

## **A new social imaginary in the making in the SSE: deliberism**

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**Abstract:** Every society is self-instituted and evolves under the authority of a radical imaginary that escapes the will of social individuals. This radical imaginary begets a social imaginary. The latter is never stable because it is shaped by the tension between the instituted social imaginary and the instituting social imaginary. As part of this understanding of Castoriadis' work, we will present deliberism (Dacheux Goujon 2020) as an instituting social imaginary in the making within the SSE or, more precisely, within a part of the SSE that we call "solidarity initiatives". To present this thesis, which makes liberalism the instituted social imaginary of capitalism, we will proceed in four stages: first, to set up our epistemological framework, then to define our main concepts theoretically, next to present and characterize solidarity initiatives and, finally, to indicate how deliberism could be a new instituting social imaginary.

**Keywords:** social imaginary, social and solidarity economy, deliberism, democracy, solidarity initiatives

The author's idea of the imaginary institution of society is complex and open to many interpretations. For our part, we understand his work as follows: every society is self-instituted and evolves under the authority of a radical imaginary that escapes the will of social individuals and any transcendence. This radical imaginary begets a social imaginary that is never stable because it is shaped by the tension between the instituted social imaginary and the instituting social imaginary. As part of this understanding of Castoriadis' work, we will present deliberism (Dacheux Goujon 2020) as an instituting social imaginary in the making within the SSE or, more precisely, within a part of the SSE that we call "solidarity initiatives", while liberalism (and its variant neoliberalism) is here considered as the instituted social imaginary of capitalism <sup>1</sup>. To present this thesis, which makes liberalism the instituted social imaginary of capitalism, we will proceed in four stages: first, to set up our epistemological framework, then to define our main concepts theoretically, next to present and characterize solidarity initiatives and, finally, to indicate how deliberism could be a new instituting social imaginary.

<sup>1</sup> To put it another way, liberalism is the system of justification of capitalism, not its truth. For example, the liberal justification of the market economy is free and undistorted competition, whereas in the capitalist reality monopolies and oligopolies are legion.

## I Epistemological framework: for an implicated impartiality in the service of a public science

On the epistemological level, our work falls within a particular constructivism, that of complex thought conceptualized by E. Morin (1994). The latter, because it no longer separates the researcher from the citizen, calls into question the notion of “axiological neutrality”. However, the latter is central for the pragmatic sociologist Nathalie Heinich (2022), for whom there is a clear demarcation between factual and value judgments. The researcher sticks to the facts, the militant defends values. Any normative approach is, therefore, in the realm of politics and therefore no longer a matter of knowledge. This epistemological position has the merit of clarity and simplicity. But it is no less problematic. Indeed, as another pragmatic sociologist, Philippe Corcuff, notes, N. Heinich<sup>2</sup>, proceeds from a partial and sided reading of M. Weber. Indeed, he reminds us, with (unshortened) quotations in support, that Max Weber does not ask the scientist to be neutral but, on the contrary, to take into account the ethical presuppositions that inform the sociological consideration: *“In 1904, he questioned the possibility of “a knowledge of reality devoid of any presupposition”, since **“Only a portion of the singular reality becomes interesting and meaningful to us, because only that portion is related to the ideas of cultural values with which we approach concrete reality”**”* (Corcuff, 2017). Moreover, P. Corcuff rightly emphasizes that *“Max Weber does not forbid scientists **“to express in the form of value judgments the ideals that animate them”**, provided always that they **“scrupulously bring to their own consciousness and to that of the readers at all times, what are the standards of value that serve to measure reality and those from which they derive the value judgment”**”*. The German sociologist here appears to be driven by a need for a reflexive differentiation between the analysis of facts and the assumption of an axiological position, the two poles having a relationship with “standards of value”, and not by the thesis of a “clear-cut distinction”, to use the expression employed by Nathalie Heinich. By integrating this passage, we may no longer speak as she does of “prescription”, “obligation” or “imperative” with regard to “axiological neutrality”. It is rather the path of sociological reflexivity that Max Weber outlines here” (Corcuff, 2017). It thus follows that to act as a scientist is not to seek, in vain, to rise above one’s citizenship but, in the dialogical perspective dear to Morin (2007), to link the two so as to better understand democratic society which, as Habermas (1997) reminds us, is carried by beings with normative values<sup>5</sup>. As a result, what is

