A Further Conversation on Social Imaginaries

Political Philosophy, Normative Commitments, and the Creativity of Social Action

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Abstract

The conversation begins with a discussion of political philosophy, a critique of *a priori* normativist approaches to that field, and reflections on the distinction between politics and the political. It moves on to clarify the place of the political within an ontology of the social-historical; while the pioneering contribution of Castoriadis to such an ontology is acknowledged, the need for a more elaborate theory of creative action, with due allowance for its involvement in historical processes, is emphasized. After some considerations on the role of ideology and utopia within the social-historical context, the conversation moves back to the questions of autonomy, creativity and the imaginary, and underlines the need to theorize autonomy as an imaginary signification in its own right, rather than merely a new attitude to imaginary significations. Implications of that view for the idea of reflective autonomy are discussed, with particular emphasis on confronting the omnipresent temptation of hubris, the condition of value pluralism and the fundamental fact of uncertainty about the future. The conversation concludes with some comments on diagnoses of our times, and a critique of various “postisms” as well as of the attempts to reduce contemporary societies to a single denominator.

Keywords

political philosophy – normativism – autonomy – action – Castoriadis – Ricoeur
Suzi Adams: In the first part of the interview, we discussed various overarching approaches to social imaginaries, some of the field’s classical sources, and key aspects of social imaginaries as such, for example, cultural meaning and power.¹ Let’s shift register now and venture into more specific domains. What does a social imaginaries approach offer to political philosophy? And what, in your view, is the main task of political philosophy?

Johann Arnason: The first part of this conversation ended with reflections on the cultural meanings of power, and that seems an appropriate connection to political philosophy. I do not share the widely accepted view that political philosophy is by definition and from the outset a normative project, or even reducible to applied ethics. In that regard, I find Raymond Geuss’s critique of John Rawls (without any doubt the most influential political philosopher of the post-1945 era) convincing. As Geuss shows, the Rawlsian approach bypasses fundamental questions that ought to be at the centre of philosophical reflection on political themes: the issues of power, political agency, the place and weight of the political sphere in the context of a multi-dimensional being-in-the-world, etc. This does not mean that I am happy with Geuss’s suggested alternative. He indicates – in a brief concluding remark – a “neo-Leninist” perspective, presumably more sensitive to the realities of political struggles and transformations, but not identical with any specific ideas or assumptions defended by Lenin. Geuss compares this loose affiliation with Lenin to quasi-Kantian positions no longer dependent on Kant’s strictly transcendental arguments but still pursuing aims recognizably derived from the three Critiques, and to the transformation of the Marxian legacy implicit in Lukács’s definition of orthodoxy as a question of method. I can’t make head nor tail of these analogies. The questions of revived Kantian themes in the work of philosophers like Cassirer and Habermas, or of a non-reductionist historical materialism along the lines of Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness are interesting, but too complex to be discussed here; Lenin redivivus is the last thing needed by the crisis-ridden

¹ The first part of this interview, ”A Conversation on Social Imaginaries: Culture, Power, Action, World”, was halted by the onset of the covid pandemic (and other things) at the beginning of 2020. Instead of proceeding further with the original interview after a prolonged break, we decided to keep it as a stand-alone conversation; it was published in the first issue of the International Journal of Social Imaginaries (2022). This second interview took on a life of its own as we delved deeper into political philosophy and related issues. As with the first part of the interview, this second part was also conducted via email; we commenced it in the second half of 2021 and completed it by January, 2022.
and disoriented contemporary Left. And if we discard Lenin’s conception of the party, as well as the combination of a pre-critical epistemology and the phantasm of a coherent and complete world-view on which it is based, what is left to build on? Nothing at all, as far as I can see.

A turn to social ontology would seem to promise a more plausible solution, and as we probably agree, that means linking up with Castoriadis’s conception of the social-historical, including of course its imaginary component. Elucidating the being of the political within the social-historical is a more basic task than any normative construction; the possibilities, ambitions and limits of normative discourse will depend on prior ontological assumptions.

Inserting this approach to the problematic of political philosophy into a social-historical framework is a complex task, and necessitates a certain twist to Castoriadis’s ideas. He associates the fusion of the social and the historical somewhat one-sidedly with the themes of social creativity and of history as its outlet. What we need is a more articulated connection between two kinds of “figures of thought”, to quote the expression that Castoriadis uses as a title for one of his books: on the one hand, various categories to be introduced as ways to elucidate the specific features of history as an unfolding and innovative process. They include the notions of path dependence, contingency, concatenations of circumstances as well as invention and creative action. All these perspectives are relevant, but it is important to avoid one-sided emphasis. Path dependence is a major factor, but so is path rupture and path diversification; and that brings us to the role of the social imaginary. The categories I have just mentioned denote spaces and horizons of the imaginary, but they also indicate limits to its impact.

Here I’d like to borrow – and amplify – a few points from my paper on the 1917 revolution(s) in Russia, published a few years ago in the *Prague Journal of Historical Sociology*. The Bolshevik seizure of power is a very instructive example of the interplay between imaginary visions and historical contexts. The title of the paper refers to an “unimaginable revolution”, to stress both how difficult it is, a century later, to grasp the aspirations and dynamics of the project that entered history in 1917, and how far the protagonists of that event were from understanding the long-term implications of what they were setting in motion. This is not to deny that a particularly ambitious imaginary vision, stretched to irrational excess by Lenin, was essential to the Bolshevik enterprise and its staying power. But historical dynamics channelled this vision in unexpected directions. A contingent situation made the bid for power possible, and its success added another dimension of contingency; but the ideologized imaginary entailed a levelling of these aspects and a subsumption under the supposedly unifying logic of world revolution. A concatenation of circumstances led to the stabilization of Bolshevik power in unforeseen circumstances that imposed
unexpected tasks; the imagined future of “socialism in one country” emerged as an affirmation of continuity with the original project and a rationale for further mobilization in its name. As the process of transforming imperial Russia along the lines of a redefined revolutionary mission unfolded, a particular kind of path dependency prevailed; the Russian trajectory of statist modernization became a half-acknowledged paradigm, and the revolutionaries turned rulers discovered – or became more aware of – the affinities of their tradition, marked as it was by authoritarian leanings, with the Russian imperial one. In this regard, historical dynamics proved conducive to a delayed but highly consequential activation of previously marginal imaginary meanings.

These considerations could be taken further. But apart from the historical figures of formation and interpretation, there is another side to the task facing an ontology of the social-historical. It needs to link up with the results of critical reflection on the concept of society. This approach was, some time ago, strongly present in debates on social theory; although it is now less actively pursued, some lasting insights can be noted. Systemic conceptions of society have been contested on the basis of processual ones; a pluralist view of social life as involved in multiple fields or orders has gained ground; these conceptual shifts broaden the scope for human intervention, guided by interpretation, and reinforce the case for a theory of creative action, in contrast to the closed and levelling “action frame of reference” formulated by Parsons. This whole spectrum of rethinking steps is an obvious and major source of suggestions for the ontology of the social-historical.

