Imagining Borders, Imagining Relationships

Can We Build Enlarged Communities Through Narrative Imagination?

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Abstract

Conceptualizations of human borders will often refer to narratives of encounters, exchanges, and/or interactions that take place in two different but interrelated settings: one internal, between individuals or groups belonging to the space defined by the border; and one external, between such individuals or collectives and everything that is foreign to them. This integrating/distinguishing role of narratives underscores the imaginative process through which borders emerge, expressed with great poignancy in the fluidity and complexity of border-setting practices in late-modern societies. Paul Ricœur's take on collective imagination and human action can be a tool to unearth some of the key conceptual features of such integration-distinction tension, by pointing to ways in which social imaginaries shape the liquidity and modality of borders in increasingly diverse communities. Ricœur's analysis of the development of cultural imaginaries through the opposed yet complementary forces of ideology and utopia, and his exploration of the multi-layered character of mutual recognition, come together in an understanding of human persons – and communities – capable of imagining enlarged spaces of recognition. Richard Kearney complements this analysis with an account of narrative imagination that allows one to articulate the narrative origins of concrete human realities and practices, such as borders and border-setting. In this article, I make use of the contributions of Ricœur and Kearney to argue that a clear understanding social imagination is needed in order to account for the cultural matrix set by human borders, as well as to provide answers to the practical questions raised by concrete historical examples of borders and border-setting.

Keywords

social imagination – ideology – utopia – narrative – borders

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[I]magination is involved in the very process of motivation.
It is imagination that provides the milieu, the luminous clearing,
in which we can compare and evaluate motives
as diverse as desires and ethical obligations,
themselves as disparate as professional rules, social customs,
or intensely personal values.¹

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1 Introduction

Perceptions, interpretations, and aspirations frame the imaginative space within which concrete realities are assessed and re-assessed by human communities throughout history. Recognizing the significance of such imaginative spaces in making sections of the world inhabitable to individuals is key to understanding how human collectives tackle the practical challenges that emerge out of the clash between their boundaries and the fluidity of their membership. Precisely because a community's interaction with the outside world is mainly expressed by the way it responds to the human movement through its borders, attending to the imaginaries at work in the process through which communities set their borders can help resolve some of the most significant quagmires surrounding community-belonging.

These considerations about the impact of social imagination in border-setting motivate the analysis undertaken in this article, which aims to identify some of the philosophical underpinnings of the process through which borders are imagined and, eventually, established as concrete boundaries between communities. The central concern of this article is the connection between the imaginative/narrative development of cohesive collectives and the exercise of border-setting, as the emergence of a community's sense of self is at the core of its relationship with the outside world. Following from this premise, a community's administrative – or political – framework is the result of intricate webs of narratives that provide cohesion to collective action, curate shared memories,

¹ See Ricœur 1991, p. 182.

and project the collective into a common future.² The exercise of collective imagination, which eventually develops into concrete borders, relies heavily on the way in which human communities imagine relationships as well as on the parameters under which these relationships can be envisioned as internal to the community. This explains how the social imaginaries constructed on the basis of collective narratives are responsible for the fluidity and modality of the spaces within which human communities exist at a given time in history. Social imagination should, therefore, be explored carefully if one intends to respond to any of the questions that plague today's political discussions about belonging, citizenship, and identity.

In order to build my argument I will utilize key aspects of the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur and the Irish cultural theorist and philosopher Richard Kearney. First, I will make use of Ricœur's articulation of the development of social imaginaries, through the opposed yet complementary forces of collective memory and collective imagination, to demonstrate how communities generate internal cohesion in response to external influences. Following this analysis, I will turn to Kearney's narrative theory to prove that the concept of collective imagination, as expressed through narrative, is needed to develop a robust understanding of the emergence of a community's sense of self throughout history, thus becoming a useful tool to unearth some of the key features of the encounter-separation tension at the core of imagined spaces of belonging. Both of these thinkers' contributions will be used to argue that social imaginaries shape the fluidity and modality of borders in increasingly diverse communities and can provide ways to question and reframe existing borders. Consequently, these lines of argumentation come together in

2 For a sociological account of the emergence of "imagined communities," see Anderson 1983. In his account, Anderson discusses the cultural and societal conditions that have enabled the flourishing of national movements in the modern world. He argues that "the possibility of imagining a nation only arose historically when, and where, three fundamental conceptions, all of great antiquity, lost their axiomatic grip on men's minds." These conceptions sustained that: [1] "a particular script- language offered privileged access to ontological truth;" [2] "society was naturally organized around and under high centres;" and [3] "cosmology and history were indistinguishable" in antiquity's understanding of time. Anderson concludes that "these ideas rooted human lives firmly in the very nature of things, giving certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all death, loss, and servitude) and offering, in various ways, redemption from them," and that once these ideas lost their grip on humankind, individuals were forced to find alternative ways of "linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together," p. 36. Although Anderson's exploration can inform, from the perspective of the social sciences, the argument of this article, I will focus on a slightly different question. I am concerned with the philosophical tools required to understand the process through which these "imagined communities" are formed and reformed over time as opposed to the sociological conditions that accompany such process.

an understanding of human communities as *capable entities* (in the Ricœurian sense of the expression), able to imagine enlarged spaces of recognition, in which new relationships lead to reimagined borders.

