ArtMonitor

WORKING PAPER

Preliminaries to a mapping and genealogy of "imaginary" and "political imaginary" as terms of art

Prof. Mick Wilson

ArtMonitor Working Paper No. 007a (Eng)
January 2025

Artistic Faculty
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract

This working paper seeks to contribute to the initial discussion on the agenda and parameters for a two-year research project (2025-2027) within the Centre for Art and the Political Imaginary (CAPIm). The Centre for Art and the Political Imaginary is committed to interdisciplinary practice and research in the meeting between contemporary art and the future of politics and is based at HDK-Valand and Kungl. Konsthögskolan. A CAPIm project entitled "Mapping of the Political Imaginary" (2025-2027) will construct a broad overview of the different ways in which "imaginary" and "political imaginary" and related terms are used in contemporary art, artistic research and across a range of other disciplines and practices including anthropology; art criticism, history and theory; cultural studies; curatorial practice; history; literary studies; philosophy; political theory; and social theory. The goal is not to produce definitive categories but to map divergent usage. This paper describes some of the issues that the mapping might address and identifies some sources that may be of relevance.

Keywords

Imagination; Imaginary; Political Imaginary; Social Imaginary.

Preliminaries to a mapping and genealogy of "imaginary" and "political imaginary" as terms of art.[1] **Mick Wilson**

> With imagination, it often seems that there is no agreement at all about its most basic phenomena and features. It is a long way, for instance, from Thomas Hobbes's (1588–1679) notion that images are vibrations in the nerves to the early nineteenth-century, post-Kantian claim that they are the creative product of the Absolute. Even whether the various words thinkers have used to name the phenomenon all have the same meaning is more than a little uncertain. At first glance, what Plato called *eikāsia*, what Aristotle named *phantasia*, what the Latin middle ages parsed as various forms of both *phantasia* and *imaginatio*, what we divide into imagination, fantasy, and creativity seem to be basically the same thing—but just a little investigation opens questions and even chasms. The more widely we cast our intellectual nets, encompassing more authors, more centuries, more disciplines and fields, the likelier that the diverse conceptions of imagination will simply bewilder us. [2]

> The concept of the social imaginary has been introduced as an alternative to theories of the imagination. Whereas the imagination tends to be conceived as a faculty that we possess as individuals, the concept of social imaginary is meant to encompass significations within which individuals are socialized and that thus precede the formation of individuals themselves. To put it bluntly, we could say that, whereas the imagination is a faculty that an individual possesses, the social imaginary is the social context that possesses individuals.[3]

This working paper seeks to contribute to the initial discussions on specifying the agenda and parameters for a two-year research project (2025-2027) within CAPIm.[4] The project entitled "Mapping of the Political Imaginary" will construct a broad overview of the different ways in which "imaginary" and "political imaginary" and related terms are used in contemporary art, artistic research and across a range of other disciplines and practices including anthropology; art criticism, history and theory; cultural studies; curatorial practice; history; literary studies; philosophy; political theory; and social theory. The goal is not to produce definitive categories but to map divergent usage.

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[1] "Term of art" is used here in the sense of a word or phrase that has a specialized meaning or technical function within a particular field or professional context, but which also has an everyday usage that is divergent from the specialist use. The everyday use of the term "imaginary" to indicate unreality (as in "their imaginary hope"; "only in her imagination"; and "an imaginary friend") is different (though not completely unrelated) to the technical use of the term imaginary in Lacanian psychoanalysis or in phenomenology.

[2] Dennis L. Sepper "The Cartesian Heritage: Kant and the Conceptual Topology of Imagination and Reason" in *Understanding Imagination: The Reason of Images* (Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London: Springer, 2013): 4.

