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Paul Ricœur on Social Imagination. Across Tradition and Innovation

*One must preserve the tension between tradition and utopia.
The problem is to reanimate tradition and bring utopia closer.**

Introduction

Imagination lies at the very heart of human existence. Since the beginning of Western philosophical thought, imagination has been paradoxically conceived as a negative and as a positive faculty. On the one hand, from Plato to Wittgenstein, imagination has been principally described as enabling the

* See Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 269. [The author does not provide the source of Ricœur's quote.]

reproduction of perceived objects, that is, within the original-copy paradigm. In this context, imagination offers an imitation of reality, i.e., a replication of sense experience, and has a negative sense. On the other hand, imagination has been recognized also as one of the most fundamental powers of human-kind, namely, as the positive ability to creatively transform time and space into a specifically human mode of existence. In this positive sense, imagination is defined as the deepest dimension of the human psyche, “as the act of responding to a demand for new meaning, the demand of emerging realities to be by being said in new ways”.¹ The difference between the negative and the positive conceptions of imagination, i.e., between its reproductive and productive power, is not a mere distinction between two faculties, but rather between two ways to problematize our understanding of reality, world, and truth.²

Nowadays, in the Global Village of telecommunications, our life is surrounded by images. Paradoxically, though, we are experiencing a failure of the power of imagining. Even if we live in a civilization of the image, where the culture of the image dominates, the notion of imagination seems to be extremely problematic. We indeed lack an awareness of who produces the images that condition our consciousness.³ As Richard Kearney declares, “it is precisely in a cyber-culture where the image reigns supreme that the notion of creative human imagination appears most imperiled”.⁴ Differently from the past, prefabricated images now precede the reality that they aim to represent. The real and the imaginary seem to be inverted and subverted together at several levels: in politics, in the world of media, at the level of arts, and in the economic and social sphere. In the consumerist era, the image is no longer the expression of an individual subject or of a community, but a product of an anonymous consumerist system. Since personal and communal identity is opened up by the narrative imagination, the crisis of the power

¹ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 40.

² See Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 1977), 261.

³ See Roland Barthes, *Rhetoric of the Image* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 38.

⁴ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining. Modern to Post-modern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 7–8.

of imagining is correlative to that of our individual and social identity.⁵ That is, the current social crisis is inherently connected to the imagination crisis. Thus, the urgent question of rethinking the social sphere suggests the reconsideration of imagination as an essential human feature.

Paul Ricœur's work, which "touches upon virtually every important aspect of European intellectual life from the end of World War II to the present time",⁶ can be considered a guide for better understanding the importance of social imagination, the complex issue of the social life, and the possibility of its renewal. Even if in his published works there is no comprehensive development of the philosophical problem of imagination, it is apparent that this topic is central to his inquiries.⁷ Through reference to his thought, my essay seeks to extend the implications of Ricœur's work on imagination in order to renew reflections on the social realm. The main references are Ricœur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* and the unpublished *Lectures on Imagination*, which were delivered at the University of Chicago in 1975.⁸ First, I will attempt to consider the anthropological foundation of imagination and to examine human creativity in connection with human being's ambivalent nature disproportioned between the pole of the finite and infinite. The examination of these terms leads us to reflect on the meaning of the social imaginary. More precisely, the analysis will be focused on ideology and utopia as two

⁵ See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Press, 1954).

⁶ Scott Davidson, "Introduction: Translation as a Model of Interdisciplinarity", in: *Ricœur Across the Disciplines*, ed. Scott Davidson (New York: Continuum, 2010), 1.

⁷ See Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, *Introduction to Paul Ricœur's "L'Idéologie et l'Utopie"* (Paris: Seuil, Paris, 1997), 13–16. For a thoughtful evaluation of Ricœur's approach to imagination see also Jeanne Evans, *Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutics of the Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, ed. George H. Taylor, forthcoming; "Quotations of the *Lectures on Imagination* from George H. Taylor, 'Ricœur's Philosophy of Imagination'", *Journal of French Philosophy* 16 (2006): 93–104. The transcriptions are based on cassette retappings in 1979 of the original reel-to-reel recordings of the 19 course lectures. The original recordings were available at that time at the University of Chicago library. Patrick Crosby undertook the original recording of these lectures (as well as the recording of the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*). In 2003–2005, the cassette tapes were initially transcribed by staff at the Document Technology Center at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. George H. Taylor listened to the tapes himself in order to edit the transcriptions to ensure their accuracy.

imaginative directions that constitute social reality. These reflections allow us to face the complex issue of rethinking the contemporary social sphere in which the challenge is to find a right balance between maintaining and transgressing, that is, between tradition and innovation, as two indispensable and irreducible dimensions of our collective existence. It is in this context that Ricœur phenomenology of imagination, both in its ideological and utopian functions, can play a decisive role in reshaping the social field from within. The analysis will lead to the re-composition of a framework among truth, tradition, and innovation.

