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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between the spatial imaginary of socio-spatial groups and the role of technical advisory practices. It suggests that the political agency of these groups and their autonomy depend on a critical exercise, which is directly connected to the processes of construction of information by the groups' members, regarding social relations and space. After all, the critique of society as well as of the space thus produced is based on information produced about them. Such information is built from a socially shared spatial imaginary. The spatial imaginary consists of the spatialization of the social imaginary theorized by Castoriadis: it is the matrix of meaning on which society imaginatively institutes itself. The institutions grounded on this matrix are not independent of the spatial dimension; instead, they manifest as social space. Therefore, not only are social relations instituted according to a way in which they make sense, but space is also produced according to a particular interpretation of reality. Thus, the technical advisory should create instruments that enable the production of information of the advised groups to contribute to the exercise of their autonomy. The goal is that such groups can expose their spatial imaginary to their own criticism, in the exercise of their autonomy and without creating a relationship of dependence on their advisers.

Keywords: Spatial imaginary, Technical advisory practices, Socio-spatial groups, Autonomy

1 Social imaginary and the project of autonomy

Cornelius Castoriadis was a Greek thinker who lived from 1922 to 1997 and got deeply involved with politics and the critique of society throughout his life. As a young man, he joined the Athenian Communist Youth. He later broke with Marxism and created the journal 'Socialism or Barbarism, an organ of criticism and

revolutionary orientation', along with other thinkers who had split from the French arm of the Fourth International (Curtis, 1988).

As explained by Souza (2017), Castoriadis was a thinker of autonomy. For him, autonomy was the essence of praxis, and of the historical development of a just society. He argued that only the exercise of autonomy would make it possible for society to be open to self-reform in pursuit of its goals over time, as well as the goals of its members (Castoriadis, 1982).

While developing his theory and critique of society, Castoriadis (1982) elaborated a thesis on the formation and existence of the latter, consolidated in a 1975 text entitled 'The imaginary institution of society'. According to him, society is not simply a natural consequence of the aggregation of individuals. Instead, it is imaginatively instituted by its members. Therefore, society does not exist prior to the social consensus that institutes it. For Castoriadis (1982), there must be a matrix of common meanings shared by the members of society so that society can constitute itself. He calls this matrix the social imaginary.

The social imaginary is a core from which society comprehends and institutes itself. It is a source for the construction of information about society by its members. In view of Castoriadis' project of autonomy, it is safe to say that a society can only claim to be autonomous – that is, open to self-reform – if its members can understand and criticize the world's socially instituted matrix of meaning. Thus, relating the production of information to the imaginary can be of aid to study political exercise in society and its spatialization. It also serves to understand how society, its members, and the groups that belong to it can exercise autonomy. This way, it contributes to rethinking the performance of technical advisers in the processes of advising the production of space.

It is important to say that imaginary is not synonymous with symbolic, even though the common use tends to make that equivalence. The imaginary is the social matrix of meaning that enables society to institute itself by gathering around an interpretation of reality; whereas the symbolic is the way this matrix expresses itself (Castoriadis, 1982). However, this does not mean precedence of one or another: the imaginary does not become reality without its symbolic expression, and the symbol does not exist without a socially shared matrix of meaning. One of the forms of expression of the imaginary is discourse, which is a modality of symbolic manifestation of a particular conception of reality. Consequently, discourse grants access to the information of the subjacent matrix that guides the institution of society.

Therefore, the concept of social imaginary created by Cornelius Castoriadis (1982) indicates an interesting path for the understanding of society. In his theory, the imaginary does not appear as something abstract, unreal or idealized, but as a concrete way of interpreting the world and instituting society. For him, the social relations that may arise between the members of a society are based on this shared interpretation, which is the social imaginary, and have functional and symbolic characteristics. After all, according to Castoriadis (1982, p.159, our translation), the imaginary "must intersect with the symbolic, otherwise, society could not have 'reunited', and with the economic-functional, otherwise it could not have survived". This occurs through the institutions.

