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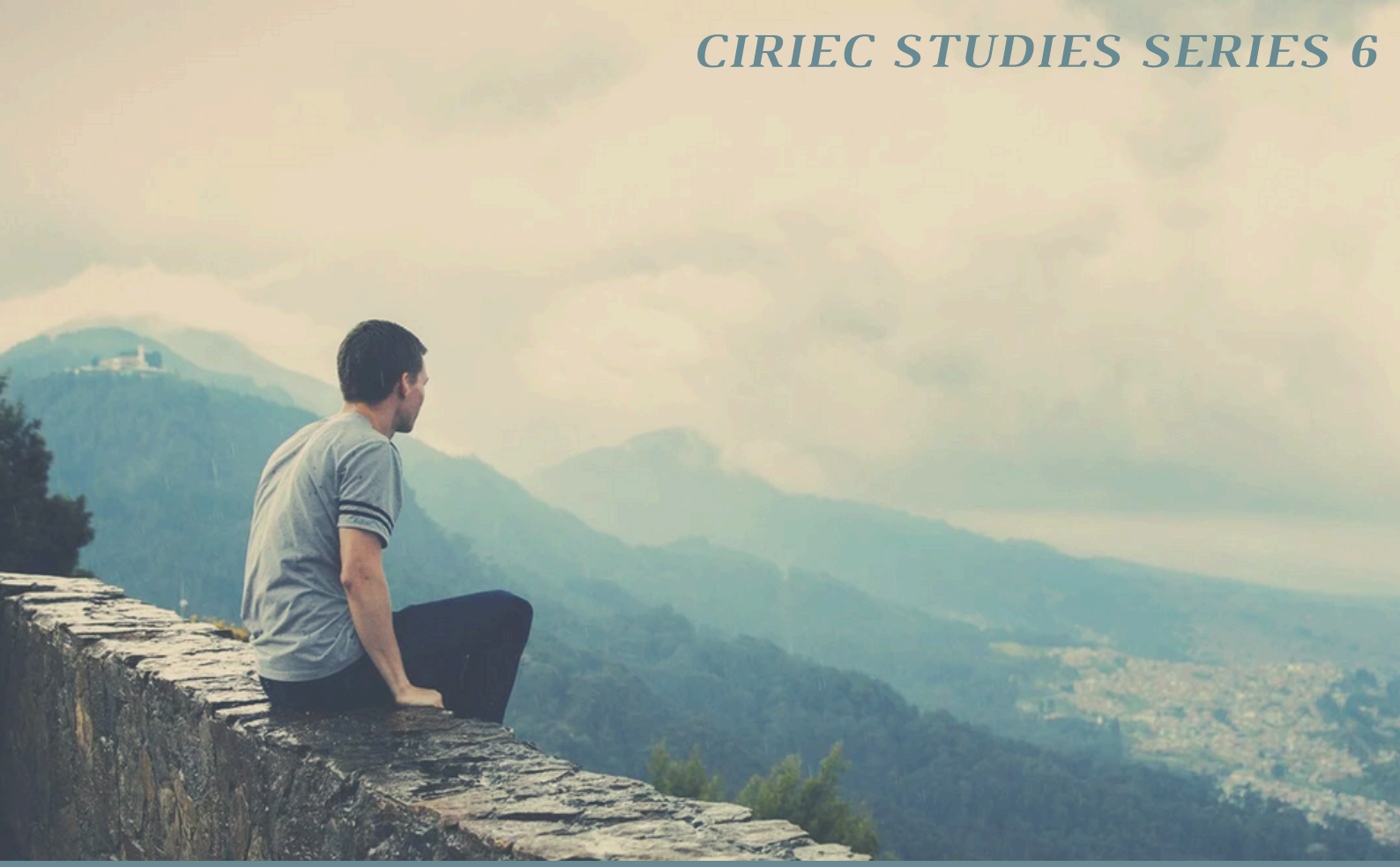

FUTURE OUTLOOKS

IMAGINING A DIFFERENT WORLD: THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF SSE RESEARCHERS

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FUTURE OUTLOOKS

Imagining a Different World: The Ethical Responsibility of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) Researchers

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The social imaginary can be defined as a vision of the world specific to a society, a set of representations that provides a collective identity and which, by demarcating what is possible or impossible to do, delimits a scope of action (Taylor, 2004). Opening up a different kind of imaginary means enabling different kinds of action. If we want to preserve our planet's habitability, we need to break out of the production-driven and growth-oriented imaginary established by capitalism. This capitalist instituted imaginary is challenged by the new imaginary of economic alternatives, in which supporters of degrowth as well as ecological planning are striving to bring about a world of greater solidarity, ecology and democracy. In a context of crises and one in which capitalism is contested, what is the relationship between the imaginary and the SSE? This is the question that this multi-disciplinary collective work, bringing together researchers of different nationalities, has set out to answer. On completion of this dense and abundant work, what stands out? The first thing is undoubtedly the complementarity of these various approaches.

