

LSE

THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

LSE Research Online

Tania Zittoun and Alex Gillespie Imagination in societal development

Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in *Imagination in human and cultural development*. Cultural Dynamics of Social Representation . Routledge, Hove, UK. ISBN 9780415661638

© 2016 The Authors

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64467/>

Available in LSE Research Online: February 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

IMAGINATION IN SOCIETAL CHANGE

While experiences of imagination are necessarily individual, the human imagination is also deeply cultural and often distributed in time and within a community. It is cultural because the contents of imagination utilize cultural resources; ideas and images from stories, books, films, games and common sense in general contribute to both the structure and content of imaginary experiences (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). The horizon of an individual's imagination is partially set by society (Chapter 4). It is an obvious, but revealing, fact that for the vast majority of human history it was impossible for people to imagine space travel, intelligent robots, or even telephones. The earliest attempts at such imaginings seem limited, and saturated with the culture of their time. That is to say, imagination that significantly escapes the semiotic universe of its time is exceptionally rare. Moreover, it is to say that the majority of imagination does not necessarily entail novelty, and that in a mundane sense, most imagination flows quite predictably along the currents of contemporary culture.

Our focus in the present chapter, however, is not so much on the cultural nature of imagination (which has been reviewed in Chapter 4 and demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6), but rather upon the way in which imagination is distributed in communities, that is, how members of a community of imagination can incrementally build upon one another's imaginings to create and maintain imaginary universes, entire semiotic universes of possibility that are usually far beyond the capacity of a single individual to create. Thus, in the current chapter, we are dealing not with individuals per se, but with traditions of imagination. In these cases many people participate in the same imaginary scenario, contributing to it and feeding into it, and, as we will see, this can unleash the power of collective action. Communities of imagination can become galvanized by a vision of the future and seek to institute it, leading to sociogenesis, that is, the development of society itself.

There is a continuum between, on the one hand, personal imagination which is idiosyncratic and pertaining to the life of the given individual and, on the other hand, more distributed imagination in which many people have similar imaginings about issues of collective concern. For example, Sarah Austin's imaginary adultery is quite personal both in its content and its effects (although, of course, it draws upon shared cultural resources). In contrast, in Třeštíková's (2009) *Studies of Marriage*, we have seen many of the partners participate in a collective imagination about the possibilities opened up by the end of communism in what was then Czechoslovakia (Chapter 6). These more shared imaginings are sustained by a community, not only are the resources drawn from the community, but also the triggers and consequences pertain to the community.

The present chapter will explore how distributed imagination is built up within traditions and communities and the potential consequences of these imaginations. First we will examine how humans have imagined the moon, specifically the imagination which led up to the moon landings. Second, we will examine less successful and more turbulent utopian imagination, which have led many to walk the path from dreams to revolution. In each case we will see how imagination is distributed in a social milieu, not only drawing on cultural resources, but also galvanizing communities of practice, with imaginings building on prior

imaginings, until whole semiotic universes adrift from paramount reality begin to guide the trajectory of societies.

AGENCY AND IMAGINATION

Beyond proximal experience lies human imagination. European maps from the 12th and 13th Centuries tend to have Europe quite well mapped, with the details getting fuzzy around Africa and Asia, and then, beyond the known, there would be drawings of wonders and dangers, treasures and sea-monsters (Mittman, 2006). Consider, for example, the Hereford mappa mundi painted around 1300. The map includes known landmarks, cities such as Jerusalem and Paris, and established sea routes. However, towards the edges of the map things become more fantastical, angels, monsters, golden cities, and demons appear. On the one hand there are the familiar landmarks of Babylon and Jerusalem, while on the other hand there is a Minotaur, violent tribes, potential riches and people battling a griffin. Although the boundaries of what is known have shifted, the same happens today. People imagine life on other planets being either a source of wisdom and technological advance or an impending invasion with the resultant subordination of earth (or, in many Hollywood variants, the heroic resistance of humans). The point is that in each case, beyond what is known becomes a projective canvas for both our hopes and fears.

