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Social Imaginaries and the Concept of the Future: A Response to Delanty

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Abstract

The present reflections respond to Gerard Delanty's critical engagement with debates on social imaginaries as found in "Imaginaries and the Future. A Conversation with Gerard Delanty" (in this issue). The responses canvass various dimensions of Delanty's social theory, and can be grouped around the themes of cosmopolitanism, backlash and counter-imaginaries; capitalism as a social imaginary, capitalism as a system; the entwined problematics of multiple modernities, civilizational imaginaries, and inter-civilizational encounters; and the radical imaginary and operational imaginaries. They conclude by further fleshing out understandings of social imaginaries, especially in relation to the concept of "the future".

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Keywords

Social imaginaries – Castoriadis – Arnason – Ricoeur – cosmopolitanism – capitalism – civilizations – the future – multiple modernities

Our questions for Gerard Delanty invited his reflections on the role and utility of the concept of social imaginaries in his social theory and attempts to tease out its critical edges.[1] Gerard Delanty's work is pertinent to the field of social imaginaries, not least as various parts of his large oeuvre touch upon the imaginary (and its dimensions). This is true for his past work on the idea of Europe, European identity, citizenship, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism and the cosmopolitan imagination, but also for his contributions on modernity and postmodernity, capitalism, and more recently, the social-theoretical discussion of the idea of the *future*. In this response, our comments engage with Delanty's reflections as well as his broader work to further refine the concept of social imaginaries, through engagement with the various fields of application that Delanty's work entails.

One prominent dimension, at the start of the conversation, is the condition of what might arguably be understood as the dominant or hegemonic imaginary of the post-Second World War era, in some form of liberal cosmopolitan imaginary. This brings into play the status of the nation-state and its ongoing historical significance. In some ways, we currently seem to be witnessing a return of the imaginary of the nation-state, after a period of prevalence of the idea of post-nationalism, forms of supranational integration, and cosmopolitan identity. But it also engages the complex international dimensions of this cosmopolitan order, in terms of political and legal regimes beyond the nation-state. The international dimension may also be related to civilizational analysis and the debate on multiple modernities, which seems to gain new relevance in current times of re-emerging imperialisms and identity politics. The notion of a "civilizational imaginary"—or of an inter-civilizational imaginary—is promising in this regard, as for instance in the defence of populist actors of the "Judeo-Christian West". Where its promise may be most evident is in the elucidation of what might be understood as emergent political projects in strong contrast to Enlightenment ideas and modern reason, in the name of civilizationalism. Related to this, human civilization appears to face an existential threat, not least due to the human pursuit of endless growth and capitalist expansion. In this regard, the capitalist dimension of modernity seems to

1 See "Imaginaries and the Future. A Conversation with Gerard Delanty" in this issue.

be currently in crisis or maybe witnessing deep changes in how capitalism is understood and justified. This is not unrelated to Delanty's recent work, *Senses of the Future* (2024), which sets out to sociologically reflect on and conceptualise the notion of the future, inter alia indicating the relevance of the idea of the future as a social imaginary.

Our collective response concludes with some reflections regarding the centrality of the work of Cornelius Castoriadis to the notion of social imaginaries, and the deeper implications of his theoretical endeavours, while highlighting some aspects in need of further explanation and elaboration. On the latter, we focus on the notion of the "radical imaginary" and attempt to further distinguish between "social imaginary significations" and "primary imaginaries", and "secondary" or "operational imaginaries". What is particularly fruitful in heuristic terms is to identify both tensions and affinities between the two main modern imaginary significations that Castoriadis identified: autonomy and rational mastery. To round out our reflections, we consider the ways in which Paul Ricoeur and Johann Arnason articulate their respective approaches to the social imaginaries field.

