

# Imagining the Collective Future: A Sociocultural Perspective

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The present chapter examines how groups imagine their future from a sociocultural perspective. First, we present our sociocultural model of imagination and its three dimensions, before building on it to account for how collectives imagine the future. We maintain that it is a mistake to assume that because imagination is “not real”, it cannot have “real” consequences. Imagination about the future, we argue, is a central steering mechanism of individual and collective behaviour. Imagination about the future is often political precisely because it can have huge significance for the activities of a group or even a nation. Accordingly, we introduce a new dimension for thinking about collective imagination of the future—namely, the degree of centralization of imagining—and with it, identify a related aspect, its emotional valence. Based on two examples, we argue that collective imaginings have their own developmental trajectories as

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they move in time through particular social and political contexts. Consequently, we suggest that a sociocultural psychology of collective imagination of the future should not only document instances of collective imagining, but also account for these developmental trajectories—specifically, what social and political forces hinder and promote particular imaginings.

## **A Sociocultural Model of Imagination**

Psychology has mainly studied imagination among children (e.g., Harris, 2000; Singer & Singer, 1992), adults (i.e., training creativity; Karwowski & Soszynski, 2008), and in small groups (i.e., brainstorming and innovation; Brown & Paulus, 2002). In contrast to these approaches, that tend to focus on the outcomes of imagination, and based on a large review and synthesis of the literature, we have adopted a sociocultural perspective on imagination; building on the works of L. S. Vygotsky, G. H. Mead, but also D. W. Winnicott and many others, we have progressively defined the core dynamics of imagination. In this first section, we present our basic model of imagination, the sequence of imagination, and the three analytical dimensions we have proposed to account for its variations.

We conceive of imagination as the process by which a person temporarily decouples his or her flow of experience from the here-and-now of his or her proximal sphere of experience. This decoupling can be described as a loop, a little voyage to a distal sphere of experience, before looping back to the proximal sphere of experience and recoupling with the immediately present socially shared reality (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). For instance, a child in math class dreamingly looks out of the window and imagines building a hut in a tree, a dragon that comes to attack, and his glorious defence; he comes back from his daydream with a smile on his face, which leads the teacher to ask what was so funny. A teenager comes back upset from a meeting with friends, locks herself up in her room, listens to her preferred rock band, and is deeply moved again and again when listening to the lyrics or certain melodic phrases; she comes to dinner calmed down. A scientist needs to conceptualize the consequences of time-space relativity, and imagines sitting on a beam of light; his clarity

of conceptualization convinces a sceptical audience. A novelist is dissatisfied with his current life, and engages in an exploration of his lost childhood, re-experiencing the tastes and smells of his childhood home; with time, he writes a novel which will be considered a milestone in European literature. An older person sees her mobility decline, and she imagines life in a nursing home and possible rearrangements of her life; this leads to practical changes in the layout of her home and the introduction of assistive devices.

In all these examples, imagination involves a three-step sequence. First, there is a *trigger*—usually, disruptions of some kind questioning a person's involvement in a current conduct that initiate the person's uncoupling from the proximal sphere of experience (boredom in class, frustration with friends, limits of physical explanation, etc.). Second, the burgeoning loop of imagination utilizes *resources*—drawn from a wide range of semiotic and material elements previously internalized by the person along the life course, or present in the immediate environment, through the presence of others, the affordances of the setting, or the power of guidance of complex artefacts. For example, the child's imagination utilizes the view of the tree out of the window, his experience of tree-climbing, and stories about dragons; the teenager uses the recording of the rock band; and the elderly person uses stories and images of assisted living. Regarding the semiotic processes of imagining, we agree with other authors that imagination demands a complex decomposition and rearrangement of all this semiotic material, loaded with emotions and embodied experiences, into new synthesis (Vygotsky, 1933). The dynamics of imagination thus resemble dream work (Freud, 2001; Singer & Singer, 1992; Winnicott, 1996). The fact that imagination occurs in distal spheres of experiences implies that it is liberated from the laws (social, logical, material, temporal, spatial, etc.) that govern proximal spheres of experiences located in specific social and material settings. When imagining, causality can be undone; children can fly; scientists can sit on beams of light; and one can regain lost abilities. Third, the sequence ends with a *return*—when the person loops out of imagining, and recouples with her proximal circumstances, a few seconds or hours older. Although no dragons will lay slain, there will always be outcomes. These outcomes can be temporary emotional changes (e.g., in the example with the teenager),

they can be important life decisions (e.g., choosing not to go to a nursing home), or the outcomes can be the production of new semiotic or material elements (e.g., new theories or the basis for a new novel). Hence, some people's imaginings are crystallized into cultural artefacts (e.g., novels, films), which then can guide the imagining of others (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). In that sense, imagination can feed into an expansion of our collective experience (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013).

