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Reflections on Imagination

Human Capacity and Ethnographic Method

Edited by

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*In memory of David Riches,
a founder of the Department of Social Anthropology at St Andrews.*

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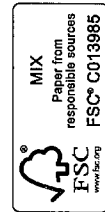
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In 'Do forest children dream of electric light? Young Matses imagining concrete paths in Peruvian Amazonia', *Camilla Morelli* explores how Matses children living in the Amazonian rainforest develop imaginary relationships with urban places. The Matses are a native people of Peruvian Amazonia who spend most of their lives in forest villages and who rarely visit urban settings. However, Matses children engage regularly with the city by imagining it at a distance. This becomes manifest in their creative productions and their conversations. In particular, Morelli has used drawing as a mode of creative experience and expression through which Matses children can be seen to manifest these imaginary realms of urban life and gain access to, and make assessments of, global spaces that are locally distant and may appear locally precluded. Drawing the city becomes a way not only of imaginatively knowing a remote 'elsewhere' not immediately available but also offers a comparative frame through which the children may interpret the distinctiveness of their forest environments both positively and negatively. Morelli reveals how Matses children draw, and learn to comprehend urban spaces whose meaningful materials—concrete, electric light, streets, cars, television and aeroplanes—are experientially unknown to them. However, the imagining of the city remains intertwined with Matses everyday life: its surroundings and common shared activities. The imagining body, the pens and paper, and the spaces of local dwelling remain in relations of mutual exchange.

Chapter 11

The Imagining Life:

Reflections on Imagination in Political Anthropology

Leo Coleman

What is in white heat imaginative reality is in cold imaginative phantasm.

R.P. Blackmur, Henry Adams

This chapter is an exercise in periodization and in marking critical boundaries—it is not based in ethnography, but rather offers a possible reading of certain trends in political anthropology, as an academic practice and subfield, and hence is based in reading in a more direct and literal sense. A textualist approach such as the one I adopt here may be uniquely suited to reflection on imagination in anthropology, since investigating imagination necessarily involves attention to the symbols, mediations, forms, and narrative structures which shape and convey hope, desire, and aspiration. In fact, defined in just this way as a matter of mediation and circulating images, imagination has since the 1990s become a key term of some wide relevance in political anthropology—or, perhaps better, a “key concept,” as I don’t mean to rest my argument on some claim that the *word* “imagination” (and its variants—imagined, imaginary, *imaginaire*) is somehow more prevalent now in anthropological writing than it ever was. Any statistical increase in the use of such a polyvalent term means nothing by itself. But the methods, and theoretical commitments, associated with some notion of the imagination do seem to have shaped the subfield in recent years (see Strauss 2006 for a more detailed account of the uses of “imagination” and the critical theories that underlie this trend).

In order to trace the uses, and usefulness, of imagination in political anthropology, I pursue two avenues of investigation. I first sketch a genealogy of the recent past in the subfield, drawing on two textbooks that have traced important shifts in political anthropology, and in some ways marked the demise of one epoch (Vincent 1990) and heralded the birth of another (Gledhill [1994] 2000). Second, I examine the promise of a diverse, but common, methodological interest in fictions, narratives, and the products of the imagination in contemporary political anthropology. Focusing on the uses to which “imagination” has been put in anthropological accounts of nations, states, and globalization, I will argue that political anthropology could fruitfully develop further repertoires of interpretation to better account for the diverse forms that products of the imagination can take, the ways they can be taken (read, interpreted, appropriated, loved, or despised),

and the effects that all this can have in the wider social world of relations, disputes, and political belonging. In this pursuit, I draw inspiration from Lionel Trilling's claim that the reading of novels and works of imagination can shape the moral imagination, but seek to remain true to his insight that only after (collective) interpretation can reading have its full "communal effect" (Trilling 1976: 252; cf., Ciertz 1983).

Ultimately, I argue for a particular account of imagination as a social power that operates through and can only be accessed in mediation. This social imagination operates in a world of (partially) shared meanings, draws on symbols that pre-exist any individual appropriation of them, and characteristically relies on compression of large and plural realities into humanly-graspable and thinkable forms. In its sociocentric approach, this chapter's theorization of the imagination stands apart from those (important and influential) accounts of imagination that treat it as a fundamentally individual capacity or as a wellspring of "creativity" (Hallam and Ingold 2008).

My own larger research projects are about infrastructure and belonging, both in North India and in broader historical contexts of social modernity. Insofar as infrastructures of transport, communications, and, above all, energy, are a hidden condition of modern lives, of our common participation in a public and in a politics of provision, my work is also integrally about imagination—about social practices that both mark and complete the gap between the here-and-now and the distant and the future. Infrastructure has always had an important imaginative dimension, one formed in the techniques of representation, appropriation, and control which allow great projects to be conceived and applied across time and space, often as part of an imperial or state-building project (Carroll 2006). Jo Guldi's (2012) recent study of the legal and political making of the "infrastructure state" in nineteenth-century Britain, somewhat inadvertently, reveals the importance of the imagination to such projects.

