



From Social Perception and Social Representation to Social Imaginary in Social Psychology Theory and Research

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INTRODUCTION

Social psychology, from its inception, has had to deal with the spectre of collective subjectivity. Is there such an entity? If it exists, how can we account for it? What would be (are) the most appropriate methods for its study? There have been several theoretical-referential frameworks that have tried to answer these questions. The most representative from the point of view of his research are studies of *social perception*, the theory of *social representations* and the conceptual framework of the *social imaginary*. The first is a common field, shared not only by psychology but by other humanists and researchers in the social sciences and applied philosophy or cultural studies, among others, based on the epistemic assumption that there are significant differences between social reality and reality

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perceived or represented and, in turn, that these representations tend to be more or less commonly representative of certain topics in certain population groups.

The *theory of social representations*, attributed to Serge Moscovici, has its antecedents in Durkheim, in particular his conception of collective representations. Probably, the most significant contribution of Moscovici and his followers has been the elaboration of an operational framework for its empirical study and the validation of such entity by statistical criteria. In other words, to support the idea that representations are sets with varying degrees of agglomeration around a nucleus. At the same time, it supposes that such a nucleus of a representation exists if there are statistical criteria on its existence. Of course, holding a numerical entity to account for a subjective reality was not new. Still, its application to the field of collective subjectivity has allowed evaluating trends of groups, communities and social subjects around objects and cultural processes of relevance in a period determined. In other words, it has served its political mission well, of social psychology, not alien to the demand to answer about what happens outside the academy, right in the space of “the social”.

Finally, *social imaginary* is a much broader concept. Although, however, some also relate it to Durkheim, a leitmotif of the theories that revolve around it. It was an attempt to account, theoretically and methodologically, for a subjectivity that exceeds individuals. It is not only the effect of representations but also the causes of reality. In that sense, it stands as an anti-representationist bet (Gergen, 1994), but, at the same time and essentially, de-representationist. In other words, the idea that, as for the subject, not all reality is representable. Rather, its existence is sustained on what does not cease to be registered; this non-inscription generates signs beyond what is instituted for the collective level. This last bet has been the one that has generated many of the new research trends on social imaginary: identifying those imaginary emergencies, signs of inscription, attempts of inscription and repeated resistance to the inscription, as well as their effects on the real and instituted of the structures and social dynamics.

This chapter will review the current state of the discussion on these issues and the author’s contributions in the studies on *social imaginary* in social psychology, particularly the theory of emergent social imaginary.

THE ASSUMPTION OF COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY(S)

The study of the collective subject(s) existed since before psychology and, of course, before social psychology. The specificity of social psychology has probably been in the relationship between identifying that object of study as one's own and the attempts to define theories or methods that would account for its existence.

However, before delving into the methodological peculiarities and the epistemic assumptions that the approaches to its study implied, it is necessary to review some of the premises of the very idea of collective subjectivity and of a collective subject, which has accompanied social psychology for so long.

As is known for Durkheim, the collective conscience represented an independent entity of the individuals, but that did not sustain itself without them. At the same time, it performed a coercive function over their acts, with greater or less intensity, according to the degree of social organicity. Durkheim (1895), despite intuiting certain immanence for collective representation, nevertheless emphasized the idea of the existence of collective subjectivity, independent of both the material and individual subjectivity. On his part, the idea of degrees¹ is the one that will have the most impact on the theory of social representations, particularly due to its numerical and vector emphasis. From other disciplinary referents, McDougal, with the notions of collective thought, feeling and actions, tried to account for those phenomena of collective subjectivity. In Wundt, the idea of a *Völkerpsychologie* also anticipated the existence of subjective phenomena resulting from collective human links and contexts, from human communities and "(...) inexplicable in terms of an individual conscience" (Wundt, 1916, p. 6)

These lines that anticipated cartography of what would be the collective subjectivity, derived from the empiricist tradition, and the notions of "conscience", "representation" and "intentionality" revealed certain confidence in the existence of control over these processes. In this way, they constituted antecedents of the construct of "social representations". What escaped this in Durkheim and acquired a more "idealistic" status, accompanied by the idea of a collective unconscious, was later combined in the emergence of the concept of social imaginaries.

¹Tangential to Durkheim's theory and only associable with procedural reasons, it can be associated with the subsequent reworking of dimensions by Giddens (1967).

In 1912 Durkheim wrote about the similarities and differences of a “collective conscience” in different societies according to the degree of relationship of men with themselves and with the rules of relationship in the community; already from his first works at the end of the nineteenth century, he pointed to facts that belong to that relationship; they are neither of the individual nor of society (Durkheim, 1976); by that same date, Wundt commented that the objective of the *Völkerpsychologie* should be precisely the “study of the mental products that are created by a human community” (1912, p. 7). In both, beyond the differences in the theoretical approaches that attempt to account for such claims, an underlying assumption was no less problematic. Is there a subjectivity beyond the individual? If there is, what is its support or objective reference? What are the indicators of its existence that could lead us to its affirmation?

There are common elements in certain “founding fathers” usually distanced by the followers of one or another current, which deserve particular attention, if we want to elucidate certain problems, with relative independence of the ethos and institutional and union legitimations to which without a doubt it is also subjected psychology as a human practice. In this sense, we find, for example, both in Freud and in Vigotsky, allusions to the presence of culture, of the social bond, in the configuration of the subject. As good antecedents to all social psychology, they were opportunely cited by social psychoanalysis traditions or social psychology with a Marxist orientation or cultural-historical approach.² However, most authors refer to that influence from the external on the internal in both traditions: psychoanalysis and the Historic-Cultural approach. In that point, it is common to leave aside appreciations that connected both Freud and Vigotsky with notions that would suppose the existence of a Collective Subjectivity. Collective subjectivity means for both of them; support for individuality, but having a presence beyond the individual; previous his borning, and despite him and with effects on the individuals and the space he inhabits and builds.³ This support is equivalent to the existence of a dynamic and a space that sustains, produces and reproduces subjectivity and that at the same time has objective effects, carried out in the space of culture and with new effects on itself, on institutions, on the social praxis

²Wrongly grouped by several of its theorists (Theo, Iñiguez, Held); under the label of “critical social psychology”.