In the process of exploration Europe 'discovered' the New World of the Americas (Elliot, 1970). This encounter opened up a projective canvas. Were the natives peers, barbarians or pagans who needed new rulers? Or, were the natives living in a Golden Age? Was this new land dangerous and diseased? Or, was this the wellspring of untold riches and opportunity? The New World was used by critics of European society to point to alternative idealized societal configurations without greed or money (Elliot, 1970). In short, early representations of the New World reveal more about Europe's concerns than about the New World per se.

European's imagination of distant lands shaped international relationships. For instance, in the 18th century, many visitors travelled to Tahiti with the expectation of finding a paradise, but that is not the reality that they found (Childs, 2013). Equally, in the 19th century, Japan was so much beyond what was known in Europe, that using the imagination was advocated as the only way to apprehend it. Hence once of the promoters of Swiss-Japan exchanges wrote about the difficulty to understand Japan with scientific methods, encouraging readers of his accounts "to give free reign to imagination" (Humbert, 1870, quoted in Gonseth, Doyen, Knodel, & Mayor, 2014, p. 14).

While there can be little doubt that the imagined other beyond the borders of our own experience is a product of our own desires and anxieties, these images of the possible also serve an important function: they are part of a collective semiotic guidance system (Valsiner, 1998), encouraging society to explore, and to voyage into possibility. Indeed, all human travel, and exploration in particular, is motivated by an imagination of a future that lies beyond the horizon of the present and which is as-yet not actualized (Gillespie, 2007). Embarking on a journey is an act of agency in the sense that it aims to turn an imagined possibility into actuality.

But the human imagination is not only 'real' because it transforms the future, but also because it impacts paramount reality. The human imagination in itself can change how humans think about themselves. Today the earth has been sufficiently mapped so as to limit the possibility for new encounters, and accordingly the human imagination has increasingly made the leap to other celestial bodies. Actual others and real encounters are not necessary. As we will see, there is a long tradition of imagining encounters with beings from other planets, and, despite being imaginary, these encounters have had a significant impact on the course of human history. Imagined trips to the moon, trips to Mars, conversations with Martians, and utopian visions of the future have all had an impact on human's sense of self – without any 'real' encounters taking place.

One domain in which we can clearly see imagination leading collective agency is in the imagination which led people to walk on the moon. Rather than imagination reflecting actuality, or being derivative of actuality, it fed forward into the construction of what became actuality. Moreover, as we will see, this imagination enabled humans to imagine themselves in a new way, as collective members of planet earth.

IMAGINING THE MOON: FROM FANTASY, TO SCIENCE FICTION, TO ACTUALITY

The moon, by virtue of its size in the night sky and regular orbit, has been a salient object in many societies. While it had practical uses for marking time and navigation it has also been the subject of art and imagination in many societies. For example, both the ancient Greeks and the Romans had goddesses for the moon, called Selene and Luna respectively. Both of whom have been lavishly depicted riding a chariot that pulls the moon across the sky. Selene, a personification of the moon, was often depicted with a crescent moon on head or shoulders. Such objectification of the moon, arguably, enabled the ancient Greeks to make meaning about the moon and thus domesticate the moon into their world view.

The idea that one might travel to the moon only became possible once the moon was conceived of as like the earth, that is, as a landscape that one could conceivably traverse. This Copernican view of the universe gained significant momentum with the invention of telescopes. In 1609 Galilei observed that the moon is not smooth, as had previously been assumed. He observed and mapped a landscape of mountains and craters – which were assumed to be volcanic. Thus telescopes, as tools, enabled people to see the moon as a landscape, and thus they spurred the imagination of the moon as a place that might, like the earth, be walked upon or even inhabited.

While no serious scientist maintained that the moon might be inhabited, it was an idea that caught the public imagination at various times. For example, in 1835, there was a spoof article in the Sun, a New York newspaper, which reported 'findings' from Sir John Herschel, a prominent astronomer of his time, showing that the moon is inhabited. The premise to the article was that Sir John Herschel had been in possession of a new powerful telescope that had revealed bison, unicorns, bipedal beavers and bat-winged humanoids inhabiting the moon. Figure 7.1 is one of the drawings which accompanied the article. While obviously a spoof article, it was a successful spoof precisely because many people of the time were taken in by it.



