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Social imaginaries and Big History: Towards a new planetary consciousness?

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ABSTRACT

A sustainable global future depends on a fundamental shift from the currently dominant national imaginary to a global imaginary. Most of human reasoning is based on prototypes, framings and metaphors that are seldom explicit; although they can be forged, usually they are merely presupposed in everyday reasoning and debates. The background social imaginary offers explanations of how 'we' fit together, how things go on between us, the expectations we have of each other and outsiders, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations. We argue that although the 17th and 18th century scientific and social revolutions generated prototypes, metaphors, framings and related conceptions of time and space that pointed towards a global imaginary, there were deep-seated structural reasons for the 'nation' to become, at least temporarily, the central category of human existence and belonging. By the early 21st century, there are already widespread metaphors that envisage the human world as a whole—from the 'global shopping mall' or 'global village' to the 'spaceship Earth'. Yet, compared to the rich poetics of national imaginaries, the proposed prototypes, metaphors and framings are often thin. Evoking innovative myths about shared human existence and destiny, Big History helps to articulate the rising global imaginary in terms that motivate transformative and progressive politics in the 21st century.

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1. The constitution of social imaginaries

Globalizing forces both generate and respond to new 'global problems' beyond the reach of nationally-based political institutions and their associated mindsets. A sustainable global future in which common problems will have been adequately addressed depends on a fundamental mindset change from the currently dominant national imaginary to a global imaginary. We argue here that such a transformation is already under way, but it remains to be seen whether: (i) it will occur quickly enough; and (ii) it will unfold towards a planetary consciousness characterized by responsibility for the long-term prospects of life and human development.

Let us begin by fleshing out in some detail our central category of 'global imaginary' and some related dynamics. The global imaginary is a specific manifestation of what thinkers from various intellectual traditions have referred to as 'social imaginary'¹ [1]. Constituting the macro-mappings of social and political time/space through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world, the social imaginary is a deep-seated mode of understanding that provides the parameters within which

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¹ As employed throughout this article, our key concepts of the 'national' and 'global' imaginary draw on relevant arguments presented in the works of Charles Taylor, Benedict Anderson, Pierre Bourdieu, and Arjun Appadurai. For the connection between social imaginaries and political ideologies, see Steger [1].

people imagine their social existence. It gives them a sense of a collective identity by furnishing the foundation of what constitutes 'us', typically involving also deep boundaries and binaries that enable and perpetuate distinctions between 'us' and 'them'² [2]. Charles Taylor argues that social imaginaries are neither theories nor ideologies, but implicit 'backgrounds' that visualize and map space and normalize a particular sense of time, thus providing the bedrock on which social discourses and practices rest and a widely shared sense of their legitimacy. Much in the same vein, Pierre Bourdieu notes that the social imaginary sets the non-reflexive framework for our daily routines and social repertoires. Structured by social dynamics that produce them while at the same time also structuring those forces, social imaginaries are products of history that 'generate individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history' [3].

Human thought is mostly not fully conscious. Abstract concepts such as 'nation' are largely metaphorical. Most of human reasoning is based on prototypes, framings and metaphors that are seldom explicit; usually they are merely presupposed in everyday reasoning and debates [4,5]. A typical modern national imaginary consists of a series of interrelated and mutually strengthening prototypes, metaphors and framings including:

