The Archetype as a Heuristic Instrument for the Sociology of the Imaginary

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Abstract

Today, one of the most interesting questions for sociology, also from the point of view of methodology and method, is the issue of the *archetype* as a heuristic tool. How can it be usefully adopted by the sociology of the imaginary? This is gradually making its way into the mainstream discipline and offers a perspective for understanding the deep, even unconscious, dimension of social phenomena and actions. In this respect, it is useful to look back at some crucial moments in the thinking of authors such as Gilbert Durand and Cornelius Castoriadis, who laid the foundations for an epistemologically and methodologically equipped use of the notion of archetype in contemporary social sciences.

Keywords: archetypes, mythodology, sociology of the imaginary.

1. Introduction

Since Jung spoke of the existence of universal instances of sense within what he defined as the *collective unconscious* in the 1920s and 1930s, the idea of archetype has gained right of entry into the field of human and social sciences. According to the German psychoanalyst, the basis of the individual psyche is to be found in the hereditary legacy of possibilities of representation common to all human beings, which is in fact the collective unconscious (Jung, 2019) : it is the seat of the basic psychic structures, the *archetypes*, which are structurally without content and which emerge spontaneously into awareness through dreams, symbols, myths and other manifestations of the active imagination. Archetypes enable contents to emerge in symbols, myths and rites that vary according to cultures and eras; they also possess their own specificity in relation to the individual in the form of *Persona* (from the Latin *persona*, mask), the outer

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part of the personality, and in relation to the individual with his *Shadow* that regards everything incompatible with conscious psychic equilibrium. The *Shadow*, for Jung, is effectively one of the fundamental archetypes.

On the social sciences scene, it has been anthropology to deal widely with the archetype issue in the collective and social imaginary (Durand, 1996) while sociology seems to have skirted the topic, probably for fear of sliding back into the "essentialism" from which it had intentionally distanced itself ever since its inception and establishment as an independent discipline in the mid-nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. However, the question of the interpretation of "removal" of the notion of archetype on the part of sociology remains open to debate.

From the point of view of epistemology, methodology and method, one of the most interesting issues in sociology today is the use of the archetype as a heuristic instrument in understanding social phenomena, particularly on the part of the sociology of the imaginary and of depth that is bit by bit making headway among the different currents of the discipline to throw light on the deep, partly unconscious dimension of phenomena, actions and social relations. It is thus useful to reflect once more on certain crucial aspects of the thinking of authors such as Gilbert Durand and Cornelius Castoriadis who have laid the epistemological and methodological foundations for a sociology of the imaginary that can make use of the heuristic instrument of the archetype.

2. Archetypes as universals

The *anthropological journey* described by Durand links the biological dimension to the cultural and social dimension, bringing to life a semantic universe effectively rooted in the bio-psychic "imperatives" of the human being. The act of setting significations at the level of the imagination is a function we may call "physiological", seeing that the imagination is a universal disposition which, from the phylogenetic and ontogenetic point of view, precedes the cognitive function in the organization of human and social experience. As Bachelard said, the human being imagines before he thinks. We may therefore formulate the hypothesis that, setting out from the Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious and the archetype, there exists a universal reality of the imaginary that through its function as a frame enables the historically determined assignment of sense that societies give to their "life stories".

In his anthropology of the imaginary, defined in the wake of Novalis as a *transcendental fantastic*, Durand describes the two mechanisms through which fantastic aspirations become manifest in socially recognized forms, myths and images (Durand, 1996, pp. 381-401). The first mechanism is that of the

imperialism of the archetypal regime belonging to a certain era: it orientates artistic, scientific and technical instances towards a characteristic regime, causing a process of cultural homogenization. The second mechanism is that of frustration-imitation, typical of the process of removal, so that a frustrated archetypic aspiration, through imaginary projections, gradually becomes the object of an active imitation and is materialized in life styles, socially legitimated and codified concepts in a pedagogical system; thereafter, the latter in turn becomes dominant and so is able to frustrate further archetypic aspirations alien to its imaginal regime. In fact, every historical age and every culture that lives in such an age is pervaded by antagonistic mechanisms of dominance and resistance that come into play at the level of the imaginary, before becoming social actions.

To return to Durand's dualism of classicism and romanticism, each culture is therefore pervaded by a dominant archetypal regime tensely co-existing with the opposing regime which is revealed through resistances that may progressively be institutionalized and so become dominant in their turn. Durand uses the aquatic metaphor of the *semantic pool* to describe this process (Durand, 2022).

