

Looking back on some dead world that looks so new: the idea of the U.N. in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq

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Grasping 'the imagination'

In this paper I would like to address a range of questions about the nature and role of the imagination. I would like to highlight the thought of philosopher, Charles S. Peirce, who developed an unusually complete theory of semiosis, reasoning, and the human community. Peirce was a leading, if under-appreciated, theorist of the human imagination. As Vincent Colapietro has shown (1988, 1989), Peirce was a champion of the role of unique individual imagination, while also showing the absolute continuity of individual thought and that of the human community. For Peirce,

[p]eople who build castles in the air do not, for the most part, accomplish much, it is true; but every man who does accomplish great things is given to building elaborate castles in the air and then painfully copying them on solid ground. Indeed, the whole business of ratiocination, and all that makes us intellectual beings, is performed in imagination. (Peirce 1931–1958: 6.286)⁹

Seen as a type of interior faculty, an aspect of an individual person, the imagination is part of his or her emotional and/or rational capacity. Here, Peirce reiterates one of the most usual common-sense interpretations of the term *imagination*, in which something like a detailed blueprint is constructed entirely in the mind – a coherent, determinate image is constructed through the free play of the imagination. But such a view is at odds with the way Peirce actually represents imagination in most of his writings on the subject. Peirce denies any opposition between imagination ('fancy,' 'musement' etc.) and ratiocination. Reason is an aspect of imagination rather than the other way around, and the two can in no way be seen as opposing forces in human nature. In fact, Peirce's departure from standard philosophical common-sense notions is more radical than this, extending to his semiotic conception of the image itself. If by image one means something determinate, like a photograph, Peirce doubted 'whether we ever have any such thing as an image in our imagination' (*ibid.*, 5.300). Instead, he supposed, the imagination is populated with much more complex figures, which are far more indeterminate than actual images. The general import of a novel, play, symphony or just one's immediate everyday situation is apprehended as a complex feeling or emotion, which the human mind apprehends as a simpler totality, the *possibility* that a series of phenomena are connected. Peirce calls such a flash of insight an *abduction*.

When a man desires ardently to know the truth, his first effort will be to imagine what that truth can be [...] there

is, after all, nothing but imagination that can ever supply him an inkling of the truth. He can stare stupidly at phenomena; but in the absence of imagination they will not connect themselves together in any rational way. Just as for Peter Bell a cowslip was nothing but a cowslip, so for thousands of men a falling apple was nothing but a falling apple; and to compare it to the moon would by them be deemed 'fanciful'. (*ibid.*, 1.46)

Because abductions begin as feelings, imagination is always embodied:

The first proper significate effect of a sign is a feeling produced by it. There is almost always a feeling which we come to interpret as evidence that we comprehend the proper effect of the sign, although the foundation of truth in this is frequently very slight. This 'emotional interpretant,' as I call it, may amount to much more than that feeling of recognition; and in some cases, it is the only proper significate effect that the sign produces. Thus, the performance of a piece of concerted music is a sign. It conveys, and is intended to convey, the composer's musical ideas; but these usually consist merely in a series of feelings. If a sign produces any further proper significate effect, it will do so through the mediation of the emotional interpretant, and such further effect will always involve an effort. I call it the energetic interpretant. The effort may be a muscular one, as it is in the case of the command to ground arms; but it is much more usually an exertion upon the Inner World, a mental effort. (*ibid.*, 5.475)

Imagination is linked to the first stages of a train of thought, as a sign of *possibility*, the vague supposition that a certain state of affairs *may* be the case. Peirce often speaks of the imaginative state as dream-like; 'a symbol, *in itself*, is a mere dream; it does not show what it is talking about' (*ibid.*, 4.56), and it will not, until it gains some sort of connection – an indexical link – to the rest of the universe.

