A Conversation on Social Imaginaries:
Culture, Power, Action, World

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Abstract
The conversation begins with reflections on social imaginaries as a crossroads concept, capable of integrating insights from multiple sources; this point is developed through references to the works of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, and followed by comments on Charles Taylor's hermeneutical realism, as well as on the task of rethinking psychoanalysis. Marcel Gauchet's approach is noted as the most promising perspective on the latter field. Further discussion deals with the concept of imaginary significations as a key to the theory of culture, and then moves on to two foreshadowed but notably underdeveloped themes in Castoriadis's work: the symbolic and the problems of theorizing action. Both of them are linked to the phenomenological notion of the world. The final section raises the question of power and emphasizes the affinity of social imaginaries with a relational understanding of power.

Keywords
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Suzi Adams: Let’s get straight into it: What do social imaginaries mean for you?

Johann Arnason: The first thing I would want to say about the idea of social imaginaries is that it is a kind of crossroads concept, capable of bringing together insights and reflections from different sources. As you have argued, Castoriadis, Ricoeur and Taylor are the major thinkers whose works are essential to further elaboration. But some further connections may be suggested. Let us start with the sociological classics.

Marx is perhaps not the most obvious case. When Castoriadis criticized his quasi-Hegelian historical determinism, he acknowledged the presence of a countercurrent implicit in Marx’s vision of revolutionary action and argued that the latent intention behind this line of thought could not be fully articulated without introducing the idea of a radical imaginary. He clearly did not think that Marx had got as close to grasping the role of the imagination as Freud did without properly identifying it. But if we look more carefully at the *Grundrisse* (which Castoriadis did not know when he wrote the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*), some of the themes touched upon there seem to foreshadow a closer encounter. Marx’s reflections on money as a symbol and institutional embodiment of general wealth go further than in the first volume of *Capital* (in that regard, as in some others, the later work regresses behind the *Grundrisse*). They deal with what we would now call imaginary significations; so does the distinction between the infinite goals of capitalist production and the finite ones of precapitalist economies; and the whole section on archaic forms of communitarian production – Asiatic, Greco-Roman and Germanic – can be read as an analysis of the intertwining of collective self-imaginings with social organization.

With Weber and Durkheim, we get closer to present concerns, but in different ways. The Durkheim connection is relatively straightforward. In the last chapter of *The Imaginary Institution*, Castoriadis criticizes Durkheim, without mentioning him, and argues that social imaginary significations cannot be reduced to the average, shared or typical part of individual ones. That is

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1 This interview was conducted via email across 2019 and completed at the beginning of 2020. It consists of fewer questions than was originally intended but we were interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and other things. So we decided to pursue the conversation on social imaginaries in a separate interview (which we began in 2021 and completed at the beginning of 2022). This second part of the interview focussed more on political philosophical issues and will be published in the next issue of *IJSI*. 

obviously correct, but applies only to the early Durkheim, whose notion of collective consciousness was – paradoxically – too starkly opposed to the individual level and at the same time too dependent on it. This changed with the shift from collective consciousness to collective representations. The latter notion stresses the complexity, plurality and transformative potential of the meaningful orientations that enter into the making of society, as well as the partial and episodic character of their individual versions. The best textual evidence for this is to be found in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Obviously, this was an emerging problematic, and with the wisdom of hindsight, it is easy to show that Durkheim did not spell out all significant implications. He did not bring in the imagination (although we may note in passing that Durkheim's reconstruction of Aboriginal ceremonies, which he had never seen, was a remarkable feat of the creative imagination); and his understanding of collective representations lacks the insight into creativity and its intrinsic limits to determinacy that was later developed in Castoriadis's work. Even so, it can be argued that the explicit engagement with social imaginaries is the logical next step after the discovery of collective representations. If the idea of religion as a matrix of social institutions is to make sense, we have to think of the original religious complex of meanings as a kind of Castorian magma, different from the rather linear definitions of sacred and profane at the beginning of *Elementary Forms*.

In the chapter quoted above, Castoriadis also criticizes Weber, and identifies him by name, but the argument is open to the same objection as the indirect comments on Durkheim. What Castoriadis has in mind is the view taken in Weber's *Basic Concepts of Sociology*; and it is true that social imaginary significations are not reducible to the “subjectively envisaged meanings” of individual actors. They have to do with the presuppositions of the latter. But as advancing Weber scholarship has shown, the exposition of basic concepts, although often mistaken for the beginning of a definitive synthesis, represents only one aspect of an unfinished multi-linear project, far from completion and integration at the time of Weber's death. There are other themes and arguments in Weber's work that can more easily be linked to the idea of social imaginaries. We can begin with the well-known distinction between ideas and interests. As Weber sees it, material and ideal interests determine human action, but ideas, especially those central to articulations of the world, channel the understanding and pursuit of interests in specific directions. The reference to ideas is reminiscent of Weber's earlier definition of culture as a way of lending meaning and adopting an attitude to the world. As I have noted elsewhere, his comparative civilizational studies tend to highlight attitudes more than interpretations (what he calls ethics, and economic ethics in particular, has much to do with
attitudes to the world); he justifies this by claiming that what matters most is the immanent logic of practices, not the formalized teachings and textual codes of the cultures and religions in question. Against this approach, it can be argued – again with the wisdom of hindsight – that explicit ideologies and codified beliefs (often mutually contested) are interpretations of underlying cultural perspectives and modes of thought. This latter level is precisely where the idea of social imaginaries comes into play. And a closer reading of Weber’s comparative studies suggests that he was not unaware of the need to explore this background. In his essay on China, the mentalities and institutions of the Confucian culture associated with literati and officials are analyzed in more nuanced terms than the sharp and polarizing conceptual demarcations in the last section of the text would suggest. Something similar could be said about the essay on India. When Weber discusses the castes, he stresses that it was not the institution of caste as such that obstructed transformations; it was “the spirit of the whole system”. The latter expression sounds rather like a premonition of social imaginaries.

