

# From Vico to the sociocultural imagination

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## **Abstract**

The papers by Mariagrazia Granatella (2015), Tuuli Pern (2015) and Pablo Rojas (2015), invited by Tateo (2015) engage in a dialogue with the texts of Giambattisto Vico, a philosopher from the 18th century. In this commentary, focusing on imagination, I first follow the authors' effort to show the compatibility between Vico's ideas and current cultural psychology; I then highlight two issues of particular interest emerging from this dialogue.

## **Keywords**

Vico, imagination, music, body, semiotic mediation

*Still nowadays, the Americans call God anything that goes beyond their limited intelligence.*

(Vico, 1725/1993b, p. 131, m.t.)

The papers by Granatella (2015), Pern (2015) and Rojas (2015), invited by Tateo (2015) engage in a dialogue with us in an unusual way. Written by young scholars versed in philosophy and semiotics rather than strictly psychology, they propose their original readings of the texts of Giambattisto Vico, a relatively obscure author from the 18th century, so as to emphasize his possible contributions to cultural psychology.

As sociocultural psychologist interested in imagination, I will highlight some of the points raised by our three authors, amplify them in the light of my reading of Vico (of which I am, as Brinkmann, 2015, not a scholar myself), and show how not

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only they prefigure some powerful ideas of current psychology, but how they shed light on ignored routes.

## **On reading philosophy**

As a matter of introduction, I would first to reflect on what it means, as current cultural psychologists, to “go back to Vico”, and on how our three authors have addressed the task.

Entering in dialogue with authors of the past has many different goals and reasons. There is certainly a historiographical call, that of understanding how our current modernity came about, and also to account for authors of the past. Sometimes, there is also the secret hope of researchers to find forgotten treasures along the way... One main motivation for such exploration is to give justice to intuitions, models and explanations developed by authors in the past, which have been forgotten, ignored or forbidden, when they actually could help us to progress and integrate our fragmentary knowledge (Valsiner, 2012). This is how I understand the attempt made here.

The three papers interrogate Vico’s text in different manner, but all engage in a real dialogue. Granatella (2015) addresses Vico’s work from a historical stance and shows its originality and evolution. This genetic perspective culminates in the interesting comparison of two pictures chosen as book covers by the author a few years apart, revealing the radical transformation of his worldview. Pern (2015) puts Hobbes and Vico in dialogue, and progressively specifies each of their perspectives, especially in what regards sense making. Lastly, Rojas (2015) starts to explore the experience of learning to play music through musicians’ accounts before coming back to Vico’s propositions. Hence, Vico seems to be an inspiring and stimulating thinking partner.

Giambattista Vico’s philosophy highlights some dynamics which, from today’s perspective, seem to be at the heart of cultural psychology. How these ideas were transmitted through the history of thought, if they were, or how they came about in different historical-cultural context, are questions far beyond my reach. Here, I simply wish to emphasize some of the meetings between Vico and cultural psychology identified by the authors. I then wish to say how, on these points, cultural psychology might actually learn, or at least, give some more attention to certain issues raised by such dialogues.

## **Cultural psychology reading Vico: A development theory of imagination**

Obviously, Vico has a strong theory of imagination as central human capacity, as the three papers emphasize. Imagination is strongly anchored in, if not moved by affects, and participates to the dynamic of sense making of experiences and the world. Imagination, in that sense, partakes to semiotic elaboration (Pern, 2015).

As many authors of his time, Vico proposes a theory of mind – his, in various versions, is based on a distinction between three capacities: memory, imagination (or fantasy) and *ingegno*, the capacity “to connect disparate and diverse things” (Granatella, 2015), a synthetic capacity which appears as a form of smartness. Yet, one of the originality of Vico is his developmental stance – his analyses always take a temporal perspective, as he is looking for how things come about. This developmental-historical stance on imagination can be observed at three scales or levels of analysis.

