The "Hidden Kings", or Hegemonic Imaginaries: Analytical Perspectives of Post-foundational Sociological Thought

Heike Delitz / Stefan Maneval

Abstract

This article focusses on parallels to Simmel's concept of the Hidden King (*heimlicher König*) of a cultural era in the social theory of Durkheim, Bergson, and Castoriadis. All these authors share the view that societies and other forms of collective identities are imaginaries founded on an empty signifier, or Hidden King, which provides what we call the foundational outside of collective existence. Based on Castoriadis's idea that: a) societies are imaginary institutions, and b) each society is informed by a central imaginary signification, the present article argues that the complexity of ideologically, politically and religiously diverse societies cannot be reduced to only one central imaginary, or a single Hidden King. We suggest expanding Castoriadis's concept of the imaginary institution of society, first, with Staten's notion of a constitutive outside and second, with Mouffe and Laclau's concept of hegemonic antagonism (both of which are informed by Derrida). The final section of the article discusses methodological perspectives for research, drawing on the suggested conceptualization of the Hidden King as an imaginary foundation of collective identity and unity.

Keywords

Authors

Heike Delitz – heike.delitz@uni-bamberg.de
Sociology, Sociological Theory
Otto Friedrich Universität Bamberg

Stefan Maneval – Maneval@bgsmcs.fu-berlin.de
Orient-Institut Beirut / Department of Social Sciences and Theology
Europa-Universität Flensburg

> In any great cultural era with a definite character of its own, one particular idea can always be discerned which both underlies all intellectual movements and at the same time appears to be their ultimate goal. (...) Every such central idea occurs, of course, in innumerable variants and disguises, and against innumerable opposing factors, but it remains withal the "hidden principle" of the intellectual era. (Simmel, 1997:78)

1. Introduction: Hidden Kings in French Sociology

Simmel's famous sentences about the "hidden principle" or, literally translated "hidden king" of a cultural era have found an echo in various sociological traditions.[1] This article focusses on such echoes in the French sociological tradition. Authors such as Durkheim, Bergson and Castoriadis, as we argue, show striking parallels to Simmel's notion of the Hidden King. This sociological tradition conceives of society as an imaginary institution – an imagined or invented collective identity that does not have an actual, or natural, foundation. It regards the foundation of a given society as imaginary.

The article traces these analogies - by which we mean comparable concepts of social imaginaries, from Durkheim's sociology of religions, over Bergson's concept of the "myth-making function", to the post-foundational social thought of Castoriadis, Mouffe and Laclau - to Simmel's notion of the Hidden King.[2] Our intention is to show

---

[1] The philosopher Helmuth Plessner provides a prominent example: "Each age finds the word which explains it. The terminology of the eighteenth century culminated in the concept of *reason*; that of the nineteenth in the concept of *development*; that of the current period in the concept of *life*" (Plessner, 2018 [1975], forthcoming). His book *Die verspätete Nation* (Plessner, 1959) traces the Hidden Kings of the German Romantics and their followers ("the people", "bloodlines", "race") as well as those of the German materialists (Marx: "economy"; Nietzsche: "life"; Freud: "the unconscious", "the id"). Other notable echoes can be found in Benedict Anderson (1983) and Charles Taylor (2004).

[2] The focus here is on this particular strand of French social theory. Generally speaking, concepts of social imaginaries presented by other authors either tend to be more limited in scope (that is, restricted to a special kind of imaginary, e.g., "the Nation" or "new media"), or to remain vague. Benedict Anderson's seminal book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), falls in the first category; Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004) in the second. For Taylor (2004:2), the social imaginary "enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society". It is the way in which "contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain" (Taylor, 2004:6). For a detailed comparison of the concepts of social imaginaries presented by Castoriadis, Lacan, Anderson, and Taylor, see Strauss (2006). Within French social theory, at least one strand of thinking centered around a concept of social imaginaries needs to be distinguished from the one discussed here. It is associated with Gilbert Durand (1963) and Michel Maffesoli (editor of the *Cahiers Européens de l'Imaginaire*), among others, who refer to imaginaries in the sense of unconscious archetypes, or collective images. Following this line of thought, historian Jacques Le Goff explains that collective images "are shaped, changed, and transformed by the vicissitudes of history. They are expressed in words and themes … They are part of social history,

the common element in the writings of these authors, who successively elaborate the key concept of a central imaginary, or Hidden King. Of particular importance in this respect is the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, in which the notion of a Hidden King can be discerned in the concepts of a "central imaginary" (1998:131) and the "central or primary imaginary significations" of a society (1998:362).