Figure 7.1: Bat-winged humanoids on the moon (1835, Licensed under Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons)

Once the moon was imagined as a place, with a landscape, then the possibility of traveling to the moon gained in ascendancy. Initial ideas were fantastical. Lucian, in *True History*, has his characters deposited on the moon after seven days caught in a whirlwind (Fredericks, 1976). Johannes Kepler, in his 1608 *Somnium*, utilizes a combination of dreaming ad spirits (Chen-Morris, 2005). Francis Godwin, in the 1638 story *The Man in the Moon*, has his hero carried to the moon by a harnessed flock of swans. However, in the 19th Century technology begins to provide more plausible means of travelling to the moon.

Jules Verne wrote two books, *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865/2009) and *Around the Moon* (1870/2005), which had a huge impact on the popular imagination of the moon. Although these stories do not go into any detail on what might be on the moon, they are notable for the detailed discussions of how one might actually get to the moon. Specifically, Verne introduced the idea that a projectile containing humans might be shot towards the moon, an idea anchored in the cannon technology of his time. It is important to recall that at this time heavier-than-air flight had not yet been demonstrated (hot air balloons were popular, but they had altitude limits). Specifically, Verne appropriated existing knowledge about large cannons, and speculated that even larger canons might be able to shoot humans beyond the earth's gravity. This idea, grounded in the existing technologies of cannons, marked a key move from the fantastical toward the possible (McCurdy, 2011). Verne even

introduced the idea, later put into practice, of steering space projectiles by means of rocket power.

The imagination of inhabitants on the moon returns in H. G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon* (1901/2003). The plot is that two men use new technology to travel to the moon, where they find an exotic landscape, magnificent fauna, and an alien species called Selenites (after Selene the goddess of the moon for the Greeks). Initially, there is a radio transmission between earth and the moon, with a lot of potential for human learning from the Selenites. However, the transmission ends abruptly when the Selenite leaders learn of the human propensity for war. This ending stimulates critical reflection: Do humans have a propensity for war? This question only becomes possible once alternative species enter our imagination, and thus we see how the mere act of imagining that there are other beings can recursively stimulate a change in our self-representation.

Arguably a high point in the imagination of the moon comes with Georges Melies 1902 film, *Le Voyage dans la Lune*. This short film builds upon previous ideas. The means of traveling to the moon utilizes a cannon technology similar to that previously described by Jules Verne. Once on the moon, the landscape is rugged and mountainous, as described by Galilei. Incorporating prior ideas of new fauna and alien species, Melies' film also has rapidly growing mushrooms and Selenites who explode when hit. Another common theme in this emerging genre is 'earthrise,' which occurs when the intrepid explorers whether in space or on the moon, turn back upon earth, to see it rise in the darkness of space – in just the same way as the moon rises for us. Figure 7.2 shows the explorers in *Le Voyage dans la Lune* gesticulating and waving their top hats and umbrellas in excitement as they watch earthrise.



Figure 7.2: Earthrise in *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (Licensed under Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons)

As with previous imaginings of the New World or alien worlds, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* is also a reflexive social comment on the society from which it emerged. Specifically, it can be seen as a comment on the attitude underlying scientific progress and imperialism. The explorers encounter an alien species, from which there could be so much to learn. But, rather than engage in any meaningful dialogue with the Selenites, the explorers discover that they are easily killed. They proceed to kill several, then they kill the Selenite king, and they return to earth with a Selenite – who is paraded and ridiculed in the streets, while the explorers are handed oversized medals for their triumph. The superior and aggressive attitude of the explorers, their disregard for everything of interest on the moon, and their disrespect of the Selenites is arguably a critique of European colonial attitudes and imperialism. Indeed, if the moon is replaced with the new world, then one has a not too fanciful account of the conquest of the new world.

Le Voyage dans la Lune reveals the key aspects of the loop of imagination. First, there are triggers, such as the dissatisfaction with colonialism and the emerging techniques of film. Second, cultural resources are utilized, such as specific ideas and tropes about the moon and space travel. Third, we see how the imagination of an individual, in this case Georges Melies, exists within a larger collective imagination which spans many decades. Finally, the consequences of this loop of imagination, range from the short to the long term. In a most

immediate sense, Melies film excited audiences across Europe and the USA, and it is considered the original science fiction film. But, in a longer term sense, the emotions it aroused and the possibilities which it toys with, likely contributed to the fact that in the 1960s humans did land on the moon.