Imagination is usually associated with images, however complex, and with the iconic sign in general. But Peirce also hypothesised two other sets of sign-types, that is, indexical and symbolic signs. An iconic sign is grounded in its *resemblance* to any possible object, and a *purely* iconic sign resembles only *itself* – a pure dream-image. Indexical signs are grounded in their *contiguity* to their objects – in extreme cases, indexes register only an 'outward clash' – 'this direct consciousness of hitting and of getting hit enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real' (*ibid.*, 8.41). Such a collision could not happen without the symbolic realm. Symbols are signs of habit, propensities to think or act or make connections

between different realms of experience. Normally, only when established habits (as expectations) are interrupted are we conscious of ourselves *qua* selves:

We separate the past and the present. The past is the inner world, the present the outer world. Now, this joined with feeling (which it involves or requires) might be called consciousness and would be the world, were it not for the phenomena of error and ignorance, which force us to reflect that there were two worlds in that two-sided consciousness. This consciousness furnishes all our facts. It is this that makes them facts. (*ibid.*, 8.282)

Supposing matter to be but mind under the slavery of inveterate habit, the law of mind still applies to it. According to that law, consciousness subsides as habit becomes established, and is excited again at the breaking up of habit. But the highest quality of mind involves a great readiness to take habits, and a great readiness to lose them... (*ibid.*, 6.613; cf. Colapietro 1989)

Experience *consists* in this breaking-up of habits, and the doubt thereby engendered is a vital aspect of imagination. Although we can *imagine* our way into doubt,¹⁰ '[a] true doubt is ... a doubt which really interferes with the smooth working of the belief-habit'; true doubt, which always arises *outside* the self, is the primary spur to imagination (5.510). Likewise, 'all doubt is a state of hesitancy about an imagined state of things' (5.373n).

A fully functioning symbol includes icons, that is, qualities predicated to certain objects, and indexes, through which a developing sign is (potentially) grounded in a larger exterior context. Because symbols are grounded in habit, they are potentially subject to self-control. They 'grow' in meaning; Peirce is fond of pointing out that a simple term like 'electricity' means much more now than it did to previous generations (*ibid.*, 5.313; 7.587).

Any symbol actually used to refer to an object will have an indexical aspect to its use, and, insofar as it conveys any information, will have an iconic aspect as well:

Just as a photograph is an index having an icon incorporated into it, that is, excited in the mind by its force, so a symbol may have an icon or an index incorporated into it, that is, the active law that it is may require its interpretation to involve the calling up of an image, or a composite photograph of many images of past experiences, as ordinary common nouns and verbs do; or it may require its interpretation to refer to the actual surrounding circumstances of the occasion of its embodiment, like such words as *that, this, I, you, which, here, now, yonder*, etc. (*ibid.*, 4.447)

We would benefit, therefore, from a closer study of how the iconic, indexical and symbolic *aspects* of meaning work together in actual events of sign usage, in other words, in social, cultural and political *history*. The term imagination properly encompasses the concerted actions of all of Peirce's sign-types. By so considering it, we can see that the life of 'imagination' is lived not only in the head of the solitary dreamer but also, essentially, in the world; imagination must be embodied and must, eventually, become generalised through some sort of human community. Peirce takes great pains to point out

that the great majority of semiosis is social in origin and locus. Thus a scientist can be such only as a (potential) member of a community of investigators, and her scientific 'mind' is located as much in the instruments and experiments of her laboratory, and indeed, in her writing paper and inkstand, as it is in her 'mental faculties' or even in her brain. Human imagination needs 'the outward clash' – to break habits of thought – as much as it needs organised conventional symbolic systems or indeed, 'the play of musement' of the creative dreamer.

Imagination in crisis

What, then, of social imagination, of human thought and creativity in the world, in history? I would like to turn to a recent crisis, certainly a crisis of imagination or a conflict between two worlds of possibility, or possibly between more than two. I refer to the run-up to the war in Iraq, which saw large portions of the world's population at odds with their own political leaderships. Among the most intriguing of the immense flow of discourses which circulated in the first few months of 2003 was a seemingly pathetic series of email petitions, meant to be forwarded to one's correspondents and then to the United Nations, calling upon it to oppose the war:

Today we are at a point of imbalance in the world and are moving toward what may be the beginning of a THIRD WORLD WAR. If you are against this possibility, the UN is gathering signatures in an effort to avoid a tragic world event.

