

CULTURE, INEQUALITY AND THE BUREAUCRATIC IMAGINATION: STATES AND SUBJECTS FOR A NEW MILLENIUM

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The space in which one examines is philosophically very different from the space in which one sees. (Gaston Bachelard, *The Philosophy of No: A Philosophy of the New Scientific Mind*)

Introduction

In this paper, I want to make a case for imagination as a ubiquitous, but neglected, modality in social life.¹ Unfortunately, in such a short piece, I will not be able to offer anything like a comprehensive examination of such a complex term. Even confining ourselves to English-language speculation, for example, such a summary would still be huge. Just in the space between Hobbes's rather lame sense of imagination as decaying sense (1992 [1651]) and Locke's subtly subversive understanding of reflection (1700), imagination emerged as the spectre haunting anglophone philosophy's empiricism. It is, arguably, one of the most interesting words in the English language and, while it appears in variations in parts of modern anthropology (such as 'imaginary' derived from the work of Lacan), its more natural language sense as a potential of certain kinds of thought is less well researched. In particular, the sense of this term denoting a way of visualizing a hoped-for better future – perhaps best expressed by one of the slogans connected to the wave of protests loosely referred to as 'anti-capitalist', that is, *another world is possible* – is less commonly examined. My interest in this paper, then, is in thinking about how we actively imagine the world in which we actually live, especially the connections within this global moment we are least inclined to see. If there is a slogan connected to my argument, it would run something like: *this world is here because we are actively making it*. Thus, there is a grimmer side to the case I am making – we are well along the road of imagining a world that is pretty unpleasant, and we had better start to understand some of the ways that this is actually done, if we want to go about changing it.

While there have been a variety of attempts to use imagination as a means of unpacking local situations (see Kaplan 1995, Aretxaga 2000, Comaroff and Comaroff 2004, among many others), fewer theorists have looked at how imagination undergirds how an anthropology of the present global moment might account for what is not imaginable for the social sciences as well as their objects of study (Fernandez n.d. on imagination in the moral order takes this idea in a slightly different direction). Tellingly, the 2002 American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings was titled *(Un)Imaginable Futures*, emphasizing the common temporal orientation of the term I am trying to unpack here. Axel (2003), for example, has a very cogent critique of the theme of this volume, emphasizing the limits of imagination as a category of anthropological analysis on the basis of its coherence with the world of fact and some of the contradictions that he finds in Anderson's sense of imagined communities

(1991), which he sees as one of the tap-roots of this use of the term imagination. Throughout, though, it is the positive sense of imagination that is emphasized.²

I believe that this use of imagination marks how closely the theoretical understanding of the term tracks its more quotidian usage. Much like an older idea of culture, others seem to have more imagination than ‘we’ do. Within ‘us’, certain classes of people removed from the workaday world, such as poets and other creative sorts, are understood to have more imagination than the run-of-the-mill person. Our day-to-day life, we suppose, is not a realm ruled by our imaginations (except as consumers of the products of the more imaginative among us, hence our connections to ‘imagined’ communities), and we mark this meaning of ‘imagination’ in our colloquialisms concerning the sorts of work and/or activities wherein the faculty is supposed to thrive, as opposed to our everyday existence. Instead, I argue that imagination clearly undergirds what we consider standard interpretations of public codes (what symbolic anthropology has long taken to be the real object of our researches); it speaks to the problem of legitimating power, and it is clearly bound up with how we know (and do not know) the world. My field for this excursion into the role of imagination is my reading of increasing structural and symbolic violence in the modern moment, alongside a case for why anthropology as a discipline should be interested in this issue.

Is Seeing Believing?

I begin, then, with four scenarios all coming from only the past ten years, touching, in very different ways, on the imaginings of justice, equality, and seeing or not seeing various types of interconnections.

1. Late 1990s. Jean Dubuisson, *une miserable*, from the central plateau of Haiti. When he was a child, his family, dispossessed by a USAID-funded development project under the despotic US-supported regime of Papa Doc, the Péligre Hydroelectric Dam, made the move from landed poor to desperate rural underclass. Unsure of his own age, he is sure that he has known ‘nothing but troubles’ in his life. He and his wife Marie watched two of their children die before the age of five. Since 1990, Jean has been slowly dying of TB, an easily treatable disease that, since the late 1980s, is claiming more lives than ever before in human history. Jean’s treatment in 1998 cost only a couple of dollars a day, but the average income in Haiti was then only a little over \$200/yr, and Jean was one of the people bringing down that average (Farmer 1999: 187–200). At about this same time, when Jean is slowly dying from a very treatable disease, the Human Genome Project is being completed, inspiring some medical researchers to begin to imagine vastly increased life-spans, perhaps even effective immortality, for at least some members of the human race in the foreseeable future.

