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Toward New Imaginaries: An Introduction

Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar

The idea of a social imaginary as an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents has received its fullest contemporary elaboration in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, especially in his influential book *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987).¹ Castoriadis was drawn to the idea of the social imaginary in the late 1960s as he became progressively disillusioned with Marxism. Reacting against the deterministic strands within Marxism, which he regarded as both dominant and unavoidable, Castoriadis sought to identify the creative force in the making of social-historical worlds.

The authors of essays in this issue, while familiar with the work of Castoriadis, are drawn to the idea of the social imaginary for a different set of reasons. Writing more than a quarter century after the publication of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, they are responding to a radically different intellectual and political milieu signaled by the cataclysmic events of 1989 and their aftermath. A majority of these authors were brought together in a working group nearly two decades ago by the Center for Transcultural Studies (CTS), a Chicago-based not-for-profit research network with close links to the *Public Culture* editorial collec-

For conversations and comments that were useful in writing this introductory essay, I am grateful to Kaylin Goldstein, Jayson Harsin, Benjamin Lee, Thomas McCarthy, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Charles Taylor.

1. See also Castoriadis 1997a, 1997b. For relevant secondary material, see Habermas 1990, Howard 1988, Kalyvas 2001, and Thompson 1984.

tive, to investigate how globalization of culture and communication is transforming contemporary societies.

The intellectual mood at that time was optimistic. There was a renewed interest in the concept of civil society and its political counterpart, the public sphere, precipitated by political developments as well as intellectual interventions. In the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe, the Leninist model of governance (i.e., the state-directed total mobilization of society to achieve revolutionary ends) was collapsing under its own weight. Here the idea of civil society seemed to offer an alternative that was neither confrontational nor partook of the usual Cold War anticommunist rhetoric. Minimally, civil society refers to the existence of free associations that are not under the control of state power. But in a stronger sense, as Charles Taylor (1995: 208) notes, civil society is said to exist “where society as a whole can structure itself and coordinate its actions through such free associations” and, further, whenever those “associations can significantly determine or inflect the direction of state policy.” It was hoped that the Soviet bloc countries could gradually reform themselves structurally by nurturing and expanding the institutions of civil society and thereby paving the way for democratization.

At the same time, democratic movements were also resurgent in much of Asia and Latin America and authoritarian regimes seemed to be on the defensive everywhere. New social movements with demands that ranged from human rights and cultural recognition of minorities to gender equity, public health, and ecological protection were spreading across the globe. Here the idea of the public sphere became highly relevant. It seemed to capture something that was missing in earlier discussions of civil society by pointing to institutions such as coffee-houses, salons, publishing houses, journals, and newspapers that could nurture public discussion on issues of common concern that would ideally have an effect on public policy. The idea of the public sphere, as elaborated by Jürgen Habermas, also drew attention to the fact that new forms of subjectivity necessary for the development of democratic public criticism arise in and through circulation of discourses in multiple genres, such as epistolary novels, literary magazines, and newspapers. If civil society was made up of nongovernmental institutions that create a buffer between the market and the state, the idea of the public sphere seemed to identify and promote those institutions that were crucial for the development of democratic debate and will formation. The CTS working group’s discussions of these issues drew upon advance copies of the English translation of Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989).

The tumultuous events of the late eighties and early nineties—the downfall of

the Soviet Union, the liberation of Eastern Europe, democracy movements in Asia, Tiananmen, and the Rushdie affair—not only confirmed the centrality of these two concepts but also gave them a global inflection. The initial impulse was simply to extend the terms analogically and to imagine an international version of civil society that would grow out of transnational institutions, such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and newly emergent NGOs, with their global reach and affiliations. It was assumed that those institutions in conjunction with the increasingly powerful global media would provide the forum and framework for discussing issues of global concern and thereby influencing the policies of individual nations and of the world community. The result would be the emergence of a transnational public sphere dedicated to promoting democratic values, human rights, and ecological justice through a potential “dialogue of cultures.”

In retrospect, that scenario looks optimistic and naïve. The events of the last decade have shown that these early hopes are being undercut by the realities of contemporary globalization. The arrival of the new millennium is accompanied by the rise of new and destructive nationalisms and fundamentalisms and the growing social inequalities created by a predatory economic globalization. Far from the hopes for an international civil society and a new, more equitable world economic order, we now face the realities of “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia, the Asian economic crisis, and the anti-American rage in the Muslim world. And the ongoing spectacle of political demonstrations, ethnic warfare, terrorist acts, police actions, aerial bombings, and peacekeeping missions ricocheting across television sets around the world raises grave doubts about the prospects of a transnational public sphere. For Americans especially, the spectacle has new meaning after the events of 11 September 2001. The reality of global terror, long known and experienced in other parts of the world, has touched the shores of the United States.