<sup>2</sup> Des valeurs. Une approche sociologique, Paris, Gallimard, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>The passages in bold are by Max Weber, «L’objectivité de la connaissance dans les sciences et la politique sociales », [1904], in *Essais sur la théorie de la science*, Paris, Plon, 1965, pgs. 162-163.

<sup>4</sup>Max Weber, « L’objectivité de la connaissance dans les sciences et la politique sociales », *op. cit.*, pg. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Without the advent of autonomy, there would probably be no constitution of modern and reflexive social sciences, because, without autonomy there is no possible reflexivity, only heteronomy. Knowledge of the social sciences may well develop with modernity, but it is also a constituent element thereof. Therefore, by participating in the constitution of knowledge, the researcher also participates in the strengthening of autonomy and, therefore, of democracy (with thanks to N. Chochoy for prompting me to make this clarification).

important is not to neutralize these normative preconceptions but to expose them publicly. In the present case, to make clear that democracy seems to us to be the most desirable form of living together as well as the most effective way of creating collective intelligence.

The distinction between fact and value is also called into question by the existence of epistemic values (Kuhn 2008, Putman 2002). A contemporary epistemologist, Léo Coutellec (2015), extends this analysis of epistemic value. In his opinion, the activity of the researcher forms part of a singular community, an epistemic community, which defines the rules of scientific objectivity specific to this community (The criteria for scientific validity are not the same in mathematics and archaeology), but the scientist is also dependent on the cultural and social context in which he lives, that is to say, dependent on the values, in particular the ethical values, of the culture in which he conducts his research. As a result, the researcher cannot be neutral, but must defend an “implied impartiality” that can be summarized as follows: *“What makes the scientific approach relevant in its singularity in relation to other approaches to understanding the world is not this epistemological illusion implied by the axiological triple of autonomy-impartiality-neutrality but, rather, another set of values constitutive of the sciences that can be formulated as capacities of an involved science: fertility (ability to create new questions and raise doubt); diversity (ability to welcome pluralism in all its dimensions); implied impartiality (ability to account for reality and to submit to it for verification, while explaining the context); responsibility (ability to answer from and respond to)”* (Coutellec, 2015, pgs 43-44).

At a time when the conditions of habitability of the planet are in danger and when the very survival of human space is at stake, this implied impartiality must, in our opinion, be part of the perspective of a public science (Burawoy 2013). That is to say, a science that, rejecting scientism and scientific neutrality, takes part in the public debate, not to impose its point of view in the name of a single, universal and intangible truth, but to contribute to the reflexivity of our societies by deconstructing certain evidences and or by opening up the space of possibilities. It is, in any case, from this perspective of the academic and social debate that we propose this research on the relations between the social imaginary, democracy and the social and solidarity economy. It is time to define these terms theoretically.

## II Theoretical framework

To understand what we are trying to say, we must now define three terms. It is not a question of freezing these definitions or imposing a normative framework but, on the contrary, of encouraging critical debate around these terms. The first one we use is that of the social imaginary. It is a term used in philosophy, but also in history where it allows us to *“think about the performative dimension of representations, the effects that imaginaries can have on practices, behaviours, ways of*

