

# Religion, Community, Borders

*Social Imaginaries and the Crisis of Neoliberal Democracy*

Workshop organized by the International Consortium

SIMAGINE – Social Imaginaries between Secularity and Religion in a Globalizing World

In collaboration with the platform 'Metamorphoses of Christianity

In Art, Literature and Philosophy'

**Thursday November the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017**

**9.00 – 16.00**

**Sweelinck room, Drift 21 Utrecht**

<https://www.uu.nl/en/drift-21>

SIMAGINE is hosted by the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht (UvH)

Coordinators: prof. Laurens ten Kate (UvH), prof. Hans Alma (VU Brussels)

## *Introduction*

The NWO-funded international consortium SIMAGINE, running over a period of three years from July 2017 to July 2020, is a platform for research exchange that has launched a research program combining theoretical and empirical methods. It aims to explore the role of *social imaginaries* in urban and digital spaces within a globalizing world, characterized by what has been called in recent scholarship *super-diversity* (Steven Vertovec).

SIMAGINE consists of 10 European and American partner universities.

During its start-up conference in Utrecht on November 1 to 3 2017, we will organize a full day workshop on the way in which the theory of social imaginaries can contribute to the

interdisciplinary study of the complex interaction between on the one hand religious and cultural traditions and on the other confined national identities and communities. In studying this interaction, an important and urgent question arises: can neoliberalism and its politico-economic agenda take this interaction seriously enough? Departing from here, the workshop will rethink the meaning of *borders*, in their literal, geographic sense as well as in their figurative, imaginary sense. Papers will be presented by guest scholars and SIMAGINE members. Admission is free but limited; please register to [cafbos@gmail.com](mailto:cafbos@gmail.com).

*The workshop also has the concrete objective to immediately work towards a publication of papers and discussions in a special 2018 issue of the Academic Open Access Journal J-RaT (Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society).*

#### *Problem Statement*

In an open, market-oriented world determined by a global economy, national borders are seen as obstacles. The endeavor to obliterate borders is supported by what may be named the last 'grand narrative' of our time: neoliberalism.

This narrative favors the retreat of governmental influence on the public space, and features a radical belief in market forces as the prime condition and shape of late modern societies. Since markets *in se* tend to expand into a transnational practice, neoliberalism has always had an ambiguous relation to borders. They are obstacles, but at the same time the political economy of the liberal nation state is considered a sound foundation for global capitalism. Pioneering theorists of neoliberalism like Von Hayek and Friedman did not advocate the abolition of the nation state, but sought to attribute a new meaning to it.

This ambiguity with regard to borders, however, does not prevent neoliberalism's narrative to proclaim an increasingly unified world, and a humanity at last in an intensely intimate state of contact with itself. A prominent theme of contemporary political discourse is that of the nation-state's inexorable decline and of a corresponding shift towards a liberalized world economy, an inclusive and trans-border polity, greater cultural integration and social interdependence, and a condition of communicative and informational liberty that refuses to be contained by territorial limits. The world invoked here is one in which populations, trade, and information move easily across the frontiers that once circumscribed localities, regions, or countries, and where social governance and cultural production are increasingly

functioning beyond the institutions or agents of particular states. This world is where attachment is no longer limited to ethnic affiliation, religious tradition or geographical proximity; it is where polity no longer roots itself in the idea of national self-determination; it is where authority has become dispersed; where finite identities, singularities, exceptions and deviations have become displaced onto a subject that has finally attained a universal and infinite human community; and where eventually only the wealthy profit from this new global belonging, as many critics currently emphasize, sometimes in the language of anger and despair (Asin Shivani).

In this place without geography, in this domain of the global citizen, the immanence of the world is taken as a substratum that can now surface. This arousal or emergence is often associated with the uninhibited movement of data across a uniform and undifferentiated planetary space. In this universal space, we are told, there has emerged a population that is at last – in an ecstasy of affiliation - communing with itself.

This celebration of global belonging is thus motivated by a process of secularization that becomes almost self-fulfilling: globalization relies on the idea that the secular mode of existence has become the only possible way to live in the world, individually and collectively. Religion, or rather, formulated in a broader way, worldview and sense, can no longer be meaningful in the global public space, that is, in the global market.

These claims about contemporary socio-cultural life are deeply interwoven with the cultural DNA of modernity, and with its ideals of freedom and autonomy, as Wendy Brown has recently analyzed. In this sense, the neoliberal critique of national borders and of their alleged meaning for socio-cultural life is a fundamental feature of the modern, 'buffered self' (Charles Taylor) striving for self-realization in a world of infinite possibilities for its entrepreneurship. Hence, neoliberalism is not a political system one may simply adopt and defend or reject and replace (Thomas Biebricher). However, despite neoliberalism's fundamental impact, its claims about a liberal, universal and secular 'end of history' are becoming increasingly unconvincing.

### *Imaginary Borders*

Borders are not only geographical demarcations, but they reflect cultural and religious communities that share, though often in a loose, hybrid and unstable way, imaginations of

who they are and to which identity they belong. The claim that borders are ‘something of the past’ invokes what Olivier Roy has coined a dangerous deculturation of the world by means of deracination. This deculturation produces the aggressive and often violent reappropriation of borders, whether territorial or imaginary, and often in a complex combination of both: examples are Switzerland’s isolationist policy, the neo-insulationist desire underlying Brexit, or the wall between the USA and Mexico. The undifferentiated, secularized planetary space described above, that expels culture and religion from the public space into the private realm, appears to gradually transform itself into what populist leaders call the monster of ‘wild globalization’.