The members of the working group at the Center were always somewhat skeptical about conceiving the international versions of civil society and the public sphere as simple extensions of their respective national models. They saw how the very transnational processes (especially those connected with the transfer of capital, information, and populations) invoked as the facilitators of an international civil society and a transnational public sphere were already undermining the ideology, power, and sovereignty of nation-states so that they could not be the building blocks of such an order. They also recognized that the concepts of civil society and the public sphere and their possible transnational variants had to be understood in the larger historical and cultural context of the development of modernity.

In their recent writings, several of the Center's most active participants—Arjun Appadurai (1996), Craig Calhoun (1997), Charles Taylor (1995), and Michael Warner (1990)—have argued that civil society and the public sphere, along with nationalism, are the key components in the advent and spread of modernity. Moreover, they subscribe to what might be called the “multiple modernities” thesis that holds that each nation or region produces its own distinctive modernity in its encounter with the allegedly culture-neutral forms and processes (science and technology, industrialization, secularization, bureaucratization, and so on) characteristic of societal modernization. Under the impact of modernity, all societies will undergo certain changes in both outlook and institutional arrangements. But different starting points ensure that new variances will emerge in response to relatively similar changes. The dialectic of convergence and divergence, played out at different national/cultural sites under the contingencies of history and politics, produces multiple modernities. Equally important is the fact that the encounter with modernity does not take place in isolation but is invariably mediated by colonialism and imperialism in the past and today by the implacable forces of global media, migration, and capital. In fact, this aspect of contemporary globalization might be characterized as the struggle over the means of production of multiple modernities. It is through exploring the productive tension between globalization and multiple modernities that the working group at the Center has turned to the idea of the social imaginary.

This conceptual turn toward the social imaginary crystallized in the summer of 1999 when a small group—Benjamin Lee, Charles Taylor, Michael Warner, and myself—met at a farm near Montreal to draft a statement on *new imaginaries*. This statement, the basis of a project subsequently funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, consisted of five key ideas.

First, social imaginaries are ways of understanding the social that become social entities themselves, mediating collective life. Often, social scientists and historians have tried to understand these entities in terms of ideas, theories, philosophies—what might be called “third-person” or “objective” points of view. But some crucial self-understandings are not formulated in explicit or theoretical molds. They are first-person subjectivities that build upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices. They are embedded in the habitus of a population or are carried in modes of address, stories, symbols, and the like. They are imaginary in a double sense: they exist by virtue of representation or implicit understandings, even when they acquire immense institutional force; and they are the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world (see Taylor's essay in this issue for elaboration).

Second, modernity in its multiple forms seems to rely on a special form of social imaginary that is based on relations among strangers. The stranger sociability is made possible through mass mediation, yet it also creates and organizes spaces of circulation for mass media (see Warner's essay in this issue for elaboration).

Third, the national people is a paradigmatic case of modern social imaginary. Its distinctive features include its representation as a "we"; its transparency between individual and collectivity; its agential subjectivity, in which a people acts in time; its unfolding in progressive history; and its posited environment of mutuality with other national peoples.

Fourth, a national people lives amid many other social imaginaries, penumbral to them. Other modern social imaginaries—such as the ethnos, the mainstream, the public, and humanity—differ from the national model in important ways. Some are not articulated as a *we* but are third-person objectifications of society; these include the market, the mainstream, and ethnic and census categories. Some are experienced vicariously or through indirect mediation. Some are not collective agents like the people but are experienced through affects, such as mass sentiment or grief, rather than through will formation. For example, Princess Diana's death inspired intense collective emotions but did not result in any kind of movements for social reform or change. Under some conditions, social imaginaries that are third-person objectifications can suddenly acquire agency; this is the case with at least some of the new social movements. And those movements, once agentialized, can under other conditions gravitate back to modes of passive belonging or vicarious agency.

Fifth, the agency of modern social imaginaries comes into being in a number of secular temporalities rather than existing eternally in cosmos or higher time. The moment of revolution or violence, of spectacular mutual display, or the quasi-sacred moment of redemptive breakthrough are modes of sociality that rival the progressive history of national peoples. It is perhaps in order to contain the violent potential of these temporalities that postfascist modern society has developed so many organized dramas of social temporality, such as sports and the quadrennial international competition for that badge of national pride, the Olympics.