Institutions are phenomena that reveal the social imaginary and constitute society. Thus, they are "a symbolic, socially sanctioned network, where a functional component and an imaginary component are combined in varying proportions and relationships" (Castoriadis, 1982, p.159, our translation). Therefore, institutions are linked to the material and functional survival of the social group. At the same time, they are connected to meanings that the group gives them. Institutions must exist in a way that makes sense to society and its members (Castoriadis, 1982).

For Castoriadis, a society only exists (not in the sense of a merely 'physical' or 'biological' existence, but as *human-social* existence, which implies the construction of *meaning* for things and the world, and the generation of *new meanings*) by creating (truly *ex nihilo*) a matrix of 'social imaginary meanings'. These meanings do not have or are not exhausted by (especially in the case of central and fundamental meanings, in contrast to 'derived' meanings) 'real' and 'rational' referents; they comprise the values, the 'worldviews' (*Weltanschauungen*), the beliefs, the myths, and the taboos ('God', 'Reason', 'Capital'...) which give meaning to the world and to which the functional aspect is subjected/subordinated, because it literally has no meaning outside the symbolic plane (apart, of course, from the banality that is, in the plane of individual and species survival, the fact that one cannot subsist without eating, without protecting oneself from weather, without reproducing the species, etc.). (Souza, 2017, p.37-38, note 12, emphasis added by the author, our translation).

Yet, despite what Souza (2017) states in the passage above, the creation of the imaginary is not “truly *ex nihilo*”. It does not come from anything. It is important to bear in mind that, such as proposed by Henri Lefebvre (2008), the instituted social relations manifest themselves as social space. Therefore, social space affects the imaginary at the same time it is affected by it. For this reason, the tension between the theory of the production of space and Castoriadis’ theory may give rise to a new concept capable of including both considerations about the imaginary and space: the spatial imaginary.

2 Spatial imaginary: a spatialization of Castoriadis

Although the ontology of society formulated by Castoriadis (1982) assists in the understanding of instituted social relations, this author is not usually present in discussions about space. In part, this stems from his position on the relevance – or rather the irrelevance, in his view – of the spatial dimension. For Souza (2017, p.321, emphasis added by the author, our translation), Castoriadis “seconded and underestimated space in favor of time, in favor of history, at least in the plane of a (proper and strongly) *philosophical* reflection”.

The disregard of space is not a particularity of Castoriadis. According to Souza (2017), at the time Castoriadis elaborated his thinking about society it was common for theorists who discussed society to refuse the relevance of this dimension, opposing spatial determinism. They used to try and understand society and its conflicts only from the perspective of history. Thus, for Castoriadis, space is simply a natural substrate, which is why only trivialities of society could be derived from it, not its constituent institutions (Souza, 2017).

Nevertheless, society is not only historical. The spatial dimension is not just the stage on which society develops itself.

If concrete society exists only in history and having history as its mode of existence in a strong sense (creation of ‘social imaginary meanings’), also, in a complementary way, it exists only ‘with’ space and ‘being’ space, since social relations only materialize ‘in’ space, *through* space and *by mean of* space, *referenced* and *conditioned* by space (which, in fact, also influences the psyche). (Souza, 2017, p.53, emphasis added by the author, our translation).

In this regard, it is important to point out the discussion presented by Lefebvre (2008) regarding the production of space. There is a tension between the position defended by Lefebvre (2008), for whom space is the manifestation of social relations, and Castoriadis (1982), for whom the institution of society is historical, and the spatial dimension would be irrelevant. However, this is a constitutive tension. It is from the contrast between these two theories of society and thanks to the identification of that tension that we can speak of the concept of spatial imaginary: a socially shared matrix of meaning that manifests itself not only as a historical construction but also in the production of space. This is not a sub-branch of the social imaginary. Instead, it is the recognition that the realization of the imaginary defended by Castoriadis (1982) must consider the manifestation of social relations. As Lefebvre (2008) states, these relations manifest as social space. And this is a two-way street: on the one hand, spatial imaginary gives meaning to certain spatial practices according to established social relations, and, on the other, these relations manifest themselves in practices that institute the spatial imaginary on which they are based. To bear this in mind is to glimpse the concrete reality and the manifestation of society’s constitutive practices and conflicts.