*appropriating the world and collective sensitivities”*”(Pinson, 2022). To construct our definition of the social imaginary, we will, as E. Morin invites us to do, weave together three different definitions. The first is that of Cornelius Castoriadis. The latter, in opposition to structuralist and Marxist determinism, bases the existence of all systems, including the symbolic, on the existence of a radical imaginary inscribed in the unconscious of each human being. This radical imaginary institutes, beyond any individual or collective will, a singular “social-historical” that varies from one era to another. This historical social is, by definition, indeterminate because it is shaped by a tension between two collective imaginaries: an instituting social imaginary and an instituted social imaginary. Thus, the imaginary *“gives the functionality of each system its specific orientation, which super-determines the choice and connections of the symbolic networks, the creation of each historical epoch, its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence, its world and its relations to it* (pg. 203). However, there are no determinative links between the radical imaginary anchored in the individual psyche and the social imaginaries that underpin the economic, political, and symbolic institutions of a given society. As Nicolas Poirier (2003) explains: *“The psyche of individual humans, although it exists only in socialized form, can never be completely socialized, that is to say, the psyche can never be made to conform to what institutions require of it: this "presocial" world” always constitutes a threat to the meaning established by society”* (pg. 401). This vision of the social imaginary, rooted in psychoanalysis, can be complemented by two more philosophical approaches: that of Charles Taylor and that of Paul Ricoeur. The first defines the social imaginary thus: *“The social imaginary is not a set of ideas ; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of the practice of a society”* (Taylor, 2002, pg..2). This definition helps to understand his success among historians, *“It allows us to understand the influence of ideas on practices and that of practices on ideas”* (Hulak, 2010, pg. 391). Indeed, the social imaginary, according to Taylor, is a way of analyzing a given historical society, because it has a double dimension: the way in which citizens imagine society; the set of social practices resulting from this imagination, that is to say, “the repertoire” of possible actions, Taylor says, for members of a society. To put it another way, the social imaginary is embodied in concrete practices which, in turn, make it possible to understand the imagination at work within a given collective. Paul Ricoeur, in an article entitled *“L’idéologie et l’utopie : deux expressions de l’imaginaire social”* completes these two visions. For him, the same faculty, imagination, allows us to think about our relationship to the past and to the future. Now, Ricoeur points out, what is interesting is *“the fact that this social and cultural imaginary is not single but twofold. It operates sometimes in the form of ideology, sometimes in the form of utopia”* (Ricoeur, 1984, pg. 51). He concludes his analysis of these two imaginaries, which are both antagonistic and complementary, in the following way:: *“The double series of reflections that we have just devoted successively to ideology and utopia leads us to reflect on the necessary interweaving between ideology and utopia in*

*the social imagination. It is as if this imaginary were based on the tension between an integrative function and a subversive function.”* (pg. 63).

These three approaches feed into our theoretical definition of the social imaginary: It is anchored in a radical imaginary that no one controls. It is permeated by a tension between a function of integration (the instituted imaginary) and a critical function of subversion (the instituting imaginary), a tension which, at the same time, founds and explains the evolution of the economic, political and symbolic institutions that make up a given society. The formal expression of the instituted imaginary is ideology, the shaping of the instituting imaginary is utopia <sup>6</sup>. It is possible to grasp the formalized social imaginary of a given collective both on the basis of theoretical productions that legitimize (orthodox approaches) or criticize institutions (heterodox approaches), but also on the basis of collective practices that reveal both what actually is (the instituted imaginary) and what could be (the instituting imaginary). Within this analytical framework, it is therefore possible to shape the imaginary instituting SSE actors theoretically by analyzing their practices and the political and scientific discourses that underpin them. This, as we shall see, is the object of deliberism.

We will define the other two terms more quickly, as we have largely justified these definitions in previous works. For us, democracy is a singular society (Dacheux , Goujon 2020). Society is the “*ensemble des ensembles*” (Braudel, 1981) which articulates a political order (the elaboration of norms for living together), an economic order (the valorization of resources) and a symbolic order (the circulation of belief), legitimates norms (Lefort, 1986) and is not based on any transcendent order, it is autonomy (Singular, it articulates a public sphere (Habermas, 1978) where conflicts between infrastructural orders are settled, it is marked by a tension between freedom and equality (Tocqueville, 1835), it is based on the legitimacy of contestation (Castoriadis, 1975).

