



# World Goodwill Seminar 2022 London

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## On Radical Imagination

Max Haiven

Introduction by Laurence Newey

Welcome back everybody. We are very pleased to invite Max Haiven to talk to us particularly on the role of what he terms the radical imagination. Imagination, as many of the people who tuned into this webinar will know, is the heart of our own, the western esoteric tradition. And while the imagination is acknowledged as the agent of culture and something that enriches the human psyche, it's still widely regarded as a means of escapism, a window into fantasy and make-belief. But the true function of the imagination is the opposite of this. It reveals the reality of the subjective realms through the externalisation of force. The imagination could be thought of as an image-making faculty, and as such it works with the intellect to concretise subjective energy into objective forms. As Carl Jung expressed it: *I'm indeed convinced that the creative imagination is the only primordial phenomenon accessible to us, the real ground of the psyche, the only immediate reality.* Due to the current association of the imagination with a dreamlike state, this may initially be a disturbing thought, but it's the quality and dynamism of the energy in which we choose to focus the imagination that determines our sense of reality. The higher the imagination is lifted, the more dynamic is its energy state and correspondingly, the greater the expansion of the sense of self and identity with the whole.

So, now it's over to you Max. Just a reminder to the viewers that Max Haiven is a writer and teacher and Canada research chair in radical imagination, an associate professor of English, and co-director of Lakeland University's reimagining value action lab. Thank you, Max.

## *On Radical Imagination*

Thank you very much, it's lovely to be here with all of you and I look forward to our discussion. So, yes, I've written quite a bit over the last few years on the imagination, and from a slightly different perspective than I think many people approach the topic. I'm not particularly interested, well I shouldn't say that... as a scholar, I'm not particularly focused on the creative imagination or the psychological notions of imagination. I'm mostly interested in the imagination as a social or sociological force. In other words, I'm interested in how the imagination shapes society and conversely, how society shapes our imaginations. So, in some of my earlier work, almost a decade ago now, I worked quite closely with social movements; specifically social movements that were not particularly successful in changing the world, to try and understand how people in those movements imagined the world could be different. I really wanted to understand how it is that they developed imagination of alternative futures that they were striving to move us towards, and also how they were trying to spread those imaginative capacities to the rest of society.

I was also very interested, and I continue to be very fascinated by, the ways, in which the economic system that we live under shapes our imaginations. The economic system we live under (in brief: financialised capitalism) also depends on our imaginations. There's a temptation to think that the economy we live under mercilessly crushes the imagination under its foot. But I think, much more dangerously, the economy we live under – which of course I probably don't need to tell you is extremely exploitative and presently destroying the ecosystem we all depend on – actually *depends* on us reshaping our imaginations, reshaping how we think of ourselves and how we think of our ability to contribute to society. It does so in quite profound ways.

My interest, then, is in the idea of the imagination as this kind of social force, something deep at work not only in our own individual beings, but also deep at work in the kind of shared territories of meaning-making and sense-making in society at large.

There's a kind of feedback loop that I try and describe. On the one hand, we have an imagination of the world, an understanding of the sublime complexity that we encounter every day. We, somehow, have to create a mental picture or a series of interlocking mental pictures about what it means to be an agent, what it means to be a subject, what it means to act in a world that's beyond our comprehension. That imagination of the world leads to various forms of action that we take in everyday life, in our jobs, in our vocations; that action then contributes to the constant reshaping of society. Conversely, society then influences and reshapes our imaginations in many ways. There's this kind of feedback loop. I won't go into detail, but it works in both directions, both clockwise and counter clockwise; there's a kind of back and forth between the imagination in society and the imagination of the individual.

Here, I've been particularly interested in theories of the *radical imagination*. As I mentioned, both my sympathies and my research lean towards social movements for racial, social, economic, and ecological justice, quite unapologetically. So, on the one hand I am interested in the radical imagination of people who are radicals, who believe that we can and must transform society in a fundamental way. But I'm also interested in the radical imagination in a slightly different valence as well, in the terms provided by another inheritor of the psychoanalytic tradition along with Carl Jung who was mentioned earlier: the French-Greek theorist Cornelius Castoriadis. In the 1950s and 60s and into the 1970s he provided a very capacious theorization of the radical imagination.

For Castoriadis, the radical imagination isn't just the kind of personal imagination that makes you a social radical. Drawing on the Latin root of the word, Castoriadis means "coming from the roots." The radical imagination is a tectonic and eternal force at work, brewing not only within both every individual subject, but also at the core of society. And Castoriadis, like me (and this is why I take such inspiration from him), was curious about the relationship between the imagination of individuals and then the imaginary structures that we create to be able to live together, which is to say the social imagination, or the realm of the social imaginary. Castoriadis gave us a very beautiful metaphor, to which I often return: magma, that fascinating substance that erupts from the earth, that's halfway between solid and liquid. For Castoriadis, the radical imagination is a magma-like substance.