³An idea that also, as Holt (1989) points out, citing Ellenberger (1970), they already had antecedents in the German psychiatric environment and even more so in the French one.

and on individuals themselves. In this sense, each of the places with which the supposed existence of that collective “entity” is related should be from those references, places to look for material for its eventual affirmation, reconstruction, description and interpretation.

One of the objections on which Castoriadis’ theoretical model is based is precisely that which reveals the inability of the Marxist tradition to take charge of the objectifying and instituting effects of this collective subjectivity, which Marx could not deny in his model,⁴ but which was forgotten in the Marxists.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE SOCIAL PERCEPTION STUDIES?

Category “social perception” as a methodological reference is used in social psychology and social science research, sociopolitical studies and sociocultural studies. It is common, to find some authors that erroneously connected the concept of “Social Perception” with the notion of “perception” as a process of the individual psyche. “Social perception” is actually a metaphor born after the decline of objectivism in the humanities and social sciences. It recognizes that “social facts” are not data in themselves but are a reading made of them by the social subjects that they are “represented”. In this sense, strictly speaking, the most immediate antecedent of the notion of “social perception” would be, like many of the approaches to studies on collective subjectivity, Durkheim’s concept of collective representations.

It is also necessary to point out that most studies on “social perception” of some phenomenon, despite assuming an approach to the existence of a collective phenomenon, in fact, what they do is study individual perceptions. In other words, although its results are stated as collective perceptions, being the result of massive studies in individuals and their response in a “private” way, they only have as a reason to affirm the existence of that “collectivity”, a mathematical reason.

⁴In several places, but in particular, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx affirms the idea of the process the dialectic of the processes of objectification—subjectivation, which, unlike Hegel, holds on the community, on the one hand, the need of others in this process of subjectivation and after self-objectification, and later, through an abstract representative, as a possibility (See Marx, Karl (1858/1985), p. 137 ff.).

The presumption of congruence in individual perceptions is obtained as a systematic conceptual reduction in the construction and elaboration of such massive instruments—surveys, online questionnaires and so on—and the conceptual adjustment of the results of those instruments. Therefore, they do not contain any other support than the statistical behaviour of these “data”. In this sense, there is no other indicator, in this conceptual frame, of the existence of truly collective phenomena.

These studies are valid for making political, economic, epidemiological decisions and so on. Still, they can hardly be sustained as a reflective and interpretive space of culture and society as phenomena that transcend, anticipate and produce the individual.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS FROM SERGE MOSCOVICI

As with the notion of *social perception*, here we do not intend to dwell on describing in detail the theory of social representations, on which abundant literature can be found, but rather place it epistemologically concerning its contribution to research on the problem of collective subjectivity (Moscovici, 1961; Jodelet, 1984, 1991).

Regarding social representations, it is common for the term to be associated with the notion coined by the social psychologist Serge Moscovici. However, before his work, there is enough research in sociology that is very similar in theoretical and methodological approaches. Thus, despite also having Durkheim as a more immediate theoretical antecedent, his work undoubtedly constituted an important contribution to social psychology, leaving the laboratory, the restricted notions that cloistered social psychology in university chairs, and putting it to the service of society and culture.

On the other hand, his contribution refers to the possibility of taking into consideration the knowledge of “common sense”, the popular knowledge, that several of the authors of critical social psychology tried to claim, but in this case, based on how this knowledge is put into action in a life experience of the collective subjects in a particular context and, above all, how the researcher can account for this process of passing from these representations to acts.

However, Moscovici was unable to identify indicators of the existence of this collective subjectivity either, since his methodological emphasis led him to define the vector ranges that demarcate the existence of this

subjectivity, rather than to its social precipitate, his first attempts for defining social representations as guides of individual behaviour in congruence with the collective.

At the same time, these guides result—in Moscovici's theory—from social interactions, and as such, they can already be understood as a collective object. Thus, this genealogical antecedent of the representations and their condition of mapping the links between them and the various plots/world and their linguistic and praxeological substratum gives a double status—"individual/collective"—to the concept "social representation".

In proposing a way of approaching these representations, this double condition is the first element that begins to be problematic from the epistemological perspective. The result ends up being, as in the methodology to investigate social perceptions,⁵ instruments that, gathering information from the individual, try to resolve the collective nature of the findings by mathematical means, in this case, vector.

Thus, the existence of phenomena of collective subjectivity is associated with the double condition of representativeness and closeness to the "shared" nuclei—statistically relevant indeed—of the various notions of representation generated around a phenomenon in a given community.

How are these notions produced in the individual? Is there a collective equivalent of these notions? How to affirm that collective character beyond the statistical correspondence? How to take charge, methodologically, of the circulations in the public space of said representations? These are questions not resolved by this tradition.

At the same time, the expectation that they are always susceptible to empirical study, the "requirement" of congruence between the representations, brings them much closer to positivism than to other traditions to which this theory is said to be an heir. In the same way, the definition of "social representations" as ways of reading reality resembles what was named by several in social psychology as "representationism" (Gergen, 1994), despite its explicit theoretical nexus with symbolic interactionism and social constructionism.

Despite Giddens himself (1967), take distance from the positivist Marx, assimilable to Comte as he affirms, despite his clear emphasis on connecting his work to the Marx of the "well-founded investigation of the

⁵This is not by chance since their main theorist recognizes them as perceptions programmes in these social representations.

historical interconnections of *subjectivity* and *objectivity* in human social existence” (Giddens, 1967, p. 14); the tradition of social representations, obtain from him and from Durkheim himself, the positivist nuances that he tried to avoid.