2. Late 1990s. At the Universities of Warwick and Oxford, an elegant experiment – conducted by members of a seemingly rare breed, some imaginative economists – yields a perverse result. Subjects are provided virtual (but ultimately convertible) ‘currency’ and are then allowed to ‘bet’ on various topics, while a few are rewarded with large windfalls. Subjects have no contact with each other except through a computer terminal, but they are aware of each other’s winnings. After very large inequalities are established, participants are allowed to ‘burn’ others’ income at

some cost to their own. Much to the surprise of the ringmasters, 62% of the ‘losers’ incur further crippling losses to bring down the winnings of their ‘more successful’ counterparts. In the popular press, right-wing commentators (e.g., Mercer 2003) take the results of this experiment as confirmation of how envy lurks in the dark corners of an acontextual human nature, and, thus, they see the necessity of vigilance in a global economy still, in their way of thinking, too slow to reward life’s winners and to punish life’s losers, in the manner in which they deserve.

3. 2000–2001, at several sites in the USA. Another experiment – in one sense, a depressingly familiar scene – that of monkeys being used as pharmacological models to measure the addictive potential of a drug, in this case, cocaine. The imaginative twist: macaques raised individually are allowed to form social groups, complete with dominance hierarchies. Cocaine is offered only after such hierarchies are established. The results: while all the monkeys try cocaine, only the ones on the bottom of the hierarchies self-administer as often as possible (the closest demonstration that those who torment monkeys have provided of what humans call ‘addiction’). Furthermore, these monkeys show wide variance in Positron Emission Topography (PET) scans of their brains, with dominant ones showing higher numbers, and activity levels, of D₂ receptors, which are implicated in the brain’s management of pleasure and aversion. Conclusion: brain chemistry, individual history, pharmacological action, and social dynamics are difficult, if not impossible, to disaggregate (Morgan et al. 2002).

4. 2002, Dublin, Ireland. A woman, D in her early 20s, relates (to a research assistant on a state-funded project on opiate prevalence) the history of her near-decade-long attraction to heroin, and her various, to date unsuccessful, attempts to come off the drug. The project is attempting to establish a clearer sense of the number of addicts in Ireland, at least 10 years into a serious heroin problem on the island, and twenty-plus years since the drug first emerged as a social issue in Dublin. After a paper and pencil instrument is filled in that measures types and amounts of compounds taken and that also develops some data on the woman’s sense of her social network, a longer conversation, developed over a few weeks, ensues. It proves impossible to get a simple narrative of her drug use without the details of the extraordinary amount of violence in her life – regular physical abuse in school as a youngster, victim and originator of violence as teenager, the experience of rape at sixteen. Currently, she is on probation and in treatment, but she will likely be homeless when she is released, and will probably find that prostitution (in which she has been occasionally involved) will be one of her only career options. During the course of almost five hours of interviews D mentions heroin and the concept of addiction only tangentially and under prodding of the interviewer.

Connections

My basic assertion is a simple one: these scenarios are related by their ways of making visible, or their pointing out ways of obscuring, a fundamental reality, perhaps the defining quality, of our historical moment – that of gross inequalities and their systematic reproduction. This problem, of course, is scarcely a new one. Inequalities, like the laissez-faire economist’s sense of ‘the Poor,’ have always been with us. My point in this paper is not to bewail this fact; rather I want to think about the place that

inequalities have in our current imaginings, that is, the conditions of the possibility for what and how we currently see, and what we feel we should do about what we see. I also want to look at the mechanisms whereby this seeing or the lack of it happens. Finally, I want to reflect on the role of anthropological thinking in this complex of what is imaginable and what can be acted upon.