The purpose of this article is to encourage further elaboration of social theory based on the notion of a central imaginary, and to make it analytically useful. The article provides suggestions about a direction in which to proceed, starting with, but moving beyond, the notion of a Hidden King. Though the general idea of the imaginary foundation of society still appears convincing, we argue that the complexity of ideologically, politically and religiously diverse societies cannot be reduced to one central imaginary, or Hidden King. Therefore, we suggest that other concepts need to be integrated into social theories of a central imaginary. We argue that Staten's concept of a constitutive outside, on the one hand, and Mouffe and Laclau's concept of hegemonic antagonism, on the other (both of which are in fact informed by Derrida), are particularly helpful in expanding conceptions of society based on the somewhat monolithic and static notion of a Hidden King.

The first section of this article provides an overview of the French sociological tradition that evolved in parallel to Simmel's idea of a Hidden King. Though Emile Durkheim, Henri Bergson and Cornelius Castoriadis did not borrow Simmel's concept of the Hidden King, this article demonstrates significant analogies between Simmel's notion and key concepts developed by these authors. In our discussion of these concepts, we will also offer a critique, addressing differences and shortcomings, which will lead us to the suggested integration of both Staten's notion of the constitutive outside and Mouffe and Laclau's concept of hegemonic antagonism into Castoriadis's social theory. Expanding the concept of the Hidden King, or central imaginary, in this direction will make it possible to understand conflicts, diversity and change as elements of all societies. This, of course, has consequences for empirical research. In the conclusion, we deal with these consequences, outlining how the expanded concept of hegemonic social imaginaries can be operationalized in analytical research.

2. From Durkheim to Castoriadis: Collective Representation, Fabulation, and the Imaginary Institution of Society

Although Émile Durkheim was Georg Simmel's contemporary, he could not have drawn on the concept of a Hidden King, which Simmel presented in *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur* (1918), a lecture published a year after Durkheim's death. In fact, their social theories as a whole diverge markedly. Simmel (and also Max Weber) laid the

---

but not subsumed by it" (Le Goff, 1988:5). Such uses of the term "social imaginary" remain relatively unspecific.

foundations of sociological thought with the constituting subject at its core. Durkheim, by contrast, established a sociological tradition which, until today, offers a theory of society centred on subject formation, i.e., on socially constituted subjects. Although Durkheim is sometimes accused of reifying society, by speaking of it as though it were a concrete object (most recently by Latour, 2014), the opposite is actually the case. He conceives of society as an imagination or, in his own words, a "collective representation" that forms the subject (see e.g., Durkheim, 2009:1-34).

It is in this regard that notable analogies emerge between Durkheim's sociology of religion and Simmel's concept of the Hidden King. A society or collective existence, according to Durkheim, is based on shared imagination; and the object of this imagination is society itself – albeit expressed in different, namely religious, terms. Communities imagine their own outside in terms of fundamental religious significations, in which they see the reason of their own existence: the gods created us, we did not create them. The religious signification "God", the Hidden King par excellence, is a form of representation by means of which individuals address collectively-produced affects. Moreover, by denying that it has produced itself, and ascribing the act of creation to a deity, the community sanctifies itself. In this context, Durkheim speaks of religion as the "matrix of social facts" (Durkheim, 1998:71). As an analytical category that captures this idea (an idea shared, yet expanded upon to varying degrees and in different directions by authors still to be discussed), we suggest the term *foundational outside*: communities consider the reason, or foundation, of collective existence to be outside the community itself.

Every society imagines its own foundation differently – and it transfigures or denies this foundational imagination in its own way, as Durkheim elaborates, using totemistic societies as an example. Totemism, according to Durkheim, is the imaginary institution of an "anonymous force" (Durkheim, 1995:197) – a term that once again recalls Simmel's Hidden King. Durkheim maintains that this anonymous force derives, in fact, from the clan itself. God, "imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal", is nothing but the collective itself; "god and the society are one and the same" (Durkheim, 1995:208). Hence, he claims that "the sacred principle is nothing other than society hypostasized and transfigured" (Durkheim, 1995:351). With regard to "modern" societies, Durkheim emphasizes the significance ascribed to the individual: the "cult of personality, of individual dignity" (Durkheim, 1960:401) takes the place of religious cults; the individual takes the place of god. In another context, he asserts that "moral individualism, the cult of the individual, is in fact the product of society itself. It is society that instituted it and made of man the god whose servant it is" (Durkheim, 2009:29). By creating a social foundation which is regarded as prior to society, the contingency of community is denied, thus making norms and values, social roles and practices of social division seem inevitable. In addition to the constitution of the community through affective and ritual processes, Durkheim's social theory also includes a conception of the symbolic. Through symbolic embodiments, which

perpetuate collectively-produced affects, the imaginations can be communicated, shared and turned into collective representations.