Complementarity that enables circumscription of a research field

These ten texts are all of different nature. This lack of uniformity does not make it easy for the reader, but, on the other hand, it makes it possible to cover a broad spectrum of possible relationships between the imaginary and the SSE. Indeed, this collective work covers all the following: how narratives can mobilise SSE organisations (in the first part), the role of utopia in local solidarity initiatives (in the second part), the place of art – in this case the blues and cinema – in the construction of a solidarity imaginary (in the third part) and the necessity to deconstruct economic myths generated by orthodox economic science (in the fourth part). These four avenues of analysis are certainly not the only ones possible for exploring the links between the SSE and the imaginary, but they do enable us to set the initial markers for a new field of research, all the more so as the authors brought together by

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CIRIEC International propose theoretical and empirical approaches, combine Anglo-Saxon references and French-language works, analyse utopias and dystopias alike, develop highly rational approaches to utopia or, on the contrary, question the links between utopia and individual identities (chapter 1), but also between utopia and organisational identities (chapter 3) or sectorial identities (chapter 4), not forgetting the relationships between utopia and cultural identities (chapter 7) or social identities (chapter 6). This complementarity of the approaches highlights different facets of the links between the imaginary and the SSE and reveals just how heuristic this field of research can be. However, while the diversity of the approaches brought together illustrates the richness of a field of research that has yet to be fully explored, it also highlights a number of differences of opinion.

Convergences and divergences

The aim of this work is to invite researchers to explore the relationships between the imaginary and the SSE, not to propose a single, coherent doctrine. So, while there are some points of convergence, it is not surprising that there are also some points of divergence. Let us start with the convergences. The first is massive and is connected to the reason which incited the authors to write their text: the ecological emergency calls for a change of economic model, which, according to the contributors, is only possible if we develop a new imaginary, a new representation of the world and the economy. A new world demands new solutions. New solutions require effort with regard to imagination, a new imaginary that authorises unprecedented experiments enabling combination of democratic demands, ecological urgency and creation of social utility. The second convergence very closely linked to the first is also often explicitly formulated by the authors: there are alternatives. Contrary to what Margaret Thatcher, neo-liberalism is not the be all and end all of the matter. Admittedly, there is no historical determinism that leads inevitably to the end of capitalism, but the need to face up to ecological and social problems is producing social innovations that are outlining paths of resilience. These paths are not definitive, nor do they all necessarily lead to sustainable solutions, but they all show that there are different ways of doing business. It is no longer a question of remaining locked in the narrow paths of a limited rationality defining a sole and single possible path, but of trusting collective intelligence to constantly adapt to changes in the environment we are modifying. As so eloquently put by Laigha Young (chapter 7): let us improvise! Much less explicit, but just as present in the writings brought together in this collective work, multi-disciplinarity is practiced by all the authors, who enrich their original discipline with contributions to political philosophy and/or the epistemology of complexity. To think differently, it is necessary to step outside one's discipline. This work illustrates a strong hypothesis expressed in an issue of a CNRS journal devoted to epistemology: inter-disciplinarity implies indiscipline (Hermès, No. 67, 2013). These three convergences form a common base, which in no way precludes divergences. The first is the reference to degrowth and post-growth. All the authors talking about the SSE support the need to act for a sustainable transition, but a transition towards what?

Some texts explicitly cover degrowth and post-growth (chapters 3 and 10) or quote authors who are specialists in degrowth (chapter 5), but the others do not, as if the local roots of the SSE - its pragmatic desire to stick as closely as possible to territorial developments - prevented it from recognising itself in a prescriptive political project. The second notable difference concerns space. As illustrated in chapter one, SSE players and the researchers who study them do not seem to have the same understanding of the configuration of the arenas on which social innovations act. Are we talking about singular places, re-enchanted by utopia, heterotopias as Foucault would say, which offer an escape from economic globalisation (chapters 3, 4 and 5) or are we talking, on the contrary, about arenas of conflict, counter-public spaces where citizens develop their autonomy by creating spaces for struggle within democracies plagued by the far right (chapter 2 and chapter 10)? Finally, the third and last major difference: what is the core value of the SSE – is it autonomy (chapters 2 and 10), solidarity (chapter 6) or cooperation (chapters 5, 7 and 9)? These divergences, and others that the attentive reader may have spotted, underline the diversity of possible approaches to the emerging subject regarding the study of the relationship between the imaginary and the SSE. And yet, despite the diversity of perspectives offered, there are still a few blind spots that need to be clarified.