To clarify the connection to political philosophy, we need one further step. For a non-normative approach to political philosophy, it is surely a high priority task to clarify the distinction between politics and the political. This conceptual pair is widely invoked in current debates, most emphatically by French authors; in one way or another, it goes back to Carl Schmitt’s attempt to define the political, but among the theorists now using it, there is no consensus on its meaning. To mention only the examples closest to hand, there are significant differences between Castoriadis, Lefort and Gauchet. For Castoriadis, the category of the political refers to the collective infra-power inherent in human societies, and to the rivalries and struggles that inevitably accompany it; we can only speak of politics when there is an active confrontation of institutional projects, hence an imagining of alternatives. The problem with this approach is that it reduces the political to an inferior version of politics, rather than an underlying and encompassing dimension, which is more commonly assumed, and which I think we need to thematize. Lefort’s references to the political are not always clear, but the most explicit ones have to do with cultural framings of power (easily translatable into constellations of the social imaginary, although Lefort does not use
that concept), a whole spectrum that includes institutionalization, interpretation and staging (the French expressions, more elegant than the English ones, are “mise en forme”, “mise en sens” and “mise en scène”). This complex embeddedness of power in culture then becomes the background to political action and interaction. Gauchet’s conception is different again and owes more to a new reading of Durkheim. The political emerges from a religious background and becomes a rival to religion in the role of a central and overarching institution, but also an outlet for mutant versions of religion, including – not least – the totalitarian ideologies, movements and regimes of the twentieth century. The “political machine” that competes with religion and – in the long run – proves capable of translating its core meanings into ostensibly secular terms is equated with statehood, inter-state conflicts and imperial ambitions. Politics, the agonistic pursuit of power, is a feature of all historical societies, but some of them are structured in a way that obscures the fundamental preconditions of that activity. When Gauchet talks about a “return of the political” in connection with the late nineteenth-century crisis of liberalism, he is – primarily – referring to the growing weight of nation-states, their geopolitical entanglements and their more or less imperial aspirations. The explosion of these trends in 1914 paved the way for a “second coming” of the political, in the guise of secular religions. Whether the structurally and regionally limited consolidation of democracy after World War II can overcome this legacy and accommodate the political in other ways remains an open question.

I think we should take Gauchet’s idea of a special relationship between religion and the political on board, but with some qualifications. The religio-political nexus – as I like to call it – is more multiform than he would have it, and that is where a comparative civilizational perspective comes in; the modern part of the story should be expanded into a more pluralistic account of different spheres than his work has so far developed, not least with a view to the religious sources and aspects of capitalist development; and the evidence for an end to secular religions may not be as conclusive as he thinks.

_How important are normative commitments for a political philosophy (or a socio-political theory, more broadly)? How could a social imaginaries framework enrich such accounts?_

The two frames of reference mentioned in your question – political philosophy and social-political theory in a more general sense – are closely connected. If there is a case for normative commitment, it is likely to find a particularly emphatic expression in political philosophy (but as I have argued in my answer to the first question, not on its most fundamental level). It may be useful to
take a quick look at the most prominent arguments of that kind. The strongest
claim now in debate is the Habermasian attempt to derive a normative political
timey, anchored in ethics, from basic structures of linguistic communication.
The most succinct formulation of this idea is to be found in Habermas’s late
1970s work on the reconstruction of historical materialism, where he argues
that claims to truth and justice are implicit in the human form of life from the
outset. To be brief, I think the most adequate critical response is to show that
the closed set of clearly distinguished speech acts – on which the Habermasian
construction depends – is a selective and retrospective pattern imposed on
the imaginary horizon that textures and transcends social practices. Habermas
combines this universalistic normative argument with a more specific one,
which can also appear on its own: the project of modernity, equated with core
ideas of the Enlightenment. I have criticized this notion in several publica-
tions and argued that we need a non-normative concept of modernity as a
social-historical field, within which normative options and alternatives can
be articulated, but remain locked in conflict; in that sense, I accept the posi-
tion formulated in various ways from Max Weber to Alasdair MacIntyre: that
modern attempts to develop a strong and unified normative framework have
failed. This does not mean that we cannot have good grounds for preferring
some modern alternatives to others. A reasoned defence of democracy is pos-
sible, but not on any transcendental or quasi-transcendental grounds, nor in
a way that would allow us to overcome its internal tensions – especially not if
we accept Gauchet’s idea of modern democracy as a mixed regime. What he
has in mind is a combination of three structuring principles: the “rule of law”
(état de droit), ultimately grounded in human rights; a political community,
predominantly identical with the nation-state; and a distinctive vision of his-
tory, centred on the future as a domain of collective action. That is convincing,
as far as it goes, but we might add that all three components involve cultural
definitions, and through them, they are linked to a more complex (in my view
civilizational) pattern of modernity.

The arguments that can be used to defend democracy are, on the one hand,
historical, referring to the experience of non-democratic regimes, and, on the
other hand, reflexive, meaning that a democratic regime is one that allows
open debate on problems and alternatives. Where Hans Joas’s “affirmative
genealogy” of human rights fits into this picture is perhaps a question that
needs more debate; it is not clear whether this construction can be expanded
into a justification of the whole edifice of modern democracy.

Some of those who reject the idea of a grand normative theory, or remain
skeptical about it, will try another approach: they try to show that some
kind of normative commitment is inherent in the very effort at articulated
understanding. The one indubitable point of this kind was made by the most influential philosopher of all times; it is Plato's maxim that the examined life is better than the unexamined one. To embark on the examination of life is then, ipso facto, to affirm the superiority of that pursuit over the unquestioning attitude. There are interesting variations on this theme in twentieth century thought. Wittgenstein (in Culture and Value) expresses his dissent from contemporary civilization by defining “clarity, transparency” as an end in itself, whereas the dominant spirit of the times treats it as a means to an end (that end being construction in the broadest sense). More importantly for our purposes, we can interpret Castoriadis’s conception of autonomy as an extension and radicalization of Plato’s principle. The argument is, in brief, that a consistent and untrammeled examination is only possible in an appropriate social context, i.e., a society that is capable of a radical questioning of its own institutions. An autonomous society, becoming conscious of itself, by the same token posits itself as superior to heteronomous ones. But there are three sets of problems with this dichotomy. In the first place, we cannot draw a clear dividing line between an autonomous and a heteronomous condition; there are only historical mixtures of the two, and it is not obvious how we are going to rank these mixtures. Traditional societies are not wholly heteronomous, and modern societies are not fully autonomous. Secondly, the modern extension of autonomy can only be understood in terms of its status and role as an imaginary signification, going beyond and at the same time problematizing the reflexive turn of social change stressed by Castoriadis. This also means that it succumbs to hubris, giving rise to imaginary over-extensions of the human ability to intervene in the world, as well as the capacity of humans to arrange their own affairs – myths of the complete domination of nature, of revolution, the invisible hand, a world without borders etc. Finally, we can envisage a cleansing from hubris (the retreat from myths of revolution to a better understanding of democracy is an example), but that is – at best – a complex and long-term process, and it is bound to raise questions about the purposes of autonomy. In some of his late essays, Castoriadis comes close to suggesting that the telos of autonomy is the opening of a space for the creation of cultural works, but that is hardly a conclusive answer. Here I think we are bound to encounter the Weberian problematic of the inexorable modern pluralism of values.