SOCIAL IMAGINARIES FROM CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS

The continuous return of the incompatibility of bringing together the Freudian and Marxist epistemes (Machin, 1998) reappears in the work of Castoriadis (1994, 2015) via the concept of social imaginary and the inscription in the institutional of the unrepresentable. The solution it offers is precisely in finding, in the institutable, not instituted, forms of expression of the imaginary beyond the objective (Machin, 2005). The problem arose precisely when an attempt was made to give sociological forms to these social imaginaries, such as they did some traditions of sociology.⁶

The notion of social imaginary undoubtedly shares the trace of ambiguity and the dispersion of uses according to disciplinary emphases. It is used in both social psychology and sociology, in philosophy or other humanities. It is common to find the term “imaginary” both in the singular or plural in papers, books, or lectures on social psychology, sociology, art and literature criticism. This category, in general, has in common the reference to subjectivities shared by subjects of a certain community or real or virtual common space, which takes as its nucleus some referential object for its anchoring. However, there are certain differences between sociological, psychological or literary notions of the social imaginary. In art criticism studies, it is common to refer to the imaginary created or constructed by an author’s work, referring to a complex world of representations created, for example, by a writer of short stories, novels and poetry, which is peculiar to its construction site. Images that appear when one delves into his different products sometimes create a culture or set of representations shared by those who approach his work, either as regular readers of his texts or as critics devoted to the study of his work.

⁶The tradition that brings together the sociologist like Pintos and several of the schools and groups legitimized by them (Pintos, 2012) has constituted a long tradition with concrete empirical contributions to the studies of social subjectivity, taking as a reference the term social imaginary; however, its methodological re-elaboration for empirical sociology has had to pay the cost of the positivization of the concept.

On the other hand, most sociological studies have approached a notion of studies of social imaginaries, relatively close to the notion of social representations developed by Serge Moscovici and the followers of this tradition, insofar as they attempt to quantify, give a certain weight—positive, measurable—to the representations they study. In this tradition, the approaches of J.L. Pintos and Ibero-American sociology could be cited, particularly interested in developing it as an “operational research model” (2012, p. 15). This perspective, which Pintos himself qualifies as “systemic constructivism” (Pintos & Aliaga Sáez (coords.), 2012, p. 15), is inscribed in a certain sense in a Western rationalist tradition, with the clear tendency to identify comprehensive forms of its object of study. The main limitation of this approach to social imaginaries is its reduction to collective representations⁷ and social identification processes. Castoriadis’ notion of social imaginaries⁸ is reduced to what is instituted as an effect, resulting from the instituting nature of social imaginaries.

Relatively different from the previous one, we find approaches to the studies of social imaginary, closer to social psychology and psychoanalysis, whose most important features we will be analysing.

DURKHEIM AND THE COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS ARE THE MOST IMMEDIATE ANTECEDENT

Emile Durkheim is one of the most immediate antecedents in all the previous notions of social representations. However, the emphasis is placed on some statements and features or others, depending on what has been highlighted in each theory.

Within the tradition that we are interested in highlighting here, the later developments of the notion of social imaginary appear linked to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, in particular, understanding that with Castoriadis, the notion of social imaginary came to try to resolve the relative contradiction in the compression of collective subjectivity between the Marxist and psychoanalytic tradition. His notion of social imaginary,

⁷“Social Imaginaries would be (...) collective representations that govern the systems of identification and social integration, and that makes social invisibility visible (...)” (Pintos, 1995, p. 7) (Our translation).

⁸Whose theory always represented a clear resistance to identifying them with processes of representation or rational spaces. It can be reviewed for more details in Chapter III, “The institution and the imaginary” 1987 [1975], *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K. Blamey, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. Chapter III (pp. 183–265).

on the one hand, offers Marxism the possibility of giving continuity to the idea of the processes of objectification and de-objectification in social determination, relatively abandoned by the developments after Marx, with an overemphasis on the notions of political economy. In the same way, the subjective production processes of societies are identified, which, unlike what had been remarked in the Marxist tradition, not so in Marx,⁹ are not necessarily attributable to social consciousness but to immanent forms that exceed the ability to be consciously represented by the social or acting subjects of their time. For this affirmation, Castoriadis undoubtedly takes the representations of psychoanalysis from which he will also have received systematic training. In this way, he manages to outline a notion that accounts for collective “representations” that are not only representatives and mirror of the instituted, of the symbolic, of the actions of the subjects and of their praxis, but also—and in this it is their emphasis—they are instituting, they have the capacity to institute, to create new institutions.

Developments after the work of Castoriadis allow us to identify that although its instituting character is its main feature, to advance beyond the limits of economic supra-determination, the social imaginary is not exhausted in the institution but exceeds what that it manages to institute. Those institutional remnants are diversifying so that at some point, they will end up reinstituting or fracturing the limits of the institution that contains them (Machin, 2000) or, on the other hand, obtaining realization through social praxis. This collective praxis will become a way of making these social imaginaries viable, giving way to their representations and the energy contained in them.

