Stereotypes and Emblems in the Construction of Social Imagination

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Abstract

This article develops two figures of the social imagination: the stereotype and the emblem. To start with we explore the notion of social imagination, principally from Emile Durkheim, Gaston Bachelard and Maurine Godelier. Secondly, the article deepens the two notions of stereotypes and emblems supported by the works of the historian Bronislaw Baczko and the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld's. Throughout the paper, the theoretical aims are illustrated with reference to coal-mining memory and heritage in the north of France.

This article is about two figures of the social imagination: the stereotype and the emblem. These are two figures among several others, that express the imagination of society that we use in our every day life relationships, or in our collective appropriations of the world. Stereotypes and emblems have something in common that differs from several other figures of the social imagination such as narratives, rumours or legends : they have a strong link with image. The stereotype is properly speaking an opinion, but an opinion which seems to arise from a caricature. In its common meaning, an emblem is an image or an object which is designed to symbolize a trade, an aristocratic family, a country, and more recently a sports team or a politic party. Due to their proximity with images, it follows that we should interrogate the relationships between images and imagination. Following on from this, we will develop the two notions of stereotypes and emblems.

Throughout this article, we shall illustrate our analysis with a discussion of coal-mining memory and heritage in the north of France[1].

Image, imagination

Between an image and the imagination, linkages are obviously close[2]. The image makes us think of reproduction, similarity, imitation. The image is a physical reality before becoming a mental representation. The image reproduces a true object, it is a material reproduction of a material reality. This material image is more or less aesthetic, more or less truthful, more or less realistic. But the image is also produced by our mental activity. It is the result of our own "creative imaginary" as the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard said. Thus, the image is potentially at least always double: on the one hand a material representation ; on the other a mental representation. But neither can exist without the other: a material image needs to become a mental image in order to be perceived and eventually interpreted. This is basic semiology. However, the material image can also represent a mental invention. It can be an expression of one's imagination. That is the reason why images occupy such a place in our imagination. They have this special quality of creating confusion between reality and imagination. Were does this image that I have in front of my eyes come from? Has it been produced in order to represent a real situation, or is it the fruit of one's imagination? The difficulty with the image, says the philosopher Pierre Kaufmann, is that images are "quasi-truth", "parody of reality". Images belong to the world of significance, they help to interpret reality and to remember the past. They are bound to reality by meaning. But they also result from the "imaging activity" of our mind, of our capacity to create imagined worlds that help us to find our place in the real world.

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[1] Collieries began in north of France at the end of the 18th century. The region was the biggest location in France for coal mining from the middle of the 19th century until industry closure, in 1990. Usually called the *bassin minier* in official documents, the "black land" as it was called before, is 120 km long and between 4 and 10 km wide. In 1990 there were only 3 307 coal-workers. Since the 20s, more and more miners came from abroad: in 1927 more than 80 000 were from Poland, to where few returned after the war. Their position was so important in the "black land" that they influenced a lot of cultural practices such as music bands or food specialities. From the 50s, a new migration wave appeared when the national company hired people from Morocco and Algeria. Despite the short contracts that they signed to prevent them from getting the advantages of miners' statute, most of them succeeded in staying in the region. In the 60s and 70s most of the underground-miners were emigrants from Northern Africa.

[2] Before we go any further, we must define a semantic point. The terms "imaginary" and "imagination" don't have the same meaning in French and in English. In French, "imaginary" is a often employed to express a large scope of significations, from fairy tales up to the proper imagination of an artist. But we also use "social. imaginary" in order to evoke a large part of social identity, for instance the place of some heroes in our national pantheon. So we'll used the word "imaginary" to evoke the cognitive function and the word imagination to evoke either the social function or the psychic process.

In the following pages, I'll use the word "imaginary" in order to express the cognitive dimension of imagination; and I'll use the word "social imagination" in order to express a social process or a practice of imagination.