Humanity and Inequality

Human sociality is in crucial respects separated from other forms of animal sociality precisely because we can imagine our own inequalities and assign them various valences. Minimally, we can imagine ones different from the one we are born with or into. More interestingly (and probably unique to our species), we can even imagine a society where such inequalities are eliminated or severely attenuated. The body of social theory out of which (at least anglophone) anthropology develops, moreover, takes inequalities as one of the foundational issues of human sociality – something that is both necessary to, and potentially destructive of, any possibility of humans living peaceably and well together in groups. From Hobbes (1651) to Rawls (1971), theorists of the social contract have had to balance the idea of some equality with respect to political power and legal subjectivity with massive inequalities of talent, interests, life chances, strength and the like. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that arguments both for and against certain types of inequality have historically been politically contentious and rhetorically powerful. Few notions have been more potent, for example, than Rousseau's (1992 [1729]) sense of 'unnatural' inequalities (those based on *une sorte de convention* imposed on a theoretically more fundamental equality of Man), as a means of rallying political forces in the cause of social change in recent Western history. Despite being declared dead and buried several times over the past 250 years, this idea of a fundamental human equality is still powerful enough that Stephen Pinker, a psycholinguist at MIT has recently written yet another book attempting to 'debunk' it (Pinker 2002).

For this reason, imagination is an important but underappreciated aspect of governance. Technocratic control of populations, appropriation of resources, and application of bureaucracy all require both imagined entities to manipulate and, crucially, imagined endpoints as goals. At the same time, resistance to various technocratic projects also requires imagination, mobilizing constructs, such as the perceived locus of agency in social life and the sense of logical routes to influence outcomes of initiatives. For such projects to succeed, states and subjects must also imagine what they cannot change, indeed, what they cannot see.

Thus, we come to the condition of possibility for the four scenarios above, which is the historical moment in which we find ourselves, at the end of, or at least adrift in, History, almost twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the de facto triumph of a globalized capitalist order complete with US-military enforcement between states, and the largely uninterrupted growth of neo-liberal policies within polities, more or less without any credible material or ideological opposition. In this current wave of imagining, the market has emerged as the master metaphor of social life, and wide (and widening) inequalities, with their attendant affective states in ontological individuals of fear and greed, are the mechanics of this imagining of the market. Whatever the perils or the possibilities of this epoch, it is a moment when

inequalities have never been greater both within and between societies and when the language in which to discuss certain kinds of inequalities has never been more meager in certain disciplines, including, I would argue, Anthropology. Hence the main, if not the only, paradox in our four cases above: we have, on the one hand, disciplines predicated on an ontological individual – economics and pharmacology – almost by accident, developing persuasive evidence that a socially-produced sense of equality and inequality is everything from a fundamental aspect of our behavioural environment to an important influence on our very biology,³ and we have social sciences, which have historically taken the ontological embeddedness of human beings in social groups as a given, finding it harder and harder to theorize what Jonathan Kozol (1991), an American writer, almost twenty years ago called ‘Savage Inequalities’ in any principled way.

What States and Subjects See

Models of bureaucracy have generally been dominated by metaphors of sight. We have become inured to terms like ‘transparency’ and ‘vision’ when discussing social policies and/or their origins and effects in modern industrial democracies. Similarly, analyses and/or critiques of the state have long conceded the centrality of vision in their terminology and analyses. ‘Bureaucratic gaze’, ‘panopticon’, and ‘inspectorial’ are easy-to-find descriptions in analyses of the state and its knowledge about its subjects. The visual metaphor also organizes our description of resistance to power. Resistance and escaping the gaze of a presumably totalizing state are equated in terms like ‘hidden transcripts’, ‘covert resistance’, and ‘subaltern history,’ all presumably obscure from, if not actually occult to, the gaze of the powerful. Knowledge and research is similarly imagined – making visible the previously obscure. In short, seeing has been related to the exercise of power – in this sense of being able to manipulate something – and its lack has been linked to the ability to avoid power.

Researchers interested in the relationship of sight to power in the sense above too often cite the seminal thinking of Michel Foucault in an off-hand way as support of this position (e.g., 1975). Foucault’s way of thinking about sight, however, could not be more at odds with this crypto-positivist reading of a sense of vision. The visual in the panopticon or in the doctor’s gaze would better be put as a gerundive, that is, the visualizing of something.⁴ Far from seeing something already there, sight, subjectivity, and power simultaneously imply each other in this way of thinking. Less obvious, though, has been what invisibility implies for power. Bourdieu’s sense of institutional forgetting as an important part of his idea of ‘symbolic violence’ gets to this issue, but more after the fact (Bourdieu 1977, 1991). Mary Douglas in *How Institutions Think* also struggles with this issue. Unwilling to locate power or agency in anything but concrete individuals, however, she is forced to define institutions in terms of getting individuals within their matrix to think alike, and she recuperates the similarly Durkheimian sense that classifying is the privileged way that such thinking proceeds. As usual in such analyses, power is difficult to locate; individuals by definition do not exercise power over institutions, but only individuals can have agendas and interests for Douglas (for critique, see Saris 1995). Surely, though, if we construct the visible in social life, we must also hammer out an agreement as to what we cannot see.