The study of these collective actions, of the form of expression of the social subject, whether or not it leads to institutionality, is another way of approaching social imaginaries. For their part, these imaginaries—and in that sense, it was also an important antecedent of contemporary affirmations—have expressions, relatively less pragmatic, more purely representational. Those representations are put into action and scenes in the form of colour and external sounds. These expressions, understood by some as performative, exceed this condition. The social imaginaries—fundamentally those that fail to establish themselves or that do not acquire an

⁹In several passages, from the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx (1858, pp. 622–623; 716–717; 942–943) highlights the difference between real and imaginary processes of societies and instituting effects, although he is more interested in the latter and the processes of capitalist institutionalization and their subsequent effects on the imaginary.

expression in the social, political praxis—take all the spaces of cultural expression. The study of those cultural objects that describe the existence of a community allows an approach to their social imaginary. Their linguistic expressions, jokes, ways of walking, gesturing and dressing, even the most visible expressions in their music, dances, paintings, photography or video, are ways of re-creating an existence in images. The interventions made of the environment—in many cases of the “instituted environment”—are a way of leaving the mark of these representations and, in many cases, of showing a differentiated way and even contrary to the instituted ones. These interventions become particularly relevant when they become the body itself, transgressing the boundaries of the limits defined for the sexual, modifications to the hair, the skin—tattoos, piercings, rings—or the body itself. One of the most significant elements is the definition of the limits of fashion and clothing, returning to civilizing moments where it was not clear when these additions were useful clothing and when they were part of the subject’s expression; where it was not clear when the intervention was on the clothes and where it was on the body itself. This almost casuistic delimitation that occurs in social imaginaries as a cultural expression accounts for many of the areas still unexplored in studies on social imaginaries.

On the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize that although one can be affirmed that social imaginaries are *collective representations of the world and societies*, they are *also pre-codifications*. They codify expectations; anticipate events, social acts and institutions; and generate cultural effects. In that sense, it cannot be reduced to its effects, although it is in them that they are updated. On the one hand, they are representations, but at the same time, instituting agents, anticipations of social action and cultural productions (creation). Their potentiality and moment of creation and their emergence is in that sense the most relevant for their study.

THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY CAN BE AMBIVALENT AND CONTRADICTIONARY: NOT NECESSARILY CONGRUENT

One of the most significant contributions of studies on social imaginary is associated with recognizing the ambivalence and even contradictoriness of these representations. In the studies of social representations, the representation congruence and a certain per cent or degree of shared ideas

between the individuals are expected. The concept of social imaginaries assumes that social imaginaries can contain contradictory representations or be ambiguous and ambivalent, without defining inclinations for the alternatives that the institution offers. In this tradition of the studies of social imaginary, these features are identified from their beginnings, among other reasons, probably because of the connection that Castoriadis' work has with psychoanalysis. One remembers that for Freud, unconscious representations can be ambivalent and contradictory. In turn, as Deleuze pointed out regarding Lacan and his interpretation of the unconscious in Freud's work, this is an "intersubjective unconscious"¹⁰; it is in the linking space, rather than belonging to an individual or collective entity.

IT CAN BE INVESTIGATED BY EACH OF THEIR EXPRESSIONS BUT INDIRECTLY

An important feature to take into account, when approaching the tradition of studies on social imaginaries, is that these are not a directly sensible reality but rather a construction of the subject that describes them, as a result of their interpretation, construction, a starting from the expressions of the existence of these imaginary representations. In other words, social imaginaries are accessed indirectly. This statement has several implications: the definition of social imaginary studies must contemplate the diversity of forms of expression of these imaginaries. The approach designs to their studies must take into account the instituted moments, of the instituting process and of social praxis and creation social imaginaries. In the same way, the studies must be open to the appearance of new symptoms or indicators of the existence of social imaginaries, not foreseen in their initial approaches to a cultural space.

On the other hand, it has a differentiating theoretical implication from different similar approaches, since these symptoms themselves are a necessary condition to be able to affirm the existence of collective representations—collective subjectivity, beyond the convergence of similarities in responses to individual response instruments such as surveys or political and social voting so that they are done privately. One of the most significant differences of these approaches from social psychology to the studies

¹⁰ "Thus, an intersubjective unconscious is defined that is not reduced to an individual unconscious or a collective unconscious, and concerning which one series can no longer be assigned as originating and the other as derivative (...)" (Deleuze, 2002 [1967], p. 167).

of social imaginaries from some of the ones that have been made from sociology is to suspect, to question, the existence of social imaginaries, which have been affirmed by statistical congruence in the response to surveys.

It does not mean that these statistically congruent responses should not be taken into account to be alert about the expression of symptoms of these collective imaginary representations but only the existence of expressions that account for a shared subject. In other words, collective emergencies authorize, according to this approach, affirming or suspecting at least that there are collective imaginary representations.

For the study from the perspective of the social imaginary, social emergencies are interpreted to obtain indicators of both the social imaginary and the social interactions that are both its cause and effect. In this sense, a rational, positive result of its study cannot be offered by the researcher; instead, interpretations are offered, which are new ways of enunciating its existence by the researcher. The researcher, as said before, does not establish an aseptic approach. Instead, it recognizes the effects of its presence in the scene, over the interpretation of the results, and the destiny of those interpretations.

Social psychology underwent three important movements—although not necessarily chronological—the passage from perception to construction, the second from construction to transformation and the third towards creation. The social imaginary was no exception; in fact, it was an advance in this process (Machin, 2005).

However, the idea of collective subjectivity has been controversial, precisely on political issues. There, the question was played in the tension between the existence of a national social subject and the fantasy of a national subjectivity—discussed in various ways in “Imagined Communities” or in “The anatomy of a national fantasy”—and the possibility of collective actions that transcend the individual subject, welcomed in various intellectual projects, from the Marxist tradition, or via French post-structuralism, Guattari. As part of the broad spectrum of approaches to social imaginaries and their manifestations, other investigations that account for their existence can be identified in more limited contexts such as groups or labour organizations.

The studies of collective subjectivity in groups have had several traditions, some of the closest to the notion of social imaginary can be identified with the tradition of studies of operative groups by Enrique Pichón-Rivière and studies in small groups of René Kaës. In both cases, an

attempt was made to identify expressions in the groups that account for shared collective subjectivities, which offer symptoms of their existence visible to an external observer—involvement or not, in the dynamics.