Here we should not get into a more detailed discussion; but what I am suggesting is that the idea of social imaginaries will help to understand the classics better than they understood themselves, and to distinguish their tentative insights from the more restrictive conceptual fixations and summaries. But there are more recent and straightforward connections to be noted. Social imaginaries have increasingly come to be understood as the most appropriate location for the tacit but thematizable background frameworks that are a central concern of twentieth-century philosophy. The search for definitive foundations – whether focused on a transcendental subject, elementary structures of language, or a unified and universal scientific method – led repeatedly to the discovery of such contexts, and thus to a relativization of original claims. This source is particularly important for Charles Taylor’s conception of social imaginaries. He has dealt extensively with the problematic of “that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of the whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have” (A Secular Age, p. 173); one of the most interesting examples of this approach is the discussion of Kant in Retrieving Realism, which Taylor wrote with Hubert Dreyfus. Kant’s transcendental deduction, conceived as a justification of what Dreyfus and Taylor call the disengaged picture, becomes in their reading an early move to deconstruct it – by showing that perception is about something, and ultimately located in the world; this anticipates phenomenological notions of the subject as always already immersed in the world. I don’t think the term “social imaginary” occurs in this section of the book, but the argument links up with elaborations of that notion elsewhere in Taylor’s writings. The disengaged
picture, the separation of the subject from the world, is a deeply rooted and widely shared assumption, a “mistake operating in our culture”, and the effort to overcome it is by the same token a cultural battle.

Taylor has often stressed the diffusion of ideas originating in the work of pioneering thinkers, and then spreading into broader social circles, thus mutating into social imaginaries. Such developments do occur, and one might think of other examples beside the early modern thinkers whom he likes to quote. There is no doubt that Marx's writings had notable effects on the social imaginary level, the *Communist Manifesto* obviously being the most influential. It is also possible to speak of a Leninist imaginary (although one hesitates to call Lenin a thinker, perhaps a “thinking guillotine”, as one of his defeated adversaries put it). But there are also shifts in the opposite direction: philosophical reflection and discourse spelling out cultural presuppositions that have taken shape in a more emergent and anonymous fashion. If the idea of the three philosophical civilizations (Greece, India and China) makes sense, as I think it does, then the common feature is an effort to “make it explicit”, articulate basic notions of the respective cultural universes.

A few more words on Castoriadis. There are interesting contrasts and divergent accents between his idea of the social imaginary and the one developed by Taylor – not that they are mutually incompatible, but the differences are significant. For one thing, when Castoriadis introduces the notion of imaginary significations (in *Imaginary Institution of Society*), he stresses the point that imaginary dimensions of meaning transcend the perceptual and rational ones. This “transcending” has multiple aspects. Most obviously, it applies to the elementary semantic level, the imaginary input into language as such, metaphors etc., as well as the comprehensive and constitutive patterns of meaning that situate social-historical formations in the world. It also seems important to relate this to the problematic of rationalizing processes. They are framed, accompanied and projected beyond their practical limits by imaginary significations. Castoriadis had much to say about the imaginary component of capitalist development in general, but the point can be taken further and linked to particular aspects and phases. Christoph Deutschmann's work on the specific myths accompanying technological breakthroughs is relevant here, and so is Jens Beckert's more recent book on the “imaginary futures” entering into capitalist strategies; both authors know Castoriadis. As for the core component of political modernity, the interplay of bureaucratization, nation formation and democratizing processes, the whole modern mythopoietic imaginary of revolution – from Sorel and Lenin to Mao and (god help us) Žižek – grows out of that. Castoriadis was of course a pioneering critical analyst of the Soviet model, but his insistence on maintaining a revolutionary claim for his vision...
of autonomy made him reluctant to confront the question of the revolutionary imaginary as a whole. Finally, there is the question of scientific progress, commonly cited as the most strictly and self-containedly rational of modernizing processes. Here the imaginary context comes in at various levels. There is the imaginary element in scientific reasoning and anticipation, up to and including the patterns known as paradigms (their role in the scientific pursuit of knowledge is still very much a matter of debate). There are the philosophical controversies on the real meaning of scientific discoveries, obviously involving imaginary connotations shared by some and opposed by others, and capable of revival after long breaks; it is, for example an interesting case that the dispute about the ontological implications of quantum physics, long thought to have been settled at least sufficiently for a clear mainstream opinion to prevail, is back on the agenda. On a very different level, scientific progress is accompanied by visions of the world and the human relationship to it, going beyond the reach of knowledge and more or less approaching the status of secular religion. In *Science as a Vocation*, Max Weber referred to the distinctively modern belief that we can master all things by calculation; this was one of the emerging themes he did not live to develop, but it is a safe guess that he did not refer to a belief without thinking through the implications of that term, and the attitude to which he applies it is a recognizable ancestor of Castoriadis’s imaginary signification of infinitely expanding rational mastery. It seems clear that this underlying cultural orientation has not disappeared, but one might argue that today it is facing more competition than in earlier phases: visions of backlash, unintended destructive consequences and human inventions leaping out of control are challenging the erstwhile scientistic faith. Finally, the ideologizing over-interpretations of scientific progress, with strong imaginary ingredients, are a part of the story. Obviously, the Marxist-Leninist mirage of a scientific world-view, guaranteeing long-term guidance of social development, was the exemplary twentieth-century case. But aren’t the neo-liberal critics who rightly saw this pretension as a “fatal conceit” indulging in another kind of ideologization? Their glorification of spontaneous evolution seems to me to involve an ideological boosting and closure of fragmented scientific knowledge, albeit along different lines.