These ideas were discussed and developed in considerable detail by larger groups that met at different venues—Chicago, Montreal, Hong Kong, and Istanbul—during the last two years. This issue is a product of the initial statement on new imaginaries and the meetings that were arranged around it. The ideas about the social imaginary that emerge in this collection of essays are significantly dif-

ferent from those enunciated by Castoriadis. Since Castoriadis's name is so closely associated with the very idea of social imaginary, it seems appropriate to provide a brief account of his formulation so as to distinguish it from the ones submitted here.



Castoriadis's orientation is decidedly ontological and is triggered by the basic question: How are a multiplicity of social-historical worlds, in all their novelty and alterity, possible? According to Castoriadis, the dominant strain within the Western intellectual tradition, which he calls an ontology of determinacy, has consistently failed to recognize the true nature of society and history. In that view, *to be is to be determined*. Hence, the genesis and development of social-historical worlds are seen as an unfolding of an immanent logic or law that governs the universe and the human endeavors within it. The new and emergent forms of social life, despite their specificity and multiplicity, are explained away as adaptive surface variations of an underlying essential order that reason deciphers as biology, or economy, or the mind.

Against that view, Castoriadis elaborates an ontology of creation. For Castoriadis, society is a self-creating, self-instituting enterprise. Each society in instituting itself inaugurates a new ontological form, or *eidós*, that could not be deduced from or produced by the preexisting conditions. The invention of philosophy and democracy in the ancient Greek city-states, a favorite example of Castoriadis, cannot be explained in terms of the antecedent conditions. It was a rupture, a break in historical time. "For what is given in and through history," according to Castoriadis (1987: 184), "is not the determined sequence of the determined but the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, non-trivial novelty." A social-historical world is created *ex nihilo* in a burst of imaginative praxis carried out not by conscious individuals or groups but by anonymous masses who constitute themselves as a people in that very act of founding. This world-forming and meaning-bestowing creative force is the social imaginary of the instituting society. Like Hannah Arendt, Castoriadis treats as paradigmatic those moments when something absolutely new comes into being, when the instituting society supplants the instituted society, to illuminate the ceaseless creativity of the imaginary dimension that informs and motivates everything that transpires in a social domain.

Within the traditional ontology of determinacy, the imaginary dimension is seen as derivative, the mere reflection of what is already there, of the real; often it is held in suspicion as a medium of distortion and displacement. For Castori-

adis, on the other hand, the imaginary is the constitutive magma of meaning, the structuring matrix without which chaos would reign. It is only through the mediation of the imaginary that we are able to conceive of the real in the first place and to make the elementary distinctions between form and content, object and image, the original and the copy. According to Castoriadis (1987: 145):

This element—which gives a specific orientation to every institutional system, which overdetermines the choice and the connections of symbolic networks, which is the creation of each historical period, its singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence, its world, and its relations with this world, this originary structuring component, this central signifying-signified, the source of that which presents itself in every instance as an indisputable and undisputed meaning, the basis for articulating what does matter and what does not, the origin of the surplus of being of the objects of practical, affective, and intellectual investment, whether individual or collective—is nothing other than the *imaginary* of the society or of the period considered.

Thus it is through the collective agency of the social imaginary that a society is created, given coherence and identity, and also subjected to auto-alterations, both mundane and radical, within historical time. Each society is created differently, subsists differently, and transforms itself differently.

To be sure, Castoriadis qualifies the *ex nihilo* rhetoric by acknowledging that a social imaginary has to recognize and contend with different orders of constraints: the external (those imposed by the natural strata, especially biology), the internal (the task of transforming “psychic monads” into socialized individuals), the historical (the reproductive inertia within the instituted society), and the intrinsic (the need for coherence and closure within the symbolic order). But none of those constraints warrants a deterministic reading. What is crucial here is not that human beings always eat, raise children, tinker with the established ways, and tell stories but that they do so in such a variety of ways. Therein lies the hold of the social imaginary. Our response to material needs, however technically impoverished, is always semiotically excessive. We lean on nature but are steered by the social imaginary.