- *Narrative prototypes* as instances and stories of what count as a typical example, basis, or standard for belonging to the (category of) nation X (for example, for the USA, the story of 'The First Thanksgiving').
- *Visual prototypes* as archetypal pictures of the landscape of the nation X; the shape of the map of the nation X, typically blended with archetypal pictures and/or familiar figures (for instance, Italy–boot, Finland–maiden); an equally important visual prototype is the flag and its colouring that becomes sedimented in social practices as an instantly recognizable shape and figure.
- *Metaphor*: 'the nation is a family' metaphor, which is arguably a key to understanding complex chains of reasoning concerning the value of belonging to the nation, the legitimate role of the government, immigration and many other issues, as well as expressions such as 'founding fathers', 'head of state' and 'fatherland' (the term patriot comes from the Latin *pater*, meaning father) [6].
- *Metaphors in conceptual blendings*: 'the state is a person' metaphor, which co-determines the meaning of the nation when the nation and state are conceptually blended ('nation-state') and when the state, like any person, is taken to have emotions, intentions, aims and a character (for instance, 'China is patiently waiting for the time when it can assume a central position in world politics', or 'India feels insecure because of Pakistan's nuclear weapons').
- *Framings*: contextualization of an issue sets the locus of good and morality within the nation(-state). Issues are systematically framed implying or favoring the idea that to be moral or ethical means belonging to the nation. 'Are you ready to die for your country?' evokes the highly moral ground of self-sacrifice for your beloved ones, seen metaphorically as family-members, often conflated with literal mothers and sisters. Yet the same preparedness could also be framed as, 'Are you ready to murder innocent human beings because of the decision made by six men (that you have never met) in the fancy palaces of a distant city?'

In short, the social imaginary offers explanations of how 'we'—the members of the imagined community of mostly strangers—fit together, how things go on between us, the expectations we have of each other and outsiders, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations. This background understanding is at once descriptive, constitutive and normative in the sense of providing with the ethical standards and material 'evidence' of what passes as the right and obvious way of being-in-the-world [7,8].

Despite their apparent intangibility, social imaginaries are very real in the sense of resting on relatively stable prototypes, metaphors, framings and related conceptions of time and space which enable common practices and deep-seated attachments. Though capable of facilitating collective fantasies and speculative reflections, social imaginaries should by no means be dismissed as mere phantasms or mental fabrications³ [9]. As shared even if ambiguous visions of self and community, social imaginaries always find expression as namable collectivities such as 'Ibo' or 'Swedes' [10]. Allowing for the endowment of these identities with specific properties, they acquire solidity through the repetitive performance of their assigned qualities and characteristics as well as through the social construction of the space of everyday practices. Although feigning permanence, social imaginaries are temporary constellations subject to constant change. At certain tipping points in history, change can occur with lightning speed and tremendous ferocity⁴ [11].

2. The era of the national imaginary

The scientific and social revolutions in Europe and the Americas transformed the previously dominant social imaginary in a dramatic way. The old modes of understanding had reproduced divinely-sanctioned power hierarchies in the form of tribes, clanships, trading city-states and, especially, dynastic realms. The republican experiments of the past had been short-lived

² In this paper we do not have the space to discuss the complex and difficult question of 'other' of a global or planetary identity, but see Patomäki [2].

³ This propensity of social imaginaries to give birth to ideologies that serve primarily on the level of 'fantasies' constructing political subjects has been emphasized by Žižek [9].

⁴ On the useful notion of historical 'tipping points' as particular combinations of dynamics and resources that can usher in a new organizing logic, see Sassen [11].

and were forgotten or actively suppressed from the collective memory. Things started to change after the European wars of religion and with the subsequent rise of natural sciences. Although many of the emerging prototypes, metaphors, framings and related conceptions of time and space already pointed towards a global imaginary, there were deep-seated structural reasons for the 'nation' to become, at least temporarily, as the central category of human existence and belonging.

Between 1776 and 1848 there arose on both sides of the Atlantic the familiar template of the 'nation' now no longer referring to the king at the pinnacle of the state hierarchy, but to an abstract 'general will' operating in free citizens. The political implications were as clear as they were audacious: henceforth it would be 'the people'—not kings, aristocrats, or clerical elites—that exercised legitimate authority in political affairs in the name of reason and its allegedly 'natural laws'. Over time, the will of the people would replace monarchical forms of authority based on transcendental powers emanating from a divine realm. However, with the failure of the Napoleonic project of continental imperial rule, the authority of the European and American people found concrete expression only within particular states. Although the emerging abstract principles of rights and justice were universalistic, the concept of 'people' in practice meant the citizens of a particular state—in a system of warring states. At this time—in addition to mercenaries who fought for material compensation—many people were still willing to sacrifice their lives for the divine rights of the dynastic rulers and aristocracy. Moreover, production remained based on land and agriculture; and the speed of communication and transportation across the surface of the planet was limited to the velocity of humans and horses. Under these circumstances, the resources of the state were harnessed to forge and circulate prototypes, metaphors and frames that would legitimize its rule. The new national categories also captured the imagination of historians, philosophers and poets. Jürgen Habermas has aptly summarized the outcome:

Emancipated members of bourgeois society, whose conventional identity had been shattered, could know themselves as one with their fellow citizens as (a) free and equal subjects of civil law (the citizen as private commodity owner); (b) morally free subjects (the citizen as private person); and (c) politically free subjects (the citizen as democratic citizen of the state). Thus the collective identity of bourgeois society developed under the highly abstract viewpoints of legality, morality, and sovereignty; at least it expressed itself in this way in modern natural-law constructions and in formalist ethics. However, these abstract determinations are best suited to the identity of world citizens, not to that of the citizen of a particular state [... Hence, he became...] *homme* and *citoyen* in one. This competition between two group identities was temporarily silenced through membership in nations: the nation is the modern identity formation that defused and made bearable the contradiction between the intrastate universalism of bourgeois law and morality, on the one side, and the particularism of individual states, on the other [12].

Nationalism became a transformative force in the modernizing world. Nationhood found its concrete political expression in the transformation of subjects into citizens who laid claim to equal membership in the nation and institutionalized their autonomy within the modern nation-state. But who really counted as part of the people and what constituted the essence of the nation became the subject of fierce intellectual debates and social struggles. Seeking to remake the world according to the rising national imaginary, citizens exhibited a restlessness that became the hallmark of modernity [13].

In line with what we are arguing, recent explanations of nationality and nationalism—appearing on the academic scene since the early 1980s—have advanced convincing arguments in favor of a tight connection between the forces of modernity, the spread of industrial capitalism, and the elite-engineered construction of the 'national community' as a cultural artifact⁵ [14,15]. Sensing the overarching stature of the national as a specific kind of social imaginary, Benedict Anderson and other social thinkers with an anthropological bent refer to the national as a 'cultural artifact of a particular kind'. As a relatively broad cultural system, it is more closely related to 'kinship' or 'religion' than to the modern ideological articulations of 'liberalism', 'socialism' or—even— 'conservatism' [16–19]. As such, the 'national imaginary' corresponds to what Anderson has called 'modern imaginings of the nation' as a spatially limited—no nation imagines itself as a 'world community'—and sovereign community of individuals. Their knowledge of each other is, in most cases, not direct, but mediated in 'homogenous, empty time' through the diffusion of discursive literacy. To a large extent, this was made possible by the invention of printing technology embedded in nascent capitalism [16, pp. 6–7, 33].

To crystallize the point, in order to be viable in the 18th and 19th century circumstances and count as 'legitimate', modern political communities had to be nation-states. Giving the new social imaginary its distinct flavor in the form of various descriptive and normative assumptions, the 'national imaginary' refers to the taken-for-granted understanding in which the nation—plus its affiliated or to-be-affiliated state—serves the framework of the political.

Over time, the 'national' acquired alluring banner headlines and truth claims that resonated with people's interests and aspirations and thus bound them to certain ideological vision of community. Like-minded individuals organized themselves into clubs, associations, movements, and political parties with the primary objective of enlisting more people to their preferred normative vision of the national. Thus, the ethico-political translation of the national imaginary occurred in terms of a 'modernist mindset' comprised of specific values, ideals, and conceptual constructs that articulated the national imaginary into concrete political programs and agendas. In 'liberalism', these valorized the profit-oriented production of

⁵ See, for example, Hobsbawm [14]. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992. Even scholars like Anthony Smith who reject the modernist view that nations were simply 'invented' without the significant incorporation of pre-modern ethnic ties and histories, concede that nationalism represents 'a modern movement and ideology, which emerged in the latter half of the 18th century in Western Europe and America...' See Smith [15].

mass commodities and the generation of meaning primarily on the basis of ever-increasing consumption, leading to individualism and atomism, separation of nature and humanity, unsustainable development and lifestyles, conflict resolution through violent confrontation that pitted nations against each other, and patriarchy.