But if borders need to be analyzed beyond the logic of demarcation, either to be superseded or reclaimed, how to think them? Can the answers to this difficult question offer a third way between the discourses of neoliberalism and of populism? In this workshop we want to explore this challenge further. We depart from the hypothesis that inspires the consortium SIMAGINE: borders are imaginary spaces in which people temporarily settle, only to travel and migrate again, and in which they are always looking for themselves, imagining themselves, re-inventing themselves. Borders are permanent yet fluid zones of migration in which everyone participates, as Jean-Luc Nancy recently has suggested; they are imagined orders of intersubjective communication, as Yuval Noah Harari recently has claimed. These imaginaries as spaces imply a reciprocal dynamic: we create them, and at the same time we are created by them. This is true for all narratives, images and symbols, practices and rituals, values and truths of which social imaginaries consist. Hence, in the workshop we aim to elaborate the question that immediately imposes itself:

- To what extent is the 21st century characterized by a deep tension between two overarching social imaginaries: that of profit, entrepreneurship and growth, and that of sense, tradition and transformation? Whatever the response to this difficult question may be, we risk the claim that both imaginaries have a major impact on the multiple concrete, ‘lived’ social imaginaries by which our communities are shaped: whether these imaginaries are material or virtual, landscapes or mediascapes, whether they are active in the urban environment or on a national level.

Following on this central tension to be explored, we propose to distinguish two more specific fields of tension that may well play a part in our debates:

- If borders are social imaginaries in which the logic of identity, unity and universality – whether informed by the ‘market’ or by the ‘people’ – is put under pressure, then the traditional border between *ethnos* and *demos*: between the sovereignty of the nation state and the universal order of law (rights, equality, justice), will have to be reformulated. It may well be that the primary condition of our time lies in a permanent border crossing between these two opposites (Paul Kahn). Can *ethnos* and *demos* be seen as two major social imaginaries of our time, that are engaged in a tension, if not a clash?
- If borders are social imaginaries in which migration is the primordial condition, then a sharp distinction between migrant and refugee is necessary. Nancy invites us to do so:

‘Today, in the Mediterranean, around the American-Mexican border or the borders of Colombia or Syria, what is taking place there has nothing to do with migration. That is a false word. What is taking place there is expulsion and flight towards refugee camps. 72 years ago Hannah Arendt wrote that the word ‘immigrant’ is a misleading and concealing term for the more embarrassing term ‘refugee’. She describes the refugee as a pariah, produced by the suspension or destruction of rights. Migration is not a suspension of rights, but it opens up the transformation of rights, and parallel to this, the transformation of identities, of thoughts, horizons, languages, colors and music.’

Current xenophobia seems to blur this important distinction between migration and flight. Nancy appears to think migration is an almost anthropological condition of our time (exemplified by mass travel, internet and digital media), if not of humankind proper; a certain affirmation of the world as a pluralism of worlds, beyond identifying borders, is at stake here. Flight, on the contrary, is an involuntary action due to tragic fate, and refers to the vital human need for a ‘home’, for belonging – for protecting borders. Today, is one witnessing a clash parallel to the one sketched above, a clash between these two modes of existence: that of infinite plurality, versatility, hybridity and super-diversity, and that of finite singularity, identity through traditions, and the relative stability of the place and the local?

The spatial, dynamic approach to borders that we propose here, serves to stimulate a day of rich and open discussions on series of themes and sub-themes related to the central problem sketched out above. Speakers and participants are invited to bring in their own perspectives. We are looking forward to the exchanges. Welcome!

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### *Program*

**From 9.00** Welcome, coffee

**9.30** Opening of the workshop by Hans Alma (VUB Brussels) and Laurens ten Kate (University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht), coordinators of SIMAGINE

**9.40** Opening paper by prof. Kurt Appel (University of Vienna, SIMAGINE partner)

**10.30** Discussion

**11.00** Short break

**11.10** Response paper by prof. Theo de Wit (Tilburg School of Theology)

**11.40** Discussion

**12.05** Response paper by dr. Tinneke Beeckman (philosopher, teacher, columnist)

**12.35** Discussion

**13.00** Lunch

**14.00** Response paper by dr. Marin Terpstra (University of Nijmegen)

**14.30** Discussion

**15.00** Short break

**15.10** Response paper by prof. Christiane Timmerman (University of Antwerp, SIMAGINE member)

**15.40** Discussion

**16.10** General discussion resuming the exchanges of the day

**17.00** Drinks

*The workshop will be continued on Friday morning, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2017, at the University of Humanistic Studies, Kromme Nieuwegracht 29 in Utrecht, with a practical session on the contents and planning of the ensuing publication in the aforementioned journal. All presenters and SIMAGINE members are welcome to this second session. See the general start up meeting program.*

#### *Literature*

Biebricher, Th., *Neoliberalismus*, Hamburg: Junius 2012.

Brown, W., *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York: Zone Books 2015

Harari, Y.N., *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Vintage 2016

Kahn, P.W., 'Crossing the Border between Law and Sovereignty', in idem, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror and Sovereignty*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2009

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–, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, New York: SUNY Press 2007

Roy, O., *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, London: Hurst 2010

Shivani, A., 'This is Our Neoliberal Nightmare: Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Why the Market and the Wealthy Win Every Time', in *Alternet*, June 8, 2016 ([www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org))

Taylor, Ch., *A Secular Age*, Cambridge MA & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007

Vertovec, S., 'Super-diversity and its Implications', in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30-6, 2007, 1024-1054