

## On Ricœur's Shift from a Hermeneutics of Culture to a Cultural Hermeneutics

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### Abstract:

The essay's argument is twofold: First, it contends that Ricœur's articulation of the social imaginary in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (and other essays of that period), reveals a turn to a general theory of culture, which is best understood as a shift from a *hermeneutics of culture* to a *cultural hermeneutics*. This move forms part of his philosophical anthropology of "real social life." The essay proposes it is epitomized in Ricœur's changing reception of Cassirer. Second, the essay hermeneutically reconstructs the emergence of this turn in Ricœur's intellectual trajectory, and, in so doing, contends that it is connected to a rearticulation of both the phenomenological reduction and the symbolic function that took place in the mid- to late 1960s. Ricœur's developing response to the phenomenological problematic of the world horizon underlies these further phenomenological-hermeneutic considerations. The essay concludes with a brief sketch of Ricœur's understanding of the symbolic mediation of action (in the Geertz lecture) as a reconfiguration of the hermeneutical actualization of phenomenological preconditions of the symbolic.

*Keywords:* Paul Ricœur, Cultural Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, Social Imaginary, World Horizon, the Symbolic, the Human Condition.

### Résumé:

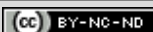
L'argument de cet essai est double: il soutient d'abord que la conception de l'imaginaire social présentée par Ricœur dans *Idéologie et utopie* (ainsi que dans d'autres essais de cette période) révèle un tournant en direction d'une théorie générale de la culture, qui se comprend mieux comme le passage d'une *herméneutique de la culture* à une *herméneutique culturelle*. Ce changement de perspective est constitutif de l'anthropologie philosophique ricœurienne de la "vie sociale réelle" et cet article défend l'idée selon laquelle il se résume lui-même dans l'évolution de la réception de Cassirer dans l'œuvre de Ricœur. Dans un second temps, cet essai reconstruit ensuite de manière herméneutique l'émergence de ce tournant dans la trajectoire intellectuelle de Ricœur, et, ce faisant, soutient l'idée selon laquelle il est lié à une réarticulation de la réduction phénoménologique et de la fonction symbolique élaborée dans la deuxième moitié des années 1960. La réponse progressive de Ricœur à la problématique phénoménologique de l'horizon du monde est à la base de ces nouvelles considérations phénoménologiques et herméneutiques. Cet article se conclut sur un bref exposé de la conception ricœurienne de la médiation symbolique de l'action (dans sa lecture de Geertz), comme reconfiguration de l'actualisation herméneutique des conditions phénoménologiques préalables du symbolique.

*Mots-clés:* Paul Ricœur, herméneutique culturelle, phénoménologie, imaginaire social, horizon mondial, le symbolique, l'humaine condition.

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# On Ricœur's Shift from a Hermeneutics of Culture to a Cultural Hermeneutics

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In his "Editor's Introduction" to Paul Ricœur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, George H. Taylor proposes that "the larger project to which the lectures belong is best characterized not simply as philosophic but as philosophical anthropological."<sup>1</sup> The question of philosophical anthropology was of enduring concern to Ricœur, and his later anthropology evinces a change in emphasis from the "fallible" or "culpable" human to the "capable" human.<sup>2</sup> The philosophical anthropology at work in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, however, is different: its focus is the social, cultural and political dimensions of the imagination, and of the human condition, more generally. Thus, the philosophical anthropology that appears in the *Lectures* is better characterized as an anthropology of "real social life"; this is a term that Ricœur takes from Marx but uses to turn Marx on his head.<sup>3</sup> Ricœur's philosophical anthropology of "real social life" emerges from his elucidation of the social imaginary; more particularly, it arises from his discussion of the *ideological* imaginary. His emphasis on the practical sphere of social life is integral to this approach. For Ricœur, it is characterized by "praxis" (following Marx) or "social action" (following Weber); he considers it to comprise the object proper to the social sciences. As is well known, the lectures on ideology culminate with the discussion of Geertz's work.<sup>4</sup> Here Ricœur's argument is twofold: first, that social action is mediated by symbolic systems; and, second, that these symbolic systems are the manifestation of ideology in its most elementary layer of "integration" (not "distortion"). As social integration, the ideological imaginary is inescapably symbolic. As Ricœur tells us, "[t]he ideological dimension is grafted onto a *symbolic function*. Only because the *structure of human social life is already symbolic* can it be distorted."<sup>5</sup>

Through hermeneutical reconstruction of key texts – where the object of reflection is the text itself (and its layers of meaning) and not the author's erstwhile intentions – I argue that Ricœur's work reveals that the symbolic function culturally configures social life (considered as a whole). Social life (and its cultural configuration) is to be grasped as always-already incorporating a trans-subjective aspect that is irreducible to intersubjective contexts (I return to this). The notion of the symbolic function as the key structuring – or figuring – element of the human condition *writ large* represents, furthermore, a significant shift in Ricœur's thought. It is best understood as a move to a general theory of culture, where he came to understand cultural meaning as the more or less autonomous basis of social life. With this change, Ricœur deepens both the hermeneutical turn that emerged most clearly in the *Symbolism of Evil*,<sup>6</sup> and his ongoing articulation of the "co-belonging" of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Thus his move to a general theory of culture remains both phenomenological and hermeneutical, although Ricœur also emphasizes different elements of the interplay of their co-belonging over the course of his intellectual trajectory.<sup>7</sup> More particularly, within Ricœur's overall conception of the co-belonging of phenomenology and hermeneutics, this essay focuses on a particular episode that begins in the

mid- late 1960s, and involves a new departure in the reflection on culture. For that reason, a certain re-enhancement of phenomenology occurs because of the rearticulated emphasis on subject, meaning and world, on the one hand, while the reach of hermeneutics was extended into the practical domain of social action, on the other.<sup>8</sup>

Ricœur's move to a general theory of culture (as part of his expanded philosophical anthropology) can be understood to articulate a *cultural phenomenological-hermeneutics* that emphasizes practical life as action.<sup>9</sup> Visible in his thought from the late 1960s, it matured by the mid-1970s as evident with his work on the social imaginary and metaphor, as well as sustained reflection on the imagination, more generally. The richest articulation of this cultural philosophical anthropology is found in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, but Ricœur continues to refine it further – in some aspects at least – in *Time and Narrative* in the early 1980s, and beyond. In order to advance this interpretation of Ricœur's project, hermeneutical reconstruction selected aspects of his intellectual trajectory is called for. The scope of the enquiry spans the period from the mid-late 1960s (beginning with the essay, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology") to 1980 (finishing with his review of Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*).<sup>10</sup> I have said that this essay attempts to articulate Ricœur's shift from a hermeneutics of culture, to a cultural hermeneutics of the symbolic as part of an expanded philosophical anthropology of the practical sphere of social life. "Cultural hermeneutics" refers to various approaches in the human sciences which take seriously the interpretation of cultural meaning as not only fundamental to the human condition but also as working more or less autonomously. Not all versions of cultural hermeneutics, however, incorporate a phenomenological element: Jeffrey C. Alexander's sociological approach is a prime example in this regard. Conversely, some thinkers who do develop a cultural hermeneutic framework in dialogue with phenomenology have looked to classical sociology – such as the Weberian tradition – for resources to articulate the hermeneutic element of culture without significant recourse to philosophical hermeneutics: Johann P. Arnason's social theory epitomizes the latter approach. In Ricœur's case the ongoing interplay between phenomenology and hermeneutics was crucial to his overall intellectual project, in general, and to his rethinking of culture, in particular.

