



## **The Rise of Cultural Commons Imaginary**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to explore the aesthetics of social forms, which can be understood as an implicit image of the world from which such forms draw their nourishment. I intend to put forward the argument that we are probably in a phase that finds a terrain for new imaginative investment in the Cultural Commons. Living in a modernity whose dominant trait is capitalism, I deal with the 'erosion' of contemporary capitalism's imaginary, trying to understand the counter movement of Cultural Commons.

**Keywords:** Imaginary, cultural commons, capitalist spirit, community, social aesthetics

### **1. What is the imaginary?**

The definition of the imaginary is a complex question. Here, I deal with it by referring basically to two different cultural frames that have a strong reference in Jung's analytical psychology and Lacan's psychoanalysis.

In the cultural tradition enriched by Jung, Éliade, Bachelard and Durand, imaginary is defined as the product of mythical thought: a 'concrete' thought that works by analogies and is expressed with dynamically-organized symbolic images. The imaginary determines space and time through material and institutional constructions, mythologies and ideologies, collective knowledge and behaviour. This conception exalts the transformative function of the imaginary on an individual and social level, implying emancipation from literal determination. The imaginary, or rather

the symbolic, produces and promotes the invention of new 'displaced' contents with the possibility of transforming the experience (Wunemburger, 2008). Trying to relocate Lacan's thought within a context such as the social one, necessarily operating a simplification, the imaginary does not have a transformative function, which instead is a function of the symbolic. The passage to the symbolic takes place with language. The fact of speaking generates another dimension beyond the purely imaginary one. This distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic is crucial in Lacan, because if one does not access the symbolic, he/she gets stuck in the imaginary phase. One remains in an overprotective but narcissistic phase, always inside the mother's loving gaze, a phase that therefore prevents the subject from leaving the specularly and narcissistic reflection of himself. Basically, one is unable to recognize the other (Lacan, 1968).

Even if the two terms, which we have said can be identified in the Jungian and Lacanian frames respectively imaginary and symbolic, are not interchangeable, they seem to converge on the role attributed to the symbolic and in particular on its transformative capacity. In a more recent book, Wunemburger (2008) explains how imagination affects reality's transformation. He extricates three orientations: one is the playful aesthetic function regarding the ability to anticipate social roles. Another one is the cognitive function, which helps find unexpected solutions or insights that do not follow the linearity of the rational. A third has an institutional-practical orientation: the imaginary constitutes the force that underlies social action. It is the energy that pushes individuals to act socially to change the status quo.

To sum up, hybridizing the real with the imaginary is transformative as it allows individuals to transform their internal and external worlds. Without this symbolic capacity, they are crushed by an exacerbated realism that makes them resigned and hopeless, given the fact that they have only the impression of moving towards change.

## **2. The imaginary institution of society**

To understand the imaginary outline of institutions, a fundamental contribution is given by Cornelius Castoriadis. For him, the social imaginary is not a substance, not a quality, action or passion; the imaginary is instead the incessant and indeterminate creation and the psychic activation of figures/forms/images of the historical-social. The problem is important because what we call "reality" and "rationality" is the work of the

imaginary. The book is very complex, but it is interesting to specify that Castoriadis (1998) defines the social-historical as a "magma of meanings" that continually boils. Not too far from Castoriadis, Charles Taylor (2004) affirms that individuals use something broader and deeper than intellectual schemes when they think about social reality. And this concerns how people imagine their social existence. They are the images that underlie the expectations of how things go between them and others. Individuals imagine their habitat that is not expressed in theoretical terms, but carried by images, stories and legends.

The imaginary nourishes that common understanding that makes common practices possible, a shared sense of legitimation of these practices. Jedlowsky (2008), recalling Taylor's contribution, underlines how the public sphere, the idea of the individual, the market, sovereignty, and citizenship are forms in which social reality and its moral order have been imagined and taken for granted. So far, I have dealt with the imaginary and the underlying imaginary institutions in general terms. In the next sections, I will deal with contemporary capitalism's imaginary and the emergence of some signs of its partial erosion.

### **3. The capitalist imaginary**

Capitalism rests its foundations on an imaginary of freedom. With the publication in 1776 of *The Wealth of Nations*, A. Smith (1994) certifies the ideological foundations of Western freedom. The productive bourgeoisie is entitled to pursue personal desires, on the basis that the individual's benefits would be of advantage of the entire population. Allowing the "invisible hand" of the economy to express itself at its best, removing state intervention, objectives of wealth would have their full realization. The centrality of the economy in the functioning of governments, companies and international financial institutions testifies to the power of the "theoretical ideology" of capitalism (Castoriadis, 1998). As Magatti (2015) writes, globalization, technical progress, economic growth, and the freedoms conquered in the twentieth century have opened up the possibility of doing many previously impossible things. This has led to an exasperated increase in the sense of power on an individual and collective level. Following the author, the circle of power from the will to power led to totalitarian and military regimes in the twentieth century. In more recent years, the will to power brought us to an economic crisis that has been paid for by the middle and poor classes. Magatti (2009) carried out a cultural analysis of

contemporary capitalism that would lay its foundations precisely on an imaginary of limitless freedom. He calls this capitalism techno-nihilist. In his view, contemporary capitalism moves away from its Calvinist roots to build a new alliance with a nihilistic vision. The will to power is the energy that ignites the desire – reduced to enjoyment –, which underlies the consumer's sovereignty and the affective economy. Freedom is imaginary, above all because it never coincides with concrete desire, but refers to a never-satisfied tension to desire continuously, and without any moment of reflection.