[3] Chiara Bottici "Imagination, Imaginary, Imaginal: Towards a New Social Ontology?" *Social Epistemology,* 33:5 (2019): 433-441, DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2019.1652861

[4] https://capim.se/en

Preliminary notes on methodology

The terms "mapping" and "genealogy" are provisionally adopted as a description of the study proposed. Mapping indicates the description of a range of definitions, glosses and usages and their interrelationships.[5] Genealogy indicates the description of shifting usage within different lines of descent over time, considering the divergences and convergences in different usages. Informing the choice of these two metaphors (mapping and genealogy) is the wish to avoid assuming that there is an underlying singular entity (*the* imaginary) that is a common *objective* reference. Rather, the working assumption is that whenever the terms (imaginary/ political imaginary) are deployed there is a wide plurality of concepts, figures, discourses and practices in play, each potentially in service of very different intentions and understandings. These terms can be used with respect to very different referential fields.

Accepting the possibility that there is no one common referent in play, it is still maintained that it might be meaningful to map and trace lines of development in definition, glosses and usages of these terms. This is rooted in a materialist approach to discourse and practice. It is a matter of observing utterances (things spoken, things written) and other practices (other things done not just utterance) to consider situated usages and expressed intentions. In observing, this form of study tries to remain alert to the practice of observation as itself situated and not abstracted (nor *imagined*) as remote and separable from the utterances and practices chosen for observation. Observation itself is understood as a matter of engaged use and active participation in the scene of utterance, and not simply as a grammar of dichotomous subject-object relations

The purpose of the mapping and genealogy is to focus on the substantive differences in how the terms function as part of doing research and the different networks of ideas implicated in these terms' usage. An understanding of these differences is then proposed as a resource within the wider project of building a picture (note the imaging metaphor again) of what is at stake in the intersections of artistic research and questions of the imaginary and particularly the political imaginary. While in English we

[5] It is often suggested in informal discussion that "mapping" is an intrinsically colonial and extractivist technique, inseparable from the imperatives of domination and tainted by its centrality in colonial and imperial projects. This informal argument often proceeds from citing decolonial analyses that claim:

> *Durante el Renacimiento, los europeos colonizaron el tiempo y el espacio, la invención de las eras históricas Antigüedad y la Edad Media, la cartografía, la apropiación y la explotación de las Américas, y el establecimiento de la idea de que la modernidad europea era el apogeo de la historia humana y el modelo para el mundo para emular*. (Mignolo, 2011, Preface.)
> (This may be roughly translated: "During the Renaissance, Europeans colonized time and space, inventing the historical eras of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, cartography, appropriation, and exploitation of the Americas, and establishing the idea that European modernity was the apogee of human history and the model for the world to emulate. ")

This claim is widely reproduced, however, it is importantly not a claim against all mapping practices:

> The historical trauma of coloniality is reproduced through the continued subjugation of bodies via such Western technologies as Cartesian cartography and its ontological understanding of body and environment as separate, which enables coloniality to persist by controlling, managing, and exploiting nature and people. (Sletto, Novoa, and Vasudevan, 2023, 151-2)

Indeed, the analysis of colonial mapping is often contrasted with other projects of mapping that counter the logics of domination (Sletto, Novoa, and Vasudevan, 2023; Benson et al., 2023.) The argument against specific cartographic technologies has for some become generalized to a claim against mapping tout court. This style of expansionist critique–dilating the critique from address to specific techniques and purposes of mapping to mapping in general–does not persuasively recommend against using the metaphor of mapping. Although, it does prompt caution about the varieties of mapping that the metaphor might be used to invoke.

can identify a series of word derivations from imagination to imaginary and some reasonably well attested etymologies for these terms, it becomes a little trickier when we turn to the question of the equivalence of other terms in English not directly derived from image/imagination (for example "myth" and "symbol"). Also, when we turn to other languages there are issues of equivalence in translation, for example in Swedish there is no easy equivalence for the French or English philosophical and other specialist use of these terms.[6]

