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Imaginaries and the Future. A Conversation with Gerard Delanty

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Abstract

In this conversation, the Social Imaginaries Collective discusses the social imaginaries field with Gerard Delanty, a prominent sociologist and editor of the *European Journal of Social Theory*. The conversation critically centres on the concept of social imaginaries, its usefulness in social theory, but also particularly its role in exploring and understanding the predicaments of our particularly complex epoch, which sees taken-for-granted developments in terms of globalisation, cosmopolitanism, universal human rights, and international collaboration increasingly facing strong headwinds. The conversation further touches upon civilizational analysis and civilizational en-

counters in relation to social imaginaries, as well as the dimension of a capitalist imaginary. Finally, the dimensions of the future and changes or shifts in imaginaries are addressed, in relation to instituting and instituted imaginaries, as recognised by Castoriadis and Ricoeur.

Keywords

capitalism – capitalist imaginary – Castoriadis – civilizational analysis – cosmopolitanism – globalisation – Ricoeur – social imaginaries – social theory

Social Imaginaries Collective:[1] Thank you for participating in this conversation with us. We understand that you have a critical view of the social imaginaries field, and we welcome the opportunity to debate key aspects with you. As the social imaginaries field is especially heterogeneous and inter-disciplinary, we thought we'd open with a general question: How did you first encounter the debates on social imaginaries? What was your initial understanding of the notion of 'social imaginaries' and has this changed over time?

Gerard Delanty: I am very pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the concept of social imaginaries. As with many concepts, it is indeed as you say heterogeneous and with that comes inevitably contestation. To address your first question, I encountered the notion of the imaginary through a number of different sources. I don't think that these different accounts are all saying the same thing. Having worked on nationalism in the 1990s, not too surprisingly, I found Benedict Anderson's acclaimed book *Imagined Communities* inspiring since it offered a wider perspective on nationalism than the notion of ideology or what was then the relatively new idea of identity (Anderson 1983). While a useful way to understand the rise of nationalism—in terms of a national imaginary and not just a product of various process of mobilization—his work was never theoretically developed, his concern being primarily South-East Asia and especially Indonesia. I also think it is fair to say that he did not see the notion of the imagined community as a concept of critique. In fact, he had a

1 The questions for this conversation were developed co-operatively by the above members of the Social Imaginaries Collective, although there are some differences in emphasis and interpretation. In turn, we have responded to Gerard's reflections in a separate paper published in this issue of *IJSI*.

broadly sympathetic view of nationalism. As a critic of nationalism, I needed something more to reveal the dark side of nationalism.

At about much the same time, I read Castoriadis's book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987). Now, at this time my intellectual lens was critical theory (in the tradition of Adorno to Habermas), so I was not particularly interested in his philosophical framework, which has always struck me as very abstract, underdeveloped sociologically, and difficult to relate to anything historically concrete. In that respect, a seminal essay by Johann Arnason did much to clarify the sociological significance of Castoriadis's philosophical perspective (Arnason 1989a). If I am not mistaken, this reading and I suppose most readings of Castoriadis are based on Chapter 3 and Chapter 7, and especially the enigmatic section at the end of the book (1987, pp. 369–73). However, Arnason's concerns were with what he has called civilizational analysis, so some of the wider implications for those not working with this approach were lost.

Sometime later I read Charles Taylor's book, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004). I think this is a very lucid book and has done much to popularise the notion of social imaginaries, as it was not overburdened with obscure philosophizing, but undoubtedly at the cost of conceptual clarity. I must confess that while I am very familiar with the work of Paul Ricoeur, which I have always admired and found inspiring, I never saw him as an important writer on the imaginary, as his comments—if I am not mistaken—on the imaginary are incidental to other topics, as for example ideology and utopia (Ricoeur 1986). Sartre wrote a book on the imaginary in 1940, but it did not leave a lasting impression on me, unlike his other writings. Then there was Lacan's writing on the imaginary and the problem of the relation of it to what he called 'the symbolic order' and 'the real.' I have tried to understand his work, but I am not a follower of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I was also well familiar with Kant's writing on the imagination in *The Critique of Judgement*. There are other philosophical renditions, for example C. S. Pearse which I am familiar with only through secondary material (Kaag 2014).

When you ask if the notion has changed over time, I think that what has happened is that these different uses of the term, which mostly arose, or were revived, at much the same time in the 1980s, developed alongside each other. Taylor's book was perhaps the main one that rendered the notion of the imaginary, now re-named as the more acceptable 'social imaginary,' into a more digestible format. Castoriadis's use of the term has of course been of enduring appeal. The term continues to be used. In a recent book, Peter Wagner referred interestingly to a concept he has used in his work, 'societal self-understandings,' as embodying much the same as the notion of social imaginary 'as emphasizing openness to interpretation' (Wagner 2024, p. 166).

I am not sure if anyone has reconciled the many different uses of the term. I suppose that is not possible, as it would not seem feasible, for example, to reconcile Lacan's and Castoriadis's uses, despite their common background in Freud (a case of two thinkers divided by a common legacy). Castoriadis and Adorno are not so far apart, as is clear from Craig Browne (2016), and as Suzi Adams has shown there are interesting parallels between Ricœur and Castoriadis arising from their brief dialogue (Adams 2017). So, there is going to be some partisanism in which intellectual tradition is to be privileged. I admit to having been influenced by Habermas's criticism of Castoriadis in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987). On the other side, as I mentioned, I found that Arnason in his work made productive use of Castoriadis in developing Weber's sociology, but as I said this was around a theory of civilizations, which he showed are based on imaginaries (1989a, 2003).