The impetus for this essay was animated by reflections on Ricœur's changing reception of Cassirer's symbolic forms (and the symbolic). Although Ricœur did not systematically discuss Cassirer, his place in Ricœur's trajectory seemed to be emblematic of larger, more latent tendencies in Ricœur's thought that were worth investigating further.<sup>11</sup> The first part of this essay thus briefly outlines Ricœur's engagement with Cassirer, and sketches the implications of culture considered as an autonomous aspect of society. The second section considers Ricœur's renewed articulation of the phenomenological reduction in relation to the symbolic function. The final part of the essay moves to the hermeneutical plane properly speaking, but remains sensitive to the ongoing interplay of phenomenology and hermeneutics in his thought.

## 1. Cassirer, Geertz, and the Autonomy of Culture

Ricœur's best known remarks on Cassirer are found in *Freud and Philosophy*.<sup>12</sup> Here Ricœur distinguishes his own approach to symbolism from Aristotle's overly narrow approach, on the one hand, and Cassirer's excessively broad notion, on the other. As Ricœur tells us, for

Cassirer, "the symbolic' designates the common denominator of all the ways of objectivizing, of giving meaning to reality."<sup>13</sup> Although Ricœur agrees with Cassirer that the place of symbols in human life indicates "above all" the non-immediacy of our grasp of reality, at that period in his thought, he concluded that the notion of "sign" or "signifying function" would be a better term for the all-encompassing domain of the "symbolic" that Cassirer articulates. At stake for Ricœur was the "specificity of the hermeneutic problem."<sup>14</sup> Cassirer's approach expanded the notion of "the symbolic" to that of "reality" and "culture," *tout court*. In so doing, Cassirer erased a distinction that Ricœur considered central for hermeneutics at that time: the demarcation between univocity and plurivocity. On Ricœur's account, the plurivocity of meaning as the double intentionality of the symbol that simultaneously conceals as it reveals – was basic to the hermeneutic endeavour. In this vein, he wrote:

If we use the term symbolic for the signifying function in its entirety, we no longer have a word to designate the group of signs whose intentional texture calls for a reading of another meaning in the first, literal, and immediate meaning. [...] i.e. an interpretation, in the precise sense of the word. To mean something other than what is said – this is the symbolic function.<sup>15</sup>

Ricœur's next mention of Cassirer occurs in a more indirect context. In *The Rule of Metaphor* Ricœur noted that Nelson Goodman had critically appropriated Cassirer's understanding of the symbolic as "signification in general."<sup>16</sup> Ricœur also mentions Goodman's engagement with Cassirer a few years later in his review of Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*.<sup>17</sup> (I return to a discussion of Goodman later in the essay.) By the early 1980s, however, Ricœur's approach to Cassirer had undergone a remarkable shift, as seen in his discussion in *Time and Narrative 1* on "Mimesis 1": The focus here is the "pre-understanding of the world of action" – i.e. the practical realm of social life.<sup>18</sup> In this context, Ricœur observes that:

[I]f imitating is elaborating an articulated significance of some action, a supplementary competence is required: an aptitude for identifying what I call the symbolic mediations of action, in a sense of the world "symbol" that Cassirer made classic and that cultural anthropology, from which I shall draw several examples, adopted.<sup>19</sup>

Let us note the lack of fanfare with which his new agreement with Cassirer is announced. Let us also note that he would seem to link it to an engagement with cultural anthropology, which, in Ricœur's case, meant the work of Clifford Geertz. Indeed, just three pages later, in discussing the symbolic resources of practical life, Ricœur begins his engagement with Geertz. He again provides different definitions of "the symbol" (and again notes his agreement with Cassirer). He tells us that:

Between too poor and too rich an acceptance, I have opted for [a definition of "symbol"] close to that of Cassirer, in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in as much as, for him, symbolic forms are cultural processes that articulate experience. If I speak more precisely of symbolic mediation, it is to distinguish, among symbols of a cultural nature, the ones that underlie action and that constitute its first signification, before autonomous symbolic whole dependent upon speaking or writing become detached from the practical level. In

this sense we might speak of an implicit or immanent symbolism, in opposition to an explicit or autonomous one.<sup>20</sup>

In this vein we might ask: what is the significance of cultural anthropology? So called *cultural anthropology* began to emerge with Franz Boas at the end of the nineteenth century, and blossomed with followers such as Ruth Benedict and Alfred Kroeber by the middle of the twentieth century. The postulate of “cultural variety” was their enduring and fundamental theme. In the 1970s, Clifford Geertz gave a distinctive hermeneutical twist to the sub-discipline (Geertz was a student of Talcott Parsons, and thus his anthropological framework was also informed by sociology). Instead of a focus on, for example (and especially), forms of cultural materialism, Geertz argued instead that:

[b]elieving, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.<sup>21</sup>

In particular, these “webs of significance” are deposited in cultural symbols, which are to be deciphered through “thick description” (which Ricœur, in his appropriation of Geertz, understands as a form of Weberian *Verstehen* sociology).<sup>22</sup>

In the current context, the significance of cultural anthropology lies in its emphasis on the articulation of cultural meaning as elemental to the human condition, especially in its collective, that is, social aspect. As such, cultural anthropology – and the late twentieth century cultural (or culturalist) turn in the human and social sciences, more broadly, challenged the then dominant images of society (as, generally speaking, structural and/or functionalist). Culture was no longer simply seen as one variable among others, but as a central and relatively autonomous element of social formation. Within sociology, this has been termed the shift from the “weak program” of the “sociology of culture” to the “strong program” of “cultural sociology.” Jeffrey C. Alexander, for whom Geertz was also a central intellectual source, has pioneered the best known version of this approach. As Alexander writes in his programmatic essay “The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology”:

The fault line at the heart of current debates lies between “cultural sociology” and the “sociology of culture.” To believe in the possibility of a “cultural sociology” is to subscribe to the idea that every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive or coerced *vis-à-vis* its external environments [...] is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning. [...] When described in the folk idiom of positivism, one could say that the more traditional “sociology of culture” approach treats culture as a dependent variable, whereas in “cultural sociology” it is an “independent variable” that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces.<sup>23</sup>