(Re)visioning the State

Still, if one imagines the state as a set of institutions (a venerable and defensible position), then what we might call their current configuration of imagination, that is how they imagine they see or what they fail to see, and how they remember or forget, is very interesting. Part of our historical moment, we are told (whether this moment is heralded or bemoaned), is the so-called roll-back of the state: the removal of bureaucracy, the relaxing of regulations, and the cutting of taxes all leading to a smaller, more efficient government, a greater scope for private life and civil society, and more self-reliance in individuals. Many researchers, myself included, have questioned this assertion, especially as it applies to those losing socio-economic ground in the new society (Farmer 2004, Saris *et alii* 2002, among many others). One of the signal aspects of inequalities in the moment in which we live, for example, is how much of the state the dispossessed actually do see, whether this is the spectacular growth over the past twenty years of the carceral state in the US or the seemingly gentler ways that chronic social problems are being ‘communitized’ and regulated by semi-state bodies interested in ‘community development’ in some parts of Europe. Amongst too many of *les miserables de la terre*, especially those in so-called ‘failed’ states in the South, moreover, the problem is not a lack of state organs, but precisely their proliferation amongst various factions, all attempting to exercise an often brutal governmentality over the same imagined territory and population. Armies consisting of strung-out adolescents, whose machetes are the only reliable weapons they possess, are led by men whom insist on the trappings of state bureaucracy.

It is especially easy, though, to miss how intrusive a presence is the state in certain areas and populations in so-called ‘developed’ society. As always, perhaps, the United States serves as the best window on this process. Television productions developed in the US, like *COPS* (now in its 700th episode), celebrate the most crude manifestations of state presence – heavily armed, uniformed forces, swooping into certain (always poor, generally black and brown) neighbourhoods, appealing to a white, mostly middle-class audience that responds to political appeals to banish government intrusion into their own lives. The State is not just made visible but actually valorized for this population – a sort of value-for-money advertisement for their reduced tax burden. Other shows that have become popular in both North America and Western Europe, especially the odious *Big Brother*, are not just the voyeuristic celebration of boring, mediocre individuals as many critics have justly claimed; instead, they exist as a sort of inside joke that we share with ourselves about the tenuousness of our own privacy in the face of the ubiquity of surveillance technology like CCTV and CARNIVORE.⁵ In my own work, for example, it astonishes me how certain commentators in Ireland can talk about the ‘roll-back’ of the state – the 8 or so neighbourhoods in the capital that score worst in the Trute-Haaze Deprivation Index, that also provide the overwhelming majority of the prison population, are also the target of multiple, very well-intentioned ‘community-based’ interventions (again financed by the state). Even the idea that the state has become smaller and less powerful would certainly be news in such places (see Saris *et alii* 2002).

While the popular and state imaginings of such connections have seemingly become impoverished, and even academic research slow to investigate certain connections (for exceptions see Davis 2003 and Elsner 2005), other analysts have had fewer difficulties. In the aftermath of a fatal prison riot in New Mexico in the US, for example, the Business Section of the *Albuquerque Tribune* ran a brief background piece on Wackenhut, the corporation making a tidy profit out of the state contract to run this prison, by (1) overcrowding and (2) cutting the number of guards on shift at any one time.⁶

Crime does pay, if you're in the private corrections business. Talk about demand: The nation's inmate population has grown 228 per cent from 1980 to 1996. 'We not looking at a slowdown in the numbers of prisoners', says Doug McDonald, senior associate at Abt Associates Inc. in Cambridge, Mass. 'Politicians still like to run against crime. We have longer and longer sentences. There are more people going away for longer periods of time.' And, he adds, 'Legislatures aren't interested in spending money for prisons.' (*Albuquerque Tribune*, Business Section 17/6/03)

Such arguments, connecting various decisions by elites, with bad (even deadly) outcomes for certain less powerful people, enabled by society-wide forms of bad faith, would seem radical in an Opinion/Editorial column of the *New York Times*, or even the *Guardian*, but it registers as a literal description in the Business Section of a paper from the US Sunbelt.