To build a theoretical integration, we have identified three core dimensions to describe the variety of imaginings in which people engage. The first dimension is that of *time orientation*: imagination can be oriented towards the past (such as when one re-experiences aspects of one's childhood in the taste of a cake); the future (such as when imagining a future life in a nursing home); or alternative presents (such as defending the tree-hut from a dragon). The second dimension is the *semiotic distance* of the imagining, some being rather concrete and close to embodied experiences (such as imagining climbing a tree) while others demand generalized experiences (such as imagining the speed of light). The third dimension is *plausibility*; this accounts for the fact that in certain social, cultural, and material conditions, imaginations can have a more or less degree of likelihood or possible realization. Hence, fighting a dragon is impossible for most children; yet, there is a small degree of plausibility if that child lives in Indonesia, habitat of the Komodo dragon. Imagination about living in a nursing home is very plausible for many people in contemporary society.

Theorizing imagination in terms of three steps and dimensions allows for a rich description and analysis of diverse instances of imagination. It also allows us to understand the complex cultural guidance shaping people's imagination of the past and people's future life trajectories. For instance, Welzer and colleagues have shown that social discourses have so much attributed the responsibility of WWII German war crimes to the "bad" Nazis, that younger generations can only end up remembering their parents' or grandparents' actual implication in the war as heroic resistance (Welzer, 2005, 2008; Welzer, Moller, & Tschuggnall, 2013). In a very different context, we have shown how a young woman's imaginings of herself and her possible future are selectively validated or rejected by

her immediate social environment (parents, friends, school), thus shaping the plausibility or nonplausibility of her possible future selves. Eventually, the young woman finds herself guided into certain life path, which she reinterprets in the light of her past imagining of her future, creating a new synthesis and imagining of herself (Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015). Our model thus shows the sociocultural nature of imagining in terms of origin, process, material, guidance, and outcomes. But what happens when imagining is done collectively?

## **Collective Imagination of the Future: Centralization and Emotional Valence**

Our initial theorization of imagination as sociocultural dynamic has been developed mainly considering the diversity of imagination of single persons, in interaction and dialogue with others and their environment. Our approach can also be used to account for dialogical imagination; that is, the capacity to imagine the perspective of the other (Gillespie, Corti, & Heasman, 2018; Marková, 2016). However, imagination can also be social in the sense of being shared or distributed; many people can collaboratively imagine, as in the case of group discussion, or imagination can emerge collectively, as in the case of the shared imagination of life on other planets, where the outputs of one person or groups imagining are resources in the next person or group's imagination. Collaborative imagination can be accounted for within our initial model with some fitting. For instance, we have shown that children in a classroom attempt to explain where stones come from; through their exploratory discussion, each child brings some elements of knowledge, personal experiences, or bits of demonstration, building on what the others have said, until one child can formulate a quasi-scientific explanation. Collaboratively, the children have imagined the origins of stones (Hilppö, Rajala, Zittoun, Kumpulainen, & Lipponen, 2016). However, in order to account for collective imagination, which takes place between more people and over a longer time span, we have to make some additions to our model. For instance, the imagination of the end of communism was developed by

many people in Czechoslovakia during communism. Some people, then called “dissidents”, expressed these imaginations in songs, theatre plays, and novels (Havel, 1988; Klíma, 2013; Zantovsky, 2015). The government of the time arrested them, censored their work, and punished their families, while producing state-compatible cultural elements (Bren, 2010). However, using these dissident songs and novels as crystallized imaginations that circulated illegally, as well as the knowledge of these arrests, many more people could build on these outputs to imagine that an alternative life was possible (Bilefsky, 2009; Day, 1999). Such dynamics of maintaining an imagined alternative, while a centralized power controlled the availability and the circulation of cultural elements and the expression of imaginations, entailed strong psychological and social tensions, until, in changing historic-political conditions (the Perestroika, fall of the Wall, etc.), the whole society came to a tipping point, and the political regime in place lost its legitimacy in what was called the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989 (Zittoun, 2018).

