Time is on Our Side: Rewriting the Space of Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

For C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination, when fully engaged, works as a lever for conceptualizing the relationship between personal interests, on one hand, and public concerns, on the other.[1] Imagining, in this context, refers to a process of articulation in which individuals take a social account of their individual relationship to systemic formations. Imagination is not a means of escape, but rather a way to connect and reconnect; private troubles become public issues. Combined with Louis Althusser's insight into the role ideology plays in representing the individual's "imaginary relationship" to social reality,[2] as well as Maxine Greene's thoughts on imagination as a means of empathizing,[3] sociological imagining becomes a means of reflexively peeling away ideological and psychological distortions that have been internalized at the level of commonsense so that we may understand more clearly the parameters of current institutional arrangements and their effect on the practice of imagining. This is not to imply, however, that there is a final state of "pure" understanding, realized through reflexive imagining. The most we can expect from this kind of process might be the recognition that ideological and psychological distortions are constantly in flux, creating new challenges and renewed opportunities for critical interventions. Of course, the process itself must be turned inward, just as it must, at some point, take a position from which to wage a critique.

A critical theory of the social imaginary positions these distortions as a form of domination, restricting and regulating the imagination through the imposition of rules, values, and norms. These articulations of domination help shape the psychic apparatus, which, in turn, conditions the imagination to censor itself or make "choices" as to what can be imagined. The self-censoring of imagination presents us with the central problem of developing alternative discourses and social movements that have the capacity to initiate paradigmatic shifts—what Gaston Bachelard (quoted in Aronowitz

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[1]. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[2]. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

[3]. Maxine Greene, *Releasing Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

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and Bratsis)[4] calls the forcing of "a profound revision of the categories of the real"—in the way we think collectively about what is real and therefore what is possible. Reality and possibility are linked and rewritten, in part, through the re- and de-construction of knowledge and the re-interpretation of experience. Acknowledging this articulation, Alvin Gouldner writes, "In the last analysis (sic), if a man (sic) wants to change what he knows he must change how he lives; he must change his praxis."[5] In the context of imagination, it is important to add to Gouldner's insight, "If a person wants to change his or her praxis, s/he must be able to imagine a life at one and the same time lived and not yet lived; s/he must move beyond the categories which have defined her."

The social imagination and the challenges of imagining a life lived and not yet lived need to be discussed through what I call the habitus of the hegemonic imaginary. Although hegemony is defined differently by different social and political theorists, Stephen Brookfield provides, for the purposes of this essay, a concise working definition of the concept:

> The term hegemony applies to the process whereby ideas, structures, and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good when in fact these ideas, structures, and actions are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well. The subtle cruelty of hegemony is that over time it becomes deeply embedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. One cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify a group or groups of people as the instigators of a conscious conspiracy to keep people silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony become part and parcel of everyday life—the stock opinions, conventional wisdoms, or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted.[6]

It is also important to include in this definition the fact that hegemony, although correctly associated with domination and oppression, is effective in normalizing social relations at the level of imagination, because it provides people with a high degree of comfort and familiarity. In short, hegemonic

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[4.] Stanley Aronowitz and Bratsis, Peter, "Situations Manifesto," *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* [Online], 1, 23 May 2005. (http://ojs.gc.cuny.edu/index.php/situations/issue/view/1).

[5.] Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books 1970), p. 491.

[6.] Stephen Brookfield, "Assessing Critical Thinking." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. No. 75, 17-29, 1997.

thinking often feels quite good, because it protects the thinker from appearing strange or different. When being different is what, in and of itself, exposes a person to ridicule, or imprisonment, or some other form of social exclusion, then for many the rational "choice" is to stay within acceptable conventions, even if to do so is to become complicit in one's own dehumanization. The habitus of the hegemonic imagination is implemented, in part, through three specific articulations of the hegemonic imagination— Educational Imagination, Political Imagination, and Aesthetic Imagination—along with the concomitant social-psychological conditions that inform their regulation. Each, as in Erich Fromm's work on authority or Max Weber's examination of capitalism, is an "ideal" type.[7] Each represents a particular historical articulation of imagination and therefore bears a unique set of restraints and opportunities. Each has a specific subject of contemplation and conceptualization—a content—yet in more general terms they share particular systems of form and function, or in Pierre Bourdieu's terminology,[8] a habitus.

THE HABITUS OF THE HEGEMONIC IMAGINARY

The hegemonic imagination's power to condition our waking dreams, while making a claim to limitless freedom, lays in the celebration of its perceived ability to produce an infinite variety of thoughts, ideas, dreams, and visions. Just as neoliberal discourses position "choice" and "opportunity" as correlates to freedom without examining the social, cultural, and political conditions that a priori regulate (i.e., normalize) the choices that can be made or the opportunities that can be had, imagination is too often conceptualized as the key to possibility, opening an infinite number of doors, all of which promise either (and most often) an escape from reality or a different perspective on it. Because the regulatory process does not determine imagination and its output, but rather suggests a field of infinitely structured and structuring structures, Bourdieu's conception of habitus is a vital, if insufficient concept, in understanding how the process of social imagining takes shape. Habitus, as he explains, are

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[7.] Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar and Reinhart, 1941); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

[8.] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. R Nice, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

> systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured struc-
> tures predisposed to function as…principles which generate and
> organize practices and representations that can be objectively
> adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious
> aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operation necessary
> in order to obtain them. Objectively "regulated" and regular
> without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they
> can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the
> organizing action of a conductor.[9]