Cosmopolitanism, backlash and counter-imaginaries

Delanty's careful consideration of a cosmopolitan imaginary as an imaginary in transformation, and as not merely subject to being undermined by a return of the national imaginary in a kind of zero-sum game, is a significant and helpful point. At the same time, it seems undeniable that combinations of nationalist, racist, and misogynist imaginaries, closely linked to closed imaginations, are dramatically undermining the more significant practical, substantial advancements of a cosmopolitan imaginary that was prominent in the postwar era. This includes the development of cosmopolitan human rights law, with significant repercussions for—as he mentioned—state behaviour in the context of international criminal and human rights law. In this regard, it might be argued that such empirical-substantial advancements of the cosmopolitan imagination are now being strongly contested or even entirely denied, for instance, in the form of the US sanctioning of the International Criminal Court, various state signatories of the Rome Statue ignoring the ICC's arrest warrants, or the rather broad manifestations of resistance towards international judicial institutions. It is in this regard impressive how various political and social forces, with highly variegated backgrounds (e.g. conservative Catholics, evangelicals, orthodox Christians, political conservatives, as well as tech-utopians) seem to align around a strong anti-liberal set of positions, which add up to the endorsement of a highly closed and conservative understanding of the world, reinforcing a closed imaginary with somehow global implications.

It would be interesting to further reflect on what this may all mean in the context of one of the most important postwar cosmopolitan projects, the European integration project. Internally, the latter seems subject to rapid transformation in the light of militarization, border control, and the externalisation of the migrant "problem". At the same time, the European Union seems increasingly regarded as the last bulwark of a cosmopolitan-inclined liberal-democratic world-view. But Delanty is right that the "backlash" against liberal cosmopolitanism appears not to be merely a return to some form of national imaginary ex ante, as witnessed in the developments in the US in which citizenship is no longer treated as a full-blown protection of human rights. The latter indicates a different (populist?) imaginary, that divides between (shifting) "friend" and "enemy" groups and flouts the liberal idea of the rule of law. As mentioned, what seems increasingly prominent is a political manifestation of conservative, religious identities and values, which in different ways—specifically when taken in a fundamentalist way—contrasts with the notions of equality, tolerance, and inclusion that cosmopolitanism may entail. Equally, a strong reaction against a cosmopolitanism that engages with the environmental predicament of humanity is part of the complex bundle of nationalist, conservative, radical right, and religious forces that ally around (right-wing) populist politics. In this regard, the emergence of an alliance of these forces across borders and in contrast with strictly interpreted nationalist motives is impressive and highly worrisome.

Capitalism: Imaginary or system?

Delanty's initial formulation of "capitalism as more than a system" is thought-provoking. His examination of capitalism from economic and sociological angles gives prominence to the economic (as did Marx and Weber), but also differentiate and highlight other dimensions of modernity, which the economic penetrates. He then addressed the question of whether this is "capitalist society" that we should be talking about by outlining many sound reasons for answering "no" to that question. Autonomy, the democratic imaginary and varieties of capitalism embedded in the social-historical of civilizational heritage are clearly among those sound reasons. The capitalist imaginary casts capitalism differently to capitalism qua *system* or qua *society*. The capitalist imaginary is conceptually both more extensive and more limited. More extensive in that it emphasizes the core social imaginary significations framing the operative meanings and logics of capitalism—the fetishism of things and the self-regulatory market, but also the pursuit of rational mastery so strikingly associated

with capitalism in Castoriadis' eyes. We can specify others following Castoriadis: the drives to endless growth and accumulation and the subsumption of nature to name two representing existential threats to human existence. The capitalist imaginary is also more in that it pre-supposes the underdetermination of instituted society and indeed instituted varieties of capitalism or capitalist spirit. Where we would part ways is with the characterization of capitalism. There is more emphasis on the systemic nature of capitalist economy than we are comfortable with. We worry that casting capitalism as an imaginary broadly speaking, yet still a system in the domain of economy, risks the reductionism Delanty is clearly trying to avoid. Systems thinking presumes totalizing logics which can easily come to be seen as a comprehensive explanation of the social institution. We have seen this in vulgar versions of Marxism, which more complex, critical, and humanistic versions of Marxism have been at pains to distance themselves from. In short, we would underscore the underdetermination of modernity and figurations of society entailed in the notion of capitalist imaginary discussed in the conversation. Delanty's comments about the future in fact seem to reflect this underdetermination to the extent that it may be possible for the end of the capitalist imaginary altogether. This seems speculative, but the trends associated with it are well analysed by others.

