

Radically Reimagining the Imagination? Aesthetic, empirical and theoretical conversations around a catch-all term

In these panel presentations and discussions, scholars working in the areas of art, migration studies, sociology, and urban studies share different approaches to the imagination grounded in their respective archival, creative, discursive, and ethnographic work. These scholars have in common a reflexive stance toward the imagination that directly or indirectly challenges loose conceptualisations of the imagination/imaginary currently in wide circulation across the social sciences, humanities and public discourse. The imagination - as mental faculty, embodied individual practice or collective process - requires critical examination through empirical, theoretical and aesthetic reflections.

How does the researcher's imagination and creativity shape his or her work? How do we study and unpack complex processes of the imagination and its products in society, both at individual and collective levels? What are the promises and perils of the imagination, as a social process, object of study or aesthetic disposition of the researcher? Through conversation and sharing works in progress, these panels explore the spatial and temporal dynamics at play in processes of the imagination as well as its relationships to rationality, embodied emotion, representation and action.

with

Maricia Fischer-Souan, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, Sciences Po

Forough Mohammadi, Assistant Professor, Acadia University

Maxime Christophe, PhD Candidate, Sciences Po

Sara Hormozinejad, PhD Candidate, University of Toronto

Sukriti Issar, Associate Professor, Sciences Po

Pavel Kunysz, Research Fellow, University of Liège

Pouya Morshedi, PhD Candidate, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Carolyn Defrin, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, University of Graz



Bruno Catalano,
Pierre David Triptyque

Date

September 20th 2024
(CRIS)

Time

14h00– 18h00 (CET)

Organizer

Centre for Research on Social Inequalities

Location

Room CS16, Saint Thomas Campus
Sciences Po
1, Place St Thomas d'Aquin 75007
Paris, France



PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

PART I: 14h00-15h45

MOVING PEOPLE, MOVING MEANINGS: ON THE SYMBOLIC IMAGINATION AND HUMAN (IM)MOBILITY

Introduction: Tools and tensions in the study of imaginations and imaginaries

Maricia Fischer-Souan, Sciences Po

Collective Imagination and Meta-Narratives: How Iranian immigrants imagine a future outside of Atlantic Canadian cities

Forough Mohammadi, Acadia University

“Decongesting Paris”: The imaginary of migratory flows and the policy of displacement

Maxime Christophe, Sciences Po

“Migrescence”: The essential images of real migration stories

Maricia Fischer-Souan, Sciences Po

Imagined Roots: The role of social imaginary in Iranian return migration

Sara Hormozinejad, University of Toronto

PART II:16h15-18h00

CREATIVE PRACTICES AND THE MATERIALITY OF IMAGINATION

Objects, Lists, and Lists of Objects

Sukriti Issar, Sciences Po

Place, Enchantment and Social Imaginaries: An experimental framework

Pavel Kunyz, University of Liège

Sing a Song for Home: Iranian songs produced in Los Angeles from 1979 to 1999

Pouya Morshedi, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador

Envisioning Future Migration Policies: Looking back and looking forward using artistic practices

(Title TBC)

Carolyn Defrin, University of Graz

DETAILED PROGRAMME

PART I

MOVING PEOPLE, MOVING MEANINGS: ON THE SYMBOLIC IMAGINATION AND HUMAN (IM)MOBILITY

Collective Imagination and Meta-Narratives: How Iranian immigrants imagine a future outside of Atlantic Canadian cities