Congruent with this interpretation is the notion used among others by Armando Bauleo of the institutional unconscious. It alluded to the existence of an organizational unconscious, shared by the members of a specific labour institution, which has effects on their actions, decisions, evaluations and so on, without their necessarily being aware of it; however, it has in common with the notions of shared *pichonean* subjectivity from which they start that this institutional unconscious offers expressions and symptoms of its existence to observers not yet involved in that institution.

One of the later developments that we have been able to follow to this notion refers to what happens with incorporating new members to the institution. Among other effects, it is mentioned that the subjects initially resist responding to those unconscious institutional mandates, which for them are perceived as an alien other and that establish little rational rules. However, after some time in the organization, they incorporate these representations unconsciously and function according to them like the rest of the organization members. In that sense, the most significant indicator of their incorporation of that institutional unconscious is the inability to perceive these representations. In other words, these representations, to operate in the behaviour of the subjects of the organization, must be presented as something natural and congruent in the subjects' actions, cancelling their ability to perceive them critically.

THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

Probably, one of the significant epistemic overturns contained in the conceptual project of social imaginaries is associated with the rupture of the possibility of representation, both in the tradition of studies of social perception and of studies of social representations. It represents an anti-representationalist alternative (Gergen, 1985), but as a capacity to contain that what is not represented and it is not representable, that systematically returns as an effect, or imaginary emergency (Machin, 2005). This sense, which this tradition inherited from Freudian thought, in turn, updated, on the subject's side, the suggestions presented in the "Grundrisse" Marx, on the alien and external determination of the subject. For Marx, this

effect of the unrepresentable is reinforced with the appearance of money; it comes from the community, but it is anticipated, initially as a determination of the individual about himself through the relationship with others (Marx, 1857–1858, p. 137). Those two conditions, first, of the necessity of the relationship with another to its objectification and second, the possibility of being represented and, at the same time, not-all representable, by something alien, will determine the condition of a relationship with the other non-objective and external to the subject.

The recognition of the actual acts, the material products and in a certain sense the institutions, beyond their symbolic existence, as in passing, was an implicit project in Castoriadis' (1975) conception of the social imaginary.¹¹ He did not achieve it because he was, at the time, more engaged in a larger project, in the confrontation with functionalism as interpretation, which involved both anthropology and sociology, Marxism and psychoanalysis. It is, however, that project on whose realization it is possible to glimpse the entire breadth of existence of the imaginary and where social psychology could take advantage of his workspace.

There is an internal relationship between the instituted, the represented, the act and the unrepresentable with the social imaginary. While the instituted represents the trace of an imaginary, the represented, it's naming, the act, the present inscription process and the unrepresentable are her future. When it was affirmed that the social imaginary does not die (Machin, 2000), reference was made, not precisely to the fact that it remains inscribed—since its inscription is exactly its death—but rather that the non-inscribable always returns to disturb on the instituted, into the represented, into the speech and into the act. These disturbances must be taken into account with caution, never literally but taken into account. Most of them appear as *emergency sources of this imaginary*.

THE EMERGENCY SOURCES OF SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

It is known that for individual psychology from Rorschach to Brunner, the use of techniques of indirect exploration of subjectivity has been vital for the development not only of profound theories about the functioning of the psyche but also in the development of alternative approaches to the “pathos” of the soul. Much less known, however, despite the

¹¹The reader can review in this regard, Castoriadis (1975). The institution and the imaginary pp. 186–187.

“Psychopathology of daily life” or “The malaise in culture” is the use of material that, as a result of socialization, emerges to fracture the limits imposed by what is instituted on social subjectivity.¹²

The “symptoms” of social subjectivity, available to everyone, every day shout the feelings of society in our faces without us paying any ears to it. However, they would be a good piece of information for those with responsibility and institutional decision-making power: it is in their hands to keep the walls of the institution flexible enough to avoid their fracture before the push of the social imaginary.

As a hinge between classical Marxism and psychoanalysis, where the confluence was not frustrated,¹³ it condensed, among others, through Castoriadis the concept of emergencies of the social imaginary, the result of the convergence of several categorical lines that preceded it.

IDENTIFICATION OF EMERGENCIES

The idea of elaborating a relatively autonomous methodology of the dominant positions in the research proposals constitutes a way to overcome the positivist imperialism of research, which has a theoretical (Habermas, 1990 [1982]; Munné, 1989), a methodological (Devereaux, 1969) or an academic (Lull, 2003) expression. In this regard, Jamel Lull advised, referring to cultural studies, that more important than following and wanting to catch all this theoretical movement was to try to adapt it to the conditions and needs of the context in which it was going to be investigated (Lull, 2003)

At this moment, rather than dwelling on an analysis of the essential concept of emergencies of the social imaginary, we will explore its operational capacity to generate social investigations that revive the critique of our daily lives. In the last three decades of the previous century, the most progressive social psychology incorporated as one of its objectives the

¹²In a previous study, we stopped at the relationship between the imaginary emergence and its fractures in the instituted. A summary of this research appeared in the essay “La Resistencia imaginaria” *Revista Encuentro*, 2000.

¹³An interesting essay on the relationship between Marxism and Psychoanalysis written by J.L. Acanda (1998) covers the historical moments of the frustration of this confluence. As an effort to complement it, from a logical and epistemological point of view, we carried out a study whose resulting essay we entitled *Cantos y desencantos sobre encuentros y desencuentros* (Machín, 2008), in which the role of a certain borderline thought between one episteme and another is analysed as is the case of C. Castoriadis.

intervention committed to reality, the result of which the critique of daily life became one of its final objectives. Then, at the end of the century, the banality and the rebirth of pragmatism—cognitivism, voluntarism and even biologism for psychology—were abandoning the “fashion” of transforming intervention from the social subject to replace it in the best of cases by the fashion of transformation “of” the social subject.

The study from the concept of social imaginary precisely proposes a return to the transforming role of social subjectivity from itself; from the recognition of its founding capacity, of its instituting power; and from the recognition of your desire.