Multiple modernities, civilizational imaginaries, intercivilizational encounters

Delanty sketches interesting lines of contrast between his own historical sociology and social theory and Eisenstadt's multiple modernities, on the one hand, and Arnason's version of civilizational analysis, on the other. It is indeed increasingly important to be able to scale up and down from the local to the regional, national, macro-regional, and global, rather than dwelling excessively on any one or two specific units of analysis or imaginaries, as his comments suggest. The time for presupposing the erosion of nation-states and regions by the forces of globalization has long passed. Social theorists and historical sociologists seem to be in agreement on this. Delanty's mild endorsement of Arnason's approach to civilizational analysis is partly qualified by a greater emphasis on interactions between civilizations as formative of the European constellation. It seems odd, however, to not mention Arnason's highly developed conceptions of intercivilizational encounters or his more formative remarks on intra-civilizational encounters. In Arnason's work, intercivilizational encounters seem to have formative influences on the creation of modernity in many world regions as his own historical sociologies of Japan, India, and

China would suggest. The close relationship between modernity and civilizational logics Delanty attributes to Arnason might fit Eisenstadt's multiple modernities paradigm better than the more contingent conception Arnason has built up. That said, his comments on a notion of "civilizational imaginary" are insightful. A few in the social sciences have used the phrase—Ino Rossi, for example, deploys it (Rossi 2025)—but a robust concept and analytic framework has yet to be properly developed. A working notion of "civilizational imaginary" would need to be flexible enough to apply to variable forms of the social-historical and processes of transformation emerging from the tension of instituted and instituting imaginary. If applied to Europe, such a concept would surely centre on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights as major civilizational features of the constellation.

Some of Delanty's earlier work on European identity suggests that it can be analysed as a multicivilizational zone formed in the intercivilizational encounters of at least three civilizations (Atlantic-oriented Western Christian civilization; Islamic civilization; and Eastern Christian-Russian). Arnason's version of civilizational analysis explicitly discusses the European constellation in this fashion, adding the Nordic and Central European experiences as regional if not civilizational variations. Notably, Arnason interweaves a problematic of social imaginaries into his framework of civilizational analysis (discussed further below). In his recent work on futures, Delanty discusses Arnason's work as continuing Castoriadis' thinking, but without reference to Arnason's broader, distinctive project. We wonder about Delanty's view on civilizations and social imaginaries. For example, in 2005, he stated (in conjunction with Chris Rumford) that a cosmopolitan Europe would "have to articulate a deeper civilizational *imaginaire*" based on a multicivilizational constellation (Delanty and Rumford 2005, p. 191). We wonder if this idea of a "civilizational *imaginaire*" comes close to a conception of civilization using a notion of social imaginaries? Can we speak with conceptual clarity of a notion of "civilizational imaginary", as some have tried to? These are important questions.

From the radical imaginary to operational imaginaries

We agree that the social imaginaries field is heterogeneous (as is the entwined field of the imagination). Yet, most core concepts are contested and difficult to pin down—consider, for example, the respective concepts of time, modernity, culture, society, and so on. The lack of consensus is not peculiar to the social imaginaries field, and, in and of itself, does not signify a lack of rigour in the theorization of the "social imaginaries" concept by any of its key thinkers.

For Castoriadis, the radical imaginary of the social-historical contrasts with the radical imagination of the psyche. The radical imaginary emerges at the social-historical—that is, the anonymous-collective— level of the social world. As such, it is impersonal. Each society creates a world of social imaginary significations, which revolve around what Castoriadis calls central social imaginary significations. So, for Castoriadis, what we have come to call an "imaginary" or a "social imaginary" is, in his terms, a "social imaginary signification" as an underdetermined constellation of meaning, which is made possible by the radical imaginary as instituting society. On Castoriadis's account, the central imaginary significations of modernity are autonomy and the infinite pursuit of rational mastery; the former has been instituted in democracy, and the latter in bureaucracy, science, and capitalism. Once instituted, these social imaginary significations may indeed conflict with each other—for example, the infinite pursuit of rational mastery, which for Castoriadis is a nuanced form of heteronomy, conflicts with the project of autonomy, instituted as democracy, which, among other things, sets collective self-limitations. There may, however, also be surprising overlaps: rational mastery can be understood as a particular kind of autonomy, for example (here, the imaginary of "infinite" or "unlimited" is separated from the imaginary of "rational mastery").