Importantly, he goes on to say

> …the habitus, like every "art of inventing" is what makes it possi-
> ble to produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively
> unpredictable but also limited in their diversity. In short, being the
> product of a particular class of objective regularities, the habitus
> tends to generate all the "reasonable," commonsense," behaviors
> (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these reg-
> ularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because
> they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a partic-
> ular field, whose objective future they anticipate.[10]

Bourdieu's theory of habitus is helpful in thinking about the hegemonic
imagination, because it provides a way to understand how we can imagine a
seemingly infinite variety of possibilities, while at the same time be limited
in the variety of possibilities that can be imagined. It is in the fact of some
variation, some choice, that parameters of choice become difficult to locate
and even more difficult to change. This is where the theory of habitus is less
helpful, since it is first and foremost synchronic in orientation and as such
dismisses temporality as a force for changing the habitus of the hegemonic
imaginary.[11] Regardless of how varied the products of the hegemonic imag-
ination appear to be, they inevitably serve current institutional arrange-
ments and dominant ideological interests. When disruptions arise, words like
utopian, silly, impossible, crazy, and dream/er are used to describe the ideas
imagined or the imaginer him or herself, and this is done in order to remind
the imaginer that his or her thinking is outside of acceptable parameters.

9. Ibid., p. 53.

10. Ibid., p. 54.

11. Stanley Aronowitz, *How Class Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

Schooling, of course, is a major social institution that helps to construct the hegemonic imaginary, as is the "culture industry," dominant political ideologies, religious formations, nation-state allegiances, Enlightenment ideals, bureaucratic apparatuses, etc. The seemingly banal cultural practices of everyday life also shape the hegemonic imaginary, such as taking out the garbage for collection, getting cash at ATM machines, surfing the internet for news, and going to the gym. It is in the everyday that histories are rewritten or forgotten, economies are reproduced or resisted, and the social imagination finds its voice and materiality.

Currently and specifically, the hegemonic imaginary's habitus is animated by 1) a deep skepticism of social hope and institutional transformation; 2) a penchant for erasing and/or whitewashing the historical record; 3) a turn to reactive thinking combined with a hostility to reflexive thinking; 4) a synchronic literacy which refers to a way of reading the world as a pre-determined spatial reality; 5) a commitment to schooling as a necessary force for social, economic, cultural and political reproduction; 6) a determination to conceptualize freedom in opposition to regulation; and 7) a belief that fantasizing is the primary goal of imagination. It should be noted that these components are interrelated and it is the sum of the parts that determine the habitus of the hegemonic imagination.

1. 1) A deep skepticism of social hope and institutional transformation **and** 2) a penchant for erasing and/or whitewashing the historical record

Social hope references the historical truism that social disruption leads to new social theories. In a dialectical fashion, new social theories seed the soil of social disruption. In individual terms, Paulo Freire referred to this type of process as praxis.[12] Through praxis, he argued, people could come to a renewed and critical state of consciousness about what is collectively possible. Possibility as a referent for social hope, however, must remain rooted in reality without becoming trapped by it; or else risk producing, according to Emile Durkheim, anomie.[13] Ungrounded utopian thinking initiates an existential crisis by psychologically disengaging with reality, the subject of immanent critique and institutional transformation.

[12.] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Boulder, Co.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

[13.] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: a study in sociology* (New York: Free Press, 1951).

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Institutional transformation is a necessary dimension of social hope, because of the relationship between our thinking and the structures that shape it. As many studies have shown, humans, as with other animals, are deeply susceptible to the socializing and/or disciplinary force of institutional structures. Whether we are speaking about schools, governments, prisons, or economic structures, people consistently, as Weber observed, obey the institutional rules and regulations represented by those structures; but only when they are taught to trust and respect the authority of said institutions. When trust and respect wane, militaristic and propagandist strategies are generally employed in the service of maintaining the hegemonic order. Beyond the scope of this discussion, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that increases in militaristic and propagandist force often lead to the opposite effect of their intentions; that is, increases in force can and do lead to increases in resistance. Resistance, when crushed violently, reestablishes, at least for a period of time, what I have termed in a different discussion the "hegemony of peace."[14]

Current institutional and ideological arrangements instill and support a notion of authority that is animated by social fatalism; that is, the collective belief that the future will not be formed by individuals-in-solidarity through their social activities, but by invisible forces that individuals have little or no control over. Another way to say this is that social fatalism is the collective *disbelief* in the efficacy of individuals-in-solidarity to rewrite the future by taking control of the present. The phrase individuals-in-solidarity is more than a reference for individuals who are working together toward similar ends and possessing similar values. It is being used as a theoretical corrective to the individuation of individuals so rampant in pre-feminist thought. Building on Carol Gould's conception of "individuals-in-relation" or "social individuals,"[15] "individuals-in-solidarity" highlights the importance, not only of individuals' constituent nature to each other in a philosophical sense, but, in the context of social change, to the values that unite them against common enemies and toward some collective good; it focuses attention on the political contingencies of our social identities. It is a reference that also indicates the changing nature of our social relations.

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14. Eric J. Weiner, "Constructions of Innocence in Times of War: Breaking into the Hegemony of Peace." *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 9 (1), 33-43, 2005.

15. Carol C. Gould, R*ethinking Democracy: freedom and social cooperation in politics, economics and society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 105.

Solidarities change and, as a consequence, our identity as individuals-in-relation changes accordingly. Our relations determine how we imagine our individuality. The manner in which we come to imagine our individuality plays a significant role in how we think and act in the service of different political and social concerns.