All this can only be read between the lines of Durkheim's writings. The main argument becomes discernible mostly in retrospect – in the work of Henri Bergson and, even more so, in the writings of Cornelius Castoriadis. A theory of the imaginary institution of society can be found in Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935). Apart from this "livre de sociologie" (Bergson, 2002:1387), Bergson's philosophy, in general, merits consideration because of his emphasis on becoming and change rather than on identity, or being.[3] Bergson's main idea is to acknowledge that permanent, unpredictable change and becoming constitute the condition of every aspect of reality. As this is particularly evident in all types of social constellations, any form of collective existence demands an imaginary identity. Every individual's and every community's actual "process of becoming" (Bergson 1935:232) makes it necessary to invent an identity and a unity. Ceaseless movement and change cause a community to close, fix and stabilize its imaginary identity. In spite of such "fabulations", as Bergson calls these products of imagination (translated into English as "myth-making", see e.g., Bergson 1935:98–99, 109), transformation, movement and change continue, thus making collective identity impossible, or counterfactual.

The real changes to which individuals are subject, the heterogeneity of individuals, and the multitude of possible collective identifications demand the fabulation, or imagination, of a specific collective identity. It is important to note that Bergson's concept of fabulation, or the myth-making function, is entirely positive. Whereas a Durkheimian perspective would foreground coercion, Bergson refers to myth-making as a productive activity through which something is brought into existence – and not just limited (cf. Seyfert, 2011:51-53).

Bergson freely makes use of Durkheim's concepts (for example, obligation and social coercion), and he also concerns himself with the social function of religion. Of particular importance here is the fact that Bergson follows Durkheim's idea of religious imaginaries, in which societies enact themselves by denying their own contingency. Here, we also see an analogy to Simmel's Hidden King. Bergson further elaborates the idea of a foundational outside by highlighting the myth-making function of imaginaries (Bergson, 1935:232), i.e., the capacity of communities to invent a new collective identity, a new people. As the myth-making function, or the imagination of a collective identity shared by a group of individuals, enables new collective identities, new ideas allow for the emergence of a new community: "Each development was a

---

[3] Bergson coined the term "durée", translated into English as "duration", which in general linguistic usage implies lasting and continuity. Yet, as Deleuze (e.g., 1991:37) has pointed out, Bergson's philosophy actually stresses constant transition and change, or "becoming". Although the term "becoming" is Deleuze's interpretation of Bergson, rather than Bergson's own terminology, we use it here because it appears to be an appropriate expression of Bergson's idea. For a discussion of Deleuze's take on Bergson, with a focus on the concept of "becoming", see Grosz (2005).

creation, and indeed the door will ever stand open to fresh creations" (Bergson, 1935:68, also cf. 114). Simultaneously, every community requires closure and delimitation from others, as well as the assertion of a foundation.

Openness and closure are essential characteristics of all forms of collective existence: every society is closed, in the sense that it has to imagine itself as one particular community, while remaining open because the process of becoming otherwise is real, inevitable and allows for the creation of new collective identities. Both aspects relate to each other in the same way as "movement" and "repose" (Bergson, 1935:49): the imagination of a collective identity "appears like a virtual stop in the course of actual progression" (Bergson, 1935:51).[4] Life as the "virtual" entirety of all consecutive and simultaneous forms of existence is actual or real only for the individual. The condition of all individuation is permanent becoming (fr. *durée*, *devenir*). In this context, Bergson (1935:44–45) furthermore distinguishes between *natura naturans*, or social life, on the one hand, and *natura naturata*, or society, on the other. Speaking of a society presupposes an imagined immobilization of social life. At the same time, social life or social becoming can only be actualized, or brought into existence, through immobilization.