Given your rethinking of the interrelation of “politics” (la politique) and “the political” (le politique), to what extent would you differentiate “political imaginaries” from “social imaginaries”?
We should think of political imaginaries as components or domains of social imaginaries, and their specific features can be analyzed with that in mind. There are at least three ways of doing that. We can start with the specific place of the political within the broader social context. The Castoriadis-Lefort-Gauchet tradition has stressed the unifying role of the political (one of the features that sets it apart from inherently divisive politics); it is, in other words, a sort of meta-institutional sphere. This centrality can give rise to imaginary but institutionally effective projections, from strong kingship in archaic civilizations to the twentieth-century phenomenon described by the Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno as “absolute politics”, i.e., the belief that the political is the centre of the human condition and the key to its radical transformation. A second approach would focus on the imaginary dimension of relations between the political and other orders of social life. In earlier publications, I have referred to the religio-political nexus, but it now seems to me that I should, in this context as elsewhere, distinguish more clearly between politics and the political. On one side, you have the enduring institutional framework, with its inbuilt imaginary significations, linking the religious and the political; on the other, the regularly or intermittently activated possibilities of politicizing dissent within the given tradition. Dissent or heterodoxy is more easily politicized in some religious or civilizational traditions than in others – more so, for example, in Islam than in Buddhism. The mixing of dissent and politics can react back upon the political and change its character; it did so, in a uniquely momentous way, in the case of reformation and counter-reformation in early modern Europe. If we move on to the twentieth century, it is an important fact that the political has been the mainstay of secular religions (sometimes, for that very reason, described as political religions). The core imaginary significations of those ideological formations have been very different (nation and race, or class and party, to mention only the paradigmatic cases), and given rise to different styles and orientations of politics. But secular religions are not the only example of the political imaginary becoming involved with other spheres. On the economic side, visions of a planned economy (significantly, but far from exclusively associated with the Soviet experience) are cases in point. This should not be misunderstood; some kind of economic planning is practiced in all economic regimes, but the notion of a planned economy, a completely controlled and predictable system, is something else. This politicized reimagining of the economic sphere was a response to the unprecedented autonomy that it had achieved in the course of capitalist development.

The third approach would be a more systematically comparative historical one, and here we can distinguish two aspects. On one hand, the political imaginary is, in one way or another, always at work in processes of state formation.
If you look at Norbert Elias’s theory of state formation, which is, for all its shortcomings, still the most classical paradigm in the field, he never mentions the political imaginary (it wasn’t in his conceptual scheme), but you can easily interpolate it. The actors involved in the processes must have been able to imagine situations, strategies and alternatives, and relied on a field of significations to do so. And some protagonists of state formation were more imaginative than others (the Habsburgs at their best were particularly imaginative).

On the other hand, there are historical episodes perhaps best described as explosive articulations or efflorescences of the political imaginary. Such phenomena are rare, but their long-term consequences are enormous. Ancient China and ancient Greece are exemplary cases. In China, Confucius represents an early landmark, but there was something going on before him, although it is more difficult to grasp; and then the story continues until the third century BC, when the short-lived and disastrous Qin dynasty cracked down on intellectual life, and then the Han dynasty imposed an authoritarian selection from the legacy of the preceding centuries. Analogously, we can see Solon as an early landmark in Greek political thought, although there was something going on before him, and the story continues until Aristotle; the politics of Hellenistic kingship are another world. There is nothing comparable to the Chinese and Greek breakthroughs of political thought in the other axial civilizations. But in modern European history, I think you can speak of three successive efflorescences of the political imaginary. The first one finds theoretical expression in the works of authors like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Bodin, and corresponds to an early phase of the secularization of the state. The second is, roughly speaking, coextensive with the Enlightenment, and the key theme is the rational perfection of the state. There is a good book about this part of the story: Der Staat als Maschine, by Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger. The third and last is the flowering of the political imaginary around the idea of revolution, from the late eighteenth century to the second half of the twentieth; it includes elaborations of the French and American revolutionary experiences, as well as the twentieth-century Communist movement. Said Arjomand argues in the introduction to a recent book on revolutions that the Iranian and Cambodian revolutions, each in its own way, put an end to the modern idea of revolution.

What comes after the exhaustion of the revolutionary imagination? It may be too early to tell. But for the time being, we seem to be back to great power politics without the extra presence of revolution (c.f. Fred Halliday, Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Power).

You noted the importance of the creativity of action earlier in this conversation. Yet elucidating “action” as part of your theoretical framework has receded in
importance over the years. Hans Joas’s The Creativity of Action is the classic text in this regard (which you reviewed), although, somewhat curiously, he did not discuss Castoriadis in any systematic way. Castoriadis was most interested in elucidating action – as praxis – in connection to social imaginaries before his ontological turn in the early 1970s; afterwards, it became more marginal to his main concerns. Linking the creativity of action to social imaginaries (and political philosophy) would involve a greater recognition of the “subjective spirit” and not just the “objective spirit” of the social-historical (which your thought emphasizes). Can you elaborate more on your understanding of the creativity of action and its place within a non-normative political philosophy and social theory?

We have talked a bit about this before; but there is more to be said about it, and good reasons to attempt a rapprochement between Castoriadis and Joas; their works are of key importance for the theorizing of creativity, but obstacles to contact are due both to the thrust of their arguments and to their failure to engage with thinkers and themes that could have helped to stake out a common ground.

In Castoriadis’s case, the main problem is that he did not develop the problematic of “le faire”, outlined at the beginning of the second part of Imaginary Institution. He defines the misconceptions to be overcome: the theories that focus on particular aspects, the technical or the ethical. Translating this into more sociological language, we might say that the critique is directed against instrumentalist and normativist theories of action; they are also the main targets of Joas’s criticism. Castoriadis also indicates a positive goal when he adds that we need to grasp “le faire comme faire être”, which in the English translation is rendered as “doing as making-be”. The problem here is that there is no English verb that you can use in both parts of the statement. “Faire” has connotations of creativity, bringing into being, and can refer to various kinds of creativity; that is not the case with the English verb “do”. The verb “make” is too close to production or fabrication. When Castoriadis writes in the first part of the book that “le monde historique est le monde du faire humain”, this is translated as “the historical world is the world of human doing” (p. 72), and that is not quite adequate.