Foroogh Mohammadi

Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured, in-depth interviews with sixty-seven first-generation Iranian immigrants residing in five Atlantic Canadian cities and five cities in Ontario, I explore how meta-narratives and collective imagination within Iranian immigrant communities shape their experiences in relation to community building, their decision-making to leave the Atlantic region, and their sense of belonging. Also, I address how the friendship communities of belonging emerge and function in the Atlantic cities. I pay particular attention to the unique characteristics of Atlantic cities and the imaginations Iranian immigrants have in relation to life in larger cities. I engage with the theories of group culture creation and functioning (Fine, 2012; Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003) to analyze how these communities emerge and function in Atlantic cities. I conceptualize the participants' practices in connection to Anderson's (2006) concept of imagined communities, Melucci's (1989) concept of collective identity, and the role of meta stories (Cope et al., 2019) and narratives in the shaping and functioning of these communities. I argue that collective narratives and meta-stories work as a source of group-making, shaping their imagination about the future and driving motivations for the participants in this study to leave the Atlantic region. Previous Iranian immigrants have deposited the knowledge of seeking a better fate on the mainland. New Iranian immigrants are immediately exposed to this knowledge and start to imagine their future outside the Atlantic provinces. However, the uniqueness of Iranian communities in the Atlantic region and the closeness of friendship groups leave a powerful impact on the minds of people who leave for the major urban centres. The impact was so powerful that the Iranian immigrants who left for the major urban centres like Toronto and Ottawa started to seek and find old Iranian friends from their Atlantic region community and reinforce their bonds with them, rather than making new Iranian friends.

“Decongesting Paris”: The imaginary of migratory flows and the policy of displacement

Maxime Christophe

A substantial body of literature has explored how migration, when re-presented through the lens of "flows" and associated symbols, tends to distort reality and frame the phenomenon as an invasive form of mobility. Simultaneously, the European "migration crisis" has evolved into a spectacle of borders, and migrant camps within the French context. This presentation aims to investigate the concrete traces that this imaginary of flows has left behind and how it has led to the creation of a tangible mechanism for the displacement of populations from Paris to other regions, which is the focus of my case study. These traces can be found in major documents pertaining to the reception of "migrants." The latest of these documents employs a vocabulary centered around flows, distribution, matrices, orientation, etc. One of the objectives is explicit: 30,000 asylum seekers must be relocated each year. Legal provisions have been enacted to enforce this mandate. In the material world, a series of transit camps—often communal—have been established across the country, now numbering around sixty. These camps serve to regulate these flows and achieve the distribution objectives. Through a comparative analysis, I aim to understand how the imaginary of a city besieged by migratory flows has led to an official policy of "fluidification," that is, the displacement of a specific population.

“Migrescence”: The essential images of real migration stories

Maricia Fischer-Souan

I present some recent findings from in-depth interviews with approximately sixty first-generation Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian individuals who are now based in the cities of Montréal, Canada, and Marseille, France. I hope to achieve four things in this presentation. First, I will try to convince you that figurative and image-based language (often grounded in emotion) that emerges in migrant oral biographies should be treated as more than “ornamental”. Attention to the metaphorical and poetic moments of interview interactions can reveal some essential elements of migrant experience, both individual and collective, as well as its embeddedness in specific social, cultural, historic and place-based processes: for instance, immigration

experienced as a “rebirth”, a certain urban neighbourhood depicted as a “jungle”, or labelling a location on the map of a city as “the black dot” to recall a painful period of adaptation to immigrant life. Secondly, I try to show how accessing these lyrical reflections can be an entry-point into the complex web of migrants’ imaginations. Though both theories of the imagination and of metaphor are contested in the humanities and social sciences, each concept is indispensable to the other, the creation of new metaphors being a “leap of the imagination” (Richard H. Brown) and the human faculty of imagination requiring a symbolic “as if” level of abstraction from the here-and-now (Corenlius Castoriadis). Third, I draw a contrast between “fresh” and reflexive symbolic language on the one hand and tired or “frozen” metaphors on the other, detailing how the former emerges organically in the narrative through merging two matrices of thought together, thus building on Arthur Koestler’s theory of bisociation and the idea of “double vision”. Finally, I interrogate what the function of an interlocutor’s “migrescence” (or essential images of migration) may be for the individual in the interview situation and beyond.