The present writer would take issue with a number of Alexander’s contentions but his central argument regarding the relative autonomy of culture (as cultural meaning) in the formation of social life remains crucial. Ricœur, too, takes on board the autonomy of culture, for

example, in more than one place he approvingly quotes Geertz's understanding of "the autonomous process of symbolic formulation" as an essential aspect of social life.<sup>24</sup>

I have briefly sketched Ricœur's shifting reception of Cassirer's understanding of the symbolic, and have linked it to a concomitant shift in his own understanding of cultural meaning. Borrowing from Alexander, we may call this the shift from a "weak" program of the hermeneutics of culture to a "strong" program of cultural hermeneutics. In the aforementioned passage in *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur links his new understanding of symbolic meaning to Geertz and the symbolic mediation of action. Ricœur finds support in Geertz's approach for his own understanding of action as symbolically mediated, but indicates that Marx's notion of a "language of real social life" provides the greater intellectual impetus.<sup>25</sup> Although Ricœur's engagement with Marx (via Althusser and Geertz, in particular) clarified and deepened the meaning and scope of his cultural turn, the shift emerges a few years earlier in his thought. In what follows, I propose to hermeneutically reconstruct key aspects of this move.

What were the key intellectual sources and contexts behind this shift? The period in question stretches from the mid- to late 1960s to the mid-1970s. Three central lines of debate can be identified in Ricœur's thought at that time (and extend back to the 1950s). These include: first, his ongoing engagement with Husserl's phenomenological reduction grounded in the development of his own project; second, his engagement with psychoanalysis; and third, his response to various challenges perceived on the intellectual scene in the late 1960s. For example, his hermeneuticization of phenomenology takes the more specific form of the rethinking of the symbolic, which was a topical discussion in the mid-late 1960s and its structuralist environment. Here Ricœur was active on two fronts. On the one hand, he critiqued the structuralist utopia of a generalized semiotics; he wanted instead a different view of the symbolic, one that was not absorbable into a general theory of science. On the other hand, he was simultaneously moving away from, or, at least, reconceptualising his earlier understanding of his "middle" definition of symbols as the specific domain of the hermeneutic project.<sup>26</sup> All this happened through engagement with particular thinkers, although sometimes indirectly. As we shall see, these included Cassirer via Goodman; Lévi-Strauss and Saussure; Althusser, and Marxian thought more generally as a critical source. In the background, the hermeneutics of suspicion and appropriation were being furthered. In the next section, we begin to investigate his rethinking of the phenomenological reduction, especially in relation to the symbolic function, and its hermeneutic consequences.

## 2. The Phenomenological Reduction and the Symbolic Function

As with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jan Patočka, Ricœur's phenomenology is premised on a critical engagement with both Husserl and Heidegger. Each of these third generation phenomenologists critiqued Husserl's philosophy of consciousness but also found innovative ways of appropriating important parts of the Husserlian legacy in conjunction with a distinctive take on the meaning of Heidegger's notion of *being-in-the-world*. Johann Arnason has termed this a shift towards "post-transcendental phenomenology."<sup>27</sup> In Ricœur's case, his critical engagement with Husserlian idealism and (post)Heideggerian phenomenology incorporated a rearticulation of the phenomenological reduction; this also took place as part of his critical engagement with



structuralism and Freudian psychoanalysis. This is evident in, for example, his 1967 essay, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology.”<sup>28</sup> Ricœur’s reappraisal of the phenomenological reduction – coupled with his critical engagement with Lévi-Strauss’s articulation of the “symbolic function” as part of his linguistic turn – provides the central impetus towards his shift to a general theory of culture (especially as it relates to the trans-subjective aspect of social life).<sup>29</sup>

In “The Question of the Subject,” Ricœur continued to reflect on a range of converging problematics, including phenomenological idealism, structuralism, and Freudian psychoanalysis. In so doing, new considerations emerged in his thought. As mentioned, my particular interest in the essay concerns Ricœur’s rethinking of the phenomenological reduction, especially in relation to his critical reappropriation of the structuralist understanding of the “symbolic function.”<sup>30</sup> Before proceeding further, a brief note on “the reduction” is warranted. Ricœur’s engagement with Husserl’s unceasing reflections on the reduction was both enduring and complex.<sup>31</sup> In his appendix to Bréhier, Ricœur understands Husserl’s cogito as continuing “the transcendental of Kant, the originary of Hume, and the doubt and cogito of Descartes.”<sup>32</sup> Husserl used the reduction itself “long before it was reflected upon.”<sup>33</sup> Ricœur identifies a consistent tendency in Husserl to combine two understandings of phenomenology and distinguishes between “methodological” and “doctrinal” idealism in Husserl’s thought. The latter was the result on Husserl’s “metaphysical decision about the ultimate sense of reality and exceeds the methodological prudence by which consciousness is only interrogated” in *Ideas II*, which were further radicalized in the *Cartesian Meditations*,<sup>34</sup> which formed a core part of Ricœur’s critique of Husserl. Husserl’s later work saw the “progressive abandonment” of idealism; the life-world was prior to the reduction and became the irreducible in his thought.<sup>35</sup> Husserl’s articulation of the lifeworld also indicated an increasing preoccupation with history, a concern with which the transcendental reduction was meant to eliminate.<sup>36</sup> Ricœur’s own understanding of the reduction is not always clearly visible, as he approaches it indirectly via his reconstruction of Husserl. Generally speaking, however, the reduction in Husserl is a way of extracting the subject from the world, which then goes on to reveal it as the creator of the world; in Ricœur it becomes – as in different ways, in Patočka and Merleau-Ponty – a way of gaining access to a field of meaning that connects the subject to the world. Unlike Husserl, Ricœur held that meanings were not solely produced by the subject of consciousness. The subject does not constitute the world. Instead, the object (the world, understood in a phenomenological not natural scientific sense, and more properly as “trans-objective” not “objective”) also “intends” meaning toward the subject. Ricœur’s own approach to the reduction did not accept Husserl’s idealism and would seem to cautiously advocate for a “methodological idealism.” What is distinctive in Ricœur is the emphatic linguistic turn in the 1960s that links up with culture and the trans-subjective, but also the determination to keep the subject alive in that context; hence the emphasis on (hermeneutic) speech/discourse over (phenomenological) language.