We might, then, ask ourselves why this is so. Radical transformations in the size, form and function of state institutions geared to the dispossessed have been remarkably integrated, and remarkably little investigated by anthropologists (exception Rhodes 2003). We know, for example, that prison populations have boomed in the US over the past twenty-odd years, but we scarcely realize how diverse these institutions have become, with some US prisons and jails being amongst the largest in-patient psychiatric institutions in the world, others existing as a sort of domestic destination of out-sourced telemarketing jobs, and still others functioning as models of factory production that have largely abandoned in the developed world. Further, at least some US researchers have pointed out how the statistics of the remarkable growth of the US prison size exist in defiance of both trends in the crime rate and the growth of population (e.g., Davis 2003).

Shulman examines some of these connections in his book, *The Betrayal of Work* (2003). A key theme of this analysis is the prevalence of mismatched assumptions about 'work' in the United States in the twenty-first century especially the harsh reality that so-called unskilled workers face there. These assumptions resonate with other neoliberal economic situations, such as that found in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Four such assumptions are (1) that social mobility is as possible as ever for the working poor in America, (2) that by improving their skills on the job, workers can significantly increase their wages, (3) that globalization is universally responsible for the marginalization of American workers, and (4) that private and religious charities provide the best medicine for those trapped in the new poverty.

All of these assumptions imagine collective action through elected government as either a hindrance or futile in the face of larger forces. While the ways that such an argument serves the interests of elites is easy to unpack, how often do we connect this ideological success of neo-liberalism to the relative attractiveness of prison employment in much of America for those on the wrong side of widening inequalities (it is only partially exposed to the most brutal of market forces, better unionized than the rest of the workforce, and seemingly protected, for the moment at least, from out-sourcing).⁷ Much like the army, it is, in short, one of the narrowing range of decent career paths for those labelled ‘unskilled’ by the masters of the new global economy. My point is that, despite some macro-analyses of the politics of widening inequalities (e.g., Klein 2004), we have only begun to investigate the mechanics of this system as a system. Much more work needs to be done, for example, on the symbolic coherence of this new configuration. Where does legitimacy come from, for example, now that the state concedes its limitations so readily (say with respect to migrant populations and certain security issues)? How is legitimating power performed successfully now that the middle classes in most advanced industrial economies seem to be at best suspicious of elections? How are certain populations on the wrong side of these widening inequalities being managed in newer equations of governmentality, and how do they respond to this management?⁸

Examples could, of course, be multiplied, but my basic argument should be clear enough. We live at a moment of vastly heightened inequalities, ones that have been deliberately (and relatively recently) brought about by decisions made by elites, both within polities and in terms of powerful international organizations imposing their will on weaker entities (generally developing countries). These inequalities have very bad implications for those at the wrong end of them. Within the so-called advanced industrial democracies, these recently-heightened inequalities have been regulated by a massive growth in certain parts of the state, at a time when the social presence of state power is supposedly in retreat. I need not spend much time on the observation that the new international order has been accompanied by a growth in militarized intervention, initially led by NATO, and increasingly just the United States, nor that the same failed economic policies tending to magnify inequalities within polities are being exported time and again, generally under threat, in this New World Order. Despite the production of this global order of great benefit to the already rich and powerful, underwritten by the military muscle of the most powerful state – something that looks rather like imperialism – we are told that never has democracy been stronger in world history, and we have even been informed that the corner has been turned on beating global poverty.⁹ In short, there seems to be a system of interlocking symbolic and material elements, the result of active and passive choices by subjects in a variety of structural positions, differentially handicapping specific areas and populations.

