

Literature Review: Social Theories of the Imagination

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These notes constitute a brief survey of theoretical works in the humanities and social sciences which share a common interest in the social functions of the human imagination. Though the imagination has long been a concern within aesthetics and philosophy and occupies a central place in the contemporary philosophy of mind (Gendler 2011), its role in social formations has begun to be theorized only in recent decades. Of course, the term appears in any number of scholarly works on culture and society, often in semi-colloquial expressions like “the popular imagination.” This casual usage tends to treat imagination’s sociality in a self-evident manner, without seriously interrogating the collective and collectivizing functions of human imaginative faculties. Too often, “the popular imagination” acts as a synonym for “mass culture,” blurring potentially fruitful theorizations of the links between the imagination’s social dynamics and its more personal aesthetic and creative dimensions.

With this in mind, I have been conducting research across several disciplines in order to locate social theories which: a) theorize the imagination as a decisive factor in social formations or in human socialization, and b) recognize a connection between the social imagination and the traditional understanding of the imagination as the aesthetic or “fictionalizing” capacity of the human mind. The pages that follow represent a sample of my findings so far. These are not meant to be in any way authoritative or exhaustive; many important theorists and discourses have been left out, and many more remain to be engaged with. However, the wide variety of disciplines treated in this short survey – as well as the commonalities between scholars’ treatments of the term – signal that a theoretical fusion of the “fictional imagination” and the social imagination would be both possible and desirable.

The Social Imaginary: Imagination as Political Force

The term “social imaginary,” theorized and popularized by the political philosopher Charles Taylor, has gained significant influence in the last ten years as a descriptor for the collective imaginative work of societies. A “social imaginary” refers to the subconscious image of social relations, defined by Taylor as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2003: 23). In other words, the social imaginary is the sum of social arrangements as implicitly understood by the members of a given society. Taylor develops the term in order to delineate the transition in Western Europe from the religious moral order of the medieval age to the “modern social imaginary” which is based on concepts of the market economy, secular democracy, and the public sphere. However, the concept of a social imaginary itself is easily abstracted from this context, offering an excellent shorthand for describing how individuals subconsciously conceive a totality of social existence through images, motifs, and practices (Taylor 2003: 63). This flexibility has no doubt contributed to the concept’s current popularity.

The influence of Taylor’s term is evidenced by the founding of the interdisciplinary journal *Social Imaginaries* in 2015. In their introduction to the first volume, the editors describe their hopes for the concept of the social imaginary as a “new approach to the question of modernity” (Adams *et al.* 2015: 8). Western political thought has maintained a one-sided focus on reason as the central principle of modern social formations, relegating to the imagination to the isolated role of imitating society within individual minds or in fiction. The concept of the social imaginary can correct this rationalist bias, since it understands the imagination as creative and productive, and highlights the “phenomenon of collectively instituted meaning.” This approach to social thought regards political systems as indelibly fused with the emotive and semiotic universe of culture. Social creativity – new kinds of relationships, intercultural connections, creative protest, etc. – are seen as the

workings of a society's collective imagination.

In addition to Taylor, the editors of *Social Imaginaries* cite the radical philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis as a major influence on the journal. In his major work, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis re-examines the fundamental nature of what a social institution is. He contests the traditional functional-economic view of society, which sees laws and institutions as existing in order to full physical human needs in a rational manner. In Castoriadis's view, human needs are neither purely biological nor static. Humans also have fundamental *symbolic* needs, and the definition of what constitutes "need" in a society is in constant mutation. Consequently, a symbolic network, embodied in language and social institutions, is a prerequisite for society. Drawing from previous ideas in continental philosophy, Castoriadis argues that, since one cannot perform a rational systematic interpretation of symbols, social institutions do not in fact emanate from rational needs based on the logic of production and economic reality but from the effects of an image-evoking, signifying process which Castoriadis calls the "radical imaginary" (Castoriadis 1997 [1987]: 72–76). The social world exists through significations, which in turn exist through an imaginary function. "History is impossible and inconceivable outside of the *productive* or *creative imagination*, outside of what we have called the *radical imaginary*" (90–92).