According to Lefebvre (2008), the production of space is closely connected to the strategic dispute for the control of social relations: it is in and through space that these relations are produced and reproduced because it is in and through space that they are realized (Lefebvre, 2008). Thus, even if we accept, with Castoriadis (1982), that social institutions – therefore included here the instituted social relations – are grounded in a socially shared matrix of meaning, this matrix cannot simply ignore the spatial dimension. Social relations do not occur over social space; social relations are social space (Lefebvre, 2008).

This way, to speak only of a social imaginary is to risk ignoring an important part of the real manifestation of the conflicts and instituted relationships in the world because the development of society in history is inseparable from the manifestation of this development in space (Massey, 2008). Therefore, taking from Castoriadis (1982) and Lefebvre (2008), it may be appropriate to speak of a spatial imaginary: not only do institutions make sense thanks to an interpretative matrix of reality, but it also makes sense that the manifestation of those institutions entails the production of space in a particular and apparently ‘natural’ way. And it seems natural because of the meaning it has to the members of society.

The big problem is that this same matrix can be responsible for the perpetuation of inequalities, and the alienation of fragilized groups, whose voices are muted regarding the production of space – consequently, of society. These groups then become hostage to top-down representations of space. These representations conceal the conflicts and strategies of domination employed, appearing as the best or even the only possible

ones. Even if these groups do not adhere to the hegemonic matrix of meaning, they suffer the violent repression of an institutionalized State apparatus based on this matrix. This is because the State violently attacks the alternatives to the existing social relations in order to ensure their continuity. As reported by Kapp (2014), the State, although with varying levels of rigor, seeks to control and plan society to ensure the necessary cohesion for the reproduction of established social relations, and does it functionally, symbolically, and discursively. Thus, resistance practices put into action by these groups are opposed by the State because they do not correspond to the institutionally established representations.

3 The project of autonomy and technical advisory practices to socio-spatial groups

Even though Castoriadis did not give due importance to space in his theory of society, “nothing prevents us from ‘*spatializing*’ the ‘project of autonomy’ – a *sine qua non* condition, in fact, for Castoriadis’ powerful reflection to gain greater concreteness and operational potential” (Souza, 2017, p.331, emphasis added by the author, our translation). Therefore, it may be positive that discussions about society’s transformation consider how society produces its space and how it believes it should do so.

For Castoriadis (1982), it is the exercise of autonomy that allows the permanent self-overcoming of society over itself, defining and redefining its goals and institutions as well as orienting itself towards their realization. This theme becomes even more relevant when we consider fragilized socio-spatial groups. Their possibilities to take part in these processes of an institution of themselves and their spaces are minimal – when those possibilities even exist.

Socio-spatial groups are those whose constitutive characteristics are intrinsically related to their own spatial practices. In other words, it is “a group of people that relate to one another in a space, which is constitutive of the group and, conversely, constituted by the group” (Kapp, 2018, p.223). Typically, these are the groups to which technical advisory practices are dedicated in the production of space (Kapp, 2018).

At this point, it is important to highlight the difference between assistance and technical advisory practices. According to Kapp (2018, p.222), “*assistance* connotes uncritical adherence to the assumption of social inferiority of those being assisted, bordering on welfare and philanthropy, whereas *advisory* complies more with a critical perspective of these relations of domination”. Thus, in assistance, a service is provided by specialists to groups or individuals who are deemed unable to produce their own space, whereas in advisory what exists is a collaborative relationship between advised and adviser. The ability of the advised to exercise their autonomy is encouraged in advisory relations.