In “The Question of the Subject,” Ricœur adverts to three core theses of phenomenology: meaning as the most comprehensive category; the subject as the bearer of meaning; the reduction which allows the subject as the bearer of meaning to emerge (as found in chronological order in *Logical Investigations*).<sup>37</sup> However, the phenomenological reduction is the most important, as it discloses a field of meaning and the subject as both co-creator and recipient of that meaning. It is through the reduction that “every question about being” is transmuted into “a question about the

meaning of being." This move – and any further step – is a crucial first stage in any rethinking of phenomenology, and raises questions about further moves.<sup>38</sup> As Ricœur observes it is "in and through reduction [that] every being comes to be described as a phenomenon, as appearance, thus as a meaning to be made explicit."<sup>39</sup> Two things are important to note here for Ricœur: First, the reduction itself is irreducible to an idealist interpretation. Second, it is through the reduction that our relation to the world becomes apparent. The three theses – in order of their founding – then become: the reduction to the subject and then to meaning "as the universal mediation between the subject and the world."<sup>40</sup> Ricœur's approach to "the meaning of meaning" avoids both the structuralist reduction and the anthropocentric turn that can result from a rethinking of transcendental phenomenology. (A rethinking of phenomenology is not synonymous with the turn from transcendental phenomenology to an anthropocentric perspective; but the latter is one kind of rethinking of phenomenology. Ricœur takes note of it and learns from it, but does not identify with it.) As I argue, Ricœur's own engagement with – and rearticulation of – transcendental phenomenology took a different path in the late 1960s. In the next sentence, Ricœur claims phenomenology as a "generalized theory of language,"<sup>41</sup> which evokes his understanding of Humboldt's approach to language as the "relation between man and world."<sup>42</sup> Meaning fundamentally emerges in language, and mediates between anthropos and world. Phenomenologically speaking, "language ceases to be an activity, a function, an operation among others: it is identified with the entire signifying milieu, with the complex of signs thrown like a net over our field of perception, our action, our life."<sup>43</sup> It is not one precondition among others, but a meta-precondition of social life.<sup>44</sup>

Ricœur goes on to discuss the ways in which structuralist linguistics challenges idealist phenomenology, as its notion of signification is placed in a different field from the subject's intentions.<sup>45</sup> This involves three aspects: the dichotomy of language and speech; the subordination of diachrony to synchrony; and, third, the reduction of "substantial aspects of language... to formal aspects."<sup>46</sup> Language is understood as a system of signs defined only by difference, and without signification, that has no externality, i.e. it is a closed system of signs. But it is this "specific negativity" that brings the phenomenological reduction into relief: "The linguistic sign can *stand for* something only if it is *not* the thing."<sup>47</sup> The reduction "renders thematic what was only operative, and thereby makes *meaning appear as meaning*."<sup>48</sup> Through this engagement with structuralism, Ricœur shows that signification becomes more distant from the subject than is the case in idealist phenomenology.

To provide an adequate response to the structuralist challenge, Ricœur draws on the resources of hermeneutics as well as phenomenology. His semantic theory of discourse provides new forms for "meaning" and "language" – but he does not substitute one (phenomenological) pair for the other (structuralist pair); rather, they operate on different levels. The two levels are conceived in interplay: the semiotic sign, organized by difference, is transferred to the semantic world "by means of reference";<sup>49</sup> this can provisionally be called the process of representation; that is, following Benveniste, the semantic function of representing the real by signs.<sup>50</sup> Here, "language is articulated for the purpose of the signifying or representative function."<sup>51</sup> In reference to Merleau-Ponty's "speaking subject," and of relevance for our succeeding discussion, Ricœur observes:



The passage through language restores to the analysis of speech its properly linguistic character, which can be preserved only if one seeks it in the direct extension of the “gesture.” It is, on the contrary, as the *semantic realization of the semiological order* that speech, by an inverse reaction, causes human gesture to appear as signifying, at least inchoately. A philosophy of expression and signification which has not passed through these semiological and logical mediations is condemned to stop short of the properly semantic level.<sup>52</sup>

It is only by traversing these (semiotic) levels that signification in its fullness appears at the semantic level of discourse. Ricœur wants to show that the semiotic order is virtual. It provides the conditions of “articulation” without which language would not exist, but it is not yet language in its signifying aspect; it has no referent. Discourse actualizes language; it is spoken by a subject and refers to the world. Thus there are two entwined orders: organization and realization, or, from another perspective, system and event.<sup>53</sup> From this, Ricœur concludes that the positing of the subject needs to be accomplished within language, more particularly in the “occurrence of discourse, that is, in the act by which the potential system of language becomes the actual event of speech.”<sup>54</sup> In an important move – and leaning on Benveniste – Ricœur thus argues that the subject asserts itself in the move from language to discourse. Overall, Ricœur’s rethinking of the reduction by way of the symbolic function and its links to language are becoming clear.

The problematic of signification was a shared problematic for structuralism and phenomenology. It challenged Ricœur to articulate a new response to the first question of phenomenology: “What does signifying signify?” and to rethinking signification as a theory of signs from a phenomenological perspective that incorporates a linguistic aspect.<sup>55</sup> Following the “long detour of signs,” he sought the reduction “among the necessary conditions of signifying relations, of the symbolic function as such,”<sup>56</sup> where the reduction will appear as:

[the] “transcendental” of language, the possibility for man to be something other than a nature among natures, the possibility for him to be related to the real by designating it through signs. This reinterpretation of reduction, in connection with a philosophy of language, is perfectly homogeneous with the conception of phenomenology as the general theory of meaning, as the theory of generalized language.<sup>57</sup>

Ricœur pursued this thread further primarily via Lévi-Strauss. He agreed with Lévi-Strauss that language, unlike knowledge (or a “science of signs”), could only have come into being instantaneously, and thus the symbolic function was to be understood as a condition of possibility: “What is at issue here is the very birth of man to the order of signs.”<sup>58</sup>

But in what sense is the linguisticity of the symbolic function transcendental? Here I note that Ricœur’s usage of the term (as in the above citation) is in quotation marks, which indicates that it is not to be taken in a strict, Kantian sense, but is rather more indicative of the fact that, at that particular stage, he was still thinking his way through the argument, and experimenting with terminology. Ricœur’s new approach to the reduction as “transcendental” could be compared to Marcel Gauchet’s project of a “transcendental socio-anthropology,” where the transcendental is understood as a “precondition” that emerges in history. This is also in line

with Ricœur's later thought (from the 1970s) which framed things more in terms of an "open dialectic" rather than as a "dichotomy." In this vein, he wrote that "[t]he old polemic between *explanation* and *understanding* can then be reconsidered anew, in a less dichotomous and more dialectical sense, now possessing a broader field of application, including not only the text but history and praxis as well."<sup>59</sup> What we see here is the beginning of a shift from the symbolic understood as the transcendental origin of society, to, in Charles Taylor's terms a "weak transcendental" that can no longer be said to be totally outside of history and time. As Ricœur writes in a slightly later essay: "It is in discourse that the symbolic function of language is actualized"; it is in the hermeneutic domain of historical life that the phenomenological preconditions are realized.<sup>60</sup> We can see that Ricœur grafts the notion of the "symbolic function" onto the phenomenological reduction in novel ways. As we know, Ricœur accepts the critique of the philosophy of consciousness, but nonetheless sought to revive a hermeneutical-phenomenological notion of the self that is not subject to the philosophy of consciousness (ultimately via discourse as text). In so doing, he took up the notion of signification, of signifying relations: the "symbolic function as such."<sup>61</sup>