Comparing Castoriadis with other theorists of social imaginaries, it seems appropriate to add a few words about the relationship with psychoanalysis. Castoriadis saw the notion of the psyche, as a domain of floating representations and de-functionalized imagination, as a necessary complement to the elucidation of social imaginary significations, and praised Freud for pioneering exploration of this realm, although he had not really understood what he was discovering. There is nothing comparable in the two other thinkers to
whom I have been referring. Taylor obviously does not see the psychoanalytical tradition as very important to his concerns. Ricoeur tried to integrate it, but without granting a status comparable to that acknowledged by Castoriadis; he proposed a hermeneutical interpretation/appropriation of psychoanalysis, while at the same time admitting that it told us something significant about the limits of interpretation.

It can, of course, be argued (it has been my opinion since I first read The Imaginary Institution of Society) that Castoriadis exaggerated both the importance and the affinity of Freud’s thought to his own, by imposing the creative imagination – unmentioned by Freud – as a key to understanding the latter’s work, and that – at the same time – his treatment of Freud was rather heavy-handed. Or, as Marcel Gauchet put it in a recent conversation: Castoriadis annexed Freud rather than interpreting him, and this was a way of downplaying the connection to Bergson. I think both parts of the statement are correct; not that the link to Bergson has gone quite unnoticed, but it certainly deserves stronger emphasis and closer examination.

On the other hand, there is a case for rethinking psychoanalysis, beyond the recent and rather sterile “culture wars” around it, and for doing so with due attention to what you might call the triple historicity of its founding work. Freud was a part of late Habsburg culture; the mental disorders with which he was dealing reflected a broader, distinctive and historically conditioned crisis of European culture; and he had to draw on an equally historical, fundamentally inadequate conceptual storehouse to articulate his findings. If we agree on the need for rethinking from basics, Castoriadis was obviously proposing such a starting point when he argued that Freud’s most important achievement was the discovery of a region of the mind that knows neither time nor contradiction. This is, of course, identical with the idea of the psyche as a closed monad. Gauchet’s essay on redefining the unconscious, which we published in Thesis Eleven some two decades ago, referred to this notion as a consummate formulation of Freudian orthodoxy, and as such too close to the founder to allow for radical rethinking. That might seem to contradict the claim about “annexing” quoted above; but I think it is less a matter of contradiction than of conclusions drawn from closer study of Freud, and also from further development of a thesis tentatively formulated in the same essay: “there is an original openness of the human psyche with regard to reality, and – correspondingly – an original differentiation of individuality; they coexist with hallucinatory closure and with the blurring of personal boundaries.” (Marcel Gauchet, “Redefining the Unconscious”, Thesis Eleven 71, p. 10). To my mind, that is a more promising basis for rethinking than Castoriadis’s monad. But we will have to wait for Gauchet’s book on psychoanalysis to see what he makes of this beginning.
You suggest that social imaginaries are a way of rethinking the sociological classics. Can we enlarge the scope and approach this from a different direction? What does the notion of social imaginaries bring to social theory and philosophy that other influential concepts, such as “culture” or “the life-world”, do not? Or, if social imaginaries are best considered a variant of such concepts, wherein lies its originality and significance?

Sometime in the late 1980s, I published a paper on “culture and imaginary significations” in *Thesis Eleven*. I argued that the concept of imaginary significations was a useful starting point for rethinking culture, and in particular for criticizing cognitivist and functionalist approaches. I would take the same view of the broader idea of social imaginaries. It can serve to rethink the problematic of culture, not to replace the concept with a new one. It is true that the concept of culture is a notoriously contested and variously defined one; there have been a few attempts to count the definitions, and they have resulted in shocking numbers, but on closer examination, the differences are often very minor. The concept is, in any case, needed as a mapping signifier for the combination of world visions with forms of social life (*Weltsicht* and *Lebensform*, as we might call them in German), and in a more restricted sense for the more prominent domains of articulated meaning on both sides. If this fundamental reference of the concept is maintained, we can allow for different perspectives of elaboration and refocusing. In this regard, the particular importance of the social imaginaries paradigm consists in highlighting the role of the imagination in the constitution of culture and society, and – on that basis – what we might call the duality of the institution (by analogy with the “duality of structure”), i.e. the point that institutions are embedded in a field of implicit meanings that enables their more or less reflected transformation.