Guldi opens her book with a comparison of two maps. First is an eighteenth-century map of England, which is a riot of place-names, the close-set labels standing in for any topographical detail on the map itself. While itineraries between cities are marked by lines, the map presents no "specific information about variations" in these routes or indeed any indication that there might be several different roads connecting widely separated places—the roads form a "network only in the imagination of the cartographer" (Guldi 2012: 9). Second, Guldi presents a nineteenth-century map of Britain as a whole, where the trunk roads between major cities have taken over visual prominence, and moreover are set in a finely detailed context of various routes; all the roads' "shapes, diversions, and connections" are precisely delineated, as are variations in the terrain itself. For Guldi, this contrast between a foot-speed itinerary of places as against an "accurately" represented network of connections is a direct index of the historical improvement of roads for transport and commerce, and the contrast thus guides us in understanding a set of material transformations that knit together the British state. Just as important as any change in practices of transport that might be represented by these maps,

however, are the techniques of representation that each map employs, and the kinds of practices each might spur. These countervailing representations of space and movement across it—one full of points, of nexuses where habitation and commerce can be found, the other a network of lines connecting major cities in a space of detailed topographical variation—are also, and perhaps primarily, dramatically different imaginative visions. The later and more detailed map, which makes the road and the terrain it traverses more important than the places along the way, hardly *only* represents a material change; it is also *effects* a change in what we might see and expect "along the road"—places on a journey rather than points of habitation—and this imaginative transformation is an essential and prior condition for the kind of conflict between "locality" and "centralizing infrastructure" that Guldi traces throughout her book.

In one of my early fieldwork interviews—in Dehra Dun, July 2003—a discussion of regional development pointed to just such a conflict between political scale and the provision of infrastructural goods, between centralization and place. I was speaking to a young engineer, an activist in movements for further political decentralization to the then-new North Indian state of Uttaranchal (now Uttarakhand), which has its capital in Dehra Dun. For years, residents of the region—a mountainous and underdeveloped area, long a province of the large state of Uttar Pradesh—had agitated for a separate state government of their own, both out of a sense of local cultural separateness and in order to spur the kind of development that they felt had been withheld by governments in distant Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. My interlocutor told me that the real problem that newly autonomous Uttaranchal faced was a lack of roads, construction of which would not only make their state the kind of completely traversable space that he thought the rest of the UP had long ago become, but more importantly would almost magically connect the most remote parts of Uttaranchal to the distant centers of wealth and prosperity *beyond* Lucknow. "There are many places in Uttaranchal," he said, "where tourists would go—beautiful places, for hiking or skiing, and with temples. But now you have to take a helicopter to get there—movie stars do this, but not ordinary people. If we had roads, then we could bring people here from Delhi or Bombay, and we would develop."

This single-minded focus on roads, particularly as they leap over space to connect a North Indian town to distant Bombay, impressed me then, and continues to entice my imagination now, as something more than a fixation on the goods of modernity—development and progress, via mass tourism. Anthropologists have often treated such statements as the evidence of an ideological process, in which the locals are duped into embracing false promises of well-being. Rightly concerned about the local impacts such development might have, and politically worried by the fervent embrace of such material dreams by elites who wield unaccountable and bureaucratic power, anthropological critics of developmentalism have stressed the material force and devastating ruin of these processes (e.g. Ferguson 1989; J. Scott 1999; Chhotray 2011). Yet the power of these promises (as Ferguson has explored elsewhere—Ferguson 1999) is not only an ideological ruse; it is also an

aesthetic, an imaginative vision, through which the world is known and grasped, and certain connections to power and authority are made realizable, while at the same time effective disconnections are also made (for similar, and also South Asian, rhetorical deployments of development and its imaginative play of connection and disconnection, see Campbell 2010; Rademacher 2011).

That is to say, while territorial and state power is certainly exerted in large-scale infrastructure projects, not least in the techniques of representation that allow them to be planned and the physical control over forces and movements that they foster, this is not all that such projects accomplish (J. Scott 1999). “Fortunately for the human imagination, things are a little more complicated than that” when it comes to the manipulations of space, time, communications, and territory that characterize modern governmentality (Foucault 1984: 255). The attempt to reshape the networks that materially bind people and territories into a state, to harness the invisible power of roads to attract people, involves both imagining the topography of belonging and communications differently and imagining the stories that will unspool on such roads—through the connections they promise and the speed they enable. All this can be a potent counter-politics as much as a material tool of a supervening and integrative power.

In any case, whether they are finally a tool of discipline and control, or objects of appropriation and sites of *détournement*, infrastructures clearly have an “imagined” dimension constituted by systematic practices of reading into a terrain or landscape. And yet, this “poetics” by which the material fabric of roads, rail, pipes, and wires are both made present and occluded (as they become banal) has often been stunted as itself a key site of politics. As Aihwa Ong has recently written in a different context, “in postcolonial countries . . . state sovereignty was not merely *imagined into being* (Anderson 1983), but largely embraced as the necessary political institution charged with defending national [and regional] well-being in a competitive global environment” (Ong 2012: 26, emphasis added, internal citation original). The specifics of her argument here are less important to me than the rhetorical force of the opposition she makes between *imagination* on the one hand, and well-being, competition, and material development—as more fundamental, and fundamentally *political*, realities—on the other. It is important to underscore that Ong casually relegates the imaginary dimension to “mere” appearance, effortless conjuring, while still paying careful attention to political ideas, identities, and forms of belonging. The contradiction between imagination and reality, as it were, that she insists upon cannot be reduced point-for-point to the old dichotomy between material base or infrastructure (no pun intended) and merely ideational superstructure.

In what follows, I wish to open up this apparently blank contradiction between imagination and reality, between legal and literary fictions (which I argue play a large role in shaping political belonging and structuring group life) and the only apparently superior materiality of politics. Dismissals of the imagination, and of Benedict Anderson’s influential book *Imagined Communities*—parenthetically disparaged by Ong—have been all too characteristic of the subfield of political

anthropology for a long time, as I discuss in the next section of this chapter. I wish to examine resources, within the anthropological tradition, for examining the real entanglement of daily practices of the imagination with (literal and material) infrastructures; but in addition, moving beyond my own interest in infrastructures, I will examine the ways in which ethnography has tried to grapple with broader practices of imaginative connection and sought to examine what Clifford Geertz, himself borrowing the phrase from another writer, once called “the literariness of real life” (1983: 47). In sum, I aim to sketch an alternative genealogy for a political anthropology in the present, one that can embrace the imagining life as an integral part of the political realities of our day.