Imagined Roots: The role of social imaginary in Iranian return migration

Sara Hormozinejad

This paper explores the social imaginary that shapes the decision of Iranian migrants to voluntarily return from their host countries to Iran. In the context of return migration from prosperous Global North host countries to Southern homelands with challenging living conditions, such decisions may appear “irrational.” However, the narratives of the Iranian return migrants I interviewed reveal a social imaginary that informs their decision to return. This social imaginary manifests in their usage of a metaphorical Persian term, *reesheh* (roots and rootedness) which challenges the widely accepted social code that questions the rationale for return. *Reesheh* discloses a multifaceted horizon of meaning and a new rationality through which a particular understanding of the world becomes possible and subsequent actions are legitimized. Through the lens of the social imaginary of *reesheh*, migrants emerge as agents who (re)define their sense of belonging and make sense of their seemingly puzzling return migration. This study raises an empirical question and adopts a person-centered approach to demonstrate that social imaginaries are not simple, homogenous, and fixed; rather, they are complex, heterogeneous, and dynamic. Following Appadurai’s (1990) argument that modern society is characterized by a new relationship between subjectivities (people’s personal experiences and identities) and imaginations (people’s ability to imagine the world beyond their immediate reality), this study reveals the relationship between Iranian migrants’ subjectivities and imaginations to understand North-South return migration.

PART II

CREATIVE PRACTICES AND THE MATERIALITY OF IMAGINATION

Objects, Lists, and Lists of Objects

Sukriti Issar, Sciences Po

My talk is on lists in general, and lists of objects in particular. Working with probate inventories I will discuss the aesthetic effects of such lists and their non-narrative potential. Far from being banal or plodding, lists of objects convey a palpable, embodied, tactile, and concrete feel for the past. I will use examples from my work on lists of objects from turn of the nineteenth-century Bombay.

Place, Enchantment and Social Imaginaries: An experimental framework

Pavel Kunyz, University of Liège

Drawing from recent doctoral research at the junction of architecture and sociology (Kunysz 2024), this presentation discusses the experimental theoretical framework that was built to investigate transformations in the social imaginaries surrounding two abandoned spaces: Bavière Hospital (Liège, Belgium) and the Champ des Possibles railyard (Montréal, Québec). This presentation first showcases the interconnections between three important but historically distinct conceptual schools: place studies, as established within humanistic geography (Tuan 1979), anthropology of enchantment (Winkin 2023) and social imaginary as explored within political philosophy (Castoriadis 1975). I then explore how these three approaches can contribute to each

other within a joint framework of theorization of places of attachments' social imaginaries. I particularly focus on operationalizing Castoriadis' social imaginary at the service of ethnographical study and the repoliticization of Winkin's enchantment. The presentation ends on some empirical findings resulting from the application of this framework and observations on the need for further scrutiny within Castoriadis' conception of imaginary and creation within our "transaesthetic age" (Serroy, Lipovetski 2013) and the development of artistic and expressive research practises.

Sing a Song for Home: Iranian songs produced in Los Angeles from 1979 to 1999

Pouya Morshedi, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador

I ask how being apart from home impacts the very definition of home through analysis of songs produced by Iranians who have left their first "home" in Iran, and resettled in Los Angeles. Findings suggest that distance from one's home expands the definition and image of home from a structure where one dwells and calls home, to an imagined community at the personal (home family), local (hometown), and regional (homeland) levels. The 1979 revolution in Iran caused many people to emigrate, including singers and songwriters. Many of them moved to Europe and North America. I analyze songs from 1979 to 1999 produced in Los Angeles, considered as the post-revolutionary heart of Iranian pop music, that focus on the concept of "home." Five main themes emerge: the "body of the home," which includes windows, niches and gardens; "homeland as home;" "home and family;" home and memory," which involves home as a place for making memories and recalling them.; and "home as a retreat." I explain how these themes are related to Iran's situation in the period of study, the image of the Iranian home, and singers' situation in Los Angeles after the revolution. I argue that as long as the dream of returning to Iran is alive, their home (or at least one of their homes) is their homeland. When there is no hope or intention for return, the first home in the homeland dies. The most significant finding is the relationship between home and homeland. Even those songs describing the body of home use home as a metaphor for the homeland. The sadness about the destroyed home, hope to return to home, and the tendency to come back to mother (or motherland) is pointing to the singers' emotions about their homeland. The distance from home has changed the conceptualization of "home." The borders of home are not around the songwriters' houses anymore, but they are around the homeland.