Two blind spots: the rise of the far right and digital servitude

Many of the authors in this book cite Paul Ricoeur's book Ideology and Utopia to define utopia as one of the components of the social imaginary. This is a relevant but partial interpretation. Indeed, according to Ricoeur, utopia should not be thought of in itself, but in relation to another component of the social imaginary: ideology. According to the philosopher, ideology and utopia are ternary structures that are symmetrically positioned and oppose each other. At an initial level, which he calls pathological, ideology is a dissimulation, a distortion of reality, while utopia is an escape from reality. At a second level, the function of ideology is to legitimise established authority, at the risk of distorting reality. This is a risk that utopia fights, because it undermines the credibility of authority. At a third level, ideology is a matrix for social integration, while utopia is a form of social subversion. What is at stake is that there is a form of tension, an unstable equilibrium, at each of these levels. Striking a balance between utopia and ideology strengthens democracy, but if the imbalance is too great, democracy falters. In such a case, nostalgia and myth come into play (see Table 1). Indeed, according to the analytical grid shown in this table, the democracies of the European Union have entered a downward spiral: the integrating conflict between utopia and ideology is gradually giving way to a destructive antagonism between myth and nostalgia. To explain, in European democracies, the civil arena - that of citizens' solidarity initiatives - is healthy, but the public arena (where public opinion is formed) and the political arena (where decisions are taken) are sick. In the political arena, the elites have been unable to think of an alternative to liberalism since the fall of communism. They clash over the possible variants of the ideology (from ultra-liberalism to social liberalism), variants which are not equivalent, but which in no way constitute

an alternative to this ideology. As a result, in the public arena, alternative proposals are being developed that are described as populist and aimed at all those who reject the ideology that has been transformed into a myth.

Table 1: The four-stroke symbolic engine of democracy

Nostalgia and myth

Nostalgia and utopia challenge the current order. Yet, while utopia is a forward-looking project rooted in the past, nostalgia is a complete rejection of the present that looks to the past. Indeed, etymologically, nostalgia is an aching to return to the past, but the *Trésor de la Langue Française* dictionary stipulates that it is also a pathological disorder which, in the nineteenth century, meant "a melancholic regret for a thing, a state, an existence that one has had or known, a desire to return to the past".

In its usual sense, a myth is a fabulous tale involving supernatural beings (gods, demons or heroes). In 1957, R. Barthes took up C. Levy Strauss's idea of a link between myth and ideology.[1] For him, a myth is a symbolic operation that aims to maintain an ideology by naturalising it, "The development of a second semiological system will enable myth to escape the dilemma: forced to reveal or liquidate the concept, it will naturalise it. This is the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature" (p. 237). [...] "This is the very approach of bourgeois ideology" (p. 251).
Myth is a secretion of ideology that aims to keep things as they are. It therefore helps to combat nostalgia, which is itself all the stronger when the utopia is weaker.

The utopian dimension of myth and the mythical dimension of utopia

Every utopia has a mythical dimension that aims to make people believe that the desirable future is already a desirable reality. This is what Ricoeur calls the "pathology" of utopia. Similarly, the strength of a myth lies in its utopian dimension. It only succeeds in naturalising the present by emphasising and explaining current promises. This is why myth is often invested in by activists who seek to take the promises it contains at face value. This dual polarity is generally beneficial: it links utopia to the present and opens up myth to the future. But it can also be dangerous when the myth becomes so powerful that it attracts a strong militant energy which, having been exhausted in trying to make the promises of the myth come true, fails to build an alternative utopia. As a result, those who do not identify with the myth are condemned to desert the public arena and/or give in to the siren song of nostalgia.

Four stroke

The integrative conflict between utopia and ideology energises democracy, with today's utopia destined to become tomorrow's ideology. However, if utopia disappears, it is replaced, in the symbolic order, by nostalgia. It is then fought by myth. These are the four symbolic pistons of democracy.

[1] Yet, the intrinsic value attributed to myth stems from the fact that the events, which are supposed to take place at one point in time, form a permanent structure. It refers simultaneously to the past, the present and the future. A comparison will help to clarify this fundamental ambiguity. *Nothing resembles mythical thinking more than political ideology*. In today's society, perhaps this has only replaced that (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 228-231).

