

# SIMAGINE

## Social Imaginaries between Secularity and Religion in a Globalizing World

### Position Paper May 2018

The NWO-funded international consortium SIMAGINE, runs over a period of three years from July 2017 to July 2020 and is hosted by the University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht, The Netherlands. SIMAGINE is a platform for research exchange that has launched a research program combining theoretical and empirical methods. It aims to explore the role of social imaginaries within a globalizing world, characterized by what has been called in recent scholarship super-diversity (Steven Vertovec). SIMAGINE consists of 10 European and American partner universities.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Across the globe, people live in increasingly diverse communities. Diversity, in all its expressions of religion, race, gender, class, sexuality etc. has become highly complex, changeable and contestable, with intersecting, overlapping and disruptive practices and modes of identification. This condition has been theorized for instance as 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007) or as indicating a need for 'multidimensional pluralism' (Connolly, 2011).

With Connolly, we believe that we live in a world of 'lost connections' (Connolly, 2011). This raises urgent questions for religious, political and cultural studies. How can we rethink the dynamics of our times in their complexity, hybridity, and indeed also animosity? Can a critical dialogue across the boundaries of the 'Global North' and 'Global South' and an interdisciplinary understanding of the dynamics of in- and exclusion contribute to a deep and multidimensional pluralism, involving an active, dialogical analysis and a productive ethos of political engagement across boundaries of differences?

To address these questions, the international consortium SIMAGINE chooses a theoretical perspective in which 'imagination' and 'social imaginaries' are key notions that inform our research. The central research question of the overall project is: *What can the concept of social imaginaries contribute to the analysis – in current cultural theory, religious studies and globalization theory – of societies that are interculturally super-diverse and display complex blends of existential frameworks, with both secular and religious features?*

In this position paper we first introduce the consortium's way of using its key terms 'imagination' and 'social imaginaries' and then relate these concepts to three related themes that we propose for giving a focus to our research collaboration:

- 1) religion, community, borders;
- 2) social imaginaries of inclusion and decoloniality
- 3) transformative power of artful articulations of social imaginaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Participating research groups and departments are located at the following universities: University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, the Netherlands (Department of Globalization & Dialogue Studies); VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands (Amsterdam Centre for the Study of Cultural and Religious Diversity (ACCORD)); University of Groningen, the Netherlands (Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization); Utrecht University, the Netherlands (Research Institute for Philosophy and Religious Studies); University of Antwerp, Belgium (Centre Pieter Gillis, and Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies); VUB Brussels, Belgium (Department of Philosophy and Ethics); University of Cambridge, UK (Department of French Studies); University of Vienna, Austria (Research Centre for Religion & Transformation in Contemporary Society); University of Colorado at Boulder, USA (Centre for Media, Religion and Culture); University of California, St. Barbara USA (Department of Religious Studies).

## Imagination as a Space of Contestation

In his book *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai shows “that the work of the imagination (..) is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 4). According to him, the contemporary world is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life, strongly reinforced by the rise of electronic media that offer new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds. Appadurai argues that electronic media are resources “or experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 3). Self-imagining becomes an everyday social project. Additionally, and often correlated with electronic mediation, mass migration is a central force in impelling or even compelling the work of the imagination. In contemporary societies we live with a plurality of imagined worlds. The work of the imagination is transformed through the everyday cultural practice of contemporary people living in super-diverse societies, and influences their ‘capacity to aspire’ for a better life in decisive ways. Appadurai speaks of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes.

Appadurai discusses three distinctions that make clear that the imagination plays a newly significant role in a globalizing world: “First, the imagination has broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth, and ritual and has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 5). People deploy their imaginations in their everyday lives to a degree hitherto unknown. Mass media and migration make them imagine possibilities for themselves and their children, e.g., with regard to the place where they will live. They build “mythographies” that function as charters for new social projects, different from “classic” myths and rituals that function as a counter-point to the uncertainties of daily life. It is not the givenness of things that powers ordinary lives today, but the possibilities that the media suggest are available. So, for Appadurai, self-images and world images are continually (re)negotiated in a dynamics that he opposes to static worldviews which offer a sense of security and stability.

