

# Imaginamics

## Practices and Dynamics of Social Imagining

**Cluster of Excellence**

**Friedrich Schiller University Jena**

### Definitions and guiding assumptions

The collaborative work in our Cluster is based on a provisional concept of social imagining, which will be revised and refined throughout the duration of the Cluster. We define social imagining as a bundle of processes and practices by which social imaginaries emerge, persist, and are modified or replaced. Social imaginaries, in turn, are conceived as imaginations that are socially shared. Their fundamental significance for social order, but also for change and transformation, remains underappreciated if their content remains the exclusive object of analysis. Of equal or greater significance are the practices of social imagining that make social imaginaries possible. These practices are themselves subject to change, and they exert a considerable impact on social dynamics. They can promote essentialisation, contribute to the suppression of antagonisms or be employed to stabilise power relations. At the same time, they can upset long-held beliefs, unleash creative potential and open up new ways of thinking.

[Imagination – contingent concretisations – imaginaries – social imaginaries](#)

At the centre of our new approach is the plea for a shift in focus from social imaginaries and their contents to the practices of social imagining. In the philosophical tradition dating back to antiquity, imagination is typically understood as an individual subject's ability to represent an object or other content as if it were perceptible to the senses (*memoria, phantasia*). It has often been considered an act of imagination when something absent is made present in some way. But imagination can also refer to something that is accessible to sensory perception. As Kant and Merleau-Ponty emphasised, imagination is not strictly opposed to perception, but is actively involved in it. It plays an important role in our access to the world and in the constitution of what we consider to be reality. Following Kathleen Lennon, we regard imagination as "the faculty by which sensory intuitions are given shape or form, without which perceptual experiences are not possible". Despite its role in processing sensual data, imagination is not bound to the factual state of the real world but is open to "irrealisation" and fiction (Wolfgang Iser). For this reason, the validity of social imaginaries is usually not measured against any sort of external objective reality but rather against socially shared conceptions of reality and their reproduction through social practices.

Imagination, as its etymology suggests, is characterised by quasi-visual, quasi-sensorial or pictorial qualities. This sensory dimension distinguishes imaginations from concepts. Imagined content is, in short, more richly fleshed out than that of conceptual thinking. It has a degree of detail that goes beyond the definitions necessary to grasp a given object or idea. This surplus, which, at first glance, appears insignificant, is evidence of what we call contingent concretisations (borrowing a term coined by Roman Ingarden in his research on reception processes). We argue that contingent concretisations play a decisive role in the work of imagination. For example, since late antiquity, Jesus Christ has generally been depicted as a bearded, white man with shoulder-length hair. These characteristics are neither substantiated by biblical sources nor are they necessary for the theological understanding of Christ. However, they have become so established that divergent depictions of Christ are perceived as irritating or even provocative. The persistence of these characteristics significantly shapes not only the understanding of the respective object of imagination but also social and cultural contexts. This is what made it possible, for instance, to integrate imaginations of Jesus's appearance into racialised ways of thinking.

By furnishing them with contingent concretisations, imaginations can be endowed with connotations, a certain 'feel' or affective, sensual and aesthetic qualities. This enrichment with concrete details can take many forms: images (mental or material), metaphors, narratives or even practices such as rituals. Whatever form they take, contingent concretisations are always a characteristic property of imagination and imaginaries. The fact that these concretisations are contingent does not mean that they are arbitrary or random. They often embody traditions or conventions as well as biases and prejudices. They are thus highly malleable and can be moulded by cultural and social forces and power relations. Especially when they are essentialised, they contribute to shaping our social reality.

While the notion of imagination primarily denotes an individual faculty or activity of creating and reproducing inner images, the term imaginaries refers to both individual and supra-individual, collective forms and patterns. These patterns underlie our understanding of reality but also allow us to envision other realities. Imaginaries affect individuals, their constitution as a subject, the development of the ego, their relation to others, the environment, social groups and societies, their self-understandings, and their conceptions of the surrounding world. They are deeply interwoven with our very conception of reality.