Imaginative Humanity. From Imagination to the Social Imaginary

The philosophical problem of imagination concerns many contemporary thinkers. From Husserl's idea of the philosophical centrality of imagination, Bachelard's poetics of the image, Heidegger's ontology of imagining, and Sartre's analysis of imagination within existentialism, up to the recent post-modern hermeneutic of imagination presented by Vattimo and Lyotard, reflections on the reproductive and productive sense of imagination have found a renewed interest.⁹ Ricœur's analysis of imagination arises among these leading researches in contemporary philosophy. His philosophical anthropology contains indeed essential foundations for an explicit reflection on imagination. Approaching Ricœurian anthropological insights, I will first focus on the relationship between the existential structures of humanity and the power of imagining, with particular reference to the social domain of imagination.

Even if Ricœur explicitly affirms that his work was not governed by a research program, the main connecting thread uniting his writing is the basic anthropological question, "who is the human being".¹⁰ From the outset of his

⁹ For an examination of these authors see Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination. Toward a Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversation with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 125–126.

work, Ricœur engages in a fierce criticism against what one might call “the citadel of modernity”,¹¹ that is, the self-aggrandizement of the thinking being. The dissatisfaction with the modern idea of the subject, conceived as a disembodied being and radicalized from Descartes to Husserl, provides the starting point for a different understanding of subjectivity. Contrary to Descartes’ cogito grounded on the stability of its rationality, Ricœur posits a “wounded cogito, which does not possess itself and understands its originary truth only in and by the confession of the inadequation, the illusion, and the lie of existing consciousness”.¹² Far from the self-foundationalism of the cogito, human subjectivity can only be the object of attestation as a form of active trust in existence, which is “always in some sense received from another”.¹³ Inspired by Martin Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Dasein* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, in his early phenomenological studies Ricœur shares the conviction that human being is enmeshed in the concrete world of thing together with others before the beginning of his or her own reflection.¹⁴ As he eloquently puts it, we arrive “in the middle of a conversation which has already begin and in which we try to orientate ourselves in order to be able to contribute to it”.¹⁵ Our life arises, then, in the middle of an already existing social shared environment. We are born in a world of meaning, i.e., in a symbolic structured world, that precedes and gives us tools of reference for understanding ourselves and others. In contrast with the modern conception of human subject as a being existing distant and disengaged from everything outside its own mind, at the core of Ricœur’s thought there is not a clear and distinct being, i.e., a subjectivity idealistically transparent to itself, but rather an embodied self whose constitution and understanding are a lifelong task, that is, a human subject conceived as a reality that can never be fully grasped.

¹¹ Dan Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 21.

¹² Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 169.

¹³ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 35.

¹⁴ See Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra “Paul Ricœur’s Phenomenological Diagnostic of the Body: Being Corporally Situated in the Sociohistorical World”, in: *Paul Ricœur and the Lived Body*, ed. Roger Savage (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 174.

¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 33.

In his earliest phenomenological insights, Ricoeur defines human being as a mediation between the voluntary and the involuntary as essential structures of action and will.¹⁶ The voluntary and the involuntary are reciprocally related: the voluntary, i.e., our free will, is connected to the involuntary of the body as a source of motives, organ of movement, and locus of necessity. At the core of subjectivity there is a sort of non-coincidence between finitude and infinitude, between what Ricoeur calls “origination, affirmation and existential difference”.¹⁷ From a philosophical point of view, imagination is conceived as a way to understand human disproportion. Imagination arises due to the human being reflecting upon itself: it is a cognitive and practical breach in one’s realm of experience. The power of imagining governs in an equal measure the plane of intellectual activity and that of practical action. Through the phenomenological description of the voluntary and involuntary, Ricoeur situates the imagination between the active, voluntary center of consciousness and the passive vulnerable body. More precisely, imagination stands at “the crossroads of need and willing [...] imagination of the missing thing and of action aimed towards the thing”.¹⁸ Imagination seeks to mediate the involuntary need and a satisfying action. On the cognitive level, imagination gives a representation of an image, derived from the diversity of felt needs, to the cognitive process of deliberation. Ricoeur states that