The Work of Culture

Where does anthropology, a small discipline not very used to thinking of itself as central to politically powerful discourses, fit into all this? A less obvious (and, indeed, far less commented on) aspect of this growth in the production and management of structural violence is an invigorated imagination of the culture concept that occurs at

almost exactly the same period. From the revival of the culture of poverty argument connected to the ‘underclass’ in the US and the UK from the mid-1980s,¹⁰ to the concept of community in ‘Community Development’ and the maintenance of corporatist solidarity in Europe from about the same time (Rose 1996), to the tensions within nation-states about the flood of immigrants that the new global economy both creates and demands, to the Think Tank success of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* in explaining conflicts between states, non-state actors and groups of states, something like the culture concept has never been more firmly linked to power both within and between polities (see especially, Harrison and Huntington 2000). Culture now ‘explains’ the differential rates of success and failure of populations within countries being fundamentally remade by neo-liberal policies (Rose 1996); it lurks as the ultimate cause of otherwise inexplicable civil wars at the edges of the global economy (Huntington 1996); it is the reason why immigrants suffer discrimination within nation-states; it motivates better and worse health outcomes in the face of diseases of scarcity and excess; and it provides a convincing narrative (at least to some) of why Pax Americana is being resisted, most obviously if not exclusively, in parts of the Islamic world. It seems to me that only at its crudest end can this explanation be read as simple false consciousness – voodoo practices as a reason for the spread of AIDS in Haiti or the famous analysis of Paul O’Neill, the (former) US Treasury secretary on a recent tour of Africa with Bono, claiming that triple anti-retroviral therapy for HIV/AIDS would not be cost effective in Africa because the lack of cultural acquaintance with wristwatches would make keeping to the relatively stringent dosing schedule too difficult for the natives – but these are the least interesting cases. Here artifice overwhelms whatever art there may be in this kind of ‘explanation’ where ‘bad faith’ seems a more persuasive description than ‘false consciousness’.

It is the ontology that such a form of bad faith supposes, and how someone might imagine its persuasiveness, however, that I want to illuminate with another imagined scenario. Imagine Ruth Benedict, magically returned from the other side more than seventy years after the publications of *Patterns of Culture*, examining the statement above. Paul O’Neill, discussing perhaps the most pressing health problem the world currently faces, elaborates an ontology of cultural difference that ‘explains’ one of the primary social-medical cleavages in the modern moment – how AIDS/HIV looks rather like diabetes in the so-called developed world and like the Black Death or Spanish Flu in the ‘less developed’ parts of the globe. Taken together, say, with some of the examples cited above, she could justifiably be forgiven for thinking that anthropologists were closely involved in the formulation of a variety of powerful discourse concerning everything from foreign policy to the administration of social problems within nation-states, even if she might disagree with the uses of the concepts in this instance.

In a sense, our revenant might still be correct. In the United States (again) anthropologists using a very Benedictian sense of culture are now advising on such diverse topics as how the US Army might kill more effectively and with less collateral damage in its ‘War on Terror’ (see Stannard 2007 and for critique see Price 2007) to how cost and populations can be managed to maintain the current structure of health-care delivery. Some commentators even place a ‘classic’ national character study, *The*

Arab Mind by Raphael Patai (1976), as one of the roots of the neo-conservative assault on the Islamic world. And in Europe, anthropologists have found new avenues for funding for social policy-relevant research using a superficially similar understanding of ‘culture’.

On the other hand, our revenant would be very wrong with respect to the discipline as a whole. Clearly, this growth of the acceptance of what might charitably be called an untheorized sense of culture outside of anthropology has been accompanied by a retreat from the concept in the discipline that gave ‘culture’ its modern definition.¹¹ The words that we have used to replace it, especially in thinking about so-called transnational phenomena, seem to me to be even less sensitive to issues of power and structural violence, especially in understanding their material and symbolic integration. What the current moment should force us to do is to think seriously about Gramsci’s famous dictum concerning the relationship of class and culture, that ‘The question of power is at the heart of the theorization of culture’ Gramsci (1983: 126–32). As Kate Crehan has recently pointed out in an interesting work on Gramsci and culture, the sense of ‘culture’ in the *Prison Notebooks* has important differences from its use in, especially American, anthropology (2002: ch.5). Gramsci saw hegemony as being built on the back of partial and contingent symbolic systems created by differentially placed populations with clearly unequal access to power within a definite political-economic structure (Crehan 2002). There was no necessary coherence in these systems and Gramsci was fairly dismissive of those academics, such as folklorists, who searched for such coherence. Gramsci’s most obvious descendant in the scenarios that began this paper would be the Critical Medical Anthropology perspective of Paul Farmer, who largely sees ‘culture’ as a form of false consciousness, especially when mobilised as an explanation for misery in Haiti, and who tends to be very chary in its use. At best, in this way of thinking, culture encourages certain forms of bad faith, and at worst it simply hides the machinations of power (2004).