Each society derives its unity and identity by representing itself in symbols, myths, legends, and other collectively shared significations. Language is the medium par excellence in which these social imaginary significations become manifest and do their constitutive work. Like all social institutions, language too has what Castoriadis calls its ensemblistic-identitary dimension, the equivalent of the structuralist *code*. But *code* cannot capture the open, inventive, and unruly

character of signifying practices. Language is essentially tropic, prone to generate surplus meaning. Creation of new meaning in language, say through metaphorization, can serve as a heuristic model for understanding how social imaginary significations arise and rupture the existing social code to disclose a new horizon of meaning, a new order of things, a new world.²

Castoriadis's account of the social imaginary as the matrix of innovation and change is linked to his central political project of promoting autonomy. According to Castoriadis, one cannot strive for autonomy without striving simultaneously for the autonomy of others. This requires rethinking the concept of human action along Aristotelian lines as praxis. Unlike instrumental action, the dominant and dehumanizing mode under capitalism, praxis unfolds in public space where one freely engages with others in activities that have no predetermined purpose. In praxis, unlike *poiesis* (making), the agent is neither detached from nor in control of what he or she is doing. Emotion as well as intellect, character as well as interests, indeed, being itself, are caught up in praxis. Occurring as it does under conditions of plurality and contingency, praxis is fragile and frustrating. Yet the agent is drawn to praxis because only in praxis can one grasp and experience what it is to be autonomous. Castoriadis radicalizes Aristotle's notion of praxis by deemphasizing its connection to *phronesis*, or practical knowledge, while rearticulating it as a future-oriented emancipatory endeavor that generates novelty and alterity in its wake. Thus, praxis is rendered indistinguishable from a transformative revolutionary politics.

Autonomy at the societal level requires a collective capacity to question the institutional order and the social imaginary significations embedded in it. Castoriadis distinguishes between two types of social-historical formations: heteronomous and autonomous. In heteronomous societies—often glossed as “primitive”—the laws, norms, values, myths, and meanings are posited as given once and for all, and their indisputable status is derived from an extra-social or action-transcendent source. In contrast, the autonomous societies habitually call into question their own institutions and representations and the social imaginary that underwrites them. Here the people as collective agents recognize the contingency and constructedness of their world and how that world is made possible through the workings of the social imaginary. Hence, one need not think of the social imaginary as a demiurge that sets itself to work behind the backs of the people. It can be reflexively interrogated and hermeneutically reappropriated.

2. Castoriadis's views on social creativity in language are similar to those of M. M. Bakhtin (1981), Paul Ricoeur (1977), and Richard Rorty (1989).

For Castoriadis, the reflexive turn that shatters the closure of meaning characteristic of heteronomous social imaginaries is made possible through the simultaneous invention and institution of philosophy and democracy. While philosophical reflection interrogates the givenness of the social imaginary's significations, democratic praxis challenges the legitimacy of institutions that embody those significations. Autonomy can be attained through making explicit society's process of self-instituting and self-understanding and becoming willing to take responsibility for it. According to Castoriadis, this has happened only twice in human history, first in the ancient Greek city-states and later in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, when autonomy was experienced and understood as radical openness to novelty and alterity. The contemporary West and those who participate in its globally mediated imaginary are the heirs to the incomplete project of autonomy initiated by those two epochal ruptures.

Aside from its staggering Eurocentrism (which hardly requires elaboration) and its idealization of ancient Greece, Castoriadis's account is notable for rarely departing from the highly abstract level of ontological reflection where it begins. To be sure, Castoriadis displays a remarkable command of comparative cultural and historical data in his polemics against the deterministic theories. He does not carefully work through that data, however, and instead deploys it opportunistically, albeit with considerable rhetorical brilliance, to reduce the opponent's grand narratives, especially those of Marxism and structuralism, to seeming absurdity. When it comes to positive formulations, he reverts to a grand narrative of his own in a distinctly philosophical idiom. As grand narratives go, it has considerable plausibility; it is internally coherent and comprehensive in scope and offers a compelling perspective on the human condition. But Castoriadis rarely engages the question of how change and difference are produced locally through the workings of the social imaginary's significations at specific social-historical conjunctures.

A philosophical theory of social-historical multiplicity, cogently argued but historically anecdotal, leaves the idea of multiplicity relatively abstract and empty. It leads Castoriadis to dichotomize societies as if they could be subsumed under the ideal types of *heteronomous* and *autonomous* instead of recognizing that all social formations, at least the modern ones, differentially incorporate aspects of both. One can understand why Castoriadis might have elected this mode of theorizing, given his avowed and lifelong mission to deconstruct the hegemonic hold of the ontology of determinacy. In such a context, multiplicity becomes the axiomatic starting point in a new ontology of creation and not a vexatious social-historical fact that poses a hermeneutic challenge. For Castoriadis,

multiplicity is the answer to a philosophical riddle but not a riddle itself—as it is for the authors of essays in this issue.



Charles Taylor, whose essay serves as a conceptual frame for this issue, invokes the idea of the social imaginary in his continuing engagement with the theme of “multiple modernities.” In a series of previously published essays (Taylor 2000, 2001) as well as in the present one, Taylor attempts to get at the specificities of Western modernity by differentiating it both from its predecessor cultures and from cultures of other modernities.