As we have been discussing, the imaginary is an ephemeral record in itself. The only way to become observable is through its objectification and/or institutionalization. Yet, paradoxically, once instituted, it is no longer imaginary. This raises the problem of the sources of its recognition in an empirical investigation. Without going too far into the characterization of the methodological and operational relevance of this type of research, it is feasible to make some comments about the main imaginary emergencies that can be taken as a reference in an investigation and their relevance in the approach to a general characterization of the social imaginary and its links with social reality and its institutions.

It is also necessary to emphasize that research on the social imaginary requires constant observance of the transferential signs of the researcher with respect to the community in each of the stages. Of vital importance is its collection at the beginning of the investigation, as much of the most relevant data of the investigation on the community social imaginary will be registered in the mutual subjective reactions of those first moments; then the effects of daily friction are tempering the irregularities of the surfaces in contact, that is, the subjectivity of the researcher and that of the social subject to be investigated, as well as the individual subjects involved; and the singular richness of subjective strangeness dissolves in everyday life: the second stage of the investigation then appears. In this second moment, patient listening is required, alert both to explicit speeches and to unconscious emergencies, own and the subject to investigate. For these reasons, a pair of records must be kept, *in situ* and *a posteriori*, which allows them to be compared at the end.

Research on the social imaginary is an adventure towards the collision of one’s own individual subjectivity with an alien collective and individual subjectivity. From its result, conclusions about the dynamics produced there may be systematized, which will undoubtedly be more a reflection of

that time interval than a timeless diagnostic interpretation; especially if we are honest enough and coherent with the idea already stated that the imaginary is in its becoming; and that any intervention in order to know it not only describes it but also transforms it.

The research report of the social imaginary should finally be read more than as the timeless anchor or the reading of an unfailing and teleological oracle, as a report of the result of that subjective experience. Let us stop now in the analysis of the expressive potentialities of some of the sources already used in previous research (Machin, 2004a).

THE LANGUAGE OF THE HOUSES

Any social research on a community has as one of its sources the house-to-house visit. This is a good space to catch the imaginary structure of an institution that is reproduced in the most archaic of systems: the home. We must go to those places, with the sensitivity of the anthropologist and of the field researcher, with the extreme sincerity of Devereaux (1969), capable of recognizing in their feelings in the personal impact of these visits an inexhaustible source of information about that “ecological niche” that speaks to us as Emilio Rodrigué¹⁴ called it. From the *façade*, which will be seen as an independent source due to its impact on the public, to the detail of each of its corners, they are relevant. The architectural and environmental design of the rooms, their distribution, the contiguity of the rooms must be recorded. Doors or their absence are significant because they limit or facilitate access, make coexistence more private or invasive and promiscuous. The distribution of small private micro-spaces inside the home such as drawers, places in the bed, corners provides information about the personal and the collective in the houses. The presence of religious or family altars, the colour of the walls and their objects are also relevant. All this acquires meaning in the space of the collective social subjectivity of the family itself at the same time that it reproduces¹⁵ and configures the lines of a more general collective or social imaginary.

¹⁴ Rodrigué spoke out in favour of “[...] the possibility of anthropologically studying people in their habitat and interacting within their ecological niche. That niche is communicative. The houses speak” (Rodrigué, 2003, p. 3) (Our translation).

¹⁵ From Durkheim to Bordieu, sociology has been able to account for the processes of social reproduction at all levels; however, the subtle mechanisms through which it is exercised change from society to society and from context to context and are also part of the reproduced.

SOCIOPATHOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

If, in an attempt to get closer to the individual subject, Freud, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, bet on studying the irruptions of the unconscious in every day: the joke, the failed acts and the forgetfulness; for the study of social subjectivity, it is also necessary to resort to everyday expressions. Everyday social conflicts; the phrases in the transport, in the market and in the street; and informal conversations—all these are sources of expression of the social imaginary yet to be instituted or of the reimagining of the instituted.

In various Latin American contexts where we have carried out these investigations, it has been possible to use the spontaneity of its inhabitants. The substantial production of expressions in which in its daily life it expresses, not only the superficial and ephemeral, the banal, but also each of its deepest concerns, ideas, dreams, theories and desires, is an inexhaustible source of information to know each context and how it is inhabited.

The set of daily expressions as a symptom of the existence of the social imaginary is a vital source of information collection for any social research that boasts of being unbiased, systematic and committed to the truth and transformation according to the designs of the social subject's own desire.

CHILDREN'S GAMES

Regardless of the differences between theoretical or disciplinary formations, the special anthropological significance that the game has in the singularization of the human being is recognized and accepted at different levels, both from the phylogenetic point of view (Huizinga, 1988 [1938]) and in the subjective ontogenetic constitution of man, due to the role it fulfils in the preparation of the "human cub" for its incorporation into the social institution to which it belongs (Vigotsky, 1987).

For Vigotsky, the game fulfils a primordial function in the child's socialization and the acquisition of social functions that he will later have to carry out as an adult. For this analysis, he incorporates Marx's idea that social objects contain within themselves a portion of human history; and he reveals the complex psychological mechanisms through which the child, assisted by the adult, appropriates the culture of humanity, especially the society with which he is directly related.

Children's games as an expression of social, cultural, community and even political information, and the more general institutional structures are a good source from which the imaginary springs. There is a long tradition in use, by psychoanalysis and psychology, of children's games both as a method of collecting information and/or as a means of intervention, not so much so in sociocultural studies. Social studies knew how to draw from psychoanalysis in its practice and its theory. Why not do it also concerning such productive techniques as observing children's play.

Children's play contains a strong imaginary charge and not just a symbolic or pre-functional expression. In this regard, W. Winnicott said that this is why he studied the small child, whose relationship with things was illusory—similar to that established by the arts of religion (Winnicott, 1971). It is in this sense that it is an almost transparent source of reading the imaginary.