3. The rise of the global imaginary

As we mentioned above, the new prototypes, metaphors, framings and related conceptions of time and space emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries already implied a rudimentary global imaginary. The Copernican Revolution shattered the belief in the centrality of one's own place or position in the world. If the Earth is not in a central, specially favored position in the universe, why should one's city or country be in a specially favored position on the surface of the planet? Many of the instances and stories of what count as a typical example, basis, or standard for belonging to political society were soon abstracted away from cultural or historical identity of a particular group of people. Natural scientists like Giordano Bruno and Christiaan Huygens and Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire and Immanuel Kant went even further and speculated about the place and origins of the solar system and envisaged intelligent life on other worlds, either similar or much more developed than that of their own society. These thinkers were opposed to particularistic framing of ethics and politics and critical of European colonialism.

Although several of the distinctive prototypes, metaphors and framings of the global imaginary had thus appeared by the time of the American Revolutionary War and the French Revolution—in effect making these revolutions possible—the social conditions were not favorable to their widespread distribution and adoption in their cosmopolitan form. Constant warfare—or at least threat of war—favored the adoption of prototypes, metaphors and framings based on the category of the nation also among those who fought the revolutionaries and their successors such as Napoleon who, under the prevailing circumstances, was drawn to establish hereditary monarchy for his own family. Subsequently, in the 19th and 20th centuries, various struggles against asymmetrical relations of power—not least those of the capitalist market economy—were framed in terms of the legitimate rights and will of the people as a nation.

Yet the emergent global imaginary engendered several transformative processes in the 19th and 20th centuries. The revolutions of 1848 involved also cosmopolitan ideas and the Communist Manifesto, from the same year, declared: 'Proletarians of all countries, unite!'⁶ Following the First International Workingmen's Association (1864–1876), a series of competing socialist international organizations were established. Likewise, liberal peace activists created transnational associations. The first World Peace Conference was organized in London in 1843. These activities resulted in the establishment of bodies such as the International Court of Arbitration (the predecessor of the Hague 1899 Permanent Court of Arbitration); the League of Nations 1919 (predecessor of the UN); and the Permanent Court of International Justice 1922 (after 1945: the International Court of Justice).

The World War II was the first truly global war, made possible by new technologies of communication and transportation. And, in the aftermath of World War II, these novel technologies allowed for an unprecedented compression of time and space, thus facilitating the speed and intensity of communication and movements. As Karl Jaspers wrote in the late 1940s:

There develops a new consciousness of the world. Since the inception of the modern system of communications and news-distribution, the feeling that we have of the spaces of the earth has come to take in the whole planet. We visualise the globe and it is filled with the daily news that comes to us from all parts of it [20].

Gradually, and in spite of countertendencies, this sense of an intra- and interdependent 'global' began to blend in as well as undermine the national prototypes, metaphors and framings. The objective acceleration and multiplication of global material networks occurred hand in hand with the intensifying subjective recognition of a shrinking world. Such heightened awareness of the compression of time and space influenced the direction and material instantiations of global flows. As sociologist Roland Robertson has pointed out, the increasingly widespread perception of the compression of the world into a single place encouraged the framing of issues in global rather than national terms⁷ [21–27]. Like all social imaginaries, the global imaginary extends deep into the self and its dispositions, based on widely shared prototypes, metaphors and framings. It facilitates the creation of new identities nurtured by the intensifying relations between the individual and the globe [28].

The eruption of the global imaginary within and onto the national began to undermine the normality and self-contained coziness of the modern nation-state—especially the by now deeply engrained notions of community tied to a sovereign and clearly demarcated territory containing allegedly homogenous populations⁸ [29]. The prototypes, metaphors and framings on which national identities and membership were based became (again) destabilized. The decolonization dynamics in the Third World and the rise of the counter-cultural 'new social movements' in the 1960s and 1970s served as powerful evidence for the ongoing transformation of the social imaginary by 'new ideologies' such as feminism, environmentalism, and postcolonialism. By the 1980s, the overlapping political-cultural consensus was seriously challenged by the inclination to

⁶ But note how Marx and Engels still frame their political project in 'inter-nationalist' rather than global terms: their communal frame of reference is 'proletarians of all countries'.

⁷ See Robertson [21]. For similar arguments see [22–27].