Nevertheless, this conceptual distinction is not so simple to be put into practice. According to Kapp (2014), as a rule, there is a disparity between the views of the technicians who provide the technical advisory service, and the groups to which are provided such services. There is “a difference of representations and discourses that is difficult to admit and even more difficult to overcome” (Kapp, 2014, p.122, our translation). For this reason, it is not an easy task for advisers to understand the spatial imaginary of advised groups.

For this to be possible, it would be up to the technical advisory services to assist the socio-spatial groups to produce information about space and society without the advisers assuming automatic correspondences. Such assumptions – or preconceptions – are typical of paternalistic welfare that prescribes what is best for groups, as if these groups were unable to decide for themselves. Now, if the intention is to promote autonomy, technical advisory practices should seek to understand the demands and needs of the group, not to assume which are these needs (Kapp, 2018). Thus, technical advisory practices should create tools to help socio-spatial groups produce space and society. These tools should also aid the groups on producing information about those issues by themselves, without depending on the advisers. Such groups can only act to change their socio-spatial condition if they are equipped with the information necessary for their autonomous political agency.

This means that technical advisory services provided to a socio-spatial group should aid in the construction of information about space and society by the members of the advised group. The advisers should not simply inform the groups about what is best suited for them. Since one of the ways in which this information is constructed by the groups is the discourses that they and their members produce, we can assume that such discourses are relevant tools for obtaining information that contributes to the provision of technical advisory services.

Certainly, advised socio-spatial groups do not passively accept the recommendations of the advisers without question. But it is necessary for the technicians to be careful. Since there is a possible technical asymmetry (actual or presumed) between advisers and advised, the technical advisers must avoid determining decisions. For the group to exercise its autonomy, those decisions should be made by the advised, not the advisers. Thus, the creation of tools that instigate the elaboration of these discourses and the representations of space

by the advised socio-spatial groups can allow their emancipation and the exercise of their autonomy. After all, this contributes to reveal and submit to critic both the way they attribute meaning to the production of space, and the way they conceive how instituted social relations should be.

4 Discourses and representations of space as instruments for autonomy

Discourses about space may be produced by socio-spatial groups and their members. They are important sources of information for understanding how space is conceived and represented by such groups. The quasi-therapeutic exercise of revealing the matrix that gives meaning to how space and society are instituted enables these groups to produce relevant information for themselves. Therefore, this helps them elaborate on the critiques necessary to inform their political exercise. This makes possible both the institutional struggle for improvements within the State and the search for the realization of a broader transformative project.

At the same time, it is important to remember that discourses can serve as instruments to disseminate a given spatial imaginary and its institutions. This can have negative consequences on society and especially to fragilized socio-spatial groups. After all, a given spatial imaginary may contain interpretive principles that corroborate aspects such as spatial segregation and reproduction of inequality of access to urban space, its appropriation, and transformation. Thus, once expressed in speeches, manifested in institutions, and, consequently, realized as social space, this imaginary can be conveyed as the best possible option or even the only appropriate one. Inattentive technical advisers can even contribute to that notion.

At this point, it is worth asking if discourses can really serve as an instrument to reach the spatial imaginary. As Bakhtin (2006, p.34-35, our translation) states, “[...] individual consciousness itself is full of signs. Consciousness only becomes consciousness when it is impregnated with ideological (semiotic) content and, consequently, only in the process of social interaction”. This means that there is interpretive content that affects the manifestation of thought; this content, in turn, is the matrix of shared meanings, the imaginary.