I did not seek to work out a theory of social imaginaries myself. My general position is that it is a very useful concept and while in need of clarity, I am not convinced that there is a theory as such of social imaginaries, which I would rather see as a concept that can be used alongside other concepts. I will state now candidly that for me the notion of the imaginary co-exists with other concepts, such as reason and emotion. So, it is correct that I am somewhat critical of its over-general use; yet I see it is an essential concept. Without it, how else would one be able to discuss how newness or innovation arises? The new first has to be imagined. However, that does not necessarily lead to its realization. Nor does it account for where it comes from. Clearly, a wider theoretical framework is needed.

SIC: In the *Cosmopolitan Imagination* (2009), you argue that a critical approach to cosmopolitanism needs to understand it as an imaginary, which consists in both an experience and an interpretation of the world. As you also argue, the cosmopolitan imaginary is in many ways in contrast to the national imagining, as put forward for instance by Benedict Anderson. One wonders how you would see the state of the cosmopolitan imaginary today? Are we witnessing a return to the national imaginary, or is the current constellation of political imagination more complex? You seem to indicate the latter in your recent work on the future, for instance, by suggesting that the modern idea of the future (as a core dimension of the modern imaginary) is undergoing a tremendous rupture today.

GD: You have correctly characterised the key idea of that book. In contrast to mainstream approaches to cosmopolitanism in normative political theory, which on the whole see it as the pursuit of an international political system,

largely expressed in law and with a tendency to overcome in some way the nation-state, I have defended a more hermeneutical and critical conception, which sees the cosmopolitan condition, to call it that, as emanating from distinctive experiences of the world, in particular those that relate to the encounter of the self with the other. Such encounters, which of course can take a variety of forms and may not be necessarily cosmopolitan, can be formative of cosmopolitanism when they lead to positive outcomes. I characterised this in terms of a continuum of weak to strong forms, for example whereby a transformation in self-understanding occurs as a result of the encounter. In such cases self-problematization and self-questioning leads to a re-interpretation of self, other and world relations. So, cosmopolitanism in this perspective is hermeneutical in the sense that it proceeds through re-interpretation and the expansion in horizons, possibly even, to follow Gadamer, a 'fusion of horizons.' It is also critical in that it proceeds through self-critique and reflection.

The imaginary also plays a role. I think I did not develop this sufficiently, since as indicated by the subtitle of the book, it was an attempt to bring critical theory and cosmopolitan together, but as in the title of the book the imagination is a key dimension of cosmopolitanism. The expansion of horizons opens up new perspectives, which can be seen in terms of a projection beyond the present. Now, while I do not see cosmopolitanism as the equivalent of globalization, which is simply an empirical fact about the world as increasingly connected, I do see cosmopolitanism as articulating an imaginary which, while I would hesitate to call a global imaginary as this may be too much, certainly involves a transformation in spatial consciousness. I think, especially from a historical perspective, cosmopolitan imaginaries may have been relatively limited, and I do not think that they necessarily have to transcend the limits of the national state. Overall, it would make sense to see cosmopolitanism expressed in terms of local-global relations, whereby the horizons of the local are expanded without being absorbed into a purely global consciousness. For that reason, I agree with postcolonial arguments for rooted conceptions of cosmopolitanism. Perhaps more important than the global perspective in spatial transformation is the orientation towards the future, which I think is an important aspect of the cosmopolitan imaginary, that is an opening to future possibility. So, the cosmopolitan imagination involves a transformation in spatial and temporal consciousness.

Is the cosmopolitan imaginary in decline? Has there been a return to the national imaginary? The issue here is if cosmopolitanism has been overtaken by anti-cosmopolitanism. How should this relation be understood? The position that I have taken is that cosmopolitanism is simply a part of the modern world and possibly integral to the human condition. I don't think it is invalidated by

the obvious existence of counter-cosmopolitan currents. It is not a zero-sum situation of our being either cosmopolitan or national. In any case, I do not see the national imaginary as necessarily anti-cosmopolitanism. It may or may not be. I believe it can be argued that in fact the nation was a vehicle for the advancement of cosmopolitanism. Nations can be cosmopolitan. I also don't think that a purely global phenomenon is necessarily more cosmopolitan than a very local situation.

Perhaps in some not-too-distant dystopian future, cosmopolitanism will be vanquished from the world. I think it is unlikely to happen, since the clock cannot be so easily put back. Cosmopolitanism, along with other political forces, has been a powerful force in the world and continues to be. It is clear of course that since 2016—with the Brexit referendum and Trump's election—that there has been a significant rise in political authoritarianism and an onslaught on cosmopolitan politics. But a sense of historical proportion is necessary. While the post 1945 period of relative peace is over and there is increasing turbulence, it is an illusion to think that the quality of democracy was better in earlier decades.

So, I do not think there is a return to the national imaginary, but as you also hint in your question there is a more complicated logic unfolding which has something to do with the decline of the national imaginary, not its return. In fact, the current situation, especially in the USA with the re-election of Trump, and the steady rise of the extreme right in Europe suggests that these demagogues are at war against the national community in the first instance and that they have buried the idea of an inclusive national community, the basis of the older ideas of nationhood.

When I look at Trump and his *aides de camp*, I only see the victory of techno-capitalism coupled with neo-fascism, as epitomised in Elon Musk's fascist salute at the inauguration ceremony on 20 January 2025. The USA is a deeply divided society: the 73 million or so who voted for Trump are at war against the 68 million or so who voted for Harris. The imaginary at work in the symbolic politics of MAGA, is not a national imaginary, but a vision of a society that seeks to exclude large numbers of people and one that has given up on creating prosperity for all. I think it is a significant moment in the ending of the so-called American Dream. This was an imaginary, a national imaginary, that was based on inclusion, multiculturalism and prosperity (of course the reality beneath the imaginary was racial segregation, white supremacy, voter suppression at home and abroad, imperialism, carpet bombing). MAGA may be nostalgic but for what? It would seem to be more a regression—a rejection of the present but without any real alternative and a giving up of hope—than a return to a historical era that has vanished. It may be taking the argument too

far, but I would suggest that in fact it is the national imaginary, not the cosmopolitan imaginary, that has collapsed.