2 The Intricate Dialectic of Ideology and Utopia

Collective imagination can be understood as the theatrical stage in which the relational drama of the community appears, that is, the setting within which the limits of the collective are envisioned, tested, and sometimes reinvented. In "Ideology and Utopia," Ricœur makes a systematic effort to understand the interaction between ideologies and utopias, the two opposing forces that, for him, shape collective imagination and provide symbolic mediation for action.³ Broadly speaking, ideologies and utopias comprise sets of guiding principles that shape the imagination of a community and motivate its members to seek stability (ideology) or change (utopia) in their material conditions of existence. Both of these forces are present in collective imagination (with different levels of strength at different times), presenting the community with opposing views of the future of the collective. Through their articulation of the community's reality, historical development, and future yearnings, ideologies and utopias help to develop the community's sense of self as either a continuation of previous efforts or a radical rupture with traditional trajectories, shaping its understanding of reality and action in the world. Hence, the action of the community is ultimately guided by the outcome of this creative tension (or dialectical relation) between ideology and utopia as they shape collective imaginaries.

Ricœur's theory of cultural imagination serves as a tool to understand how this process unfolds and how it varies according to particular situations. He argues that ideologies and utopias are not the polar opposites of a single spectrum. Instead, they are intricate combinations of distorted and healthy tendencies, layered as symbolic systems of motivation whose function is to fill the gap between claims and beliefs. Consequently, Ricœur expects the theory of cultural imagination to account for: (1) the dialectic between ideology and utopia, understood as the forces behind collective imagination, and (2) the health-pathology dialectic existent within both of these forces.⁴ The framework

³ See Ricœur 1991, p. 308.

⁴ Ricœur 1991, p. 308. "From this connection under this merely formal title, I expect two things: first, a better understanding of the ambiguity they both have in common, to the extent that each of them covers a set of expressions ranging from wholesome to pathological forms,

presented in “Ideology and Utopia,” therefore, comprises four phenomena (as opposed to a simple ideology-utopia dyad) that delineate the development of human thought, namely: healthy ideology, distorted ideology, healthy utopia, and distorted utopia.⁵

In order to provide a depiction of Ricœur’s theory of cultural imagination useful to my argument, I will first address the influence of American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, one of Ricœur’s primary dialogue partners in “Ideology and Utopia.” Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*, a landmark of cultural anthropology, is key to understanding Ricœur’s overall attitude toward ideology. In this work, Geertz describes the function of ideology as bridging “the emotional gap between things as they are and as one would have them be,” thereby becoming a source of meaning for economic agents by “insuring the performance of roles that might otherwise be abandoned in despair or apathy.”⁶ According to Geertz, although ideology affects directly the economic life of a community, its function is ultimately political, making “an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful;” in other words, ideology provides the intellectual constructs that make ultimate sense of the political reality in which a community is immersed, supplying everyday political life with “the suasive images by means of which it can be grasped.”⁷ Ideology thus gives meaning to the imperatives that lead a collective toward common goals, impacting economic modes of production while delineating political horizons.

Geertz is keenly aware that ideologies are not neutral human constructs. Given that ideological meaning responds to the interests of particular human groups, ideologies often carry with them some degree of distortion or pathology favourable to such interests. In fact, the concept of ideology has itself been affected by this distortion. According to Geertz, the social and political tragedies of the Twentieth Century – themselves the product of the unjust manipulation caused by ideologically distorted movements – has had an adverse impact on the academic approach to ideology. As a result, the concept of ideology has been reduced to its distorted form, circumscribed by totalitarianism,

from distorting to constitutive roles; second, a better grasp of their complementarity in a system of social action.”

5 Ricœur 1991, p. 309: “It may be a fruitful hypothesis that the polarity of ideology and utopia has to do with different figures of noncongruence, typical of social imagination. Moreover, it is quite possible that the positive side of the one and positive side of the other are in the same complementary relation as the negative and pathological side of the one is to the negative and pathological side of the other.”

6 See Geertz 1973, p. 205.

7 Geertz 1973, p. 218.

propaganda, and oppression. Through this process, which Geertz calls the “ideologization of ideology,”⁸ the discipline of anthropology has lost an important way to account for the construction of collective meaning.⁹

In the context of “Ideology and Utopia,” Marx is very likely Ricœur’s most direct opponent when it comes to these distortion-health dynamics. In Ricœur’s reading of Marx, ideology fills “the gap between the unactual representations in general and the actuality of the life process,”¹⁰ and provides cohesion to a scattered social reality only to justify existent systems of production. Marx thus understands the ideological force of the superstructure to be predominantly pathological, simply a way for the emergent ruling class to justify the unjust economic relations of the base with inauthentically-ascribed universalist values/language. While Ricœur agrees with Marx on the distinction between superstructure and base, sustaining the claim that “the sphere of representations, ideas, and conceptions [superstructure]” enters into a dialectic relation with “the sphere of actual production [base],”¹¹ he takes a different stance when it comes to the structure and outcomes of the relationship between the two.

Ricœur differs significantly from Marx insofar as he also sees a positive or non-pathological role for ideology (the reciprocal relation that Marx needs but also disallows). Marx tends to see the relation between base and superstructure as unidirectional: the base determines the superstructure (the actual relations of production determine the shape of the ideology used to justify them by the ruling class). Ricœur argues instead that ideologies are able to fill the representation-actual gap because they provide a system of motivation for individual and collective action that interprets the ‘actual’ in terms of the ‘representation,’ making the relation between base and superstructure reciprocal. He describes this as a “place or space in which praxis itself implies some symbolic mediation,”¹² a mediation to which Marx alludes but does not otherwise develop.