This linkage that is created by images, when material and non material images are confused, between the real world and the imaginary world, is an old story: this is the anthropological basis of mythology which tells us where we come from. But it is also a large part of literature and the cinema, it leads to religion and political beliefs. We identified a lot of these in the history of coal mining mythology which began in the middle of the 19th century with the industrial revolution until the 1970s and 1980s in western Europe. Probably, the first representation of the miner as a mythical figure appeared at the very beginning of the 19th century in the unachieved Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Novalis, one of the most important romantic writers, was also a mine-engineer and he compared the miner who goes underground with his little lamp on his forehead with the astrologist who guesses the future in the stars[3]. His work is an exploration of the bowels of the earth, a quest of the birth of the world. After Novalis, the mythology has been established progressively by a large number of images in novels, by movies, by plenty of professional and journalistic articles published over the course of one and a half centuries. During the 19th century, artists and engineers often shared the same word to describe the miners' work Just one example. In 1857, the engineer Simonin wrote:

> *"The collier is half a worker and a soldier, disciplined, full of energy. In this work army, the elders teach the youngest, and these acquire patience, thought, sang-froid, all qualities which are necessary to become a good collier. (...). Do greet them, the obscure and virile fighters of abyss, the pioneers of the modern world" (in Mattéi, p 89).*

With the publication of Emile Zola's Germinal, a new image of the collier is installed in the collective consciousness : dangerousness, solidarity, social exploitation by the coal mining company. Since the middle of the 19th century, the miner had been a hero of the industrial revolution ; between the two world war, and specially during the French "Bataille du charbon" between 1944 and 1947 he was to become a hero of the proletarian revolution. At that time, France was governed by a coalition government, led by General de Gaulle. He accepted several communist ministers into his team. The coal-mining companies were nationalized in 1946 and a trade-union leader, Victorin Duguet ; placed at the head of the national consortium Charbonnages de France. Production slumped during the war and attempts to increase coal exploitation became a national cause. The communist trade-union leaders, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and the government tried to convince the miners to be more productive, despite the hard working conditions: accidents were still numerous, and every year miners died while working because of explosions or poor tunnel maintenance. There were several strikes in the collieries. So an important propaganda offensive was organized in order to sustain production. The miners were declared "the first workers of France", "they are at the wheel of the country". The "Bataille du charbon" is presented as the continuity of the resistance against the Germans during the war. The government glorified resistance activities in the collieries despite the fact that many "collaborators" remained in their jobs. This campaign for promoting coal-mining exploitation and the figure of the collier mobilized non only the C.G.T. trade-union and the government, but also artists, photographers, film makers, journalists. It led to a deepening of the mythology that we described above by means of the production of a large quantity of images and narratives. One of the most emblematic

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3 Florence Fabre-Tournon, 2002

example is the movie Le point du jour produced by Louis Daquin for the CGT which relates the story of a young and inexperienced engineer who is taught the job by the union representative.

The social imagination in traditional French sociology, from Durkheim and Bachelard to Godelier

Strangely, contemporary French anthropologists have not paid much attention to social imagination, even less to these two notions of the emblem and the stereotype. Actually, most of the sociologists who are interested in these questions are heirs to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard and the sociologist Gilbert Durand[4], but they are closer to a symbolic anthropology than social anthropology. This is so despite the significant place attributed to the imagination in social life by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.

In France, these notions are more familiar to philosophers, historians, psychoanalysts and psycho-sociologists. We are more likely to find discussion of the stereotype and the emblem elsewhere, as for example in Michael Herzfeld's work, which relates them to the social imagination. We will return to Herzfeld later.

Gilbert Durand's conception of social imagination is rooted in the thought of Gaston Bachelard who published several books in the 40s and 50s. For Bachelard, the imaginary possesses significant autonomy and must be distinguished from the "world of symbols". The imagination does not transcribe reality. Rather it depends on archetypes of cognitive activity. It is a property of the mind as is symbolism or reason. He distinguishes between the "formal imagination" and the "material imagination". The first produces images which transcribe aspects of the real world: for example someone imagining himself flying like a bird, as in the Greek figure of Icarus. The second emerges from our intimate relation to the matter at hand. Bachelard proposes that quite a lot of our mental activity depends on this symbolic, sensual and emotive bind to the natural elements, particularly earth[5], water, fire, air, but also space and the home. The imagination produces images, which are sublimations of these archetypes (1947: 4-5). For Bachelard, psychic activity initially expresses itself by the way of images, and only later through thoughts or feelings.