GRAFFITI, WALL PAINTING AND CALLIGRAPHY: THE IMAGINARY TRANSMISSION OF INFORMATION THROUGH THE LINE

In societies, some information transmission runs parallel to the symbolic transmission and is relatively independent of it: the imaginary transmission of information. This transmission of information has always existed; it even predates its symbolic form. The pictographs, the petroglyphs, were not only pre-symbolic forms but imaginary forms of exchange of ideas, forms and structures that were not real and also not yet symbolic. This space would then only be reserved for the non-symbolizable.

In ancient Egyptian writing, there were glyphs that embodied in themselves the two forms of information containment. The glyphs were imaginary—symbolic; this is its difficulty in being deciphered. Only then did sign and image separate, and the word came to be interpreted almost exclusively in its symbolic dimension. Anyway, calligraphy remained as an imaginary subversion to the order of the written word. In everything that we write, by hand, on a paper, we place not only signs, with the meaning and meaning that we intend—or that escape our conscious intention but are still symbolically decipherable, by an interpretive reading—but we also record a whole generation, a family brand, a whole teaching tradition, a

whole era, a country, a culture, an identity¹⁶ and a social imaginary. If we make this brand a public exercise, then we are taking a leap out of the generational transmission; we are creating a space not only for imaginary containment but also for the generation of imaginary. In this sense, graffiti continues to be a key to understanding, unveiling and building the social imaginary. The line is a container of the imaginary, as is the word of meanings; if it is shared, it is also a transcendent imaginary creation.

Interesting antecedents, however, are found via the connections between cultural and political studies of graffiti and mural painting.

Among the publication of Julien Besancon (1970) work, *The walls have the floor*, and the Committee for the Defense of Chilean Culture (Comité de Defensa de la Cultura Chilena, 1990) in Berlin published *Muralismo = Wandmalerei = Peinture Murale = Mural Painting = Pittura Murale Art in Chilean popular culture*, twenty years passed. Just three years after Besancon's book, the Chilean people knew of a sad political reality that left the walls as one of the few forms of expression, almost a screaming. Unfortunately, we social researchers have added little to the voices that those eloquent walls cried out.¹⁷

TOWARDS THE IMAGINARY FORMALIZATION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION, HOWEVER, THE MURALS ARE MOVING

Keys for a reading of the social imaginary of the peoples, the murals are an expression of the instituting moment of the image and generators of the social imaginary. Without dwelling too much on this expression of the community imaginary, already studied previously by us, it is necessary to point out some keys: in a study on the social imaginary of a community, all graphic expressions that contain at least two of the following

¹⁶ Various researches on the subject can be found. In our case, at the beginning of 2000, we directed a degree thesis of Sociocultural Studies entitled "Studies on calligraphy and identity", which tried to account for this complex process of identity construction through personal calligraphy and its relationship with the calligraphy of parents, guardians and teachers.

¹⁷ While the project of this book was beginning in 2018, Chile revived its long tradition of expression in the walls as one of the ways of existing what was called the social outbreak of October of that year. We collected a very brief and fragmentary part of that moment in a visual work and some ideas. Still, this work should be complemented by a systematization of all the recorded images from that recent period.

characteristics should be studied: occupy public spaces, be two-dimensional and in a visible format, not be ephemeral. This combination of qualities will ensure that your exchange with the community objectively represents the possibility of being both containers and generators of social imaginary. Some of these expressions have already been studied by us at different times and contexts. Among them, the research projects on murals, the pictographs of the Indo-Cubans, graffiti or tattoos stand out, the first results of which constitute premises for adjusting their use as sources in this research.

FACADES VS INTERIORS

The facades of houses, despite the relative rigidity¹⁸ of regulations on architecture and urban planning, are on the other hand a rich expression of aesthetic ideals, but also social, economic and political, ecological and so on of a community; they are its subjective expression displayed in and towards the environment. Observing the evolution of the architectural design of the houses, we can contrast, against the grain of the regulations instituted, an expression of values, ideals, desires, frustrations and social conflicts. If we investigate the history of the design of the architectural idea of a house, we will find family histories, generational differences more or less well settled, hierarchical power structures that go beyond economic wealth or the spatial and design limitations pre-established by regulation.¹⁹ It is important to understand a community to see its daily customs as its architectural expressions and the use and exploitation of the physical space in which it is located. Although many times this transcends the possibilities of the community itself, the use that it makes of its public and private spaces within the framework of what is instituted or outside of them is an inexhaustible source of information about the spatial imaginary of that community.

¹⁸The regulations on architecture and urban planning have always followed imaginary tendencies, and not every time they have constituted the just institutionalization of the social imaginary of an era, associated above all with variables of power, political and economic in the first, but later also the power that knowledge grants—or its absence—on these issues and the struggle of the most diverse social actors.

¹⁹In any case, these regulations are also an expression of imaginary variables determined, such as the place that architectural design occupies in the hierarchy of those who elaborate and interpret these regulations and their value judgments regarding the role and place of architectural design in society.

On the other hand, the interiors of the houses, much more intimate and private, are a living image of their inhabitants, as is how we represent ourselves. Without being too exaggerated, it can be said that the facades are to the face and the way of dressing of the people, like the interiors to the skin of the rest of their body and their own personal image. Any researcher who enters a house after the imaginary trace must be subtle and careful both in the appropriation of this rich information and in the use that he makes of it. With it, its tenants give us part of their privacy. There the ethical guarantee on its use must be stamped on our part. However, the facades are the public bet of the homes; it is the shared image, the mask designed for exchange, the way we would like to be identified. These are created to be shared: however, due to their public cost, they must be discussed by consensus rather than by rigid regulations instituted by the subjects of the public space that they cut.