Against Imagination

The ideational, ideological, or simply imaginary was, for quite some time, an object of suspicion and critique in the subfield of political anthropology. The systematic (and non-Marxian) theories of politics that dominated the subfield of political anthropology in the 1950s and ’60s were based in a common-sense rationalism that had little patience for anything that could not be observed in action. A major textbook of the period (Bailey 1969) tried to define the political in universal terms of interest and behavioral repertoires which could be found in any culture free of local meanings (see Silverman 1974 for an influential critique). In this political-anthropological tradition, even affectively-loaded and often empirically “fuzzy” or difficult-to-define social realities such as group boundaries and symbols were treated as the precipitate of strategic action (Barth 1969).

Importantly, the critique of this rationalist and universalist tendency was framed in terms of a symbolic anthropology (e.g. Kapferer 1977), rather than as a debate directly over the terms for the anthropological study of politics, since that latter domain had already been defined so narrowly as to rule local symbolic formations out of consideration, and to discount the important ways in which people are connected, and form political ideas, through active participation in ritual situations of unequal exchange and hierarchical encompassment. Conflict, strategy, dispute, and material things were all politics; symbols, ritual, and meaning were not—and neither were the exchanges of meanings and conflicts of interpretation which preoccupied ritual and symbolic specialists both indigenous and anthropological, who were not even credited a share in the analysis of “power” at all.

Accordingly, as Joan Vincent remarks in her historical overview and synthesis of the subfield, in much disciplinary work of this era “culture” was explicitly excluded as an explanatory term or variable, with its cultivation of concern with irreal or value-laden ideas (Vincent 1990: 335—although she does not fail to note “subterranean” influences from symbolic anthropology and folklore which tended to highlight contests over values and meaning; see p. 371). Ultimately, it became clear that neither legal recognition nor political power could be seriously discussed without attention to local categories, forms of knowledge, and the ambiguities of

practice (Moore 1978; Geertz 1983). But this did nothing to mitigate the general allergy to imagination in political anthropology, even as the universalist and model-building theories of politics and the subfield they had shaped both largely died out as an active arena of research and publication in the 1970s and '80s—perhaps, as Jonathan Spencer hypothesized, out “of boredom” (Spencer 1997: 5).

Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s, the subfield moved toward historicist and materialist interpretive frameworks, yet with a few exceptions (Tausig 1987; Sahlin 1985; Kapferer 1988) still abjured any interest in “invisible realities” of culture, of cosmology, and symbolism. Vincent, in her conclusion and prospectus for a revived subfield in 1990s, specifically situates political anthropology as the materialist and historical side of a general cultural anthropology. Tellingly, she places political anthropology at the opposite pole of the discipline from the “fad” of interpretive anthropology, critically identifying interpretivism with “neglect of the issue of power and the promotion of myths of cultural unanimity” (Vincent 1990: 427).

Meanwhile, in an important textbook of the mid-1990s, John Gledhill (2000) similarly argued for political anthropology as a study of material power, exclusion, and violence—although his title, *Power and its Disguises*, indicates the more Marxist, and Latin-American, political anthropological tradition which he was instrumental in codifying and summarizing. Gledhill includes nuanced discussion of symbolic and ritual forms of modern state power, that appear as distinction, hegemony, and symbolic violence, but mitigates his attention to such aspects of power by granting primacy to the “real” ground of political life in physical violence, in subaltern (and usually semi-autonomous) forms of action and interpretation, or in ultimately material conflicts over goods, things, and people. In one extended discussion, Geertzian interpretive anthropology, with its purported attention to “static” texts and consensual images of society, serves—again—as the antagonist for the materialist, historical, and locally-embedded approach that he advocates (2000: 64–6).

In the length of his discussion—which is more focused on current theoretical debates and trends than Vincent’s historical, albeit “presentist,” review—Gledhill traces in detail the increasing attention paid in the 1980s to theories of hegemony, ideology, and to subaltern or hidden forms of resistance, and he acknowledges that such forms of resistance are always enmeshed in symbolic projects and imaginative, often religious, responses to the world and to power. Moreover, he highlights as aspects of the revived, and refocused, political anthropology of the 1980s and 1990s, an important shift to anti-colonial historical writing, direct theorization of the state (something largely neglected by an earlier anthropology of “political systems”), and activist forms of engagement—all developments influenced in different measure by Western Marxism and by Foucauldian theorizations of subject-formation in contexts of pervasive power (e.g. Comaroff 1985; D. Scott 1999; Schepher-Hughes 1992; Orner 2006). However, for all his attention to hegemony and the symbolic modes of domination, Gledhill consistently reads the world of myth and symbol as something which has, ultimately, been transformed

in modernity into something alien, desiccating, and fundamentally a “false consciousness”: “Myths and symbols,” he writes, in summary of arguments about Sinhala nationalism put forward by Kapferer (who does not, himself, write in this mode of reduction), “were converted into ideologies of ethnic nationalism via elite political strategies and these ideologies entered into the consciousness of ‘ordinary people’ and fired their emotions, turning neighbours and fellow victims of class domination into demons” (Gledhill 2000: 180). While it is empirically true that the violence of ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, as anywhere, is often perpetrated by poor people upon other poor people—“fellow victims of class domination”—the fundamental question is less how they *fail* to recognize their shared interests, than how they imagine themselves as similar to some and different from others in the first place, and how these codes of distinction become such powerful guides to multiple, local, and often immediately violent acts of discrimination. Nor is Gledhill wrong to see ethnic nationalisms as “ideologies”: thin, imaginatively impoverished, and ultimately unsatisfying to the intellectual observer; but again the question then is how they manage to have the action-orienting force they evidently do.