Ricœur’s conception of ideology thereby accounts for a thought-practice relation that appeals to the concept of motivation. He clarifies here that “the complex relationships” in which ideologies are circumscribed, “between

8 Geertz 1973, p. 193.

9 Although Geertz’s work is restricted to the concept of ideology, Ricœur builds his description of the distortion of utopia on Geertz’s developments as well. Geertz’s conclusions on ideology serve as a starting point for Ricœur’s explanation of the ambivalent mobilization (healthy-pathological) emerging from both types of cultural imaginaries, which I will undertake later in this chapter.

10 See Ricœur 1991, p. 310.

11 Ricœur 1991, p. 310.

12 Ricœur 1991, p. 312.

interest, authority, legitimacy,” articulate “a system of motivation, not of causation.”¹³ A theory of ideology should, consequently, “show how ideologies transform sentiment into significance and make it socially available,”¹⁴ becoming triggers for social action. Intentional social action, in return, is already “mediated and articulated by symbolic systems”¹⁵ as the product of previous systems of motivation. Marx’s conception of ideology as ideological distortion is particularly limiting in this context, as Ricœur attempts to describe how ideology, through motivation, *enables* human mobilization towards justice.

Following Geertz, Ricœur’s theory of cultural imagination counters the limitations of Marx’s account with an intricate dialectic of healthy and distorted ideological tendencies. The healthy expressions of ideology translate integrative forces into motivation, serving as a way of articulating in a single discourse a dispersed, messy, and complex reality. Opposite to this integration, ideology can also become a legitimating force, providing a justification and cohesion for existent, unhealthy systems. Under this approach, “the concept of distortion only makes sense if it applies to a previous process of symbolization constitutive of action as such.”¹⁶ Ricœur describes the interaction between healthy and distorted ideologies as a layered structure of diverse expressions of legitimation of systems of authority, which varies in its outcome according to the health of the system itself:

Under the layer of distorting representation we find the layer of the systems of legitimation meeting the claim to legitimacy of the given systems of authority. But under these systems of legitimation we discover the symbolic systems constitutive of action itself [...]. At its three levels – distortion, legitimation, symbolization – ideology has one fundamental function: to pattern, to consolidate, to provide order to the course of action.¹⁷

The central point in this description is Ricœur’s placement of “the symbolic systems constitutive of action itself” at the heart of the intricate dialectic of healthy and unhealthy legitimating tasks. Operative expressions of ideological legitimation move in two directions: one that motivates in the direction of universal justice, and the other in the direction of entrenching a system in which

13 Ricœur 1991, p. 316.

14 Ricœur 1991, p. 316.

15 Ricœur 1991, p. 317.

16 Ricœur 1991, p. 312.

17 Ricœur 1991, pp. 317 et seq.

an elite class unjustly rules an oppressed class by encouraging the motivation of a symbolism in which the oppressed come to see their oppression as normal and justified. However, breaking apart these healthy and pathological forces is not possible, as they constitute aspects of the layered symbolization process carried forth by ideologies as a whole.

Even though such separation is not possible *de facto*, it is possible to distinguish two general directions of ideology and, with it, identify the forces at play in each of them. Furthermore, it is possible to identify two expressions of ideology particular to unhealthy contexts: the first leading to the legitimation of the existent pathological imaginaries and the second to a retrieval of past symbols that is critical and, ultimately, mobilizes collective action toward justice. Whereas pathological ideology serves to provide the symbolic legitimization of an unjust order by claiming for it the semblance of justice and universality, healthy ideology is always on the move, ever critically retrieving itself, and only when it congeals does it become oppressive, distorting, and illegitimate.

In response to the pathological tendencies of ideology, which motivate collective action from 'behind,' so to speak, a second mode of cultural imagination emerges, that of utopia, which shapes human thought and motivates collective action from 'out front.' Ricœur defines utopia as "the imaginary project of another kind of society, of another reality, another world," thereby capturing cultural imagination's *inventive* function – as opposed to the *integrative* function that underlines ideology.¹⁸ In the case of utopian imagination, the gap between reality and its ideal representation is not filled through consolidation; this gap becomes bridged through a mobilization process that pushes the community to embrace the vision of a different type of reality.

Utopias "imply alternative ways of using power," as utopian visions "call established systems of power into question"¹⁹ in seeking a new order of societal affairs. The utopian tendency, framed by these visions' ability to articulate a society that overcomes the challenges of the damaged present, has both healthy and distorted expressions. Much like ideology, utopia comprises an intricate dialectic of these expressions, one of them leading to fruitful innovation and the other to schizophrenic subversion of the current reality – and at times violence.

Through its inventive function, healthy utopia becomes a force of innovation, mobilizing communities to social transformation. The function of a healthy utopia is to "give the force of discourse" to the possibility of an

¹⁸ Ricœur 1991, p. 319.

¹⁹ Ricœur 1991, p. 321.

alternative order that avoids the limitations of a damaged reality.²⁰ This eccentric character of utopia is not immune to a pathological side, however, which takes the form of a schizophrenic state of dislocation between collective imagination and collective action. Motivation is impossible under this distortion because any new reality is subverted by our constant suspicion of the present reality that prevents us from recognizing the possibilities it contains to begin moving in a different direction.