⁸ See Appadurai [29] and Albrow [22]. Albrow's epochal theory postulates the 'end of modernity', whereas Beck argues for a seismic shift from a 'first modernity' to a 'second modernity'.

'de-center' the individual subject and deconstruct, pluralize and democratize existing power relations presented in the unsuspecting garb of 'normalcy'.

The material and ideal tangibility of both mutual and asymmetrical relations of dependency—a result of global economic growth and liberalization and the rise of neoliberalism—favored the strengthening of two distinct ethico-political visions of a future cosmopolitan order. Global social elites associated with the political Right fastened onto the new buzzword 'globalization' to push for the creation of a single global free market and the spread of individualist and consumerist values around the world. Most importantly, they translated the rising global imaginary into ideological claims laced with references to planetary economic interdependence rooted in the principles of free-market capitalism: global trade and financial markets, worldwide flows of goods, services, and labor, transnational corporations, offshore financial centers, and so on.

The political Left forming around the nascent global justice and democracy movement articulated an ethico-political cosmopolitanism in terms of a global civil society committed to the ideas of humanity as part of nature, the priority of the planet over the nation, sustainable development and lifestyles, political pluralism and cultural diversity. The political shell of these ideals was 'globalization-from-below'—a global network of civil society organizations, many of which were associated with the World Social Forum. But the most fundamental novelty of this remarkable shift in the prevailing mindset lay in its reliance on the rising global imaginary, regardless of whether its ideological articulations were produced by the forces of the global Left or the cohorts of the global Right.

4. Big History and the global imaginary

The prototypes, metaphors, framings and the ensuing conceptions of time and space constituting the contemporary global imaginary attest to dynamics characterized by both historical rupture and continuity. Although some of the components of the new global imaginary emerged already in the 17th and 18th centuries (and others by the mid-20th century), its ensuing possibilities remain underdeveloped. By the early 21st century, there are widespread metaphors that envisage the human world as a whole—from the 'global shopping mall' or 'global village' to the 'spaceship Earth'—but compared to the rich poetics of national imaginaries, the proposed prototypes, metaphors and framings are often conceptually thin and, therefore, tend to be articulated in rather general ways as slogans or buzzwords. This is especially true in the temporal dimension. Any identity is always temporal, not only in the simple sense of being located in time and space, but because ethical and political existence discloses itself as sameness over time that can only be established in and through narratives that the actors are telling [30].

In our view, the global imaginary can become conceptually richer and thus more plausible in terms of historical stories that make dexterous use of the metaphorical constructs of the 'planet', 'globe' and 'humanity'. While the articulation of stories about human history as a whole may still be relatively marginal and small-scale (compared to more parochial histories), it has been envisaged in 'Big History' narratives already for at least a century. H.G. Wells, for example, began his intellectual work on systematic cosmopolitan history immediately after the First World War. In his two-volume *Outline of History*, he argued for the importance of widely shared historical ideas:

The need for a common knowledge of the general facts of human history throughout the world has become very evident during the tragic happenings of the last few years. Swifter means of communication have brought all men closer to one another for good or for evil. War becomes a universal disaster, blind and monstrously destructive [...] There can be no peace now, we realize, but a common peace in the world; no prosperity but a general prosperity. But *there can be no common peace and prosperity without common historical ideas*. Without such ideas to hold them together in harmonious co-operation, with nothing but narrow, selfish, and conflicting nationalist traditions, races and peoples are bound to drift toward conflict and destruction. This truth, which was apparent to that great philosopher Kant a century or more ago—it is the gist of his tract upon universal peace—is now plain to the man in the street. A sense of history as the common adventure of all mankind is necessary for peace [...] [31].

Wells framed his 'world history' in cosmic terms, interweaving his narrative and visual prototypes of 'the global' in stories probing the origins of our solar system and the huge distances in space. There had been universal histories—presentations of the history of mankind or its most important parts as a whole, as a coherent unit—well before Wells. One can think of various lineages of 'macrohistorians', for example, the one starting with Ssu-Ma Ch'ien and Ibn Khaldun and running, via Giambattista Vico and G.W.F.Hegel, to later figures such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Arnold Toynbee [32]. But the authors of earlier macroscale stories have tended to tell the global story in Eurocentric, Sinocentric or otherwise limited terms, often assuming or suggesting that a Christian, Western, or some other particular society constituted the be all and end all of world-historical dynamics. In contrast, Wells' ability to frame world history in very wide cosmic terms and, simultaneously, from the vantage point of a future world state provided an early articulation of the global imaginary.