What is remarkable in the vision of political anthropology that these two textbooks mark out—and I am not entirely criticizing, but remarking on a systematic elision which helps buttress their unique contribution as much as it is a lacuna—is the way in which the nation, or any other “large-scale” formation to which one might feel oneself as really belonging despite the fact that it is impossible to see or grasp immediately, is obscured as itself any real scale for action and interaction of a politically-relevant kind. The equally institutional and affective sites of nation or state are not granted any reality as locales where symbols are fostered, formed, and take hold, and the self is “hyphenated” to multiple others. Large-scale formations that depend on such processes of linking, *imaginatively*, through and across multiple consciousnesses to become a site of meaningful action—that are corporate and hence have a real existence through their forms of incorporation, their *collective* reality, their *mediated* or *fictional* form—are routinely reduced in this political anthropology to the scale of the psychological operations of (false) consciousness or to the ethnographic level of immediate relations, the latter often figured as the site of a dominating and its way constructive violence (Gledhill 2000: 178–9).

The way each of these texts forecloses the imagination as a political force, having tangible if not immediate sources in texts, practices, affects, and understandings that bridge the gap between the here-and-now and other times and places, is indicated by the fact that neither Vincent nor Gledhill engages in depth with Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983; 1991). This is not just the lack of a single citation. Vincent understandably does not cite or discuss Anderson’s book at all, in part because of the way she defines the boundaries and scope of her inquiry, but also because its impact in political anthropology was not evident at the time she wrote. But its absence only highlights the fact that she excludes from the purview of political anthropology any comparable approach to

the formation of social and political communities, whether in studies of sacrifice, totemism, kinship, or religion, or via questions of representation and the symbolic or semiotic properties of identity which link individuals together. For his part, Gledhill discusses Anderson's book briefly, but only to highlight its more Weberian arguments about the career-paths of colonial bureaucrats and the ways in which the "pyramid" of the imperial state provided the material conditions for national bureaucratic vocations, and hence led to the emergence of colonial nationalisms (Gledhill 2000: 75–6).

Yet already by the mid-1980s, the first edition of Anderson's book had provoked debate in a range of fields precisely because of its dual claims, first about print-capitalism and bureaucratic routines as the material conditions for nation-formation, and second about the equally important and foundational literary content of national imaginations. Anderson, famously and contentiously, identified as a central mechanism of nation-formation the literary representation of a "homogenous, empty time" and a novel "seriality" of personal identity. This emphasis on a novel literary form and content meant that *Imagined Communities* was early on attacked by scholars of Indian anti-colonial nationalism who saw the work as shifting historical agency away from the later movements of anti-colonial nationalism and focusing instead on comprador elites, while elevating particularly literary and intellectual histories to the status of universal historical mechanisms (Chatterjee 1986)—a debate which rapidly became part of the redefinition of political anthropology around questions of representation and inclusion.

This early reception via partial appropriations and strong critiques helps explain the later standard misreading of Anderson's work as "merely" about imagination, and not more centrally about the conditions of group solidarity, power, and order—canonical issues of concern in political anthropology—a misreading prepared by the disciplinary bent of the subfield toward material histories, visible relations of power, dominance, and subordination, and embodied (often violent) encounters. Yet, as developments elsewhere in the anthropological study of politics revealed, Anderson's work had indeed opened a methodological pathway for grappling with "the large scale" of national and state formations (I take this loose meaning of the "large scale" from Moore 1993).

Imagination at the End of an Era

Now it must be said, again, that the crux of Anderson's argument was not that nations are imagined, invented, historically false, or simply ideological fictions; rather—as is very little remarked—he rested his claims about the emergence of and spread of nationalism on particular practices of *reading* and *recognition* by which new boundaries and modes of belonging were fostered as imaginative realities (Greenhouse 2011: 19; Rutherford 2000). Imagined and imagination take on a very specific meaning in his argument, referring not to private fancies but to durable social fictions, shaped and formed by specific practices of writing

and reading—Anderson is concerned with "the *style* in which they [nations] are imagined" (Anderson 1991: 6, my emphasis). It is thus doubly ironic that Aihwa Ong, in the passage I quoted earlier, can so easily dismiss Anderson's argument with a parenthetical citation and the phrase "not merely imagined," for Anderson both offers a materialist and practice-based theory of national communities (with his concept of print-capitalism), and more importantly aims to show the imaginative *labor*, the shaping of a style of thinking about history and community, that goes into summoning their irreal existence. There is nothing mere about the imagination.

By linking the *practices* of the production and circulation of texts with their *effect* in the shaping of expansive imaginations, through the daily and simultaneous practice of reading as well as the content of what is read, the imagined communities thesis promised a new way to understand peoples' actual claims to *belong*—intensely, affectively—to an absent, abstract totality, claims which had long been problematic to a more positivist anthropology and treated as ideological fictions or as "merely" the domain of litterateurs. As Anderson himself pointed out, he hoped to shift debate over nationalism into closer proximity with matters of "religion and kinship" (Anderson 1991: 5). In line with earlier anthropologies of sacrifice, totemism, and commensality, Anderson's thesis was centrally about the strength and depth of community, even in its distinctively modern forms, and importantly contradicted the antithesis between modernity and community that had become a fixed habit of sociological thought.