contrary to common psychological opinion, it itself is an intentional design projected into absence, a product of consciousness within actual nothing and not a mental presence. Intentional as perception, it can, like perception, play such a role as it completes the virtual intentionality of need: absence gives a vivid, non actual form to lack.¹⁹

Imagination has a meditating function in relation to the interior hierarchy of needs and motives which are the first elements of a projected course of action. Consequently, imagination is not something marginal in thought, but rather permeates all thoughts and conceptualizations. As such, the

¹⁶ See Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophy of the Will. I. Fallible Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 140.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 95.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 97.

psychology of perception and ordinary language philosophy show that all impressions are adorned by human structuring, i.e., by psychological and imaginative processes. Quoting Kant, Ricœur notices that imagination is not “an alternative to perception but an ingredient of perception. It’s encapsulated with the framework of perception”.²⁰ The work of imagination is not a weakened form of perception, but it is a creative activity of “seeing” something “as” something else, that is, a metaphoric act of creating resemblances across differences. As Ricœur argues, we “can no longer oppose [...] imagining to seeing, if seeing is itself a way of imaging, interpreting, or thinking”.²¹ Moreover, the moment of imagination is a viewpoint of humanity’s totality in which the person experiences the plural dimension of life: my perspective is indeed connected to birth seen as a “here” preceded by the decision of others. More simply, imagination is not a general category of seeing and knowing, but it is what enables us to perceive plurality and divergences which basically constitute our existence. Ricœur holds that the human being is not posited by itself but is necessarily a social being posited by others and who lives with and for them in institutions.²² In order to understand life as a whole, we must adopt a perspective, a point of view, through which we can in some sense step outside ourselves and see ourselves as others would see us. In performing such a transgression through imagination, the human being realizes to be a relational being whose life is a continuous mediation between what is relative and what is absolute, singularity and plurality, receptivity and creativity. Against the liberation of the subject from its historical existence, Ricœurian anthropology conceives the human being as a situated being who assumes a sense of reality on the basis of the tradition in which he or she is born, and who has a type of knowledge that is necessarily potential. Each person’s identity is an open task, namely, a never ending enterprise of innovation, creating a path of infinitude. Consequently, identity is defined as “the network of interweaving perspectives of the expectation of the future, the reception of the past, and the experience of the present, with no *Aufhebung* into a totality where reason in history and in reality would coincide”.²³

²⁰ Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 2:6.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 2:6.

²² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

²³ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative III* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 207.

Human imagination touches different spheres; creativity may take the form of epistemological, poetic, religious or social imagination.²⁴ Focusing our attention on the social sphere, imagination is seen as a volitional act having an argumentative function with social consequences. Since our existence is rooted in the social world, we must actively imagine ourselves as belonging to a group. Thus, “there is no social group without this indirect relation to its own being through representation of itself”.²⁵ In other words, imagination is an intentional act of consciousness and the social imaginary is the process through which consciousness creates a framework of sense which is fundamental to founding the models of thinking and acting in social and practical life. Thus, the social imaginary is understood as “the touchstone of the practical function of the imagination”,²⁶ and it is an irrefutable part of human shared reality. Imagination is associated with the formation of a community, i.e., with the foundation of common experiences with others in the present and over time. As Ricœur affirms, humans are historically bound to others through “the analogical tie that makes every man my brother [...] accessible to us only through a certain number of imaginative practices”²⁷ in which individuals participate consciously. The social imaginary has an integrative function through which “everyone is recognized as a ‘member’, even beyond the idiosyncrasies of the individual members of a society”.²⁸ Recognition is linked to the necessity of social institutions, showing in this way the connection between the social and the political planes. In other words, it can be argued that social imagination contributes to “a political dialectic that is an equal part of the foundation for the concrete human being”.²⁹ Furthermore, the importance of the imaginary production is not only in terms of the constitution of personal and common identity, but also in terms of the possibility to provoke changes in the history of a society. Hence, the imaginary is a col-

²⁴ See Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 16:18.