The social and solidarity economy, on the other hand, is an economic activism that asserts the link rather than the good. For us, it is a political expression of the instituting imaginary that articulates a critical ideal (the democratization of the economy) and alternative social experiments (cooperatives, neighbourhood boards, fair trade, etc.) that feed each other, in other words, what we call, following Ricoeur, a utopia (Dacheux Garlot, 2019) . To put it another way, the SSE as a utopia allows access to the formalized part of the instituting imaginary of our capitalist society. In any case, this is the case for a part of the SSE, the one that is not the victim of institutional or economic isomorphism, that is not part of a-capitalism, but that openly claims an alternative to capitalism, what we have called (Dacheux, Goujon, 2020): solidarity initiatives.

<sup>6</sup>This definition seems to be in line with Ricoeur's thought, which makes Utopia an expression, and therefore a formalization of the social imaginary, but it is very far from the thought of Castoriadis, for whom “Utopia” visibly replaces here, as in all contemporary parlance, the Kantian “regulatory idea”, removing from it the unpleasant “idealist” connotations and conferring on it, after the bankruptcy of Marxism, a pleasant “pre-Marxist revolutionary” flavour (1988, pg.113).

### III) The solidarity initiatives

As Laurent Fraisse (2024) points out, scientific vocabulary is not neutral. Talking about a social and solidarity economy company is not the same thing as talking about an organization. The first term refers to a liberal imaginary embodied by social entrepreneurs, the second refers to the plurality of legal forms that make up the SSE: cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations. Similarly, he points out, the term "organization" tends to refer to a managerial imaginary that departs from the political dimension of the SSE. However, the latter is very present in the SSE (Duverger 2023, Laville 2010). To restore this political dimension to SSE practices, Laurent Fraisse reminds us that the actors use the term initiatives *"When talking about socio-economic initiatives, its promoters (Hersent and Palma Torres, 2014) emphasize that the economy is not only a matter of companies, even if they are social economy, but that it is also a question of economic citizenship. Moreover, one of the flagship schemes of Guy Hascoët's Secretary of State for the Solidarity Economy (2000-2002) was called "solidarity dynamics" and provided much support for new projects or activities as the creation of companies"* (Fraisse 2024, pagination not final). For our part, we have used the term solidarity initiatives, in a complementary perspective. It is also a question of underlining the political dimension of the SSE, and also of distinguishing, within the SSE, initiatives that are in opposition to capitalism. More precisely, it is a question of identifying a fringe of anti-capitalist economic militancy that stands out from the institutionalized social economy and social entrepreneurship while having links with other anti-capitalist economic movements, such as the commons or degrowth. In concrete terms, these solidarity initiatives (SI) have three characteristics:

One: These are citizen initiatives that experiment with ways of producing and consuming alternative to capitalism. Another agriculture, non-industrial and globalised, but ecological in short circuits, is desirable, as the CSAs are experimenting. To fight against the financialization of the world, we need to democratize money, which is what social currencies and SELs, etc., test every day.

Two: these initiatives are experimenting with new practices that are supported by a desire for alternatives that finds its source in the contestation of the liberal instituted imaginary, in the social and environmental degradation of the world of capitalist production and in the alternative economic theories (instituting imaginary) carried by the SSE, the commons, degrowth, Marxism, etc.

Three: the SIs may be diverse but they do have a common feature: deliberation. It is not the invisible hand of the market that builds solidarity-based economic exchanges, but discussion in local public spheres where both the terms of trade (quantity, price) and the political project of the initiative are constructed.