For Anderson, the forms of narration that shape both historical pasts and immediate presents in national imaginings also, and distinctively, link individuals into a seriality, a sequence of events, which has continuity and temporal depth but, at first glance, no particular intensity. But through the narrativization of routine, and ritual recognitions of similitude, the ever-present "now" of daily life is seeded with markers of continuity with an immemorial past and co-presence with a body of anonymous others, which grant it meaning (Anderson 1991: 22–36). The diverse genres of realist novel, newspaper report, and even ethnography and government document foster these affects, these imaginings of commonality and continuity, and, allow all, in their perusal of the daily newspaper, their reading of an account of their *own* manners and morals, or a novel of secret deeds and dark corners, to feel connected to distant events and centers of power and to a shared—and yet particular—past which stamps its seal on the individual's identity.

The insights promised by Anderson's twin focus on the production and the meaning of circulating texts, and their evocation of belonging to communities in time, were rapidly taken up in diverse attempts to grapple with the particularities of this modern form of imagined *community*—at once distant and abstract, and physically proximate and even violent in its purchase on the individual and consciousness. Thus, Bruce Kapferer wrote in 1988 that he adopted Anderson's account of "print-capitalism" as the "making of folk-knowledge into common knowledge" in order to help explain certain dynamics of Sinhala nationalism "because this is exactly what happened" (1988: 94). Edward Said, speaking

to an audience of anthropologists in 1987, said that "nationalism, resurgent or new, fastens on narratives for structuring, assimilating, or excluding one or another version of history [and] Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* drives the point home attractively" (Said 1988: 222). Writing with more of a concern for disciplinary developments within linguistic anthropology, Susan Gal identified "an emerging concern with the symbolic, linguistic aspects of power, domination, and global political economy, reflecting a move as much by neo-Marxists scholars toward symbolism and discourse, as by symbolic anthropologists toward questions of power," all of which was part of a general theoretical shift which sought to overcome normative separations between the conceptual and the material that had been associated with structuralism (Gal 1989: 345-6). And Gal, too, found the *Imagined Communities* thesis persuasive as an account of language-politics, highlighting an aspect of political practice inferior to linguistic groups that had been neglected by previous theoretical accounts (356; cf. Herzfeld 1997).

Ultimately, *Imagined Communities* arrived on the scene just as both political and literary repertoires of representation that involved the partitioning out "interest" on the basis of class or ethnicity, or the mimetic promises of formal representation in a political system, all seemed to be under strain—the strain was theoretical, as new social movements pressed for recognition and inclusion on new grounds, but also geopolitical (which is another story). In fact, *Imagined Communities* achieved a *methodological* turn away from reliance on formal political mechanisms of representation to define and summarize communities—since this is the form in which modern communities so often *misrecognize* themselves, or which they seek as the ultimate ratification of their prior existence—and offered an avenue of study which could explore how communities, social groupings, are cultivated in the work of the imagination, not only in the categories and procedures of state recognition and representation.

Anderson's notion that "the generation of the impersonal will is, I think, better sought in the diurnal regularities of the imagining life" (1991: 35 fn. 63) than in the formalities of political representation or even in the abstract partitioning of identity and interest on material bases, thus promised specific methodological tools for studying the *connection* between the mundane routines of modern life and the largest claims of collective belonging. In this, Anderson's methodological innovations tapped into historical and methodological currents which he could not have foreseen, and the importance of his arguments was realized not so much in accounts of nationalism as in challenges to the very sociological importance of that category in a globalized, networked world.

Thus, in the early 1990s, struggling to understand both migration and new ethnic formations, Arjun Appadurai explicitly picked up the thesis of print-capitalism and tried to renovate it for a less bounded, more mobile age, writing that what characterized social and political formations in his present was the effect of "migration and media ... on the work of the imagination" (Appadurai 1996: 3). As Rapport and Dawson wrote, at the same time and in much the same terms:

the migration of information, myths, languages, music, imagery, cuisine, décor, costume, furnishing, above all, persons ... brings even the most isolated areas into a cosmopolitan global framework of socio-cultural interaction. ... The world can no longer be divided up into framed units, territorial segments, and the like, [the inhabitants of] each [sharing] a distinctive, exclusive culture, a definite approach to life; rather, everyone is now caught between local origins and a cosmopolitan society. (1998: 23, internal citations omitted)

What seemed to characterize post-modern, post-Soviet, and post-colonial politics, for these writers at least (though they are exemplary of a certain trend in anthropology of the time), was fragmentation and flux, an ever-moving exchange and flow of people, goods, and ideas on routes that could no longer be mapped by the firm certainties of a more cartographical science.

Confronted with the real plurality of social movements and forms of collective identification of the late twentieth century, and with the apparent decline of the post-war, and postcolonial, "international system" it seemed analytically precise and even theoretically innovative to speak of any such fixed reference-points as nation, identity, or belonging as "imagined" entities, as fictive products of the (ensocialized) mind, on the terms that Anderson had offered. Moreover, the ways people were linking together across borders and shaping their collective movements were not based on the kind of material connections that had been the basis for asserting class or interest-based solidarities. Rather, forms of media—not merely conveying information, but whole cultural complexes of meaning and image—were prominent in the new world system that confronted anthropologists.