THE TATTOO, THE PIERCING AND THE BODY ART

Sometimes it is not enough to leave an external mark, external to ourselves: it is necessary to do so on ourselves as well. It is not necessary to go to the psychopathology of autistics or children with severe psychological disorders. At certain moments in the evolution of any child, we will discover both the pleasure of painting the walls, the things and themselves, after they discover the enjoyment of the line. Finally, older, many children in our culture enjoy drawing a clock or a doll on their finger. There is in this expression something of play, of playful enjoyment, of aesthetic pleasure and of bodily enjoyment. Also, there is an attempt at imaginary differentiation where the symbolic difference fails. As early as 1929, Ivor Armstrong Richards established relationships between social conditioning and aesthetic reactions, which was equally valid regardless of cultural level. The reaction to aesthetic expression is more the result of a shared imagination than of a rational formation. Around that same date, Vigotsky, the brilliant Russian psychologist, was writing a treatise on art and psychology in which he tried to unravel the keys to aesthetic production and reception. However, in all of his work, there are elements to understand social and individual subjectivity links with art. Among his most surprising conclusions was that the symbolic expression of art was the result of the symbolic synthesis of a rich and even vaster inner imaginary world (Vigotsky, 1966 [1926]), formed in turn in the conditions of the complex social situation of the development of each stage of each historical moment of the

subject (Vigotsky, 1987). Michael Foucault incorporates, for his part, the idea that bodily expression is also the result of resistance to repression, to symbolic exclusion. Perhaps this is why Habermas believes that he is reading in Foucault a vindication of corporal expression very similar to that made by Bataille. According to him, Foucault sees the body as “[...] resistance can extract its motivation, if not its justification, only from the signals of the body language, from that nonverbalizable language of the body on which pain has been inflicted, which refuses to be sublated into discourse” (Habermas, 1998 [1985], p. 285–286). The aesthetics of the body runs as a vindication of the asymmetry generated by all forms of power.²⁰ Perhaps because “the asymmetry (replet with of normative content) that Foucault sees embedded in power complexes does not hold primarily between powerful wills and coerced subjugation, but between processes of power and the bodies that are crushed within them. It is always the body that is maltreated in torture and made into a showpiece of sovereign revenge” (Habermas, 1998 [1985], p. 285). Even when the sovereign is the subject himself, he wishes to only express his sovereignty over his own body. “[...] it is always the body [Habermas continues saying about Foucault], that is taken hold of in drill resolved into a field of mechanical forces and manipulated; the one that is objectified and monitored by the human sciences, even as it is stimulated in its desire and stripped naked” (Habermas, 1994 [1985], p. 285). That relative autonomy of the body was, not without a certain scandal, exhibited by the greats of Cuban literature: Lezama and his homosexuality,²¹ Carpentier and his phonetics, Guillén and his Cubanness²² and Sarduy and the peculiar poetics of his body²³; and it is exhibited now by the most dissimilar sexual tendencies and corporal expression.

²⁰ “Power also preserves in Foucault’s hands a literally aesthetic reference to the perception of the body, to the painful experience of the abused and punished body” (Habermas, 1994 [1985], p. 340).

²¹ Not only private but his controversial gaze for the time that he submitted to public space through *Paradiso*, especially his controversial Chapter VIII.

²² Understood as vulgarity by those who insist on ignoring it, in criticism, for example, of his “Poem of Purity”, one of his most controversial poems, is probably because it is precisely an expression of the Cuban sexual, social imaginary. Thus, the controversy ranges from those who question his authorship, through those who question the quality of Nicolás Guillén by having dared to write that, to those who try to turn it into a great poem, because Guillén is a great poet: what he hides is the horror of unveiling what is repressed in the social imaginary.

²³ The reader can review the essay by M. Mateo (1999) “Sarduy y la poética del cuerpo” In *Crítica*, 1999.

THE CARNIVAL

Carnival represents for the collective conscience a space for the liberation of this imaginary, not only because of the wide range of symbolization spaces that it offers but because in itself it represents the liberation from the repressions that culture establishes through what is instituted. Even when not all the tendencies of the social imaginary manage to establish themselves in the carnival, due to the ambivalence of the imaginary itself, impossible to be found in the plane of the instituted and its endless wealth incapable of being trapped by the limits of the symbolic, it finds itself in it a space of greater freedom. Even though not all the expressions of the social imaginary find a space in the real manifestation of their existence, the garland of voices that is the carnival offers a greater wealth of symptoms to meet him there.

ETHICS OF THE INVESTIGATION OF THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

Before ending with this list of emergency sources of the social imaginary, it is necessary to make an ethical statement. No social inquiry is aseptic and neutral. Asking ourselves about our social image and not only about our model is more than characterizing or describing it; it is in itself a way of transforming it. It is here where a type of investigation of this court becomes delicate, where it is required, as the poet said, to walk with cat's feet. Any intervention for investigative purposes in a community undoubtedly causes irreversible movements, and not always predictable in it, but it always undoubtedly opens a gap in the struggle of community desire beyond the designs of the instituted. The claim of asepticism or neutrality, in reality, hides more or less conscious determinations and desires of the researcher, but which undoubtedly have their influence on the object to be investigated; to the extent that these are not made explicit, their influence is diluted in the research results. That is why we believe that it also has an essential role in an investigation on the social imaginary, the constant questioning of the researcher about his desire or, if you like, the evolution of his moods, feelings, attitudes and values, with respect to the research object, which is itself a subject, with certain levels of action, reaction, autonomy and intentionality, and whose effects on the researcher are also variable.

FORWARD ON THE INVESTIGATION ON THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

At this time, several investigations are coordinated from the perspective of the social imaginary. These should contribute to consolidating the practical output of the investigations of social subjectivity that are a debt to settle with the tradition of Marxist thought. However, the academic perspective will never replace the role of social subjectivity in the struggle for hegemony, to which Gramsci (1975) opportunely gave an active role to the intellectual of the social sciences.

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