Please COPY (rather than Forward) this e-mail in a new message, sign at the end of the list, and send it to all the people you know.

If you receive this list with more than 500 names signed, please send a copy of the message to: unicwash@unicwash.org

Even if you decide not to sign, please consider forwarding the petition on instead of eliminating it.

As well as swamping its computer systems, these petitions seem to have embarrassed the UN, which posted the following message on its website, pointing out that the UN's constituency is its member-states, not individual persons:

*** Note to Web Site Visitors:***

The UN is NOT involved in soliciting or collecting such petitions. We would suggest that since it is member governments of the UN who will decide on whatever action occurs in various situations, citizens should contact their own government.

Member states of the United Nations decide on the policies and programs of the organization. Citizens wishing to express their views or concerns on any issue, such as international peace and security should consider addressing their views first to the officials of their own government. The General Assembly is the main deliberative body of the UN, where all member states have one vote, and where issues relating to peace and security, admission of new Members and budgetary measures are decided by a two-third's vote. The Security

Council with 5 permanent and ten rotating member states has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and has the power to make decisions binding on all members of the organization. Security Council Decisions on major issues require nine votes, including the concurring votes of all the permanent members: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. The 10 other current members of the Security Council are: Angola, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Chile, Germany, Guinea, Mexico, Pakistan, Spain and Syria.

Your inquiry and interest in the work of the United Nations are appreciated.¹¹

Let us leave aside for the moment the fact that millions of voters felt disenfranchised by the actions of their own governments in supporting the US administration's drive to war, and saw the UN as a court of final appeal — a perception strengthened by the UN's role in Iraqi weapons inspection, and the reluctance of certain governments (notably the UK's) to go to war without a mandate from the Security Council. I am interested in the elegant responses to these sentiments penned by Perry Anderson (editor of the *New Left Review*), which castigated the anti-war movement for its naivety regarding the U.N.:

The United Nations is not a seat of impartial authority. Its structure, giving overwhelming formal power to five victor nations of a war fought fifty years ago, is politically indefensible: comparable historically to the Holy Alliance of the early 19th century, which also proclaimed its mission to be the preservation of 'international peace' for the 'benefit of humanity'. So long as these powers were divided by the Cold War, they neutralised each other in the Security Council, and the organisation could do little harm. But since the Cold War came to an end, the UN has become essentially a screen for American will. Supposedly dedicated to the cause of international peace, the organisation has waged two major wars since 1945 and prevented none. Its resolutions are mostly exercises in ideological manipulation. Some of its secondary affiliates — Unesco, Unctad and the like — do good work, and the General Assembly does little harm. But there is no prospect of reforming the Security Council. The world would be better off — a more honest and equal arena of states — without it. (Anderson 2003)

For Anderson, the UN Security Council was only a 'portable ideological screen for the initiatives of the single superpower' (Anderson 2002: 7). His views were oddly in harmony with those of senior Bush advisor Richard Perle:

Saddam Hussein's reign of terror is about to end. He will go quickly, but not alone: in a parting irony, he will take the UN down with him. Well, not the whole UN. The 'good works' part will survive, the low-risk peacekeeping bureaucracies will remain, the chatterbox on the Hudson [*sic*] will continue to bleat. What will die is the fantasy of the UN as the foundation of a new world order. As we sift the debris, it will be important to preserve, the better to understand, the intellectual wreckage of the liberal conceit of safety through international law administered by international institutions. (Perle 2003)

Perle and Anderson both argue from 'realist' positions against the same popular 'fantasy' — that the UN could be 'the foundation of a new world order'. As Anderson put it, there is only one world order — that imposed by the US:

No international community exists. The term is a euphemism for American hegemony. It is to the credit of the Administration that some of its officials have abandoned it. (Anderson 2003)