Maintaining that becoming otherwise, i.e., transformation and change, is the inevitable condition of social life and, indeed, of all being, Bergson considers society to be nothing but an imaginary fixation, or immobilization. In this regard, his theoretical approach diverges significantly from that of Durkheim. This becomes particularly apparent in his treatment of totemism. Here, his concern is not so much about why the totem has the shape of an animal, but why totems have different shapes. He argues that, by identifying with different totems and animals, communities conceive of themselves as being different (cf. Bergson, 1935:156, also cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1991:97). In other words: if social life necessarily involves permanent change, every society has to fix its identity by way of differentiating between "us" and "them", us and the Other. Identity always implies delimitation from others. Expressed in the terminology later coined by Staten (1986:24, referencing Derrida, 1972, 1998), every society or community defines itself in relation to a "constitutive outside".[5]

Bergson's conception of social life as constant becoming, and of society as an imagined stop, has methodological consequences: if the formation of a community always entails differentiation – just as different life-forms can only be distinguished and individuated through differentiation – an analysis of societies demands a comparative perspective. In this regard, Bergson anticipates the comparative method of structural anthropology employed by both Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, cold vs. hot

---

[4] The significance of this observation can hardly be overestimated: Gilles Deleuze (1991:95) identifies the "actualization of a virtuality" through difference or differentiation as the key concept in Bergson's philosophy (see Deleuze, 2004:157–58; Deleuze, 1991:14, 37–49).

[5] For the wide resonance of the deconstructive category of the "constitutive outside" within social thought, see, for instance, Laclau (1990:18) or Butler (1993:3).

societies) and Pierre Clastres (1989, societies with vs. societies against the state). We also find Marcel Gauchet's (1989; 1992; 1997) and Claude Lefort's (2006) methods and political theory within the frame of Bergson's legacy. In the final section of this article, we discuss methods suitable for an original analysis informed by Bergson's philosophy of becoming.

In *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1998), Cornelius Castoriadis conceptualizes society in a way quite similar to Bergson. According to Castoriadis, any society is based on fluid ground:

> The social-historical is the anonymous collective whole… that fills every given social formation but which also engulfs it, setting each society in the midst of others, inscribing them all within a continuity in which those who are no longer, those who are elsewhere and even those yet to be born are in a certain sense present. It is, on the one hand, given structures, "materialized" institutions…; and, on the other hand, *that which* structures, institutes, materializes. In short, it is the union *and* the tension of instituting society and of instituted society… (Castoriadis, 1998:108, emphasis in the original).

In dealing with the question of why every community seeks a fixed identity, and why it demands a foundation other than itself, thus alienating itself from itself, Castoriadis indeed integrates both Durkheim's sociology of religion and the Bergsonian philosophy of becoming. Although Castoriadis denies any influence of Bergson (Castoriadis 1985:9–10), his theory of the imaginary institution of society reminds one of Bergson's concept of the myth-making function. Furthermore, his reflection on the relationship between "instituting society" and "instituted society" resembles Bergson's distinction between *natura naturans* (social life) and *natura naturata* (society).

As Castoriadis maintains, again recalling Bergson, society is only real in terms of an imaginary institution, which is invented by a group of people. Collective existence requires the denial of the "radical otherness, immanent creation, [and] non-trivial novelty" of the social – the denial of the "incessant transformation of each society", as well as of the fact that "new types of society" are always possible (Castoriadis, 1998:114). Furthermore, a society can only exist if it conceals its "self-alteration" by referring to "'stable' figures" (Castoriadis, 1998:126), to certain spatial and temporal structures, as well as to a specific classification of things and individuals. The imaginary immobilization of collective life is thus based on a whole system of symbols.

Castoriadis's conception of society as an imaginary institution in fact consists of two theories of the imaginary: the first pertains to the imaginary immobilization of collective being; the second, to the "central imaginary" that constitutes the foundational outside of a given society. Like Simmel's Hidden King, the central imaginary is an undetermined, invented final signification, that enables a community to conceal the contingency of its own norms, desires and inequalities. This final, primary or central imaginary, the foundational signification, "create[s] objects ex nihilo" (Castoriadis, 1998:361). Shaping even the most secret wishes of individuals, it structures both the social and the natural world. The central imaginary "*denote[s]*

nothing at all" and "*connote[s]* just about everything" (Castoriadis, 1998:143, emphasis in the original). It is the "invisible cement holding together this endless collection of real, rational and symbolic odds and ends that constitute every society". As such, it causes a "'coherent deformation' of the system of subjects, objects and their relations" (Castoriadis, 1998:143). Following Durkheim,[6] Castoriadis (1998:372) uses religious institutions, specifically, to illustrate his concept of the central imaginary. The imagined "extra-social origin" – or the foundational outside – determines all "religious symbols" and integrates "signifiers and signified into a system" (Castoriadis, 1998:140). A multitude of secondary significations are derived from it, which, in turn have particular social effects: for instance, the formation of religious subjects, or the division of the year into weeks of seven days, with the seventh day reserved for rest (Castoriadis, 1998:129).