With a few notable exceptions of planetary thinking such as K'Ang Yu-Wei, Rudolf Steiner, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Arnold Toynbee [32, pp. 105–113, 120–127], [33, pp. 52, 72–83], [34], it was not until the aftermath of the decolonization process in the late 1980s, that we witnessed the rise of sweeping critiques of the 19th and 20th century Eurocentrism from a globalist perspective. The European or Western bias is based on a simple and yet false assumption: all important concepts, practices, technologies and capacities have emerged from Europe or from Europeanized parts of the world. Originating in Europe, these crucial capacities are said to have been subsequently diffused in unilinear fashion to the rest of the world. The semiotic prominence of 'Western values' or 'European civilization' in such narratives reveals their cultural embeddedness in

powerful diffusionist and orientalist models. Imagined as the permanent navel of the world, due to its recent (and probably already fading) success in relation to others, the 'West' is inscribed with a superior cultural essence that must be diffused to the inferior, 'backward' periphery. The West represents the active masculine principle, whereas the East appears as a passive feminine vessel waiting to be filled with occidental knowledge. James Blaut has referred to this hegemonic conceptual regime as 'the colonizer's model of the world'—a worldview constructed by Europeans and their American descendents to explain, justify, and assist their colonial expansion. It is not grounded in facts of history and geography, but in imperialist and colonialist translations of the national imaginary [35].

An instructive example of the contemporary pervasiveness of such pejorative and historically flawed strains of Eurocentric 'diffusionism' can be found in the writings of influential American foreign policy experts like Michael Mandelbaum who boldly asserts that 'the ideas that conquered the world'—peace, democracy, and free markets—were 'invented' in Great Britain and France in the 17th and 18th century. Claiming that 'it was natural for Britain and France to lead the world into the modern age', Mandelbaum never acknowledges that these countries owe much of their 'meteoric rise' to the previous scientific and cultural contributions and achievements made by the great Eurasian civilizations of Arabia, China, India, Japan and Persia. Similarly, he ignores parallel developments in Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific [36].

The starting point of non-Eurocentric and planetary 'Big History' is that—as human capacities emerged from nature—human societies remain part of nature, 'properly at home in the universe despite our extraordinary powers, unique self-consciousness, and inexhaustible capacity for collective learning'. William McNeill argues further that as natural sciences have been historicized at many levels, it is now the task of historians—and social scientists—to generalize boldly enough to connect their area of study with the history of the cosmos, solar system and life [37]. David Christian formulates this task in respect to expanded scales of space and time:

What is the scale on which history should be studied? The establishment of the *Journal of World History* already implies a radical answer to that question: in geographical terms, the appropriate scale may be the whole of the world. [...] I will defend an equally radical answer to the temporal aspect of the same question: what is the time scale on which history should be studied? [...] the appropriate time scale for the study of history may be the whole of time. In other words, historians should be prepared to explore the past on many different time scales up to that of the universe itself—a scale of between ten and twenty billion years. This is what I mean by 'Big History' [38].

In short, Big History narratives draw on a series of mutually strengthening prototypes, metaphors and framings that logically lead to envisioning the place of 'us' in the framework of 'global', 'planetary' or even 'cosmic' time and space. It encourages new framings of human activities in terms of a new geological era, an *anthropocene*, as the most recent period in the Earth's history involving human activities that have a significant impact on the Earth's climate and ecosystems⁹ [39]. Expressing the global imaginary in such ways contributes to the acceptance of ideas emphasizing that 'we' are living today in a geological age of our own partial making. Thus a whole range of new prototypes and metaphors become plausible, most importantly a sense of global belonging—the Earth as 'our home'.