It is the "psychosocial environments" that define the existential relations of society with reality, and "mythic consciousness" can be interpreted in terms of social pressures: rationality and imaginary, reason and myth, are the structures of the "fantastic current" that transforms archetypes into symbols and cultural myths. From this viewpoint, the evolutionist pattern of history is also the offspring of a myth, the myth of progress: mythical thinking is co-substantial with human thinking of which it is an integral part (Morin, 2016). It is myth, the archetypal offspring, that founds the cultural relations maintained by societies with their existential experiences, and so models their relations with history: this is an outlook that runs quite contrary to the truly Marxian one and legitimizes what Castoriadis calls "the imaginary institution of society" (Castoriadis, 2022).

Durand clearly states:

> "it is the sociological context alone that collaborates – as Bastide showed in a crucial piece of work – *in modelling the archetypes into symbols* and constitutes its pedagogical derivation… there is, shall we say, a growing sociological "tension" that specifies the symbolism of the archetype and of the universal pattern in the exact social expression of the concept by means of the well-differentiated sign of a language. This explains both how a language – a semiologic field – is never completely translated into another language, and yet how a translation that plays on the semasiology of mythemes is always possible. The paradox of the translation summarizes the psycho-social ambiguity of the symbol" (Durand, 1996, p. 394).

The most meaningful example of the process through which the relation between the imaginary and instituted society is expressed, says Durand, concerns the masculine and feminine in language: seeing that for Jung the two basic archetypes are the male principle and the female principle, *Animus* and *Anima*, it is interesting to see the way in which, in one language, the words lead back to one gender or the other – something that may not correspond to the translation into other languages – and clearly conform to the social representations of the male and female, and so to gender roles, which are apparent in any given culture. History and culture feature semantic properties that recall universal instances of sense – defined by Durand as axiomatic – that structure the imaginary: archetypes.

The archetype's channels of expression are *symbolic images*; what is known as the "fantastic function" creates the sense. The French anthropologist states: "the symbol… is the outcome of the impossibility of semiologic knowledge, of the sign, to express that part of happiness or anguish that total knowledge perceives confronted with the inevitable instance of temporality. *Semasiology of the symbol is the creator…* Far from being the result of removal, the image is the non-semiological vehicle of creative joy" (Durand, 1996, p. 397).

So, in the wake of Durand, it is the "science of the social" that follows the systemic tensions manifested in dominant myths through the analysis of literary texts, and also through the analysis of practices, institutions, social structures. We thus pass from what Durand calls *mythocriticism* to what he defines as *mythanalysis* (Durand, 2022). The myth as the subject of sociological understanding is therefore constituted as that "common place" that enables diachronic and synchronic comparisons between cultures, in their similarities and in their diversities, but above all in their contaminations. In the end, this is the method followed by *mythodology*.

3. The imaginary institution of society

Having thoroughly reviewed and analysed Marxian thought, Castoriadis describes how society, which he calls the historical social, is instituted first of all on the level of the imaginary (Castoriadis, 2022): the instituted social, however, is never completely transparent since it always implies the presence of a social unconscious. The latter does not finish with the individual unconscious nor with the inter-subjective relations between the two. The instituted social always presumes an instituting social that potentially maintains its unconscious contents.

Social life, at both the individual and the collective level, is entirely harnessed within the symbolic: it starts out from the symbolic rooted within the unconscious – hence archetypal – dimension. The most meaningful example of an institution founded on the symbolic is certainly religion, but that does not mean we can forget that all social institutions are founded on it. The symbolic material on which institutions are founded comes from the past and from the relation that all human beings have with nature where the significations investing symbols are formed. The difference between nature and culture, says Castoriadis, lies precisely in the set of significations that culture assigns – symbolically connoted and progressively instituted – to the experiences that take form from the relationship that human beings hold with nature itself.

> "The historic-social institution is that within which and through which the social imaginary is manifest and *is*. This institution is the institution of a medley of significations, the social imaginary significations. The representative support of such significations that can be shared – and they are not, of course, solely support, whether direct or indirect – consists in images or figures, in the widest sense: phonemes, words, banknotes, djinns, statues, churches, tools, uniforms, tattoos, numbers, borders, centaurs, cassocks, fasces, musical scores; yet the support also consists in the whole of the natural that is perceived, named or nameable by the society under consideration… The social imaginary is, in the primordial sense, creation of significations and creation of images or figures that supply support" (Castoriadis, 2022, pp. 371-372).

According to the philosopher of Greek origins, a "fundamental phantasm" exists at the base of each symbolization process that the subject sets in motion: a phantasm impossible to grasp directly; it can be tracked down in its manifestations, since it is nothing but a condition of possibility that enables reality, and therefore history, to exist and to survive. Shifting from the subjective to the social level, we may speak of "social imaginary significations", much broader than individual significations and yet more complex to grasp in their symbolic manifestations. Castoriadis's ideas on the "fundamental phantasm" and on "imaginary significations" may be set beside Jung's notion of "archetypes".