"Self-alienation" (Castoriadis, 1998:372), in the sense of defining collective identity by reference to an overarching principle external to oneself, is always essential to the imaginary institution of society, even in cases where religion does not supply this principle. As examples of other central imaginary significations, Castoriadis mentions "nature, reason, necessity, the laws of history" (Castoriadis, 1998:372) and, in another context, "the nation" (Castoriadis, 1998:148) and "rationality" (Castoriadis, 1998:156). Even contemporary societies that consider themselves to be secular, and founded upon rational principles, draw on imaginaries – because rationality has no reason, nor does it appear to need one. Rationality is imaginary, like God, and it forms collective identities and subjects just as reliably (Castoriadis, 1998:157-58). Castoriadis wrote *The Imaginary Institution of Society* hoping to invoke an emancipated, autonomous mode of social coexistence that could do without the denial of its own self-creation. So far, however, every society that we know of has referred to an "empty signifier", a Hidden King or an imaginary outside, thus concealing its own contingency, self-creation and changeability – as well as legitimizing social inequalities.

3. Laclau and Mouffe: Antagonism and Hegemonic Central Imaginaries

Simmel, Durkheim and Castoriadis all mention only *one* imaginary, or Hidden King. They create the impression of harmonious unity within distinct societies, each founded on a central, undisputed principle. However, as one presently observes in many societies, imaginary significations are capable of dividing a country's population. Various social groups or movements, following different Hidden Kings, struggle for political and social hegemony. This is evident in the rise of right-wing populist movements, as well as in the leftist and mainstream liberal reactions to those movements in France, Germany, Poland, Hungary and elsewhere. It is also evident in

---

[6] Castoriadis explicitly acknowledges Durkheim's significance, stating that, "Durkheim has seen quite well, religion is at the outset 'identical' to society" (Castoriadis, 1993:7).

the United States' political climate both before and after the election of President Donald Trump. Furthermore, since the so-called Arab Spring, the Middle East has witnessed fierce power struggles and violent clashes between movements propagating a social order based on a god's purported will, and supporters of a liberal or secular state.

Believing that the notion of one universally accepted Hidden King, or central imaginary, ignores the dynamics and conflicts in diverse societies, we suggest combining the concept of the imaginary institution of society with the political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. They call attention to the antagonism within societies, on the one hand, and the hegemonic character of every central imaginary, on the other. A quotation from Laclau's *New Reflections on The Revolution of Our Time* indicates that he can indeed be seen as standing in the tradition of thought that highlights the social institution of a Hidden King, or of central imaginary significations:

> Every age adopts an image of itself - a certain horizon, however blurred and imprecise, which somehow unifies its whole experience. The rediscovery of a past which gave access to the natural order of the world for the Renaissance; the imminence of the advent of Reason for the Enlightenment; the inexorable advance of science for positivism: all were such unifying images. In each case, the different stages of what has become known as "modernity" were conceived as moments of transition towards higher forms of consciousness and social organization... (Laclau, 1990:3).

A second point of departure for Laclau and Mouffe (2001), however, is that a consensus on the principles of social coexistence, shared by all members of a given society, does not exist. There are always conflicts and power struggles between proponents of different political projects, or between groups maintaining divergent positions and opinions on the fundamental questions of life and coexistence. Asserting that it is impossible to ultimately fix the meaning of a society, or a collective identity, Mouffe and Laclau argue that "there have to be *partial* fixations" (2001:111–12, emphasis added).[7] Disharmony and conflict are the necessary results not of diversity and human differences, but of fundamentally different attempts to "arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre" (Mouffe and Laclau, 2001:112). Several groups or communities informed by different imaginaries coexist within every society – either in a state of open enmity, in various modes of latent antagonism, or, ideally, in a relation of agonistic pluralism.[8] By asserting the centrality or universal validity of its own

---

[7] "Even in order to subvert meaning, there has to be *a* meaning. If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a *society*, the social only exists […] as an effort to construct that impossible object" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:112, emphasis in the original).

[8] For Mouffe (2005; 2013), agonistic pluralism means a relationship between collective identities characterized by a view of the respective Other not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as a political opponent – no more and no less, i.e., neither enemy nor partner. Mouffe suggests that the objective of democratic politics should be to transform the antagonistic friend/enemy distinction between rival hegemonic projects into an agonistic relationship. She argues that this objective can only be achieved if the

imaginary signification (e.g., the existence of God, or freedom as the highest good), each of these communities aims to be hegemonic. Any political or religious discourse seeking to determine the trajectory of the entire society therefore constitutes a hegemonic project. Chantal Mouffe expands this theory of hegemony into a normative concept of agonistic pluralism, emphasizing once more the relational character of every identity, i.e., the fact that identity construction always requires the affirmation of a difference (Mouffe, 2005; 2013; 2016). Collective identity, according to Mouffe (2016), is based on "the perception of something 'other' that constitutes its 'exterior'", or its "constitutive outside":

> When dealing with political identities that are always collective identities, we are dealing with the creation of an 'us' that can only exist by its demarcation from a 'them'. This does not mean of course that such a relation is by necessity an antagonistic one. But it means that there is always the possibility of this us/them relation becoming a friend/enemy relation (Mouffe, 2016).