The cosmopolitan imaginary is still there, not unscathed but changing. The older cosmopolitanism that was a feature of the 1990s—as reflected in, for example, the end of apartheid, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the beginning of electronic communication etc—is gone, but gone in the way that earlier forms of cosmopolitanism (the Enlightenment expressions, post-colonial rebellion against imperialism, etc) have gone, namely overcome in the Hegelian sense of the term and realised in new forms. The category of crimes against humanity, war crimes, as well as genocide as a crime, for example, continues to be important. International law as an expression of the cosmopolitan spirit remains significant and offers hope to many people, as in the horrific crimes committed by Israel and Russia. Perhaps most important, climate change is now one of the main ways that the cosmopolitan imaginary is expressed. So rather than see the national imaginary and the cosmopolitan imaginary in conflict or as opposites, I think it is more fruitful to see both as potentially compatible and with an orientation to the future. Furthermore, from a practical political perspective, I do not think any kind of cosmopolitics or any kind of resistance to injustice would be realistically possible if it did not try to reconcile itself to the national community.

SIC: You have commented on many aspects of civilizational analysis and multiple modernities over the years, especially as it has been developed by Eisenstadt and Arnason. Some of your 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, and Eastern Christian/Byzantine/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. In your recent work on futures, you have discussed Arnason's work as continuing Castoriadis' thinking, but without reference to Arnason's own distinctive broader project. We wonder about your view on civilizations and social imaginaries. For example, in 2005, you 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). Does this idea of a 'civilizational *imaginaire*' come 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?

GD: I have been for long interested in what was once called the 'multiple modernities' paradigm, originally associated with S. N. Eisenstadt, but developed in an interesting way by Johann Arnason who made it central to his 'civilizational analysis' (Arnason 2003). This approach within historical sociology, along with more generally transnational history, certainly influenced my own thinking on how to conceptualise European modernity—for example in *Formations of European Modernity* (2018a) and also in *The European Heritage: A Critical Reinterpretation* (2018b)—in a way that takes account of forms of plurality that cannot be reduced to national cultures and at the same time does not over-emphasise the unity of Europe in the context of a situation in which the specificity of Europe can never really be settled, since it is not so easily defined culturally or geographically.

For me at least, there are two problems to be considered, the problem of civilization and the problem of modernity. Both concern major questions in historical sociology and social theory. Arnason provides a reasonably good solution to the first but less so for the second. Despite reservations about the concept of civilization, from a long-term historical perspective the concept civilization is a reasonably serviceable way of looking at the larger constellation of cultures that make up Europe, taking account of the fact that Europe constantly changed in its geopolitical form throughout history. In short, we need something larger than nations to conceptualise the unity of Europe. In my view, Arnason provides a good way to approach this.

In my work, as you have mentioned, I have referred to European civilization more as a constellation of interacting civilizations than one civilization. While I don't think that goes against Arnason's approach, it probably gives more emphasis than he does to the interaction with other civilizations, for example the Byzantine tradition, the latter Ottoman and Russian civilizations. It is certainly true that some components were more decisive than others, for example the Roman tradition and medieval Christianity. I have referred to Europe as formed out of a constellation of interacting civilizations. Perhaps the emphasis should be on the interaction, as such dynamics were what created Europe, rather than an original historical origin. There were several origins and they were all continuously transformed. Europe as we know it today did not just spring out of the ancient and medieval world; it was very much formed out of colonialism, and there was also the process (which post-colonial theorists prefer to ignore) of 'internal colonization.'

I will also comment that Arnason's conception of civilization, which builds upon Weber and Castoriadis, as organized around an imaginary, such that we can speak of a civilizational imaginary, makes sense when one looks at the wider unity and diversity of Europe. Now, where I think I differ from his ap-

proach is on two matters. One is that the notion of civilization is ultimately a somewhat problematical term when it comes to looking at world history more generally. It really applies to the ancient Euro-Asian civilizations of the northern hemisphere, at least to those that have understood themselves to be civilizations. I am not sure how it really applies to the diversity of world cultures, especially those of the southern hemisphere. Are these all to be understood as civilizations? What if they don't see themselves as civilizations. This problem relates to a slightly greater one, namely modernity.

If I am right, Arnason sees the varieties of modernity in the world as expressions of civilizational logics that have radical imaginaries at their core. Now, while I can see how this works to a certain level, especially in comparative context—the European route to modernity and its main form is somewhat more distinctive when compared to, for example, the Chinese route—I really don't think it is very helpful, since it reduces modernity too much to particular geopolitical entities. So we end up with different forms of modernity without really knowing what modernity actually entails other than it emanates from civilizational logics. I find a more helpful way to approach the problem of modernity is, to follow Peter Wagner (2012), less in terms of different civilizational forms than in a particular condition—he emphasizes three central *problematiques*—that manifest themselves in diverse forms. These forms may be roughly close to the historical civilizations but may also be more closely bound up with national paths or historical regions. I don't think this is a major departure from Arnason's approach, but a necessary corrective and perhaps gives more attention to the contemporary context, which in my view is difficult to really understand in civilizational terms.

You are right to highlight the claim made in the book with the late Chris Rumford where we talked about the need for Europe, in this case the European Union, to articulate an identity that was more in tune with its intercivilizational history. This was a critical-normative claim made in the context of the enlargement of the EU some twenty years ago to include much of eastern Europe. It was also a time when there was a new opening with Turkey and also, though to a less extent, with Russia.