For an anthropologist, this strict autonomy of the imaginary is difficult to maintain. However, many of Bachelard's intuitions are to be retained. Above all, images can be transformed into ideas by cerebral activity. The French psychoanalyst Robert Desoille showed in the 60s that these images can be expressed in language, and that they reveal a mix between the imaginary of the patient, which is organised like space, the sensual experience, and the situations of the everyday life. Our imagination picks up models and forms from the social word and then articulates its own images corresponding to these. Images stay in our mind, and we use them to appropriate the world in personal ways. One social institution is particularly important in producing social models: the family. So, the psychoanalysts often notice the crucial role of grandparents that the patient has never even

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[4] One of the most famous of them is Michel Maffesoli whose works are often contested in French academic sociology, and rather unknown by anthropologists.

[5] In French, earth and ground are translated by the same word « la terre ».

known: they have a place in the patient's imaginary that has been transmitted by the parents, and the patient connects images of his grandparents with events of his own life. The therapist, as the anthropologist, can notice memories, narratives, facts that the patient appropriates even when it was impossible that he or she was present. So, writes Desoille, we are the repositories of an ancestral memory. In our representations and in the ways we interpret the world, we strongly associate reality with non-reality.

In the miners' memory, we also find that sort of narratives and images that bind the present and past working experience, and the miners' experiences with an older past they didn't live through but to which they belong in their collective identity : the figure of the miner as a hero (of work, of the nation, of the working class) which was directly transmitted from the "Bataille du charbon" propaganda, the narratives of tunnel collapse or disasters underground, the nostalgia of the former solidarity between the miners, all that web of collective imagination that seems to be shared by most of the inhabitants of the region, largely outside the ancient "black land". This collective imagination cannot be seen as collective memory, even though they have much in common : people didn't live what they are telling, they tell narratives that they have been told, that they read somewhere without remembering where, they are the repositories of this history. For example, it is disconcerting to discover that the movie Germinal, made from Zola's book, is often used by people to describe the mine so that most people know that it describes, with some mistakes, life in the region at the beginning of the century[6] . Sharing a collective frame of the past and the present seems to be more important than relating personal experience.

Let us return to sociology. Emile Durkheim's contribution to the anthropology of imagination has been decisive, even if he doesn't' employed the term. In his book *Modernity at large*, Arjun Appadurai explains what he owes to the French sociologist in his own conception of the imagination. For Durkheim, social representations are present at several levels. Firstly, they are the conceptions that individuals have of social life and they depend on "social morphology". Secondly, based on those individual representations, there are collective representations such as religion or magic. For him, a homology exists between the personal level and the collective level, but both are autonomous from each other. Systems of representations exist independently of the personal psyche[7]. They lie in social institutions such as religion, family or public institutions, and are circulated by rituals, arts and myths. However, nowadays social imagination is no longer framed by solid institutions as it was when Emile Durkheim invented modern French sociology. Social imagination depends on all sorts of flows that Appadurai described: tourism, media, universal charity and so on. Traditional institutions, in Durkheim's vocabulary, have not disappeared, but they are in competition with global flows which are significant sites of production of images and emotions.

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[6] The movie has been made in the ancient colliery of Wallers Arembert. It is possible now to visit the place as if it were a museum!

[7] This is the main critique made of his sociology: where do the collective representations reside if they are independent of individual minds?

Another reading of traditional French sociology is that of Maurice Godelier. In his book *L'énigme du don,* Maurice Godelier goes back to Marcel Mauss and Levi-Strauss's researches about the gift. The gift, even in our society, has an important personal characteristic, which attaches the giver to the one who receives the gift, and both to the object of the transaction. Godelier points out, after Levi Strauss, that Mauss failed in explaining the reason why we are obliged to give back: the explanation with the "mana" leads to a dead end[8]. For Levi-Strauss, the true reason of Mauss's "three obligations" (to give, receive, and give back) is that "exchange is the original phenomenon of social life;" the necessity to exchange is included in our way of thinking and in our unconscious. Interested in discovering the "unconscious structures of the mind," Levi-Strauss gives priority to symbolism and neglects the imaginary which was much more important for Mauss and Durkheim. He refuses to give importance to feelings and beliefs. In order to explain how people think, he suggests that we need to analyse the human mind as a signification system, with which we interpret our social and natural environment. Then, beliefs such as "mana" belong to a special type of signification which he called the "loose signifier" whose specificity is not to be linked with their proper signification.