To account for these societal dynamics, we define the collective imagination as loops of imagination distributed among many people over time, with partly shared and crystallized outputs of imagination being the resources utilized in subsequent imaginings. Also, we assume that collective imaginations can have large-scale outcomes, which not only affect one person, but a community or a society at large. It is this consequential aspect of collective imagining that can make such imaginings political, such as when people imagine alternative possible social arrangements. Accordingly, considering collective imagining and the future requires a consideration of social control and valence, or emotional guidance.

Before considering these new aspects of imagination, let us review how our previously proposed dimensions fit the phenomenon of collectives imagining their future. First, the temporal dimension remains central. Like individual imaginations, the collective imagination can be oriented towards the past (i.e., spontaneous memories of the collective past, as well as history or other more controlled versions of the past), or towards alternative realities, or towards the future. Here, however, we will only consider collective imaginations of the future. Second, the dimension of semiotic distance becomes less relevant here, because collective imaginations are diffused and distributed in many minds, using a wide variety of

resources, and each of them may be more or less concrete or distanced. For example, the collective imagination of a socialist future involves very concrete ideas, such as equal income, and very abstract ideas, such as the idea of equality; it is thus impossible to define an overall or “average” semiotic distance. The third dimension—plausibility—is central, as it is the place through which groups and entities can exert their free determination or their power: deciding what is plausible is to decide the orientation of progress of a group. Of course, plausibility is changeable and different in various zones of the social field.

Now, we can consider our new dimension—namely, the extent to which a collective imagination is centralized or distributed, and thus, the social control exerted. At the extreme, control of imagination is centralized in a small number of social or political entities, which have a strong and unilateral power to define what can, should or should not be imagined by the other members of the society. At this extreme, they would control the production, availability, and circulation of cultural elements usable for imagining, and the social spaces in which imagination can be achieved. Their control would be unilateral, in the sense that the public sphere would be deprived of dialogical imagination: it ignores or does not tolerate the fact that members of the group or society have the capacity to imagine, using cultural elements in divergent ways or in spaces that escape from its control, and that these imaginings might be divergent from the one promoted by these sources of control. Techniques of control include censorship, a climate of fear leading to self-censorship, and at the extreme, silencing by incarceration. At that extreme, collective imagination is an imagination asymmetrically promoted by a few on the many; we call it “monological”. Examples include imaginations controlled by a central party, an ultra-liberal market economy, an ideological hegemony, or a bureaucratic entity (Marková, 2016). At the other extreme, control is largely distributed among participants of the given sociocultural field. People can engage their personal and dialogical imagination with others, in the social settings of their choice, and produce and identify the cultural elements they wish. They may also question, contradict, or refuse certain elements or imaginings. Because of the distributed nature of the control and the symmetrical dynamics amongst actors, at this extreme, control is dialogical and collective imagination is an emergent property of

a field (Marková, 2016). This dimension of control does have an affinity with Habermas's (1970, p. 205) concept of the public sphere in the sense that collective imaginations that are produced in a non-ideal public sphere could be described as "systematically distorted".

The second aspect that we need to introduce concerns the "valence" of these imaginings; that is, how these imaginings are attractive for a given group of people in a different field. Valences are relational and motivational; they designate how people will tend towards these imaginations, and therefore, organize their conduct so as to maintain and cultivate certain imaginations and even turn them into projects. Imaginations with positive valences for certain persons are utopian; imaginations of the future with negative valences are dystopian—that is, futures to be avoided. For instance, the projects of "urban garden" that are developed in many urban centres are carried by individual and collective initiatives, and are plausible enough for people to get committed to it and be attracted by the utopia of a green city.

Imaginations are always located in a specific time and context: we need to place collective imaginings in their historical sequences, within socio-cultural fields that have their own historicity. In that sense, imaginations develop and die, and utopias can become dystopias. Accordingly, our argument is that collective imaginations have their own developmental trajectories within the multidimensional space of collective imagination that we have described. To illustrate our argument, we will present two examples: travel to the moon and socialism in the first half of the twentieth century.