Castoriadis sees a possibility for human freedom precisely in the nonrationality of imaginary systems. Nonrational systems are never perfect and thus not fully determining; human agency can manipulate the system to a degree. While Castoriadis focuses on alienation, the contemporary Taylorian notion of the social imaginary applies this malleability towards the possibility of fostering deeper understanding between nations and cultures. The editors of *Social Imaginaries* conceive social imaginaries as plural phenomena: "social imaginaries – as cultural articulations of the world – elucidate cultures as open rather than closed" (Adams *et al.* 2015: 17). The influential social thinker Craig Calhoun has posed the prospect in this way: "To say that [society is] a product of imagination doesn't mean that it's just easily changed, but it does mean that it *can* be changed, that we can imagine it a

different way. We can begin to think a different way and make a different reality” (Calhoun 2014). In other words, dialogue and creative sharing based on a recognition of the imagined aspect of social existence can help bridge cultural gaps which traditional diplomacy cannot.

Social Imagination in Cultures, Nations, and the World

Considerations of the imagination as a factor in social organization appear throughout the range of disciplines which deal with human culture. Theories of the imagination have encouraged interdisciplinary borrowing, as thinkers pursue productive models to describe the collectivizing functions of cultures, nations, and society in general. The scholarly interest in globalization which arose after the end of the Cold War played a role in strengthening the transdisciplinary appeal of the social imagination in the 21st Century.

The semiotic theory of culture promulgated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz can be seen as an initial flashpoint. For Geertz, “culture” is composed of systems of meaning. Cultural activities such as rituals and festivals operate on semiotic principles similar to those of language, rhetoric, or artistic expression (Geertz 1973). Geertz further claims that cultural systems function as maps for humans to understand themselves and their social environment. Therefore, he asserts, the study of culture is better conducted through an interpretive process than through an experimental one (1973: 24–25). Applying these principles to specific cases, Geertz freely compares collective social action such as religious ceremony with literature and art under the common heading of “significant works of the human imagination.” Art and ritual both offer means to examine the ways in which “collective fantasy color[s] collective life” (1982: 40–42). While not explicitly a social theory of the imagination, Geertz’s anthropology offers a method for simultaneously analyzing different kinds of social and cultural behavior as creative acts of meaning-making. His emphasis on the power of the semiotic and the imaginative world within social life has provided inspiration for various thinkers up to the present day.

As a case in point, philosopher Paul Ricouer (1986) specifically utilizes

Geertz's semiotic conception of culture in order to propose the existence of a "social imagination," a mental faculty which he claims contributes to the dynamic constitution of society (Ricoeur 1986: 3). According to Ricoeur, the social imagination functions through a dialectic between "ideology" and "utopia." Ricoeur breaks down the Marxian distinction between ideology and reality, claiming that ideology is actually analogous to what Geertz calls a cultural system, and therefore has an integrative, identity-giving function as well as a distortive one. For Ricoeur, ideology is the image of society "as it is." In contrast, the concept of utopia allows humans to perceive the contingency of current social formations and consequently imagine the possibility of social change. The interaction between these two facets of the social imagination allows humans to function under given social conditions without being completely contained by them. Similarly to Geertz, Ricoeur believes that artistic works, in particular those of fiction, play an integral role in the work of the social imagination, since artistic creation is able to "help shape a new reality" (Ricoeur 1986: 309).

Another important contribution is Benedict Anderson's landmark work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1991 [1983]). Anderson figures nations as "cultural artifacts," thus complicating a simple understanding of nationalism as a political phenomenon. "It would make things easier," Anderson claims, "if one treated [nationalism] as if it belonged with "kinship" and "religion" rather than with "liberalism" or "fascism"" (1991: 5). He demonstrates how nations constitute imaginary extensions of local communities, and are made possible through widespread participation in particular media cultures. In the modern period, the growth of print media – mainly newspapers but also novels and other fictional works – was essential in the formation of national consciousness, since printed texts allowed citizens to perceive the sense of a "solid community moving steadily down or up history" through "steady, anonymous simultaneous activity" (26). Media participation, cultural affinities, and political ideology simultaneously work through the citizens' imaginative process to form a subconscious vision of a single society.

Imagined Communities's intertwining of culture, media, politics through a

conception of the imagination has undergone numerous re-applications. For example, Charles Taylor builds on Anderson's ideas to formulate the broader category of social imaginary described above. More recently, political scientist Manfred Steger (2009) has built upon both Anderson and Taylor's work to theorize a nascent "global imaginary," which he sees as "a superimposition of the global village on the conventional nation-state" (2009: 10). In social and political life throughout the world, Steger argues, an increasing number of conflicts, movements, and accords are conducted through appeals to a global community. He cites not only secular market-based economic globalization processes but also global fundamentalist movements, for whom religious and political ideologies fuse through the imagining of a worldwide community of the faithful (20–22). Though Steger claims that "the twenty-first century promises to be an ideational interregnum in which both the global and national stimulate people's deep-seated understandings of community" (8), he strongly implies that the modern social imaginary of the nation-state will eventually be replaced by a global imaginary.