Social fatalism is currently the dominant modality of institutional authority. The authority of social fatalism garners *en masse* uncritical respect via in-school and out-of-school pedagogies. Respect, as a consequence, becomes the copula of fatalism's authority. The key to understanding this aspect of the hegemonic imagination is to examine the pedagogical forces that link the authority of fatalism to its individual internalization at the affective and psychic levels.

When teachers represent history, for example, as a static discipline, they enact this type of pedagogy. The teaching of history takes on a conservative bent when it obfuscates how history is made and remade through human activity. This obfuscation is caused, in large part, by engaging history as a series of disconnected "official" events. Howard Zinn's *The People's History* is a corrective to this type of historicizing, as is Aronowitz's *How Class Works* and much of Robin D.G. Kelley's research on African American intellectual history.[16] These historical correctives, when taken up in a pedagogically critical way, challenge the authority of fatalism by showing clearly that people, when they work collectively not only against oppressive forces, but for an articulated alternative, change their social landscapes.

Labor, Civil Rights, Gay Rights, Black Power, and the Women's Movement are all examples of how social change occurs through collective action. Just as important, though, is the power these movements had at their zenith to restructure peoples' sense of not only what was possible, but of how to make it so. At both the affective and psychic levels, the Black Power and feminist movements also transformed the way in which many people—black, white, men, and women—*saw* themselves reflected back at them from the imagined minds of others. As Cooley's work suggests, transforming the social optic is a necessary step in rewriting the imagination's social script.[17] This

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[16.] Howard Zinn, *The People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2005); Aronowitz op. cit.; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Radical Black Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

[17.] Charles Horton Cooley, *Human nature and the Social Order*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1901).

perceptive process is not fatalistic, as history has shown; but, given the hegemony of fatalism's authority, it appears to be so.

These social movements, lest I be misunderstood, are not answers in and of themselves, to the problem of hegemony per se; they simply offer some concrete examples about how the social optic can, and indeed, did change. Now, was the "new" social optic simply a means to help establish a new hegemony rather than an example of people freeing themselves of hegemony all together? This gets to the theory of hegemony itself. Some theorists, like Althusser or Raymond Williams, position hegemony as not only unavoidable, but as a force of social cohesion which makes establishing a certain kind of commonsense as a necessary component of ideological transformation. From this perspective, counter-hegemony and the different forms of authority that help its establishment are positive forces in the transformation of social memory, institutional structures, and the more affective dimensions of transformation like our emotional investments, values, and how we see ourselves and each other.

This perspective needs to be complicated on the grounds that freedom of thought and feeling are rationalized as no more than an ideological or discursive articulation of authority. And although I agree with Foucault that power must be seen as a positive force and not simply as a means of repression, freedom at the level of imagination, or imagination at the level of freedom, must move beyond the trappings of history, just as it paradoxically must be extremely aware of the historicity of its own conceptualization. This is not to say that to be free is to be outside of history, but rather that the history of the future is underdetermined. To make hegemony a necessary dimension of social cohesion and change—i.e., to make the establishment of a counter-hegemony part of the progressive project—is to try and authorize what the future's history will look like in ideological terms. It flirts with a kind of social engineering, defending the position in rationally pragmatic terms, thereby diminishing the anarchistic force of spontaneity. It is the anarchistic potential of the imagination that makes rejecting hegemonic thinking even possible. It is also the appeal to anarchistic thinking that provides a corrective to fatalistic thinking without exchanging one oppressive regime for another.

2. A turn to reactive thinking vs. reflexive thinking

Reactive thinking describes a dimension of imagining that serves and reinforces established parameters of thought; it is an uncritical correlate to current

institutional and ideological arrangements that create categories of the real by essentially severing the imaginer from what is imagined. Reactive thinking, unlike reflexive thinking, takes as its starting point for knowledge and thought the assumptions rooted in, and supported by, dominant epistemological formations; it adheres to the ideological parameters of the social and linguistic constructs in which, and from which it gains legitimacy. Reflexive thinking by contrast, adapting Alvin Gouldner's thoughts on Reflexive Sociology[18] to our discussion of the hegemonic imagination, points to a way of knowing the parameters of our knowledge and experience, not so that we can know where our inquiries are to end, but rather so we know "the frontier which separates being from being more" (Alvaro Vieira Pinto, quoted in Freire).[19]

3. Synchronic literacy which refers to a way of reading the world as having a pre-determined spatial reality

The concept of synchronic literacy comes out of, but is nevertheless in opposition to, a synthesis of Aronowitz's diachronic theory of class formation and the work of New Literacy theorists like James Gee, Colin Lankshear and Brian Street.[20] To get a clear picture of synchronic literacy it is necessary first to discuss what it is not. In Aronowitz's theory of class, time is not considered a function of space, instead it "presupposes that space is produced by the activity of social formations and as a function of time."[21] This simple, yet important, intervention into how class has been theorized in the past situates history as the embodiment of class struggle and fractured class interests. Time, or more accurately, the movement of time, signals not only the dynamic condition of historical memory, but the underdetermined nature of the future, as well. Aronowitz's "diachronic" framing of class formation situates the activities of social movements as *modalities* of class struggle and class formation (for those still frustrated by "identity movements" and their seemingly reductionist activities, this is an important

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[18.] Gouldner, *op. cit.*

[19.] Freire, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

[20.] James Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 3rd Edition, 2007); Colin Lankshear, *Changing Literacies* (London: Open University Press, 1997); Brian Street, *Social Literacies* (London: Addison Wesley. 1995).