Laclau and Mouffe thus reformulate the concept of the social imaginary by highlighting the multiplicity of, and potential for conflict between, hegemonic imaginaries – phenomena deriving from the necessity of a "fundamental nodal point in the construction of the political" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:155), or from a hegemonic central imaginary, on the one hand, and the ever-present possibility of antagonism, on the other (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; cf. Laclau, 1990; Mouffe, 2005; 2016). Therefore, an analysis of a given society must take the construction of different collective identities, and different central imaginaries, into consideration. In the following section, we will summarize the theoretical insights presented thus far, in order to draw conclusions in terms of analytical perspectives and research methods.

4. Analytical Perspectives of the Concept of Hegemonic Imaginaries

In this article, we have suggested reading Simmel's enigmatic notion of the Hidden King in light of the French sociological tradition; primarily through Durkheim, Bergson and Castoriadis. We have shown parallels to Durkheim's conceptualisation of religion as a "matrix of social facts", to Bergson's myth-making function and especially to Castoriadis's concept of the central imaginary. As Castoriadis, in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, presented the most comprehensive elaboration of this concept, we have relied predominantly on his terminology of primary, or central, imaginary significations. The aim of this article has been to expand Simmel's concept, and its equivalents, by integrating other theoretical approaches, which highlight the relation

---

ineluctable existence and power of collective identities, with their respective hegemonic agendas, is acknowledged and not, as has been the case in most Western liberal democracies since the end of the Cold War, ignored in favour of an allegedly post-ideological society.

between different collective identities, as well as the hegemonic character of any central imaginary signification.

In our discussion of Durkheim's sociology of religion, the focus was on the social function of religious concepts, as well as their counterparts in societies that consider themselves to be secular. In this context, Durkheim regards both "god" and the "individual" (insofar as the latter sanctifies itself by means of the concept of human rights) as ideas on which communities found themselves. Taking Bergson and Castoriadis into account, we emphasized that, while constituting an invented, purely imaginary signification, such a social foundation is imagined to be both outside of, and constitutive of, the community itself. In this sense, it corresponds to Simmel's idea of a Hidden King. We further suggested referring to the social function of the Hidden King, or central imaginary, as the foundational outside of a community.

The central imaginary is taken for granted; it cannot and need not be explained, but serves as an explanation for everything. It shapes the desires of individuals, determines their time schedules, and preconditions their political and economic actions. It is the empty signifier that enables a given society to establish its unity, identity and necessity. The invention of a Hidden King is a prerequisite for any community, because it allows groups of people to systematically deny change, human differences, the contingency of their own imagined collective identity, and social divisions. In addition, it persuades them to accept what are declared to be "social facts". Social theory in this tradition can be labeled as post-foundational social thought, because it frames societies as lacking and, hence, seeking a foundation. As Oliver Marchart (2007:137) observes, such a foundation is "impossible", and at the same time "necessary" for collective existence.

In contemporary societies – including those that consider themselves to be secular (for a critique of this claim, see Casanova, 1994; 2015) – imaginary significations are still at work. Moreover, they must be constantly updated and actualized through discourse and social practices, as can be observed in the ongoing search for "European values", the German "*Leitkultur*", or a supposed "Judeo-Christian" tradition. These debates also show that an important aspect of such a discursive actualization of imaginary collective identity is the delimitation from an Other, or from a "constitutive outside" – in this case, from Muslim culture, as well as from societies in and immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. While we do not intend to legitimize, or justify, the racist overtones that these public debates sometimes assume,[9] we have argued that the desire to construct a collective identity cannot easily be done away with. As long as we think of social life and coexistence in terms of cultures and societies, we necessarily refer to imaginary differences.