But apart from these translation problems, it is clear that the second part of Imaginary Institution does not fulfil the promise of elucidating “faire être”. The emphasis is on the ontology of the social-historical, and little is said about “faire” as the participation of human action in the social-historical world, or about the modalities of this participation – from aesthetic creation to political revolution, and from the opening of new paths of reflection to the accumulation of power and wealth. I suspect that the ultimate obstacle to that kind of
clarification was the notion of the psyche as a monad – it was difficult to get from there to an interpretation of the active human subject. But that issue is too complicated to be discussed here.

Be that as it may, the consequences of neglecting *faire* are obvious and have affected the reception of Castoriadis’s work. The main point is that revolution, as a particular mode of doing history, came to occupy a disproportionate place in Castoriadis’s writings; an explicit commitment to revolution was still maintained in his late writings, although the meaning of that concept had undergone a radical change. Some critics have oversimplified the issue and short-circuited social ontology and revolutionary theory; that applies to Axel Honneth’s interpretation of Castoriadis’s work as an “ontological rescue of the revolution”. That view disregards both the intermediate concepts between the two levels and the changing meaning of revolution. Joas’s discussion of revolution as a metaphor for creative action is more interesting; but to judge its merits and limits, we need to place it in context.

Joas published his book five years before the book publication of Blumenberg’s “Paradigms of Metaphorology”; the bulk of that text had been published in a journal long before, but was not widely read, and there is nothing to suggest that Joas knew it. It is nevertheless possible to draw a connecting line; it has to do with the uncertain and often blurred boundary between concepts and metaphors. For Blumenberg, the conceptual repertoire of philosophy shades off into what he calls “absolute metaphors”, such as the notion of the world; but we can imagine situations where a concept with a specific focus becomes, as it were, a metaphor for another one, the latter being difficult to articulate or blocked by traditional preconceptions. In that sense, I think it is true that Castoriadis puts into the concept of revolution some of the meaning that ought to have been clarified from a broader horizon through an elucidation of *le faire*.

That said, the problem is that Joas does not really engage with Castoriadis’s changing idea of revolution, from the early 1960s invocation of the revolutionary element in the Marxist tradition to the much later theorizing of the autonomous society. Instead, the discussion in *The Creativity of Action* shifts to the problematic of American pragmatism, interesting in its own right and potentially important for further development of Castoriadis’s indications concerning *le faire*; but there is no further engagement with the question of historical creativity.

To conclude, I would suggest that to bring the arguments of Castoriadis and Joas closer to each other, we might need to take a look at approaches and authors whom they did not take much note of. I don’t think there is anything to suggest that Castoriadis was interested in Norbert Elias’s analysis of civilizing
processes, and Joas has been very dismissive of Elias. But on the one hand, the ontology of the social-historical, envisaged by Castoriadis, cannot do without an analysis of historical processes; creativity must be understood in terms of emergent patterns, generated by such processes. On the other hand, social action is always involved in processes, and that entails not only unintended consequences, but also the emergence and articulation of implicit meanings; the concept of imaginary significations fits this situation. Blumenberg’s reflections on ideas in processes and their possible directions – accelerating, projecting, contesting, transfiguring – are also relevant.

I would also like to mention an author whom neither Castoriadis nor Joas seems to have engaged with. Arnold Toynbee’s *Study of History* has met with very mixed responses, and although there are certain signs of revived interest in it, the focus is not so much on his conceptual scheme as on some substantive aspects. But in one case, he did hit on a conceptual innovation that deserves more attention (it has occasionally been favourably received by authors otherwise quite distant from Toynbee, such as G.H. von Wright; I also think that Eisenstadt drew on it, although I do not remember him quoting Toynbee). It is the idea of challenge and response, referring to constellations where a culture or society of some kind invents and implements a creative solution to problems concerning the very foundations and prospects of social life – a solution that can be understood in relation to the broader context, but not explained in strictly causal terms. This is obviously not unrelated to Joas’s theorizing of problem-solving action, but the difference is that it has to do with problems of the most fundamental kind, and the solutions shape long-term patterns of history, even – in the most interesting cases – the paths of whole civilizations. I think we can count this approach among the interpretations that have thrown light on historical creativity.

Although debates on “ideology” or “ideology critique” have been an important source for the social imaginaries field, they have not been as significant for the development of your own approach. Recently, however, drawing on Dumont rather than Marx, you have more explicitly included ideology into your theoretical framework. Can you enlarge more fully on what you understand by ideology in relation to power, meaning, critique, and social imaginaries? Does ideology appear only in modernity? What do you make of Ricoeur’s multi-layered approach to the ideological imaginary?

A discussion of the concept of ideology should start with the rejection of various reductionist versions. Ideology is not to be equated with false consciousness, nor with the transfiguration of class interests; it is not a distinctively
modern phenomenon. Rather, it is a constitutive component of human societies, involved in the making of their ongoing practices and overall patterns. To put it another way, it provides operative definitions of social life forms, especially of their power structures. But in addition to this involvement, it can be explicitly elaborated by more or less empowered specialists, and that can serve to reinforce or justify the existing order, but also to expose problems and tensions within it. The elaboration of ideology is thus at the same time a potential opening to criticism. In this sense, I would accept Michael Mann’s distinction between immanent and transcendent ideology. Where does that leave the social imaginary? I think it constitutes the background source of both immanent and transcendent versions. Here we can draw on Castoriadis’s clarification of the mode of being of social imaginary significations. They are “the conditions for the representable and the do-able”, “the primary, inaugural, irreducible positing of the social-historical and the social imaginary” (The Imaginary Institution of Society 1987, pp. 367, 368).

Since this definition of ideology is in some ways close to Louis Dumont, it seems best to use an example from his work on the Indian caste order. The immanent ideology would then consist in the widely varying rules of caste division and ranking applied in practice in various Indian regions and periods of Indian history; the transcendent ideology was the caste doctrine elaborated by the Brahmins, more systematic and coherent than the rules on the ground. Dumont’s critics have – often rightly – stressed the difference. The complex of imaginary significations behind both immanent and transcendent ideology would be what Max Weber called “the spirit of the whole system”, more precisely the combination of other-worldly orientations and their specific kind of individualism with a strong emphasis on inner-worldly hierarchy of purity. This is stressed in Eisenstadt’s analysis of Indian civilization.

It follows from this that I do not take the same view as Ricoeur, i.e., that ideology and utopia should be treated as opposite and complementary modes of non-congruence between social consciousness and social reality (an approach which he adopts, in somewhat modified form, from Mannheim). As I understand the two concepts, they are not on the same level; ideology is the more fundamental and comprehensive one (a bit more on utopia below).