The second distinction Appadurai discusses is between fantasy, that has a private, individualistic ring to it, and imagination, that can become the fuel for action, especially in its collective forms. This points to a third distinction, between the individual and collective senses of the imagination. Appadurai speaks of the imagination as a property of collectives. Again, the mass media play an important role in this regard. They make it possible for a group to imagine and feel things together. This can apply to groups that have never been in face-to-face contact, and that can move from shared imagination to collective action. “Even the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities are now open to the play of the imagination” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 54). This need not be a simple matter of escapism, for it is possible that a new imagined community is formed, generating new kinds of collective expression.

The transformative power of the imagination can be both constructive and destructive. Imagination as a fuel for collective action can be used in violent ways in service of extremist world images that spread over the world by the intensive use of social media. Also, the dominance of Western imaginaries in the media, in economy, and in politics on a worldwide scale has destructive effects that are often harder to admit for Western politicians. To gain a better understanding of these dynamics, we relate Appadurai’s focus on imagination as a social practice with a collective dimension to the concept of social imaginaries as used by Charles Taylor. We think this term does justice to

the dynamics of today's creation of self and world images, as opposed to static worldviews, while relating them to what people aspire to in terms of 'the good life'.

### **Social Imaginaries**

In cultural studies, the concept "imaginaries" has gained ground. It is used in several contexts: social imaginaries, violent imaginaries, techno-scientific imaginaries, spatial imaginaries, environmental imaginaries, etc. These uses can be traced back to the work of Benedict Anderson (1983), Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), and Charles Taylor (2004), seeking to understand (late) modern societies (cf. Gaonkar, 2002). Vandevoordt, Clycq, and Verschraegen (in press) argue that the concept of social imaginaries harbors at least two potential contributions to the socio-scientific study of culture. Firstly, social imaginaries refer to particular ideas and narratives flowing within the social world, visions of one's own society, and the interrelations that are part of it. Because of imaginaries' substantial fluidity, Vandevoordt et al. see in the concept a useful heuristic tool for the analysis of culture's contemporary complexities (cf. Strauss, 2006). Secondly, the concept of social imaginaries helps to draw attention to the creative power of individual agents in dealing with imaginaries of different, overlapping institutions and social fields (cf. Gaonkar, 2002). Influential though social imaginaries are, it is possible for people to take a critical distance, reflect and evaluate them and go through transformative processes. The concept of social imaginaries allows for recognizing the strong impact of social processes without assuming social determinism.

Charles Taylor defines a social imaginary as "the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain" (2004, p.6). Social imaginary is about "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (ibid., p. 23). Taylor stresses that the notion of social imaginary is closely related to the notion of moral or spiritual order, defining the context in which it makes sense to strive for and hope to (partially) realize the right. In terms of Appadurai, social imaginaries strongly influence what people can aspire to in their daily contexts. Taylor discusses the moral order in terms of our ability to recognize ideal cases: "And beyond the ideal stands some notion of a moral or metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals make sense" (Taylor, 2007, p. 172). Social imaginaries always imply an orientation towards what we consider to be "good," towards "the values we hold most precious" (Goodman, 2014, p. 2). The concept of social imaginaries helps us to bridge the secular-religious divide, by giving insight in the way every worldview is both rooted in and productive of shared practices and implicit images of self and world. This is an important challenge to the assumption of 'worldview neutrality' with regard to secular states. By banishing worldview issues to the private domain, dominant social imaginaries of neoliberalism and capitalism escape critical reflection and are allowed predominance in all areas of life in taken for granted ways.

### **A Spatial Approach to Social Imaginaries**

Whether articulated or not, social imaginaries orient our practices both in the public and private domains. In unarticulated forms, their guiding power is often strongly resistant to change. Moreover, social imaginaries emerge and flourish within the material world, for instance the urban space of the modern metropole, as well as in the virtual world, for instance in digital media. Both worlds again harbor public and private dimensions of expression, identification, contestation, creation and imagination. Social imaginaries can be defined as the *spaces* in which all these dimensions become active.

Just as Appadurai uses the metaphor of space to understand the imagination, social imaginaries can be understood in terms of spaces as well, in which people on the

one hand create images of their being and on the other hand are created by these images. Images guide their daily practices and the stories they tell about them. When people find ways to articulate and share these images, they may be challenged, negotiated and reconstructed, opening new spaces for communication and action. In that sense, social imaginaries are spaces with flexible boundaries. Articulation and recognition of what people aspire to in their social imaginaries is a key factor in democratic processes that allow for social change.