Our hypothesis is that the analysis of SSE practices allows, as C. Taylor (2004) indicates, to highlight the key elements of a social imaginary specific to its initiatives. The name we have given to this instituting imaginary is deliberalism. More precisely, deliberalism is a theoretical construction that is

based on the utopia carried by a specific fringe of the SSE (solidarity initiatives) to develop, in the public sphere, a reflexive debate that favours the contestation of the established imaginary (liberalism) in order to facilitate the emergence of new institutions that promote the transition to a post-capitalist society.

#### IIV) Deliberalism

Deliberalism is a play on words. It is all about leaving behind the (neo)liberal imaginary to enter into democratic deliberation. But deliberism is more than just a play on words, it is a rigorous theoretical construction based on the idea that in a democracy, the best factor for allocating resources is not the self-regulating market, but the deliberation of actors in the public space. This theoretical construction is based on the analysis of the practices of solidarity initiatives: all of them are utopias that rely on the deliberation of the collective that implements them. Solidarity practices thus reveal the contours of a particular social imaginary marked by:

- the search for a new form of democracy that goes beyond representative liberal democracy. The desire of the Solidarity Economy Movement (SEM) and the Network of Local Authorities for a Solidarity Economy (NLASE) to develop the co-construction of public policies or the self-management demands, present in the ZADs and in certain associative cafés, clearly indicate the presence of an alternative democratic imaginary that we have tried to specify by evoking, in accordance with our theoretical framework, various heterodox approaches to democracy, namely: the deliberative (Habermas, 1997), creative (Dewey, 1939) and conflictual (Rancière, 1995) dimensions of democracy.
- the desire to establish a post-growth economy. Alongside the idea that deliberation is the best way to build more ecological and solidarity-based terms of trade, the ideal, experimented by initiatives such as Terres de Liens or Enercoop, of an oecomenia (an ecological economy that takes care of the home of all of us, the Earth) reconciling the economical development of resources, the protection of the habitability of the planet and conviviality is emerging which some heterodox thinkers have summarized under the idea of happy sobriety (Rabhi, 2010)
- The search for a new rationality that does not submit to transcendence but remains open to spirituality. The interchange of knowledge implemented by ATD Fourth World, the popular education practices applied by the associations and the demands of a third sector of research show the emergence of a new common sense, the search, sometimes made explicit, for a new cognitive justice, Sousa Santos (2015), resulting from a vision of science not as a single truth enlightening the world, but as a co-construction of new knowledge respectful of the diversity of knowledge. To put it another way, the imaginary that emerges behind SSE practices is that of rationality which would no longer be

the indisputable universal calculation promoted by the Enlightenment, but a sensible (Laplantine, 2005), limited (Morin, 1994) and situated rationality (Varela, 1999).

Deliberation is therefore an intellectual construction that is based on a practice common to the SI (deliberation) and that formalizes this instituting imaginary with the help of heterodox theories (which are therefore not related to the liberal imaginary) that are often evoked by the actors or researchers who accompany them. Like liberalism - which is based on the strong theoretical coherence between an economic (free competition), political (representative democracy) and symbolic (the Enlightenment) dimension - deliberation intends to defend freedom by also articulating these three dimensions: radical democracy (politics), oecomenia (economy) and epistemology of complexity (symbolic). It is, moreover, for this reason that, in our previous work, we defined deliberation as the system of justification<sup>7</sup> of the SSE, in the image of liberalism, which is the system of justification, but not the truth, of capitalism. What we would like to emphasize here is that this theoretical formalization is also a way of giving a conceptual and reflexive form to the social imaginary instituting solidarity initiatives. Are the latter not seeking, through practices such as election without a candidate or decision by consent, alternative forms of democracy? By being part of the circular economy, by seeking to develop other forms of entrepreneurship, by creating free zones, are corporate tax carriers not of another vision of the economy? By practising participatory action research, by demanding the consideration of experiential knowledge, by working for emancipation through action, do these SIs not bring a new relationship to science, even if few actors formulate it in this way? Thus, deliberation is an attempt to translate the social imaginary instituting solidarity initiatives into a theoretical formalization as well as being a reflexive framework that can help these initiatives to develop, in full consciousness, new solidarity practices. Deliberation is thus both a conceptual formalization of the instituting social imaginary and a system of justification for a post-growth society yet to come.