Range of reference

In considering the breadth and range of the terms in play, it is interesting to note that in the evolution of the journal *Social Imaginaries* to become *The International Journal of Social Imaginaries* in 2022 there is a shift in frames of analysis and study. While the earlier version of the journal worked "to gather philosophical, social-theoretical, and broader social-scientific research on the role of the creative imagination and of social imaginaries" the new iteration of the journal responds also to a "growing variety of approaches and disciplines" that "focus on social imaginaries as ways in which people collectively and pre-theoretically make sense of their social and personal existence, to constitute a collective space of meanings or semantic space for co-being." This leads to both a continuity and an expansion of the mission:

> An emphasis on the phenomenological and hermeneutical analyses of the imagination and the collective creation of social life, politics, representations, power, myth, and modes of actions (such as social movements) continues because the collective level is a major point of distinction for the field. In the human sciences, phenomena studied as social life, politics, representation, power, myth, and modes of praxis are often understood as subjective or inter-subjective, or at most systemic. By adding the collective level of meaning as an essential reference point in interpreting and debating empirical issues, the journal further elaborates a different conception of collective and individual levels of imagination in examining social imaginaries as collective institutions.[7]

If we place this in relation with descriptions of imagining, the imaginary and imagination within artistic research contexts, an interesting range of convergences and divergences becomes apparent. Consider the recent announcement issued by the internationally acclaimed research platform and art institution based in Utrecht, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, under the heading "Basecamp for Tactical Imaginaries: Building Cultural Infrastructure Anew":

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[6] A colleague, Andjeas Ejicksson, in preparing translations of materials for CAPIm has shared his sense of the challenge of translating these terms from English to Swedish. He notes in his email correspondence that there is no good translation of "imaginary" in Swedish. Sometimes it is possible to write "*imaginär*" (for example in translations of Lacan's "*l'ordre imaginaire*" which becomes "den imaginära ordningen" in Swedish "and "the imaginary order" in English), but it mostly does not work so well with respect to the conceptual range of the English term in scholarly usages. There is then a choice between *"inbillning*" (imagination in one sense but extends also to the senses of "delusion", "conceit", "fantasy") and "*föreställning*" ("perception") or the use of some combination of these as translations of the English terms, however, this is not always possible. For example, Benedict Anderson's "imaginary community" if translated as "*föreställd gemenskap*" in Swedish becomes very rigid in certain constructions.

[7] Editorial Collective IJSI, 2002: 5

> The terrifying undoing of the promise of democracy in the rise of anti-democratic, authoritarian, right-wing politics in the Netherlands and worldwide necessitates cultural formations that cultivate thinking, imagining, and acting; these approaches must prioritize equity and repair to counteract and reinvent the status quo. Recognizing the need for cultural space to function as a location of intimacy, critique, exploration, and possibility, the convenings focus on tactical imagination and collective practices that provide both respite and a place from which to act.[8]

This invocation of "tactical imagination" is followed by acknowledging the defunding of the institution and a reference to a specific method of work (identified with the practice of the BAK's artistic director Jeanne van Heeswijk) "long-time collective practice of learning by radically imagining and embodying a more just future."

In these two instances of institutional projects–an academic journal and an art institution–each predicated through the centrality of the imaginary and imagination, each undergoing substantial change (partly re-naming and partly renewing their respective missions) there is an interesting contrast. This is a contrast between the affirmation of study as end in itself and study as the condition of possibility for pre-figuring the future. This contrast may also be apprehended through a contrast in explicit political positioning. However, it may be worth considering that the differences in play might also pertain to fundamentally different referential fields and different understandings of what the imaginary is, and what kind of agency is possible with respect to it and its operations. Part of the mapping task will be to explore these issues and take account not only of these statements but also of the actual operations and practices enacted adjacent to, or embedded within, these discursive productions.