To account for the differences among modernities, Taylor deploys the idea of *social imaginary* to refer broadly to the way a given people imagine their collective social life. Within the folds of a social imaginary, we see ourselves as agents who traverse a social space and inhabit a temporal horizon, entertain certain beliefs and norms, engage in and make sense of our practices in terms of purpose, timing, and appropriateness, and exist among other agents. The social imaginary is something more than an immediate practical understanding of how to do particular things—such as how to buy a newspaper, ride a subway, order a drink, wire money, make small talk, or submit a petition. It involves a form of understanding that has a wider grasp of our history and social existence. It is closer to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* or what some contemporary philosophers, following Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, call the *background*. It is a complex, unstructured, and not fully articulated “understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world become evident” (Taylor, in this issue). It gives us a sense of who we are, how we fit together, how we got where we are, and what we might expect from each other in carrying out collective practices that are constitutive of our way of life.

Although Taylor shares Castoriadis’s view of the social imaginary as a generative matrix, he emphasizes its role in the hermeneutics of everyday life. This is evident in his attempt to further distinguish the social imaginary from both explicit doctrine and habitus-based embodied understanding. Unlike theory, which only a small minority entertain and comprehend, the social imaginary “is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” (Taylor, in this issue). Given such widespread adherence, the social imaginary can confer legitimacy on our common practices and pursuits and embed them in a normative scheme. Moreover, the idiom of social imaginary is distinct. It is expressed and carried in images, stories, legends, and modes of address that constitute a symbolic matrix that cannot be reduced to theoretical terms. That idiom also distinguishes it from

habitus. In a manner similar to Castoriadis, Taylor (2001: 189) claims that the social imaginary, “while nourished in embodied habitus, is given expression on the symbolic level.” The social imaginary therefore occupies a fluid middle ground between embodied practices and explicit doctrines. The relation between the three is dynamic. The line of influence is not causative but circular. A social imaginary carries within it an image of moral order, which imbues embodied practices and the accompanying cultural forms with meaning and legitimacy. That image of the moral order might have, in turn, originated in an explicit doctrine or theory, but the process through which it penetrates and takes hold of a social imaginary is slow and complex.

What is distinctive about Taylor’s approach to the social imaginary—and of considerable methodological significance—is that he deploys it as a key concept in the hermeneutics of history and culture. In the essay included in this issue, he gives an account of the interplay among theory, social imaginary, and embodied practices in the making of Western modernity. According to Taylor, the modern Western imaginary is animated by an image of moral order based on the mutual benefit of equal participants. This moral order is radically different from the pre-modern version, which was based either on the law of the people (a people bound by law that has existed since time immemorial) or on the principle of hierarchical complementarity (a people organized into different orders that are functionally interdependent but unequal in rank and worth). The new image of unmediated mutuality and equality, first elaborated in theories of natural law and contract by seventeenth-century thinkers such as Hugo Grotius and John Locke, gradually penetrated and took hold of the social imaginary of Western people. As the older images faded and became marginalized, they continued to have some residual hold in cultural spaces such as family and gender relations. But the “long march,” to use Taylor’s phrase, was already underway. The new image, incubated in the Grotian-Lockean theory, steadily permeates and saturates a social imaginary as new cultural forms and social practices emerge, or old ones are modified and acquire new meanings. One cannot map that long march in the manner of a history of an idea because it is at once a march and a mutation of an image into a fertile cluster of cultural forms, symbolic expressions, and institutional practices. Hence, Taylor does not trace the career of the image from one theoretical text to the next. Instead, he gives a brief but highly suggestive account of the emergence of three key cultural forms and the accompanying institutional arrangements—the economy, the public sphere, and the self-governing people—in the womb of the modern social imaginary.

Taylor’s account of these three cultural formations provides a fresh perspec-

tive on how to read the specificities of Western modernity: how we came to imagine society primarily as an economy for exchanging goods and services to promote mutual prosperity; how we began to imagine the public sphere as a metatopical place for deliberation and discussion among strangers on issues of mutual concern; how we invented the idea of a self-governing people capable of “founding” acts in a purely secular time without recourse to action-transcendent principles. The style and substance of these forms cannot be understood apart from the social imaginary within which they have evolved and are embedded. More importantly, Taylor’s account provides a new frame for the “multiple modernities” thesis. Some versions of these three pivotal forms of collective life and agency are visible (installed and fought over) in almost any non-Western cultural/national formation that is undergoing the passage to modernity. But those versions—entrepreneurial culture in Singapore, the Islamic public sphere in Turkey, democratic self-rule in India—differ from their counterparts in the West in important ways. That difference should be understood not as a deviation from an idealized model but as an expression of a location in an alternative social imaginary. Taylor’s key insight here is that these cultural forms—notwithstanding their seeming portability and replicability—are refigured both in meaning and function when placed within a social imaginary calibrated by an image of a moral order different from that of the West. And that refiguration is not a corruption but a creative adaptation. Thus, Taylor invites us to explore the cultural face of “multiple modernities” by attending to its refractions within the symbolic matrix of alternative social imaginaries.