[21.] Aronowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

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insight to consider). The activity of these social formations, made up of the combined activity of social movements as they struggle over class formation, have historically shaped political and cultural life through direct action, such as strikes, sit-ins, rallies, and, in extreme cases, violent uprising.

New Literacy Studies' major contribution to our understanding of literacy is to conceptualize literacy as a social practice. As such, literacy is defined as having mastery over what Gee calls secondary discourses. Discourses embody the way we think, see, act, and use language that makes us a member of a social group. Secondary discourses are those discourses that we learn outside of our intimate or familial relations. Importantly, according to Gee, we do not "speak" discourses; rather, they speak through us. They are historical, cultural, and ideological; and, as such, are always caught up in, affected by, and are a product of power relations.

Synchronic literacy, then, refers to a social practice that refuses, at the level of signification, the diachronic force of discourse in the construction and destruction of social structures and class formations. It is part of the character of the hegemonic imagination because it severely limits how we conceive of social change. It regulates our thinking about social change at the conceptual level. We can move around the board, as Aronowitz argues, but the board itself is accepted as immutable. Imagining what is possible in terms of social and political change, therefore, is regulated by the imagination's inability to conceptualize change in diachronic terms. In other words, the hegemony of synchronic literacy makes diachronic thinking appear fantastic, ungrounded in reality, and utopian. This makes literacies of transformation, such as those advocated by Freire or Myles Horton, seem naïve, just as it makes literacies of reform the only viable option for resisting oppressive social structures.

4. An understanding of schooling as a necessary dimension of social, economic, cultural and political reproduction

This dimension of the hegemonic imagination is animated by an investment in schooling. Schooling is seen positively as a means of training students as functionaries or commissars of the dominant political culture. It is a socializing force in the reproduction of dominant historical narratives, but is also thought of as ideologically neutral in its approach to learning. To question the authority of dominant historical narratives is discouraged by de-legitimating the process of questioning power relations, as well as of

questioning ideological structures of thought and feeling. In the context of schooling, the critical edge of questioning is made dull by qualifying the idea with the value of acceptability. Questions that interrogate the legitimacy of previously accepted truths, truths accepted at the level of common-sense writ large, are often harshly disciplined. For example, students might be encouraged to question the health care system's efficacy in the United States in the face of inadequate health care for the poor, but not to the point where they are questioning the capitalist ideology that supports it. As such, students literally "get schooled" if they question the ideological assumptions of privatization, instead of limiting their questions to issues of *effective* uses of privatization. Students might be encouraged to interrogate how and why racism exists, but would be discouraged in questioning the ideological structure of white supremacy. As such, racism is learned, at best, as a horrific social force that plays upon the bodies and minds of people of color (as it certainly does), but never as a social force that offers significant political and economic benefits for whites. If they did, they might begin to see how white privilege and racism are two sides of the same coin, the former existing literally on the back of the latter. Certain expressions of multiculturalism support this kind of schooling by celebrating "different" cultures without addressing how dominant power works to define what is "different." The eradication of hunger can be a subject for investigation as long as our examinations stay at the level of help and assistance in the form of charity or giving. But to question why people are hungry, to question the constitutive nature of the relationship between starvation and gluttony at the level of economic and political structures is dismissed on ideological grounds as inappropriate.

5. A determination to conceptualize freedom in opposition to regulation

In the hegemonic imaginary, freedom is defined against and in opposition to a notion of social regulation. Fromm's distinction between "freedom from" vs. "freedom towards"[22] provides us with an analytical frame for thinking about the topic. "Freedom toward" situates freedom as a socially-constructed phenomenon, whose primary objective is to create new forms of cooperation amongst people who inevitably experience the world in different ways. "Freedom from," by contrast, not only defines freedom as an escape from regulation, fear, abuse, violence, oppression, etc, but positions escape at the height of its expression.

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22. Fromm, *op. cit.*

Fromm called this type of freedom "negative freedom," because it imprisons individuals within a social matrix of isolation, fear, and anxiety. As such, negative freedom undermines political agency, because it attacks individual spontaneity; the pinnacle, according to Fromm, of positive freedom. Negative freedom creates the conditions for a fear of authority by positioning authority as the opposite of freedom; while, at the same time, offering itself as the only hope for escape.

But instead of escaping into a world in which individual creativity, political agency, and social responsibility guide the creation of democratic formations, people escaping from negative freedom find themselves dependent on a new type of bondage. "Thus freedom—as freedom from—leads into new bondage."[23] The repercussions of this cycle—negative freedom, escape into new structures of domination, dependency due to isolation and the denial of the spontaneous self, then a renewed escape from negative freedom into new bondage—causes a crisis in the educational and political spheres by delimiting political agency to those actions which denounce political power in the name of freedom, negative freedom.

In order to break out of this crisis of freedom in the imaginary, the relationship between regulation and freedom should be understood dialectically. Regulation without the reflex of freedom quickly becomes authoritarian. Freedom outside an apparatus of regulation moves us outside the sphere of political work. By presenting politics, generally, and democratic regulatory formations, specifically, as a hindrance to freedom, the conditions for self-governance are threatened; or, in Fromm's language, the possibilities of embodying a "freedom toward" are cut off. Hannah Arendt explains, "We are inclined to believe that freedom begins where politics ends…,"[24] even though "the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and that this freedom is primarily experienced in action."[25] Freedom, understood outside the authority of political action and social engagement, devolves into "unfreedom;" that is, into a system of governance in which people are free to suffer economic injustice and cultural oppression without the systemic sanctioning of political interventions, on one hand, and minus political agency, on the other. The health care fiasco in the United States is an example of how freedom

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23. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

24. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 149.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

from a socialized regulatory apparatus creates the conditions of "unfreedom," i.e., people are free to be sick because they remain free from the regulatory imposition of national health care.