## **Travelling to the Moon: From Distributed and Implausible to Centralized and Plausible**

The moon has long been a projective canvas for human's collective imagination. The Ancient Greeks imagined the moon in terms of a goddess named Selene, daughter of Hyperion and Theia, and protagonist in several love affairs with both gods and mortals. A more plausible set of imaginations about the moon were introduced with the invention of the

telescope. In 1609, Galilei observed that the moon is not smooth, and instead, had ravines, mountains, and craters. The idea that the moon was a landscape led to the quite concrete and positive imagination of being on the moon, walking on the moon, and inhabiting the moon.

Initially the imagined mode of transport to the moon was magical, including, dreams, magic and transportation by a flock of swans (Godwin, 1638/1971). However, it became much more plausible with Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865/1993) and *Around the Moon* (1870/2012), which had a huge impact on the popular imagination of the moon. Specifically, Verne speculated that huge cannons might be able to shoot humans beyond the earth's gravity and thus to the moon. He also introduced the idea, later put into practice, of steering space projectiles by means of rocket power (McCurdy, 2011). The ideas introduced by Jules Verne were made visual and vivid by Georges Méliès, in his 1902 film, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (Méliès, 1902). In his film, Méliès used a cannon to shoot his protagonists onto the moon. Once on the moon, these discovered a rugged and mountainous landscape, as described by Galilei. Incorporating prior ideas of new fauna and alien species, Méliès' film also included rapidly growing mushrooms and Selenites who exploded when hit. Méliès also had his protagonists observe the earth rise over the lunar landscape—a future defining feature of space imagination (Farr, 1999).

As with previous imaginings of the New World or alien worlds, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* was also a reflexive social comment on the society from which it emerged. Specifically, it can be seen as a comment on the attitude underlying scientific progress and imperialism. The explorers encounter an alien species, from which there could be so much to learn. However, rather than engage in any meaningful dialogue with the Selenites, the explorers discover that they are easily killed. They proceed to kill several, then they kill the Selenite king, and they return to earth with a Selenite—who is paraded and ridiculed in the streets, while the explorers are handed oversized medals for their triumph. The superior and aggressive attitude of the explorers, their disregard for everything of interest on the moon, and their disrespect of the Selenites is arguably a critique of European colonialism. *Le Voyage dans la Lune* reveals the stages of the loop of imagination. First, there are triggers, such as telescope

imagery, the emerging techniques of film, and concerns about colonialism. Second, cultural resources are utilized, such as specific ideas and tropes about the moon and space travel. Third, we see how the imagination of an individual—in this case, Georges Méliès—exists within a larger collective imagination which spans many decades. The consequences of this loop of imagination range from the short to the long term. In a most immediate sense, Méliès' film excited audiences across Europe and the United States. However, over a longer term, with its positive valence, it provided an early template for thinking about a moon landing.

The anxieties of the Cold War period provided another trigger for a much more programmatic imagination about the moon and space in general. During the 1930s and 1940s, technological advances in rocketry moved science closer to travelling to the moon, but the idea did not fully catch the public imagination. However, in 1957, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) successfully put a satellite into orbit. The impact on the global imagination was unexpectedly immense. Sputnik 1 was not designed to gather data; rather, it was designed to broadcast an open-channel radio signal, to prove that the USSR had a satellite in orbit. Orbiting the Earth every hour and a half, its verifiable signature sound heralded the start of the space race. This unknown quantity hurtling above at 29,000 kilometres per hour was an open canvas (McCurdy, 2011): Was the satellite spying? Could it fall from the sky? Was the satellite carrying a nuclear weapon? In the United States, the Dow Jones fell over 10% and Eisenhower saw his popularity fall over 20 points. The number of UFO sightings in the United States in the months before Sputnik 1 was 46 per month, while immediately after, it was over 200 sightings per month (Condon, 1969). In short, Cold War anxieties provided a massive trigger, or spur, to the imagination of manned space flight.

The emergence of the space race marked the shift of imaginings about the moon from being distributed and unregulated towards becoming more centralized and guided. When, in 1961, President Kennedy announced that the United States would put a person on the moon (despite there being little more practical or scientific benefit to such an achievement than using sensors or remote devices), he was leading the charge in a governmental interest in how the moon was imagined. The

space race led the governments in both the United States and the USSR to invest money in promoting, on the one hand, the utopic dream of conquering space, and on the other hand, the dystopic fear of losing the “space race”.

