THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON URBAN SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

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Abstract – The purpose of this article is to reflect on urban social imaginaries as a theoretical and methodological tool that allows interpreting social reality in the urban context. The methodology of the text is oriented from the parameters of the interpretive paradigm and the use of the hermeneutic method to understand the arguments proposed by Durkheim, (1968), Berger and Luckmann, 1986, Castoriadis (1989), Pinto (2005), Baeza, (2004, 2022), Pérez (2005), Ugas, (2007), Silva (2006), Rojo and Henríquez (2010), Carretero, (2011) Martínez, (2011), Martínez (2014), Ramírez and Aliaga (2022), among other authors, who conceptualize, theorize and design research methodologies to interpret urban social reality through imaginaries.
Keywords: Urban social imaginaries, Theoretical and methodological reflections.

INTRODUCTION

Urban life is closely linked to social imaginaries, which are facts inherent to human beings, according to the philosopher Castoriadis (1983). Social imaginaries can be understood as an incessant and essential indeterminate creation (social, historical and psychic) of figures, forms and images that humanity creates, that is, the social imaginaries are a tool that allows us to understand the dynamics of the modern world in all its dimensions from the subjective perspective.

A definition of social imaginaries that becomes relevant is the one provided by Pintos (2005), who argues that social imaginaries are "those socially constructed schemes that allow us to perceive, explain and intervene, in each and every differentiated social system which is considered reality."

In this article, a subjective study is carried out to describe "social imaginaries" considering them as a relatively new term, which has been investigated from the social sciences, especially from philosophy, anthropology and urban sociology. The text provides a theoretical and methodological overview of the imaginary as an emerging tool that helps interpret social problems in urban space. It is not intended to be a state-of-the-art definition, but rather to include some aspects that may be useful to operationalize research on this category of analysis.

1.   Theoretical reflections

It is very common for readers not to have conceptual and theoretical clarity about what a social imaginary is, confusing it with imagination; the truth is that they are two very different categories. The difference is described below.

Imagination is generally defined as a creative process that allows humans to manipulate intrinsically generated information in order to create a representation perceived by the senses.

Ugas, (2007), in his text, Educated Ignorance: A way of being of thought, defines imagination as a mental activity that is expressed through images, which represent contents of consciousness, in turn, distinguishes it in that which is governed by association and reproduction, considers it a basic individual faculty, which participates in the collective as the latter is the source of the necessary impressions of the former. Ugas (2007:49).

Ugas (2007) also states that the imaginary is the codification that societies create to name a reality; to that extent the imaginary is constituted as an element of culture and matrix that orders and

expresses collective memory, mediated by ideological evaluations, self-representations and identity images" (Ugas 2007:49).

Cegarra (2012) establishes a very specific difference between imagination and imaginary, stating the following:

The imagination reproduces and recreates reality from images; while the imaginary must be assumed as a matrix of meanings that guides the meanings assigned to certain vital notions (love, evil, good) and ideologically shared notions (the nation, the political, art, etc.) by the members of a society, (Cegarra, 2012:3)

Taking into account the above, it can be said that the essential difference between the imagination and the imaginary is that the former is an innate human faculty and the social imaginary, a condition or external regulation as a characteristic of life in society, this means that the imagination is representative, the social imaginary interpretive.

Social imaginaries are a relatively new term, which began to be thought of from the social sciences with the contributions of Durkheim, (1968) who, through his text "The elementary forms of religious life", affirms that social imaginaries are generated through collective identities where social facts are configured as material, he also highlights the inherent character of representation, questioning the dualism of the material and the ideal that prevents doing justice to the intrinsic practical dimension of social representations by considering them a constitutive part of the social and immaterial reality.

For Castoriadis (1989), social imaginaries are tools that allow us to understand the dynamics of the modern world and look with respectful curiosity at the customs, inventions and imaginary representations of past societies and he argues that the construction of social imaginaries is done from the subjective dynamics in social life.