The lifeworld is a different matter. I tend to think that it was a transitional concept, and that we can now do without it. Husserl did not invent it, but his use of it became the main inspiration for later reformulations, sometimes with a very different thrust (think of the interpretation of the lifeworld in Habermas’s theory of communicative action). Husserl was trying to build a bridge between transcendental phenomenology and history; I think that this problem has now been neutralized – on the one hand by the post-transcendental turn of phenomenology and the focus on the world, on the other by Castoriadis’s elucidation of the social-historical. In short, we now have conceptual resources that make the lifeworld redundant.

We might add a third theme of importance for the demarcation of social imaginaries and for further work in this field: how does it relate to the linguistic
turn – or turns, if we accept that there are different versions of it, phenomenological as well as analytical? Let us start with the very interesting but frustratingly sketchy section on “imaginary significations in language” in Castoriadis’s _Imaginary Institution of Society_; and we can draw on Taylor’s _Language Animal_ to spell out some hints.

Castoriadis’s aim, as outlined in the text mentioned above, may be summed up in four main points. He argues that linguistic meaning is always an open-ended bundle of referrals to other meanings, to phenomena in the world and to the accompanying representations of individuals; that this implies a radical rejection of all systemic approaches to language, replacing them with the idea of an open-ended context – open to its own internal horizons, to the world as a horizon of references, and to the horizon of the psyche as an inexhaustible realm of representations and drives (to use a slightly more phenomenological language than Castoriadis did); that creative innovation is a permanent possibility built into language; and that the role of the imagination in activating all these aspects finds expression in the figurative, “essentially tropic” character of language, more fundamental than specific figures of speech (this is particularly relevant to the question of metaphors and their role in discourse). The whole argument suggests that Castoriadis was familiar with basic distinctions in the analytical philosophy of language; apart from a brief mention of Frege, there are no direct references, but the notion of a “family of neighbourhoods”, invoked to describe the contextuality of language, looks like a second-order version of Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances”. To situate Castoriadis’s ideas in relation to the contemporary agenda of analytical philosophy, we might quote a formulation by Robert Brandom (_Making it Explicit_, p. xiii), who observes a disjunction between semantic and pragmatic theorizing about language and proposes to bridge this gap; Castoriadis’s reflections suggest that kind of project, with an emphasis on both the constitutive interconnections and the inbuilt tensions between meaning and use.

If we confront this very abridged analysis with Taylor’s exposition of the constitutive theory of linguistic capacity, both affinities and contrasts will come to light. Taylor contrasts his approach with a more reductionistic one, which he calls the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac theory; he twice quotes Condillac’s statement about language enabling us to control our imagination, thus clearly suggesting that there is more to this view than sheer reductionism; but then there is no explicit discussion of the imaginary dimension from the viewpoint of Taylor’s alternative theory (and social imaginaries are only mentioned in passing towards the end of the book). But it is not difficult to locate the steps of the argument where the imagination should be brought in. Against the early
modern (pre-Herderian) reductionists, Taylor stresses Herder’s insight into the “reflective” dimension of language and adds his own interpretation, focusing on the notion of “intrinsic rightness” implicit in the use of linguistic expressions. Amen to that, but I think that something should be added, and we might call it intrinsic alterity: the open-ended reference to a magma (to use Castoriadis’s metaphor) of other meanings, and I don’t see how we can make sense of that without bringing in the imagination. But the way to anchor and elaborate this approach to the theory of meaning is probably a closer engagement with the “inferential semantics” that Brandom has been developing.

Then there is Taylor’s chapter on the creativity of discourse, where the imagination is constantly invoked sotto voce, but never made explicit. But the connection to Benveniste’s distinction between language and discourse is a very important move (allow me to mention that I read Benveniste during my stay in Paris 1971 and included a brief discussion of his “linguistics of discourse” in my book Zwischen Natur und Gesellschaft; Habermas, who read that part of the manuscript, expressed interest in Benveniste, but did not take that any further; when it came to the crunch, he preferred speech act theory and the universal pragmatics that he tried to build on it). Benveniste had of course formulated the distinction as a critical response to structuralism, which is now a thing of the past, but Taylor wants to put it to a new use, against speech act theory and Habermas’s adaptation of it; in fact, I suspect that the latter is the ultimate target of his criticism, and that this will become clearer in the second volume. The emphasis on the holistic and open character of discourse, plus the useful notion of speech event, helps to conceptualize the nexus between language and action without a priori equating it with a closed set of paradigmatic speech acts.

The creativity of discourse is the source of linguistic innovation. But here the line of argument developed by Taylor seems one-sided: the stress is on “metabiological” meanings articulated by the language animal, the meaningfulness of situations to possessors of language. I think we need a more explicit focus on the collective imagination and the paradigmatic cases of its innovative dynamics. Think of Castoriadis’s favourite example, archaic and classical Greece, and the massive transformation of cultural semantics that took place there – e.g. the emerging meanings of terms like kosmos, physis, nomos, demos, kratos etc. This cannot be simply understood as a case of individual articulation writ large.