In the lectures on ideology and utopia, Ricoeur does not apply the paradigm of social imaginaries in any systematic way. But this does not mean that we cannot link up with various specific aspects of his analysis. Although I do not agree with his use of Mannheim’s conceptual dichotomy, his actual analysis of Mannheim’s work is very convincing. He realized that Ideology and Utopia should be read as a response to Mannheim’s countryman and erstwhile intellectual partner, Georg Lukács, and more specifically to the
latter's *History and Class Consciousness*; this connection was not well understood by those who engaged with Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge in the English-speaking world. Ricoeur also showed very convincingly that Mannheim’s attempt to broaden the concept of ideology and at the same time stake out a cognitive position beyond it led to insoluble dilemmas – a kind of Hegelianism without absolute knowledge, but with a kind of pseudo-empirical substitute for it.

And then there is the discussion of Geertz, very short if compared to the more extensive treatment of other thinkers – especially the three chapters on Althusser, who hardly merited this level of attention; but although Ricoeur was highly critical of Althusser, he seems to have – like many others at the time – regarded him as a more significant figure than he actually was. In retrospect, Althusser’s brief but massive success appears as a rather absurd phenomenon: an attempt to reinstate Marxism-Leninism from within Western Marxism. But to get back to Geertz: at the end of Ricoeur’s chapter, we are left with a fundamental question: in view of Geertz’s tendency to equate ideology with culture, what kind of distinction can we still make between the two categories?

There is one aspect of the problematic of ideology that is not on Ricoeur’s agenda: the question of ideologies evolving – or mutating – into secular religions. Needless to say, this is a controversial concept, but I do think it is necessary, if we want to understand key developments of the twentieth century, especially the record of totalitarian movements and regimes. The discussion of these things in the second and third volume of Marcel Gauchet’s tetralogy on modern democracy (*L’avènement de la démocratie*) is the best account so far proposed, but with some qualifications. Gauchet does not work with the concept of imaginary significations, but it is a sort of subterranean presence in his work, and it might be worthwhile to pull it out into the daylight. Gauchet stresses the importance of organization, mass politics and the ideological abuse of scientific progress for the formation of secular religions; more could be said about the complexes of imaginary significations clustering around the themes of class, nation and revolution. Finally, the concept of the sacred is essential, and Gauchet notes affinities and analogies with it when analyzing the secular religions; but he has been strangely reticent about it when it comes to a more general theory of religion. On that level, he seems to prefer the distinction between the visible and the invisible, rather than the profane and the sacred.

The secular religions relativize the distinction between ideology and utopia. Was Marxism-Leninism, as the official doctrine of Communist states, an
ideology or a utopia? Obviously both, and it is not easy to disentangle the two elements.

A strong emphasis on autonomy is central to understanding varieties of modernity. Autonomy – or the project of autonomy, in Castoriadis’s terms – includes space for contestation (problematizing, questioning), dissent, and reflexivity. Modern articulations of the human condition may often incorporate articulations of society and/or history as humanly created, and thus, in turn, as having the capacity to be subsequently changed by anthropos. Autonomy is a project to be realized: it is a creative, collective socio-political doing that is oriented to the future as a making-be of an autonomous society. In this sense, Castoriadis tends to blur the distinction between the imaginary signification of autonomy and the project of autonomy. The project of autonomy includes a normative dimension that is secondary to the social imaginary level. Peter Wagner has recently argued, amongst other things, that implicit normative commitments are embedded in your intellectual project, especially concerning notions of autonomy and equality, and thus a more explicit normative account needs to be incorporated into your framework. How would you respond to Castoriadis and Wagner, respectively?

Let us start with the problematic of autonomy. The concept of autonomy, as elaborated by Castoriadis, seems to me to leave an open question: should autonomy be understood as merely a new way of relating to social imaginary significations, or is it also – and first of all – an imaginary signification in its own right? I think we have to start with the latter aspect, and that is the line I took in *The Labyrinth of Modernity*. Higher and self-reinforcing levels of human intervention in the world, in natural, social, and cultural contexts, characteristic of modernity as a civilization, are both inspired and transfigured by imaginary projections. But the imaginary signification of autonomy, inasmuch as it involves a new focus on human creativity, empowerment and self-determination, also opens up a space for interpretation and reflection. We can therefore distinguish reflective autonomy from the more basic imaginary signification, and on that level, I have no objection to Castoriadis’s idea of explicit and unlimited interrogation. That is *ipso facto* a normative orientation; you cannot understand it without accepting it; and we can add that in opting for reflective autonomy, one also – implicitly – opts for the kind of social regime that favours it. But if we take that further, the picture becomes more complicated than Castoriadis would have it. Reflective autonomy confronts a whole set of problems. At the most elementary level, there is the involvement of human action in historical processes, with the consequence that intentions produce unexpected results and orientations acquire unforeseen meanings.
Then there is the problem of plural value spheres, forcefully thematized but not adequately theorized by Max Weber (it is not as such a specifically modern condition, but it becomes particularly acute in the modern world); reflective autonomy finds itself entangled in that constellation and faced with inescapable dilemmas. A third factor is uncertainty, increasingly prominent in theoretical discussions after the great financial crisis; if we admit that the future is inescapably uncertain, social action will inevitably be confronted with alternatives and forced to make choices backed up by inconclusive arguments. Last but not least, reflective autonomy has to contend with hubristic versions of its own underlying imaginary signification. Castoriadis was certainly not unaware of hubris as a temptation for societies embarking on the road to enlarged autonomy (this consideration is, for one thing, implicit in his description of democracy as a tragic regime); but hubristic visions and actions are a very important part of modern history, and he did not elaborate on that theme. This category includes imaginings of complete human mastery over nature, of revolution as a complete transformation of society into a vehicle of human self-realization, and of an entirely rational control over social lie; it also applies to notions of an ultimate and absolute sovereignty of the individual, and of infinite human perfectibility. So, we are looking at a very broad field. But if we want to identify the most unmitigatedly hubristic action of modern times, I think a plausible case can be made for the self-destruction of the Japanese empire between 1931 and 1945: the Japanese wanted to colonize China, throw the Americans out of the Asian Pacific, and destroy Western colonial power in Southeast Asia, all in one great offensive. That could only end in a total collapse. If you are wondering what that has to do with autonomy, the answer is that the idea of national independence is an offshoot of the imaginary signification of autonomy; this particular interpretation was never taken to such extreme lengths as in the Japanese vision of “the nation as a measure of all things” (compared to that, European racist ideologies transcended nationalism into another dimension); and the dominant ideology had made national independence inseparable from imperial power.

To sum up, reflective autonomy will not yield more than a minimalist ethic; that is never enough, but the rest depends on situations, choices and decisions. The idea of a philosophically grounded, self-contained and universal moral compass should be discarded as a hubristic illusion.