For Perle and Anderson, the 'idea' of the UN has no relation to its actual function or powers. In this analysis, 'imagination', as ideology, conceals real social relations while appealing to or creating false dream-images in the minds of a gullible populace. But there is another way of approaching these matters, possibly no less cynical but leaving room for some hope: that these images are promissory notes issued by states to their populaces. Thus, it was exactly the idea of 'the international community', as embodied in the UN, for which people fought and died to bring the Second World War to a close:

The United Nations was a real entity during the war, not a spin-doctored slogan offering a gullible public the promise of world peace after the conflict. The allies fought the war as the United Nations and created organisations in its name and on its foundation. (Plesch 2005)

Perhaps this 'UN' — the entity to which the Axis powers surrendered, was a bit of both. As a Peircean symbol, it *indicated* (had as its object¹²) the entity officially founded in San Francisco in 1945, but its *meaning*, that is, the interpretants it generated, embodied 'the promise of world peace'. Perhaps even the most ideologically distorted uses of symbols carry potentially disruptive entailments, promises which may get called in at moments of crisis. Thus, even as the great powers were setting up the post-war world system and laying the foundations of the Cold War, they found it necessary to appeal to the idea and image of world peace, in order to secure the allegiance of their own populations.

Leaving Perle and the Bush administration aside, the crisis of the UN and international law was a crisis of imagination. Anderson maintained that

... if the movement is to have staying power, it will have to develop beyond the fixations of the fan club, the politics of the spectacle, the ethics of fright [...] Resistance to the ruling dispensation that can last has to find another, principled basis. [...] current debates so interminably invoke the 'international community' and the United Nations, as if these were a salve against the Bush Administration. (Anderson 2003)

In a similar fashion to critics of the antiglobalization movement, Anderson looked to the antiwar movement for a blueprint, an image, of an alternative new world order — something along the lines of a Galileo, or a Dr. Faustus perhaps, working alone to hatch a new world system. I would like to suggest that historical movements don't work this way, nor does political imagination, at least when it is embodied in popular movements.

Anderson suggests that the UN is a woefully inadequate *image* (a spectacle) for a global antiwar

movement. But it became most powerful at exactly the moment the actually existent UN ceased to function, in the world of Perle and his ilk. Citizens of many nations put enormous pressure on their own governments not to vote in favour of war, that is, to not use the Security Council as a rubber stamp for the US war project. The Irish government continually reassured its public that only Security Council sanctioned war and the rule of international law was legitimate. When the US pressed ahead anyway without a vote, the Irish government, like that of Tony Blair, was caught out, violating its own explicit principles and the promises it made to its citizenship. The result was a tremendous crisis of legitimacy, as when (for example), the Irish government lamely explained that it could not endanger US investments by taking a stand or by denying the use of Irish facilities to the US military (cf. Allen and Coulter 2004). Needless to say, similar things were happening all over the world.

Perhaps the complexity of this historical moment can alert us to the role of the *symbol* in history: that the UN as a symbol contained what Peirce refers to as 'powers' that went beyond both its immediate object (the actual existing UN of 2003) and any particular qualities one might have predicated upon it (its structure, degree of representativeness, etc.).

As 'the portable ideological screen' of the Security Council collapsed, exposing the democratic states' betrayal of their own populations, what was left of the UN was what Walter Benjamin (1999) would term a 'dream image' discovered in its wreckage, an image very similar to that momentarily discovered by a handful of New Yorkers in the wreckage of the World Trade Centre: that of a global community. The unprecedented demonstrations of February 15th 2003 actualised these images, if only momentarily. Like those pathetic email petitions, these demonstrations momentarily called this other world of possibility into being, purely through the power of *addressing* it. In what Benjamin termed 'a historical index' – 'the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning'. Benjamin's 'figure' (Cochran 1995) or 'dialectical image' could be read as a description of how Peirce's 'symbol' unfolds in political and social history, as the playing out of human imagination – imagination the locus of which lies in the material artefacts of human history. Cochran refers to this as 'actualisation',

a process whereby the past and the present collide in producing new constellations of meaning ... [S]teeped in idealism, it tends to name the process by means of which something hidden becomes visible or, to render a temporal version, the process by means of which something past becomes present. (Cochran 1995: 48)