The imagination of going to the moon reached a new height when injected with Cold War anxiety. In the 1930s and 1940s technological advances in rocketry moved science closer to travelling to the moon, but, the idea did not fully catch the public imagination. However, in 1957 the conditions for the imagination changed fundamentally when the USSR successfully put a satellite into orbit. Neither the USA nor the USSR were likely fully aware of the significance of this event on the global imagination. Sputnik 1 was not designed to gather data, rather, it was designed to broadcast a radio signal. Orbiting the earth every hour and a half, it let it be known to all that the space race had begun. In the USA the popular imagination exploded: Was the satellite spying? Could it fall from the sky? Was the satellite carrying a nuclear weapon? (see McCurdy, 2011, for a good account of these public anxieties). In the USA the Dow Jones fell over 10% and Eisenhower saw his popularity fall over 20 points. The number of UFO sightings in the USA in the months before Sputnik 1 was 46 per month, while immediately after it was over 200 sightings per month (Condon, 1969). In short, Cold War anxieties provided a massive trigger, or spur, to the imagination of manned space flight. Indeed, this imagination became so intense that in 1961 President Kennedy was forced to announce the ambition of putting a person on the moon – despite there being little practical or scientific benefit to putting an actual person on the moon (as opposed to sensing equipment). Thus, we see not only how triggers can operate at a global scale (nationalism and Cold War anxieties) but also how a community of imagination, such as the USA, can commit vast economic resources to turn what had been inconceivable and then fantastical into actuality.

As the space race between the USA and the USSR gathered pace, the imagination about the moon became more concrete, less fantastical, and more guided by practical concerns. New knowledge removed the crevices of the unknown in which the fantastical imagination thrives. In 1959 the USSR successfully landed the probe Luna 2 on the moon, and the probe was not greeted by Selenites. Thus, the popular imagination focused increasingly on the technical details such as how to escape the earth's gravity, how to land on the moon without crashing, how to live in zero gravity, and so on.

As the horizon of the known expanded to include the moon, so the horizon of the unknown in which imagination thrives, was pushed further out into space. First the imagination moved to other planets, such as Mars (e.g., Meredith, 1939), Venus (e.g., Farley, 1924) and even beyond our galaxy. Imagination of intergalactic explorers was evident in the surge of reports of UFOs and alien abductions that preceded the moon landings (Bowen, 1969). In Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clark's *2001: A Space Odyssey* produced in 1968, the journey takes viewers not only distant planets, but also to another dimension of existence – arguably, operating at the very edge of what could be imagined at the time. Of course, there has been an active minority who have insisted that the moon landing never occurred, and as such, they have escaped the constraints of established knowledge.

As our knowledge of the moon expanded into what had been imagined, we can see how the imagination had a guiding influence on that expansion. One can trace technical details and overall design details moving from the realm of imagination into the realm of actuality, albeit, usually with substantial modification. For example, the very idea of using rocket power, using controlled explosions to slow descent, having orbiting satellites and space stations all originated in science fiction. But more than these details, the imagination provided the guiding ambition, the vision, and even the emotion which led countless people to dedicate their lives to this task. Borman, with his colleagues Lovell and Anders, were the first humans to fly around the moon as part of the Apollo 8 mission. Borman, referring to the Jules Verne books, wrote in a letter that “Generations of American schoolboys – including capt. Lovell, Maj. Anders and I – have been fascinated by the books [...] In a very real sense, Jules Verne is one of the pioneers of the space age” (Daytona Beach Morning Journal, 1969, p. 37). These books are also known to have inspired Arthur C. Clark, who in turn, inspired a generation of rocket scientists and astronauts (McCurdy, 2011). But, in a larger sense, what really made the moon landings happen was that the American public participated in the imagination. It was because it was a huge community of imagination that the coffers of government were opened, and more than one hundred billion dollars (normalized to 2010) was committed to the task (Lafleur, 2010).