Whereas pathological forms of utopia fail to find an echo in present realities, healthy forms of utopia permit a relationship with reality that opens the transformational potential of a given tradition. For Ricœur, utopia opens up the field of the possible in virtue of possibility's rootedness in the actual. Healthy utopian imagination remains sensitive to the 'credibility gap' between claims to legitimacy and actual legitimacy. The fantasy of the future created by the utopian imaginary is in direct relation to the concrete, as Ricœur points out:

Utopia is the way in which we radically rethink what is family, consumption, government, religion, and so on. The fantasy of an alternative society and its topographical figuration 'nowhere' works as the most formidable contestation of what is. *What some, for example, call cultural revolution proceeds from the possible to the real, from fantasy to reality.*²¹

The connection of healthy utopian tendencies and reality is, therefore, double. On the one hand, a utopia is itself a fantasy that emerges from a current reality. On the other hand, the mobilization triggered by utopia moves toward a new, transformed reality. Although the utopian force is instrumental in achieving this new reality, the integration needed at the end of the visioning process is carried forth by ideology. This is why I am particularly interested in the healthy expressions of each mode of cultural imagination, as I argue that Ricœur's key contribution to a theory of cultural imagination is his argument for the possibility of the emergence of justice-seeking, innovative/subversive forces within collectives, capable of regulating the distorted developments of the system from within. A community can develop a space of meaningful inhabitation for its individuals through integrative social imaginaries that bestow motivation on collective and individual actions. Consequently, the limit of this concrete space of inhabitation is set by the dialectic play of the imaginative forces of ideology and utopia, which can both reaffirm existing borders or reshape them from within the community.

²⁰ Ricœur 1991, p. 318.

²¹ Ricœur 1991, p. 320 [emphasis added].

Ideology and utopia, in both their healthy and pathological versions, “dialectically imply each other,” as the “fundamental directions of social imagination.”²² These two phenomena, therefore, play a constitutive role in any society’s visioning of possible futures, its awareness of a unified present, and its memory of a shared past.²³ Ricœur thus identifies utopia as “the counterpart of the basic concept of ideology,”²⁴ arguing that the subversion accomplished by the utopian function is only possible in a context where integration has already taken place: the limits of the space of meaningful action can only be questioned if they already exist. Ricœur’s sustained effort to connect ideology and utopia is a sign of his commitment to the dialectical structure of the development of communities, according to which both functions should be present in order to diagnose and cure the other function’s tendency toward pathology. More to the point, if these pathologies were not present, ideology and utopia would not “meet at [the] intermediary level of the legitimation or contestation of the system of power,”²⁵ keeping society in a state in which new possibilities would not be presented or realized.

Ricœur’s argument can be paraphrased as a twofold structure that explores the way in which social imagination, in conjunction with collective memory, generates spaces for meaning for communities, and how such social imagination then can become a mobilizing agent in the pursuit of justice. While Ricœur does not offer an apology for ideological or utopian movements *tout court*, he does insist that both of these (via construction of collective identity) play a central role in the achievement of common goals, whether those goals are morally admirable or reproachable. Ricœur’s dialectic of ideology and utopia explains how it is possible to mobilize the collective to pursue the kind transformative action that is needed to reimagine the entire cultural system, including the limits that have been set for the community of belonging. Ricœur’s unique contribution to this discussion is his identification of the

22 Ricœur 1991, p. 322.

23 In her analysis of the concept of recognition within the Ricœurian corpus, Marianne Moyaert also identifies the healthy function of ideologies and utopias in the maintenance of societal structures, meanings, and motivations. For more on her take of this issue see Moyaert 2011, p. 25: “Like Honneth, [Ricœur] stresses primarily the importance of ideological discourse for social identity construction. Ricœur would agree with Honneth that a minimal sense of national solidarity is vital to a social world in which personal and collective differences do not give rise to serious social instability. A society without some shared meanings and internal consistency cannot survive. Here we encounter the constructive role of ideology.”

24 See Ricœur 1991, p. 321.

25 Ricœur 1991, p. 321.

healthy (non-pathological) role these forces play in the construction of collective identity, and the contribution that this sense of identity makes, in turn, to such pursuit.

3 Narrative Imagination and Border-Setting

In light of the previous exploration, it is possible to assert that imaginative forces (ideology and utopia) motivate the construction of spaces that are inhabitable for human communities. These spaces should be understood as frameworks within which individual actions are bestowed with meaning and direction, hence allowing the members of the community to act as a collective in seeking a common future. As a corollary of this analysis one would also need to conclude that the kind of exchanges that take place within the community (i.e. between its members, between subsets of them), as well as between communities, ultimately gain meaning and direction because of the boundaries that the social imaginary has set for the collective. In other words, just like any other action, relationships become constitutive of the collective in virtue of the imaginative exercise that is a product of the interaction of ideological and utopian forces. This consideration allows me to shift the focus of this article from the imaginative limits of the communal space to the relationships that can, in fact, take place within such limits. My premise for this section is that border-setting is not only the result of an imaginative exercise, but that it is ultimately the product of the way in which a community imagines its internal relationships.