6. A belief that fantasy is the primary practice of imagination

Similar to its escapist orientation discussed above, fantasizing arises as the hegemonic imagination's main practice. This is not to say that the hegemonic imagination never imagines, nor does an imagination free of hegemonic characteristics never fantasize. This would miss the point. Fantasizing becomes a characteristic of the hegemonic imaginary when it displaces imagining, the primary vehicle of empathy,[26] in situations that demand it. As such, empathy as a way of connecting with experiences and people becomes impotent. Fantasy is a means of escape, whereas imagining is a means of inserting oneself into a social presence which, for one reason or another, remains absent, beyond the reach of one's senses. Fantasizing desensitizes us to knowledge and experience, sending us off into other worlds, not to learn from those other worlds in an effort to change reality, but simply to escape it. Imagining, by contrast, orients our thoughts back upon themselves by first taking a detour through the experiences and knowledge of others. "To imagine" is to be mired in the process of becoming, while "to fantasize" is to be mired in the process of forgetting. Forgetting what is, while exploring worlds and ideas that will never be, disconnects the social imaginary from its sensual core, instigates alienation, and supports social atomization as a consequence.

The hegemonic imagination employs all of these characteristics to varying degrees. They form a circuit more than a hierarchy or bureaucracy of terms and ideas. As a circuit, they flow in and between themselves, guiding and shaping our thoughts, feelings, actions, and ideas about what is real and therefore what is possible. As I mentioned earlier in the discussion, the power of the hegemonic imagination arises directly from its sensual and pragmatic appeal. We are all seduced and intertwined to varying degrees within the circuit, not because we are too dumb or ignorant to escape, but because we benefit in any number of ways through our participation. In some instances, we are rewarded with "social goods," like tenure or a gallery show. In other instances, we are simply accepted by our peers; or, if not

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[26.] Greene, *op. cit.*

accepted per se, at least not rejected. Hegemony, from this perspective, can be warm and fuzzy or comfortingly disinterested, and frankly, to reject its power and rewards is counter-intuitive.

To desire freedom from the hegemonic imagination is essentially to risk security, friendship, social acceptance, and significant social rewards, like power, influence, authority, and prestige. Then, why would anyone in his/her right mind consciously want to reject the comforts that the hegemonic imagination offers? One speculative answer is they do not. In other words, rejection of the hegemonic imaginary might not come in a conscious form at all. Rejection might arise, at least initially, from a feeling or some manner of intuition. It might be forced upon a person who, on a whim, or by reacting to a deeply repressed need, expresses an idea, a truth, or lives out a curiosity or taboo and finds him/herself beyond the pale of hegemonic thinking. A person might not have a "choice" to reject hegemonic thinking, but finds him/herself, as a function of some biological, physiological or psychological orientation, at odds with the prevailing norms and social values of a given society. But, for most of us, the hegemonic imagination and its corresponding circuit makes sense in terms of its familiarity; it provides a deep level of social and cultural comfort by shaping our ideas and dreams in ways that are safe and expected.

But the very same qualities that make the hegemonic imagination so appealing also makes it a bit of a drag. Familiarity represents the boredom of our present everyday life from an epistemological and cultural sense. As humans, our curiosities, if allowed full reign, can be delightfully anarchistic, leading toward all manner of unexpected outcomes and surprise. Safety, likewise, can dull the senses, while danger or dangerous living often has the effect of heightening our perceptions. The power, prestige, authority, wealth, notoriety, etc., that a person or group might achieve from adhering to the rules and regulations of the hegemonic imagination on some level can begin to ring a bit hollow; innovation takes a back seat to elaboration and, as such, the rewards we get for playing the game are ephemeral, circumspect for their familiarity, for their ontological lightness. Lastly, the hegemonic game is ultimately rigged, and we are not, generally speaking, suckers. Even when it feels good, if, in the end, the promise or payout never comes, we will resist the most common of conventions in the service of our own social interests.

This circuitry of hegemonic imagining is grounded on three specific articulations of the hegemonic imagination that strongly influence the construction

of our social realities—Educational Imagination, Political Imagination, and Aesthetic Imagination. Each articulation of the hegemonic imagination has within it, however, the seeds of its undoing. The hegemony of the imagination is not overdetermined by nature or nurture and can be countered through a combination of critical analysis, creative action, and psychoanalytic work. But to think and act against the grain of the hegemonic imaginary, one must be compelled to do so. This can open a way, then, to discuss a few compelling possibilities for restructuring our social imaginations.

EDUCATIONAL IMAGINATION

In the United States, the educational imagination is currently dominated by the dream and promise of positivistic knowledge. This dream is driven by an investment in measurement, standardization, and privatization. Imagining what is possible is limited by a type of thinking that makes objectivity a necessary condition of educational legitimacy. Educational theory and practice are dismissed as purely ideological, if they don't meet the standards of verificationism, a methodological articulation of positivism. Cunningham explains, "Verificationism is always concerned with the meaning of statements rather than the nature of reality."[27] A struggle over meaning, however, always signifies a struggle over relations of power.[28] Standardization of procedures and outcomes coupled with muscular technologies of surveillance and oversight define its educational vision, just as the privatization of public education is the most respected vehicle for its realization. In recent years, No Child Left Behind is arguably the strongest national articulation of this perspective in policy form.