In the face of the waning coherence of anthropology's fictions of bounded "culture" and the simultaneously increasing prominence of mediated representations of culture and commonality, the ability to incorporate into ethnographic study forms of discursive production, circulating media and images, shared imaginaries of distant lands and other mores, and analysis of films, advertisements, newspapers, radio, or cassette-sermons, seemed to mark a new methodological opening. What anthropological theory turned to, that is, facing the waning of its fictions, was more fiction—the imagination and its products took on a centrality and a salience in the thinking of political anthropologists that was decisively novel, even on the terms previously mapped out by the study of symbols and forms of hegemonic incorporation. Imagination in political anthropology was, we might say, "at the end of an era," and served to "press back against the pressure of reality" (Stevens 1951: 22, 36).

The Reality of Imagination

There was a fundamental ambiguity in the notion of imagination as it was appropriated into ethnographic studies from the literary and more historical-sociological purities in which it had been first developed as an analytic term-of-

art, by Anderson and others. How to incorporate analysis and interpretation into the same frame of study? Did imagination merely refer to the means by which large-scale social formations were constructed, the media and material infrastructures (of communications and transport) that linked diverse people together over time and space? Or could it also refer to the substance of that which was imagined, the meaningful form and tangible, albeit literary, reality of narrative forms and of styles of articulation that seemed to summarize whole collective situations?

For the most part, scholars stayed close to the terrain marked out by "print capitalism," focusing on the materiality of the networks in which products of the imagination flow. However, Appadurai's (1996) attention to the "work of the imagination" linked up with a new ethnographic sensitivity to the prior discursive formation of our field sites and locations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1993). A related turn to studying "publics" and their practices of media, politics, and belonging focused on "infrastructures of communication, each with its own qualities, extending beyond printed texts to include parliament buildings, political rallies, literary salons, teashops and coffee houses, neighbourhood 'interkom' networks, movie theaters, and virtual worlds" (Cody 2011: 47, internal citations omitted). Only some of the work in this vein examines in detail the *content* of these imaginative products, or even their meaningful *form*, in order to ask questions about the narrative structures or the imaginative power fuelling the embrace of these sites of mediated sociality as politically important and relevant (for an exemplary study attentive to content, form, and their political effects in the imagination, see Kaplan 2009).

A parallel, and equally biased toward the material, sense of the "imagination" and its role in reproducing large-scale forms of politics was introduced with the concept of "the imagined state" by Akhil Gupta (Gupta 1995—the 1995 article is now incorporated into his book-length analysis of bureaucracy in India, Gupta 2012). At first, this concept relied for its critical force on a notion of ideational or conceptual deixis more than any critical study of imaginative forms, beyond the fact of their circulation and tangible presence in ethnographic contexts. Indeed, Gupta was in some senses picking up on the newly available but simplified use of "imagined" in anthropology; when people talked about the state, or the nation, or tourists from Bombay, or anything that was not immediately present, the anthropologist was now licensed to speak of the larger-scale abstraction of which they speak as something "imagined," and thus incorporate it into local ethnography. While such imagined realities might be admitted to be very powerful, shaping and orienting political practice, the focus in this new sense of imagined was on the *construction* of the totality and its *real absence*. The state, the promise of development, or the nation, in such work, for ethnographic purposes was *only* imagined.

Gupta, in this latter vein, initially frames his primary question as that of the construction of large-scale, fictive, absent entities: "What is the process whereby the 'reality' of translocal entities comes to be experienced?" he asks, with significant scare quotes (Gupta 1995: 388–9). His original article can thus serve to

mark a contrast between the "imagined communities" approach to novel forms of translocal solidarity as they are conjured forth and made real in literary forms and genres, and an account (Gupta's) which emphasizes how entities that remain unreal are ingredients in local-level action, in part through the now quasi-miraculous appearance of circulating discourses from some higher, "imagined" level.

Gupta pays attention to the presence and discursive content of periodicals, images, and other circulating representations, as they were received and reproduced in local interactions, in order to achieve ethnographic purchase on something which otherwise might be thought of as outside the frame of investigation—the state. The ideas held about, and hopes invested in, the distant *sarkaar* (or government) that he elicited from local informants in an Indian village were shown to be deeply affected by both the content and sheer presence of mediated images of state officials and distant locations (in the form of televisual appearances of prime ministers and politicians, and newspaper reports of their words, which together gave the state a false immediacy in the lived world of the village). Gupta emphasizes, however, a contradiction between such "imaginary" representations of the state and local practice. The state was imagined to be vertical, encompassing, centralized, distant, and just, as opposed to the local reality, which was immediate, enmeshed in other relations of kinship and caste, partial, corrupt, violent, and capricious.

The "imagined state" in this sense for Gupta is the effect of the processes of circulation and discourse that make it appear as if there is a center to political life, when in fact there is no such thing. Moreover, its "imaginary" qualities are just that—they exist only in opposition to local reality, and the "reality" of the state is kept, rigorously, in scare quotes. What Gupta did not do in this initial approach to the political imagination was reach into the centers of production of this imagination—wherever they may be, in novels or in capital cities—to measure its formalities not against *local* reality but against its own narrative forms and generic procedures (see Abu-Lughod 2005). More recently, Gupta has drawn on a novel, *Raag Darbari*, about local bureaucratic practice to complement his ethnographic interests in the force of state developmentalism in the everyday lives of poor farmers, and to ratify the generality of the discourse of corruption as a feature of the Indian state imagination. The wide circulation of discourses of corruption is now adduced as something which is both local and general, no longer only the direct experience of poor people suffering under unaccountable officials; it is a structuring feature of the stories that Indians tell themselves about the state, while remaining a means of marking "the state's" practical distance, as an imagined thing, from any local reality (Gupta 2012: 136).