The radical imaginary generates these core social imaginary significations as a world of meaning. Social imaginaries are virtual and must be actualized (and configured) as and through concrete social forms (institutions and social doing)—for example, the ancient Greek instauration of democracy. This multi-layered but simultaneous process of the radical imaginary creation of social imaginary significations, which are actualized through the creative interpretation of institutions and social doing, are considered radically creative because for Castoriadis they are *absolutely generative*. Social forms—such as democracy—are irreducible to any antecedents, are not determined by an extra-social source (be that nature, Reason/ rationality, or God), and, when speaking of democracy, for example, the core imaginary signification of autonomy does not have a world referent. Hence, for Castoriadis, as absolutely generative, they must be understood as a creation e*x nihilo*. (Some have criticized his emphasis on the *ex nihilo* and insisted on an interpretive aspect to creation and the creative aspect of interpretation: we agree with this critique.) The radical imaginary forms an ontological pre-condition of autonomy for Castoriadis; it is not directly an aspect of the project of autonomy itself. In the same vein, social imaginaries themselves are not radical per se but *emerge from* the radical imaginary. In this way, Castoriadis utilizes the term "radical" in the sense of absolute generation as radical creation *ex nihilo* (Castoriadis 1987).

Social imaginaries must be instituted to have purchase. Once instituted, they form various networks of secondary imaginaries that must themselves

be interpreted and instituted. We might call these *operational imaginaries* (cf. Adams 2023).[2] If we take, for example, the notion of sustainability, we would agree that it is an instituted—that is, operational—social imaginary, but find it more ambiguous than Delanty does: on the one hand, because it critiques the unlimited plundering of the natural world by capitalism, it introduces an element of the project of autonomy; on the other hand, because it does not fully question the implications of the capitalist social imaginary or seek to fundamentally alter our instituted relationship to the natural world, it remains a weak balm, at best.

Fleshing out social imaginaries

Delanty's approach takes up the concept of the future as an idea in itself; its cultural or civilizational background is not of primary importance. He is further interested in closed notions of the future that seemingly are at odds with the notion of a future that is open and in part at least created by human action. He mentions theories of action primarily in connection with phenomenology but not all approaches to the theory of action, whether individual or collective, are phenomenological—important examples are Hans Joas and Alain Touraine, who each in their own way emphasizes the creativity of action. Those phenomenological-hermeneutic approaches that do focus on action, however, may conversely see in the world horizon a limit on the idea of unrestricted human action. The notion of the future as an idea in itself emerges in a strong sense with modernity, which ushered in changed conceptions of history, time, and the human condition. In this sense, the concept of the future does emerge from cultural and civilizational backgrounds. The future is the work of human history, even when it is limited or constrained by non-human nature; such is the case in the environmental crisis within which we find ourselves today. To take two examples that Delanty mentioned, the closed, apocalyptic visions of the future and the notion of the Anthropocene are premised on a sense of prolonged, heightened, and reckless human activity that has either summoned the end of the world or brought us into a new and perilous era, respectively. In both cases, to draw on Castoriadis, this can be understood as a result of the imaginary signification of the unlimited pursuit of rational mastery in its modern institutional forms, such as capitalism and science. The future that we encounter in these scenarios would come about as a result of human activity.

2 Charles Taylor, for example, has generally preferred to focus on what we are calling operational imaginaries.

We share Delanty's view on the importance of a hermeneutic and critical approach to social and political theory, philosophy, and the human sciences, more generally. The question at hand can be summed up as: can a social imaginaries framework help us to understand the concept of the future? A secondary question has also emerged which concerns the adequacy—or not—of a social imaginaries framework as the basis for a social or political theory. The discussion in *Senses of the Future* concentrated mainly on Castoriadis's approach as it included a "futural" dimension but ultimately found it lacking. Part of the reason for suggesting Ricoeur and Arnason is that their respective articulations might correct or flesh out certain aspects of Castoriadis's thought, or, indeed, comprise an alternative in a way that is more attuned to Delanty's critical and hermeneutic concerns. Both Arnason and Ricoeur, in their different ways, have articulated significant approaches to social imaginaries that draw on interpretive and critical elements, both in an impersonal sense, as the conflict of interpretations and field of tensions, in emphasizing the fundamental importance of questioning and, crucially, an interpretive approach to creation.