These parameters encourage not simply the creation of new standardized tests, but a considerable social investment in their outcomes. The outcomes of these tests are sold as though they correlate with a kind of learning that is necessary for nation-state competitiveness and ideological hegemony on a global scale. This belief is rationalized at the level of public relations (i.e., propaganda) by a deep rhetorical commitment to the idea that positivistic orientations to scientific research can and will lead society, locally and globally, to a more ordered state. The propaganda is uncovered by taking a quick

[27.] James W. Cunningham, "The National Reading Panel Report [A Review]," in *Big Brother and the National Reading Panel*, R. Allington, editor (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 2002), p. 54.

[28.] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, trans. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 114.

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look at the kind of educational paradigms most heavily supported by the ruling classes, namely, progressive paradigms where students are encouraged to be creative, self-motivated, curious, and broadly literate across various disciplines. Global competitiveness of the capitalistic variety will not arise from a "critical" workforce, but rather from its opposite. As such, the positivist paradigm succeeds precisely because it fails.[29] Putting aside the question of whether we can demarcate science from non-science,[30] the rationalization is troubling for other reasons as well.

First, as theorists like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Foucault have made clear, science and technology are as much tools of domination as they are for liberation. If the recent past is any indication, they continue to be employed primarily in the service of domination, atomization, and political powerlessness. Even in cases where science and technology are utilized for cures to disease—social, physiological, psychological—it is often to cure what they have caused to be diseased in the first place. The environment, of course, is a case in point. The irony, which should not be lost on anyone, is that Western science is viewed—by official sources as varied as recent Nobel prize winner Al Gore and the current Bush administration—as the primary source for information and inspiration for healing environmental degradation, ignoring that the degradation was caused, in large part, by an ideological investment in Western science and technology, specifically, and a belief in the benefits of "progress," generally.[31] We look to science to cure cancer, just as we acknowledge that science has helped to support industrial, agriculture, and nuclear apparatuses, whose waste correlate with increases in cancer and other sicknesses and diseases. These arguments are not new. But they point to the imaginative inertia within the educational sphere, which is characterized by an uncritical investment in "scientifically proven" practices and a social investment in standardizing outcomes, while simultaneously ignoring social and economic inequities.

In a world where economic and cultural power is distributed differentially, to demand standards of outcome while ignoring standards of opportunity is to stack the deck of opportunity against those who possess limited and limiting power. In light of these arguments, it can be said with some confidence that

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[29.] Thanks to the editor, Ivan Zatz, for putting me back on track in this section.

[30.] Cunningham, *op. cit*.

[31.] Ralf St. Clair, "Environmental Literacy," in *Multiple Literacies*, pp. 14-18.

many of the problems we see in schools today—from the spread and rationalization of culturally irrelevant teaching/learning (i.e., teaching to the test) to stagnating literacy levels in our high schools[32]—are due at least in part to the institutionalization of positivistic orientations to science and technology, on one hand, and an intense ideological commitment to roll back advances in learning and teaching made during the height of the child centered, Dewey-influenced educational movements, on the other. This is by no means to suggest that what is called for is a return to some imagined utopia, where kids learned unencumbered by economic relations of power, racism, patriarchy, etc. On the contrary, it is to point out the need for a more rigorous analysis that considers how our social imaginations might, indeed, flourish if we could break away from our fetish of schooling. What might it mean to "de-school" our imaginations, to break away from the long durée of schooling-as-education that has so fascinated those on both the right and left?

POLITICAL IMAGINATION

The political imagination in the United States is currently dominated by neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologues of various hues and temperaments, whose considerations of, and engagements with political reality are mediated by fantasy. Their ideas about the political converge in a shared ideology of fantastic thinking; this is thinking that is materially and psychically disconnected from the imperatives of a democratic and socially substantive life, and which is the only kind of thinking valued in the official sphere of political discourse. And this is the point of fantasy that mediates fascist ideology; it makes no claims to knowing or caring about the needs born out of social reality, needs whose satiation can only be conceived in and through imagination. It only promises an escape from misery or oppression, allowing both to continue unmolested by political solutions.

In the United States, fantasy of this type disconnects the metaphors of freedom and hope from the sphere of political struggle, negotiation and cooperation. The political sphere is represented as both useless and impenetrably powerful. Its deep bureaucratic structure breeds cynicism, just as it tries to represent itself as the primary place and space of hope; fantasizing releases us from the paradox, while soothing the anomic effects of living within

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[32.] Richard Allington, *Big Brother and the Reading Panel* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman Press, 2002).

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a political contradiction. But the anomic effects so soothed do nothing to eradicate the anomic condition. In fact, the anomic condition depends upon, for its strength and reproduction, a softening of its effects by fantasy.

The slow development of fascism and its current significance is belied by many of its historical representations. Time and space get condensed in our media dominated culture, while we both absorb and resist images of jackbooted soldiers marching lock-step in black, white and gray tones across hidef fields of dirt and smoking stacks. These images have become the representative default of fascism's anomic effects—hollowed skulls and fragile wrists dangle at the barbed-edges of concentration camps—just as they help obfuscate more subtle, yet maybe more dangerous, fascist aesthetics. In other words, when fascism comes to be imagined in one particular way, it makes it difficult to see it when it is represented in another way, especially when the new aesthetic correlates with a set of values that are or have been, at least historically speaking, in opposition to fascist sensibilities. By internalizing this new aesthetic as fascism's opposite, we effectively remove our bodies and minds from the long slog toward its imminent realization.