In this context, we should stress that Castoriadis also dwells on the male/female dichotomy – think of Jung's two archetypes, Animus and Anima – which, from the natural fact of biological difference, poses social imaginary significations of being male and being female, which in turn undergo a process of *symbolic institutionalization* in any given society in which being a man or being a woman becomes substantiated.

The essential role of the creating imagination that Castoriadis calls the *radical imaginary* is to create a universe of significations that become manifest in what is defined as the *effective imaginary*: the identity of society is based on symbols that create the critically important bridge with what is considered as reality.

Western rationality is also equally subjected to the process described: constituted as a form of imaginary determined historically and culturally, it manifests its significations in the symbols shared by society. There is not any one and only "real", since each society establishes its own "real" springing from the imaginary. It is therefore impossible to absolutize a symbolic universe, even that featured by the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality in the modern West.

All merit goes to Castoriadis for having "overturned" the Marxian materialistic perspective; it has undoubtedly borne fruit yet it has substantially hindered the symbolic dimension from acquiring heuristic legitimacy in the social sciences. If society establishes its own "real" starting from symbolic processes and they take root in a medley of potential significations, it is up to sociological comprehension to follow the steps of this process of institutionalization, to understand how a dominant imaginary came to be dominant, and to understand which "resistances" are potentially in a position to overturn the social order starting from the subconscious dimension of the same social.

4. Archetypes among symbols, myths and rites

Another aspect to be taken into account in order to understand the role of archetypes in the comprehension of the historical-social is the fact that the mythic story is an indispensable component of the narration that each social group, each society, makes of itself: what Durand calls the *sermo miticus*, founded on archetypes, is an essential constituting element of history as it is told and historiography must perforce take it into account. Thus *mythobiography* connects personal history and myth, legitimizing the profound link between individual and social dimensions in elaborating historical narration – between past, present and future.

In their intrinsic dynamism, archetypic images and their symbolic configurations organize themselves in the form of mythic stories that represent all the stories that legitimize religions and the various belief systems – in which social groups recognize each other and merge their identity – in the same way as legends, folk tales and novels. All these myths take the form of rituals the

instant they become shared systems of action that enact the mythical story, legitimizing it once more as the foundation of the identity of a social group.

The power of the myth lies precisely in its foundation, first archetypic then symbolic, expressed in structural constellations that make sense of life in its "anthropological journey" between the natural and the social, between the individual and the collective. In this sense, being the eternal repetition of the cosmogonic myth, the myth is the representation of the cyclic essence of ritual time, and the "figurative sense" that it bears is essentially the root of the sense that the social attributes to its own existential experience. This is the role of the social imaginary which, in the different cultures, finds its own unity precisely in archetypes.

One of the basic archetypes that can be usefully applied to studies on the sociology of the imaginary is the archetype of the *Hero*. This is the framework of significations within which is made manifest the "rough" ride towards the youth's transformation into a young adult: translating this ride into symbolic terms, Durand speaks of *diairetic symbols* – symbols of division – of the *Diurnal Regime* in what concerns the models and archetypes of transcendence that require a dialectic procedure, where the heroic figure confronts the shadows (the light that shines) and the abyss (ascension). For Durand, the "solar" hero is he who opposes, who rebels against someone or something – while there seems to be a "lunar" hero who is resigned, who submits to the command of destiny. Solar heroes are Prometheus, Hercules, Samson the Semite; the sword and the arrow are the truncating weapons that diairetically separate good from evil, symbols of power and purity. The struggle is frequently spiritual and intellectual: the mythological figure that best embodies the different features of the hero is Apollo in the ancient Greek and Roman tradition, god of the intellect and of sciences and a skilled archer. In the Roman tradition, the myth of Mars, god of war and duels, is similarly heroic: in effect, the prestige of the warrior hero has contaminated the religious and mythological traditions of western history, from Christian hagiography to the medieval institutions of chivalry. As a corollary of heroic symbols and myths, recalls Durand, certain rituals exist that put into practice the ascendant and "enlightening" attitude belonging to such an imaginal configuration: from the "cutting" rites, such as the tonsure and its derivatives, to purification rites in their various forms, which may involve different elements, water (the rite of baptism), fire (as the purifying flame) and air (as the breath of life).

