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THE EASTERN AND THE IMAGINED:
DEFENDING THE REALM OF THE CULTURAL
IN THE GLOBAL

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South Asia has had a particular role in the disciplinary history of social anthropology largely due to the works of Louis Dumont. For a long time the existence of an ideal typically and radically different social existence as a counterpoint to the individualistic ideology of the European cultural sphere locked the research of the area into an inevitable commentary on the hierarchical principle, either reinforcing Dumont's ideas, rejecting them or transforming his structuralist model.

The changing economic policy of the Indian federal state has nevertheless had inevitable influence on the ways social sciences and anthropology approach life in the subcontinent. The liberalization of the economy that started in the early 1990s has created a situation in which global influences and networks have profoundly transformed social reality in India: possibilities of migrating from India have expanded, foreign investors have created sites for global corporate activity and media expansion and commercialization has been abrupt and pervasive. The emergence of the new middle classes as well as new types of international migration and media has attracted the attention of anthropologists. India does not appear to be what it used to be: the 'different' *par excellence.* Those studying new social and cultural forms of life in the subcontinent are asking: Are we seeing the emergence of radically new cultural forms in South Asia? How is cultural integrity surviving the onslaught of global capitalism? Is the Dumontian holistically hierarchical—or McKim Marriott's 'dividual', characterisation of the South Asian person—readjusting and transforming or disappearing and individualizing? In other words, is the evident change skin deep or fundamental? Or is the question erroneous?

The last fifteen years have witnessed a new vocabulary of the imagination (Appadurai 1996), fantasy, phantasm (Ivy 1995), simulacra (Baudrillard 1994) and other related concepts in anthropology and cultural studies. This interest has been growing from ideas of the intensifying interconnectedness in the transterritorialized or transnational world and it can be seen as a challenge to conventional anthropological wisdom. However, the notion of 'the imagination', just like 'hybridization', and 'negotiation of identities' and

other concepts that inhabit the vocabularies of postcolonial and cultural studies, tends to arouse doubts in more 'hard-core' anthropologists (see, for example, Friedman 1994). Examining the debates on the imagination and its emergence as a new form of mass mediated, transterritorialized phenomena, as suggested by Arjun Appadurai (1996), helps to understand the coordinates of the discussion and its relevance for the anthropological study of South Asia.

Appadurai also agrees that the ability and tendency to imagine alternative worlds, to transcend the visible and tangible, is undoubtedly one of the universal mental features of humankind, expressed in dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories. However, according to him, the socially transformative role of the imagination as a collective consciousness is radically different from anything that existed before: a 'social fact' of the post-electronic, mass mediated and transterritorialized world. Ordinary people, more than ritual specialists or charismatic leaders, are engaged in creating mythographies that form the basis of new social projects. The effect of the new imagination is that it "creates ideas of neighbourhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (Appadurai 1996: 7).

In the case of the South Asian transformations, can the imagination therefore be said to influence realities and collective action? The answer undoubtedly has to be in the affirmative. It helps to understand how people operate in their everyday lives and strategies if we take into account that the new forms of media and migration, experienced in close, personal, social networks, create a sense of opportunity and, even more, a consciousness of alternative realities. However, the dividing line implied by Appadurai between the 'socially imaginative present' and the 'socially unimaginative past' is highly questionable. For example, radically imaginative projects such as devotional Bhakti movements have been widely present in the continent since the Middle Ages. And what should we think about the Independence movement? Or Gandhi's salt marches? They are exemplary cases of movements that have been fuelled by a collective imaginary, even without the presence of modern electronic media.

The question then arises: What exactly is different in the way the imagination plays a role in present day South Asian realities? Is it just an issue of scale, an unprecedented growth in the social importance of the imagination? More interesting than focusing on such a debate, however, is turning a keen eye to the *contents* of these 'modern dreams' and alternative, imagined realities. They are based on certain taken-for-granted and shared cultural givens which the media and migration scenarios may only very slowly transform. The imagined reality that motivates mass political and cultural movements such as the Dalit movement (of ex-untouchables), the parties of the so-called Other Backward Classes, or organizations of divorced women, is intelligible only from local cultural meanings. The imaginary as it is used by Charles Taylor (2002) appears much more rewarding than the one à la Appadurai (which is locked into its dichotomizing tendency): Taylor has used the social imaginary as a concept that occupies a middle ground between doctrines and practices: "It gives us a sense of who we are, how we fit together, how we got where we are, and what we might expect from each other in carrying out collective practices that are constitutive of our way of life" (Gaonkar 2002: 10). To me, this sounds like the phenomenon some may label as 'culture' and the debates related to it.

'Culture' or 'cultural' has been used to describe the interconnectedness between actual social practice and the wider symbolic matrix (Taylor's expression) that make such practice meaningful, and thus I doubt if re-naming this fundamental cultural process 'the social imaginary' adds anything substantial, though undoubtedly making it more appealing and fresh to the eye. Taylor's social imaginary helps us to see that there exists a circular, dynamic relationship between practice and a symbolic, doctrinal matrix via imagination. All in all, taking a long detour through the murky backwaters of the imaginary, we are inescapably back in the wide stream of the 'cultural'.

The imagination may have more relevance to understanding the anthropological project than the realities of people, say, in South Asia: the need to imagine *either* culturally different lifeworlds *or* homogenizing global process may be so evident in the social sciences that we hardly see the cultural trees for the ideological forest. Anthropologists are at times guilty of fidelity to the credo of 'difference' even when it is empirically unconvincing, while, on the other hand, those engaged in the grand narrative of globality, such as Appadurai—or ecological determinism or some other doctrine—may be blinded to the realities revealed by unpretentious fieldwork. The call to side either with eternal difference or human universality severs the anthropological imagination in South Asia: it is as though academics studying cultural worlds in the region have been locked into either parroting the oft-quoted stanza from Kipling's ballad: 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'—or the less-oft quoted part of the same ballad: 'But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!'. Such a dichotomy is limiting and evidently motivated by Western binary thought. Ultimately, a stress on long-term, conceptually informed and comparative fieldwork remains the remedy to the constriction of the anthropological and sociological imagination, in the case of South Asia as elsewhere.

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