Something of the order of practical action is required to actualise, or even to develop, the meaning of a symbol:

... a symbol, in itself, is a mere dream; it does not show what it is talking about. It needs to be connected with its object. For that purpose, an index is indispensable. No other kind of sign will answer the purpose. (Peirce 4.56; cf. Colapietro 1988: 67)

This is why Benjamin insisted that it is only during political-historical crises that the dreams of the relatively powerless manifest themselves and develop. Popular

movements advance by discovering and revealing connections between vague general concepts and aspects of events, in crises which they themselves advance or even bring about. The 'actualisation' of a symbol results not from its degree of coherence or completeness but from its degree of implication in 'the outward clash'.

As Warner, Arendt, Derrida and others have noted, the United States called itself into being through a performative act, the Declaration of Independence, which constituted the citizenry of the US as a politically sovereign entity through its self-enunciation as 'We the people'. This was an essentially indexical moment, but one with several entailments, not the least of which were several assumptions about what 'the people' consist of – what degree of cultural, social, religious, and ideological unity are necessary for the unity and coherence of 'the people'.

The accidental genius of the antiwar movement was its similarly constitutive, performative moment: it addressed the UN – not the actually existing UN of the Security Council or even that of the General Assembly, but a strictly non-existent though, at that moment, very real UN, the direct representatives and voice of the global multitude. By addressing this 'UN', people also performatively constituted themselves as – as what? Not as 'we the people' – this multitude was constituted by the unity of its addressee rather than its putative unity as 'a people', let alone as 'the people'. For Warner (2002), 'publics' (in the plural) are called into being through being addressed, in a type of discursive act which simultaneously creates 'public' discourses. These 'publics' are in principle unlimited in extent, but the characteristics of 'public' discourses and the material conditions of their circulation act to circumscribe the character of 'publics', lending them distinctive (and limited, exclusionary) voices (cf. Fraser 1990). The movements of 2003 lacked even this degree of self-specificity. Hence, the extraordinary diversity of the movement, its 'lack of coherence' in the eyes of its critics – a strength rather than a weakness, as it kept all eyes focused on that which experts worldwide declared to be unrealizable – a real, democratic world order.

For a few months, this real but non-existent 'UN' (which 'existed' only as a sort of addressee), with only what the *New York Times* referred to as 'the second superpower' – 'world public opinion' (Tyler 2003) behind it, became the most powerful player on the international political stage.

Being stuck

... the generalization of intellect and the more important generalizations of sentiment ... It is the instincts, the sentiments, that make the substance of the soul. Cognition is only its surface, its locus of contact with what is external to it (Peirce 1976: 4.435).

Linebaugh and Rediker, in their book *The Many Headed Hydra*, tell the following story: In February 1803, Col. Edward Marcus Despard, condemned to death for advocating the overthrow of the British monarchy in favour of a republic, gave a speech from the gallows. Although he professed innocence, he declared himself 'a friend to truth, to liberty, and to justice, a friend to the poor and the oppressed':

Citizens, I hope and trust, notwithstanding my fate, and the fate of those who will no doubt soon follow me, that the principles of freedom, of humanity, and of justice, will finally triumph over falsehood, tyranny, and delusion, and every principle inimical to the interests of the human race (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 248–49).

Linebaugh and Rediker report that ‘at this significant phrase – “the human race” – ‘the sheriff admonished him for using such incendiary language’ (*ibid.*). Note that the very idea of a unitary ‘human race’ – now a truism – owes its reality in part to the struggle and deaths of people like Col. Despard. Peirce hypothesized that the symbol, as a general sign or idea, has reality but not existence (Peirce 2.292). Symbols influence actual existing events:

The words justice and truth, amid a world that habitually neglects these things and utterly derides the words, are nevertheless among the very greatest powers the world contains. They create defenders and animate them with strength (Peirce, *New Elements of Mathematics*, 4: 243–4).