This goes some way to answer Peter Wagner’s criticism. But we need to add a couple of things, with particular reference to equality. I am less non-committal on that point than Wagner seems to think (although I admit I did not use the right word in my interview with Blokker and Delanty, when I referred to liberty and equality as modern principles; we are dealing with something too vague...
and open to multiple interpretations than the term “principle” would suggest. I would borrow the idea of “aspirational concepts” from Raymond Geuss; he applies it to freedom, but it seems equally applicable to equality. What I mean is that these notions are internal articulations of the imaginary signification, on a more elementary, ambiguous and ideologically disputed level than reflective autonomy. They express divergent but interconnected expectations related to the modern experience and horizons of autonomy. There is a book about the history of the United States called *Liberty and Freedom* (by David Hackett Fisher), and it contains a chapter about the civil war called “Liberty against freedom”, the point being that the two sides invoked contrasting ideas of freedom. It is a commonplace that the idea of equality is also exposed to a conflict of interpretations.

Both freedom and equality, as disputed ideas, have a much longer history than the modern world. What is distinctively modern is the combination of close association and recurrent conflict between the two. Of course, I do not deny that you can defend a mutual implication of freedom and equality and argue that this is the most attractive understanding of both. That is my preferred position. On the other hand, there is no denying the historical fact that no attempt to realize it can escape compromises and tensions – or worse. Among many other things, the history of the radical Left provides some interesting lessons. Back in 1844, Marx criticized the radically egalitarian version of Communism for being insensitive to the demands of human freedom, understood as free development. Twentieth-century revolutions in the name of Marxism set out with a very strong emphasis on equality at the expense of freedom but resulted in extreme forms of inequality setting the more or less explicitly divinized leader – and his privileged associates – apart from the subaltern masses.

*Castoriadis vehemently rejects the notion of the project of autonomy as utopian, whereas Ricoeur, for example, has a more multi-layered view of the utopian imaginary as part and parcel of modernity. You tend to be sceptical of modernity’s utopian impulses. How would you articulate the utopian imaginary, autonomy, and the modern emphasis on the problematization of existing social institution and social change as part of la politique that involves an element of “collective willing” and “collective doing/action” that is irreducible to the impersonal dimension of the social-historical per se? Posed differently: how would a political philosophy, which, as yours does, begins with a clarification of non-normative horizons and levels, view utopian projects, or, more broadly, socio-political movements focused on the future-oriented component of la politique in order to create, in their view, a better society? Where would Castoriadis’s project...*
of autonomy – especially in its enlarged form that encompasses political ecology – fit in here?

I have never discussed utopia in any systematic way, and I do not think that this concept can claim the same order of importance as the concept of ideology; Mannheim’s (and Ricoeur’s) dichotomy of ideology and utopia is therefore misconceived. There have, of course, been attempts to give it a central place in social theory; the most significant is without doubt Ernst Bloch’s Das Prinzip Hoffnung. Odo Marquard, widely regarded as the wittiest German philosopher, quipped that this was the wrong title: the book should have been called Das Prinzip Unbelehrbarkeit (The Principle of Never Learning). Be that as it may, I read it in Prague back in the 1960s, and did not find it convincing; it was quite out of tune with the phenomenological Marxism to which I was then attracted. This may be one of the reasons why I have not felt strongly motivated to engage with the question of utopian consciousness or culture.

That said, there is obviously a case for considering the utopian aspect of social imaginaries, and we should not rest content with the variously repeated saying that human beings often achieve what is possible because they have striven for the impossible. It bypasses the social dimension, and it ignores the other side of the matter: pursuit of the impossible can also lead to neglect or thwarting of the possible.

We should think of utopia as an operative mode of the social imaginary, and it will be useful to take a look at Ricoeur’s comments to that effect. He writes that “the utopian mode is to the existence of society what invention is to scientific knowledge”, and that it “may be defined as the imaginary project of another kind of society.” A utopia is the image of an alternative order. This seems a bit over-simplified and over-generalized. The connection between utopia and social change is not always as straightforward as between knowledge and invention. Take the political transformations of the Greek polis, from aristocratic beginnings to democratic conclusions, surely an exemplary case of sustained change. There was a lot of invention going on, Kleisthenes’s reform of the Athenian constitution was perhaps the most striking achievement of that kind, but were there any utopias? Scholars dealing with political thought in a broad sense, rather than the more narrowly defined discourse of political philosophy, have shown that there was democratic thought, but were there any democratic utopias? The fragments of the Sophists do not add up to that, and some of them were on the other side; but some more articulate defences of democracy may have been lost. It has been argued that utopias were more congenial to the adversaries of democracy. It may be the case that the Pythagoreans in South Italy were pursuing utopian goals, but too little is
known about that. And then there is Plato, the master critic of democracy and often described as the founding father of utopian thought. But was he? Thomas Alexander Szlezák, now the main spokesman of the Tübingen school, published a big book earlier this year, called *Platon: Meisterdenker der Antike*; a section of a chapter on Plato’s political thought is called “Plato did not write any utopias”. Szlezák’s point is that Plato was trying to spell out the properly understood foundational principles of the polis, in such a way that they could be reconciled with philosophy (given Socrates’s fate, that was a key consideration); he repeatedly stressed that he was not dealing with desirable options (*euchai*, which Szlezák translates as “*Wunschvorstellungen*”), but clarifying possibilities inherent in the life of the polis, however difficult to realize.

Let us jump from the Greeks to modern times. In that context, the most frequently mentioned aspects of utopian thinking and imagination have to do with socialism, its different versions and its historical destinies. The distinction between utopian and scientific socialism was codified by Engels, but it is already foreshadowed in the *Communist Manifesto*. It served a triple purpose. The superiority of Marxian socialism over earlier versions of that idea was affirmed in the name of science. At the same time, the authority of science (and more specifically the kind of science that could claim to know laws of history, more often invoked in Marx’s later writings than the earlier texts) served to disguise the radically utopian elements in Marx’s thought, e.g. the “free association of the producers” as the foundation of a future society that would do without both state and market, and at the same time to justify the abstention from spelling them out in a full-fledged utopia – on the grounds that it was enough to know the essentials of a historical process that was moving towards a revolutionary transformation (by the way, Castoriadis’s refusal to think of autonomy as a utopia was not quite unlike this last point: although he did not believe in laws of history, he saw the project of autonomy as a historical trend, discontinuous but recoverable and open to further radicalization that should not be prematurely constrained by plans for the future). Finally, it now seems clear (although it was not and could not be admitted at the time) that the distinction between utopian and scientific versions of socialism served to disguise religious aspects of both types.