I agree that a civilizational imaginary can be understood as a social imaginary, a more apt term in my view, since it avoids the need to qualify in what sense the notion of civilization is used. So I would prefer to avoid talking about a *civilizational* imaginary as such and instead talk about a European social imaginary, which is also more relevant than a notion of collective European identity. For instance, today if there is a European imaginary, I think it is very much in terms of the preservation of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. These are not primarily specific to Europe, and therefore not civiliza-

tional, but with the spread of political authoritarianism throughout the world and also within Europe they are important to defend and the only way to see the European imaginary without falling into the trap of cultural essentialism.

While I would like to think that the civilizational position that I took is still a valid one in terms of the formation of European modernity, the geopolitical situation has changed with an increasing authoritarian turn in Russia at about the time of the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the annexation of the Crimea. At about this time, political authoritarianism also increased in Turkey. I cannot see for the foreseeable future any possible positive relations with Russia, which has clearly embarked on a long hybrid war with a Europe that is struggling to contain the extreme right. This of course does not change history and the notion of an intercivilizational constellation still remains valid. The real conflict here is not in any case between civilizations but between liberal constitutional democracies and dictatorships/autocracies.

I will have to leave open for now exactly what constitutes such an imaginary other than to reiterate that rather than define it in terms of something civilizational it is probably more meaningful to define it with respect to democracy, as that seems to be what is really on trial in the world today.

SIC: In your recent book on capitalism (with Neal Harris), you discuss capitalism as part of modernity. Your overall characterization of capitalism as less a system and more a part of modernity interconnected to political logics and cultural patterns seems both right, in our view, and in tune with much recent theorization of capitalism's contemporary variants (including most notably Boltanski and Chiappello 2005). When you write, approvingly it seems, about approaches following Castoriadis, you note the conception of capitalism as part of a larger configuration of modernity. Such non-reductive approaches using a notion of imaginary to reconceptualize capitalism are quite at odds with theories premised on a systemic and totalizing understandings of capitalism. Following this line of thinking, some, including one of us, go as far as to talk about capitalism as a 'capitalist imaginary' (Browne 2016; Smith 2014b, 2014a). What potential do you think this phrase might have as a guide to understanding capitalism and developing a critical political position on it? What problems could you see with this concept?

GD: Theorizing capitalism is particularly difficult since one has to include somehow the economic and the sociological angles to grasp the phenomenon. Capitalism as an economic system is probably easier to understand. I don't think this can be avoided, since it is first and foremost an economic phenomenon, as in Marx's account with the pursuit of profit and the accumulation of

capital as its primary motor. This was also Weber's position, even if he gave more place to cultural factors, at least in its formative stage. *Capitalism and its Critics* was an attempt to offer a working definition of capitalism based on a number of key elements. Even if there is some disagreement about these elements, I think it is easier to agree on the nature of capitalism as an economic system than as a more general phenomenon. But capitalism is more than an economic system, as it penetrates the entire fabric of society, including the political and cultural.

This all raises the question whether instead of seeing capitalism as an economic system we should be talking about capitalist society. The answer to this question must be no. Despite the penetration of capitalism into the social sphere more generally, modern society is not reducible to the logic of capitalism. Capitalism may be the most fateful force in history as Weber wrote but it is also not all dominant. Other forces are equally consequential in shaping modernity, which to refer to Arnason again is best seen as a 'field of tensions' (Arnason 1991). In any case, as Nancy Fraser has very well shown, capitalism has fed off non-capitalist traditions and non-capitalist social relations, as for example it relies on social production, a privatised domestic sphere outside the capitalist system of wage-labour. Capitalism may have transformed the world, but it nonetheless interacts with other social phenomena. There is also the fact that capitalism as an economic system, in the sense of economic activities that can be described as capitalist, existed before the world-wide triumph of capitalism, as Weber also recognised. So for example as in Ancient China, there was evidence of capitalist activities but this did not mean that the economy and the society more generally was capitalist. It was only in the West in the nineteenth century that it can be said capitalism became the dominant social force in society.

Now, while this suggests a notion of capitalist society, it doesn't entirely work as a description of modern society, which is also based around democracy, individual autonomy, nationhood to mention just some of the obvious features of modernity. The democratic imaginary has been as consequential as the capitalist imaginary. I think we are in agreement on this broad characterization of modernity as shaped by diverse logics, which implies limits to the total dominance of anyone, including the economic system of capitalism.

A further complication in any discussion of capitalism is that it exists in a wide variety of forms, some of which are civilizational. From a global perspective, there is a huge difference between, for example, the oligarchic capitalism in Russia, Chinese capitalism within a communist state, the various forms of capitalism in western Europe and the variant in the USA. The diversity of these forms of capitalism is so great that it is only with difficulty that one can speak

of capitalism as such. They also illustrate the point I have been making that the economic system of capitalism is embedded in wider cultural and political spheres.

All these societal spheres produced social imaginaries. I am entirely in agreement that it is possible to speak of a capitalist imaginary. This is not something that can be reduced to capitalist ideology. As you have mentioned, several theorists have used the notion of a capitalist imaginary. There is a basis for this in the writings of Weber and Schumpeter. Marx's famous notion of the 'fetishism of commodities' in *Capital* suggests also an imaginary. In its formative phase, as in the writings of F. A. Hayek, especially *The Road to Serfdom*, neoliberalism before it became an orthodoxy was also in part based on a radical imaginary, the imaginary of 'self-regulating' market as the basis for political organization.

Following Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), this can be related to various spirits of capitalism. I think it would have to be seen as something that is not fixed but changes and is probably also culturally variable in terms of world varieties of capitalism. However, it cannot be so variable to be in perpetual change, since if that were the case, it would not carry the force that it is supposed have. Now, I don't think that the notion of a capitalist imaginary is going to solve all problems or that it dispenses with the need to see capitalism as an economic system. There is also what is perhaps a more circumscribed notion of the imaginary, as in for example Jens Beckert's book, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*, which shows how capitalism requires an imagined future in order to deal with the problem of uncertainty (Beckert 2016). This use of the terms is perhaps not quite what you mean in talking about a capitalist imaginary as more akin to a 'spirit' or a self-understanding. However, the fact that capitalism is a future-oriented economic system means that it needs various ways of dealing with the future, including imagining it; and while many of these are simply strategies for coping with uncertainty, they inevitably cultivate a wider orientation to the future that might include too post-capitalist futures.