Not only did imagination lead people to the moon, but people going to the moon transformed the human imagination of the earth (Farr, 1999). LIFE’s publication *100 Photographs that Changed the World* (2003) selected ‘earthrise’ for its front cover. The image of the earth, as seen from space, was a motif in many early narratives of going to the moon (i.e., see Figure 7.2). Anderson (1993) argued that the imagination of a national community, a community larger than any one individual could ever encounter, only really became possible with the advent of the printing press and the mass media. What the preceding history of our imagination of the moon has revealed is that imagining encounters on the moon enabled humans to imagine themselves as war-like (*The First Men in the Moon*) and imperialist (*Le Voyage dans la Lune*), while the image of earthrise enabled humans to imagine the earth as fragile (earthrise became an iconic image for the environmental movement) and vulnerable or easily dominated (hence the race between the USA and USSR to control space). In just the same way as the imagination of the moon itself has been heterogeneous, equally the consequences of those imaginings on our self-representation have been heterogeneous, with some viewing the occupation of space through the lens of national pride and others fearing domination.

As with the earliest maps of the world, the space beyond the horizon of the known contains an imagination charged by both hopes and anxieties. These potent imaginings have led humans to embark on projects to turn the fantastical into actuality, as with the moon landings. However, more often than not, pursuing imagined futures leads to unintended outcomes (Merton, 1936). The failure to actualize that which has been imagined is, perhaps, best illustrated with the utopian imagination.

UTOPIA: IMAGINATION VS. ACTUALITY

The idea of utopia, a place where everything is perfect, is longstanding. However, the term was introduced by Thomas More in 1516 as part of a fictional narrative about an island in

the Atlantic with a very perfect form of life, which he termed 'utopia' from the Greek meaning 'no' (ou) and 'place' (topos). Utopias, by virtue of being 'no-place' and relating to an impossible perfection, are quintessentially products of the human imagination. Yet, despite being 'fantastical' dreams of utopia have exerted a powerful influence on human history. Thus, as we will see, utopia is used both to describe a non-existing place that is used to critique the present and as a blueprint for societal reconstruction.

First, let us consider the collective imagination of utopia itself, its social history, and the accumulation of cultural resources for imagining utopia. Arguably, humans have had a very long history of imagining the perfect life, the good life or the Golden Age. However, the concept of utopia really begins with Thomas More's (1516) book *Utopia*, in which a very earthly vision of societal perfection is described in great detail. Utopia is set in contrast to the social ills of Europe, such as war, crime, disease, poverty and starvation. The island of Utopia is an administrator's dream, the villages and households are of equal size, everyone is productively engaged, and everyone is so satisfied that strife both between people and between Utopia and other nations is minimized. A defining feature of Utopia is the idea of property being held in common. This basic idea also appeared in Bacon's (1624/1901) *New Atlantis*, but Bacon adds into the mix an emphasis on science as a means to advance the utopian community, and becomes a core ideal underpinning socialist utopias.

More and Bacon both used utopias as a foil to critique European society. By imagining how things could be different, they opened up a space for critiquing the status quo (Elias, 2009). Other authors, however, took a more programmatic stance, aiming to work out the details of how society could be improved in the direction of Utopia. An early example is provided by Gerard Winstanley, in 17th Century England, who set up communities on common land, distributing the fruits of the collective labor to the collectivity. Winstanley argued that there was nothing in nature implying that only a minority should own the earth: "that part that hath the earth, hath no right from the law of creation to take it to himself and shut out others; but he took it away violently by theft and murder" (1650/2006, p. 164). One can also find traces of utopian ideals in the ideas behind the American and French Revolutions. But, arguably, a culmination of this tradition of utopian thinking is in *The Communist Manifesto*, written by Marx and Engels (1848). This manifesto advocated abolishing land ownership, stopping all inheritance, introducing free education and letting the state organize labor based on scientific principles. This utopic vision of societal progress has been central to many communist revolutions, from the Paris Commune to the Cuban Revolution, but we will focus only on the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

The role of art and imagination in spurring the utopian dreams that led to the Bolshevik Revolution has been emphasized by Stites (1989). The early 1900s was a time of huge technological change, and beliefs about the potentials for progress were in ascendance. In both Europe (Beaumont, 2009) and America (Roemer, 1976) utopian imaginations were surging. Stites (1989, p. 3) describes pre-revolutionary Russia as undergoing a "surge of futuristic fantasy."