The creative energy of early capitalism ended up leading us towards the drift of forced enjoyment, described by Lacan (2001) as the “capitalist's discourse”. In such a ‘discourse’, the subject is consumed by the illusion that this infinite consumption can resolve the “lack of existence” that is intrinsically correlated to humans (*ibidem*). This sentiment is turned in its favour by the market (*ibidem*; Miller, 2001; Recalcati, 2010).

In short, the contemporary imperative of *jouissance*, following Magatti (2009), retains traces of the reactive nature to the instrumental and rational order. Enjoyment manifests itself in the tendency to seize all opportunities and live a life in a continually excited state. It pushes towards enjoyment, accepts all opportunities, and lives at the highest possible, exaggerated pace. However, the excess loses its value; rebellion loses meaning because the transgression is insistently requested directly by the contemporary capitalism as the very form of its reproduction. Once the ‘law’ is dismantled, only the desire reduced to enjoyment remains to constitute the new social norm (Lacan, 2001).

We find partial confirmation of this in the work sphere of many young people without a structured course of study and the widespread mentality that you can always put your body and emotions to work and you don't need any competence as demonstrated by the success of top-rated reality shows (Fassari, 2014). The world of contemporary marginal and small jobs appears fragmented by the myriad of physical activities performed by bodies willing to persuade, seduce, relate and create value through sociality. These are the precarious, temporary jobs that spread outside organizations. The activities carried out are narrated as bodily performed, flexible and contingent, devoid of any real competence; they are aptitude for generality and linguistic interaction to juggle a myriad of alternatives e vernacular behaviours - fights, disputes, games – and seductive modalities (Marazzi, 1994).

#### 4. The sad passions of contemporary capitalism

What has been discussed above leads us to the following conclusion, contemporary capitalism imaginary is based on the will to power that has led to the loss of the sense of limit and sense in general. In short, the imaginary of power has, therefore, to deal with its shadow: the feeling of fatigue and exhaustion that circulates in our society (Han, 2010). Even Lipovetsky (1989) in the 'ecstasy of the new' had emphasized the euphoric exaltation of the present as a time of 'hyperconsumption', the absolutization of a 'perpetual present'. He writes of consumption that has abolished waiting. Having fun, not giving up anything: the future policies are replaced by the promise of a euphoric present (*ibidem*). However, the interest in Lacan's thesis lies in associating *jouissance* with the death drive.

The first consideration related to the forced enjoyment and the coercion of bodies to work seems to lead us to grasp a great sense of tiredness and fatigue that pervades contemporary society. Being cool, winning, brilliant, exuberant, tireless, shameless, toned, cheeky, and popular leads to bodies exposed to continuous extraordinary work (Cavicchioli & Pietratoni, 2011).

The deathly enjoyment and fatigue of the bodies are associated with another, so to speak 'sad passion', which is social resentment.

This second consideration is inspired by the work of Fred Hirsch (1976) on capitalism's social limits. He shows how economic growth has proved frustrating for industrial societies by becoming the source of many social discontents. As society's material wealth grows, consumers are moving towards an increasing share of goods and services aimed at satisfying non-basic needs. Still, not everyone can access these goods and services. Hirsch defines them as positional goods, precisely because compared to other goods, access to them depends on social status and individual income. Hirsch explains that in the past social distinction in terms of classes functioned as an effective tool in partly preventing the progressive erosion of consumer satisfaction experienced during the boom period of the 1960s. Hirsch's intuition can help us understand how in a connected and osmotic society like the one we live in, proximity, also amplified by social media, may have paved the way for frustration. The transparent society makes the lifestyle of the other 'sensitively' visible, and the proximity allowed by the connection in the absence of social mechanisms of social mobility may create that sense of frustration for a lifestyle that is apparently within reach but is impossible to achieve.

To sum up, a deadly enjoyment and the body's fatigue to always be happily available and social resentment are the sad passions that circulate in contemporary societies. Perhaps they are the effects of an atomistic conception taken to the extreme. Their social circulation may have caused the fall of the fascination of the capitalist imaginary built on the rhetoric of freedom, mobility and openness, and opened a way towards a new imaginary of community.

### **5. Cultural Commons Imaginary**

Cultural Commons emerge as a nostalgic idealization of the abstract idea of community. Contemporary capitalism results from both the individualism of early modernity and the narcissistic one of postmodernity; and the community seems to take shape as a response to a new need for belonging (Bauman, 2013). But we must be careful because the community also has its implications. If the erosion of the social bond involves an explosion of the community's need, community can be declined either according to the solidarity modalities of the recognition of difference or alternatively according to the much more alarming figure of the immune community (Esposito, 2011; Pulcini, 2010). Following Touraine (1992), the communitarian principle taken to its extreme consequences is an obstacle to subjectivation as it is identity based and suspicious of the different. In fact, a subject can only express himself/herself as an absolute difference from the other. For this reason, Esposito says that it is not the difference but the absence of differences that becomes risky for the community itself. As this could slip into internal violence out of anger of the subjects who do not feel recognized in their uniqueness. Subjects affirm themselves through the relationship with the other, but are equidistant from the market's destructive force as much as from the identity community (Touraine, 1992; Dubet, 1994; Wieworka, 2001).

The Cultural Commons should refer to an infrastructure simultaneously symbolic, material and social in support of the 'construction of subject' that is not opposed but closely related to difference (Touraine, 1992).

Based on what has been said so far, I believe that an attempt is emerging to overcome a conception of the individual closed in on itself and animated only by private interests favouring the presence of what Touraine calls the subject. In the terms set by Touraine, we speak of a subject when one is aware of one's limitations and one's own radical vulnerability and recognizes the constitutive relationship with the other. One is oriented

towards sharing common values, towards social solidarity that we call Cultural Commons.

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