The psychic removal of our bodies and minds from the development and normalization of fascist imagery leaves the underlying grammar of fascism, namely, the political powerlessness of individuals, undisturbed and reinforced. On the surface of experience, contemporary articulations of fascism are animated by material comfort, individual cultural expression, and technologically mediated freedom. Without real political power, individuals experience their power primarily in the service of narcissistic interests. Personal consumption is elevated to a form of freedom, intimate relations replace social movements as a means of protection against political violence, and virtual space is completely severed from terrestrial notions of time, just as the techno-time/space relation constitutes what appears to be a new geography.

This kind of social shift in the political imaginary is evidenced, in large part, by how powerful the role of aesthetics is in political life.[33] From John Edwards' tour of impoverished towns in middle America to Rudolf Giuliani standing amidst the burning towers in downtown NYC, on September 11, 2001, it is hard not to see the relevance of Benjamin's thought to our times. The anemic condition of the political imagination is disguised by its aesthetic

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[33.] Ibid.

synthesis of the technological medium and the political message. The aesthetic synthesis makes resisting the "fascism in all of us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us,"[34] also making it seem to be an irrational response to an aesthetic representation of hope and possibility. Their notions of hope and possibility have little substance beyond the aesthetics of their representation. In this way, beauty replaces rationality as a means for measuring the truth value of information, just as it guarantees the perpetuation and celebration of an anemic political imaginary.

AESTHETIC IMAGINATION

The aesthetic imagination is concerned primarily with the aesthetic dimension, which is different in kind from the concept of aesthetics used in the previous section. The aesthetic dimension refers to the artistic form of art itself. Art, rather than representation, is the object of critique as well as the impetus for sublimation. It is true that all art embodies a notion or moment of representation, but the inverse is not true; that is, all aesthetic representations are not art. In his critique of Marxist aesthetics, Marcuse explains:

> The radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. This experience culminates in extreme situations (of love and death, guilt and failure, but also joy, happiness, and fulfillment) which explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard. The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions.[35]

The sublimation of another reason or sensibility, vis-à-vis an engagement with the radical qualities of art, suggests that the introduction of aesthetics (i.e., at the surface level of representation) into political life, the kind that

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34. Michel Foucault, "Preface," in Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. xiii.

35. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension (*Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 6-7.

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Benjamin argues sets the stage for the development of fascist ideologies, desublimates our reason and sensibilities further into the grammar of dominant social institutions and the logics of social relations that they support and help to reproduce. Desublimation of this nature, interpreted through the logic, grammar, and vocabularies of dominant social formations, is perceived as its opposite. When desublimation is perceived as sublimation, we have turned freedom on its head; to be free means simply to be aware of one's place in the established order of things—to know where not to go, what questions not to ask, and what/how not to think. Freedom is containment and containment guarantees freedom.

Sublimation, the kind that Marcuse argues art motivates, moves individuals "beyond the vital order to a 'human order,' which involves the 'capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others'."[36] The aesthetic imagination is, therefore, significant for our discussion of the hegemonic imagination, because it is the locus of sublimation/desublimation. Within the habitus of the hegemonic imagination, the aesthetic imaginary is desublimated, reducing the aesthetic dimension to a matter of individual taste and style.

The reduction of the aesthetic dimension to a matter of individual taste and style is the result of the radical reification of the individual, or in ideological terms, radical individualism. Radical individualism positions the individual as *the* source of knowledge and creativity, as well as the subject of history in need of the most protection and the only subject of history deserving of "rights." This conception of the individual finds its philosophical roots in John Locke's discussions of property, which C.B. MacPherson argues established a justification for "possessive individualism," the dominant ideological thread of thought that guided the principal designers of the American constitution and Bill of Rights.[37] Today, this idea of possessive individualism finds its most powerful support from those who believe in an economic marketplace unhampered by the demands of democracy, so that it will, in the end, support the social needs of the public. From libertarians to neoliberals, the case for possessive individualism still rests on Locke's arguments that the individual's right to property is his/her best defense against social and political insecurities.

[36.] Maurice Merleau-Ponty quoted in Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

[37.] David Sehr, *Education for Public Democracy*, New York: SUNY, 1997.

In the context of art and the imagination, the possessive individualism that MacPherson identifies in Locke's work gives the individual the sole power to decide what art is. The notion of property in Locke's work, which constituted individuals' "lives, liberties and estates,"[38] must come to include, in our current times, their constructions of reality as well. By including an individual's construction of reality as an extension of Locke's possessive individualism and hence his notion of property, we have bridged the modern/post-modern gap, but with dangerous results. In other words, constructivist orientations to the production of knowledge rest on the belief that we are first social beings and the meanings that we create are at their core social. This position challenges the fundamental premise and rationality of Locke's consideration of the individual. However, this "post-modern" idea, within the dominant "modern" ideology of possessive individualism, gets turned on its head; that is, it creates a philosophical defense of narcissism. By embracing both the constructivist belief in the social construction of knowledge and reality and the belief that the individual is the sole recipient of "rights" and, therefore, the most vulnerable historical agent, individuals have come to view themselves as the final arbiters of the aesthetic dimension. It's a neat trick. The individual, a social invention itself, conceptualizes itself outside of the social context in which it gets the authority to think of itself at all. Having imagined itself as the sole author of its own authority, the individual conceives for itself "rights" that are above and beyond any consideration of the social or public, outside of their potential for violence against the individual. Under the authority of radical individualism, the individual carries his/her rights like a cowboy carries her/his guns, always at the ready to shoot down any and all moral appeals to the social sphere, if there is any whiff of an attempt to challenge the primacy of the individual as the most forceful and fragile subject of history.