The state-centred and state-controlled Marxism-Leninism that inherited the label of scientific socialism was, as noted in the answer to an earlier question, a mixture of ideology and utopia, structured in a way that made it the paradigmatic example of a secular religion; it is difficult to separate the ideological and utopian aspects of its specific components. Late twentieth-century developments, reinforced by an entrenched and general tendency to stress economic perspectives, have led to a certain emphasis on the contrast between
state planning and market forces; the former then becomes the arch-utopian element of the Soviet model, accused of being out of touch with reality, human nature or the facts of economic life. On the other side, the trust in an omniscient market has been singled out as a utopian aspect of capitalism (Pierre Rosanvallon wrote a book called *Utopian Capitalism* back in 1979; it has been re-edited twice).

Eric Hobsbawm, an outstanding historian as well as a lifelong radical, seems to have – towards the end of his life – arrived at the view that the scope for ideological conflict in Western societies had now shrunk to different judgments on the relative weight of states and markets. Given that states and markets are both needed, and need each other, this might seem a very limited field of dispute. But that would be to miss a crucial point: the core components of modernity, including the structures of state power and market power, are constituted, framed and transcended by imaginary significations that lend themselves to both ideological and utopian elaboration.

*Peter Wagner has argued that you understand civilizations as particular phenomena in human history, limited to certain time-spaces. How would you respond?*

I’d say the picture is a bit more nuanced. My “civilizational turn” has been a combination of basic conceptual perspectives with analyses of specific cases. A reference to the idea of civilizations as groupings of multiple societies, defended by Durkheim and Mauss, can be found in the text that stands at the beginning of my civilizational studies: “Social theory and the concept of civilization: large-scale units and long-term processes”, *Thesis Eleven* 20 (1988). In later work, I have tried to synthesize this view with Eisenstadt’s idea of a civilizational dimension of human societies, consisting in the interplay of cultural articulations of the world with the institutional arenas of social life. We might describe these two aspects as an external and an internal civilizational dimension. That said, we also have to locate – in time and space the formations to which we want to apply this conceptual scheme. To take the temporal framework first, Eisenstadt argued that the civilizational dimension of human societies first appears as such in the axial age. I could never agree with that; it seemed – and still seems – to me that the archaic civilizations, especially those of the ancient Near East, were too important to be left out. My most extensive discussion of these matters – *Civilizations in Dispute* – follows what I think was the Weberian line (although he never stated it explicitly), and also the view of many prehistorians and anthropologists, i.e. that the beginnings of civilizations are identical with the emergence of states, cities and writing systems. As can be seen from the book I edited with Chris Hann (*Anthropology and...*)
Civilizational Analysis), I later changed my mind on this and moved towards the position of Durkheim and Mauss, who saw – in principle – no problem with applying the concept of civilization to stateless societies, even if that is empirically a more difficult matter. In contemporary anthropology, the work of Philippe Descola seems to be the most significant move in this direction.

Then there is the spatial dimension. Civilizational analysis has, first and foremost, dealt with Eurasian cultural worlds, and extending its scope to other regions is less straightforward. In the premodern world, the easiest cases outside Eurasia are perhaps the Meso-American and Andean cultural complexes; but although not much work in this vein has been done on Africa, I do not think there is any reason to doubt that further progress can be made; two obvious starting-points are the particular characteristics of African processes of state formation and the paths of Islamic expansion in Africa.

When it comes to the modern world, there is both a temporal and – because of the global scope – a spatial dimension to be considered. My view is that it is justified to describe modernity as a new type of civilization; it is therefore misleading to talk about Western civilization or European civilization. Both these notions presuppose more continuity than can be substantiated. There are different versions of modernity as a civilization, Euro-Atlantic versions among them – a whole cluster, on both sides of the Atlantic and both sides of the Equator.

I think there is a cultural-institutional core of modernity; it may be described as a combination of central distinctions/dualities in three main spheres. In the economic sphere, there is the difference between capitalism and industrialization (the latter in a broad sense, including the imaginings of alternatives to capitalism, based on industrial dynamics). In the political sphere, we have the tension and interconnection between processes of state formation (involving the bureaucratic accumulation and rationalization of power) and the dynamics of modern democracy. Finally, the cultural sphere is characterized by a problematic relationship between the organized growth of knowledge and the multiple attempts to articulate a framework of meaning compatible with that trend (or immune to it); that includes secular religions.

Then there is the question of civilizational approaches to the overseas societies that developed in the course or the aftermath of European expansion. I would not admit that I have “shied away” from applying civilizational theory to these cases; this has, rather, been a question of time, opportunities and resources, and I hope to be able to do a bit more in this field. In my contribution to the Oxford Handbook on Max Weber, I outlined a way of getting the Americas into the framework of multiple modernities (and thus into the context of modernity as a new type of civilization). Eisenstadt’s essay on the “two
Americas” as the “first multiple modernities” contains an important insight: The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation shaped European colonization and settlement of the Americas in different ways, and both these cultural forces acquired a new space across the Atlantic, different – in important ways – from their zones and fields of influence in Europe. But then the argument becomes too unhistorical. We cannot treat the two reformations as long-term cultural programmes for two and only two Americas. For a more historical perspective, we need on the one hand a more detailed picture of the internal differentiation of the Americas (many more than two of them); on that subject, there are very interesting arguments in Wolfgang Knöbl’s Die Kontingenz der Moderne (an important book, unfortunately not translated into English). On the other hand, there is a complex history of external relations influences after the wars of independence. The American Empire: A Global History, by A.G. Hopkins, is a path-breaking work on the United States in world-historical perspective. Laurence Whitehead, Latin America: A New Interpretation, is good on the Iberian Americas in a global context.

There are, of course, other cases where colonial rule lasted until more recently. India is the most complex and interesting one; I discussed it briefly in a paper on “Understanding intercivilizational encounters”, published in Thesis Eleven in 2006. I have no plans for further work in this area, but it remains one of the most attractive themes for civilizational analysis.

To conclude, I should add that civilizations are not the only kind of trans-societal formations that comparative history has to deal with. There are, of course, empires, and then there are geo-cultural spheres of a kind in which I am now more interested than has become clear in my writings: the cultural worlds defined by sacred or at least culturally distinguished languages. Starting-points for work on this topic can be found in the work of Marshall Hodgson, Sheldon Pollock and – most recently – Said Arjomand. The Sanskrit sphere and the Persianate sphere are exemplary cases.

Suzi Adams: Thanks very much, Johann, for these rich reflections. A concluding question: The multifaceted approach to social imaginaries, society, civilizations, political philosophy and critique that you’ve outlined here (and in other contemporaneous writings) offers a framework for significant insights not only for an analysis of history but also for a diagnosis of our times. How would you interpret the state of our contemporary world? Does such a diagnosis include an inherent call to action?