Without such a notion it is difficult to understand how capitalism has had such an impact on the modern world. The pursuit of wealth and the desire for prosperity must come from something, as did the desire for justice. According to Weber, until it took off in the eighteenth century, the capitalist spirit was subordinate to other values and even the 'Protestant ethic' only coincided with the capitalist spirit. Protestantism did not itself cause the spirit of capitalism. But once it took off there was no stopping it. Some of the most famous capitalists—Henry Ford, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates—were driven by a creative impulse for wealth creation but also the desire to innovate and, especially with Gates, to improve the world. Steve Jobs was not entirely driven by personal material

gain, and this is true of Bill Gates. It is difficult to say if this was true of all the capitalists of the so-called gilded age of American capitalism, as say J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie or John D. Rockefeller who were also opportunists, but they were also utterly ruthless, as was the case with Steve Jobs as it was of Andrew Carnegie. Then there are the Silicon Valley techno-capitalists of the present day, Bezos, Musk, Zuckerberg, who have produced a form of capitalism without a proletariat (if we ignore for the moment Amazon's giant army of warehouse and delivery workers). I think something like a capitalist imaginary is useful, but it needs more work of clarification.

A final point of reflection on this theme is whether the notion of a capitalist imaginary is in a crisis today. While I don't think it makes any meaningful sense to say capitalism is in crisis, since capitalism is an economic system that is in perpetual crisis—it generates one crisis after the other; capitalism is not a smoothly working system but is highly destructive; yet, it always survives. As Wolfgang Streeck (2016) has very convincingly shown, the crises produced by neoliberalism never fully brought the system down, since they were just delayed or displaced in various ways (public debt being replaced by private debt, for instance). Furthermore, capitalism has been very effective in absorbing dissent and neutralizing it, as Marcuse argued in *One-Dimensional Man*. This is also a conclusion of much Foucauldian theory. Incidentally, such modes of political neutralization may also work against the idea of a capitalist imaginary, since it may be the case that capitalism today is taking a form that entirely erases any consciousness of an alternative. Thus, neoliberalism according to some is now becoming transformed into 'neo-feudalism,' whereby large corporations take over functions once performed by public bodies. I wonder if this is also accompanied by a new capitalist imaginary. I suspect that this is not taking place. It may be the case that instead of the end of capitalism, we are witnessing the end of the capitalist imaginary. I think Schumpeter had something like that in mind when he wrote about the 'decomposition' of capitalism but in the context of another era which he thought was witnessing the end of the creative entrepreneur. To generalise, the capitalist imaginary was once based on the idea that capitalism generates prosperity for all, even if it is unequally divided; capitalism today has abandoned that claim. There are too many people who want a share and too many who want a larger share for themselves. I am not sure there can be a new capitalist imaginary, especially now in the context of climate change.

SIC: Your recent work, *Senses of the Future* (2024) and your comment on Adloff and Neckel's approach to 'Futures of Sustainability' (2019) features greater engagement with the social imaginaries field. You have singled out Castoriadis's

approach as a 'future directed concept' as the most relevant for discussion, in contrast to the more general notion of 'social imaginary' and have focussed on his understanding of radical creation. For him, the emergence of autonomy in ancient Greece is a spectacular example of this. Your discussion seems to emphasize what Castoriadis would call instituting society, but he also emphasized that instituting society only exists together with instituted society. Instituting society is further linked to his project of autonomy as a project of collective doing and critical reflection—this is the political aspect. Castoriadis's account of instituting society and social imaginary significations does emphasize radical historical novelty but it is not restricted to that. The 'future' is not necessarily attained in relation to 'ruptures' only. Taking this into account, would you still find the social imaginaries approach unhelpful in elucidating the concept of the future?

GD: Let me begin by saying that the article by Adloff and Neckel (2019) that you refer to is a very good example of the use of the notion of social imaginaries. Empirical applications are necessary, otherwise the concept remains on a very general level of abstraction. This of course presupposes clarity and consensus on the meaning of the concept. The thrust of my remarks (Delanty 2021) in the discussion of the article was that the authors assumed that the concept was sufficiently theoretically clear, when in fact I think it is not. While making good use of the term, the result was also unsatisfactory in that, as I argued, they lost sight of the double-edged nature of the imaginary, if we follow Castoriadis (who is just one theorist of social imaginaries) along the lines you suggest.

I agree that for Castoriadis there is the 'instituting society' and that it exists together with 'instituted society.' Most social scientists do not approach social inquiry through the lens of Castoriadis's conceptual vocabulary, so these terms need some unpacking. Let's try to establish some clarity. The instituting society is related to the radical imaginary which strives for newness and is the expression of creativity and autonomy. It does not come out of nothing, but derives from the existing society, which it seeks to transform. But Castoriadis also says it creates the new out of nothing, which seems implausible to me. So how can it do both? It seems then that there are two imaginaries at work, the imaginaries that are directly products of the present, the instituted society, which Castoriadis calls 'imaginary significations,' and the radical imaginaries that seek to go beyond the present. While these are in some way products of the present, due to their radical reflexivity they are not of the present but transcend it. I also think that for him there is just one radical imaginary, but in my view there are many and they may conflict with each other, as the capitalist imaginary and the democratic imaginary. It is also not evident to me that they necessarily

deliver autonomy (or that one does and the other does not). As such, the radical imaginary is future oriented while presumably the other imaginary significations are only present directed. However, the relationship between the two imaginaries is very unclear in Castoriadis's work, which is really a conceptual mess. It makes no sense to say that the radical imaginary is not an imaginary signification. There is also the question of what methodological implications follow from his theory. Castoriadis did not ground his concepts in history, aside from a rather idealist and questionable view of ancient Greece.