Following this path, Ricœur agrees with Lévi-Strauss that the symbolic function is not reducible to semiology. The reduction marks the "beginning of signifying life"<sup>62</sup> and the symbolic function "a condition of possibility."<sup>63</sup> He goes on to quote – and agree with – Lévi-Strauss's critique of Mauss:

The two beginnings, thus understood in their radicalness, are one and the same beginning if, following Lévi-Strauss's remark, the symbolic function is the origin and not the result of social life: "Mauss still believes it possible to develop a sociological theory of symbolism, while obviously what must be sought is the symbolic origin of society."<sup>64</sup>

These three aspects form the turning point towards his general theory of culture: the symbolic origin of society, the symbolic function as the beginning of signifying life. Later we will see a fourth aspect: the actualization of the symbolic function in hermeneutic discourse.

In bridging the passage from "sign" to "signification," from "language" to "discourse," from the "semiological" to the "semantic," Ricœur demolishes the presuppositions of an "objectivist" approach (that is both *worldless* and *subjectless*) to the actualization of signification, and instead develops an understanding of the subject and world disclosure as reciprocal. As Ricœur argues, the symbolic function includes the capacity to put all exchanges (including exchanges of signs) under an overarching rule, "thus under an anonymous principle which transcends subjects."<sup>65</sup> More importantly for Ricœur it is the capacity to actualize the rule into an "event," of which discourse is the "prototype," where, a key aspect of the symbol in its social (not mathematical) variant "implies a rule of recognition between subjects." But he goes further, following in this instance Ortigues rather than Lévi-Strauss, where the fullness of the reduction is an understanding of society that involves a "return to the self by way of its other which makes the transcendental no longer a kind of sign but a kind of signification."<sup>66</sup>

Even though Ricœur consistently emphasizes the intersubjective aspect of the social as a critique of the "anonymous" and "subjectless" approach of structuralism, the overarching point is that the symbolic function constitutes the social dimension of the human condition. This is put even more clearly a few years later when he draws again on Lévi-Strauss's critique of Mauss: In discussing the "constitutive character" of the social imaginary and the "most elementary level" at

which it (and specifically, ideology) operates, Ricœur notes, “As Lévi-Strauss strongly asserts in his introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss, symbolism is not an effect of society, rather society is an effect of symbolism.”<sup>67</sup> Here we also note the shift in terminology, from “the symbolic” to “symbolism”: these have slightly different meanings, and point, in my view, to the interlacing of phenomenology (and the “transcendental” symbolic) and hermeneutics (and the symbolism of discourse and history) at the very core of society’s self-institution in his thought.

As it is often misunderstood, opening a parenthesis to clarify the trans-subjective dimension of the human condition seems relevant at this juncture. It is possible – and, in the present writer’s view, desirable – to hermeneutically reconstruct a “trans-subjective” aspect to Ricœur’s understanding of sociality (including the symbolic function that incorporates the anonymous aspect of society) but without, unlike structuralism, negating subjectivity nor sidelining meaning. In so doing, it would connect Ricœur’s understanding of the social imaginary as both cultural and social (and political, although that would be not as central in this context). This would be important to pursue, as Ricœur’s rethinking of the reduction and the linguistification of the symbolic calls for a greater understanding of the place of the trans-subjective – this broadest and most fundamental mode of sociality – for the reduction. This would simultaneously mean that signification would be irreducible to the subject (or to intersubjectivity), but must be thought of as the interplay of subjective, trans-subjective, and trans-objective contexts. This is especially the case when concerning the practical world of action (which would also include not only culture but also “movement” from a trans-subjective aspect). (To make this argument on the basis of Ricœur’s thought would require extensive hermeneutical reconstruction, however, which is clearly beyond the scope of the present essay.)<sup>68</sup>

The trans-subjective dimension of the human condition can be seen in, for example, the distinction between “the imaginary” as a region of social existence, and “the imagination” as a singular human faculty. It refers to the level of human sociality that is anonymous, and is the precondition for subject-selves acting meaningfully in intersubjective contexts. Castoriadis has elucidated the trans-subjective level of the human condition very clearly, although he frames it in social-ontological terms. On his account, the trans-subjective is to be understood as the mode of being of the social-historical as the *anonymous collective* of society. It is always-already unmotivated, thoroughly historical, and irreducible to the intersubjective level of sociality. It appears as cultural significations that are embedded in (but not exhausted by) institutions – understood here in the broadest sense – and thereby in patterns of power that alter themselves in, through, and as time (and concrete temporal forms). In the historical domain proper, the trans-subjective context of the social-historical consists of the interplay of instituted patterns and instituting irruptions of cultural meaning, social power, and collective movement that are both *in-the-world* and *opening-onto-the-world*. Castoriadis’s use of the term “institution” is important to note. It draws on Merleau-Ponty’s elucidation of “institution” as a critique of the Husserlian notion of “constitution,” on the one hand, and emphasizes the properly societal element of the human condition as the social-historical, on the other. In phenomenology, the trans-subjective dimension has been likened to Heidegger’s “Das Man.” Although the notion of “trans-subjectivity” shares with “Das Man” an anonymous level of sociality, the trans-subjective, in the way that it is meant here, does not refer to an inauthentic mode of being; it is better understood as *meta-normative*. Some, such as Habermas, have criticized Castoriadis for losing sight of the subject in the “hurly burly” of anonymous sociality. But the subject is neither reduced to nor

submerged in the anonymous collective; rather, trans-subjective contexts both open up and limit possible varieties of subjectivity within cultural and civilizational complexes.

To return to Ricœur's articulation of culture: The key to understanding Ricœur's shift to a strong theory of culture begins with his reformulation of the phenomenological reduction in the mid- to late 1960s that was *de facto* operational by 1970-1971, in as much as Ricœur had placed the idea of the sociality of the symbolic, and the symbolic constitution of society firmly in the centre of his hermeneutic-phenomenological framework. In brief, he always rejected the notion that the phenomenological reduction was a subtraction from reality "as the metaphor of the parenthesis let us believe,"<sup>69</sup> no longer looking at the "things themselves" – absolute and in itself but instead at their *meaning for us*, as did Husserl, but with Ricœur now adopting a decidedly more relative rather than absolute position. With the reduction, an "empire of meaning (*sens*)" appears, an appearance *for* humankind. We take our gaze away from the "natural world" and towards the thesis of the meaning of the world. If in effect the reduction is not the loss of something, nor its subtraction, but to take distance from what are not only things but signs, meaning, significations, "the phenomenological reduction marks the birth of the symbolic function in general."<sup>70</sup>

Ricœur's insights into the textuality of action "the gradual re-inscription of the theory of texts within the theory of action" – along with his deepening hermeneuticization of phenomenology, his new understanding of a semantics of reference, and his grappling with the ideological imaginary further refined his cultural framework for articulating the human condition.<sup>71</sup> We discuss these aspects in the following section.