²⁵ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 182.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 169.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 181.

²⁸ Paul Ricœur, Cornelius Castoriadis, *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social*, ed. Johann Michel (Paris: éditions EHESS, 2016), 125–126; translation mine.

²⁹ Timo Helenius, “Between Receptivity and Productivity: Paul Ricœur on Cultural Imagination”, *Social Imaginaries 2* (2015): 32–52.

lective action which enables social transformation within the historical plane. In brief, instead of deforming real life and detaching human beings from it, imagination is constitutive of human social reality. Social imagination is connected with a form of practical truth, a kind of truth that seeks social interconnection. Recalling Aristotle's speculation, we can state that this is not an intellectual truth, but it is indeed a practical truth, understood as the result of a history of trial and error, of a challenge to approach the happy medium in personal and social life. Practical truth arises from our living experience; it deals with our capacity of openness for novelty, that is, with our freedom and creativity.

Ricœur insists on the hermeneutical aspect of imaginative production and more broadly on the connection between the social imaginary and historical conditions.³⁰ Following his line of thought, hermeneutics is a product of historical understanding which inscribes the comprehension of a certain social system within the pre-understanding of its context. Human knowledge is necessarily partial and "excludes the total reflection which would put us in the advantageous position of non-ideological knowledge."³¹ Interpretation refers, then, to a social configuration that already exists. Therefore, new social significations and configurations are connected to historically existing institutions, refusing, in this way, the idea of a radical revolutionary project. Since the present is linked to the past and to the future, Ricœur concludes: "by the retroaction from the successive "nows", our past never stops changing its meaning; the present appropriation of the past modifies that which motivates us from the depths of the past."³² Therefore, imagination, interpretation, and practices cannot be divorced. The extension of Ricœur's phenomenological and hermeneutical implications to social theory opens up a discussion of human being's social life, which is "an issue that concerns both our present and our persisting possibilities."³³ The social aspects of imagination lead us to suggest, then, to bring forth the role of human creativity into the direction of the social sciences.

³⁰ See Ricœur, Castoriadis, *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social*, 60.

³¹ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 267.

³² Paul Ricœur, *Philosophy of the Will. II. The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 22.

³³ Taylor, *Introduction to Ricœur, "Lectures on Ideology and Utopia"*, xi.

Phenomenology of Productive Imagination: Across Social Boundaries

Ricœur's more complete assessment of the productive imagination within the social field can be discovered at the juncture between the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* and the *Lectures on Imagination*, in which he drives towards a theory of productive imagination as opposed to reproductive imagination. In the *Lectures on Imagination* Ricœur observes that in the history of Western philosophy, aside from Aristotle and Kant, there is a general misunderstanding of the relation between imagination and seeing, as well as a strong emphasis on the reproductive imagination to the exclusion of the productive one.³⁴ Whereas the model of original and copy exemplifies reproductive imagination as representation (*Vorstellung*), the image in productive imagination is not duplicative or determined by an original, but it consists in a creative act of a positing (*Darstellung*).³⁵ In the social field, the analysis of productive imagination is developed from the examination of the concepts of ideology and utopia. As Ricœur notes, the dialectic between these notions can "shed some light on the unsolved general question of imagination as a philosophical problem".³⁶ Ideology and utopia are presented as the tensive components of social and cultural imagination, i.e., as the two fundamental faces of the social imaginary which are indispensable to each other. Since each society is constituted by an ineluctable symbolic structure and all human actions are mediated, structured and integrated into it, ideology and utopia refer to the common ground of collective identity and typify social imagination. Symbolic praxis is the key concept to understand the relation between these two categories which can have a positive or a negative role. More precisely, these two processes of imagination are involved in a tensive complementarity and function in two different ways. On the one hand, imagination seeks to "stage a process of identification that mirrors the order. Imagination has the ap-

³⁴ See Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 2:1.

³⁵ See Timo Helenius, "Between Receptivity and Productivity: Paul Ricœur on Cultural Imagination": 39.

³⁶ Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 2.

pearance here of a picture. On the other hand, though, imagination may have a disruptive function; it may work as a breakthrough”.³⁷ Through the examination of the relation between ideology and utopia, Ricœur deals with social problems such as the relation between human action and social structures, between individual life and society, in light of the issue of social change and the possibility to criticize social order.