Taking the example of sustainability, for instance, this can indeed be seen as an imaginary, following Adloff and Neckel, but I think it does not capture the radical imaginary since by its nature the politics of sustainability seeks to preserve the status quo by preventing further ecological damage rather than being a drive for radical transformation. The notion of sustainability as in the aspiration to reach net zero carbon emissions is difficult to capture in the sense of a radical social imaginary. This is more strikingly the case with the politics of control, which only in some respects can be related to an imaginary as it is primarily about technocratic measures or problem-solving to control carbon emissions. Perhaps some proposals for climate engineering encapsulate the Promethean view that humans can through technology be the masters of the universe. There is a somewhat dubious imaginary at work here and it may correspond to the radical imaginary. I take these examples to broadly illustrate the more domesticated social imaginary significations that the instituted society produces about itself, like the capitalist imaginary.

Letting aside what for me is considerable conceptual unclarity, the notion of the social imaginary, whether radical or not, is of considerable importance in exploring the idea of the future. In *Senses of the Future* I was primarily interested in the idea of the future and approaches to its analysis. In my view, one dimension is that it is something that has to be conceived as an imaginary. I fully agree that imaginaries of the future do not necessarily entail rupture with the present. The idea of progress was based on an imaginary, perhaps not a radical one; the prophetic tradition, which I discussed in the book, in the romantic tradition, certainly gave expression to a radical imaginary. As I argued, some of the most influential post 1945 visions of the future, for example Daniel Bell's writings, saw the future very much as a continuation of the present and something that could be controlled through 'social forecasting' by the present. In that sense, it was an imaginary based on the instituted society and reflected very much, as Jenny Andersson (2018) has shown, the political imagination of the Cold War. Such imaginaries were also very limited temporally, most to the next thirty years. In my book, where I discussed the notion of the future as an imaginary, it is probably the case that I mostly had in mind the radical imagi-

nary. I agree that a fuller account would need to distinguish different types of the imaginary. There are of course also literary or aesthetic conceptions of the imaginary, which were important in articulating ideas of the future. But these are not strictly social imaginaries, except possibly in some works of science fiction literature.

In my analysis, social imaginaries constitute just one dimension of the idea of the future. There are also other logics at work, such as reason and necessity. I can comment further on that. To address your question my position is that a concept—for example the concept of the social imaginary—does not by itself lead to a theory. The concept of the social imaginary needs a wider theoretical framework, at least if you agree, and you might not, that it is not the only component of a socio-cultural phenomenon, as in the case the idea of the future.

You draw attention to the dimension of historicity—by which I understand the capacity to make history through the transformation of cultural frameworks of meaning—in relation to the radical social imaginary. This is something Alain Touraine captured in his discussion of social movements. One of his important ideas was that the success of a social movement, as opposed to a political movement, can be seen in terms of three principles: it must have a sense of opposition, an identity, and totality. By totality he meant it must have an awareness of its own historicity. This can be understood to be a vision of society as a whole having a future in the sense of a capacity to make history. This latter concept captures the radical social imaginary as the project of a vision of future possibility. I wonder if the principle of identity captures the other dimension of the social imaginary, which is closer to the instituted society. There are some interesting parallels with Castoriadis on these questions, but although contemporaries I do not think that Touraine drew on the latter's obscure writings. In any case, I think we need more examples of applications of Castoriadis's theoretical framework. It is not satisfactory that this body of work resists meaningful application.

A final comment on sociological applications is perhaps relevant. In my book I was somewhat critical of some uses of the notion of the future as an imaginary, though these are not necessarily based on Castoriadis, but on largely phenomenological approaches to social inquiry. My position here is that such approaches give too much emphasis to human experience and social action as generative of future possibilities, suggesting that the future is radically open and can be shaped by how human beings imagine it. The idea of the future is not entirely a category of human action. I think it is also important to take account of the many ways in which the future is also closed, or is perceived to be so; for example, a tendency in the environmental movement in recent years is a pronounced apocalyptic turn, even a post-apocalyptic turn, which

seems to declare the end of the radical imaginary that was a feature of the older environmental movement (Cassegård and Thorn 2012). There is also the epistemic problem of the unknowability of the future, a position represented by Luhmann for example in a classic essay (Luhman 1976).

SIC: In your comment on Adloff and Neckel's research program on 'Futures of Sustainability,' you argue that social imaginaries as a concept may be too vague and may be too much used in a catch-all fashion to be useful. In your argument, however, you appear to restrict the notion, as also alluded to in the previous question, to a one-sided dimension of radical creativity, without acknowledging the dual nature of what Castoriadis called the instituted and instituting imaginary. The latter opens up to a continuous tension between the reproduction of social reality and possible alternatives to that reality. A similar tension is elaborated by Paul Ricoeur in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. Understood in this way, the concept of imaginaries elucidates the continuous human struggle over the interpretation of society and of the world, indicating the imaginary dimension as indeed an unavoidable, intrinsic dimension of individual and social life. In contrast, you seem to be arguing that the imagination might be less relevant in some instances, or entirely repressed, as you mention in relation to 'sustainability as control.' What is your take on this tension between reproductive and productive imagination, and how does it relate to critical social theory, in your view? If in specific cases, such as that of 'sustainability as control,' the imagination is irrelevant, how is it possible to critique such positions, for instance, in relation to their dystopian and authoritarian dimensions?