We know now that structuralism gave much to the social and cognitive sciences, but we also know its limits. For Maurice Godelier, a shortcoming of Levi-Strauss's theory is to have forgotten the function of the imaginary. In order to understand why this is so, we must go back to the philosophical context of the period. Levi-Strauss's project was to bring anthropology closer to linguistics and mathematics. To do so, it is easier to use signs and symbols rather than images and feelings. More generally, the period was marked by the central place given in France to a semiological approach to cultural problems. Godelier underlines the close links that existed between structuralist theory and the research of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. During the 1950s, Jacques Lacan proposed a fundamental frame that can explain Levi-Strauss's position. He distinguished 3 "orders:" the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. For him, the main one is the symbolic order which organises the imaginary. Levi-Strauss and Lacan shared the same orientation: "reducing thought and the social to language and the contract" (p. 38).

Godelier defends the reverse position. What matters is the manner in which people imagine the society they form together, how they imagine the relations between themselves. (p. 41-42). The imagination is "materialised" into social institutions, into social linkages, and into symbols. So, the "gift" is one of these institutions. Unlike Mauss and Levi-Strauss, Godelier thinks that exchanges are not able to explain the social in totality because there are things which are never exchanged, particularly the most sacred. But it is worth remembering that according to the People's imagination, things always carry with them part of the personality of the giver. If we forget the imagination involved in the gift, we fail to understand the kula and the potlatch.

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[8] According to Marcel Mauss, the Trobriands believed that things that have been given keep a part of the giver's soul.

From social imagination to emblems and stereotypes

What lesson can we draw from these ideas? First that we have to analyse the imaginary separately from the semiological/semiotic way we often used to. Symbols use the imagination in order to give meaning to social life. Secondly, one main problem that explains why many psychoanalysts and anthropologists have chosen to prioritise the symbolic is the difficulty in applying general interpretations to the products of the imagination. As Robert Desoille wrote, there is no single meaning for each image; the meaning is always reset in different contexts. One tale related by a patient can be associated with several types of situations, even with situations that one has never lived through before regardless of what he or she believes. One image, he takes the sun as an example, can mean very different things: for one patient the sun is associated with love; for another it is associated with intelligence; for a third it is associated with cruelty because of Aztec mythology. There cannot exist a dictionary of symbols, he adds (p 54), despite the fact that some figures leave a deep mark in our collective memory, such as figures from children's tales like Peter Pan or Cinderella. Nowadays, I imagine we would have to include Super Mario as well!

When going back to the miners' memory, we see that museums and cultural centres invested a great deal in this part of collective identity. We can understand most cultural exhibitions of miners' activities and lives as setting aimed to propose other lectures of the past. More and more often, artists and poets are conscripted alongside historians and ethnographers, sometimes instead of them, in order to offer a sensitive representation of the past. The challenge confronting those in charge of cultural institutions is that emotion and imagination are as important as knowledge in order to legitimate this heritage and allow it to be more effectively appropriated. That is what is done in the theatre and cultural centre Culture Commune in Loos-en-Gohelle (Rautenberg, Trigano, 2009), in the centre of the "black land". To summarise, this theatre produces plays based on research into miners' memories, including their wives and, above all, the miners who migrated from north Africa who are usually forgotten in the collective memory. It is not clear whether working-class residents feel it belongs to them because, as often, very few of them go to the theatre. Nevertheless, progressively, a new conception of the colliers' memory is emerging, growing stronger by the activity of the mining museum of Lewarde, 30 kilometres away. The idealisation of the miner is questioned; for example the racism which has long been completely silenced began to emerge at last. Through the testimonies that have been collected, the figure of the hero gives way to less glorious ones : the suffering of bodies, the double work of women, at home and in the colliery where they were employed in coal-washing, the fear of the young men when descending down inside the shafts. We realize that the understanding of the miners' condition has been, for a long time, bound up with the social imagination that we share collectively. A social imagination that has been largely influenced, as we saw, by the political propaganda in the middle of the century. New images are emerging, which may or may not be more true, which work to transform the collective identity. They demonstrate that other collective memories exist that were invisible in the public space.