At various moments in human society, there are eruptions that then sweep away the social institutions with which we're familiar, like a volcano erupting, and replace them. As the magma cools and solidifies or petrifies into rock, we are left with new structures. And we, as social subjects trying to contend with the incredible complexity of a social world of which we are a part, we then imagine that these solidified structures of the magma of the imagination are eternal, that they've always been this way, that they're natural, that they are necessary. But in fact, they're not. And, inevitably, there is another eruption, later on. For Castoriadis, these eruptions were, in the most dramatic forms, revolutionary changes in society, when people rise up to demand changes to the social institutions under which they live. But these eruptions could also happen in other ways. The work of particularly stirring or influential artists, for instance, could be a kind of volcanic eruption of the imagination, which fundamentally transforms the way that we understand how the world fits together, to a certain extent.

Castoriadis was also interested in a way that this also occurs within each one of us, on some level. We imagine ourselves, we imagine who we are, we imagine our capacity to act in the world in ways to which we give an archetypal or statuesque form. In the development of the ego, we come to imagine ourselves as an eternal, natural or normal manifestation; but throughout our lives – both in the natural progress of maturation and also due to events that occur—we are often met with erupted moments, where the things we took to be natural, normal, and the basis of our being are swept away by some kind of magma-like eruption. I think magma is a

very nice and useful metaphor. By social institutions, here, Castoriadis had in mind not only particular institutions like this or that museum or university or government office; he's thinking much more in the sociological sense. Marriage is an institution of society, policing is an institution of society, the university writ large is an institution of society.

Institutions are all at least in part structures of the imagination, in the sense that they are given meaning and given power in our lives through the way we invest them with our belief and with our participation and with our consent. We assume these institutions are normal and natural and eternal, but that are in fact merely, in some senses, solidification of the shared imagination. Castoriadis is a materialist theorist of the imagination, and so too am I, at least in my scholarship. I believe we need to have a materialist analysis of how the imagination works in society. I want to move away, at least my scholarship, from more romantic or metaphysical notions of the imagination, even though I acknowledge that there's a great deal of value in thinking those things through. I also acknowledge there are a great number of limits inherent to a strictly materialist perspective. But as I've already made clear, my interest is in how the imagination can change society, and can change it urgently and radically. So, for that reason, I'm less interested in the subjective side of the imagination, and less interested in the metaphysical questions of what the imagination *is* or, for instance, where consciousness and its capacity to innovate comes from.

I want to speak, in the minutes that remain, about two things I'm thinking about for a future short book on the imagination. One, I'm framing as pathologies of the imagination. The second is what I see as movements of the imagination that are disrupting, in this moment, our notions of how the world fits together in what I see as quite important ways.

I'll mention very briefly three pathologies of the imagination which I think helped illuminate the kind of theoretical framework that I'm suggesting to you today.

The first is money. Money, today, is essentially a stream of immaterial digits in databases that interlock with one another around the world. Perhaps at one point in human history money was much more closely tethered to either useful qualities (for example, salt was often used as a money), or largely useless but scarce commodities, like platinum or gold. We could argue to what extent those forms of money were also imaginary. But certainly today's forms of money are increasingly imaginary and I think, beyond that, we live in a world that has been largely subordinated to money. We have been told that the means of each person's individual survival, and the means to the competitiveness of the nations to which we might be forced to belong, and the greatest good that can be achieved, is the acquisition and accumulation of money. This is a terrible pathology of the imagination, and we are dealing with its consequences right now, as we are watching with increasing horror, as the needs of transnational corporations to make a great deal of money is trumping any meaningful action on the calamitous effects

of anthropogenic climate change. We have here a crisis of the imagination of epic and world-historical proportions. We've essentially determined and imagined, collectively, that money is more valuable than ecosystems.

A second pathology of the imagination is racism. Now, briefly, racism is not simply a manifestation of the eternal human tendency towards xenophobia. When we speak of racism in a critical valence and draw from experts on the history of racism, it is a very particular form of social hierarchy that we inherit from the ages of colonialism and imperialism, when essentially western European elites licenced themselves to go around the world and steal everyone else's resources and labour, for their own benefit. These elites essentially invented and broadcast a set of imaginary hierarchies between human beings that then justified the theft. We are, unfortunately, still in the hangover of those moments, partly because many of the structures of imperialism and colonialism continue to be with us to this day. We need only look at the flows of wealth from the global south to the global north to recognise that we are not in the post-imperial, post-colonial and post-racial moments for which we had perhaps hoped.

Racism is, in one sense, a pathology of the imagination that we continue to endure and that is so harmful to so many. I speak about it as a pathology of the imagination because it fundamentally infects our understanding of the world, and our understanding of ourselves, and our understanding of one another, based on a completely fabricated hierarchy of human beings. And what I think is really important and telling about the history of racism is that the original justifications and the original narratives for racism, which were developed in the ages of empire and colonialism, may no longer still be with us. And yet, racism, as an imaginative structure, renovates and reinvents itself with a new language and new set of justifications. So, for example, today it is no longer customary for people to speak in terms of biological racism, the idea that some groups of people are genetically inferior to others. Rather, it's more than common to hear on the nightly news, on read in newspapers, that certain groups of people have a cultural deficiency: for example, a culture of poverty, a culture of dependency, a culture of terrorism. This is one new form that the imagination of racism takes in our moment, that draws on those long legacies that gave rise to it and that renovated for new moments to enable new forms of power.