## Conclusion

At the end of this short survey, what can be said about the relationship between deliberation and the social imaginary? Three things. First of all, deliberation reveals the existence of a social imaginary at the heart of the SSE as opposed to the social imaginary that instituted the capitalist economy. Indeed, deliberation has its source in the analysis of the practices of a fringe of the SSE, solidarity initiatives. Now, as C. Taylor (2004) shows, the analysis of practices gives access to the social imaginary of a given collective. By discovering that deliberation is at the heart of the SI, deliberation brings to light an instituting imaginary opposed to economic liberalism, an instituted imaginary carrying capitalism.

<sup>7</sup>We have taken the concept from Boltanski and Thevenot (1991; for us, it means a theoretical discourse of legitimation that we distinguish from the system of truth, which is the set of practices that define themselves as the only legitimate ones and invalidate the others. In our societies, liberalism is the system of justification, capitalism the system of truth.



The theoretical formalization<sup>8</sup> of an alternative social imaginary embodied in practices and a critical political project, what P. Ricoeur (1984) calls a utopia, then opens up the political space of possibilities. Secondly, deliberation is a tool for decolonizing the imagination. By translating the instituting social imaginary with the help of heterodox economic, political and symbolic theories, deliberation is an intellectual construction that makes it possible to question the doxa (what is self-evident is not debatable): free trade is not the only possible conception of the economy that respects the freedom of each individual; liberal democracy can be overtaken by participatory and creative democracy; science is neither the truth of the world nor a knowledge that must submit to transcendence, but a rational, situated and limited knowledge that can authorize the co-construction of emancipatory knowledge between different forms of knowledge. However, this decolonization of the imaginary is, according to Serge Latouche (2006), the prerequisite for the advent of a post-capitalist society. If, as Castoriadis (1975) indicates, institutions are indeed the fruit of the imagination, only the establishment of a new imaginary, stripped of the rags of liberalism can, in fact, produce the bifurcation that we need. Finally, as a theory of democratic society formalized to generate debate in academic, activist and public spheres, deliberation is also an attempt to escape the unconscious grip of the radical imagination. It is a question of avoiding the grip of this informal and unconscious magma Castoriadis (1975), without sinking into historical determinism. Seen thus, instituting society through deliberation in the public sphere is a further step towards the autonomy dear to Castoriadis: It is no longer the unconscious at the heart of the faculty of the human imagination that institutes an indeterminate historical social, but human communication that makes and unmakes the rules of living together<sup>9</sup>. This emancipation of the psyche - impossible in Castoriadis - becomes possible once we adopt the concept, drawn from complex thought, of emergence. In the same way as consciousness emerges from the brain and allows us to better control its functioning, the deliberation that arises from the aim of autonomy made possible by the radical imagination can help us to think of a democracy that is always indeterminate, but an indeterminacy linked to the contingencies of the deliberations taken and no longer linked to the uncontrolled emergence of meanings engendered by the psyche. A conscious autonomy that is consciously redefined according to the problems encountered and not an autonomy constantly produced by the breaches opened by the unconscious. Thus deliberation is constituted both with and against Castoriadis' thought.

<sup>8</sup>It is therefore a question of a second and partial representation: the theoretical formalization of a (formal) political expression, of an instituting social imaginary that cannot be reduced to the practices and discourses of the SIs..

<sup>9</sup> Deliberation is not pure rationality, emotions and the unconscious are obviously present. Through communication with a deliberative aim, it is a question of strengthening the power of the human imagination beyond "unconscious reproductions" (with, however, the limits of collectives that may not behave in an enlightened way but on the contrary allow themselves to be dominated by collective unconsciousness). With thanks to Marius Chevallier for prompting me to make this clarification.

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