Johann Arnason: I wrote some “notes on diagnoses of our time” for the last issue of Social Imaginaries published by Zeta Books, and a few remarks may be
added to them. But I should, first of all, reiterate a critical observation. There are two misguided approaches to this problem that have been repeated in an almost obsessive way. One of them portrays the present as coming after something – it is postmodern, postindustrial, post-national, post-colonial, etc. This leaves open the question of a specific novelty to be theorized; the result is, as became particularly clear in the heyday of postmodernism, a general licence and confusion. In the meantime, there are some signs of this paradigm – or rather anti-paradigm – being exhausted. Postmodernism is, if not stone dead, then at least well on its way to that state. Quite a few authors have reverted to talking about late modernity, but that is open to the same objection as the erstwhile Marxist discourse about late capitalism: given our uncertainty about the future, we cannot know how late it is. As for postindustrialism, it is now more commonly accepted that there is an industrial logic to recent and contemporary technological transformations; various authorities now talk about a third or fourth industrial revolution. “Transnational” now seems more popular than “post-national”, but then what is new? Nations have always been transnational, in the sense of existing only in and through their interrelations. Finally, there is a growing tendency to proclaim “decolonial” rather than postcolonial insights and virtues, but it has yet to be seen whether this constitutes a significant change.

The other erroneous approach, opposed or complementary to the “postist” one, is the search for a single common denominator, or – to put it another way – one covering label for contemporary society. I discussed examples of this at some length in the text mentioned above, and will not repeat that. The most fundamental problem with the monoconceptual diagnoses is that they neglect a basic lesson of classical and contemporary social theory: the need for multi-dimensional perspectives on society in general and modern society in particular. We might describe this as the most elementary Weberian theme that has to be taken on board by the social sciences. But in the present context, it also has to be taken beyond the original Weberian framework. With reference to the contemporary version of the modern constellation, we must distinguish between multiple meanings of multi-dimensionality. There is, to start with, the dimension of relations between humanity and nature, now widely perceived as far too complex to be captured by the paradigms of production or managed scarcity. On the one hand, a dominant model of growth appears to be on collision course with nature (climate change is one aspect of this problem, and it is probably true that the concern with it tends to overshadow other issues); on the other hand, there is a new emphasis on human capacity to redefine the ways of acting on and relating to nature. These changing attitudes are often summed up in the notion of the Anthropocene; that term is controversial, and
as a geological metaphor, it seems rather dangerous: it can tempt writers on this subject into exaggerated ideas of human power, or – alternatively – into very confused cosmology (a prize example of the latter is a book called *Introduction to planetary thought*, which ends with a plea for something called “differential and comparative planetology”).

Then there are the dimensions of modernity, which I prefer to theorize in “trinitarian” terms, i.e. as intertwinnings of and tensions between economic, political and cultural “orders of life”, to use the Weberian expression. The crises since 2008 have thrown much light on the problematic relationship between political and economic processes; the writings of Adam Tooze (which I reviewed in the second 2021 issue of the Prague journal of historical sociology) are good on this. Tooze also has something to say on cultural aspects; his comments on the shared culture of central bankers can be read as an indication of lacking cultural resources in a broader arena. But the crises have also done much to reveal a third level of complexity: the new geopolitical configuration. Great power rivalry, wrongly believed to be on the road to extinction after 1989, is back with a vengeance and with the main centres shifted further away from Europe. The European players in the field have not disappeared, but they are handicapped by an indispensable, unfinishable and incessantly crisis-generating process of integration (opting out of it makes things worse, as the Brexit folly has already shown). Geopolitical aspects are complicated by the fact that great power encounters now take place in the context of intensified economic globalization, and at the same time against a background of decreasing ideological globalization. Revolutionary ideologies have lost their erstwhile global appeal, and neoliberalism, although not as moribund as some critics go on claiming, has not achieved the hegemony that once seemed within reach; as a result, particularist perspectives have been reinforced, and they obstruct communication between rivals.

Another response to these complications is the retreat to older modes of perception and interpretation, which must be described in terms of imaginaries rather than precise assumptions (unfortunately, this retrograde move is the most obvious presence of social imaginaries in the contemporary state of international relations). A resuscitated cold war imaginary serves to make sense of the very different challenges inherent in the US-Chinese rivalry. A less politically influential image, not infrequently invoked by commentators, is an analogy with the situation before 1914; China is then supposed to be a rising power like Germany at the beginning of the century, and similarly likely to provoke military conflict. This is doubly misleading: the present constellation of powers is very different from the pre-1914 one (for one thing, there is no Habsburg empire), and the idea of Germany having unilaterally initiated or exclusively
caused World War I is no longer tenable. At the other end of the political spectrum, would-be radical responses to global problems have a worrying tendency to fall back on Leninist prescriptions. A recent and extreme example is a Swedish writer and activist who proposes War Communism (i.e. the years 1917–1921 in the emerging Soviet Union) as a source of inspiration for policies confronting climate change – a lunatic idea if there ever was one. Finally, the identitarian Left is notoriously prone to labelling every adversary, real or imagined, a Fascist. The anti-Fascist imaginary has degenerated into an all-purpose invective.

Where does all that leave us with regard to diagnoses of our time? They are obviously not easy to produce; in fact, I do not know of a good and comprehensive one. But there are partial ones, some of them quite suggestive and conducive to further thought. An example is Dani Rodrik’s “globalization paradox” (discussed in his book with that title). The thesis is that you cannot reinforce democracy, the nation-state and globalization at the same time. If democracy is strengthened within the framework of the nation-state, that will have a negative impact on globalization; a democratization of transnational structures is theoretically conceivable, but only at the expense of the nation-state; if nation-states make globalization their first priority, that will undermine democracy. You might say that this is a trilemma rather than a paradox, but never mind; it invites further reflection on problems and crisis potential within each of the three forces in play. Economic globalization is one aspect of a capitalist transformation that also involves financialization, with its specific de-stabilizing dynamics, and a “flexibilization” of organizational models, which can also become a source of vulnerability (e.g. through the problems with supply chains). The present universally acknowledged crisis of democracy is best understood as a disruption of relations between the components identified by Gauchet as elements of a mixed regime; the trend confusingly described as “illiberal democracy” is only one aspect of a more complex constellation. Finally, the nation-state, although certainly not on its way out, is undermined by the twin forces of neo-liberalism (in various guises) and proliferating identity politics of a kind that tends to turn the nation into a blind spot. But Craig Calhoun’s thesis that we need to reform nationalism, not to ban it from history, is as valid now as when he published his book on the subject fourteen years ago.

A call to action? I lost the belief in a smooth unity of theory and practice a very long time ago, and now tend to take the Weberian position that scholars should not be in the business of telling politicians what to do. But it is my visceral conviction that we now live in a world where politics will for the foreseeable future be reduced to crisis management; and if you want a general formula for that, you can do no better than follow what Jeffrey Sachs calls a social-democratic ethos (Sachs was once known as an advocate of shock
therapy in post-Communist countries, but he has now explicitly repudiated that part of his past).

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