To allow for further theoretical and empirical research in the field of social imaginaries, aimed at developing a powerful framework for understanding and addressing key issues in contemporary societies, we focus our collaboration on three related themes that will be explored in our successive conferences and will result in publications, public events and applications for grants. We aim to build a consortium that is an active and critical platform for exchange, experimentation and creativity, that challenges us to articulate, evaluate and transform our social imaginaries, and that allows us to experience, perhaps in unsettling ways, what deep pluralism is about.

### **Proposed Research Theme 1: Religion, Community, Borders**

The first theme was/is the topic for our workshops in Utrecht (2 November 2017) and Vienna (23 May 2018). The following description of our research theme 1 is the position paper as it has been developed around this theme. This also serves as a concept note for a special issue of the *Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* (JRaT), to be published in 2019.

In this special issue of JRaT we will assemble studies on the way in which the theory of social imaginaries can contribute to the interdisciplinary study of the complex interaction between on the one hand religious and cultural traditions and on the other confined national identities and communities. The contributors to the special issue will consist of SIMAGINE members and invited guest scholars.

The special issue will be coordinated and edited by Ernst van den Hemel and Laurens ten Kate.

#### *1. Borders in neoliberal times*

We live in times of crossroads. On the one hand globalization continues to shape the way in which people, thoughts, ideas flow and interconnect. The study of religion found a new focus in order to account for this more and more compelling process of globalization, in which national and cultural borders are put under pressure. They seem to become liquid in view of a global borderless infinity. On the other hand, these borders are being reclaimed as national, cultural and often religiously informed identifications, and debates on the 'clash of civilizations' increasingly shape and influence our present. Borders are firmly re-modalized.

In this first thematic line of research, SIMAGINE aims to explore the ways in which the tensions and junctions between the liquidity and modality of borders determine the way in which the present and its 'sense' is imagined, with a particular emphasis on religion and worldviews.

Globalization and religion have proven to be a productive field of study. Emphasizing the way in which religious communities organize themselves translocally, virtually, spontaneously and momentarily, scholars have emphasized the global resurgence of religion. Whether inspired by or in protest against the flow of people, ideas and capital, religion has proven to be able to thrive in contexts of globalization.

Yet at the same time, we live in times marked by the return of borders. The return of nationalism in Western Europe, United States, Russia, India, as well as the renewed emphasis on the role of religion in national identity in these different settings, have given increased urgency to the study of borders and religion. The field of border studies has provided a productive word for this process: border as method (Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson). In this field the return of borders is not anathema to neoliberal globalization, it is constitutive of it. As Étienne Balibar has argued, borders are nowadays not merely located at the border, but they take place a little bit everywhere, so that it becomes sensible to turn 'border' into a verb, 'bordering': "The borders of new sociopolitical entities, in which an attempt is being made to preserve all the functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer entirely situated at the outer limit of territories; they are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled." ('At the Borders of Europe', 1)

Bordering takes place in different intensities. Compare the smooth flow of products over borders from e.g. the Middle East, to a gas tank in North Dakota, to the way in which persons can have difficulty in crossing from one border to the other, and to the difficulty 'undocumented' migrants have inside the territory of nation states. Bordering can take place invisibly. For an undocumented migrant public space in a Western European city is a radically different affair than for a documented citizen.

Having said this, in an open, market-oriented world determined by a global economy, national borders are seen as obstacles. The endeavor to obliterate borders is supported by what may be named the last 'grand narrative' of our time: neoliberalism.

This narrative favors the retreat of governmental influence on the public space, and features a radical belief in market forces as the prime condition and shape of late modern societies. Since markets in se tend to expand into a transnational practice, neoliberalism has always had an ambiguous relation to borders. They are obstacles, but at the same time the political economy of the liberal nation state is considered a sound foundation for global capitalism. Pioneering theorists of neoliberalism like Von Hayek and Friedman did not advocate the abolition of the nation state, but sought to attribute a new meaning to it.

This ambiguity with regard to borders, however, does not prevent neoliberalism's narrative to proclaim an increasingly unified world, and a humanity at last in an intensely intimate state of contact with itself. A prominent theme of contemporary political discourse is that of the nation-state's inexorable decline and of a corresponding shift towards a liberalized world economy, an inclusive and trans-border polity, greater cultural integration and social interdependence, and a condition of communicative and informational liberty that refuses to be contained by territorial limits. The world invoked here is one in which populations, trade, and information move easily across the frontiers that once circumscribed localities, regions, or countries, and where social governance and cultural production are increasingly functioning beyond the institutions or agents of particular states. This world is where attachment is no longer limited to ethnic affiliation, religious tradition or geographical proximity; it is where polity no longer roots itself in the idea of national self-determination; it is where authority has become dispersed; where finite identities, singularities, exceptions and deviations have become displaced onto a subject that has finally attained a universal and infinite human community; and where eventually only the wealthy profit from this new global belonging, as many critics currently emphasize, sometimes in the language of anger and despair (Asin Shivani).