Envisioning Future Migration Policies: Looking back and looking forward using artistic practices

(Title TBC)

Carolyn Defrin, University of Graz

I will share aspects of my work in progress developments from my current Marie Curie project. Focusing on how creative methods can bring different key actors together from the migration landscapes in her two case study locations (Samos, Greece and Tenerife, Canary Islands), I will discuss artistic processes for looking back and looking forward as a way to envision future migration policies that centre dignity, empathy and mutual respect.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Maricia Fischer-Souan (chair) is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow at CRIS (Centre for Research on Social Inequalities), Sciences Po, Paris. Her postdoctoral research project, "IM.MAGINE – Mapping Immigrant Imaginations: Comparing North Africans in Montréal and Marseille", investigates the lyrical and figurative representations of migratory experience as articulated in interview-based migration narratives and their relationship with theories of the imagination and human mobility, respectively.

Foroogh Mohammadi is a faculty member in the Sociology department at Acadia University and works on the sociology of migration, space, place, racialization, and belonging. She is currently investigating how Iranian immigrants create, develop, or resist a sense of belonging to home in Canada through a symbolic interaction perspective. She is a co-founder of the Avalon Research Society and is developing a network of scholars who focus on the social aspects of space and place as an inseparable part of our social interactions.

Maxime Christophe is a PhD candidate at CRIS (Center for Research on Social Inequalities), Sciences Po, Paris, and a teaching fellow at the University of Strasbourg. His research focuses on French mechanisms for the displacement of "migrants," particularly transit camps designed for their "distribution."

Sara Hormozinejad is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation examines the narratives and practices of return migrations and mobilities among Iranian migrants. Shifting the traditional focus of migration scholarship from an economic understanding of global migration, her study seeks to reveal how migration patterns are shaped by sociocultural contexts and vary across intersectional characteristics.

Sukriti Issar is Associate Professor at CRIS (Center for Research on Social Inequalities) at Sciences Po, Paris. She is the scientific advisor of the Governing the Large Metropolis master's program at the Urban School of Sciences Po, Paris. Her research is focused on urban policy, regulations, property and law, and social history.

Pavel Kunysz has a masters in Architecture (2015) and Sociology (2017) and a PhD in the Built Arts and Urban Planning (2024). He is involved in several community organizations, including the Belgian urbAgora association for the development of citizen debate on the city. Pavel's dissertation presents a social and sensitive history of the diversity of imaginaries of two urban fallows, the Hôpital de Bavière (Liège, Belgium) and the Champ des Possibles (Montreal, Quebec), and draws up an ethnography of the professional practices of artists, architects and cultural agents who transform these imaginaries.

Pouya Morshedi is a Ph.D. candidate (ABD) in Sociology at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. He specializes in the sociology of space and place, the sociology of cinema, and the sociology of revolution. In his dissertation, he investigates the changes in the cinematic representation of home during the 1979 revolution in Iran. Pouya is one of the co-organizers of the Qualitative Analysis Conference since 2022. He also serves as the chair of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee at the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI).

Carolyn Defrin is an interdisciplinary artist, researcher and facilitator focused on applying creative methods to cross-sector collaborations. Her work has been commissioned by Dulwich Picture Gallery, performing.borders, Ovalhouse, The Albany, Barbican and The Yard (London) and numerous theatres in Chicago. She is currently a Marie Curie fellow at the University of Graz, Austria, examining the role of art in border and migration contexts. She holds an MA in Performance and Design from Central Saint Martins College of Art and a PhD in co-creating culture and policy from London South Bank University.