Durkheim and Castoriadis overlooked this aspect of the imaginary institution of societies and other forms of collective identities. Although it can be deduced from Bergson's philosophy, in this article we have proposed integrating the political theory

---

[9] For a prominent analysis of such racist constructions of collective identities and Otherness, see Bhabha (1994).

of Laclau and Mouffe into the concept of the imaginary institution of society, because these authors explicitly consider the ever-present possibility of antagonism and conflict between rival collective identities (i.e., those based on different central significations, or hegemonic imaginaries). Whereas Laclau and Mouffe present a critique of liberal democracy with the aim of formulating an alternative conception of democracy, based on agonistic pluralism, the purpose of this article is not to provide a normative concept, but an analytical approach. The theoretical insights drawn from our discussion of Durkheim, Bergson, Castoriadis, Laclau and Mouffe lead to a particular analytical perspective, which we will briefly outline below, by way of concluding.

The overarching aim of a social analysis informed by the suggested concept of hegemonic imaginaries will be to explore how collective identity is imagined and fixed by means of denying contingency, permanent change and social divides. This requires, firstly, a focus on *central imaginary significations*, which provide the foundational outside of a given society, i.e., on final principles which are taken for granted, not called into question, barely explained, and simply referred to in order to explain decisions, positions, circumstances, injustices and a broad variety of other aspects of social life. It is not enough to merely identify the respective principles, or central significations (e.g., "God" or "Human Rights"), because mere identification fails to explain why a given community perceives itself as closed and distinct. Rather, one needs to consider the way in which an "empty signifier" is discursively filled with content, as well as the characteristics and intrinsic properties ascribed to the respective central signification.

While the previous focus deals with society as an instituted imaginary, the above reflection suggests, secondly, that society should also be studied as an imaginary *instituting* particular social practices and modes of coexistence. The productivity of social imaginaries can be captured in various ways, e.g., by investigating how central significations shape spatial arrangements, enable political rhetoric, give structure to medical, juridical or economic discourse and education systems, establish historical and literary narratives, and legitimize specific gender relations, racial policies and social inequalities.

Thirdly, as the imaginary institution of a foundational outside is constantly actualized and reaffirmed in new ways, specific *discursive events* need to be investigated. It should not be ignored that any imaginary signification is as much subject to change as social life itself: it will never be possible to identify what Indian, Egyptian, Brazilian or Swedish society actually is, but only how these societies are imagined at a particular point in time. The historicity of every social imaginary can be looked at either from a diachronic, or from a synchronic, perspective.

A fourth aspect that can be derived from the above discussion concerns the *relationship between various communities*, which by imagining the foundation of social coexistence differently, shape society at large. In this regard, one must consider not only the discursive production and actualization of different central hegemonic significations within a society, but also the way in which these significations relate to

one another. The modes of enacting collective identity through discursive and performative practices, as well as in "material assemblage" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), can be studied by means of discourse and media analysis, as well as with the aid of anthropological methods (observations, interviews), in particular cases. Political debates, speeches, dinner conversations, dress codes and other everyday practices and interactions, acts of violence, etc. can all be objects of such case studies.

A fifth consideration: just as the various communities coexisting within a society reference different hegemonic significations, they immobilize collective identity by means of their *delimitation from other societies*. Thus, the constitutive outside of each collective identity should also be part of a study of the imaginary institution of society, taking into account that its construction is subject to change. Questions to be considered include: who serves as a "constitutive outside" to demarcate one's collective identity at a specific point in time? Why is this particular Other chosen for this purpose? What are the parameters in the construction of its otherness, i.e., in what ways is it perceived to be different?

Finally, both the concept of the constitutive outside and the emphasis on different modes of imagining collective identity imply a *comparative perspective*. Subject to comparison should be different communities, and their respective ways of imagining coexistence both within a given society, and, ideally speaking, between different societies. A comparative study of different societies will shed light on many aspects of the imaginary institution of societies, not least the specificity and contingency of the central significations that function as instituted and instituting imaginaries. This specificity manifests itself in the permanent actualization of an imaginary collective identity within the framework of discursive events related to particular historical contexts.

Any community investigated in this way should be regarded as a positive choice: that is, as a case apart from, and a denial of, other possibilities of collective existence. A society centred around God (and the sacred king; see Kantorowicz, 1957), and a society centred on the imaginary of human rights, on the one hand, and of "the people", on the other (the "democratic paradox", highlighted by Mouffe, 2000), are two different contemporary possibilities of collective existence.[10]

It seems unlikely that a single researcher could cover all the aspects of an analysis of hegemonic social imaginaries that we have suggested here. However, different studies

---

[10] Drawing on Lefort and Simmel, Giesen and Seyfert (2016) distinguish between "mysterious" and "secret" empty signifiers at the "very center" of collective identity. Whereas the divine "will remain an unsolvable mystery", the notion of the "secret" presupposes "solvability" (Giesen and Seyfert, 2016:120). If "in monarchical societies the king is a transcendent figure who has to be kept separate from the people [...], then the space of power is mysterious" and "beyond reach". In democratic societies, by contrast, "everybody in principle has access to power, but nobody knows exactly where it is" (Giesen and Seyfert, 2016: 118-19).

dealing with selected aspects, while maintaining an awareness of those not taken into account, may serve to complement one another.[11]

Bibliography

Anderson B. (1983), *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso Editions.