The technologies that the United States and USSR utilized to generate particular imaginings around space and to propagate these through their respective communities were diverse. Posters, television programmes, leaflets, children’s toys, educational courses, celebrity status, awards, medals, ceremonies, art, and even stamps were used to stabilize and focus the collective imagination. Figure 2.1 shows a 1962 stamp from the United States. Project Mercury was the national plan to have an astronaut orbit Earth. Although the United States succeeded in this task, the USSR was the first to achieve this milestone by a narrow margin. Figure 2.2 shows a 1967 stamp from the USSR. This stamp depicts people on the moon, a milestone to be achieved by the United States in 1969.

The trigger to the centralized imaginings about the moon in the USA and the USSR was the Cold War in general, and the space race in particular. This trigger, when combined with the rich resources of previous imaginings (i.e., Verne, Miles, etc.) and the technological potentials of the post-war period (i.e., computing and rockets), led to huge investments to make the implausible plausible. It is estimated that, normalized to 2010 values (i.e., adjusted for inflation), the USA invested more than 100 billion dollars in the moon landing (Lafleur, 2010). Such investments could



**Fig. 2.1** 1962 USA stamp, 4 cents, “U.S. Man in space. Project Mercury” (USA stamps no copyright before 1978. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Project\\_Mercury\\_1962\\_Issue-4c.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Project_Mercury_1962_Issue-4c.jpg))



**Fig. 2.2** 1967 USSR stamp, 6 kopeks, “Space science fiction. On the moon” (No copyright on USSR stamps. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1967\\_CPA\\_3546\\_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1967_CPA_3546_(2).jpg))

only be made because the public participated in the collective imagination of the space race and the future possible significance of the moon landing.

Our collective imagination of the moon, in the context of the space race, reveals how centralized collective imaginations can grow out of decentralized distributed imaginations, and in turn, how these centrally promoted imaginations can feed back into more distributed imaginations. For example, the moon landings have been the focus of alternative interpretations and conspiracy theories. Also, thinking specifically of the space race, it is evident that utopian visions go hand in hand with dystopian imaginings. While the imagination of the moon was certainly attractive, the idea for either side of losing the space race was repelling.

## **Imagining Socialism: From Distributed to Centralized but with Polarizing Valence**

Another trajectory of collective imagination is that related to socialism as a political programme. Socialism as a project for a class-free, equalitarian society can be seen as, initially, an emergent utopia. Present in many novels and stories, the possibility of a life where people would all be equal, cooperating and sharing their resources, was developed in the work of

authors such as Gerrard Winstanley in the seventeenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century, and in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, by Charles Fourier in France (Fourier, 1829) and Robert Owen in the United Kingdom (Owen, 1991). These authors were part of general intellectual movements developed in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom that inspired authors such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—both widely read in Greek philosophy. Hence, for a very long time, experiences of cooperative or equalitarian communities were either imagined and debated, or freely experienced by small groups, among which religious communities. To develop these shared yet collective imaginations, a strong conceptual analysis was provided by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's reflexion on the emerging capitalist society. They then wrote their *Communist Manifesto* in 1847, and had it published in 1848 for a meeting of the, at that time, secret German Communist party (Marx & Engels, 1969).

When, later, the Russian Revolution started in 1917, first to overthrow Emperor Nikolai II, then under the command of the Bolsheviks, to install a proletarian power in place, the ideas promoted by Marx and Engels became an inspiration for a political system—although the practicalities of the system had to be fully defined. Various attempts were made and different policies implemented, supported by a strongly future-oriented ideology. To shape the imagination of the future, the political authorities reedited various science fiction books, both local and foreign (such as works by G. Orwell and Jules Verne; Lovell, 2009, p. 20). Under Stalin from 1928 on, the materialization of these ideas became stronger, and also more centrally controlled; alternative cultural elements were suppressed (e.g., Churches destroyed), and the semiosphere started to be built in a redundant manner—from urban architecture to official arts. Writers, film-makers, and artists had to narrate and make the “Soviet dream” convincingly imaginable (Lovell, 2009, pp. 22–23). In the 1930s, the history of the beginning of the Soviet society started to be rewritten according to political goals, and Soviet communism redefined as a national project, rather than an international movement. Next to this work of imagination, of course, the communist regime implemented important industrial reforms, and a very strong controlling apparatus—first, the Tcheika; then, the KGB, whose role was to identify people that