Conceptualizations of community borders will often refer to encounters and/or interactions that take place in two different but interrelated settings: one internal, between individuals or groups belonging to the space defined by the border, and one external, between such individuals or collectives and everything imagined as foreign. While at the personal level individuals operate under the assumption that boundaries should be adjusted according to the natural evolution of relationships, collectives tend to counter this principle, resisting to revisit their boundaries in response to the relationships emerging at a given time. The world's administrative/political borders, tangible expressions of the territories, ethnicities, cultural forms, and religious affiliations that are imagined as proper groupings, are concrete expressions of this unresolved tension between our understandings of "relationships" and "boundaries" at the level of the collective. The prominent role of "relationship" in the imaginative exercise through which borders are set corresponds to a narrative process in which the figures of "the local" and "the foreigner" emerge in the stories that

identify, describe, and distinguish human communities. Reimagining these figures is in itself a challenge to the tenuous self-perception of any collective, hence the recurrent resistance to undertake such a process beyond the level of the individual.

In order to articulate this process, I will look into some aspects of Kearney's take on the significance on narrative for the life of communities. Kearney begins his 1997 article "The Crisis of Narrative in Contemporary Culture," with the following words:

Does narrative imagination still have a role to play in our culture? In an age where the practices of storytelling are being increasingly replaced by technologies of information and simulation, can we sustain the notion of a human imagination that is both creative and responsible? Is there poetical or ethical vocation for narrative imagination in our contemporary society of spectacle and 'pseudo-events,' a society in which we seem to be having difficulty distinguishing between which narratives are genuine or fake, enabling or disabling, better or worse.²⁶

Through his answers to these probing questions, Kearney aims to continue Walter Benjamin's 1939 reflection on the impact that the instant transmission of information has had on the shared experience of traditional communities. Throughout his corpus, Kearney makes a strong case for the use of narrative, pointing at the multiple ways in which collective life has historically been mediated by narratives, both as historical consciousness and as projections of a transformed future for human communities.²⁷ Although he recognizes that narrative does not exclusively facilitate but at some points hinders human communities (by subsuming individual stories into all-encompassing collective narratives), he stresses the importance of a process of discernment alongside narrative imagination. Key to my analysis here is the connection that Kearney establishes between narrative imagination and the development of collective identities, where the imaginary borders surrounding human communities emerge out of the narrational attempts to differentiate "the local" and "the foreign."

Kearney's work draws heavily on a number of thinkers who argue for the significance of narrative in human experience. Perhaps the most prominent voice within this group is that of Ricœur himself, in his three-volume work

²⁶ See Kearney 1997, p. 183.

²⁷ For a general overview of Kearney's view of narratives and the way in which they have mediated human interaction, see Kearney 2002.

Time and Narrative. Amongst other themes, *Time and Narrative* explores the ethico-political commitment that emerges out of historical memory,²⁸ key to recognizing the impact of narrative imagination in human relations. Kearney often refers to *Time and Narrative* when arguing for the value of narrative imagination, pointing to narrative reconstruction as the only way forward for communities in crisis. For him, narrative imagination is central to historical consciousness as it combines the recollection of the past and the projection of the future in a movement that opens up a space for hope.²⁹ Throughout his argument, Kearney attempts to respond to a number of criticisms to narrative imagination – from scientific positivism, structuralism, or post-structuralism – by highlighting what he sees as “the central role of narrative in the cultivation of an ethico-political commitment to historical memory, resistance and change.”³⁰ He argues, following Ricœur, that there is an element in the exercise of narrative that resists the normalizing effect of scientific explanations. Narrative imagination, Kearney states, provides the ethical call from the victims of the past that is absent in historiographical accounts, an invitation for individuals and communities to develop mechanisms to change their patterns and avoid repeating previous atrocities.

The transformations that are possible through narrative imagination are not limited to revisiting the atrocities of the past with critical eyes; they also allow the community to examine, evaluate, and question the limits that the community has set for itself. Narratives break open a temporal space, which becomes inhabitable by storytellers and listeners alike. In the process, they create the boundaries of meaning for their imagined community, its people, and their relationships. This twofold capacity of narratives to break open and to project becomes a key component in the construction of a world in which transformative action, restoration, and reconciliation are not only desirable but also possible. The unending list of isolated facts often provided by historiographical research lacks projection and retrieval, both of them “narrative functions which [...] resist a certain postmodern tendency to reduce history to a ‘depthless, meaningless present.’”³¹

In responding to the question of how narrative accomplishes its retrieval function, Kearney appeals to narrative’s capacity to make present what has been repressed and to bring to life those victims of the atrocities of the past

28 See Ricœur 1988, pp. 216–229.

29 See Kearney 1997, p. 184.

30 Kearney 1997, p. 188.

31 Kearney 1997, p. 188.

who have been forgotten (even when these are repressed, elements in the narrative can stand in for them). Kearney states:

We would not be able to respond to the summons of the historical past were it not for the mediating/schematising function of imagination which provides us with 'figures' for things that happened but are suppressed from memory. The responsibility here is a double one. On the one hand, narrative imagination provides us with figural reconstructions of the past which enable us to see and hear things long since gone. On the other, it stands in for, by standing-for, these things as events that *actually happened*. Here we encounter the complex ethical claim on the past, as it once was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), to incite and rectify our narrative retellings of history. We recall our debt to those who have suffered and died. We remind ourselves, for example, that gas ovens and gulags *did* exist, that Nagasaki and Cambodia *were* bombed, that political crimes and injustices *have been* inflicted on innocent people over the centuries [...] Narrative imagination serves to retrieve the excluded and neglected 'others' of history.³²