One of the most popular novels of pre-revolution socialist utopian fiction was *Red Star*, by Alexander Bogdanov's (1908/1984). Bogdanov was a Bolshevik revolutionary, moving between being front line on the barricades and prophesizing the future socialist utopia

(Stites, 1989). He chose to set his communist utopia on Mars, a choice likely inspired by observations of canals on Mars which had captivated the public imagination (Lowell, 1906; Crossley, 2011). The novel begins with the hero, Leonid, caught up in the 1905 Revolution. Leonid becomes aware that one of his colleagues is from the planet Mars which has a thriving socialist utopia. Leonid is invited to make the trip to Mars. During the flight to Mars there is the familiar motif of looking back at earth. Leonid looks at the peaceful vista imagining the emotional intensity of the struggles and suffering upon the surface. He is reminded of the blood being spilt in the revolution for a better future. One of the Martians replies: "in order to wage a struggle one must know the future. And it is for the sake of such knowledge that you are here" (Bogdanov, 1908, p. 47).

When Leonid arrives on the 'red planet' he finds an advanced socialist society, with comfortable living quarters set among gardens above ground, and productive factories beneath the surface. The economy, being centrally planned, is well ordered and productive. The populace are educated and well taken care of. Children are particularly well cared for in children's colonies, where all age groups mix together into a microcosm of society. Leonid explores the Martians approach to all aspects of society, including factories, art, love, divorce, education, politics, science, illness, death and, of course, the canals.

Red Planet and similar utopian novels were popular in pre-revolutionary Russia, Stites (1989) argues, because they answered to the anxieties and fantasies of administrators, peasants and the intelligentsia. The administrators felt that Russia, sprawling from the Baltic to the Pacific, was difficult to govern, defend and modernize. The peasants, positioned as in need of modernization, were anxious about controlling the direction of change. The intelligentsia celebrated the peasants but they were also shamed by the peasants' oppressed and basic condition. In short, the major sectors of Russian society wanted something better, something that could be called progress.

Arguably these anxieties were triggers not only for enjoying communist utopian fiction, but also for the motivation to turn these utopian dreams into actuality. The Russians were not the first to try and institute communism. One can find traces of the idea in the 'levelling' movement led by Gerrard Winstanley, whose followers occupied land and farmed it in common during the 17th Century in England (Shulman, 1989). The idea of levelling inequality was also evident in the French Revolution, specifically in the writings of François-Noël Babeuf and Sylvain Marechal, and in the Paris Commune of 1871, specifically in the writings of Charles Fourier (Fourier, 1829; Beecher, 1990). In the Russian Revolution, 'levelling' wealth inequality was also common, but as the idea met with reality, it took many diverse forms – such as redistributing clothes, rent income, land and surplus production (Stites, 1989). Thus gradually, imagination led actuality, but at a collective level, and also at the level of individual lives, with authors such as Bogdanov moving from the writing table to manning the revolutionary barricades.

Step-by-step and in a range of different societies utopia moved from being a fictional nowhere to a potential future state which could become institutionalized through a reorganization of society. Moreover, rather than being something inevitable, the images of utopia often became something which had to be instituted through effort, and maybe even sacrifice. Indeed, Lasky (1976/2004) has argued that utopian dreams invariably lead to

violent outcomes as the dream clashes with reality. Utopias, Lasky (1976/2004, p. xx) argues, tend to fail, and this leads to revision, dogma and heresy because they are founded upon a “triple error: utopia conceived as a sterile monolithic harmony; revolution as a dogmatic commitment to total change and violent reconstruction; principles of hope and belief transmogrified into an orthodoxy incompatible with heretical dissent or critical opposition.”

Lasky’s point is that visions of utopia are as dangerous as they are seductive; one’s desire for them seems in proportion to their implausibility. Accordingly, taking up the challenge of turning a vision of utopia into reality entails confronting reality and the implausibility of the dream. But, rather than recognize the need to adapt the vision, to compromise the vision, the tendency has been a slide towards violent revolution, dogma and then heresy and associated persecutions, as the focus is upon adapting reality to the vision rather than the vision to reality. What is interesting in Lasky’s observation is that it shows clearly that sometimes reality does not dissolve untenable plans for societal reconstruction, instead, it is reality that is subordinated to the utopian imagination.

