

# The Politics of Social Imaginaries

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What does it mean to study international relations through the lens of imaginaries? What are our different modes of imagination? The concept of imaginary has increasingly been used in the theorisation of global and international processes across a variety of theoretical approaches and empirical sites (cf. Mälksoo 2009; Kinnvall 2018; McKeil 2018; Barder 2019; Zhang 2020). The concept is usually associated with Charles Taylor and his focus on the public and the market as well as Edward Said's geographical imagination which has profoundly shaped scholarship in critical geopolitics (Gregory 1995; Ó Tuathail 2002). At the same time, it is closely connected to questions of symbolic orders, as examined by thinkers such as Ernst Cassirer and Pierre Bourdieu, and metaphors as in Hans Blumenberg's *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*.

Building on recent IR scholarship and social theory, this workshop seeks to explore the concept of 'global social imaginaries' and its adjunct semantic field of visibility, metaphors and symbolic orders through a variety of theoretical lenses. We are particularly interested in dissecting its promise for understanding global dynamics, such as the constitution and performative power of authority and hierarchy. The concept of imaginary allows us to address two theoretical problems of contemporary international theory and international political sociology: first, imaginaries as abstractions can group diverse things together, creating a singularity out of a plurality. Such abstractions are fused with power and linked to questions of grammar and language. Second, imaginaries must be continuously nurtured with knowledge producing practices. They don't speak for themselves but are embedded in particular knowledge structures that can be studied historically, such as the imagination of 'the subject', 'the state' or singularities like the market.

To explore these problems, the workshop invites scholars from various sub-fields in IR. The first aim is to explore the use of imaginaries across the literature, what this concept 'does' and how it relates to different objects such as concepts, triple contingency, collective singulars, metaphors or symbolic orders. This entire semantic field challenges our understanding and ways of knowing about the world. Yet, we know that these imaginaries are never neutral but imbued with power relations with effects which might remain invisible. Therefore, this workshop also speaks to literatures that can highlight the power linked to imaginaries, such as: (1) historical IR approaches which have developed tools to study how imaginaries were formed and how other forms have existed in the past in relation to religions, society and the globe. (2) post-colonial and feminist scholars have dissected the hierarchies and violence of the imposition of particular imaginaries. (3) international political sociology has analysed various symbolic orders and violence which might pass as legitimate if taken for granted.

## Possible topics:

- approaches to social imaginaries
- conceptual transformations in time and temporal imaginaries
- comparing the politics of different imaginaries
- imaginary symbolic orders, metaphors, visibility: tracing normative transformation
- colonial geographical imaginaries and resistance
- tracing global imaginaries historically