Symbols, as bits of living consciousness, have the power of growth:

A symbol is an embryonic reality endowed with power of growth into the very truth, the very entelechy of reality (Peirce NE 4: 261).

How do symbols grow? There seem to be two ways of considering this. At various places Peirce gives an account of meaning in terms of a history of reference (as in the ‘composite photograph’ reference quoted above). In this case, the meaning of a symbol is ‘schematic’ (cf. 5.517), – a complex iconic sign. Here we may suppose, with Sapir, that such schemata are not fully conscious, and furthermore, that we are engaged in the business of trying to rationalize them; as Sapir says in the case of changes in the linguistic system:

These ‘drifts’ are powerfully conditioned by unconscious formal feelings and are made necessary by the inability of human beings to actualise ideal patterns in a permanently set fashion (Sapir 1985: 23).

The ‘drift’ of cultural symbols through history is partly motivated by their internal structures – the contradictions to which our ‘unconscious formal feelings’ respond. But such feelings must also be motivated by surprised expectations in a manner which directly reflects the way that experience and doubt foster ‘habit-change’ in the person – in fact Peirce denies that there is any substantial difference between ‘a man’ and a sign.¹³ In both cases, change occurs as a result of what Pesmen (this volume) refers to as ‘getting stuck’ – coming up against contradictions. In both cases, as well, our efforts to get unstuck are acts of the imagination as well as the will, and operate (sometimes inadvertently) to *realize* symbols. It is only this process of realization that gives a symbol its material (indexical) being and hence its ability to resist expectations.

As the case of Col. Despard demonstrates, this process is always potentially political, – a focus for human conflict and collective action. The mass demonstrations of February 2003 were a fine example of this, as opposing sides sought, not so much to *define* as to

occupy what Silverstein (2003, 2004) terms ‘cultural concepts’ – the ‘messages’ which politicians and their opponents seek to embody and represent. Demonstrators in New York City saw the government’s anti-terrorist rhetoric as a means of stifling dissent, and engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with municipal and federal authorities. Dire warnings of impending chemical and biological attacks had been issued in the lead-up to the demonstrations, and citizens were advised to stay at home, insulating a room with plastic sheeting and duct tape. These efforts were undermined by a *New York Times* article which detailed exactly how difficult it is to kill large numbers of people with chemical or biological weapons (apparently car bombs are much more effective). On February 15th, many demonstrators adorned themselves with duct tape (in the form of gags, masks, and even epaulettes), mocking the rhetoric of anti-terrorism as US government snipers gazed upon them from rooftops. The state made every attempt to ensure that demonstrators got nowhere near the UN (originally proposed as the focus of the march), nor anywhere near the speakers’ platform at the conclusion of the march. It seemed as if the state’s goal was essentially to prevent demonstrators from ever seeing themselves as a single group (proposals for a rally in Central Park were likewise turned down). But the sheer numbers of people who turned up on the day overwhelmed both the march organisers and police, and the day descended into richly organised chaos. Marchers carried boom-boxes on their shoulders broadcasting up-to-the-minute reports courtesy of WBAI. Mid-town Manhattan became a giant human traffic jam as police impeded any direct movement toward the end-point of the demonstration. There were periodic break-outs through police barricades, enabling intrepid demonstrators to make short-cuts forward. But when we reached the vicinity of the platform, there was nothing much there, just the opportunity to stand in police pens (barricaded segments of the street) while listening to inaudible echoes from the stage. Escaping from this, attempting to walk to Times Square (subway stations had been closed), we discovered that the centre of Manhattan had been transformed into a giant meeting-room and salon for debate, as strangers discussed the day and the issues, complained about the cops, or debated tactics and goals. So this was ‘the new power in the streets’. Clearly, something was happening which escaped the intentions of everyone who was involved, whether they were organising the demonstration as a cultural ritual (Szerszynski 2002) or were trying to prevent or hijack this. Habits were being broken, doubts, fears and hopes realised.