Despite this turn to meaning and the force of official (and international) as well as literary discourses about the state, the task that Gupta sets himself is still to reach some level of ethnographic specificity where the state, as it is imagined, might melt away into immediacy and presence with the *real people* who are ultimately invoked as anthropology's distinctive source and ethical aim. Gupta's analysis simultaneously embraces imagination as a critical and distancing term—for the purchase on abstraction and on large-scale forces that it can provide—and yet

conditions this set of insights as something which must always meet the test of a more fundamental reality—one not “merely” imagined—in the lives of subaltern citizens and marginal peoples. An anthropology of imaginary entities must guard, he cautions, against the danger of a fundamental separation from the really real of daily life and the ordinary violence that is otherwise unreported and “slips beneath the radar of politicians, academic, journalists, and concerned citizens” (2012: 137). It is characteristic of the dueling aims of his analysis that Gupta both uses novels and other texts to gain insight into the tropes and interpretations that give form to this imagined reality of the state, but at the same time moves away from textuality and meaningful form in order to seek the hidden reality buried under the prolixity of this imagination.

As Thomas Blom Hansen has recently commented on Veena Das’s similar elaboration of “the ordinary” as a testing ground for the ethical truth of anthropology:

In this move, actual speech, public statements, and ritualized conduct by those who claim social or cultural authority in the communities studied, or those who just speak and banter, may be relegated to a realm of the mediated, even not so ordinary. Only those properly equipped ... seem able to decipher the whispers and murmurs of the ordinary. (Hansen 2012: 20)

But further—as Hansen’s own exemplary ethnography of contemporary Indian political life in South Africa amply demonstrates, by incorporating analysis of films and plays, local newspapers and high-state legitimations—the realm of the mediated or “not so ordinary” is precisely a prior condition for “speech, public statements, and ritualized conduct,” and the tropes, forms, genres, and techniques of social description are as much a part of the analysis—and the means by which authority itself is claimed—as the only apparently absent reality to which they refer.

I don’t mean to mount a simple-minded defense of textuality as a method, nor certainly does Hansen. Indeed, textuality is a seductive danger in anthropology—the Western reliance on authorized, written, forms of knowledge-production (and more recent love of “discourses”) can often lead unwary anthropologists into inserting proxies for presence into ethnographic accounts, since such (written) proxies appear more authoritative than the fragile evidence of ethnography. This is a real danger, since such reliance on the written and authoritative interferes with the trust and listening necessary to capture any other register of knowledge and being in the world (Bonneman and Hammoudi 2011). Most problematically, the anthropologist can end up divorced both from everyday life and from the power relations that provide him with his own perspective.

However, circulating texts and media are not merely proxies; they are also literary forms, vehicles of meaning which are diversely seized, interpreted, and reshaped, and which gain much of their power from the very imagined reality that they make available, one which is not always (or even often) tested against hard local realities—by the readers and consumers of these imaginative products least of all. It is by evading the very possibility of comparison that they become

structuring elements in daily life, and imaginative realities. The problems presented by mediation in ethnographic practice, thus, seem less urgent to me than the risk that we might run by sacrificing the social imagination and its forms as real objects of ethnographic engagement. It is my argument that by sacrificing imagination, we would risk losing our ability to trace the ways in which the “large-scale” with its authority is in fact received, constructed, taken for granted, and itself imaginatively present in everyday life, often through the reuse, recirculation, and transformation of high political terms and concepts—like neoliberal, or accountability, or corruption—in the service of new projects of solidarity and belonging, and of imaginative affiliation with some powerful center, often enough at that center itself. (As a sidebar, this is a complexity of location—being at the center—that has seldom been addressed as an epistemological problem in anthropology, or as a result of processes of the imagination, but it is I think a simple enough observation that some locations are not imagined to be central even by those who live there, while others are very much at the center of things, while remaining inveterately local, and this is an imaginative difference that matters to any anthropology of politics).

Moreover, the effort to maintain some understanding of the “large-scale” as a political framework in which moral projects are constructed and individual identities achieved, and made meaningful, by no means entails dispensing with the traditional anthropological concern with persons, men and women working, thinking, writing, and talking in the flow and flux of social life. Creative constructions of self and other—even the most idiosyncratic or heroic—depend on shared horizons of meaning and collective constructions of the good and desirable, and this is the avenue by which a specifically political anthropology comes to deal with them. These shared experiential and interpretive horizons, though imaginary, cannot simply be “imagined” in the sense of “made up,” out of whole cloth: they must be said, inscribed, echoed, and rehearsed into existence, in the complex play of social dramas and in the diurnal regularities—including the dreams and fancies of the night—of the imagining life.

Far from being “mere” imagination, what I am seeking to define here is that aspect of imagination by which forces which extend beyond the scope of any individual power come to take on form and become socially real; that dual aspect of reality and fantasmatic appearance of which we might justly say, “what is in white heat imaginative reality is in cold imaginary phantasm” (Blackmur 1980: 199). Neither just the obverse of cold, material reality, nor some foundational fantasy that refers back to an inaccessible and primary realm of unsymbolized real relations, what comes to attention in this way is that aspect of the political life that is urgent and meaningful in a collective moment of concern, and often is only grasped in fleeting shorthand or in compressed reference to some larger and absent reality (hence its often highly liturgical, and religious, appearance in “ritualized conduct”). The elements of this imagination wax and wane depending on the needs of the day, may be more or less present in a given moment, and benefit from ritual concentration as much as from misdirection and subtle reference. Rather

like irruptive fantasy, this social imagination can transport you elsewhere while also maintaining its connection—through symbolic associations and stylistic compression—to the real-world and interpersonal context in which it occurs, and to which it returns, and from which its interpretation gains all its force and relevance (Borneman 2011).