At an ontogenetic level, based on his own autobiographic memories and his observation of children, Vico has a hypothesis about the role of imagination in human development. Hence, observing the strength of children’s memory, Vico suggests that they should learn languages from an early age. Yet, because their reasoning abilities are still weak, they should be shown examples that can touch them through their rich and vivid imagination. For this reason “one must bring children to study history to children, both the real one and the fabulous one” (Vico, 2004, p. 77–78, m.t from French). Reading literature, poetry, or appreciating the Arts, all support imagination, itself the basis of further elaboration. If Vico has a theory of the progressive importance of other capacities over imagination, he is actually one of the rare authors of his time (not to say ours) to encourage people to cultivate children’s imagination *per se*, through the use of cultural resources.

At a microgenetic level, Pern retraces Vico’s depiction of the emergence of sense – “men at first feel without perceiving, then they perceive with a troubles and agitated sprit, finally they reflect with a clear mind” (Vico, 1984/1744, para.218, quoted in Pern (2015, p. 166). This, as the author underlines, is very close to contemporary depiction of semiotic mediation and progressive distanciation in semiotic approaches to mind (Abbey, 2007; Green, 1999; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; Wagoner, Chaudhary, & Hviid, 2014). Rojas (2015), who expands Vico’s idea of imagination within the embodied practice of music playing, goes further in this microgenetic depiction. Here, it is the whole trajectory going from an expressive intention, through embodied experience, the exploration of a practical-sound topography, being guided by it, to creating a musical gestalt which guides further action, that appears as it unfolds.

At a sociogenetic level, Granatella and Pern (2015) recall Vico’s mythological, yet convincing demonstration of the role of imagination in the evolution of societies. At the dawn of history, humans were afraid of the noises and mysteries of nature; they invented stories of Gods that were expressing their wrath and so they made sense of the Universe. Myths and legends then become people’s companions, making their world graspable and containing their emotions. The point is not the accuracy of historical explanations, but the explanatory power of the idea. Vico’s point comes back to see complex cultural elements, or even more, cultural systems, as produced by human experience, put so to say outside of them, and then used by them to regulate individual and collective life. This point, which has been elegantly phrased as “I create you to control me” (Valsiner, 1999), can be seen as key in the mutual construction of culture and human beings.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, on these three points, Vico can be read as an author who had the powerful intuition of the cultural making of man, and of the role of humans in the constitution of culture, through a model of thinking and action deeply articulated to a conception of an historical affective semiosphere. Imagination – as the process of imagining – appears as one of the possible articulation between the unique person and society. Humans grow up with a need to make sense to the world and nourish their affective lives, which they can only do through imagination. To feed and give substance to imagination, they find cultural elements and semiotic systems produced by previous generation of humans having to deal with similar people and crystallised into durable myths, legends and pieces of art; and so they end up, thanks to the work of imagination, participating to and transforming culture. Hence, Vico becomes an ally to defend the importance of imagination as sociocultural process (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011; Valsiner, 2014; Vygotsky, 1994; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; Zittoun et al., 2013).

## Expanding cultural psychology

But can we actually *learn* from reading Vico today? Are there intuitions and ideas which are worth promoting, and that do not already have better versions in current thought? One indirect answer to this is that the freshness of Vico appears in the eyes and words of his young commenters. And so I wish to turn to two points brought forward by the authors of this special issue and that deserve more attention in cultural psychology.

First, there has been over the past years a growing attention in cultural psychology for human experience of art. Finding inspiration in the work of Dewey (1934) and Vygotsky (1971), cultural psychology explores the interaction of the spectator or audience with literature, music and the arts. Cultural artefacts are seen as very specific dispositive of guided experience (Benson, 2001; Boesch, 1991; Klempe, 2009; Kuhn, 2013; Tateo, 2014; Zittoun, 2006, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2014). But what about the activity of producing art? Creativity research has recently addressed this question (Brinkmann, 2015; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Glăveanu & Gillespie, 2014; Lock, 2011; Tanggaard, 2014, 2015). But, as Vygotsky suggested, imagination is the psychological process involved in creativity – “imagination, as the basis of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life, enabling artistic, scientific, and technical creation alike” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 9–10). Creativity, in contrast, always involves a form of social evaluation of a process or a product (to be said ‘creative’) (Glăveanu, Gillespie, & Valsiner, 2015). For this reason, the exploration proposed by Rojas (2015) is powerfully new. Avoiding any normative stance, it describes the slow process of domesticating an instrument, and turning a relation to a material object and the gestures that it affords into a series of embedded semiotic system – a formal mastery of scales, a progressive construction-internalisation of an idiosyncratic tone-language, until a “tacit integration” allowing an exploratory-improvisational process. This exploration, drawing on phenomenological accounts as well