That brings me to a final comment on Taylor’s project. He has an agenda for further work, mentions it a few times in the book, but says that he is not quite ready for it: it is the exploration of “the full range of expressive modes (what Cassirer called the “symbolic forms”)” – p. 263. This is an extremely attractive
idea; it implies the recognition that a proper and balanced understanding of
the linguistic turn in philosophy will only be possible if we link it to a com-
prehensive analysis of trans-linguistic meaning. We can look forward to more
on this in the second volume. But in the meantime, we can speculate on what
a rethinking of Cassirer’s conception of symbolic forms would involve, and
it is not a foregone conclusion that all aspects of that task would be equally
compatible with Taylor’s framework. We would, to start with, have to aban-
don or at least tone down the quasi-evolutionistic assumptions inherent in
Cassirer’s picture of the development from myth to science. We would need a
much more extensive discussion of art, and a vastly enlarged phenomenology
of religion. Both art and religion would throw light on the metaphoric and/or
symbolic component of philosophy (here we have, of course, a connection to
Blumenberg, who has also said a few interesting things on rethinking Cassirer).
Last but not least, I think there is work to be done on civilizations as configu-
rations of symbolic forms; but I suspect that Taylor might be reluctant to take
that road.

You have articulated social imaginaries as part of your approach to the “meaning
of meaning”. In this you credit Castoriadis’s linking the creative imagination to
meaning as one of his most original insights. Drawing more explicitly on phe-
nomenological-hermeneutical currents than did Castoriadis, your own work has
emphasized the imaginary dimension of meaning in its twofold relation to soci-
ality and to the world. The world as tacit background features in Charles Taylor’s
account of social imaginaries, and it is an assumed background for Ricoeur’s
articulation of the social imaginary (although he reserved explicit treatment of
the world problematic for other writings), but for much of the social imaginar-
ies field, the “world problematic” is incidental if, indeed, it features at all. Why
is the question of the world horizon important to consider in relation to social
imaginaries?

The notion or the problematic of the world is widely and variously discussed
in contemporary philosophy and social theory, and by comparing these
approaches, we could trace multiple connections to the idea of social imagi-
naries. But let us, as you suggest, start from the other end: what does the
reference to the world do for the paradigm of social imaginaries, or why is it
needed when that perspective is to be tested? I think we can begin with the
point that there is a kind of selective affinity between the idea of imaginary
significations and that of the world as a horizon of horizons. In the first place,
the world is the ultimate precondition for the transcending move inherent
in imaginary significations. Castoriadis identifies them from the subjective
side, as configurations of meaning that go beyond drives, perceptions and reasonings; this “going beyond" presupposes the creative imagination. But it also presupposes a kind of space – or should I say a spatial-temporal dimension – into which you can move. That dimension is ultimately identical with the world, as we can most clearly see in the case of the broad encompassing significations that define the world perspectives of whole cultures. Secondly, the way we indicate the dimension in question has something to do with the imagination. If we accept (as I think we should) Blumenberg’s classification of the notion of the world as one of the “absolute metaphors”, it follows that the imagination is at work here. At least in the traditions with which we are familiar, the expressions that denote the world suggest some kind of ultimate totality, hence a closure; but we are referring to an openness unlike any other. Finally, it appears to be the case that such metaphorical ways of referring to the world are not equally developed in all cultures. As far as I know, scholarly authorities on the ancient Middle East agree with Rémi Brague’s claim that the archaic civilizations in this region did not have an equivalent of the Greek idea of kosmos. If that is so, we can conclude that the appearance or non-appearance, development or non-development, of these world metaphors depends on interconnections with other imaginary significations.

It seems fair to say that the theorists of social imaginaries have not done much to explore these affinities. With regard to Castoriadis, the situation is clear, and you have discussed it in various publications: the theme of the world horizon is there, but it is marginal, and only intermittently visible. Taylor’s position is different. In his work, the problematic of tacit frameworks appears earlier than that of social imaginaries, and I do not think that the former has, as yet, been fully integrated into the latter – I am not even sure that Taylor wants to do that. He tends to think of social imaginaries in a narrower sense: as imaginaries with an operative and effective social content, backgrounds to the ideas and ideologies involved in institution building and social conflicts. And the same applies to Ricoeur. He links the social imaginary to ideology and utopia, but the world comes into the picture when he talks about the understanding of texts and other works. There is not much of a connection between the two levels.

That said, we can certainly pick up some threads in the work of the above-mentioned authors and try to use them to trace connections to the imaginary. Here I will limit myself to one very interesting example: Ricoeur’s discussion of aesthetic experience in the last chapter of Critique et conviction. This is a conversation (with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay), not a systematic argument, but we can identify three central themes: the sign (in fact, it is the more specific notion of the signifier that is at issue), the work and the world. There is, interestingly, no mention of the imagination, except for a marginal
and inconsequential reference to Kant on the interplay of intellect and imagination). But I think it can be shown that the imaginary signification (or, if you want to avoid complete identification with Castoriadis) the imaginary dimension of meaning is the missing link in this constellation.

To begin with, Ricoeur compares the artwork to a metaphor: it integrates multiple and accumulated (empilés) levels of meaning. But it can only do that because the integration is prefigured by the intertwined multiplicity of meanings in language, the primary metaphorical dimension, articulated directly in the interpretation of literary works and less directly when it comes to the other arts. In short, the integrative achievement of the artwork presupposes a prior integrability of multiple meanings.