In her essay, Mary Poovey draws on Taylor’s formulation of the modern social imaginary to show that the idea of *the social* was deployed in justifying a new form of liberal governmentality in early-eighteenth-century British moral philosophy. According to Poovey, the social is a secondary abstraction derived from a more fundamental abstraction, human nature, which occupies a mediating hermeneutic position between observable human practices and institutions and the invisible underlying providential order that allegedly animates them. The eighteenth-century British theories of human nature stress that human beings have a natural tendency to benefit one another in the course of pursuing their individual interests. Thus, the social order of mutual benefit is seen as rooted in human nature itself rather than as a product of political imagination and intervention. Poovey tracks the secularization of human nature as it sheds its “providential framework” and takes on secondary properties, especially that of the social, which in turn becomes an objectifying abstraction in its own right.

For Poovey, the rise and proliferation of objectifying abstractions like human

nature and the social are an integral part of the modern Western social imaginary and its constitutive force. Through her innovative explication of the rhetorical structure of those key abstractions, Poovey is able to disclose what she calls the “self-authenticating” and “recursive” structure of the modern social imaginaries.

Like Taylor, Arjun Appadurai has been preoccupied for more than a decade with tracking the career of modernity but from a decidedly global perspective. In his earlier work, especially *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai (1996: 5) writes about imagination as a “collective, social fact” that is at “work” in the multiple ways that people find their lot, make a dwelling, and build a world in and through modernity. According to Appadurai, “imagination has broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth, and ritual and has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies.” The entry of imagination into the logic of everyday life is given a global inflection by the twin forces of modernity: mass migration and mass mediation. Whether moving voluntarily in search of better lives or moving involuntarily as refugees and persecuted peoples, the migrants have lost the worlds into which they were born and are therefore forced to construct new imagined worlds that rarely coincide with geopolitical space or the ideologies of nation-states. These imagined worlds, which combine memory and desire in unexpected ways, can create loyalties and affiliations that are sometimes violently hostile to the modernizing projects of nation-states and sometimes to modernity itself. But there are also other imagined worlds that, while operating within the nation-state system, are animated by postnational projects that attest to the ongoing struggle over the production of multiple, translocal modernities. In the opening essay of this issue, Appadurai presents a brilliant case study of the latter type.

Appadurai’s case study examines the political vision and organizational practices of the Alliance, a partnership among three grassroots organizations, which is involved in a struggle to secure adequate and durable housing and access to urban infrastructure (e.g., water, electricity, transport, and sanitation) for slum-dwellers in Mumbai. The three partners are SPARC (an NGO formed by social work professionals), NSDF (the National Slum Dwellers’ Federation), and Mahila Milan (an organization of poor women). According to Appadurai, the Alliance is involved in a new form of urban governmentality that combines local activism with horizontal global networking. The work of the Alliance is predicated on reimagining politics in terms of partnership, patience, self-empowerment through visibility, and performative competence.

The Alliance has cultivated close global links with not only donor institutions in the West but also activist organizations of the urban poor in fourteen other

countries, notably South Africa and Thailand. Among other things, it brings together in small groups the urban poor from different countries to share practical knowledge gleaned from local struggles and thus decenters the developmental model of an expert/client relationship where knowledge flows unidirectionally and asymmetrically. Aside from such innovations in the politics of globalization from below, the work of the Alliance also challenges many of the pieties of Western modernity. Paradoxical as it might seem, its commitment to a politics of patience in the face of the daily “tyranny of emergency” is radically different from what Martin Luther King Jr. once denounced as the “tranquilizing drug of gradualism” from the normative perspective of Western liberalism. Appadurai’s account of that politics of patience and its allied practices of “savings,” “federating,” “precedent-setting,” “self-enumeration,” and “toilet festivals” brilliantly captures a new form of politics of recognition from below and a new imaginary—neither fully global nor national nor local—that underwrites it.