In this place without geography, in this domain of the global citizen, the immanence of the world is taken as a substratum that can now surface. This arousal or emergence is often associated with the uninhibited movement of data across a uniform and undifferentiated planetary space. In this universal space, we are told, there has emerged a population that is at last – in an ecstasy of affiliation - communing with itself.

These universal claims about contemporary socio-cultural life are deeply interwoven with what may be called the cultural DNA of modernity, and with its ideals of freedom and autonomy, as Wendy Brown has recently analyzed. In this sense, the neoliberal critique of national borders and of their alleged meaning for socio-cultural life is a fundamental feature of the modern, 'buffered self' (Charles Taylor) striving for self-realization in a world of infinite possibilities for its entrepreneurship. Hence, neoliberalism is not a political system one may simply adopt and defend or reject and replace (Thomas Biebricher). It is strongly connected with and informed by phantasma's of infinity and infinite growth and 'social acceleration' (Hartmut Rosa) that lie at the heart of modern culture.

However, despite this fundamental impact, neoliberalism's claims about a liberal, universal and secular 'end of history' are becoming increasingly unconvincing at the same time.

## *2. Borders between territories and imaginaries: the challenge of religious and world view traditions*

Borders are not only geographical demarcations, but they reflect cultural and religious communities that share, though often in a loose, hybrid and unstable way, imaginations of who they are and to which identity they belong. The neoliberal celebration of global belonging is motivated by a process of secularization that becomes almost self-fulfilling: globalization relies on the idea that the secular mode of existence has become the only possible way to live in the world, individually and collectively. Religion, or rather, formulated in a broader way, worldview and sense, can no longer be meaningful in the global public space, that is, in the global market.

The claim that these borders informed by traditions – whether nationalist, religious, cultural, or in any blend of these - are 'something of the past' invokes what Olivier Roy has coined a dangerous deculturation of the world by means of deracination. This deculturation produces the aggressive and often violent re-appropriation of borders, whether territorial or imaginary, and often in a complex combination of both: examples are Switzerland's isolationist policy, the neo-insulationist desire underlying Brexit, or the wall between the USA and Mexico. The undifferentiated, secularized planetary space described above, that expels culture and religion from the public space into the private realm, appears to gradually transform itself into what populist leaders call the monster of 'wild globalization'. But if borders need to be analyzed beyond the logic of demarcation, either to be superseded or reclaimed, how to think them? Can the answers to this difficult question offer a third approach between the discourses of neoliberalism and of populism, an approach that explores and rethinks the complex relations between borders and religion?

Religion plays a particular role in the above-mentioned flows of products, people and imaginations across the globe. Increasingly mediated, religion cannot be easily contained by borders. Yet, taken up as it is in definitions of national, regional identity and matters of security and nativism, religion plays a crucial role in laws, conflicts, marginalizations and inclusions in a world that is more and more focused on cultural identity and clashes between them. One only has to look at the Muslim ban in the United States, integration discourse in Western Europe, the rise of Hindu-nationalism in India, or the regulation of certain religions as 'native' to China (whilst others, such as Tibetan Buddhism, are seen as foreign radicalism), to understand how religion is taken up in ever intensifying conflictual border regimes. In these times, religion is the subject of crossing narratives, competing claims and practices. Bordering as border-making reframes a series of questions concerning religion, and inversely, religion informs, supports and critiques new border regimes.