In contrast to unifying visions of modernity proposed by figures like Taylor and Steger, global studies pioneer Arjun Appadurai's work *Modernity at Large* (1996) rethinks Anderson's thesis in the light of globalization's disruptive characteristics. Appadurai proposes that, as a result of global migration patterns and shared communication technology across the world, the unifying power of the nation as imagined community suffers a series of disjunctions, leading to the formation of "imagined worlds" – bricolages of mediated images, narratives, ideologies, and socioeconomic pressures assembled in the minds of individuals. As a result, Appadurai claims, "imagination has become the quotidian mental work of ordinary people" (pp. 3–4). He describes this imaginative work as a piecing together of one's life "using the cinematic and social tools at [one's] disposal" (63). As the diversity of people and information increases in a given society, interactions between different social visions become more complicated, forming the seeds of social and even political conflict. However, this complication of the social imaginary can also be seen as a transitional state where the social imagination is able to experiment with new meaning systems and relational maps to give

order to an increasingly complex social landscape. Of the theorists cited here, Appadurai is perhaps the most explicit in describing how the creative forces of popular culture play a role in the re-imagining of society.

Fictional Imagination and Society: *Otaku* Studies in Japan

The imagination as a category also figures strongly within the branch of Japanese cultural studies that might loosely be called “*otaku* studies.” This type of criticism examines the behaviors of the *otaku* fan cultures surrounding Japanese anime and related media. In *otaku* studies, the term “imagination” largely refers to any creative activity on the part of *otaku* in relation to their favorite fictional media. However, many works in this field expand the effect of this “subcultural imagination” seeing the imaginative work of fan cultures as mediating the fans’ experience of the social world at large.

Critic Hiroki Azuma’s *The Birth of Game-like Realism* [*Gēmu teki riarizumu no tanjō*] (2007) is especially relevant here. Seeking a way to conceptualize the myriad genres and media platforms that make up *otaku* culture, Azuma concludes that they share a common conception of stories based on the autonomy and shared reality of fictional characters, which makes possible references across works, genres, and platforms. He provocatively terms this common belief in the ontological value of the characters an “imaginative environment” [*sōzōryoku no kankyō*] (Azuma 2007: 60–64). Azuma notes that affinity for this fictional world is a sociological phenomenon in that the “2nd dimension” of animated images is self-consciously “*treated as real*” rather than truly believed in, a treatment which has social effects (22). *Otaku* perform their relationship to the fictional world in their everyday social relations, which causes the representation systems of *otaku* culture to diffuse into the wider social imaginary of Japan. This re-formulation is a welcome development from Azuma’s previous description of *otaku* culture, which overemphasized a solipsistic, unreflective form of isolated consumption (Azuma 2001). The concept of the imaginative environment can serve as a tool for connecting the semiotic universe of subcultural fictions with other forms of meaningful social behavior.

Sociologist Izumi Tsuji (2012) attempts to theorize a direct connection between the subcultural imagination and the wider society, proposing that the fan practices of *densha otaku* (train enthusiasts) have mirrored the patterns of a larger cultural imagination shaped by the vicissitudes of 20th-Century Japanese history. Tsuji conceives of the imagination in terms of directions; imagination moves the thought process away from the embodied present towards an idealized mental realm. According to Tsuji, the Japanese train fans' imagination expanded first spatially in the military period, then temporally in the high-growth period, and finally collapsed inward after the Bubble crash. He ends his analysis by criticizing mainstream Japanese society's inability to foster a greater flexibility of the imagination. Tsuji further develops this linkage between *otaku* practice and social change in a paper co-written with Daisuke Okabe (2014), where the two writers claim that *otaku* culture can “provide hints for how to live in the coming society” by modeling examples of communication and lifestyle patterns within a media-saturated environment (2014: 15–16).