If Appadurai explores optimistically how new translocal solidarities can be forged in the folds of new imaginaries, Achille Mbembe darkly dissects a continental imaginary of Africanity that has become profoundly corrupt and dysfunctional. According to Mbembe, the two dominant discursive modes of imagining the African self and its relation to the world have reached a dead end. Neither of these modes—the Marxist-nationalist and the nativist—has been able to break away from a canonical set of “closed” meanings and interpretations attributed to the three key historical events: slavery, colonization, and apartheid.

The Marxist-nationalist reading of those events leads to a conception of the African subject as a wounded victim and of African history as externally and conspiratorially determined. Such a reading in turn gives birth to a politics of self-knowledge, sovereignty, and autonomy galvanized by a radical utopic vision that holds that Africa can attain full selfhood and be made “whole” again only by disconnecting itself from the world. This is, says Mbembe, “the mad dream of a world without Others.” On the other hand, the nativist reading, which is not dissimilar from its Marxist-nationalist counterpart, posits an emancipatory politics based on Africa’s cultural uniqueness. Here African subjecthood is so deeply grounded in race and geography that the distinctions between “racial body,” “spatial body,” and “civic body” are erased, and the idea of an Africanity that is not black becomes unimaginable.

Out of such an impasse, Mbembe desperately wants to be able to imagine a politics of Africanity not rooted exclusively in victimhood and blackness. He searches for the intimations of newly emergent imaginaries that would, among other things, reflect on the status of suffering in history (as in Jewish thought and

experience), recuperate the collective memory of the African collaboration in the crime of slavery and break the silence over that secret guilt, and recognize that the involuntary diaspora has produced different temporalities and affiliations on the opposite shore of the Atlantic. What Mbembe finds is disturbing: an imaginary of *states of war* where the African self seeks to transcend and reinvent itself through excessive, sacrificial violence; an imaginary of religion where the self awaits the gifts of tongues and of divine healing; and an imaginary of scarcity where the self longs for goods to which it has no material access.

Elizabeth Povinelli, like Mbembe, engages an aspect of modern imaginaries that has deadlocked if not reached a dead end. In her essay, she explores how the politics of recognition within the modern liberal imaginary is beset with contradictory pulls and pressures from two different grids of social bondage—the genealogical and the intimate. A characteristic feature of liberal modernity is that one's unmarked membership in an abstract social order, rather than one's marked placement in the genealogical grid of kinship, descent, and rank, increasingly defines one's rights and obligations. As the old regime of genealogy is replaced with the new regime of citizenship, the rhetoric of intimacy (“love makes true families and just nations”) begins to permeate the ideologies of nationalism and the public sphere. But intimacy is not easily institutionalized; its rhythm and duration are multiple and unpredictable. Besides, the genealogical grid does not disappear but is reconfigured. Citizenship itself continues to have a strong genealogical component, as do other state-mediated dispensations such as inheritance, child welfare, and taxation. Povinelli gives a provocative parallel reading of two archives—the Australian indigenous people's claim to land tenure and lesbian, gay, and queer struggles for recognition—to show how the genealogical grid, while diminished at the cosmopolitan/heteronormative center, continues to hold sway in the postcolony and in regimenting same-sex desires and world-making.

The essays by Michael Warner, Craig Calhoun, and Nilüfer Göle further extend our understanding of the public sphere and its shifting status in the spread of global modernity. Warner, whose previous work on the public sphere has been highly influential, offers a conceptualization of the public sphere in terms of its seven quasi-formal features: (1) a public is self-organized; (2) a public is a relation among strangers; (3) the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal; (4) a public is constituted through mere attention; (5) a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse; (6) publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation; and (7) a public is poetic world-making. Starting with the simple propositions that “a public is a

space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself,” and that “it exists *by virtue of being addressed*,” Warner draws out a series of conceptual implications with such rigor and insight that it significantly extends and modifies our modernist Habermasian understanding of the public sphere. Aside from the formal rigor, which is impressive, the essay is richly historicizing as it draws on readings of some key textual moments (e.g., the eighteenth-century English journal the *Spectator* and the making of the public sphere in the West). Although Warner’s analysis is based on the Euro-American experience, his conceptual extensions and innovations, most notably regarding “stranger sociability” and the “multiple temporalities of circulation,” provide tools for mapping the unfolding logic of multiple publics and counterpublics across the terrain of global modernity.