GD: We can agree that there are two generic kinds of imaginaries and that within each are different ones pertaining to specific issues. So, we have the radical social imaginary expressing the 'instituting society' and another one, for which we do not have a satisfactory term other than 'imaginary significations,' to express the 'instituted society.' I agree with your characterization of this, which might be expressed as a tension between the reproductive and transformative visions of social change. Social imaginaries are an essential dimension of this dynamic.

As you also note, Paul Ricoeur discussed ideology and utopia as entailing imaginaries (Ricoeur 1986). Nonetheless, I don't think it follows that social imaginaries are always involved in all aspects of social life, for instance in contexts that are not primarily about ideology or utopia. But I agree imaginaries come into play when there are major struggles of interpretation of society and world. A pertinent example, a topic on which I having been working since I

completed the book on the future, is hope (see Delanty 2025). I think this is a highly pertinent example of how the social imaginary plays out. One might hope for things to be better; now while this might involve a vision of a better future, as Jonathan Lear (2006) has shown in an acclaimed book, *Radical Hope*, it is also possible to hope without having a vision of what an alternative might be, that is to hope for something that is as yet unknown and thus cannot be imagined.

You raise a question about critical theory and where [the tension between reproductive and productive imagination] might relate to critical theory. As I said, in my view concepts such as the imaginary need a wider theoretical framework. To address some of the topics I am interested in, for example ideas of the future, I think we need a multi-dimensional approach, as I am not sure any one theoretical tradition is really adequate. I argued that the critical theory tradition (by which I mean the tradition from Adorno to Habermas) has much to offer, without claiming that it is the truth path. I mention this here because in my view the concept of social imaginary needs to be complemented by other related concepts. The critical theory tradition would draw attention to reason for instance (see my book *Critical Theory and Social Transformation*, Delanty 2021). I think this needs to be part of the picture as does also emotion. As I argued in Chapter Six of *Senses of the Future*, the future is a product of the learning outcomes of history; it does not simply come from social practices alone or spring forth from social imaginaries but is shaped by deeper generative forces that are also to be found in spaces of reason in modern society. Going beyond the critical theory tradition, there is also the force of emotion at work. Logically, this would be prior to the imaginary, since something must also give rise to need for imaginaries, which are also tempered by Reason. Incidentally, Castoriadis did touch on this when he wrote about 'the imaginary and the rational' but this notion of 'the rational' does not entirely capture the concept of 'reason' (1987, pp. 160–4).

It is not conceptually convincing to me to claim that the imaginary is somehow the principal force in shaping future possibility. The imaginary by its nature gives form to diverse elements, including emotions. But the reproduction and transformation of the social world also requires other kinds of structures, including cultural structures and structures of consciousness, to sustain beyond imaginaries. In this respect I think Habermas correctly identified a core problem with Castoriadis when he wrote in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*: 'Castoriadis cannot provide us with a figure for the mediation between the individual and society' (Habermas 1987, p. 334). As I have consistently stressed, the imaginary is one source of mediation but it is not the only one. Critique entails something more than imaginaries; it is also informed by reason, and I would add emotion.

A perspective on social imaginaries, as I said, is naturally inclined to emphasise the agency of social actors and, as a cultural concept, it implies interpretation. As such, it is highly attractive to sociological research. However, unless qualified there are pitfalls, as such a perspective may not adequately embrace reason, which is present on the level of agency, and cultural significations such as social imaginaries will also bear its mark. However, the action theoretic standpoint on its own is inadequate when it comes to the macro-order of society, namely societal logics that are irreducible to agency. This is also the case with cultural constructions such as imaginaries. Future possibility is also conditioned by what can be put under the heading of reason, namely the accumulated outcomes of historical struggles, science, the logic of justification and the voice of the intellect. In this respect, the future is not just an outcome of experience but is graduated by reason, the logic of possibility, and by necessity, by which I do not mean determinism (see the articles by Esposito (2024), Strydom (2024), Guégeun and Jeanpierre (2024) in a special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory*).

Perhaps I could add as regards the problem of critique that the notion of social imaginaries is not a normative concept. Imaginaries can be good or bad. I don't think radical social imaginaries are necessarily good while those of the instituted society bad.

SIC: Your sociological reflections on 'the future' include a hermeneutic and critical dimension. Yet, although you mention Johann P. Arnason and Paul Ricoeur in passing in your discussion of social imaginaries in *Senses of the Future*, you do not discuss their work further. Given they have each made very significant approaches to the social imaginaries field (and, in Ricoeur's case, also to debates on the imagination), this seems surprising, as they each expressly include a hermeneutic and critical aspect to their approach. Each criticizes Castoriadis's 'radical' notion of the imaginary as 'creation out of nothing' (see Ricoeur and Castoriadis 2017; Arnason 2003, 1989a, 1989b, 2020). Arnason relativizes Castoriadis's overly strong notion of creation ex nihilo by articulating the interpretative aspect of creation and the creative aspect of interpretation (further anchored in a hermeneutic phenomenology of the world). He argues, moreover, that social imaginary significations need to be understood as cultural projects of power. Paul Ricoeur, both in his reflections on the social imaginary (e.g. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 1986) and in his radio discussion with Castoriadis (2017) emphasized the inescapably hermeneutic aspect of social imaginaries anchored in social praxis, on the one hand, and the rejection of the notion of creation ex nihilo, on the other. I note that both Arnason and Ricoeur (each in their own way) accept an instituting and instituted aspect to

the social imaginary creation of future worlds: the future is also inescapably an interpretation—often a critical interpretation—of instituted society and the past anchored in the present. Additionally, they each include the problematic of critique as part of a social imaginaries approach. For Ricoeur, the utopian imaginary offers a critique of expressions of the ideological imaginary, while Arnason, even though he might wish to 'downsize' critical theory (2022), still holds open a place for it in his thought. What is your take on Arnason and Ricoeur's respective approaches to social imaginaries and the problematic of the future?