According to this account, the past events brought to light through narrative imagination are neither isolated nor merely descriptive; they come to us as reminders of our debt with the inhabitants to the past, that is, as complex calls to include those whom we have neglected in our historical accounts – as well as in our projections of the future. The imperative “Lest we forget” that is frequently uttered in commemorations of atrocities is, in fact, a call to action that springs forth from the narratives of the oppressed, the victimized, the poor, and the dead, and is intimately linked to their stories. Therefore, dislocating such a call to action from the narratives out of which it emerged comes with the risk of losing the narrative’s (or the call’s) integrity. We want to stir history away from repeating such acts of oppression because of the hold that the victims of the past have on our present, particularly in light of their personal stories of oppression and suffering (only the combination of the call and the story will enable us to effectively avoid a cycle of retaliation).

This analysis becomes particularly relevant when thinking about border-setting. Kearney’s emphasis on the excluded, the marginalized, and the wronged is not accidental. Narrative exercises allow communities to include the stories of the marginalized in their collective imagination: they enable us to, as it were, re-draw the borders of our past in response to the commitment

³² Kearney 1997, p. 189.

that emerges from memory. The relationship that this exercise of retrieval establishes between those who remember and those who are remembered re-shapes the imagined community and resets its borders. The relationships between individuals are reimagined through the narrativ process, through a present storytelling that looks into the past and reshapes the communal future. In turn, these reimagined relationships provide the community a new sense of self, grounded in a new understanding of the boundaries of the community – because those who were victims of exclusion are now included through the narrativ retrieval.

The value of narrative not only resides in its ability to provide elements that stand in for what has been forgotten. According to Kearney, stories allow for “[t]he hermeneutic act of *transfer* by analogy,” an intellectual and emotional exercise that “enables us to transport ourselves into alien or eclipsed moments, refiguring them as *similar* to our present experience [...]”³³ In this movement to the past, we are able to identify our narrative surroundings at the same time that we can acknowledge “the *dissimilarity* of such historical moments as different and distant from us.”³⁴ Kearney concludes that “the narrative reappropriation of the past operates according to a double fidelity: (a) to the *past as present* and (b) to the *past as past*.”³⁵ This exchange of past and present is the experiential moment that enables us to clearly hear the call to be remembered of those who have been forgotten and excluded, shaping our current sense of the limits of our communal life.

All efforts to transmit the stories of the excluded, of the victims of the past, in ways that go beyond the frontiers of historiography, speak of a key element in storytelling: the need to highlight certain moments of history as particularly transformative, damaging, or memorable. In the narrative process, the storyteller not only refigures the events and organizes them according to a specific narrativ arc; she also emphasizes some of those events in response to an ethical valuation. According to Kearney, “[e]qually important is the responsibility to refigure certain events of deep ethical intensity which conventional historiographical methods might be tempted to overlook in favor of a so-called ‘objective’ explanation of things.”³⁶ Objective explanations miss the depth allowed by the narrative, as well as the call to remembrance and the motivation to action that the story implies. This call to remember certain moments and people is best expressed through art, which effectively highlights moments

33 Kearney 1997, p. 190.

34 Kearney 1997, p. 190.

35 Kearney 1997, p. 190.

36 Kearney 1997, p. 191.

and peoples in an attempt to balance their absence in previous retellings of the stories – whilst avoiding to provide comprehensive accounts of past events.

There is an element in the narrative structure that I have so far left aside. Behind the stories we are told there is often a foreigner, someone who prompts in us a different relationship with the past because she or he wasn't part of our original narrative account. How can this other find a place in that original tale? This relationship of self and other is central to Ricœur's analysis of narrative imagination. For him, the alterity of the past echoes the alterity of the other. Narrative complexifies the self's interpretation of the other through its resistance to reducing the particularity of the other into the explanatory outcomes of the self. The reconstruction that takes place through narrative is not reductive, since "[t]o the extent that it remains ethically answerable to historical memory, imagination [...] resists absorbing difference into sameness."³⁷

In *The Course of Recognition*, Ricœur attempts to complexify traditional understandings of these concepts by highlighting two sides to the act through which we recognize one another. While there is a cognitive operation involved in the act of recognition there is also an act of mutual exchange that transforms both parties involved.³⁸ An individual who recognizes another is not only identifying the other as a separate entity, but is entering into an exchange that makes both parties vulnerable to each other's capacity to act. For Ricœur, "[b]eing recognized, should it occur, would for everyone be to receive the full assurance of his or her identity, thanks to the recognition by others of each person's range of capacities."³⁹ Recognition, both cognitive and experiential, is directly linked to our acknowledgement of the capacities of the other to affect us, to our familiarity with the story of the other and its hold on us.