Another of the basic archetypes that has been usefully employed in understanding the profound dimension of social phenomena and in the analysis of the productions of mass culture is the archetype of the *Great Mother* (Morin, 206; Bartoletti, 2012). There are many examples among the configurations under which the Great Mother appears in cultural symbols; they well represent

the consubstantial ambivalences of all the imaginal semantic instances. From the white lady of Germanic folklore to the symbolism of Church and Fatherland, from wild animals to the ample symbolism of witches, the archetype of the Great Mother is polarized in Durand's anthropological structures of the imaginary towards the *Nocturnal Regime*, and its mystic features make it particularly suitable for the interpretation of all stories in which the great maternal image is projected into primordial aquatic and telluric substances. The etymological relationship between the Latin words *mater* and *materia*, underlined by Jung and recalled by Durand, refers to the material from which, in the constellations of the social imaginary frequently found in the semiology of language, the symbols of mother, water and nourishing earth converge in the myths and legends of cultures, both western and non-western. Durand stresses that the cult of the Great Mother, with its reference to the *materia prima*, wavers between the symbolism of water and telluric symbolism in different cultures: "the custom regarding ground birth common in China, the Caucasus, with the Maori people, in Africa, the Indies, Brazil, Paraguay, and with the ancient Greeks and Romans, confirms the universality of the belief in the maternity of the earth. The divine sky-earth couple is in any case a *leitmotiv* of universal mythology. Eliade lists a whole page of legends relating to the divine couple, gleaned from the Urals to the Rocky Mountains" (Durand, 1996, p. 231).

The sky-earth "divine couple" cited by Durand brings together the heroic diurnal imaginary and the nocturnal mystic, maternal imaginary in the anthropological tension that underlies all the productions of the *creating imagination*. The inversion of the diurnal imaginary in symbols of aquatic and telluric descent, towards which a universal regression of human desire comes about – nostalgia for one's origins – is seen in the mythological Great Mothers from Isis to Aphrodite, from Gea to Shing-Moo. The vast symbolism of intimacy, amply described by Durand, descends from the archetype of the Great Mother: the "return to mother" complex sustains the semantic attributes of death as the return to the Earth-Mother and as a *rêverie* of rest (Bachelard, 2013). The *isomorphism* symbolizing the return to the earth, of death and of home as the place of intimacy, refers to the isomorphism corresponding to the grave and the cradle in a number of cultures where death is symbolized as a return to infancy. The containing symbols, typical of the *mystic structures* of the nocturnal regime of the imagination, go from the womb to the cradle-home, and the etymological femininization of the house, like that of the fatherland, is found once more in the Indo-European languages as proof of the profound relationship between archetype and cultural symbols. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how the "uterine" intimacy is an imaginal configuration deeply rooted in magic-religious traditions: alchemy itself, in the West as in the Far

East, is a *regressus ad uterum*; moreover, the archetype of the mother is linked to the archetype of nourishment, primordial nourishment, mother's milk.

5.   Final thoughts

At the end of this brief work on the possibility and utility of considering the notion of archetype as a heuristic tool for sociological understanding, it is useful to recall that the attempts already explored to apply such a notion to social research and to research on the products of mass culture have shown how the *sociology of depth* is able to bring into play certain wholly new interpretative elements compared to the tradition of the mainstream discipline.

The now widely-explored usefulness of conflictual or structural-functional approaches cannot be denied. An approach to retrace the deep dimension of social phenomena – shown in symbols, myths and rites which in turn constitute the foundations of identity recognition and the feeling of belonging – should be considered in all its heuristic potential to access new spaces of interpretation of the social.

As universal instances of signification, archetypes constitute pictures, imaginative potentialities, that take form within the symbolization processes that found the social. The symbolical dimension is to be found, in its archetypic root, in all social phenomena as in all the products of material and immaterial culture: putting into practice a sociology of the imaginary means rendering all the legitimacy it deserves to the symbolic content of the sense of the real. Social research can usefully take an interest in the myths and rites typical of the identity of a group and of a whole society in order to understand their potential urge towards action. It is a case of searching for the symbolic traces of media representations, today particularly in the social media but also in consumption types, religious and magic practices, on the political scene, in pedagogies, and in the dominant scientific paradigm with its norms and its shared values. We are talking about marking the confines of a conflict between the dominant imaginary and potential alternative imaginaries that open the way for cultural changes and "revolutions". Because the real, before becoming reality, is always above all imagined.

The complexity which global society is progressively confronting, the now endemic crisis of modernity, the decline of the West, the acceleration of social changes: these are the aspects that lead researchers in the field of social sciences to arm themselves with new keys for an open-minded interpretation that can productively weave together different disciplines, including the STEM subjects. Sociology can revive its potential, inherited from the classics, to ask a changing

world pertinent questions and so set out on that route defined by Franco Ferrarotti as the "self-listening" of society.

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