Under these conditions, the aesthetic dimension is hollowed out; no longer can the aesthetic form (poems, paintings, sculpture, plays, etc) "break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*."[39] This is, because under the defining gaze of the individual, art's unique language, the language of fiction—"which is more real than reality itself"[40]—is conceived not as a language (a productive structured system

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[38]. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[39]. Marcuse, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[40]. *Ibid.*, p. 22

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of signs intertwined in relations of power), but as a blank page open to private communicative interpretations. The dissenting narratives of art are reduced to self-affirming monologues in which the individual can decide what realities are reflected by art and what realities are refracted by art. In either case, however, art no longer creates realities "more real than reality itself." It has become an "empty" vessel for individuals to fill with their ideas and attitudes about reality, and, of course, about art itself. As such, the reality that is created through the private communicative interpretations of individuals is *less* real than reality itself. This relation between art and the individual sustains an individualistic aesthetic at the expense of, and in spite of the artistic form.

The individualist aesthetic is defined by the following propositions:

1. As individuals, we are the subjects of the imaginative process. Imagining begins and ends with the individual. The social and aesthetic relations of individuals are recognized as necessary, yet inconvenient, dimensions of the human and aesthetic order. Through evolutionary processes, our dependence upon one another will weaken and free the individual to pursue its own ends unrestrained by the ethic and aesthetic of social responsibility.

2. There is a connection between art and the individual, which is manifested through the individual's conception of him or herself in relation to the aesthetic dimension. Art is no more and no less than the product of the individual's perception of what art is and what it is not.

3. Although there is a definite connection between art and the individual, no one person can determine the "truth" of art. Art, therefore, is relative.

4. The artist's intentions are of little to no consequence except in academic criticism, just as a consideration of the social effects of art is considered an ideological intrusion on the relation between the art and the individual. Purity of experience is understood as the primary goal of the interpretive process. It should be noted, however, that "intentions" are not exchanged for "mediation" in a Foucaultian sense, but rather are renounced as an obstacle to the process of conceptualization. Conceptualization is both product and process; it is relative as a consequence.

5. Museums and galleries (paintings, sculptures), Theaters (plays), Concert Halls (music), and other formal showcases for art are considered unnecessary (from a hermeneutical perspective), but helpful in terms of their ability to mediate the relationship between art and the individual.

6. Art can affect the individual deeply, but only in direct correlation to the individual's imaginative investment in the artistic form itself. As such, the artistic form is not the source of affectivity, but the individual's investment in it.

Radical individualism creates the conditions for a radical relativism, from which the dissenting character of the artistic form is replaced with a legitimating force. Delegitimation of reality via the artistic form's capacity to represent reality against the dominant categories of the real, by consequence, is negated.

The aesthetic imagination and its potential for liberating the individual from dominant categories of the real, under the regime of radical individualism, now services those same categories. This makes the aesthetic imagination complicit in the hegemony of reality, as opposed to its foil. The aesthetic dimension is consumed within the deep psychic structures of the social mind, encouraging us to forget that it is an influential force in shaping our views of what is possible.

CONCLUSION

The hegemonic imagination supports our social and individual investments in the familiar and established. By accepting established categories of the real, reality becomes immutable; its synchronicity is concretized through a complex set of sociological, psychic, and political relations. Change is possible at the level of representation, but transformative discourses that operate at diachronic levels are dismissed as vulgarly utopian. Fantasizing rather than imagining is the muscular technology of the imagination and, as such, escape and/or adaptation becomes the only sanctioned response to repression.

The Political Imagination, Educational Imagination and Aesthetic Imagination are three facets of what I have called the Hegemonic Imagination. Each shares the major tenets of the hegemonic imagination; but they are specific in their contents, respectively. Together, along with other articulations of the imaginary, they create a habitus which gives the

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sensation of freedom through a diversity of imaginative and interpretative choices, but nevertheless suggests a structure that limits the imaginative and interpretative choices of our imaginations. Radical individualism negates the artistic form's capacity for sublimation, making the individual the sole arbiter of meaning making. This vulgar rewriting of constructivism results in both the negation of the social as a political and epistemological category and in the legitimation of dominant ideological narratives around the nature of reality.

Bourdieu's discussion of habitus is insufficient to account for this, because it suffers from a kind of overdetermination; that is, his theory of the habitus and its construction, by primarily addressing relations of power in synchronic terms, ignores the transformative power of time. Aronowitz offers a corrective to this by arguing, "space is produced by the activity of social formations and as a function of time." As such, synchronic relations of power are mutable. It follows that the habitus of the hegemonic imagination is not overdetermined, but decidedly underdetermined. Time and the activities of individuals-in-solidarity determine the space of our relations, even and, maybe, especially at the level of the imagination. The spaces we create for our imaginations will determine, in a decidedly undetermined manner, the shape of our waking dreams.

Our current times demand nothing less than a radical intervention into the established categories of reality. Time is the revolutionary constant, while space is mutable and much more fragile than anyone who works in the service of established ideologies would have us believe. The mutability of our imaginations is the challenge, the possibility, and the concern.