### 3. The Social Imaginary: Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

Ricœur understands phenomenology and hermeneutics to be in perpetual interplay – the problematic of the "meaning of meaning" is their common ground. As we have seen the phenomenological reduction opens onto hermeneutic operations. This enduring intertwining is also apparent in the hermeneutical sphere of life, as seen in his understanding of the structuration of *being-in-the-world* in relation to the ideological imaginary. For Ricœur, the most "fundamental phenomenological presupposition of a philosophy of interpretation is that every questioning concerning any sort of 'being' is a question about the meaning of that 'being'."<sup>72</sup> In turn, hermeneutics becomes a philosophical and not just exegetical hermeneutics and addresses itself to "the lingual condition 'the *Sprachlichkeit*' – of all experience," but it goes further and must subordinate *Sprachlichkeit* "to the *experience* which comes to language;"<sup>73</sup> that is, it "refers the linguistic order back to the [phenomenological] structure of experience."<sup>74</sup> Hermeneutics has its own domains beyond phenomenology proper, but of primary interest here is the domain of historical experience as part of particular historical traditions. The phenomenological act of signifying a "lived experience" is also a hermeneutical act, an act of signifying a lived experience that belongs to an historical tradition (which from the 1970s, Ricœur understood as mediated by texts).<sup>75</sup>

Here we can see ideology already at work. First, as Ricœur has noted, he employs the Gadamerian term "belonging" to signify "*being-in-the-world*"; the term "belonging" emphasizes its hermeneutical element.<sup>76</sup> It is a "primordial relation of belonging [...] without which there would be no relation to the historical as such."<sup>77</sup> Simultaneously, the hermeneutic aspect is also

phenomenological, in that it signifies the existential structures – the structure of anticipation, of “pre-understanding” – that are constitutive of our *being-in-the-world*.<sup>78</sup> These existential structures precede language – it is these “experiences” that language brings to life and to meaning – or better, to the fullness of expression. (Let us recall Ricœur’s interpretation of Cassirer in *Time and Narrative* mentioned above, of the symbolic “articulating experience.”) Yet these structures are not a-cultural or a-historical; they emerge as historical meaning as the most elementary aspect of meaning. We think through and with these structures of existence *in-the-world*, which emerge as a relation of belonging to a “history, a class, nature, culture, etc.,” but consequently upon which we cannot ever fully reflect.<sup>79</sup> This is the work of the social imaginary in its primitive, ideological layer in its cultural rendering of the world.

But this, too, I would suggest, comprises a plurality of levels: the most basic corresponds to “certain fundamental human experiences [that] make up an immediate symbolism that presides over the most primitive metaphorical order. This original symbolism seems to adhere to the most immutable human manner of being in the world” (such as cardinal direction, terrestrial localization, elements of such fire, wind, etc).<sup>80</sup> Then we come to the imaginary – or ideological – layers of the human condition *in-the-world*, properly speaking. There are at least two of these: first, the work of the symbolic function in the institution of society, and, second, the interpretation of this symbolic bond in historical patterns of symbolism. These latter layers are not explicitly delineated as such by Ricœur but are implicitly indicated in the following passage: “Ideology is an unsurpassable phenomenon of social existence insofar as social reality always has a symbolic constitution *and* incorporates an interpretation, in images and representations, of the social bond itself.”<sup>81</sup> The interplay of the phenomenological and hermeneutical aspects is here apparent. The ideological imaginary renders the underdetermined horizon of the world as the world for a particular collective – these are the anticipatory structures of *being-in-the-world* as the sphere of “belonging.” These need not always be explicit as this hermeneutical sphere of “world articulation” is operative not thematic. We think *from* these anticipatory structures, not about them, and we can never fully posit them absolutely, as their historical antecedents are never given in itself;<sup>82</sup> instead, as hermeneutic, they always involve an interpretation, and, further, operate such that we always find ourselves “in the middle” rather than at any origin or end point.<sup>83</sup> This is in line with some of Ricœur’s writings at the time of a language – or a “phrasing” [*phrasé*] of the world that would be a kind of “interior language” to human modalities such as action,<sup>84</sup> or an as an implicit symbolism of action.<sup>85</sup> This would imply that they are inseparable from – yet go beyond – an explicit articulation by language.<sup>86</sup> Simultaneously, emerging from the movement and activity of the ideological imaginary of the anticipatory structuration of the world, a more explicitly articulated interpretation of the social bond as symbolically mediated, in images, narratives, ritual etc., that integrates and identifies a social collective as that particular collective comes to the fore. These two layers – the symbolic institution of society and its further articulation in and as concrete forms of symbolic activity and forms that are particular to that social collective – as well as the symbolic mediation between them – disclose/create “possible modes of being, as symbolic dimensions of our *being-in-the-world*.”<sup>87</sup> Not only are the structures of society symbolic to its core, but also the structures of the human condition *in-the-world* are symbolic: both emerge from the activity of the social imaginary operating at different levels.

This would also make sense in light of Ricœur’s discussion of Althusser in the *Lectures*, where he discusses the shifting layers of the “imaginary.” I quote the passage in question in full:



On this basis the imaginary features of ideology must be qualified and improved. Here I raise two points. First what is distorted is not reality as such, not the real condition of existence, but our relation to this condition of existence. We are not far from a concept of being-in-the-world; it is our relation to reality which is distorted. "Now I can return to a thesis which I have already advanced: it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there."<sup>[88]</sup> This leads to a most important insight, because what is a relation to the conditions of existence if not already an interpretation, something symbolically mediated. To speak of our relation to the world requires a symbolic structure. My main argument, therefore, is that if we do not have from the start a symbolic structure to our existence, then nothing can be distorted. As Althusser himself observes: "it is the imaginary nature of this relation which underlies all the imaginary distortion that we can observe [...] in all ideology"<sup>[89]</sup> We are not far from a complete reversal in our approach to the problem of the imaginary. We could not understand that there are distorted images if there were not first a primary imaginary structure of our being in the world underlying even the distortions. The imaginary appears not only in the distorted forms of existence, because it is already present in the relation which is distorted. The imaginary is constitutive of our relation to the world. One of my main questions, then, is whether this does not imply before the distorting function of imagination a constitutive function of imagination.<sup>90</sup>

It is tempting to bring in Castoriadis's understanding of the *imaginary element* in its interplay with the symbolic element at this point. This would correlate to Ricœur's understanding of the symbolic function as symbolic institution of the world (this is the "imaginary element, as such," for Castoriadis), and its simultaneous but distinct layer of concrete symbolic interpretation. The two are in constant interplay. Prior to his ontological turn in the early 1970s, Castoriadis published an important essay in 1964-5 called "The Imaginary and the Institution: A First Approach" that focussed on the interconnections of imaginary and symbolic elements in the self-institution of society. There he argued that the imaginary element – as social imaginary significations – was the precondition for the symbolic webs of the social world.<sup>91</sup> Not only are the structures of society symbolic to its core, but so, too, are the structures of the human condition *in-the-world*: both emerge from the activity of the social imaginary operating at different levels.