## *3. Borders as imaginary spaces*

We depart from the spatial approach described above, that is leading for SIMAGINE's research. Borders are imaginary spaces in which people temporarily settle, only to travel and migrate again, and in which they are always looking for themselves, imagining themselves, re-inventing themselves. Borders are permanent yet fluid zones of migration in which everyone participates, as Jean-Luc Nancy has suggested; they are imagined orders of intersubjective communication, as Yuval Noah Harari has recently claimed.<sup>2</sup>

These social imaginaries as spaces imply a reciprocal dynamic: we create them, and at the same time we are created by them. This is true for all narratives, images and symbols, practices and rituals, values and truths of which social imaginaries consist. As one of the leading theorists of modern social imaginaries, Taylor too underlines the dynamic and practical character of imaginaries, as opposed to more stable and solid ideologies or 'grand narratives'. A social imaginary is defined as a 'common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life' (*A Secular Age* 24). For these practices of imagination to flourish, a public sphere in which people can appear to one another without the burden of a pre-existent identity (Arendt) and as equal and free citizens, is a crucial ingredient. To illustrate this, Taylor uses the example of a demonstration. In a protest even antagonistic participants inhabit a shared framework: taking place in public spaces, 'we are always already in some kind of conversation with each other.' This conversation is dialogue in a radical sense: even a violent protest 'figures the addressee as one who can be, must be, reasoned with' (27). To conclude, a social imaginary does not need to be consciously held, it is rather part of a backdrop against which people act and share commonality.

Taylor's *A Secular Age* is the descriptive analysis of a change in the dominant social imaginary of the West: from a situation in which being religious was the obvious status quo to it being an option open to the free choice of the individual self. Productive as it is for theorizing social imaginaries as a vital condition of late modern culture, Taylor's analyses have oriented themselves predominantly on the western European world and on Latin Christendom within that world. What, if we keep Balibar's diagnosis about the dispersed nature of borders in mind, happens to our understanding of global social imaginaries? Does a change of perspective announce itself as soon as scholarship departs from narratives of secularization in the 'secular age', and focuses on the flows and closures of bordering across the globe? What imaginaries are contested, now that borders are both effaced and highlighted anew?

#### *4. Two essential tensions to be investigated*

Proceeding from these preliminary conceptualizations and reflections, we aim to elaborate the following question: *To what extent is the 21st century characterized by a deep tension between two overarching social imaginaries: that of profit, entrepreneurship and growth, and that of sense, tradition and transformation?* Whatever the response to this difficult question may be, we risk the claim that both imaginaries have a major impact on the multiple concrete, 'lived' social imaginaries by which our communities are shaped: whether these imaginaries are material or virtual, landscapes or media-scapes, whether they are active in the urban environment or on a national level.

Following on this central question to be explored, we propose to distinguish two more specific fields of tension that may well play a part in our debates:

- If borders are social imaginaries in which the logic of identity, unity and universality - whether informed by the 'market' or by the 'people' - is put under pressure, then the traditional border between *ethnos* and *demos*: between the sovereignty of the nation state and the universal order of law (rights, equality, justice), will have to be reformulated. It may

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<sup>2</sup> See for an elaborate series of studies on the theory and practices of social imaginaries esp. H. Alma & G. Vanheeswijck (eds.), *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*, Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming 2018. This volume is a first result of SIMAGINE's research.

well be that the primary condition of our time lies in a permanent border crossing between these two opposites (Paul Kahn). Can ethnos and demos be seen as two major social imaginaries of our time, that are engaged in a tension, if not a clash?

• If borders are social imaginaries in which migration is the primordial condition, then a sharp distinction between migrant and refugee is necessary. Nancy invites us to do so:

Today, in the Mediterranean, around the American-Mexican border or the borders of Colombia or Syria, what is taking place there has nothing to do with migration. That is a false word. What is taking place there is expulsion and flight towards refugee camps. 72 years ago Hannah Arendt wrote that the word 'immigrant' is a misleading and concealing term for the more embarrassing term 'refugee'. She describes the refugee as a pariah, produced by the suspension or destruction of rights. Migration is not a suspension of rights, but it opens up the transformation of rights, and parallel to this, the transformation of identities, of thoughts, horizons, languages, colors and music.

Current xenophobia seems to blur this important distinction between migration and flight. Nancy appears to think migration is an almost anthropological condition of our time (exemplified by mass travel, internet and digital media), if not of humankind proper; a certain affirmation of the world as a pluralism of worlds, beyond identifying borders, is at stake here. Flight, on the contrary, is an involuntary action due to tragic fate, and refers to the vital human need for a 'home', for belonging - for protecting borders. Today, is one witnessing a clash parallel to the one sketched above, a clash between these two modes of existence: that of infinite plurality, versatility, hybridity and super-diversity, and that of finite singularity, identity through traditions, and the relative stability of the place and the local?