did not fit with the system (because of their background, opinions they may have expressed, or different imaginings they might have externalized), and to isolate, control, or transform them (in prisons, the Gulag, etc.). Yet, even so, until the end of communism, the political regime sponsored (e.g., in science and art) and promoted (e.g., in education and propaganda) versions of the radiant, equal, and advanced future to come (for example, in Fig. 2.3 the chimneys are valorized as leading to a glorious future).

In this example, the trigger for change is a combination of long-standing wars and inequalities in Russia, dissatisfaction with the emperor, and a series of complex political events, together with the long-standing presence of revolutionary literature. Communism developed as collective imagination—first, diffuse and spontaneous, and progressively, more and



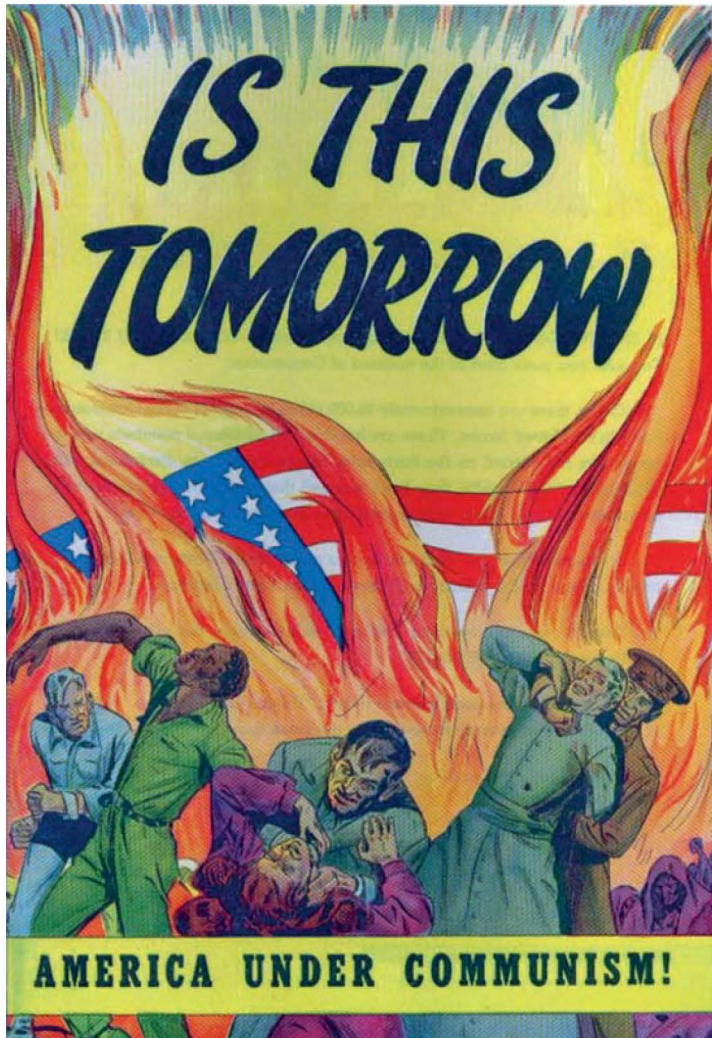
**Fig. 2.3** “Smoke of chimneys is the breath of Soviet Russia” (1917–1921) (No copyright on Russia for posters before 1942, and per extension in the USA. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Smoke\\_of\\_chimneys\\_is\\_the\\_breath\\_of\\_Soviet\\_Russia.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Smoke_of_chimneys_is_the_breath_of_Soviet_Russia.jpg))

more controlled by a centralized power. The future to come was meant to attract and motivate the whole of society, and accordingly, the utopic imagery organized the whole field.