The manifestation of thought is related to language, an intellectual faculty. But language must not be conceived only formally, as an idiom, a system of symbols. Although it may exist abstractly as this system, both the concretization and the faculty of language occur through discourse, as stated by Bakhtin (2006). If the human capacity of language does not manifest as discourse, it remains latent. If the system of symbols that is the idiom does not manifest as discourse, it remains abstract. Discourse is not just an individual production: it derives from the meanings that the individual constructs in the processes of social interaction – so much so that Bakhtin (2006, p.34, emphasis added by the author, our translation) categorically states that “*individual consciousness is a socio-ideological fact*”. Therefore, if the spatial imaginary is a shared matrix of social meanings that expresses itself by socially constructed symbols, one of the ways to reach this matrix is the analysis of discourses. Thus, to reveal the ideological content underlying the discourse on space may help in understanding the principles that govern the way individuals interpret the production of space.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that constructed representations have only ideological content, even when they are discourses on space. For Lefebvre (2008, p.45), representation “supplants the concept of ideology and becomes a serviceable (operational) tool for the analysis of spaces, as of those societies which have given rise to them and recognized themselves in them”.

Constructed representations, whether they are discourses or not, reveal objective characteristics. For this reason, they can serve as an instrument of analysis and understanding of the social relations behind the production of space. Thus, they guarantee access to ideological content, and enable access to concrete elements regarding the configuration of social institutions, allowing the production of information about the society. Although the ideological dimension of discourses and of their representations does not determine by itself the social space, it helps to unveil the strategic dispute in the production of space. It also aids in revealing the dispute to control the configuration of the instituted social relations, which is something quite real and concrete.

The effectiveness of ideology is undeniable, but it is limited: it masks the contradictions for and in consciousness (in representations). At worst, it postpones the effects of these contradictions. It cannot suppress them. Clearly, without the growth of productive forces and population, ideology would never be able to maintain the relations of production; it can only conceal their reproduction. (Lefebvre, 1976, p.68).

Consequently, discourses on space cannot be assumed as mere ideological objects: they can be instrumentalized. Because of this, the technical advisory services need to be prepared to analyze the discourses produced by the advised. The advisers must also help the groups by creating tools that the latter can use to analyze these discourses by themselves. After all, such discourses are tools useful to construct

objective information about the production of social space and about the instituted relations manifested as such space. This will aid in submitting this information to critical reflection by the groups themselves without creating a link of dependence on the technical staff.

5 Final thoughts

The search for the spatial imaginary of socio-spatial groups is not simply theoretical preciousness. It is not just a gathering of data to understand how these groups imagine their spaces should be. The spatial imaginary is, like Castoriadis' social imaginary, something concrete. Even though discourses about space may help in identifying this imaginary, the latter goes beyond the mere construction of images, representations, and discourses themselves. It is a matrix that institutes established social relations. Therefore, a matrix that institutes their manifestation as social space. In a way, the discourses serve as instruments to access the spatial imaginary because they are constructed according to the ways we believe space should be produced. As Massey (2008, p. 250, our translation) recalls, "space is an implicit dimension that shapes our structuring cosmologies. It modulates our understandings of the world, our attitudes toward others, our politics".

Thus, when we consider the possibility of technical advisory services for fragilized socio-spatial groups, the investigation of spatial imaginary can serve to identify conceptions and social institutions that are related to the matrix of the meaning of these groups. It can also serve to investigate which are the traits concerning the unique characteristics of these groups and which are those derived from heteronomous impositions upon them. Since they might be subjected to the dictates of a hegemonic thought that subdues them, several of these groups may be in a situation in which the information they produce and the interpretations of space and society they make are compromised by an agenda that does not concern their authentic interests.

Groups can question and produce their social relations and their social space based on the information they produce. Therefore, the exercise of autonomy by socio-spatial groups is immediately impaired if the construction of this information about the city and society is determined by imposed imaginaries. If this happens, their political agency and their capacity to produce information about space may be conditioned by an external source: it is imposed upon them a spatial imaginary that tells these groups how their space should be. This hinders the ways they produce their own space and the autonomous production of their social relations according to their real interests. And sometimes the architects and urban planners themselves are the ones who do it, with an 'advisory practice' that 'teaches' the group the best way to produce space. This is much closer to paternalistic welfare than to technical advisory practices. Technical advisers need to be careful not to create situations that compromise the construction of information by the advised groups, whose members may often feel obligated to present information that does not correspond to their real interests.