One final treatment of the imagination in this field can be found in some extensions of *wakamonoron* (theories about the youth) which consider the role that anime, manga, and other subcultural works play within Japanese youth sociality. Two relatively recent examples are Shintarō Nakanishi's *Social-style Imagination [Shakai-kei no sōzōryoku]* (2011) and Yasuchika Yamazaki's *A One-Meter Radius Imagination [Hankei ichi mētoru no sōzōryoku]* (2014). In these two studies, subcultural works, particularly the genre of youth-oriented fiction called “light novels,” function as tools for uncovering “youth culture's imagination,” which Yamazaki defines as the “ability to shed light on oneself, on others, and on the surrounding world in terms of the past, present, and future” (Yamazaki 2014: 15–18). Taking specific issue with descriptions of youth as antisocial or apathetic, Nakanishi analyses the dialogue and narrative patterns of light novels in order to identify a social imagination based on the “politics of fellowship” (Nakanishi 2011: 152–153). Nakanishi claims that the supposedly asocial world of youth found in light novels is actually an indirect challenge by the youthful imagination toward adult society, a kind of resistance which takes the form of

reshaping their social relations on their own terms. There are some problems with these two theorists' approaches; their presumption of an equivalence between subcultural fandom and youth in general is perhaps the most notable. However, their portrayal of fictional media as positive factors within the imaginative lives of young Japanese deserves attention.

Commentary

As this short sample has hopefully indicated, the wide variety of works on the social imagination share a number of important convergences, as well as possibilities for further application.

In the first place, we can see that an emphasis on the imagination encourages semiotic view of human sociopolitical life. It is interesting, for example, that Geertz and Castoriadis, who apparently had little to no influence on each other, came to such similar interpretations of the constitution of the human world. Both scholars, in different ways and for different purposes, propose that society's grounding institutions are symbolic in their operation. Both aim to resist the modern tendency to examine social activity through one-dimensional rationalism. Attention to the role of the imagination allows each of them to construct their alternative theoretical frameworks. Indeed, the introduction of imagination into the social tapestry allows for a more integrated vision of human activity, where ideologies, creeds, and kinship are interwoven with aesthetics and popular tastes. Far from impeding a functional society, nonrational elements actually propel it forward. This view is most fully illustrated in Appadurai's "quotidian work of the imagination" and to a lesser extent in Ricouer. Positive adaptation to social change occurs on the level of creative practices.

Congruously, the sense of human agency which the imagination implies helps theorists to better account for differences in worldview. Taylor's theory of the social imaginary and its various permutations assert that modernity – as well as the nation-states which comprise it – is defined not only through technological and institutional development but also by shared subconscious images and communal understandings. The social imaginary

can therefore ground analysis of contemporary geopolitical tensions with in the realm of human perception. Thinkers like Steger and the editors of *Social Imaginaries* seem to believe that the concept will even offer a way around the impasse in current international society, where global imperatives clash with the deep-seated affiliations of national cultures. By shifting the attention from functional-economic constructions to semiotic ones, the social imaginary offers a wider range of potential common ground in dialogue.

As a tool of sociocultural analysis, the concept of the social imaginary is not without its drawbacks. Preoccupation with large populations and large scales of time make it somewhat ill-equipped, at least in its current form, to theorize sociocultural patterns at the local level. In addition, the disjuncture in the global cultural economy, which Appadurai and others have convincingly shown, has the dual effect of diversifying the modes of cultural life within national borders while inducing the intercultural borrowing across them. Finally, the dominance of media cultures in contemporary societies encourages forms of identification and community which are not directly connected to any social or political worldview. Further applications of the social imaginary will require critical application and refinement in order to account for increasing social complexity.

With this exigency in mind, I believe that the most promising path in the study of the social imagination lies in clarifying the interactivity between the fictional and the social imagination. In this light, the work of Japanese *otaku* studies offers an interesting prospect in its similarities with the wider-ranging Euro-American social theories. For example, the “imaginational environment” described by Azuma exhibits the challenge to social reality which Ricouer attributes to the concept of utopia, and its dissemination into the wider discourses of Japanese society serves as a fine example of Appadurai’s “quotidian work” of the imagination. Tsuji’s spatial dynamics of imagination also evoke Ricouer’s utopian concept, in that the imagination is urged by social change to look beyond the possible. Finally, the *wakamono* sociologists see in subcultural works a total vision of youth social relations, Taylor’s social imaginary (or Ricouer’s ideology) in miniature. We might notice two analogous, inverted trajectories here. Geertz, Ricouer, and

Appadurai draw connections from social and cultural systems, through the imagination, and into arts and fiction. Azuma and the other Japanese theorists of subcultures draw connections from the fictions and their related practices, through the imagination, and out into the social realm. The fact that these two vastly different enterprises trace a path through the same point suggests the existence of a fluid continuum between the imaginative activity of fiction and the imaginative activity that leads to social formations. I believe that research in this direction would prove immensely useful for the humanities and social sciences at large.

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