We readily concede that our preference for large-scale spatial and temporal framings situates us in favor of revival of 'grand narratives' within 'world-time' that stretches from the mists of the past towards the hazy horizons of the distant future. Indeed, Big History spans across world-space—and even across the visible universe and beyond. This kind of 'global imaginary' is radically open-ended also in the sense that it considers globalization to be a stepping-stone in a process that should—if all goes well—gradually lead to the 'solarization' and 'galacticization' of the activities and concerns of human beings¹⁰ [40,41]. Like in the 18th century, the 21st-century forerunners of this cosmic imaginary may be ahead of their time in terms of technological and practical-political possibilities. There are good reasons to expect, however, that today's rising global imaginary will be—gradually or, after a possible catastrophe, abruptly—adopted and enriched by an increasing portion of the humanity, as we are struggling to live in dignity on our overcrowded, vulnerable and self-endangered planet Earth.

5. Conclusion

The time that has passed since the epochal American and French Revolutions is short. In the cosmic and biological scales of time, 230 years is but a tiny span. It is during this short era of industrialization that the national imaginary has dominated ethics and politics. With industrialization, the speed of history has accelerated. Two centuries of rapid economic growth and technological change have resulted in transformative capacities that would have been unimaginable to people living only five generations ago. Even after the second industrial revolution in the second half of the 19th century and the related emergence of 'science fiction' that envisaged for the first time in human history future societies on the basis of crucial technological changes, many realities that are commonplace today remained well beyond the reach of human imagination.

⁹ The term was coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, who regard the influence of recent human behavior on the Earth as so significant as to constitute a new geological era [39].

¹⁰ There are three logical steps: (1) planetization aka globalization, which covers also new technical systems located in the gravitational field of the Earth; (2) solarization: the expansion of human activities beyond the orbits of the Earth and to other parts of the solar system; and (3) galacticization: the expansion of human activities beyond the solar system of Sun and to other parts of the galaxy. When Peter Dickens and James S. Ormrod analyse the movement "from the global to the galactic" in terms of capitalist contradictions and expansionism, they are in fact talking about (1) and (2) rather than (3). See [40]. See also [41].

But humans in the early 21st century are getting used to instant auditory and visual communications across the planet via satellites and powerful personal computing devices that have shrunk to the size of wallets—and they are also aware of the advanced stealth-fighters and sophisticated nuclear missiles.

In spite of these rapid techno-economic changes, the transformation of social imaginaries takes time. Humans are complex living beings and self-organized systems living in socio-cultural structures of their (predecessors') own partial making. These structures presuppose, among other things, knowledge inscribed in the hidden complexities of the mind that govern 'normalcy' in human communities: how things are supposed to be seen, understood and enacted by social actors. The duration of the day-to-day life intersects with the *durée* of the biological lifespan of individuals. Living beings are sentient organisms suspended in self-created systems that exhibit high levels of order and consciousness. It takes a considerable amount of time and energy and manifold life-experiences to become a social actor with the prototypes, metaphors and frames characteristic of the prevailing modern social imaginaries.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the national imaginary still dominates the formative experiences of most human beings. However, the national imaginary is being increasingly blended with and destabilized by the prototypes, metaphors and framings of a global or 'planetary' imaginary. Big History is important in moving this transformation towards richer articulations and instantiations of cosmopolitanism because it tells easily graspable stories about human history from a planetary vantage point—involving large scales of time and space while remaining critical of the predominant particularist framings of human history. Big History cultivates and, at the same time, makes palpable and familiar the narrative and visual prototypes, metaphors and framings of democratic possibilities steeped in the global imaginary.

New social imaginaries require also fresh myths about human existence. Stephen Gill, for example, associates the defining myths of emerging global forms of political agency with 'the quest to ensure human and intergenerational security on and for the planet, as well as democratic human development and human rights' [42]. Our myths of a desirable global future, however, refer more deeply to the poetic-evaluational aspects of social imaginaries and to the stories about the long-term human possibilities in a cosmic setting. These two aspects of mythic narratives must have a historical counterpart as well, since stories about possible and likely futures can only be grounded on an understanding of history. Evoking innovative myths about shared human existence and destiny, Big History helps to articulate the rising global imaginary in terms that motivate transformative and progressive politics in the 21st century.

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