There is a further example of the claim on the imaginary, which challenges the ways in which the imaginary might be apprehended as an object of study or inquiry. This challenge is framed by the theorist, artist and researcher Denise Ferreira da Silva in her contribution to the catalogue of the 32nd São Paulo Art Biennial "*Incerteza viva*" (Living Uncertainty) in 2016. Da Silva problematises the ontological/epistemological premisses of modern knowledge because of their role in producing the violence of raciality:

> Since the early 20th century, articulations of cultural difference in the modern text added a social scientific signifier designed to delimit the reach of the ethical notion of humanity. Precisely because they too are specimens of modern thought, the available critical tools cannot support an ethico-political

[8] See https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/634971/basecamp-for-tactical-imaginaries-building-cultural-infrastructure-anew/ (accessed 6/1/2025) It is noteworthy that BAK is a key institutional locus to consider in mapping the construct within the contemporary art field. BAK's *Former West* project has arguable had an mimportant role in advancing the currency of this construct in contemporary art and artistci research. This project announces itself as "a long-term, transnational research, education, publishing, and exhibition project in the field of contemporary art and theory". It focuses on "the repercussions of the political, cultural, and economic events of 1989 for the contemporary condition". It uses "the propositional imaginary" of "Former West" as a way to challenge the dominant account of political change that speaks of "the former East", and so also challenges the implication that it is the former Soviet sphere that has undergone profound political change, while the hegemonic West remains intact. This is an expanded exhibition project that both discloses and seeks to intervene in the political imaginaries of post-1989 Europe. An important reference here also is Simon Sheikh's doctoral thesis at Lund University (2012) *Exhibition-Making and the Political Imaginary: On Modalities and Potentialities of Curatorial Practice*. Sheikh addresses exhibition making as a mode of *production* of political imaginaries drawing on Castoriadis's model. Sheikh was also a key partner within the *Former West* project, and a co-editor with Maria Hlavojova of the project's main publication: *Former West* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017).

> intervention capable of undermining cultural difference's capacity to produce an unbridgeable ethical divide. That is, they cannot effectively interrupt deployments of otherwise unacceptable total violence onto those placed on "the Other" (cultural) side of humanity.[9]

The argument then is that the imagination in its indeterminacy, precisely in its imprecision, offers a path that can avoid the production of violence intrinsic to what da Silva terms "the modern text":

> An ethico-political program that does not reproduce the violence of modern thought requires re-thinking sociality from without the modern text. Because only the end of the world as we *know* it, I am convinced, can dissolve cultural differences' production of human collectives as "strangers" with fixed and irreconcilable moral attributes. This requires that we release thinking from the grip of certainty and embrace the imagination's power to create with unclear and confused, or uncertain impressions, which Kant (1724-1804) postulated are inferior to what is produced by the formal tools of the Understanding. A figuring of The World nourished by the imagination would inspire us to rethink sociality without the abstract fixities produced by the Understanding and the partial and total violence they authorize – against humanity's cultural (non-white/non-European) and physical (more-than-human) "Others."[10]

This invocation of the imagination moves in a different register than that of the sociological (or indeed of any -*logos*) and suggests that we take seriously the plurality and irreducible difference of imaginings at work in these different discussions of the imaginary.

These initial considerations of the approach to the task of mapping and genealogy are now followed by a somewhat *ad hoc* indication of some sources that may be used as points of departure. (This following section is based on notes developed for the course "On Friendship and the Political Imaginary" that is an asociated initiative of CAPIm.) A more systematic approach to identifying and selecting sources will be developed by the research team during Spring 2025.