In his essay, Calhoun calls for a reconceptualization of the public sphere “not simply as a setting for rational debate and decision-making—thus largely disregarding or transcending issues of identity—but as a setting for the development of social solidarity as a matter of choice, rather than necessity.” According to Calhoun, it is a mistake to view identities and solidarities, especially those linked to the idea of nationality, as preconstituted in a cultural matrix of language, tradition, and ethnicity before they appear as collective agents within the discursive arena of the public sphere. This leads to a host of errors, such as equating nationalism with ethnic nationalism, drawing false distinctions between the *irrational* sources of cultural integration and the *rational* sources of political legitimization, and saddling the inclusionary cosmopolitan democratic projects with thin identities while allocating thick identities to the exclusionary projects of cultural nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms. For Calhoun, this is not only a conceptual error but also a politically dangerous one because a democratic imaginary depends on a notion of solidarity richer than one based merely on juridical equality. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, he argues that the public sphere is a form of social solidarity, a unique one in the sense that it exists “in, through, and for talk.” What transpires in the public sphere is not limited to rational-critical discourse about affairs of common concern. Here more than anywhere else reflexive choice and solidarity are joined together in an imaginative act of world-making.

Calhoun’s call for an enlarged notion of the public sphere gets a strong endorsement from Göle’s case study of the semiotic struggle over “performing” Islam and making it visible in the political public sphere in Turkey, a self-styled secular republic with a complex history of voluntary but authoritarian modernization. The case involves the election of Merve Kavakçı, a headscarf-wearing

Muslim woman from the pro-Islamic party who was unable to take the oath on the opening day of the parliamentary session due to the vehement opposition from the members of secular parties. At the heart of controversy is the white headscarf, an overdetermined sign of the Islamization of a woman's body, worn by Kavakçı. But Kavakçı was not a transparent vehicle for transmitting Islamist political symbology. A divorced, United States-trained computer engineer, Kavakçı dressed fashionably in modern business suits, spoke fluent English, and remained calm and composed in the face of political heckling. She had at her command all the idioms and accoutrements of modernity. According to Göle, it is precisely the ambivalent quality of a figure simultaneously so modern and yet Muslim that terrified the secularists. In Göle's account, what is at stake here is the struggle between two imaginaries, the secular and the Islamic, to define the contours of the public sphere. The "excess" of modernity of the secularists, easily overwrought by "small differences" as exemplified by Kavakçı's headscarf, is what leads to the frightful narrowing of the public sphere and to the exclusion of cultural performances and counterperformances out of which solidarities are formed.

In a far-ranging essay that swiftly moves from structural linguistics through speech-act theory to Marxism, Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma provocatively argue that the modern Western imaginaries of the public sphere, the citizen-state, and the market—the three singled out by Taylor—are based on a social contract model of society. In that model, as elaborated by Thomas Hobbes and others, out of an imagined state of nature, "individuals exchange promises and create a transcendent power to govern the social totality they create" (Lee and LiPuma, in this issue). Thus, the sovereign becomes the third-person authority that transcends the "I-You" exchanges of promises that constitute it. According to Lee and LiPuma, this complex interplay of first- and third-person perspectives is the structuring form out of which surplus—both transcendent and tangible—is produced and circulated in different realms. Surplus emerges as surplus value in the market economy, sovereign power in the citizen-state, and general will in the public sphere.

For Lee and LiPuma, the reflexive structures and cultures of circulation through which those surpluses move and encompass social life are of greater importance than the matrix within which they are produced. They argue that circulation is something more than mere movement of people, ideas, and commodities from one place or culture to another. Rather, it is "a cultural process with its own process of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint" that facilitates the performative constitution of collective agency and subsequent visions of social totality.

Lee and LiPuma unpack the construction of capital as a self-reflexive temporal agency in its “two objectified forms—historically as abstract labor time and surplus value, nowadays as risk and finance. . . .” Further, they argue that the collective agencies such as the market, the public sphere, and the sovereign people so central to the modern imaginary are “fetishized figurations” of the underlying performativity of capital. Lee and LiPuma’s highly suggestive argument is based on an analysis of the circulation—in terms of both its structure and culture—of the equity-based derivatives and currency swaps in the contemporary global financial markets.

Thus, from Taylor to Lee and LiPuma, we have come full circle in our exploration of new imaginaries. The key institutional sites of modern imaginary identified by Taylor are seen by Lee and LiPuma as “fetishized figurations” of capital that circulate at a dizzying speed across the globe. The essays in this issue offer a rich array of approaches to new imaginaries that disclose new possibilities and challenges at the crossings of globalization and multiple modernities. Many of the essays are provisional statements of work and thought still in progress but are sufficiently developed for public offering and discussion. These essays are written by a group of scholars with varied academic, political, and cultural backgrounds who came together by chance, contingency, and good fortune but have stayed together through will, sagacity, and emergent solidarity to work on common projects such as this one. This is a collective work with multiple voices and multiple trajectories groping toward new imaginaries.

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