Ricœur defines three levels of ideology by drawing on Marx, Weber, and Geertz, claiming that on the third and deepest level ideology has a mediating integrative role in the social realm. More exactly, these three levels of ideology are: (1) distortion, (2) legitimation, and (3) identity formation. All levels are comprehensible only on the basis of the symbolic mediation or structure of action as “absolutely primitive and ineluctable”.³⁸ Otherwise put, it is only because the action is symbolic that it can be distorted, legitimated, or contribute to identity formation. Utopia contrasts with ideology operating with it on the three levels. Utopia can be a form of escapism, an alternate form of power and authority, or an exploration of possible group and individual identities.³⁹ Limiting here my analysis to the positive function of these social categories, ideology is the primary instance of the figuring of the social landscape by imagination. According to Ricœur, ideology functions as the image of a socio-political group and it is identified with its dominant interests. This category is an instance of reproductive imagination which has a conservative function: it seeks to consolidate and integrate a society and to legitimate the system of authority. That is, ideology is a cultural product which repeats what exists and provides a justification for it. Ideological culture is like a text produced by social agents, it organizes social processes and allows for integration among members of a society, giving them the orientation to act within social life. Thus, ideology is not opposed to reality and praxis, but rather there is an inner connection between these terms. The truth of ideology is related to the internal coherence of narrations and practices which characterize a given community. Therefore, ideological truth is not something universal coming from an external perspective, but it is an inter-communitarian truth, an in-

³⁷ Ibidem, 285.

³⁸ Ibidem, 77.

³⁹ See ibidem, 310.

ternal parameter which is directly participated in by members belonging to a particular ideology. Even if conflicts among groups or social classes arise in the active process of integration, the struggle seeks to achieve recognition among social members. Conceived as the experience of belonging, ideology is therefore the source of subjectivity's constitution and preserves both individual and social identities. Hence, by dealing with identities, ideology institutes a fundamental anthropological and social relation. As Ricœur stresses, "we belong to a history, to a class, to a nation, to a culture, to one or several traditions. In accepting this belonging that precedes and supports us, we accept the very first role of ideology, that which we have described as the mediating function of the image, the self-representation".⁴⁰ In other words, each community is an act of historical synthesis of a tradition, understood as a medium for the narrative transmission of practices and patterns. Tradition as *traditio* and *transmissio* implies both a content to be transmitted and the active engagement of the receiving members. In this way, ideology implies the activity of handing down.

The positive roles of ideology cannot be separated from utopia's aim to give alternatives to the existing social model. From Ricœur's perspective, utopia is conceived as "the imaginary project of another society, of another reality",⁴¹ namely, as the fiction that exemplifies productive imagination. Utopia is defined as "the possibility of the nowhere in relation to our social condition",⁴² i.e., it reflects upon the given which is already constituted and points to a new kind of reality. At its best, utopia is not connected to the notion of "nothingness" or the unreal; it does not escape from the boundaries of current empirical reality, but rather it expands our sense of it through the power of distancing. Thus, utopia is seen as an "exploration of the possible" that seeks to manifest new realities and truths.⁴³ In others terms, utopia enables our critical consciousness and its judging function to reflect on an ideology's truth, allowing also the possibility to move from intra-communitarian truth to a perspective of inter-communitarian truth, opening up the possibility of a meeting among different traditions. Contrary to the romantic concep-

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 328.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 231.

⁴² Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 14:12.

⁴³ See Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 310.

tion of imagination, utopia's "nowhere" and critique cannot exist outside and separate from social existing categories. More simply, any utopia must refer to elements of reproductive imagination: "it must be categorical in order to be transcategorical".⁴⁴ This category allows us to disclose reality that is both available and yet to come, i.e., it moves us from the constituted to the constituting, from the instituted to the instituting. As George H. Taylor concludes, even if "we begin with an experience of belonging or participation in the culture, class, time, and so on that give us birth, [...] we are not completely bound by these factors".⁴⁵