GD: My theoretical approach is always inspired by a critical and hermeneutical intention. As already mentioned in this interview, my work has also been inspired by Johann Arnason. His work has been a source of inspiration on the civilizational sources of modern Europe. I have mentioned where I depart from him, namely in using a civilizational approach to make sense of the dominant developments in contemporary society. I think a civilizational approach is an important perspective on the long-run historical trajectories and patterns of history, but when it comes to the present day, it loses it explanatory power.

It is true that in my recent book, *Senses of the Future*, I did not discuss Arnason's work in any detail. This is probably because in this work I was more or less exclusively focussed on the idea of the future, which did not figure in his work significantly, except obviously where it relates to the imaginary. In any case, my argument is that the idea of the future needs first and foremost to be seen as an idea in itself, as opposed to being a product of any specific cultural or civilizational background. I was also interested in identifying, as indicated by the subtitle, conflicting ideas of the future. However, the ideas I had in mind here are not specifically civilizational ones, or ones emanating from specific national cultural contexts, but relatively new ones that do not have a specific civilizational context (climate change, the implications of AI, new existential threats from nuclear war, for example).

Now, of course, a more complete analysis would need to take account of conflicting ideas of the future that derive from specific cultural models including those that can be related to civilizations. I am not sure exactly what that might entail. For example, are the dominant ideas of the future in China and Russia shaped by civilizational backgrounds? I suspect the catastrophic history of the twentieth century played a more important role. Afrofuturism and indigenous futures would be good examples of a civilizational angle. In any case it was not my concern to analyse the civilizational sources of future thinking. I employed the notion of the imaginary in rather general cultural terms, rather than civilizational terms. I am also of the view that the greatest challenges for

the future—climate change, AI, and nuclear war—are not primarily to be seen in terms of civilizational histories (unless of course civilization were re-defined in the singular, as human civilization, but I think that is not the sense you mean).

You mention again Ricoeur. I have also not engaged with Ricoeur on the question of imaginaries. I am very familiar with his work as a whole, at least his major works, such as the *Rule of Metaphor*, *The Symbolism of Evil*, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, *Oneself as Another*, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, but I did not find a well-developed argument in *The Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. He does make some, what I think are passing, comments on the imaginary in relation to both ideology and utopia, especially in the context of a discussion of the lectures on Althusser on the former and Mannheim on the latter. It is also very unclear what methodological implications would follow from these remarks.

I fully agree with the point you make in saying that both Arnason and Ricoeur claim that 'the future is also inescapably an interpretation—often a critical interpretation—of instituted society and the past anchored in the present.' Ideas of the future are often critical interpretations of the present and of the past. They relate to potentials within the present that are unrealised but may also become future possibilities. Concerning utopia, Ricoeur was commenting on Mannheim's book *Ideology and Utopia*. Utopia (and I think we should be talking about utopianism, not utopia which is the outcome of utopianism) entails a tension with ideology and is future oriented, until it is realised when it becomes a new reality (many such realizations ended up as dystopias, as the history of the USSR under Stalin showed). Incidentally, concerning Arnason, here I liked very much his book on the USSR, the *Future that Failed* (Arnason 1993).

I do want to stress that while the future is an interpretation it is also not the only aspect to it. There are also other logics at work, unknowability, necessity, existential aspects, even fear. I argued too that the idea of the future is a temporal and spatial concept.

To conclude, let me take the example of the Anthropocene. I would like to say that this is a good example of a social imaginary that is rooted in the present and recent past while being future directed (see Delanty and Mota 2017). It is an interpretative category and mostly expresses a critical attitude, but also an order of governance today. I don't think it is a civilizational category, unless in the sense of being a product of human civilization, and is of a relatively recent origin (most accounts, as in the Great Acceleration thesis, date it to the post 1945 period). There is, of course, the diverse historical context that led to carbon emissions, but these are also of very recent origin. It is difficult to cast it in Castoriadis's

framework, since it is not just a radical imaginary—which as I understand him, is related to the assertion of autonomy—and nor is it merely a matter of diverse imaginary significations. Given the exegetical problems of figuring out exactly what Castoriadis said and what he meant, I think we will tie ourselves into knots if we have to rely on his concepts, especially as are there are different views, as in your comments. But my problem here, as I said, is that I do not see that many of the main expressions of social imaginaries are primarily civilizational in the cultural as opposed to the existential sense of the term. We have also the problem that for Castoriadis the radical imaginary is broadly to be viewed in normatively positive terms, as bound up with the project of autonomy as opposed to domination. However, many radical social imaginaries are of highly dubious nature and are contrary to autonomy; for example, communism (Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot), fascism, and many violent nationalist movements. All of these were driven by radical social imaginaries—various mixes of ideology and utopia—that were continuously re-interpreted until they finally collapsed in dystopias.

To sum up, a perspective on social imaginaries is important for the analysis of many aspects of the social world and it is central to the idea of the future. It offers a critical and hermeneutical perspective. The are many intellectual sources to it, such as the authors we have been discussing, but there are also major differences between these positions. In the case of Castoriadis, who has been a key figure, the problems lie in the absence of meaningful historical references and unclear conceptualization of the different aspects of the imaginary; in the case of Arnason, a limitation is that his approach requires a civilizational context, which restricts too much analysis of specific issues that are not primarily civilizational. Finally, my only disagreement with what you appear to be calling a social imaginary is that from a methodological point of view, the category of the imaginary must be related to other concepts, for example reason and emotion. On its own, when it comes to the analysis of ideas of the future, this is essential and therefore a wider theoretical framework is needed.

I would like to thank all interlocutors for putting these challenging questions to me. It has been from my side a really fruitful exercise and has certainly sharpened my own thinking about social imaginaries.

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