More specifically, Ricoeur talks about the retreat or even the “exile” of the sign from the world, necessary for it to be able to signify something (here he is obviously referring to a signifier, not just a sign). But “the signitive relation”, as Castoriadis called it, must be conceived, it is neither given nor deduced, and here the imagination must come in. Ricoeur then argues that by retreating from the world, the sign generates its own order that develops into an intertextuality; on that basis it then returns to the world. Ricoeur quotes Benveniste to the effect that the sentence returns language to the universe, and “universe” is here identical with what Ricoeur calls the world. If the sign/signifier generates its own order, I think Castoriadis’s argument in “The Imaginary as such” is relevant: language can only be an order if it is more than an order, it only acquires a systematic character because it transcends systemic boundaries, and all that presupposes the imagination. Moreover, the return to the world involves situating the signified thing in broader horizons, and that can only be done through the indeterminate ramifications of the imaginary. Finally, Ricoeur refers to the configuration of language in its own sphere and relates that to its capacity to refigure the world of the reader. Refiguration is for him the most powerful kind of mimesis and involves discovering dimensions of experience that were not there before the work. But when you talk about figuration, of one kind or another, you are talking about the realm of figures; the imagination is there in the background.

You have generally focused on the imaginary dimension of meaning but this has sometimes been to the detriment of other aspects, such as the symbolic and doing (or “movement” would be perhaps a better term for the trans-subjective sphere), which have been more important for Ricoeur and Taylor, for example. In his early work, Castoriadis, too, elucidated the imaginary both in relation to doing and the symbolic, although they were later marginalized as he became increasingly preoccupied with the creative imagination. In your view, how significant are the symbolic and/or doing for elucidating social imaginary frameworks?
Castoriadis did take a few steps towards an elucidation of the symbolic (in the *Imaginary Institution*, before he moved on to the imaginary), but it is definitely an overstatement that he elucidated the imaginary in relation to doing (*le faire*); he foreshadowed that line of inquiry, most clearly at the beginning of the second part of the *Imaginary Institution*, but he never fulfilled the promise. The short text on the imaginary as such contains one sentence that was obviously meant to introduce a discussion of doing, but there is no continuation. If we want to take these indications a bit further, it is probably best to start with the theme that is less developed but was obviously meant to play a more important role in the conceptual framework that Castoriadis was articulating. That is the problematic of *le faire*. Here we should note a serious translation problem. Castoriadis argues that traditional ways of thought have only thematized technical and ethical aspects of action, and thus obscured its character as a “*faire être*”. But here we have a major translation problem. In the original, Castoriadis says that “l’efficace et l’inefficace” are “dérivés” from “le bien et le mal.” The English version translates “bien” and “mal” as good and evil. But how could we ever derive the contrast between effective and ineffective from the one between good and evil? It does not make sense. The point is that the French word “mal” has a much more general sense than “evil” in English; you can say “ça va bien” or “ça va mal”, things are going well or not going well, but it also covers the ethical dimension more emphatically than the English word “bad” does (nobody would think of translating Ricoeur’s *Symbolique du mal* as “symbolism of the bad”). “Good” is of course as general as “bien”, but its specific meaning depends on whether it is opposed to bad, evil, or something else. To cut a long story short, what this sentence really says is that there is an elementary distinction between good and bad, intrinsic to oriented action, but given specific meaning in different contexts. It is true that Castoriadis refers to the opposites as traditionally mistaken for absolutes coming from elsewhere, but that does not necessarily mean ethical absolutes: we can understand it as meaning that they are mistaken for a priori principles, instead of flexible hermeneutical perspectives, creatively interpreted by action. That brings me to the point made in my response to the previous question: the Weberian life orders or world orders are also domains of action, and it is not the case that traditional reflection on them was strictly limited to ethical and technical aspects. There is a long history of reflection on political action and its notoriously problematic relationship to ethics. And economic action is not reducible to technical action.

What about the *faire être*? The task that Castoriadis left unfinished is to distinguish it more clearly from the *à-être* thematized in his ontology. I think that further reflection on this could link up with Hans Joas’s arguments in *The
Creativity of Action. The idea of action as an opening of horizons, an encounter with problems and an invention of solutions taken us beyond the means-ends scheme but does not lend any support to notions of a *creatio ex nihilo*. Moreover, this view of action entails a stronger emphasis on its interpretive frameworks; to put it another way, contextuality is the other side of creativity, and action is a particularly instructive example of this connection. The interpretive frameworks are articulated in and through symbolic orders. Castoriadis is right to insist that the imaginary is what makes symbolism(s) possible, but then we can add that symbolic orders translate the imaginary significations into social reality.