We agree that Arnason has not focussed on the idea of the future as a question in its own right, and that much of his work is anchored in civilizational analysis.[3] However, his articulation of social imaginaries is irreducible to his civilizational framework. Arnason's turn to cultural hermeneutics emerged in the early 1980s, whilst his interest in civilizations emerged a few years later and should be understood as both a parallel and entwined development with his cultural hermeneutic of modernity. His understanding of imaginary significations was essentially an upgrading of the concept of culture, and, in an extension of these reflections came to lay special emphasis on the kind of social imaginaries that were an interpretation of power, that is, he emphasized social imaginary significations as cultural sources of power. But his approach to social imaginaries is distinctive and irreducible to the civilizational framework that it underpins (Arnason 1989). Arnason's articulation of culture was anchored in meaning, and, following Castoriadis, he understood the social imaginary as central to meaning formation. This brings a number of distinctive insights into history, creation, and interpretation in its wake. Additionally, it's worth mentioning that, although Arnason has not focussed on the concept of the future, some interesting albeit implicit indications can be gleaned from his thought. For example, the futural horizon is not so much one of expectation or the result of intended action but of unintended consequences; second, the future is not divorced from the past, as Delanty has indicated, but emerges as

3 But see his *The Future that Failed: Origins and Destinies of the Soviet Model* (1993).

an interpretative creation within a field that is non-sociocentric; third, questions from the past haunt the future (Blumenberg) or a crisis of interpretation may occur, for example, a crisis of sovereignty (to use Vernant's example), from which the future cannot escape and to which a collective response must be articulated. History bequeaths a legacy to the future.

Unlike Arnason's emphasis on the unintended consequences of action, Paul Ricoeur (like Castoriadis) focuses on the future as an open "project" of human activity (the utopian imaginary), with a particular emphasis on it, adapting Kosellek, as an "horizon of expectation". In Ricoeur's thought, the social imaginary (as the intertwining of the ideological and utopian imaginaries) is cast as the practical aspect of the imagination. Like Castoriadis, and unlike Taylor, the question of the creative-productive imagination (and imaginary) was a question in its own right for Ricoeur. The imagination, in particular, the productive imagination (in connection with the twin problematic of creativity) is arguably the central theme of Ricoeur's oeuvre. But unfortunately, he did not publish a systematic full-length work on this topic. As alluded by Delanty, Ricoeur's most extensive articulation of the social imaginary is found in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986) and were summarized more succinctly in a number of important essays. For Ricoeur, the ideological and utopian imaginaries formed the practical dimension of the imagination which have been significantly expanded with the recent posthumous publication of *The Lectures on Imagination* (2024). For Ricoeur, the imagination spans four spheres: the practical, the poetic, the epistemological, and the religious. The *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* address the first, the *Lectures on Imagination* the second and third. In broad terms, Ricoeur's understanding of ideology is similar to Castoriadis's articulation of instituted society and the reproductive imagination, and the utopian imaginary is comparable to instituting society and the productive-creative imagination. It is important to note that, as with the (early) Castoriadis, Ricoeur anchors his account of the social imaginary in social action: in this sense, the future is the result of human action against an imaginary horizon. The utopian imaginary in the positive sense provides practical exemplars of Ricoeur's distinctive take on the imagination as fiction and the possibility of opening up new worlds as a critique of the status quo. For the utopian imaginary and the imagination as fiction, the creativity of the imagination, which is not bound to a reality that precedes it, produces "a new reality" (2024, p. 214).

Finally, Delanty argues that, in addition to the imaginary dimension, a comprehensive approach to the concept of the future needs also to address the notions of emotions and reason, to which we might also add the phenomenon of power. It is worth observing that both Castoriadis and Ricoeur address all three aspects, but here we will expand briefly on emotion and reason. The empha-

sis on the imaginary is not meant to expel reason and rationality. But reason and rationality must be instituted and as such have an imaginary dimension. Forms of practical rationality, as reflective reason and *logon didonai*, for example, are central to Castoriadis's account of the project of autonomy. His later work on the living being—and more broadly, the poly-regional ontology of the for-itself, including human modes of subjectivity and society—recognized a tripartite organization of affect, representation, and intention—and he explicitly raises the issue of collective affect as "permeating the whole of society" (Castoriadis 1997, pp. 327 ff). For Ricoeur, the creation of a new reality through the imagination as fiction (including the utopian imaginary), focuses on the qualitative aspects of the new world and the emotions that emerge within it as part of the "non-descriptors of reality", that is, as irreducible to subjective connotation (2024, pp. 281 ff), while also emphasizing the importance of practical reason especially as a hermeneutical reason to the human condition.

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