Some points of departure

The terms "social imaginary" and "political imaginary" enjoy wide currency in a range of disciplines including social theory, political theory, anthropology, cultural studies, history and contemporary art practice. The "imaginary" within this compound term typically refers not to imagination as unreality, but rather to imagination as material construction of experience, as integral to reality-building in experience. This usage often draws upon psychoanalysis and phenomenology though not in a necessarily systematic nor dogmatic way. (Naming 'imagination' as one of the necessary conditions for *accessing* or *experiencing* or *constructing* 'reality' is based in part on a philosophical tradition that includes Kant's critical philosophy and that also traces back to earlier psychological theories.) The current usage of

[9] Denise Ferreira da Silva "On Difference Without Separability" in *32nd Bienal de São Paulo – Incerteza Viva. Catalogue*. eds. Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças. (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016): 57-65 Url: https://www.are.na/block/7078431 (Accessed 6/1/2025)

[10] Ibid.

these terms emerges out of the work of diverse philosophers, cultural historians, social and political theorists, and scholars including Cornelius Castoriadis, Benedict Anderson, Claude Lefort, Drucilla Cornell, Charles Taylor, and more recently Wendy Brown, and Manfred B. Steger.[11] One way of construing the differentiation between the 'social' and 'political' imaginaries is provided by this introduction to a special journal issue on political imaginaries:

> The concept of political imaginaries manifests in the first instance as a specific zone within the broader field of social imaginaries, which, in turn, draws from phenomenological strands of French social and political thought. The field of social imaginaries forms a particular constellation within the broader "cultural turn" in the human sciences. Charles Taylor gave broad currency to the term "social imaginaries" in *Modern Social Imaginaries*. In so doing, he leaned on Cornelius Castoriadis's earlier elucidations of social imaginary significations. Social imaginary significations were central to Castoriadis's elaboration of the creativity of history, and society as an imaginary institution. … Castoriadis also occasionally used the term "political imaginary", which had a more specific meaning (in this case, a comparison of ancient Greek and modern articulations of the democratic imaginary), and highlights the importance of considering society as a political institution. Social imaginary significations are not reducible, however, to "cultural meaning" alone; rather, they are best understood as "cultural projects of power". Perhaps surprisingly, however, Castoriadis did not systematically pursue a theory of power. Overall, he tended to emphasize forms of implicit power, on the one hand, and the inter-relationship between instituting society and instituted society, on the other. These considerations lead beyond the imaginary dimension of the political and highlight the importance of social doing as central to politics (la politique), as well as the imaginary dimension of society, more broadly.
> Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort … are part of a revival of Western political philosophy that has included Hannah Arendt and others also. This revival has sought to broaden the horizons of politics as it is often understood in political sociology and political science. However, why talk about "political imaginaries" and not just politics? The term indicates that there is an imaginary dimension to the political activities in a society. Indeed, this term points to the centrality, but also the indeterminacy, of meaning and signification, on the one hand, and the motivation for political action, on the other. Thus, to act politically means to be engaged in struggles over society's meaning and significations…[12]

A device often used to exemplify the role of the political imaginary is Benedict Anderson's (1983) reading of national formations/nations/national identities in terms of "imagined communities". The political imaginary of nationalism constructs the national community as a collectivity more extensive than any feasible face-to-face community, and therefore requiring imaginative projection through various cultural forms – anthems, flags, rituals, public spectacles, memorials, historical narratives, folk-psychology of 'national character' and other informal belief systems to delimit 'the nation'.

> The nation… is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even

[11] Key sources include: C. Castoriadis (1975) *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, and B. Anderson (1983) *Imagined Communities*; and M. B. Steger (2008) *The Rise of the Global Imaginary: Political Ideologies from the French Revolution to the Global War on Terror*. Here is a bibliography in development for the project.

[12] Suzi Adams, Jeremy C. A. Smith and Ingerid S. Straume "Political Imaginaries in Question" *Critical Horizons*, 13.1 (2012): 5-11

> the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion… In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

Another way in which the term is anchored, is through Cornelius Castoriadis' ideas of the imaginary institution of society. The research programme "CulturaI Theory and Theory of the Political Imaginary" at the University of Konstanz in the early 2000s defined the context of its inquiry two decades ago as follows:

> For a long time imaginary processes were relegated to the history of ideas and at most considered to be complementary phenomena to processes of 'hard' social materiality. The most important recent theories (Castoriadis … etc.), however, show that the social and political order rests on an order of the imaginary, which dissolves alternatives of the type base/superstructure … No society exists without institutions, and institutions in the sense used here are imaginary. Merely representing a collection of individuals as a collective agent, to enable their functioning as an institution requires a whole series of genuinely aesthetic procedures. Imaginary integrals must be created in which the parties involved reflect themselves while at the same time retrospectively finding their way to a (new) image of the self, a new relationship to themselves… Along with the study of institutions, the theory of the political imaginary includes the wide field of the politics of the past, that is, the retrospective creation of tradition and legitimization of political organizations, as is currently being done for example with respect to the European Union. But no less imaginary than providing images of the self is the construction of the other: the foreigner, the enemy. Current world politics offers sufficient illustrative material on the power of the imaginary. It also presents the opportunity to focus theoretically on the renewed connection between politics and religion since the failure of the secularization thesis.[13]

A key challenge in mapping the widespread use of these terms of the imaginary will be to take account of what has changed over the last few decades in how the problematic of the imaginary has been constructed in different fields of inquiry. It is also important to attend to key differences in how the diversity of the field of usage is described and conceptualised. For example, in the following overview of the construct "social imaginaries" from a recent publication, there is a sense of an emergent paradigm that synthesizes across multiple conceptualisations:

> Investigations into social imaginaries have burgeoned in recent years. From 'the capitalist imaginary' to the 'democratic imaginary', from the 'ecological imaginary' to 'the global imaginary' – and beyond – the social imaginaries field has expanded across disciplines and beyond the academy. The recent debates on social imaginaries and potential new imaginaries reveal a recognisable field and paradigm-in-the-making. We argue that Castoriadis, Ricoeur, and Taylor have articulated the most important theoretical frameworks for understanding social imaginaries, although the field as a whole remains heterogeneous. We further argue that the notion of social

[13] https://www.uni-konstanz.de/kulturtheorie/profil_e.htm (Accessed 6/1/2025)

> imaginaries draws on the modern understanding of the imagination as authentically *creative* (as opposed to imitative). We contend that an elaboration of social imaginaries involves a significant, qualitative shift in the understanding of societies as collectively and politically-(auto)instituted formations that are irreducible to inter-subjectivity or systemic logics. After marking out the contours of the field and recounting a philosophical history of the imagination (including deliberations on the reproductive and creative imaginations, as well as consideration of contemporary Japanese contributions), the essay turns to debates on social imaginaries in more concrete contexts, specifically political-economic imaginaries, the ecological imaginary, multiple modernities and their inter-civilisational encounters. The social imaginaries field imparts powerful messages for the human sciences and wider publics. In particular, social imaginaries hold significant implications for ontological, phenomenological and philosophical anthropological questions; for the cultural, social, and political horizons of contemporary worlds; and for ecological and economic phenomena (including their manifest crises). The essay concludes with the argument that social imaginaries as a paradigm-in-the-making offers valuable means by which movements towards social change can be elucidated as well providing an open horizon for the critiques of existing social practices.

This might be contrasted with the work of Susan Buck-Morss and Mark Neocleous and their citation of the work of Valerii Podoroga and Elena Petrovskaia, where there is a strong sense of differentiating contrary usage: "The term is not to be confused with contemporary uses of the term 'imaginary' as it is currently widely employed within social and political theory."[14]

Buck-Morss in her 2002 book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* opens her discussion of the contrasting political cultures and legitimation strategies of the Soviet East and the Capitalist West by invoking a version of the political imaginary construct - *Politicheskoe voobrazhaemoe* - that she attributes to the Russian theorists Valerii Podoroga and Elena Petrovskaia:

> I would like at this point to introduce the concept of the "political imaginary" (*politicheskoe voobrazhaemoe*) as it has been formulated by the Russian philosopher Valerii Podoroga and explicated in the work of his colleague Elena Petrovskaia. Similar terms abound in contemporary discourse. Laclau and Mouffe write about the "Jacobin imaginary." Castoriades speaks of the "social imaginary." And, of course, the stage of the "imaginary" is a fundamental category of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. But in the Russian language, the concept takes on a representational concreteness lacking in contemporary Western discussions, where, at least among political theorists, it has come to mean little more than the logic of a discourse, or world view. *Obraz* signifies "form" or "shape" as a graphic representation, and is used to mean "icon." *Politicheskoe vo**obraz**haemoe* is thus a topographical concept in the strict sense, not a political logic but a political landscape, a concrete, visual field in which political actors are positioned. In terms of our present discussion, it can be said that the three icons of the political imaginary are brought into this field at the same moment: the common enemy, the political collective, and the sovereign agency that wages war in its name.[15]

[14] Neocleous, 2003: 1
[15] Buck-Morss, 2002: 11-12

Mark Neocleous' introduction to his 2003 book *Imagining the State* picks up on Buck-Morss's construction and repeats her formulation:

> I take the idea of the political imaginary from Susan Buck-Morss' work with Russian philosophers Valerii Podoroga and Elena Petrovskaia. The term is not to be confused with contemporary uses of the term 'imaginary' as it is currently widely employed within social and political theory – for example in Laclau and Mouffe's 'Jacobin imaginary', Castoriadis' 'social imaginary' and the 'imaginary' of Lacanian theory. In such accounts 'the imaginary' involves little more than the logic of discourse. In the Russian, in contrast, the concept implies a representational concreteness lacking in these other accounts. The Russian *politicheskoe voobrazhaemoe* contains the notion of *obraz*, which signifies 'shape' or 'form' as a graphic representation, and is used to mean 'icon'. As Buck-Morss explains, '*politicheskoe voobrazhaemoe* is thus a topographical concept in the strict sense, not a political logic but a political landscape, a concrete, visual field in which political actors are positioned'.[16]

We may take from this that the political imaginary is not a resolved nor a unitary construction or analytic and the differences – explicit or implicit, avowed or disavowed – require careful re-construction. Also, we will need to make specific efforts to address the question of developments outside they anglophone context and consider linguistic diversity and different geopolitical positions and genemalogies.

Relation to theories of ideology and other constructs?

Some authors have seemed to use "political imaginary" to refer to the creative, imaginative acts that undergird any social-political order or any political project / movement / programme and that delimit the sense of possibility operative for socio-political actors, collectivities and institutions. The collective projection of: What exists? What matters? What is possible? What is a realistic expectation? What can we hope for? What can we believe in? What are the parameters of our world? What is outside the world of possibility? Who are "we"? Another, somewhat casual use of the term, is simply to denote the horizon of possibility imagined with respect to political and social change. Projective constructions such as 'the Arab Spring' or 'Brexit' establish horizons of the thinkable and so produce 'real' effects. In contrast to those theories of ideology that emphasise the distortion of knowledge in ideological processes, the analysis of political imaginaries places greater emphasis on the reciprocally generative role of ideas, values, beliefs, discourses, and political activity, experience and event. Sometimes this becomes the propsoition that in order to construct an alternative social or political reality it is necessary to be able to imaginatively project a world different from the one given in experience. Mark Fischer describes capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it". In

[16] Neocleous, 2003: 1-2

doing so he has been understood to address the conditions of the contemporary political imaginary of "the West". The capitalist realist reduction of the political to the management of the economy, and the relegation of the social to a relatively inconsequential externality, returns then to the slippages between social and political imaginaries noted in the genealogy of the term.

This slippage between "social" and "political" imaginary that we have seen repeatedly is in itself an interesting problematic as it points to ways of imagining a world that carves up into discrete spheres of – for example - the social, the political, the cultural and the economic. Arguably, this division of the lifeworld into discrete zones or spheres is precisely an imaginative ordering of collective life that undergirds the possibility of a whole range of collective projects from nation-building, profit-seeking and public health to internationalisation, unionisation and gender and sexual dissidence. It is also the case that the remapping of this ontology of the lifeworld is itself a dimension of the contestation of the political imaginary, that has real effect in terms of delimiting what constitutes a meaningful political project and a sense of what is possible.