Two final points are worth observing, each in its own way closes the hermeneutical circle we are presently traversing only to open onto a new one. First, I began this essay by noting that Ricœur's turn to a general theory of culture culminated in his engagement with Geertz in the *Ideology and Utopia Lectures*. The point of the lecture on Geertz was to emphasize the way in which symbolic systems mediate action, and thus conclusively to demonstrate that ideology and praxis are not opposed but rather that ideology in its integrative aspect is the ground of praxis. Ricœur notes that "Marx himself suggests by his allusion to the 'language of life' that here must be a place or stage in which praxis itself implies some symbolic mediation [...] symbolization [is] constitutive of action as such."<sup>92</sup> But we can go further than this.

At play, here, I suggest, is the symbolic function and the interconnections of phenomenology and hermeneutics reconfigured into the practical domain of life as action. We



note again that that for Ricœur (hermeneutic) discourse actualizes the (phenomenological preconditions of the) symbolic function of language that the phenomenological reduction brings into relief, and note, too, that Ricœur explicitly extends this to practical life.<sup>93</sup> Ricœur observes, moreover, that the structural model can be generalized to all social phenomena that can be understood semiotically (that is the general relation between code and message, signifier and signified, etc):

Inasmuch as the semiological model holds, the semiotic or symbolic function, that is, the function of substituting signs for things and of representing things by means of signs, appears to be more than a mere effect in social life. It is its very foundation. We should have to say, according to this generalized function of the semiotic, not only that the symbolic function is social but that social reality is fundamentally symbolic.<sup>94</sup>

In his Lecture on Geertz, Ricœur has emphasized Geertz's semiotic approach to culture and symbols,<sup>95</sup> his use of "cultural codes" and "templates" to inform social action:

We have to articulate our social experience in the same way that we have to articulate our perceptual experience. Just as models in scientific language allow us to see how things look, allow us to see things as this or that, in the same way our social templates articulate our social roles, articulate our position in society as this or that. And perhaps it is not possible to go behind or below this primitive structuration.<sup>96</sup>

But although there is a "primitive hermeneutic layer of praxis,"<sup>97</sup> that is, although the symbolic mediation of action takes place on the historical level – on the hermeneutical plane – it also refers us back to the phenomenological milieu, to what we might call the "primitive phenomenological layer of praxis":

Indeed, I have never ceased to base the semantic analysis of reference upon the conviction that discourse never exists simply for its own glory but that it attempts, in all its usages, to carry an experience to language, a manner of inhabiting and of being-in-the-world, which precedes it and demands to be said [...] Now, in a philosophy that was increasingly seen as a practical philosophy, acting constitutes the core of what, in Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian ontology, is called being-in-the-world, or, in a more striking fashion, the act of inhabiting.<sup>98</sup>

Thus the interplay of hermeneutics and phenomenology is reconfigured on several levels in the realm of social action.

One of Ricœur's central aims in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* was to show that praxis/action and ideology were not opposed but interconnected. As is well known, he concludes that ideology as symbolic and integrative underlies praxis as the "activity of real social life." This comes to the fore in his lectures on Marx and Althusser, where Ricœur takes up Marx's notion of an anthropology of "real social life" and the "language of real life" – the language of praxis – to reinforce the symbolic dimension (and only on that basis, could possible ideological "distortion" occur) of the human condition in the practical sphere. We cannot go beyond ideology: "For how could illusions and fantasies have any historical efficacy if ideology did not have a mediating role

incorporated in the most elementary social bond, as the latter's symbolic constitution in the sense of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss? Hence we cannot speak of a pre-ideological or non-ideological activity."<sup>99</sup>

This brings us to our final point. I suggested at the beginning of this essay that Ricœur's changing reception of Cassirer encapsulated his turn to a general – or anthropological – theory of culture. In so doing, I noted that part of his reception of Cassirer occurred indirectly as a result of his engagement with Nelson Goodman's work. Here I would like to suggest that Ricœur's encounter with Nelson Goodman's thought helped refine his turn to a general theory of culture, in both its phenomenological and hermeneutical aspects and that this happened most likely in the early to mid-1970s. Two of Goodman's works are of importance here: his earlier work *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* and his now classic text, *Ways of Worldmaking*, which Ricœur reviewed (and interestingly for much of the review discussed the earlier book *Languages of Art*).<sup>100</sup> Goodman features in Ricœur's thought generally as a way of thinking through metaphorical reference (in Study 7 of *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricœur characterizes Goodman's approach as a "denotative theory of metaphor"),<sup>101</sup> which appeared to Ricœur as "capable of taking up under new auspices [his] old problem of the symbol, to which [he] had accorded without discussion the function of detecting the deepest recesses of experience, metaphor now appearing in the semantic framework of the symbol."<sup>102</sup> In the important essay, "Imagination in Discourse and in Action," published a year before *Ways of Worldmaking*, Ricœur mentions in passing, in referring to Goodman's work of the icon, that his own work on the imagination "links up with the theory of generalized symbols in Nelson Goodman's *The Languages of Art*: all symbols – of art and of language – have the same referential claim to 'remake reality'."<sup>103</sup> The notion of "generalized symbols" is a crucial context for understanding Ricœur's shift to a general theory of culture. Although he only mentions it in "Imagination in Discourse and in Action," he discussed it at greater length (or rather, he discussed Goodman's interpretation of it) in his earlier *Rule of Metaphor* (in particular, Study 7), where Goodman's theory of metaphor is inserted into the theory of symbolic systems: "The universality of the referential function is guaranteed by the universality of the organizing power of language and, more generally, of symbolic systems [...] symbolic systems 'make' and 'remake' the world."<sup>104</sup> Here it is of less relevance to go into Ricœur's argument about the ultimate difference between "reference" and "denotation" when it comes to symbols; instead it is important to note the overlap between symbolic systems and metaphor.<sup>105</sup>