In our time, marked by rapid social changes and political turmoil, we are experiencing a generalized crisis of all forms of interpersonal connection. Ricœur's analysis of productive imagination can guide us to reflect on the crisis of social realm and to look for remedies that might allow for the possibility of new social ties. Let me briefly sketch the difference between our society and the traditional one. In traditional society members are held together by the ideology of local symbol systems, shared morality, values, and rites. In this form of society, utopia is conceived as a comprehensive image of a complete and perfect society. The model of social relation mutates through the passage from traditional to post-traditional society, which is shaped by globalized social and economic forces. Contrary to traditional societies, the imaginary in the post-modern society is polymorphic and fragmented, that is, a space where the multiplicity of codes and forms substitutes for the meta-narratives and the universalism that characterized the project of modernity. The fragmentation of the imaginary is connected to the dissolution of social bonds, to anomie, and ethical relativism, culminating in the so-called "age of anxiety".⁴⁶ Since social relationships do not exist independently of human understanding, Ricœur's hermeneutics and phenomenology of imagination can play a decisive role in becoming informative for social theory. The renewal of social bonds must be supported by the hermeneutical dialectic between distanciation and appropriation, contestation and redescription,

⁴⁴ Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 16:11.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *Introduction*, xxv.

⁴⁶ See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

towards the understanding of a belonging into the distance.⁴⁷ Only through critical distancing can members belonging to a certain group and tradition recognize the limits of their position, opening a space for dialogue with others. This implies that belonging to an historical tradition or to a certain ideology should not be a passive assumption, but rather an active and critical act of acceptance. In this way, distancing constitutes a positive and productive aspect of comprehension. The dialectic counterpart to distancing is appropriation, which refers to the act of making familiar what was foreign, an attempt to transform something alien into something no longer strange. As Ricoeur notes, appropriation is a desire to understand the different social and historical horizon of the other without totalizing it. In short, distancing and appropriation are dialectical counterparts of “a struggle between the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which all understanding aims as the extension of self-understanding”.⁴⁸ This play of estrangement and retrieval is what constitutes the transmittal of a cultural heritage and a particular ideology. Through a practical dialogue supported by critical reason and tolerance, members engaged in their tradition can continue to trust its values without denying the possibilities of meaning that arise from other experiences. The building of respectful relationships between adherents of different traditions encourages individuals and communities to experience a deeper common understanding and mutual enrichment. The difficult task consists, then, in finding the right balance between openness and the maintenance of differences, between comprehension without assimilation and critical distance without refusal. It is my contention that this hermeneutical dialectic can be productively applied to the problem of renewing the social bond, and that it can be enriched further by a phenomenology of productive imagination. The same dialectic suggests that all ideologies are limited, partial perspectives which can always be criticized within a socio-historical context. Emphasizing this critical edge and starting from elements of the contemporary social situation, utopia as the productive imagination of a “nowhere” points

⁴⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology”, in: Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 270–307.

⁴⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 43.

to a new kind of reality and expands its possibilities. That is, in our context of a generalized crisis of social interconnections, utopian thought, conceived as something rational, has an important role together with practical reason for reshaping bonds and for discovering commonalities across differences. The wake of productive imagination as a social practice constitutes the first step in facing the general crisis of today's mayor type of social bonds – that is linear bonds (family), elective participation bonds (friends, neighbors, etc.), organic bonds (relationship in the context of work), and citizenship bonds.⁴⁹ In the new global cultural processes, a reflection on the image, the imaginary, and the imagined can direct us toward providing elements to reshape the ways in which we conceive ourselves and our social relationships. Ricœur's work points towards a traversal of the boundaries of our tradition and opens us to innovation by way of critical analysis of our current social situation. This is achieved through analytical and social remembering, critical and social reasoning, and creative and social imagining, that is, by reflecting on our socio-cultural situation, on what we are doing in the life-world and on what is going on around us. In other words, we have to rediscover the importance of our active participation in the context of our praxis and through the praxis of our context. Undertaking the attainment of this renewal is an arduous project with a limited range of possibility. It can never be completely accomplished, but instead requires our constant effort to protect the essential value of our cohabiting together.

Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated the possibility of extending the implications of Ricœur's phenomenology of imagination and hermeneutical thought toward rethinking the social sphere. My interest was primarily focused on the development of a phenomenology of imagination founded on an ontic-ontological anthropology that recognizes the partiality of human existence.

⁴⁹ Serge Paugam, *Le Lien Social* (Paris: PUF, 2013); See also Serge Paugam, *Vivre Ensemble dans un Monde Incertain* (Paris: Éditions de l'Aube, 2014).