Castoriadis’s comments on the symbolic should also be read in light of his militant opposition to the structuralist approach that was all the rage in Paris at the time. Symbolic orders or structures were the favourite field of structuralism; Castoriadis’s emphasis on processes within the symbolic dimension is a way of demonstrating the historicity of symbolic formations, which was not much noticed by the structuralists. There are at least four kinds of processes, mentioned or indicated in Castoriadis’s discussion (*Imaginary Institution of Society*, pp. 162–177). Ritualization is characteristic of religion as a symbolic order, but extends into other domains. Rationalization in the strict sense of striving for logical coherence is mentioned is connection with law, with an emphasis on the fact that such efforts can take a long time. Then there are processes of functional adaptation – the functionality of a particular symbolic order is not a given, it has to be achieved; but the obverse of that is the possibility that the functionalization of one order may be defined and developed (definitions of functionality are always involved, and they can in turn involve misperceptions) in such a way that they result in divergences from or conflicts with other orders (cf. the remarks on p. 171, on the case of the 1929 depression, where the internal dysfunctionality of the economy was reinforced by inadequate political responses).

To conclude these comments, I’ll add a few words on two interesting cases where we can object to Castoriadis’s description of the historical context, but the objections turn out to strengthen his argument on another level. He refers to “Mosaic religion” (p. 164) as an example of ritualization, and more specifically an illustration of the effort to place all details of a ritual on the same level; he stresses the point that the cultic ritual is much more detailed than the law laid down in the same text. But the importance of ritual and its attention to details vary from one religion to another; in the case of the Old Testament, both ritual and law are associated with the idea of one god who is imagined as creator and legislator, and it seems reasonable to explain the extreme focus on cultic ritual as a condensed expression of divine legislation (it would have
been impossible to regulate everyday life down to the same detail as the cult). As Jan Assmann has clarified, it is not monotheism as such, but the idea of a legislatively creator god that sets ancient Judaism apart from other religions; this notion is one of the great leaps of the religious imaginary, and in that regard, it fits well into Castoriadis’s vision of history.

The other case is the most important episode in the European history of law. Castoriadis cites Justinian’s sixth-century codification of Roman law as an example of how distant a delayed rationalization of law can be from the economy. He was of course relying on a view of late antiquity as an epoch of general economic regression, then widely accepted by both Marxist and non-Marxist historians, but now abandoned by scholars in the field (there was regression in some regions, growth elsewhere). So this part of the argument has to be discarded. But the age of Justinian, as historians now call it, comes in at another level. It is now generally agreed that we should speak of a transformation of the Roman world, beginning with Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and ending with the rise of Islam, rather than of a “decline and fall of the Roman empire.” Justinian’s attempt to restore the Roman empire, between the geopolitical havoc caused by the Huns and the seventh-century Islamic expansion, was probably the most ambitious restorationist project in recorded history, and it involved an enormous effort to re-imagine Rome in its Constantinian version: as a Christian empire whose ruler could also claim religious authority, a pan-Mediterranean power and an exemplary legal order. So, once again, the imaginary comes in through the back door. Justinian’s project failed, but there is now a lively debate among historians about that outcome: to what extent was it a result of overstretch, or primarily caused by a major epidemic, now better known than it was before the reassessment of late antiquity that began some forty years ago.

The phenomenon of power has been less central to discussions of social imaginaries. Instead, “meaning” (and meaning in relation to institutions and forms of social doing) has been more important. The exception is Ricoeur, but even then he discusses it in terms of “domination” and not power. In his later work, Castoriadis develops a distinctive account of “ground” or “infra-power” (infra-pouvoir) that appears at the trans-subjective level of institutions and the social-historical. It bears some family resemblances to Foucault and Elias’s respective accounts of power. Despite clear connections to his social imaginaries framework, Castoriadis does not really systematically integrate ground-power into a social imaginaries account. Is Castoriadis’s account of infra-power sufficient?

The notion of infra-power or ground power is a sign of the Durkheimian element of Castoriadis’s thought (but so are, on a more elaborate scale, the
imaginary significations as a stronger and more philosophically grounded version of collective representations). The power aspect – or, in other words, the political dimension – of religious domination in tribal societies, as analyzed by Durkheim, was clarified by Bernard Lacroix in his book *Durkheim et le politique*, published in Montréal in 1987, but as far as I can judge, this work has not entered into English-language discussions about Durkheim (it seems a safe guess that Castoriadis did not know it; he was, generally speaking, not very interested in secondary literature about the classics. I have discussed it in a Czech paper, included in the book on religion and politics which I edited together with Milan Hanyš). In short, the notion of infra-power or ground power as inherent in the primacy of society (not as existing separately from the individuals, but as existing in, through, and beyond them) is thus a sound one, and it is particularly relevant to stateless societies. But it is equally true that even in those societies, ground power translates into a certain configuration of explicit power: the unequal power of genders and generations, of the religious specialists and the rest of the community, and – depending on more or less violent relations with other tribes – between warriors and the rest of the community. So ground power is inseparable from a set of relations. And the relational aspect becomes more visible if we consider the nature of ground power as such. Durkheim’s idea of an ultimate unity of society and the sacred is no longer tenable; we must allow for a relation between society and its sacraly centred vision of the world, and – even at the tribal stage – for some variations of that relationship. That said, I think Gauchet is on the right track when he stresses the rule of the past over the present and the future in stateless societies – not, of course, in the sense that they have no history, but their history is subsumed under a mythicized past seen as the domain of paradigm-creating ancestors. This implies an intra-temporal relation – a regime of historicity, as François Hartog calls it, in this case a regime that minimizes and devalues historicity.