Grand utopian visions gained a poor reputation in the second half of the 20th Century. After two world wars and many revolutions there was growing skepticism of meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984). The collapse of the USSR, arguably the world’s most ambitious utopian project to date, also undermined the possibility of imagining communist utopias (Fukayama, 2006). The march of progress towards a scientific-inspired utopia became questionable; dystopia, the antithesis of utopia, became an as-imaginable possible future (Moynan & Baccolini, 2003).

However, the urge to imagine a better future has not been erased, and arguably, can never be erased. Ernst Bloch (1989) argued that the utopian imagination is evident, in small ways, in most disciplines and cultures. From science to architecture, from art to politics, there is an urge towards improvement. Most religions, he argued, evidence a utopian imagination. This primal urge, Bloch argued, was, however, often not given full expression by our contemporary culture. The scientific focus on facts or the psychoanalytic focus on the past, he argued, held back our future orientation. While Bloch did celebrate Marxism, as a full expression of the utopian imagination, more recent authors tend to focus on smaller utopias. Little utopias (Unger, 2007) and “real utopias” (Olin Wright, 2010) entail small steps at improving the human condition, without the demand for a grand unifying narrative which is held above immediate practical and ethical concerns. Real utopias, according to Olin Wright, include local gardening projects and Wikipedia. Such utopias are a long way from the ‘no-where’ described by Thomas More, they are more tame, less threatening, and much more plausible.

The utopian imagination cannot be entirely erased because it is intrinsically linked to human agency. What our brief survey of utopian imagination reveals is not so much that utopias tend to fail, ending in dogma and millions dead. Rather, what they reveal is that there is a powerful human urge to make the world a better place (even if history teaches us that this urge is often misplaced and filled with unintended consequences, Merton, 1936). As Levitas (2004, p. 39) writes: “what is important about utopia is less what is imagined than the act of imagination itself, a process which disrupts the closure of the present” (Levitas, 2004, p. 39).

In resisting the closure of the present, utopian dreams open up paths of action for the future. In being inspired by a utopian vision, humans find a way to make their own futures. In a sense, we imagine ourselves into our future existence. The problem, of course, is that despite creating our own futures, these futures rarely correspond to what had been imagined.

THE SOCIOGENETIC IMAGINATION

The loop of imagination entails a 'stepping out' of the immediate situation, which can, in turn, have consequences for the immediate and future situation. We have seen this at the microgenetic level (Chapter 5), the ontogenetic level (Chapter 6), and the sociogenetic level (the current chapter). At the sociogenetic level, the loop of imagination, however, is somewhat different from the microgenetic and ontogenetic levels because it subsumes the former. The sociogenetic level entails innumerable microgenetic instances of imagination, moments of individual reverie and daydream, which draw on the same resources and stepwise contribute to the development of the given imaginary sphere of experience. Equally, within the sociogenetic level, countless lifecourses are given shape and meaning from the shared dream.

When we examine imagination at the sociogenetic level, we find 'traditions' and 'communities' of imagination. Within these semiotic streams it is difficult to pick out singular acts of imagination by particular individuals. Rather, what we observe is a 'chain of distributed imagination' in which each generation appropriates and reconfigures the imaginings of the previous generation. For example, the Greek goddess Selene was a resource for many authors in the 19th century to imagine inhabitants of the moon as Selenites. There was continuity in how authors imagined the landscape of the moon and its fauna (with giant mushrooms making a regular appearance, in much the same way as canals would become a staple of the imagination of Mars). Jules Verne's mechanism of getting to the moon using a cannon, was taken up and refined by Georges Miles. Moreover, Verne's idea of steering space ships using rocket power became reality in actual space travel.

The sociogenetic imagination expands by building upon existing resources, utilizing images and narratives circulating in culture, but, also, its horizon is set by these resources. Jules Verne, Georges Miles, and Alexander Bogdanov were all limited in their respective imaginations by the knowledge, technology, and expectations of their time. Nonetheless, incrementally, step-by-step, this tradition of imagination escaped the confines of the actual, and a stable organized universe of meaning emerged; a shared province of meaning which, itself, could feedforward into even more extravagant departure from what was real. Each tradition of imagination is carried forward by displacements, condensations and figurations of pre-existing ideas or artifacts. For example, Verne's space ship is a condensation of cannon and vehicle, and, in Figure 7.1, we see inhabitants of the moon condensing properties of bats and humans. Thus, incrementally, with one psychological movement at a time, these traditions of imagination accumulate into elaborate and complex spheres of distal experience that run parallel to paramount reality, with their own internal logic and even with their own history.