The analysis of the structures of human being, that is, the voluntary and involuntary, offered a valuable signpost that helps us on our way to better understand the role played by imagination in humanity's life and its role within the constitution of the social life-world. With respect to the voluntary and involuntary as the main poles of our existence, I assessed the anthropological roots of imagination, the constitution of social imaginary, and the possibility for the social bond's renewal through the dialectic between ideology and utopia. We can note the following points by way of conclusion.

From a Ricœurian perspective, imagination stands between the voluntary and the involuntary, and it offers a way to understand humanity's ontological disproportion. As an act of consciousness, imagination deals with the dynamic constitution of human existence, which is a creative and embodied stretching of being. In connection to the social sphere, human creativity takes the form of social imagination. Human imagination is indeed the source of common and shared life, as well as of individual and common identity. Following Ricœur's analysis, the social imaginary cannot be conceived separately from its historical context. On the other hand, he highlights the difference between reproductive and productive imagination. Focusing attention on the social domain, I have analyzed the positive aspects of ideology and utopia as the two faces of social productive imagination.

Aware of the tense mixture within human personal and communal life, and consistent with Ricœur's thought, we can conclude that interpretive capability and practical imagination can play a decisive role in the renewal of the social framework. Through its critical and imaginative resources, each community can indeed become aware that it offers only a limited and contingent perspective. The challenge is to find, through practical reason and social imagination, the right balance between loyalties to one's own tradition and the fictions engendered by utopia, moving across the boundaries of the settled social context, between tradition and innovation. As Richard Kearney affirms:

imagination, once again, comes to the rescue by operating in a double capacity. In so far as it secures the function of reiterating types across discontinuous episodes, imagination is on side of tradition. But [...] in so far as it fulfills its equally essential function of projecting new horizons of possibility, imagination is

committed to the role of semantic – and indeed ontological – innovation. As soon as one recognizes the schematization and synthesizing power of imagination at work in narrative, the very notion of tradition and innovation become complementary.⁵⁰

In short, “we should not restrict ourselves to the settled expectations and boundaries of reproductive imagination”.⁵¹ Then, the reshaping of the social field from within finds its possibility in the recognition of the non-exclusivity of tradition. More broadly, Ricœur’s thought helps us to recompose the framework between tradition, innovation, and truth. During the Enlightenment, tradition was conceived as a residual, factual, and inertial concept, detached from epistemological truth and critical thought. Ideology was seen a shade which deforms the historical conscience of the socio-economical structures and hides their truth. In Romantic traditionalism, tradition is instead the echo of the origins of a community and a factor of truth. Following Ricœur, tradition as an activity of handing down can stay alive only if it remains open to real relations, that is, only if it recognizes it is limitless and if it maintains its generativity towards the innovations of the future. There is, then, a redefinition of tradition in the name of critical utopia: tradition is not a fixed conservation of past patterns, but rather it is the knowledge of the evolution of the different forms of cooperative exercise, which are integrated, by the work of practical reason, into the social space. Tradition and innovation are then two poles of an ongoing dialogue supported by *phronesis*. The elaboration of a theory of social reality in which ideology is placed between integration and distortion, and utopia between subjection and redemption, invites us to a revision of our concept of reality and truth: imagination discloses new realities and truth can no longer be defined in terms of “adequation” or absoluteness, but as manifestation within history, that is, always as a contingent truth. This understanding of truth within the social context can be considered as a convincing and novel response to postmodern criticisms of the Enlightenment. It is my contention that this kind of truth, as a partial truth, can find its foundation within the human disproportion between the finite and infinite, between fragility and capability.

⁵⁰ Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur. The Owl of Minerva*, 56.

⁵¹ Taylor, “Ricœur’s Philosophy of Imagination”: 104.

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Abstract

This paper aims to extend the implication of Paul Ricœur's phenomenology of productive imagination to the social sphere. Specifically, through reference to Ricœur's anthropological analysis of imagination and his reflections on the tensive categories of ideology and utopia, belonging and distanciation, this essay seeks to rethink the social lifeworld through the recomposition of a framework between tradition and innovation. The attention will be focused on human productive imagination and on the constitution of the shared social imaginary. These reflections will open up to a renewal of the concepts of reality and truth.

Keywords: imagination, ideology, utopia, belonging, distance