These propositions look to the past, a golden age that needs to be rediscovered, nostalgia for the happy days when the world was stable. This nostalgia becomes xenophobic because it compensates for economic insecurity with security of identity. As a result, it is rightly opposed by the European elites. In the absence of a new utopia[2], these elites are proposing, for 2030, a new European myth named, by the President of the European Commission, the European Green Deal (involving green growth based on a dual ecological and digital transition) which is supposed to mobilise European citizens. This myth has the particularity of combining liberal ideology, technological determinism and a utopian dimension (reconciling the economy and ecology). This utopian dimension is so strong that many activists mistake the bubble of the sustainable development myth for the light illuminating the ecologist utopia. Yet, the very name of this project shows that it does not embody a new European utopia, but rather the Europeanisation of an American ideology. However, this global ideology, embodied in the myth of the European Green Deal, is not matched by any utopia known to the general public. As a result, those who have no other future other than the uncertainty of an unstable world that they do not recognise and that does not recognise them turn away from political life and/or seek reassurance in the arms of nostalgia embodied by the parties of the far right. The latter skilfully play on the rejection of the inegalitarian model promoted by the elites, on fears of the future and on a sentiment of confusion (Corcuff, 2021) that glorifies a past marked by the Cold War, decolonisation and the armed violence of extremist groups, while disregarding historical facts.

Re-thinking the imaginary of the SSE therefore means not only highlighting the links between social experimentation and utopia, but also underlining how this new imaginary is invisible because it is doubly opposed by the instituted imaginary of capitalism and the regressive nostalgia of the far right. This regressive nostalgia develops because the future is clouded, but also because the present is unstable: it is unstable due to ecological and economic crises, unstable due to wars and the widespread rearmament of the planet, but also unstable due to the lack of credible information. A quotation from H. Arendt perfectly explains the current dynamic:

> *"What allows a totalitarian dictatorship or any other dictatorship to reign is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? When everyone lies to you all the time, the result is not that you believe the lies, but that nobody believes anything anymore.*
>
> *This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and so a lying government has to constantly rewrite its own history. As a citizen, you are not on the receiving end of just one lie - which you may continue to believe for the rest of your life - you are on the receiving end of many, depending on how the political wind is blowing.*

[2] The European Union is in fact the daughter of utopia, the daughter of all the writings which, from Kant to Victor Hugo, via Rousseau and the Duke of Sully, called for perpetual peace and an end to wars between European nations.

A population that can no longer believe anything cannot form an opinion. They are deprived not only of their capacity to act, but also of their capacity to think and to judge, and you can do what you like with such a people".[3]

The ease with which the likes of personalities such as Milei, Trump or Meloni manage to convince a majority of voters proves - alas! - the point of H. Arendt. However, in our collective work, there is little discussion of digital connection tools. Yet these tools partly shape our imagination through what Morozov (2014) calls technological solutionism, the idea that the solution to all crises (economic, ecological and democratic) lies in technology, which, however, creates a present in which everything accelerates (Rosa, 2010). This digital urgency clashes with the ecological pace of living things. Life mutates, evolves and transforms over time, whereas economic pre-eminence on the short term tends to sacrifice biodiversity and the climate on the altar of profitability. The long-term evolution of living things is being called into question by short-term decisions that are leading to an unprecedented ecological disaster. We need to act quickly to preserve life while taking the time to build a sustainable society together. This contradiction is the central difficulty of all policies aimed at solving the ecological crisis.

Another considerable problem which players in the SSE striving to work towards a new imaginary come up against is digital connection. Indeed, the applications and software controlled by the GAFAM are slowly but surely leading us into an era of digital servitude[4] (Poitevin, 2020) in which the suspension of our personal data and the proliferation of algorithms are restricting our autonomy. Yet democracy, as chapters 2 and 10 of this work remind us, is precisely autonomy - auto (self) and nomos (norm, law). In a democracy, it's not God, the supreme leader or GAFAM that make the laws that govern us, but it is the people who make, unmake and remake the rules that enable them to live together. The more our choices depend on market algorithms, the more our political autonomy diminishes and the weaker democracy becomes.

In the end, the democratic autonomy so dear to Castoriadis (1975) is under a twofold threat: by xenophobic nostalgia which, in the absence of a visible utopia at European level, appears to many to be the only way of combating the myth of green capitalism; and by digital connection tools which speed up time, encourage misinformation and thus create digital servitude. These two threats combine and help to make invisible the emergence of a new social imaginary supported by the SSE, one in which there is a world that is more supportive, more ecological and more democratic, where citizens can freely organise themselves to find solutions to the problems they face.

As readers will have realised, pointing out the blind spots in this collective work is a way of emphasising that this book is not the end of the journey but the beginning of

[3] Source: https://www.les-crises.fr/une-archive-exceptionnelle-un-certain-regard-entretien-avec-hannah-arendt-1973/

[4] Digital servitude which is, at the same time, the fruit of our freedom, but also the product of a 'management of appropriation' of our personal data by the GAFAM (Guignard, Le Caroff, 2020).

an exploration. Our collective research has opened up a new field, but in no way claims to be exhaustive. On the other hand, this approach is also, and perhaps above all, an invitation to conduct research differently, to combine indiscipline (exploring new fields by combining different disciplines) and ethical responsibility (developing a public science that opens up the range of possibilities in the public arena). And what if, in the era of the Anthropocene, we were to collectively construct a new scientific imaginary?

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