The Anglo-Saxon tradition of imagining the moon or Mars builds, over centuries, into a rich province of distal experience, that is, it becomes an independent semiotic realm with its own assumptions, reference points, and even words (i.e., Selenites). Within this tradition individuals and authors are not free to imagine the moon or Mars anew; their imaginations invariably conform to the expectations of the given narrative universe. However, each act of imagination is also a building on and, in a limited sense, a re-imagination. Thus each act of imagination within the tradition feeds forward, a recursive looping, reproducing and reconfiguring the resources that will form the basis for the next iteration within the given tradition. Thus, at the sociogenetic level the entire representational system, or province of meaning, evolves. Like a snowball accumulating mass, the representational system pulls into play resources in order to build an increasingly rich platform for distal experiences.

The triggers driving the sociogenetic development of elaborate representations, platforms for distal experiences, such as landing on the moon or socialist utopias, are to be found in the concerns and anxieties of the age. The Copernican revolution and telescopes promised a new age of discovery. Concerns about war and imperialism motivated moral tales. Russian dissatisfaction and the desire to control progress motivated communist utopias. It was the fear of Soviet control of space which spurred the American project of putting people on the moon.

The consequences of the sociogenetic imagination operate at the three levels, namely, microgenetic, ontogenetic and sociogenetic. First, at the short-term microgenetic level of individual experience, it is likely that fantastical spectacles of trips to the moon or communist utopias provided enjoyment, and release from mundane or even oppressive social conditions (see Chapter 5). Second, at the level of the individual life course, these utopian dreams have contributed to the guidance of countless individual life trajectories (see Chapter 6). Third, at the longer-term level of society, these imaginations culminated in the multi-billion dollar project of putting people on the moon and the deaths of millions through revolution. But, beyond material outcomes, at a symbolic level these imaginings changed nations' self-representation and thus the course of history. From the outset, More and Bacon used the foil of utopia to critique existing social arrangements. Imagining sophisticated and peaceful Utopians, Selenites or Martians can make us feel barbaric, imperialistic and war-like. Imagining the earth from space fosters imagery both of the "global village" of humanity, but also, our vulnerability. In short, imagining building these distal spheres of experience has changed human's self-representation, enabled humans to re-imagine themselves.

SYNTHESIS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF IMAGINATION

In the current chapter we have examined imagination at the sociogenetic level, that is, the level of culture and society. The emphasis has been on the power of imagination to provide alternatives to the actual, and sometimes to provide possibilities for action. Of course, imagination does not always lead to action; sometimes it ruminates on the past, and sometimes it enjoys an inconsequential reverie. But even in such cases, the imagination has power, the power to engender certain feelings or, indeed, to escape certain feelings. The focus of the present chapter, however, has been on the larger scale consequences of imagination. Even initially fantastical imaginations about the moon, we have shown,

progressively created a sufficiently elaborated understanding of the moon so as to motivate and guide the project of landing people on the moon. The power of the imagination to alter the course of history is, perhaps, most evident in utopian projects. This is not to imply that utopias tend to be successful, indeed the historical record shows that they are spectacularly unsuccessful in fulfilling the original vision, but rather to say that it is in the clash between visions of utopia and actuality that history is made.

Examining imagination at a sociogenetic level leads us to the central paradox of the imagination; although imagination is defined in opposition to 'the real,' imagination is central to human's agency and thus a basis for a process of world-making which will have very real effects (Gergen, 2015). Imagination fills in the space between what is, what could be, and what will be (Vaihinger, 1924; Valsiner, 2014). Even utopias, defined as no-where and impossibly perfect, can have real consequences in their critique of actual states of affairs (Elias, 2009). Wars, revolutions, exploding spaceships and footprints on the moon are all very real, but the causal roots of these outcomes, which arguably are as real as the outcomes themselves, grow out of the human imagination.