We have seen above the question of how the imaginary relates to different theories of ideology (such as base/superstructure.) The imaginary is conceptually related – whether in adjacency, complementarity or as contrary - to ideology and other terms that point to over-arching conceptions, beliefs and/or understandings of how the world is constellated as indicated by expressions such as "world-view" and "belief system". However, these are not each the same concept. Each has a different tendency and do not simply reduce to each other. One of our tasks then will be to establish their points of overlap and difference.

For example, the construct "ideology" may be glossed very roughly (and crudely) as the proposition that there is a systemic relationship between thought, belief, myth, values and the material conditions of their social production: ideology is the distorted (or unthinking) thinking that is needed to legitimise and reproduce the current social order.[17] The significance then of the turn to political imaginaries as an analytical strategy may be seen in the dual nature of the construct in: **(i)** that it does not collapse the pair of 'the imaginary and the real' into the binary of 'the false and the true'; and **(ii)** that it seems to offer a way to access questions of meaning, symbolism, belief, value and identity as forces affecting the construction of lived worlds, without presuming to stand outside the object of study in the privileged position that ideology critique sometimes appears to posit for itself, nor of presuming to unmask other people's illusions about themselves and their lifeworld while safely ensconced in the certainties of one's own. In a way that may be seen to contrast with some versions of the theory of ideology, talk of the political imaginary, places greater emphasis on the (reciprocally) generative-productive role of ideas, values, beliefs, discourses etc. The propositional content of political imaginaries, are not analysed as particularly "true" or "false", they are simply processes and forces

[17] For a more nuanced account of questions of ideology see Dave Beech's "Ideology, Intellectuals and the Subaltern" Working Paper 005a in this series. See https://www.gu.se/en/artistic-faculty/artmonitor-working-papers

affecting (not exclusively or determinatively) the conditions of possibility for action. The political imaginary is then seen also as reciprocally affected by actions in the world. There is such a wide variety of relative levels of sophistication in theories of ideology, that a complete contrastive opposition – political imaginary vs. ideology – is ill-advised. The challenge is to address developed theories of ideology that do not reduce to simple dichotomies of true/false nor distorted/undistorted thinking and generate a much more nuanced mapping of relations between the different terms of imaginary and ideology and their respective genealogies.

Practical start-up tasks proposed for Spring Semester 2025

Some tasks proposed for the early stage of the mapping process:

(i) construct an open access bibliography and list of resources for the mapping exercise

(ii) build a simple open access catalogue of research projects and platforms – past and present – that have specifically invoked the social and/or political imaginary as central terms within their inquiry build a simple catalogue of research projects – past and present – that have specifically invoked the social and/or political imaginary as central terms within their inquiry

(iii) conduct a survey across several languages (including but not limited to: Arabic, Cantonese, Danish, Finnish, French, Gaelic, Greek, Hungarian, Icelandic, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Italian, Mandarin, Norwegian, Sami languages, Spanish, Swedish, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian) to assess the general currency in scholarship and informal discourse and the different semantic resources – narrative, conceptual and metaphorical – used in the elaboration of terms that have equivalency with imaginary / imagination

(iv) build a preliminary description of contrasting constructions of the imaginary (and especially of the social imaginary and political imaginary) drawing upon a wide range of disciplinary sources

(v) build some detailed descriptions of instances of the imaginary, social imaginary, and political imaginary deployed as specific formulations and operational terms within artistic research and practice

(vi) investigate the usefulness of the descriptor “applied experiments in the political imaginary” as a way of approaching a range of artistic practices and research processes

It is also proposed that through the doctoral level course *Researching Imaginaries* (Spring 2025) these materials may be presented and further developed.

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