But what was being born, discovered, imagined in this ‘laboratory’ of the streets? It is clearly too early to tell. The global anti-war movement remains stuck, having subsequently turned much of its efforts towards electoral strategies, in spite of persistent world-wide ‘democratic deficits’. The US administration and its allies are much more ‘stuck’, however, in a war which likewise defied their expectations. Meanwhile, world-wide *sentiment* has turned decisively against the war.

The imagination in power?

The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious

study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors [...] and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do' (Suskind 2004).

... what really provokes the most violent reactions on the part of the forces of order is precisely the attempt to make constituent power – the power of popular imagination to create new institutional forms – present not just in brief flashes, but continually. To permanently challenge the authorities' ability to define the situation. The insistence that the rules of engagement, as it were, can be constantly renegotiated on the field of battle; that you can constantly change the narrative in the middle of the story [...] Direct action is, by definition, unmediated. It is about cutting through all such frameworks and bringing the power of definition into the streets (Graeber 2007).

One of the problems facing any attempt to theorize the imagination is that it seems to escape 'ownership' by either the dominant or subaltern classes – it is difficult to recruit 'the imagination' as a reliable agent for one's own kind of history. In 2003, the imaginative prize was clearly taken by the Bush administration, if by 'imagination' we mean that admirably counterfactual construction of castles-in-the-air. But is that what imagination is really all about? In a famous paper of 1877, Peirce discusses four methods for 'the fixation of belief' – personal tenacity, public authority, deductions from *a priori* first principles, and 'the scientific method.' Reading it in the light of Peirce's theory of the imagination, it becomes clear that what Peirce terms 'science' consists entirely in the organized attempt to encounter external factors the resistance of which may put oneself into a state of doubt, making oneself 'stuck.' 'There must be a real and living doubt' (5.376) in order to stimulate us to struggle for belief, to produce a new imaginative synthesis. The first three 'methods' for fixing belief (which amount to a concise survey of recent US political debate) involve precluding this 'living doubt,' and thus hobbling the imagination. It is only in this sense that, as Graeber maintains, the imagination belongs to the subaltern, whose only field of action is the laboratory of the streets. And yet, such struggles rarely *create* new realities; rather, they cause general crises of the imagination, as Benjamin reminds us, and it is through these that new communal habits, sentiments, and concepts grow into realities.

We are in the midst of unspeakable 'politics' here ... it seems strange to me that any man of sense could think that any device could cure our condition of public health. The fatal thing with us, as it is with most peoples, is the dreadful *légèreté* of the people in regard to public affairs. I have a remedy for that. It is to start a certain movement which would of itself have a natural & inevitable power of growth. But I haven't space left on

my sheet, nor time left, to tell you what it is. Besides, why would you particularly care for it? (Peirce)¹⁴

Endnotes

- ¹ References to Peirce 1931–1958 are cited as volume and paragraph number.
- ² '... a suitable line of reflexion, accompanied by imaginary experimentation, always excites doubt of any very broad proposition if it be defined with precision' (5.507).
- ³ <http://www.unicwash.org/unic%20was%20response%20to%20petition.htm>, accessed via Google Cache, 17/6/2003.
- ⁴ 'An indexical word, such as a proper noun or demonstrative or selective pronoun, has force to draw the attention of the listener to some hecceity common to the experience of speaker and listener' (3.460).
- ⁵ 'Consistency belongs to every sign, so far as it is a sign; and therefore every sign, since it signifies primarily that it is a sign, signifies its own consistency. The man-sign acquires information, and comes to mean more than he did before. But so do words. Does not electricity mean more now than it did in the days of Franklin? Man makes the word, and the word means nothing which the man has not made it mean, and that only to some man. But since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, these might turn round and say: "You mean nothing which we have not taught you, and then only so far as you address some word as the interpretant of your thought." In fact, therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man's information involves and is involved by, a corresponding increase of a word's information' (5.313).
- ⁶ C. S. Peirce, letter to Lady Victoria Welby, 21 October 1906 (Peirce & Welby 1977: 60).

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