Bergson H. (1932), *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, London, Macmillan & Co, 1935.

Bergson H. (2002), *Correspondances*, Paris, Puf.

Bhabha H. K. (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge.

Butler J. (1993), *Bodies that Matter*, London and New York, Routledge.

Casanova J. (1994), *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Casanova J. (2015), *Europas Angst vor der Religion*, 3rd ed., Berlin, Berlin University Press.

Castoriadis C. (1985), *Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe Vol. 2*, Paris, Seuil.

Castoriadis C. (1975), *The Imaginary Institution of Society,* Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1998.

Castoriadis C. (1993), "Institution of Society and Religion", *Thesis Eleven,* 35: 1-17.

Clastres P. (1974), *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology,* Chicago, MIT Press, 1989.

Deleuze G. (1966), *Bergsonism*, New York, Zone Books, 1991.

---

[11] The authors of this article are envisioning a joint research project from a comparative perspective, dealing with contemporary German and Lebanese society, respectively.

Deleuze G. (1960), "Cours sur le chapitre III de *l'Évolution créatrice* de Bergson", in Frédéric Worms (ed.), *Annales bergsoniennes II,* 166-88, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

Deleuze G., and Guattari F. (1980), *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Delitz H. (2015), *Bergson-Effekte. Aversionen und Attraktionen im französischen soziologischen Denken,* Weilerswist, Velbrück.

Derrida J. (1972), *Limited Inc*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern UP, 1988.

Derrida J. (1967), *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins UP, 1998.

Durand G. (1963), *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire: Introduction à l'archétypologie générale*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

Durkheim É. (1893), *The Division of Labor in Society,* New York, Free Press, 1960.

Durkheim É. (1912), *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* New York, Free Press, 1995.

Durkheim É. (1998), *Lettres à Marcel Mauss*, présentées par Philippe Besnard et Marcel Fournier, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

Durkheim É. (1898), *Sociology and Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 2009.

Gauchet M. (1989), *La Révolution des droits de l'homme*, Paris, Gallimard.

Gauchet M. (1977), "Primitive Religion and the Origins of the State", in M. Lilla (ed.) *New French Thought: Political philosophy,* 116-22, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1992.

Gauchet M. (1985), *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1997.

Giesen B., and Seyfert R. (2016), Collective Identities, Empty Signifiers and Solvable Secrets, *European Journal of Social Theory,* 19(1): 111-26.

Grosz E. (2005), Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming, *Parallax*, 11(2): 4–13.

Kantorowizc E. (1957), *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton, Princeton UP.

Laclau E. (1990), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, New York, Verso.

Laclau E. (2014), *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, New York, Verso.

Laclau E., and Mouffe Ch. (1985), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, New York, Verso, 2001.

Latour B. (2014), Formes élémentaires de la sociologie; formes avancées de la théologie, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 167: 255-77.

Lefort C. (1981), The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?, in H. de Vries, L. E. Sullivan (eds), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-secular World*, 148-87, Fordham, Fordham UP, 2006.

Le Goff J. (1985), *The Medieval Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1988.

Lévi-Strauss C. (1962), *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Lévi-Strauss C. (1962), *Totemism*, London, The Merlin Press, 1991.

Marchart O. (2007), *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP.

Mouffe Ch. (2000), *The Democratic Paradox*, New York, Verso Books.

Mouffe Ch. (2005), *On the Political,* London, New York, Routledge.

Mouffe Ch. (2013), *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, New York, Verso Books.

Mouffe Ch. (2016), Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach, *Politica Comun*, 9, retrieved on 17 October 2017 from http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0009.011.

Plessner H. (1928), *The Levels of the Organic and the Human,* New York, Fordham UP (forthcoming, 2018).

Plessner H. (1935), *Die verspätete Nation*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1959.

Seyfert R. (2011), *Das Leben der Institutionen: Zu einer allgemeinen Theorie der Institutionalisierung*, Weilerswist, Velbrück.

Simmel G. (1918) The Conflict of Modern Culture, in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture*, 75-89, London, Sage, 1997.

Staten H. (1986), *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press.

Strauss C. (2006), The Imaginary, *Anthropological Theory*, 6: 322–44.

Taylor Ch. (2004), *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, Duke UP.