In her analysis of *The Course of Recognition*, Silvia Pierosara argues that although the connection between narrativity and recognition happens at an individual level, "the capacity to narrate is fundamental for recognizing oneself as being responsible for one's actions," primarily in the context of the community.⁴⁰ In virtue of this connection between recognition and public behavior, facilitated by the narration of one's own story, recognition – even in its expression as self-recognition – relates to the way in which the individual in question affects others, how she appears in public, how she shapes the imagined community of which she is a member. According to Pierosana, "[n]arration, as a means of self-recognition, signifies the capacity to ascribe

37 Kearney 1997, p. 190.

38 See Ricœur 2005, p. 257.

39 Ricœur 2005, p. 257.

40 See Pierosara 2011, p. 71.

acts to oneself and to recognize one's own biography,"⁴¹ which highlights the connection between recognition and action. More importantly, this aspect of recognition is intimately tied to the ethico-political responsibility that Ricœur outlines in *Time and Narrative*, as expressed in the imaginative outcomes of retrieving memories of exclusion, oppression, and violence.

Based on these principles, Pierosana defines recognition as "a human capacity which pertains to the intrinsic openness to the alterity and to the need for visibility or approval of one's story in light of the stories of others."⁴² What is particularly interesting about this take on Ricœurian recognition is that it is not described as a process, action, or event carried forward by the person, but as a capacity of *one's story* to interact meaningfully with the *stories of others*. Such an understanding of recognition highlights the role of the human person as a storied being, identifiable for its ability to remember, forget, and forgive. Recognition, therefore, modulates human thought and behaviour due to its central role in the identification of the self and others and in its shaping of the imagined space inhabited by the individual. Consequently, narrative provides meaning to collective human action through the task of recognition that it bears within, tying a series of actions with individual identity and providing the possibility to carry an ethical evaluation of actions over a period of time. Pierosana writes:

Given that identity is narrative, it follows that to be recognized as the object of recognition is precisely to be recognized as a story, both by the person to whom the story can be ascribed and by others. *Based on this hypothesis, we can say that the claim for recognition comes from a narrative which represents itself and constantly configures its relational bonds through a story.* To ask for recognition means to ask that one's essential values be recognized as worthy of consideration or esteem. People configure their own values in narrative terms, both because narrativity provides a tendency towards a sense, and because narrativity justifies our choices or values.⁴³

The insistence in protecting the stories of those excluded or wronged in the past – which characterizes processes of truth and reconciliation – is central

41 Pierosana 2011, p. 71.

42 Pierosana 2011, p. 72.

43 Pierosana 2011, p. 72. [Emphasis added].

to achieving the type of recognition articulated by Ricœur.⁴⁴ There is a connection between the integrity of the stories and the integrity of the peoples who bear them. This illustrates with great clarity the role that narration plays in shaping, and re-shaping, imagined borders. The operative principle behind this process is that “the excluded” find recognition in a multilayered process that involves their own story of exclusion and the encounter between this story and the stories that shape the social imaginary of the community that failed to include them in the first place.⁴⁵ In other words, reshaping the borders of the community entails a collective imaginative process, in which a new narrative, that acknowledges the prior stories of exclusion and recognizes those excluded as integral part of the community in the past, emerges.⁴⁶ In virtue of its ability to hold in tension several perspectives and interpretations, narrative opens the space for a type of recognition in which “the other” does not need to be reduced to an object of cognitive recognition of a subject; instead, that “other” finds a meaningful place in an enlarged community in which the relationship of recognition is bidirectional. In “Paul Ricœur and the Utopia of Mutual Recognition,” Gonçalves Marcelo argues that, for Ricœur, “the self is intrinsically relational” and “wouldn’t be capable of understanding him or

44 For a supporting account of the significance of the narrative in preserving the dignity of those excluded, see Ricœur 1995, pp. 289–292. In this account of the necessity of remembering both the moments of victory and the moments of suffering, Ricœur states, “[t]he task of memory is to preserve the scandalous dimension of the event, to leave that which is monstrous inexhaustible by explanation. Thanks to the memory and to the narratives that preserve this memory, the uniqueness of the horrible – the unique uniqueness, If I dare say so – is prevented from being leveled off by explanation,” p. 290. This can be easily extrapolated to the case of those excluded from the narrational memory of the community. Their inclusion is necessary for the community to respond to the ethical call that comes with its own imaginative existence.

45 It is important to note that the process of recognition maintains its integrity only if these processes run parallel to each other. Recognition bestowed from a third party will not necessarily alter the sense of self of those excluded and, vice versa, a coherent story of exclusion will not achieve recognition if it does not find an echo in the stories of the community.

46 See Pierosara 2011, p. 81: “When a group asks for recognition, it asks that its own way of looking for significance be given space and accepted as a site of meaning. Recognition, for this reason, is more than a recognition of mere existence; it is a recognition of value, expressed in the significance of a narrative. In other words, in order to gather the moral implications of recognition, it is necessary to presuppose that the object of recognition is a narrative, both in individual and in collective cases. Only by accepting that, is it possible to understand that the claim for recognition is a demand for the acceptance of a particular way of giving significance. When an individual or a collective subject asks to be recognized, the subject is asking that its own values and its own narration of them are appreciated and taken into account.”

herself without the component of alterity that affects him or herself,"⁴⁷ providing support to the thesis that the process of recognition is relational and, therefore, can evolve alongside the relational life of the community.