Although the USA and USSR were allies during WWII, in the post-war years a strong anti-communist imagination was cultivated in the USA. This period was called the “Second Red scare” (the first one taking place during the Great Depression in the early 1930s) and referred to as McCarthyism after Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy (Storrs, 2015, p. 2). McCarthyism was a centralized and emotionally charged imagination of a communist infiltration of American society (see, for instance, Fig. 2.4), in great part fostered by a State-commissioned institution, the FBI. During the Cold War, McCarthyism led to systematic screenings of the population, with many people being blacklisted, censored, and interned on suspicion of espionage or collaboration with the Soviet Union: “During the program’s peak between 1947 and 1956, more than five million federal workers underwent loyalty screening, resulting in an estimated 2,700 dismissals and 12,000 resignations” (Storrs, 2015, p. 8). Authorities especially screened the Arts; a list of suspect cinema artists was created, known as the “Hollywood blacklist”, denying access to work to actors, directors, and other cinema professionals. Interviews with suspects appear totally scripted and staged, denying people the right to defend themselves. Also, librarian activities were controlled and books burned (Storrs, 2015).

Hence, in this case, we could say that the collective imagination in Russia triggered a counter-imagination in the USA. There, we can observe another variation of controlled, monological collective imagination of the future. Only this time, the future has to be avoided—a possible communist USA is the repelling organizer of the sociocultural field. Ironically, some of the mechanisms by which this communist-free imagination was implemented were very similar to the mechanisms used by the USSR to foster the utopian imagination of communism: control of the production of cultural elements, control of their mode of diffusion, and control over their access, as well as silencing people who maintained a different voice.

To summarize, the collective imagination of the future of socialism can be described as having undertaken a series of mutations and bifurcations. Starting as an emerging, distributed and dialogical utopia, socialism



**Fig. 2.4** Cover to the propaganda comic book "Is This tomorrow" (1947) (Public domain, By Catechetical Guild (Catechetical Guild) [Public domain], [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:is\\_this\\_tomorrow.jpg?uselang=fr](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:is_this_tomorrow.jpg?uselang=fr))

encouraged people and groups to work for a better society, producing a great number of texts presenting these ideas. Then, after the trigger of the revolution, once implemented as political regime in the USSR, socialism

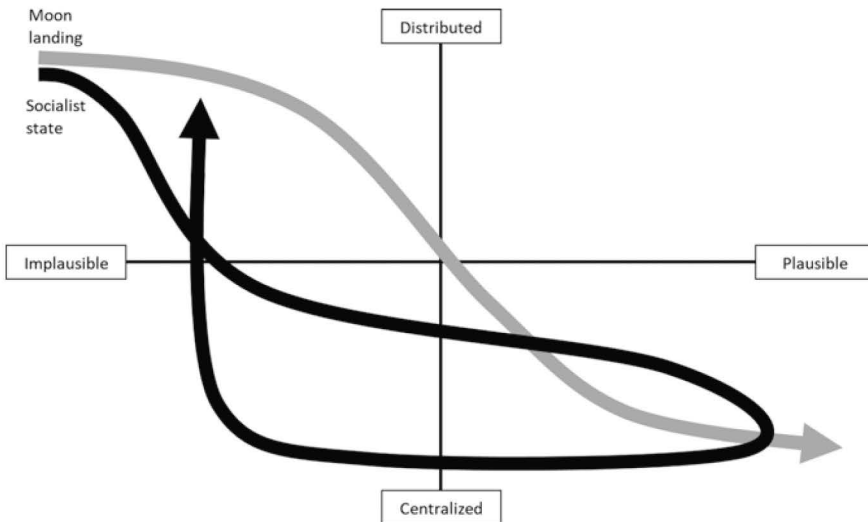
became a controlled collective imagination, creating and diffusing the cultural elements nourishing that imagination, and suppressing and destroying the possibility of alternatives; even so, it remained a positive utopia, a goal to achieve. Interestingly, from the perspective of the USA, the valence was flipped over: the “same” content of an imagination appeared as radically repelling, and another centralized control shaped it as dystopia, being the future that must be guarded against.

## Discussion

Humans are actively oriented towards goals, understood as a broad range of imagined future states, and as such, any understanding of human behaviour needs to take account of human imagination of the future. Imagining the future, however, is only in a narrow sense a solitary cognitive act. Each individual’s imagination of the future is a reconfiguration of past experiences and imaginations; the horizon of our individual futures is set by our community of imagination (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016).