Following the line of sociology, Baeza (2000) maintains that social imaginaries (SI) are schemes of dynamic and socially constructed meanings through which we can give meaning to the social environment that surrounds us, which can become institutionalized, generating a external and explicit character for the subjects involved in social reality.

Baeza (2004) asserts that imaginaries are multiple shared mental constructions about the practical significance of the world which, in turn, can give meaning to life. He also points out that imaginaries allow us to verify ways of thinking and lead human beings to relate socially, recognizing them as their own in society; Therefore, an interpretation of the real world is achieved from the imaginaries in which alternatives and different thoughts about the same society are created through the symbolic and cultural representations that each person manages; These imaginaries are mentally constructed from what is seen, observed or experienced within the social context.

In addition to the above, Pintos (2005) says that social imaginaries are those socially constructed schemes that allow us to perceive, explain and intervene in what each social system is considered reality. Pinto affirms that social imaginaries have to do with an alternative rationality of spontaneous knowledge; It is a kind of unquestionable collective unconscious. In other words, they are collective representations that govern the social identification and integration systems that allow us to see social invisibility (Martínez, 2011); Therefore, it can be deduced that the social imaginary allows us to go beyond social reality, that is, it transcends the most internal part of the human being, thus showing his thoughts and his way of seeing the world.

That is, the social imaginary is a social construction that human beings create through the symbolic, the cultural or simply the validated practices of the ancestors in a process of socialization and interrelation of the individual with his or her environment.

In urban studies, a reflection emphasized by Hiernaux (2007) is being used, who argues that "the imaginaries" can be called a scheme of dynamic and socially constructed meanings through which we can give meaning to the social environment that surrounds us, this one can become institutionalized, generating an external and explicit character for the subjects involved in social reality. Similarly, Alicia Lindón (2007) in her article titled "The city and urban life through urban imaginaries" argues that:

Imaginaries are collective, they are social, they are socially shared, which should not be assumed to be universal. They may be anchored and recognized by small social circles or by extensive social worlds, but they are always a product of social interaction between people. They are built from discourses, rhetoric and social practices. Once constructed, they have the capacity to influence and guide practices and discourses, without this implying that they remain immobile (like the language with which they are molded, while they are in force, they are modified) given the variant and changing condition of the language itself. (Lindón, 2007, 9)

Armando Silva (2006) also contributes to the reflection on imaginaries, recognizing that:

The city is also a setting for language, evocations and dreams. It should not surprise us, then, that the city has been defined as the image of a world, but this idea would be complemented by saying that the city is in the same way the opposite: the world of an image, which slowly and collectively is built and transformed. to build, incessantly, (Silva, 2006, 25)

Once again, the contributions of Silva (2006) are taken up, who conceives imaginaries as mental representations that are "incorporated" to "citizen objects" and from which feelings registered by each subject are evident in different types of expressions and languages that give them imaginary values to the same object (3).

García Canclini (2010), reflects on the characteristics of urban imaginaries, indicating the following:

We not only get the physical experience of the city (...) but we imagine while we travel, we build assumptions about what we see, about who we meet, the areas of the city that we do not know and that we have to cross to reach other destinations, in sum, what happens to us with the others in the city. Much of what happens to us is imaginary, because it does not arise from real interaction. Every interaction has a share of the imaginary, but even more so in these evasive and fleeting interactions that a megalopolis proposes (91).

Among the outstanding contemporary works we can mention the one carried out by Jaime Martínez Iglesias (2011), entitled "What are the imaginaries?" In this document, the author presents an approach to the concept of the imaginary, influenced by thinkers such as Castoriadis, Baeza and Pinto, referring that the imaginaries provide the tranquility of a response model, in a certain way, designed expressly to conjure, answer or counter-ask the great questions of man regarding the world in which he lives.

Martínez (2011), in his text, exposes five criteria that can allow a deeper analysis of the same criteria: Why does an imaginary emerge or is adopted?; What does it respond to? What actions does it promote? What is it composed of? and Why is it modified or terminated? Finally, four examples of imaginaries related to youth identity are discussed, highlighting the influence of media and technologies as mediators of the social construction of reality practiced by today's urban youth.