We refer to social imaginaries as imaginaries that are socially shared, i.e., imaginaries that are collectively accepted or at least understood within a given social group or society and that social actors believe they have in common with other people. Social imaginaries contribute to the collective production of meaning and guide both individual and collective action. They are often embedded in and simultaneously co-constitutive of social institutions. Social imaginaries are highly context-sensitive and context-dependent. They articulate the historically and culturally determined characteristics of social groups, collectives and societies; at the same time, they contribute significantly to the development, stabilisation and efficacy of these characteristics. Particular social imaginaries thus cannot claim universal validity, even if they have a high degree of generality. Since social imaginaries (unlike individual imaginaries) can be contested and challenged, they can be a topic of debate and negotiation.

Our understanding of the social intentionally avoids a narrow definition. It encompasses all kinds of collectives, ranging from small groups, crowds, communities or organisations up to societies both on a national or supra-national level. This allows us to enquire into the scope of social imagining – to investigate the range and dissemination of particular social imaginaries throughout society.

### Practices of social imagining

Our Cluster is guided by the idea that social imaginaries only exist in practices of social imagining. Our understanding of these practices, which emerges from the previous considerations, can easily be linked to practice-oriented approaches developed in sociology and anthropology in recent years. What these approaches have in common is their attempt to overcome the traditional antagonism between theories that concentrate on social structures and those that place the human subject with its ideas, intentions and agency at the centre of explanations of social phenomena. Instead, practice-oriented approaches emphasise that practices sustain the social, lend it stability and explain its propensity for change.

If we understand social imagining as a practice, it follows that researchers should not limit their analysis to the content of imagining. Instead, the practices associated with imaginaries have to be analysed in their own right, including practices of production, reception, reproduction, distribution, interpretation, iteration, translation and variation, of remembering and forgetting, of affirmation and resistance. Taking practices of social imagining into account necessitates considering their diverse conditions and forms of situatedness, which can encompass material and media factors, embodiment and implicit knowledge, conventions, habits and rules as well as social, economic and political structures, organisations or institutions and power relations.

### Dynamics of social imagining

The focus on practices of social imagining can provide answers to two fundamental questions. Firstly, how are relatively stable social imaginaries possible at all? Secondly, why do social imaginaries change and in what ways can radical innovation emerge in social imagining? Both characteristics of social imagining, its potential for stability as well as its potential for innovation, have important effects on social relationships and interactions. Without an understanding of the relative stability and, conversely, the enormous and sometimes even rapid changeability of social imaginaries, their fundamental ambivalence cannot be adequately understood.

Social imagining is a practice that transforms contingent experiences into complex nexuses of meaning. It embeds separate individual perceptions and experiences in meaningful contexts. In doing so, it also contributes to expanding and consolidating these nexuses of meaning, which tends to increase their persuasive power. Imaginaries are likely to be powerful when social actors are unaware that they are malleable or revisable but instead view them as self-evident or 'natural'. The contingent concretisations of social imaginaries make a particular contribution to such developments. Originally secondary, insignificant characteristics of imaginaries can gradually appear natural and in this way become essentialised, semanticised

and endowed with deeper meaning. This happens especially when social imaginaries undergo processes of de- and recontextualisation. When a social imaginary is taken out of its context and transferred to other contexts, the probability increases that contingent concretisations can come to be considered as essential elements. Essentialisations and naturalisations of social imaginaries and their contingent concretisations can significantly contribute to the consolidation of power relations and social, political or economic structures. By making existing conditions appear plausible or even rational, they can help to render possible alternatives invisible.

However, inherent in the processes and practices of repetition and renewal that are essential to social imagining is a potential for crisis and conflict. The same practices of (re)production and reception that ensure the persistence of social imaginaries also render them susceptible to de- and recontextualisation and to translation into different languages and media, which can lead to shifts in their meaning. These modifications can go so far as to fundamentally alter an imaginary's content or undermine its social acceptance. Imaginaries can also be called into question if their underlying material, technological and institutional structures change. In such moments, social imaginaries that previously had a stabilising, cohesive effect (because they glossed over differences of interpretation) can suddenly unleash social tensions and conflicts. Even well-oiled routines of social imagining can fall into crisis if the practices within which social imaginaries are constituted become less accepted or less homogeneous.

The fact that social imagining can undergo incisive changes is not only observable in emancipatory movements, but can also go hand in hand with the violent assertion of power. This can occur at all levels of social interaction and social order, but manifests itself most dramatically in colonial expansion and domination, which imposes heteronomous imaginaries and erases existing ones in support of colonial power and violence. Social imagining thus involves at least two dynamics: change in practices of social imagining as well as change provoked by them in social realities.