It is time now to define what we call emblems and stereotypes and the place they occupy in the social imagination. The historian Bronislaw Baczko in his book *Les imaginaires sociaux,* published in France in 1984, aims to analyse how totalitarian governments

succeed in shaping social consciousness. Specifically, he proposes stimulating ideas about how to understand the links between collective memories and political representations[9]. In the Preface, Bronislaw Baczko used the expression "'ideas images" to explicate the notion of "global representation". He does not define the expression "'ideas images" but in reading the following pages of the book, we are struck by its proximity to the philosophical concept developed by John Locke in the 17th century. For Locke, truth is contained in the conformity between an idea and its object. We know the world by the way of images that take form in our mind. They are 'ideas' images that we tie in with our understanding of the world. Baczko used the notion of "idea image" to evoke the new conception of the "people" that was born from the Revolutionary events in July 1789 in France. The idea of the "people" came to mean much more than the sum total of the members of a national community. It refers to the intention to defend collective interests and to be excited by the same emblems. The category "people" takes the shape of a collective being with specific characteristics. "People" is a "community of social imagination" (p53). It is an "idea image" when we attribute to it specific properties as did the inventors of the nation who glorified the ties between a "people" and a country. Following Baczko's non-explicit hypothesis, we suggest that Lockes's individual 'ideas images" could be extended to designate a collective meaning. In order to complete Bronislaw Baczko's approach, we must say a few words about his conception of social imagination.

Societies are never "clear" to themselves. They must invent collective images of themselves in order to know what they are. These representations take place in the collective imaginary. They continually invent representations of themselves and through what they see as "their divisions, they give legitimacy to institutional powers, elaborate social and cognitive models for their members, for instance the "brave warrior", the "good citizen", the "loyal militant"" (8). These social characters are reputed to have strong attributes which are supposed to define the collective character. Generally they are picked up in the mythology, which can be rooted in real history but are also continually readapted. In France, the most famous is probably Jeanne d'Arc. In the USSR, such a figure was Stakanov. Such characters contribute to the making of the collective representation "French people" or "Soviet people". Rituals, commemorations, and emblems are used to reactive these figures in order to express the symbolism of power. They help give institutions the appearance of the sacred; they carry with them tales and narratives.

In Bronislaw Baczko's mind, ''Ideas images" are not only produced by public institutions. They can also result out of contestation movements. For example, *Solidarnosc* in Poland produced heroic figures such as Walesa or the priest Popielusco. In that case, the idea-image focuses on the hero's figure. But there are also others types. The red flag serves as a paradigmatic example of the emblem which signifies an "idea image", this time of the working class. It has been taken up as the emblem of the workers' movements because of

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[9] It was published one year after the well-known book of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined community*. It would be profitable to compare Baczko's and Anderson's approaches, which are parallel and very close to each other on many points. Baczko is less known than Anderson, though, in my opinion, his book is as stimulating as Anderson's.

the Commune de Paris during which "it was soaked with the blood of the workers" as the Communards tell it in a famous song. Later, it was monopolized by the Communists and particularly by the USSR. In 1984, when Bronislaw Baczko wrote his book, he outlined the multiple significations that are attached to the red flag: does it signify the struggle between the Parisian workers and the French prime minister Thiers in 1870? Or else, the communards' utopia, which was very popular in 1970s France? Or the Communist Party? Or the fight against the Nazis? Or a solidarity with workers all over the world? The emblem represents a legend (the Parisian Commune) and a universal ideal which has affected millions and millions of people. It represents also the bodies of sacrificed workers, members of the Commune mixed with millions of others from every socialist revolution;. The red flag carries along collective emotions; it has wonderful powers of mobilisation. In a word, it was the collective body of the workers marching in the streets to prepare the next revolution or to celebrate the previous one.