A more complex pattern of relations takes shape with the emergence of the state. Here we need not enter into the different origins and divergent paths of state formation. The main point is that we need a relational concept of power. Power – more or less concentrated or diffuse, more or less explicit or implicit – is inherent in patterns of relations. This idea cuts across Castoriadis’s distinction between ground power and explicit power. And I think that Norbert Elias has to be given credit for introducing the relational concept. It is closely linked to his concept of figurations. Foucault did not add anything significant to the concept as such, although he applied it to problems and domains that had not entered into Elias’s project. But this relational concept is also a potential link to imaginary significations. Figurations or networks of power must include orientations of the actors, and these orientations – we can also call them cultural
definitions of power – are grounded in imaginary significations. The imaginaries of power can be more or less elaborate, more or less sacral, and more or less open to challenges. But in general terms, the combination of a relational concept of power enables us to theorize what some political scientists (e.g. Lucian Pye in his comparative analyses of Asian political cultures – have called “the cultural plasticity of power”). It also serves as a corrective to approaches such as those of Michael Mann, whose analyses of power networks and their transformations are very insightful, but neglect the whole problematic of the cultural interpretations that enter into the constitution of power.

Finally, we should note that the concept of power is still open to interesting variations. It was, if I am not mistaken, the first concept to be described as “essentially contested”, and although it is now fairly generally accepted that this applies to all basic concepts of social theory, it seems particularly relevant to ways of understanding power. Let me briefly mention a recent proposal for new approaches. Peter Katzenstein and Lucia Seybert have published a book called “Protean Power: Exploring the Uncertain and Unexpected in World Politics”; I haven’t finished reading it yet, but the general idea is clear: it is about the question whether power structures are attuned to or able to cope with situations of radical uncertainty. We might quibble about the term “protean” (in the Odyssey, the metamorphoses of Proteus are more about ways of escape than about the exercise of power), but the idea is a good one, and it links up with a more general tendency of contemporary thought (not least unorthodox economists) to thematize radical uncertainty. Castoriadis’s conception of history as the realm of risk and tragedy is easily compatible with such perspectives; and we can relate them to the problematic of social imaginaries. Some of the latter have a stronger “elective affinity” with radical uncertainty than others. And this is in turn connected to the typology of power. The “uncertainty competence” of power structures (to borrow a term from the jargon of economists) is clearly and significantly influenced by the interpretations that enter into their workings, and these interpretations presuppose imaginary contexts. Examples from recent and contemporary history are not hard to find. Christopher Clark’s excellent book on the outbreak of World War I, The Sleepwalkers, does not discuss radical uncertainty as such, but that condition is implicit in the narrative and alluded to in the title (somnambules are not very aware of uncertainty). The pre-1914 imperial, national and dynastic visions of power, variously mixed in each of the warring states, were obviously not conducive to the kind of adaptivity that Katzenstein and Seybert want to grasp through the concept of protean power. It is also tempting to look at the contemporary deterioration of Sino-American relations from this point...
of view. On both sides, we can observe developments that block adaptive and inventive responses, with potentially – and increasingly likely – disastrous consequences. In China, the authoritarian turn goes hand in hand with a retreat from the ideological eclecticism that marked the beginning of this century (not to be mistaken for complete abandonment; Xi Jinping is still an eclectic). This trend leads to a concentration of authority in the person of the “core leader” (a new title invented for this purpose), reminiscent of the traditional Chinese institution of the emperor as an ultimate arbiter on the scope and limits of permissible pluralism. This comparison makes more sense than the attempts of the Western media to portray Xi as a Maoist throwback; in fact, his policies and his ideological profile are very different from Mao. He is, if I may put it that way, both more traditionalist and more modernist than Mao. The fusion of personified power and codified certainties is a major obstacle to innovation. That said, it is of course true that in the Chinese tradition, the imperial ruler could be more or less successfully guided by enlightened advisers, and more or less effectively manipulated by shadow factions. But everything we know about Xi suggests that he is the more autocratic kind of emperor.

On the American side, we have a different but no more encouraging picture. US policies towards China reflect a troubled awakening from illusions about co-opting a junior partner through the magic of global markets; the ideological basis of the largely bipartisan shift is a mixture of unquestioned cold war reminiscences and leftovers from the fin-de-siècle vision of a unipolar world. On top of that, there is the regressive turn described by some observers as the Trumpification of American politics (the eponymous key actor of that process may be gone with the wind when this discussion is published, but we can be sure that the background forces will not disappear with him). All this adds up to a constellation that does not favour reflected uses of power.

To round off this conversation on power, let me briefly shift to a very different angle. One of the unexhausted sources of insight into this topic is the work of Elias Canetti. The Canetti industry that developed after he received the Nobel Prize was not receptive – often allergic – to theoretical use of his ideas; there is much more work to be done in that vein, and as I have argued elsewhere, a phenomenological reading of Canetti is a good starting point. Here I won’t go into details, but what makes Canetti’s observations of power particularly interesting is the combination of a very wide range, from mental disorders to mass movements, with an anthropological focus on two central themes: mortality and the capacity of transformation. One more thing might be added: Canetti’s ability to clarify the often indirect or disguised encounters with power in the work of other writers. His interpretation of Kafka as an expert on power is to my mind the most promising entry into that much-debated field.