In conclusion, then, I wish to explore briefly the resources which may remain available for an account of this “imaginative reality”—what Geertz called the “literariness of real life” (Geertz 1983: 47)—as a *political* imagination, fostered by certain literary forms and decisive in both anthropology and everyday life for any understanding of others.

The Moral Imagination

Responding to Trilling’s fragmentary, posthumously-published thoughts on anthropological difference and the literary imagination, Clifford Geertz lamented that we so often are left, in our attempts to imagine other ways of living, with the pleasing but wholly unsystematic path of empathy (Geertz 1983). But, as he pointed out, in fact there is something in the literary forms and forms of life of others which does make them comparable, in a fairly systematic fashion but at the cost of illuminating all the dark and unexamined corners of our own moral life, revealing the taken-for-grantedness of all our own most precious forms (this is, of course, the great liberal and Boasian project of anthropological relativism). The partialness and aestheticism of such an account of difference and relativity, particularly the limited, one-sided accounting of the costs and who bears them, and the implication that others are different and static and “we” anthropologists are those who change, have been justly criticized by postcolonial scholars (D. Scott 1999).

But there is something to be said for the idea that other, more strange, forms of symbolic compression can illuminate that which is elided in those which are more familiar; the encounter with other interpretations of a future, its rewards and risks, can force a recalibration of our own. This does not have to take the extreme form of Evans-Pritchard’s “Nuer are fortunate” to have its relativistic force. One doesn’t need to be a romantic to see in the tightly-written topography of local places, way-stations and market-towns, of an eighteenth-century map, a different imaginative vision than that which structures a map of modern freeways. The mistake would lie in assuming that the imaginations fostered by the older map were any more local, bounded, shaped by place than the present-day ones—or, as Trilling sharply corrects a misapprehension about Jane Austen’s moral world, that it was “much more abundantly provided with trees than with people, a world in whose green shade life for a moment might be a green thought” (Trilling 1976: 250). It is good to know what towns you’re passing through, if you’re passing through them slowly; Trilling’s point is that slowness is no guarantee of moral rectitude, nor does it imply greater density of connection or more authentic experience.

Likewise, the imagination that sees in roads, trucks, and the transport of both heavy goods and tourists a promise of development is no less true to the local concerns of a community than that which seeks to defend the “pristine” environment and culture of the hills. Livelihoods give people a stake; hopes give them a future; imagination knits this together through repertoires of story-telling, employment of self and other, and projections of unseen totalities in order to shape a politics both local and large-scale. The community that developmental visions seek to make prosperous and grow is just as real as that which fosters traditions and remains tied to place and the land—which means that it is equally imagined. The tropes are different; the hopes are too—what *community* means to each itself will change. But the role of the imagination and of the works of the imagination is equally important for each, particularly (as Gupta’s more recent work reminds us) when modernist dreams of participation are systematically fostered in both local and central locations, through democratic representation and techniques of publicity. But the style, the particular scope of a ritual, the reach of a demand for developmental goods—addressed to a local bureaucrat or to a national journalist or a visiting anthropologist—does matter, as does the kind of community that it invokes, whether as a constituent part of a large-scale political project of belonging and representation, or as a bulwark against power and against its cultural forms.

In either case, what is key for anthropological understanding is the symbolic form and narrative context in which the imagination takes shape, through systematic forms of compression, reliance on words that mean more than they at first appear to, and the use of figures, tropes, and conventions.

To understand this final, key aspect of the political imagination—which is also, always, a moral and moralizing imagination, of who and what should be given a share in a relevant world—I am drawn to T.O. Beidelman’s definition of the imagination, which he ties fundamentally to storytelling and more particularly fable-making: “I use the term [imagination] in a restricted sense to mean the picturing of characters and events in the mind’s eye in a manner or form resembling, but significantly different and removed from, reality. . . . Few such clear cut and enduring stereotypes are formed in real life” (1980: 33). There is a significant defamiliarization that comes with such compression, but which also produces a gain in interpretive power. The stories that interested him were, he wrote, “odd, not in the sense that they do not represent recognized characteristics, feelings, motives, and roles, but in the sense that, whereas in real life these cannot all be properly judged and met by the same person or in one situation, here they are clearly defined and resolved.” He continued, however, to mark the unreality of this moral imagination: “Indisputable, unambiguous moral judgments and permanent resolutions must remain imaginary so long as a person lives” (33).

This final sense of “imaginary” is important for Beidelman’s argument, and my own—for if such indisputable, unambiguous moral judgments are imaginary, inaccessible, for any one individual, they are precisely the register in which society itself becomes real, for good or for ill, in everyday life. It is the insistent sound of the collective which is heard in such moments of judgment, not the murmur of the

ordinary and ineluctably human. As Beidelman goes on to explore, the imagination in his sense is not something opposed to reality but something superadded to it as an interpretive guide to real life. Highways do not "bring" development; tourism has costs as well as benefits; media depictions of what is going on "over there" can be abusive and damaging as much as they can dazzle and scintillate. But such imaginative projections are part of real life, they act back in the situations that matter to us as anthropologists, and also form part of our own apparatus of understanding. Or, as the poet says, imagination presses back, "against the pressure of reality" (Stevens 1954: 36). And there is nothing mere about that.

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Chapter 12

Do Forest Children Dream of Electric Light? An Exploration of Matses Children's Imaginings in Peruvian Amazonia

Camilla Morelli

I think the reason that boredom is the principle affliction of school children in the United States ... is that they are bored with the artificial world. The artificial world is boring.

Margaret Mead 1977: 22, italics in original

Concrete is great. I love concrete.

Paloma, six-year-old Matses girl



Figure 12.1 Iquitos

Source: Drawing by Paloma, six years old.