Perhaps [members of the advised socio-spatial group] try to assess the situation and find out what response the interlocutors [technical advisers] expect or which answer will be most beneficial to the group itself. Or maybe they'll just say anything to get rid of that awkward situation. Without realizing it, architects take advantage of it and induce a lot of confirmations of what they themselves think. Ultimately, there is an unimaginable potential in this situation for misunderstandings and frustrations. (Kapp, 2014, p.123, our translation)

As Souza (2017, p.61, emphasis added by the author, our translation) states, autonomy will be a fundamental parameter for judging concrete processes of socio-spatial transformation, having in mind "*social justice* (considering the increase or not of social justice in a distributive or other sense) and the *quality of life* (considering the increase or not of the quality of life for as many people as possible)". And this is even more striking in criticizing the work of the technical adviser. After all, does he contribute to the exercise of autonomy or does he just create a dependency relationship of the group on him? Or worse: isn't he simply masking a heteronomous process with the veil of 'participation'? These are questions that need to be asked by architects and urban planners whenever they set out to do technical advisory work.

Moreover, one must be aware that the representations of space that may be built from the discourses of members of socio-spatial groups are not the social space itself. As Massey (2008) warns, representations of space are always limited constructions, restricted readings of social space. Therefore, an investigation of the informational content constructed by the advised groups needs to be careful not to treat these representations as exact correspondents of all characteristics of the social space. This assumption would imply a space solidified in a static and insufficient representation (Massey, 2008).

In fact, when we think of peripheral contexts like ours in Latin America, we must bear in mind that the spatialization of this project of autonomy – its manifestation as social space – is quite complex and hampered by a culture of violent subjugation of some socio-spatial groups. Heteronomously established rules are imposed upon these groups, and those rules are 'justified' by the imaginatively instituted authority of the

State. Within a matrix of meaning where the State defines what space should be like, its authority appears as a strictly rational and logical phenomenon, as if the definition of every detail of urban space by the State was essentially the only viable alternative.

Faced with this heteronomous reality that affects instituted social relations and its manifestation as social space, architects and urban planners need to inquire about their method of obtaining information and about how they can make it possible for the advised groups to produce this information in the absence of the advisers. If the members of the socio-spatial group cannot manifest themselves and identify the defining traits and principles of their spatial imaginary, the technical advisory practices may be compromised. After all, if the technical advisory services do not help the group to independently critique the traces of its spatial imaginary, how can we be sure that the technical advisory services are not only perpetuating a situation based on the advisers' own matrix of meaning, external to the advised group? Unless caution is taken in investigating the spatial imaginary, the unique characteristics of the group might be immediately dismissed by standard urban planning. Now, if we consider that the exercise of autonomy is necessary for these groups to finally have the right to the city – the right to change the city and, therefore, change themselves (Harvey, 2008) –, technical advisory services that seek to contribute to the emancipation of subjugated groups have quite a task to perform.

Thus, technical advisory practices that really intend to serve the interests of these groups should not dictate representations of what would be best for them. Instead, the advisory services must aid these groups in the search for their own matrix of the meaning of the social world and their own spatial imaginary. This way, technical advisory could help such groups to subject their imaginary to criticism and decide by themselves the directions they want to give to the production of their space and their reality, exercising their autonomy. After all, as Kapp (2018, p.232) points out, the goal of the technical advisory practices "is not an integral architectural object, but an active socio-spatial group". Thus, the study of the spatial imaginary can help technical advisers instigate advised groups to produce the information they need to fuel, by themselves, the political discussions in which they take part. With that, the technical advisory practices could aid these groups to work autonomously and actively to make the transformations they consider appropriate.

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