This model has some issues when applied to concrete processes in which new, enlarged, imagined communities are intentionally struck: when does the inclusion process stop? What protects the community from an endless movement toward a type of inclusion in which its borders can never be set? More importantly, is it ever possible to set actual boundaries of membership for a community? A possible way out of this problem appeals to the gradual development of robust communal stories through a constant process of retelling. A more robust collective story, built on a growing number of individual narratives, allows individuals to be reflexive and critical hence setting clear parameters for community membership. As the storytelling continues, the narrativel reach of the more robust story makes it a clearer point of reference for the individuals, forcing the community to recognize the need to enlarge its borders only when clear cases of exclusion have taken place. One cannot forget that, for Ricœur, the stories that shape community life are not superficial accounts of series of events; they contain ethico-political commitments that mobilize individuals to action. By the impulse of the ideological and utopian forces that give these stories a framework individuals find motivation and direction. The healthy expressions of such forces push the individuals who belong to the community to the pursuit of justice, as well as a kind of social transformation that is in line with the ethico-political guidelines contained in the community's constitutive narratives.

The fundamental narrativel differences, expressed through the competing appraisals of individuals previously excluded, constitute an integral part of their own identity as political agents within the community. According to Ricœur, these stories are only transformative if the moral and political valuations of the individuals to whom they belong develop as they make sense of the tragic events that originally excluded them, allowing the listeners to get a sense of the "range of capacities" (in the Ricœurian sense) of these victims of community exclusion. Consequently, the recognizing function of the narrative is only present if the community members confront through stories the entire reality of those previously excluded.

This is how the borders of the community can be enlarged through an ongoing exercise of recognition that is a product of social imagination. This confrontation, between the stories that the community has held as constitutive of its imaginative identity and the stories of those marginalized, is bound to

47 See Marcelo 2011, p. 116.

cause tension, debate, and resistance; however, all of these are signs of a community that journeys in the direction of inclusion. This is a process that can only take place if the narratives that make the community whole are constantly reviewed through the lens of the relationships of the community with the victims of exclusion and marginalization. Consequently, it is through an ongoing encounter with their past, through narrative retelling, that communities can develop spaces of inclusion in the present, becoming able to reimagine their borders and their future as collectives.

4 Conclusions

Borders are not necessarily set by physical boundaries but by imagined spaces of belonging and identification. What truly determines these boundaries is not a separation with the outside world but the cluster of relationships that allow someone to be recognized as a member of a community; in other words, to participate in the community's social imaginary. These imaginative boundaries are fluid and dependent on the ever-emerging interactions between individuals and communities. Through the lens of Ricœur's theory of cultural imagination, it is possible to see how communities develop this cohesive sense of self by creating an imaginative space through which they can inhabit the world. Ideological and utopian forces shape such imaginative spaces so that community members can ascribe meaning to their own actions and those of fellow members, understand their connection to the past, and identify transformation as constitutive to the community's historical development. Borders do not escape this dynamic, as ideology and utopia shape a space of meaning for the community members, thus establishing a division between them and the outside world. The juxtaposition of Ricœur's theory of cultural imagination and his understanding of recognition will eventually allow us to establish the relational character of social imaginaries and, with them, the relational basis of the borders that frame human communities today.

Kearney's excursus on narrative imagination reveals the ways in which ideological and utopian forces operate in communities throughout time, using narrative as a tool to encapsulate the social imaginaries of the collective in manageable stories, which are passed on between individuals and through generations. Concrete, real-life relationships force us to imagine, and re-imagine, the boundaries we set with one another. Although easily accepted at a personal level, this insight loses traction when brought to the level of the collective – whether it be institutional, regional, or national. The encounter of stories (this

narrative exchange between individuals), can always create an opening in the space of meaning within which communities exist, enlarging their borders to accommodate further difference and disagreement, and welcome those previously excluded or marginalized. The question of communal recognition is, therefore, a question of the nature of relationships and how those relationships are portrayed in the narratives that make sense of the community's history, present, and future. The imagined community – often constructed on the basis of common experiences, shared languages, and behavioral precepts – has narrative ways to reimagine itself to favour inclusion. While this does not imply a perpetual movement to “metropolitanism,” it can create a space of recognition in which the community can learn to integrate newcomers, immigrants, and refugees through social imagination. The community's ability to respond to the pressures on their borders rests, at least in part, in its capacity to reimagine itself and its relations to the world at large.

Biography

Originally from Bogotá, Colombia, Héctor A. Acero Ferrer is Associate Director of the *Centre for Philosophy, Religion and Social Ethics* (CPRSE) at the *Institute for Christian Studies*. Through his involvement at the CPRSE, Héctor has contributed to two multi-year research projects exploring the relation of faith and society. The outcomes of the first of these projects can be found in “Just Faith? A National Survey Connecting Faith and Justice within the Christian Reformed Church,” in *Review of Religious Research*, an article co-authored by Héctor. For the second of these projects, entitled “Faith and Settlement Partnerships: Setting Immigrants and Canada up for Success,” Héctor led two case-studies, conducted a webinar series, and co-authored a Facilitator's Guide.

Héctor's research focuses on the ways in which religious narratives have assisted civic movements in the pursuit of social transformation for oppressed communities and vulnerable groups. In 2016, building on his interest in understanding how diverse religious narratives mobilize young people to social action, Héctor joined the *Martin Luther University College* at *Wilfrid Laurier University* as an Adjunct Faculty, where he teaches courses on youth engagement, social action, and knowledge integration. Currently, Héctor is pursuing a PhD in philosophy at the *Institute for Christian Studies*, through which he aims to identify key aspects of Liberation Theology's contribution to the development of a distinctive understanding of the concepts of “justice” and “reconciliation” in post-colonial Latin America.

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