Following Baczko's approach, we can consider that "the miners" represent a good example of an "idea image". They are supposed to be politically engaged for the defence of the whole working class, they are supposed to be courageous, organized, and attached to social solidarity. For the miners, it is sure that the red flag was an important emblem. However, we can underline some other pieces or place which seem today more representative of their history and culture. First, the little snuff that they hang on their helmets seems to be henceforth the most emblematic piece of their costume and tools. Several old miners collect them and the oldest ones attract good prices on the antiques market. Secondly in the colliery two buildings are preserved above all others: the pit head gear and the changing rooms where mines hang their clean clothes. They symbolize both technology and the workers. The snuff represents an individual appropriation of the collective memory, the danger of the work; headgear and the changing rooms represent a social appropriation of this history ; and we could add the slag heap which used to be levelled and which are now protected because they are considered emblems of the "traditional" industrial landscape of the region.

One other expression of the "ideas-images" which is largely unknown to anthropologists and social scientists is the stereotype. We know that a major "invention" of the 19th century and a corollary of the nation is the notion of the "people". There is no nation without a people. Thus, alongside the national imaginary, appears an imagery of the "people" in painting and in literature. These images power the imaginary which crystallizes in cultural traits that may seem caricature-like but need to be seen in their historical contexts to be properly understood. Thus, according to Anne Marie Thiesse (1997), French people are thought to be made up from several regional peoples with their own specificities : the Normand is "laborious, hard-working and tough to gain", the Provençal has a "gesture broad and colourful phrases," the Berrichon is "placid and lacks imagination"… All images are still alive today, and have been revitalized in film (the biggest success story of the French cinema is the movie 'les Cht'is' which caricatures the inhabitants of the North of France), in novels, in more or less humorous comics etc… Stereotypes are still strongly installed in our collective imaginary and they remain particularly static as time passes. People reject them but at the same time adopt them. As

Herzfeld[10] shows, they can be used for trade or in situations of conflict in which questions of identity are played out.

According to Herzfeld, stereotypes are more complex than they seem to be. Indeed we must understand them in the frame of what he calls "cultural intimacy." He suggests that we have to see how individuals and social groups appropriate these collective identities, which are more or less caricatures, and how they integrate their specific ethos in the framework of national identities. Stereotyping, according to Herzfeld, contributes to developing a process of reification of national identities. Cultural intimacy involves people's production of stereotypes about themselves through what he calls a "poetic social," against, or despite, public institutions. For example Greeks say that they are "barbaric," i.e. Turkish but they would never allow a foreigner to call them that. These stereotypes can also be inverted against a central power in order to express an opposition to the other regions or to the capital. Stereotypes can be understood as extreme essentialist forms of identity, the types of icons that are used in response to specific situations (p 31).

Conclusion

As we can see, stereotypes have a long life! Based on what has been said, here is our hypothesis: stereotypes function as images, they move through a variety of media, adapted to the technical conditions of communication and the economy. During the 19th century and the "awakening of nations," they were supported by novels and serial press, lithographic reproductions ; later by photography, film, and television. With the current process of globalization, characterized by a radical transformation of space-time, we are faced with a new economy and movement of images and cultural signs. Stereotypes with their easy grasp of semantics are privileged instruments for modelling the imagination. They work very well in the tourist industry and in the cultural industries[11]. In short, stereotypes help to train our understanding of a common world in the same way they contributed to forging our national imagination in the 19th Century. Local communities do not disappear with globalization, but instead they adapt globalization to their needs. They use "tricks" and "tactics" (Herzfeld echoing Michel de Certeau) to shape the world and appropriate these stereotypes often to their own advantage in the context of national and global competition. Stereotypes can be understood as forms of extreme essentialization of identities, as types of icons that are used to respond to specific situations… (p. 31). Stereotypes and emblems help to structure collective identities. They constitute solidified elements of such identities, a phenomenon that has long been an obstacle to anthropologists who feared having to deal with inauthentic, fake identities. Following Herzfeld, we must take into account how people appropriate and divert constructions that are more or less institutional, political and media-generated. With Bronislaw Baczko, we saw that the social imagination produces the fundamental elements of representations that groups have of themselves. These representations function as mirrors in which peoples see themselves as collective "ideas-images.' But Godelier and the psychologists who follow in the footsteps of Bachelard raise one last point. The social imagination is difficult to interpret because it cannot be assigned a permanent meaning. We must always relate it to a

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[10] Michael Herzfeld, 1995

[11] We could consider that the world music is the commercial use of ethnically stereotyped-music.

social context, and so as far as we are concerned here, ethnography is a necessity because it allows us to do just that.

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