The third pathology of the imagination I want to sort of mention is conspiracy theories and conspiracism. I am just now drawing to a close, after several years, a very interesting project on why it is that conspiracism is so popular in this moment. There are a lot of reasons. But I think that, by approaching conspiracy theories and conspiracism as structures of the imagination, we can learn about it from a space of compassion and thoughtfulness, rather than judgement and othering. We are, each of us, as I've already suggested, struggling throughout our entire lives to make sense of incredible complexity that we find ourselves amidst, a complexity that in many ways exceeds our cognitive ability. The society we live in is made-up of innumerable moving parts, with complex interrelations at the economic, sociological, political,

and cultural level. It's not surprising, then, that we all turn our imaginations towards trying to come up with narratives that would explain not only the situation that we find ourselves in, but why, for the vast majority of us, the world constantly gets worse. Most people anticipate that, in their lifetime, the world is going to get more chaotic, more harsh, more competitive, more alienating.

Conspiracism emerges from this very genuine need and desire to make sense of the world. It is in some ways, as I say, a pathology of the imagination. The imagination enables people to try and make often quite bizarre or dangerous connections between the different elements of their social world. But in the absence of criticism, in the absence of rigorous investigation, in the absence of self-reflection, these imaginations of how the world works can run amok. I'm a believer that we need to encourage and cultivate those processes of the imagination that give rise to conspiracism, but we need to measure them with very close attention to facts and argument. I'm not just speaking of the rigours of intellectual study that encourage us to test falsifiable hypotheses and question our beliefs; we also need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how power works. Because a "conspiracy theory" ultimately is a theory of power. Often, the problem with conspiracy theories and what makes them different from more useful theorisations of what's happening in our world, is that they advance from a very skewed understanding of how social power functions. We're fortunate to have a wealth of theories at our disposal that explain how social power works, and those theories contend with one another to explain the world. Conspiracy theories often emerge from a genuine but ill-informed attempt to try and understand how power works.

To close, I want to turn to what I see as three movements of the imagination that I think are especially important in our moment.

First, I want to point to the worldwide movement of solidarity with migrants. I think this is an incredibly important movement, not only because it leads people to do incredible work, like occupying aeroplanes to prevent people from being deported, or travelling out onto the high seas to rescue people who've been abandoned to drown in the Mediterranean, or defying vigilante border forces on the southern border of the United States to give water and necessities to people trying to move for economic or political reasons. I think it's also important because these movements demand that we imagine the world differently, not as a map cut up, thanks to the legacies of empire, into thousands of different jurisdictions that will compete with one another for resources until we end up in war or privation. Rather, these movements are suggesting that we need to truly imagine that every human life is fundamentally valuable, and, if we truly believe that, then we could not countenance and allow the kinds of crimes against humanity that are being perpetuated largely by wealthy countries in the Global North, in order to keep their borders "secure" from the arrival of people from the Global South, whose ancestors our countries in the Global North have robbed for generations.

Next, I want to point to a movement that is especially strong, but not exclusively practised, among young people today. It is a movement to defy and challenge our understandings of the gender binary. We have a whole generation (but also people of older generations) who are demanding and exercising the right, and, indeed in some cases the duty, to challenge our ideas of what masculinity and femininity mean, and even to challenge our fabricated idea that our world needs to be structured by the binary between the two. I'm here speaking about nonbinary people, about trans people, about queer people. I'm speaking about the ways that, in everyday life, these people are taking it upon themselves to challenge our imagination about what it means to be human, and the idea that we should divide ourselves into these gender or sex roles, which has so many catastrophic impacts on so many of us, as we mature and try and come to know ourselves.

And I briefly want to speak about the movement to abolish prisons and to abolish the police, which is gaining steam around the world as we realise that these were always false solutions to the common problems of harm in our society. First of all, police and prisons do nothing to eliminate the major sources of harm in our world: the harms of an economic system, or the harms of a political system that oppresses and exploits so many. Further, we know that police and prisons have generally failed in their efforts to prevent this thing that we know and we've come to understand as crime. Grassroots movements are developing new methods for caring for one another and bringing about justice in ways that I think are very important.

These three practises of the radical imagination stem from everyday grassroots activism. But they're not simply satisfied to challenge the powers-that-be. I think each of them essentially creates a framework that shoots beyond their particular, localised efforts, beyond the individual body, and instead challenge all of us to reimagine society. They are essentially eruptions of what I've spoken of as the radical imagination. They are fundamentally showing us that those things that we thought were eternal structures that we could do nothing about, that we had learned to imagine were natural and normal—borders, gender, law and order – are in fact neither natural, nor normal, nor necessary. The world could be otherwise. I see in them a great deal of potential, not only in their own particular fields of activity, but as challenges to the imaginary structures that are right now threatening, truly, life on earth.