Berger and Luckmann (1986) specify that:

The reality of daily life is also presented as an intersubjective world, a world shared with others, in turn this intersubjectivity establishes a marked difference between daily life and other realities of which one is aware. In reality, one cannot exist in everyday life without continuously interacting and communicating with others (Berger and Luckmann, 1986, P 40)

According to what was mentioned above, imaginaries can be conceived as symbolic universes and, in turn, these symbolic universes are problematic since they are part of human construction because they are historically produced through human activities. This intrinsic problem is accentuated if some groups of "inhabitants" come to share divergent versions of the symbolic universe, Berger and Luckmann, (1986) on the other hand, also ensure that social phenomena develop particularly from social contexts; The latter may also be threatened by direct clashes with other societies with a palpably different universe.

2.   Methodological Reflections

Taking into account the referential search presented in this document, one can reflect on the different qualitative (subjective) methodologies by which studies on urban social imaginaries are approached in recent times.

The first work that is taken as a reference is the one designed by Rojo and Henríquez (2010), who, based on qualitative work based on Grounded Theory, carried out a study where they observed the urban social imaginaries linked to neighborhood identity and the social relations present in two closed neighborhoods of Gran Concepción in Chile.

Another work that is valid to reference is that of the sociologist Hermes Martínez (2014), who proposes to carry out studies of urban social imaginaries from ethnography as a tool that facilitates the interpretation of customs, beliefs, social practices, social and religious representations, knowledge and behaviors of a group of people or a particular culture, in this case urban residents who build urban imaginaries in the closed residential complexes in the city of Valledupar.

The doctor in sociology Baeza (2022), presents his chapter "Hermeneutics and social imaginaries", in the text, the improvement of the method is presented as an important tool for the understanding and interpretation of imaginaries in the current and contemporary world.

Researchers Ramírez and Aliaga (2022) publish a book chapter titled "Grounded theory and social imaginaries", in the text they design a methodology to investigate social imaginaries from the conversation of epistemic essayists in the area of social sciences. They present the contributions of pragmatism to symbolic interactionism, as well as its articulation with grounded theory and, on this, a proposal for reading the functioning of social imaginaries.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it can be said that urban social imaginaries have the facility of urban ubiquity, that is, they are throughout the city, they are collective constructions that the urban being creates mentally and materially on the experiences and relationships with the geographical space, which are transmitted through language and are represented through common feelings such as love, fear, rage or illusions, and they can also be expressed through human creations such as texts, sounds, images, urban architectural designs, among other creations.

Urban social imaginaries are constructed as a material and immaterial scheme and are used to interpret the socially legitimized reality founded in the subjective world and mediated from the multiplicity of political, economic and cultural exercises.

Urban social imaginaries structure the social fabric based on socially constructed mental schemes, which function as a system of interpretation, where institutionalized imaginary meanings crystallize a natural perception of the world. Configurators and structurers of reality, they determine and create a perception of what is accepted as such, ensuring the repetition of the same forms that regulate life in society.

The social imaginaries constitute a study, a referential scheme to interpret the socially legitimized reality constructed intersubjectively and historically determined, that is, the social imaginaries are a frame of reference or semantic field that serves as an interpretation scheme to understand and apprehend the socially given reality.

Urban imaginaries constitute a repertoire of meanings that have been certified in a social and cultural framework to interpret social behaviors and legitimize certain ideological and cultural valuations.

Under the precise contributions or mentioned by scholars of the subject, it can be said that the definitions and theorization of social imaginaries are closely linked to the hypothesis of "the social construction of reality" proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1986); thus marking the tendency to affirm that imaginaries are collective constructions.

Taking a general balance of the research studied and referenced in this article, it can be said that it served to define what social imaginaries are; more than a concept, they are a tool that allows interpreting social reality, that is, they are social constructions that men created through networks of meanings in the sociocultural, sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts, are conceived as important tools that can be studied from pragmatic-interpretive perspectives, the qualitative approach and the use of subjective methods such as ethnography, hermeneutics, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study and other methods.

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