To put it as briefly as possible, I believe that this critique too easily abandons the theoretical and methodological strengths of modern anthropology, and, further, it misses the symbolic coherence that is an important part of a successful hegemonic project. If we are not to abandon some sense of coherence in symbolic systems, however, we will need to rethink coherence in the face of power and hegemony, and the privileged sphere for this reanalysis seems to me to be the imagination. This sense of imagination will not be in the sense of a new field, but as a ubiquitous (but theoretically neglected) modality of social life that is central to what we are doing in the here and now. I am not persuaded that a two-decade-long project stressing hybridity, -scapes, fragments, and the like have moved us as far forward as we might be in understanding our shared historical moment in this sense. In short, we are not merely in Fabian’s term ‘coeval,’ we are interconnected in ways that would have seemed fanciful only a couple of decades ago. ‘Globalization’ is only a convenient label, not an explanation, for this process.

Conclusion

Minimally, having the courage of our current professed theoretical convictions forces us to face some potentially grim realities connected to this realization. If we do

construct significant parts of our social world, at least in part through a concordance of symbols within our imaginations, then we are well on our way to building a pretty grim reality in which to live. It is a reality that is deaf to the calls of the suffering; that has an impoverished register in which to discuss subjectivity; and one that has a very narrow sense of ‘meaning’ in power and politics. If we really believe that imagination is to be one of the midwives of ‘another world’, then we are over-late in investigating how it is under-girding and reproducing the one in which we currently find ourselves. On this ground, such diverse phenomena as the sociology of knowledge, the analysis of advertising and popular culture, the study of elites, as well as those of so-called ‘new’ social movements can be brought into productive connection with one another. It is an area that the tools and thinking of anthropology should be especially suitable to map.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This essay has its roots in two presentations, *Engaging Imagination*, 19–21 June 2003, University College Dublin and Dublin Business School, Dublin, Ireland, and at the Medical Anthropology Seminar, Harvard Medical School in March 2004.
- ² There is, of course, an enormous philosophical literature on imagination, e.g. Sallis 2000. I wish to confine my argument in this piece to some of the specific ways that anthropology has used the terms.
- ³ More evidence for a sense of fairness in animals can be found in Brosnan and de Waal (2003)
- ⁴ Wolf (1999) makes a very similar case in his volume on ‘envisioning’ power.
- ⁵ The acronym for the FBI’s computer programme to sift masses of e-mails for sensitive data. Effectiveness is less an issue (consider 9/11), than the shared sense that such techniques exist and *could* be used. Imagine the outcry in the seemingly conformist 1950s, if J. Edgar Hoover had announced the ubiquitous opening of letters in every post office in the nation.
- ⁶ Actually, the situation is even worse than it sounds, as the company clearly tried to deceive its inspectors by pretending to have more guards than they actually had on a pre-riot visit in the wake of complaints from some of their employees to the oversight body.
- ⁷ See Saris 2004. Coulter 1999 makes a similar case for how the Troubles in Northern Ireland helped insulate the province from Thatcherism.
- ⁸ John Gledhill (1999) discusses the metaphor of visibility in a very sophisticated way in his development of the notion of ‘the shadow state’, especially in his analysis of the production of violence at the edge of believability
- ⁹ See World Bank, 2002. Global Economic Prospects and the Developing Countries: Making Trade Work for the Poor. For a devastating critique of the methodology of this report, especially the sleight-of-hand employed around the idea of the equivalence of purchasing power, see Sanjay G. Reddy and Thomas W. Pogge, March 2003, *How Not To Count The Poor* – <http://www.columbia.edu/~sr793/>. For a general summary of the debate, see Monbiot 2003 ‘Rich in Imagination’.
- ¹⁰ Wilson 1987, Murray and Herstein 1994, and continued in the UK by Dalrymple 2003. For critique, see Wilson 1992 and Wacquant 1997.
- ¹¹ One of the few works in the 1990s using the concept of ‘culture’ in this sense is Kuper’s *Culture: An Anthropologist’s Account* (1999). In this piece, he more or less debunks the culture concept. The relationship of anthropology to its conceptual progeny has been broached in a more serious way in recent years, with a Special Edition of *American Anthropologist* (September 2004) dedicated to recuperating Boas’s legacy.