SIMAGINE wants to stimulate, starting from this spatial and dynamic approach to borders as imaginaries, new research combining religious studies, border studies, media studies, globalization studies. The focus on the meanings and role of social imaginaries allows us to provide new frameworks and improve existing conceptual approaches (such as those of Taylor himself).

## **Proposed Research Theme 2: Social Imaginaries of Inclusion and Decoloniality**

The second theme of our SIMAGINE collaboration focuses on rethinking the borders that have been created and sustained by racism and the 'integral role which race and racism played in the construction of modernity' (Mbembe, 2017). The context in which this theme will be developed, is the contemporary aspiration to enhance 'social inclusion' in South African society. Social inclusion is the current post-apartheid policy directive, and flows from earlier national aspirations of 'reconciliation' and 'social cohesion'. Whereas social cohesion addressed complex diversity by focusing on coherency, being united, reducing and/or eliminating inequalities, exclusion and disparities (Department of Education, South Africa, DET p.14), social inclusion is meant to go beyond social cohesion and nation building, as is "embraces all people, even those who do not share similar value systems, territories and histories" (Department of Education, South Africa, DET p. 23)

One important aspiration expressed in contemporary African philosophy is 'decoloniality'. The South African social theorist Mporu speaks of decoloniality as "the thinking and practices from peoples and parts of the world that have experienced even the Enlightenment itself as a darkening of the world and have endured modernity as dehumanization" (Mporu, 2017). He describes coloniality as a "stubborn [...] reality of the



present and not a past process, event or episode in the history of the Global South". He agrees with Maldonado-Torres (2007) who maintains that coloniality is alive in "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations". As such coloniality is also a powerful presence in "criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality as the time and every day (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Mbembe argues that: "until we have eliminated racism from our current lives and imagination, we will have to continue to struggle for the creation of a world beyond - race. But to achieve it, to sit down at a table to which everyone has been invited, we must undertake an exacting political and ethical critique of racism and of the ideologies of difference (Mbembe, 2017).

In terms of our consortium, coloniality is a social imaginary that is still very influential both in everyday life and in global politics. What do we gain from studying coloniality from the perspective of imagination and social imaginaries as discussed above? During our conference at Bloemfontein, the hosting Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice at University of the Free State (UFS) will start off the conversation with two examples of (de)coloniality and social inclusion. Firstly with a focus on post-apartheid visual arts, but also on the impact of images of colonialism in art forms such as statues, novels, architecture, museums etc. Secondly, with a paper on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as ways of knowing.

Both these topics will be discussed in terms of what they mean when it comes to social inclusion and contemporary imaginations of self and other? How can humanity be restored to those who "have historically been subjected to processes of abstraction and objectification" (Mbembe, 2017) in a local and global context of (de)coloniality? We will start from a perspective of decoloniality, regarding 'colonialism and especially coloniality itself as a contemporary reality of and not a past process, event or episode in the history of the Global South. It is present in the domination and exploitation of people according to gender and sexuality and in the colonization of knowledge and subjectivities (Mpofu, 2017). We will explore whether the concept of social imaginaries is helpful to understand the continuing dominance of coloniality, and to find new ways of imagining the future which matches contemporary aspirations of enhancing 'social inclusion'. We will also explore whether the study of practical examples of (de)coloniality can help us to rethink and refine the concept of social imaginaries.

The Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice at University of the Free State (UFS), with its expertise in matters of social change, social injustice, de-coloniality, and human dignity, could offer a much-needed contribution to the SINAGINE research. At the same time, with our current focus on imagination and social imaginaries, we hope to be able to contribute to the research of the Institute. We are looking for dialogue and partnership - also on the longer term - that is mutually enriching.

### **Proposed Research Theme 3: The Transformative Power of Artful Articulations of Social Imaginaries**

As we have seen, social imaginaries always imply an orientation towards what we consider to be 'good', and the articulation of what people aspire to in their social imaginaries is a key factor in democratic processes that allow for social change. The arts are an important way of articulating and criticizing social imaginaries in ways that are sometimes provocative. In our third theme, we intend to explore the transformative power of art. John Dewey's *Art as Experience* will be an important point of departure. We want to

develop the theme together with contemporary artists that relate their art to social processes and in relation to the VUB-project Human(art)istics. In our upcoming conference in Vienna, Hans Alma and Marc Van den Bossche will give a further elaboration on this theme.

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