as on a diversity of philosophical and technical sources, actually offers a notable contribution to cultural psychology. In effect, beyond the shores of verbal language, which usually constitutes the zone of comfort of authors, Rojas proposes an analysis of an embodied, multimodal, intentional activity, producing and produced through musical yet meaningful gestalts.

Rojas also suggests that this dynamic process can be seen as a form of embodied imagination, a convincing proposition. Even more, one might suggest that activities such as music playing, painting, or also, aikido practice (Gfeller, 2015) demand the mastery of complex embodied language involving a form of affective topography; all of them, to be perfected, demand imagination, which is also the condition of expertise – the display and recreation of these embodied semiotic forms in new forms. In addition, these embodied imagining may also have, as multimodal activity, a more mental counterpart, as musician’s report shows (Diep, 2011).

Second, with the development of a critical stance in current psychology, the moral nature of the discipline appears more clearly, and with it, the ethical implications of any research or theoretical act (Brinkmann, 2010). As researchers, some forms of knowledge imply a social responsibility – that of making clear or public, if not actively promoting, certain ideas or forms of actions. On that line, it is interesting to come back to Granatella’s reading of Vico and her emphasis on the notion of “barbarism of reflection”. As mentioned above, Vico’s theory of mind was based on a certain idea of the development of children and people; together with it, he actually had an educational theory. He thus writes that certain educational techniques make the mistake to impose to young minds essentially geometry and mathematics. Doing so, he argues, education fails to nourish children’s expressive and affective needs, and the sort of sensual, affective and imaginative experience on the basis of which intelligence can be nourished and exerted. As a consequence, their intelligence dries out and becomes empty. This is thus the germ of the “barbarism of reflection” – a non-relational, non-experiential rationality (Granatella, 2015). Also inspired by Vico, Marková (2013) has developed a reflexion on the role of ‘dialogical imagination’ – a rich capacity to think as experiencing human in relation to others, which she contrasts to a form of monological administrative rationality. This form of des-humanised reasoning, she suggests, can be seen as much in totalitarian states than in the extremely mechanised institutional forms produced by our liberal economy. The “barbarism of reflection” resembles the same monological, cold rationality. Through such analysis, one ethical concern emerges: imagination appears as the condition of our very humanity, residing in our capacity to acknowledge, respect and promote the Other in its singularity, as much as the richness of the products of experience of Others, that is, culture.

## **On imagining with Vico**

Reading an author of the past, like Vico, demands to plunge in a strange Universe. In his way of writing and constructing arguments, in his choice of words and images, Vico departs from more known and accepted thinkers of his time.

Yet imagining with Vico, retracing his exploration of ancient times, human *bestiones* and pyramids, following him in his childhood memories, standing his long contradictions, self-justifications, and needs for recognition, one is invited to explore a complex and luxuriant world (Vico, 1993a, 1993b, 2004). And hence, with the kind guidance of Pern, Rojas and Granatella, one cannot come back totally untouched from such an exploration. As I tried to show, it indeed raises fundamental questions about the development of ethical human beings, about our educational systems, as well as about embodied imagination. Altogether, they call for a reassessment of imagination in human development and the evolution of societies (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).

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### Note

1. It was also a very dangerous point to make, for it has brought many of their authors to lose their community if not their life (hence Spinoza was excommunicated for offering such a reading of the Deuteronomy in his political-theological treatise).

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