So powerful is the imagination of the future in corraling human behaviour that it inevitably becomes political and potentially ideological. Accordingly, when considering the collective imagination of the future, it is imperative to interrogate the provenance of an imagination, the resources used in its construction, the institutions promoting it, and its consequences. Arguably, a core concern should always be evidence of a narrowing of the collective imagination; that is, any closing off of the alternatives that might become resources either for future imaginings or critique. In this sense, a healthy community of imagination is diverse, a rich treasure trove of cultural elements, the building blocks of human potential.

In the present chapter, we have used a sociocultural model of imagination, focused on the collective imagination of the future, to describe and analyse two case studies. Figure 2.5 depicts the movement of these collective imaginations in a two-dimensional space of distributed-centralized and implausible-plausible. Both imaginings began as implausible and distributed, both became more plausible as they were centralized and



**Fig. 2.5** Trajectories of collective imagination of the future in a two-dimensional space (copyright authors)

resources were put behind instituting the given imagination. Both imaginations were achieved, but the trajectory of socialism arguably became more implausible through its institutionalization and centralization, ultimately collapsing back into a distributed and implausible set of imaginings. Of course, Fig. 2.5 is highly simplistic. Arguably, we should have separate lines for imaginings in the USA and USSR (or indeed, separate lines for the heterogeneous groups within each society). However, the aim of Fig. 2.5 is not to represent these collective imaginings exhaustively, but rather, to illustrate how trajectories of collective imagination can be conceptualized using the proposed multidimensional model. For example, one could point out the role of key moments in history (e.g., the Sputnik orbit, President Kennedy's speech committing to a moon landing, or Glasnost) that shape the trajectory.

Sociocultural psychology is particularly suited for studying how groups imagine their own future. First, the imagined future, despite exerting material changes on the present, is an entirely semiotic construction (Salvatore, 2016; Toomela, 2003; Valsiner, 1999, 2009; Zittoun et al., 2013). Accordingly, any understanding of imagined futures needs to

focus on the content and semiotic dynamics of those imaginings, including how embodied feelings and images combine and recombine to create images of the future that motivate behaviour. Second, to understand how groups imagine their future requires a model of how individual subjectivities (loops of imagination) are related to and supported, hindered, or subtly guided by broader social factors such as the cultural elements available, the social valences ascribed to given images of the future, and technologies of imagination that can selectively cultivate, amplify, and project particular imaginings (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Again, sociocultural psychology has the conceptual tools for understanding this intersection between individual subjectivities and societal forces. Third, sociocultural psychology has a methodological toolkit that enables both the close and detailed study of semiotic processes at the level of the individual, as they unfold in a specific context and time, and also the more macro-structure of ideas as they relate to collectives and broader sociocultural processes (Toomela & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato, & Dazzani, 2016). However, although sociocultural psychology is moving towards more complex phenomena, it has so far been very hesitant to address social and political changes (but see Wagoner, Jensen, & Oldmeadow, 2012).

Within the frame of sociocultural psychology, we have argued that the study of collective imagination, especially of the future, needs to be attuned to the political forces shaping the trajectory of imagination. Finance, uprising, propaganda, censorship, and silencing dissenting voices are all techniques used to centralize and institutionalize particular imaginings about the future. We have also tried to emphasize, in the case studies, how collective imaginations do not occur in isolation. In both case studies, the imaginations cultivated in the USA and the USSR were reacting to each other. The imagination of the moon landing, which became particularly strong in the USA, was a reaction to the USSR having an early lead in the “space race”. The case of socialism is even more striking; the same phenomenon (i.e., socialism) was represented with entirely opposing valences in the USA and USSR. While there was broad agreement on the positive valence of landing on the moon, there was outright opposition to the valence of socialism. This demonstrates, as mentioned above, that valence is more about the relation that an indi-

vidual or group has to an imagination than a quality of the imagination itself (although, of course, such strong valences shape how the phenomenon is imagined).

In this chapter, we have used the theoretical assumptions, concepts, and methods of sociocultural psychology to conceptualize collective imaginations of the future. Although we have here examined two cases of past collective imaginations, we call for more careful studies of current emerging imaginations of the future, and the social forces that are supporting, channelling, or silencing these trajectories. In this way, sociocultural psychology can use its strengths to address the mutual construction of individual and collective trajectories of imagination in the contemporary world, with all its ideological and political underpinnings, and perhaps help us to foster an imagination of the future that has positive valences for all.

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