The interplay between symbolic systems and metaphor highlights the interconnectedness of the ideological and utopian imaginaries and their shared participation in the creative imagination. Ricœur's approach to the social imaginary can be said to be situated at the intersection of his various approaches to meaning – his earlier work on the double meaning of symbols, his expansion of the hermeneutic approach to texts and action; the theory of metaphor as creative reference to the world; and his later approach to narrative. Although he does argue that both the ideological and utopian imaginaries are creative, overall, however, it seems clear that the ideological imaginary appears more closely linked to the "bound" nature of "symbols" – and the reproductive imagination, whilst the utopian imaginary appears more closely aligned with the semantic creativity of metaphoric reference, with "the function of fiction in shaping reality," and the productive imagination.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, from Goodman's thought, as we have seen, Ricœur takes the idea that "symbolic systems 'make' and 'remake' the world."<sup>107</sup> For

Ricœur, the *rhetorical* aspect of ideology links it to the creative aspect of metaphor, and shows us the interplay of creative and reproductive aspects of the ideological imaginary. In the Geertz lecture he tells us: “If the rhetoric of ideology proceeds like, say, that of metaphor, then the relation between the ideology and its so-called real basis may be compared to the relation of reference that a metaphorical utterance entertains with the situation it redescribes.”<sup>108</sup> However, it can only emerge against an always already symbolically configured background of signification as the world horizon (itself the primitive layer of ideology) as the anticipatory structure of a particular social collective. Thus this involves an open dialectic between “invention” and “disclosure.” In this way, as he notes in his review of *Ways of Worldmaking*:

Contrary to the first alternative [regarding world versions v versions of the world], the world may be more than each version without being apart from it. It is the very experience of making that yields that of discovering. And discovering is to confront the opacity of the world. The world is included – excluded as the horizon of each intentional aiming. It is not something to which versions refer, but that out of which or against the background of which, versions refer.<sup>109</sup>

### *In lieu of a conclusion*

I began this essay by arguing that Ricœur’s turn to a strong theory of culture – his shift from a hermeneutics of culture to a cultural hermeneutics – was encapsulated in his reception of Cassirer, and culminated in his engagement with Geertz in the *Ideology and Utopia Lectures*. I contended that Ricœur’s turn to culture involved a rethinking of the interplay of specific phenomenological and hermeneutical problematics that focuses on responding to “the meaning of meaning” as their common ground. His rethinking of the phenomenological reduction in light of the symbolic function (and its linguisticity and sociality) was central to this endeavour, as was the hermeneutical aspect of “belonging” to an historical tradition as the anticipatory structures of *being-in-the-world*. Several layers of the ideological imaginary were disclosed as part of the philosophical anthropology of real social life, as was its connection to the utopian imaginary, that is, the productive imagination, properly speaking. The interlacing of phenomenological and hermeneutic aspects – especially centred on the symbolic function – that were discussed in “The Question of the Subject” were reconfigured onto the domain of practical life, where action was understood to hermeneutically *actualize* symbolic systems, whilst referring back to ideological structures of *being-in-the-world*, on the one hand, but opening onto new worlds (or onto “counter-worlds” in the case of the utopian imaginary), on the other.

The social sciences have been quicker than philosophy to embrace the cultural turn in the strong sense and to explicitly interrogate its implications – especially in relation to the sociality of meaning in all its fullness. However, the social sciences have been reticent to explore the other aspect of meaning: its world relation. This is apparent in Geertz (and in Ricœur’s discussion of Geertz, where the phenomenological problematic of the world is not mentioned). To do so would challenge the pre-eminence of broadly social constructionist approaches that are at the core of its endeavour. Philosophy – especially in its phenomenological and hermeneutic variants – has embraced understandings of meaning that go beyond anthropocentrism: *being-in-the-world* is the most elementary form of meaning. Ricœur’s elucidation of the social imaginary as part of an

anthropology of "real social life" foregrounds the complexity of the phenomenological problematic of the world and its hermeneutic centrality for understanding the human condition in new ways.<sup>110</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> George H. Taylor, "Editor's Introduction," in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, by Paul Ricœur, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), xi. See also Richard Kearney, "Study 4: Between Ideology and Utopia," in *On Paul Ricœur* (Farnham: Ashgate Pub., 2004), 75-91.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Paul Ricœur, "Devenir capable, être reconnu," *Esprit*, no. 7 (July 2005): 125-9. Cf. Gaëlle Fiasse, ed., *Paul Ricœur: De l'homme faillible à l'homme capable* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Ricœur notes in the introductory lecture in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (p. 10) that he first encountered Geertz after already having written on ideology (this was his essay entitled, 'Science and Ideology' that was first published in 1974, c.f. 323, note 6). It seems possible that the connection was the other way around and that it was Ricœur who influenced Geertz's approach to the cultural-symbolic, and, indeed, Geertz quotes Ricœur in that book – in the opening essay 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,' and tells us that he has taken 'this whole idea of the inscription of action' from Ricœur (p. 19). However, Ricœur's main engagement with Geertz was with the essay 'Ideology as Cultural System,' which, although included in Geertz's 1973 collection of essays *The Interpretation of Cultures*, was first published in 1964. At the very least, though, Ricœur and Geertz seemed to be mutually influential on the other's work at important junctures in their respective thought. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- <sup>5</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 10; emphasis added.
- <sup>6</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the co-belonging of phenomenology and hermeneutics in Ricœur's thought, see Eileen Breenan, "Hermeneutics and Phenomenology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 461-70.
- <sup>8</sup> This is of particular importance in the context of disciplinary discussions. For example, cultural hermeneutic approaches are particularly strong in sociology (e.g. epitomized by Jeffrey C. Alexander and the Yale School), and anthropology (e.g. Geertz) but they are not linked to phenomenology. The major exception in this regard is the work of Johann P. Arnason who has also grafted a cultural hermeneutics onto a phenomenological framework; he developed it for macro-historical analyses of civilizations and multiple modernities (e.g. Johann P. Arnason, "Merleau-Ponty and Max Weber: An Unfinished Dialogue," *Thesis Eleven* 36, no. 1 (1993), 82-98).
- <sup>9</sup> If the problematic of the imagination has now been recognized as central to Ricœur's œuvre, there is an emerging interest in the ways in which the imagination frames understandings of culture in the anthropological sense as part of a more nuanced understanding of the human condition. See for example, Jean-Luc Amalric, *Paul Ricœur, l'imagination vive: une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne*

*de l'imagination* (Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2013), 457ff, and Timo Helenius, "Between Receptivity and Productivity: Paul Ricœur on Cultural Imagination," *Social Imaginaries* 1, no. 2 (2015), 32-52.

- <sup>10</sup> Paul Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (London: Continuum, 2004), 232-62; Paul Ricœur, "Review of Nelson Goodman's 'Ways of Worldmaking'," in *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdées (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 200-15.
- <sup>11</sup> This shift in Ricœur's reception of Cassirer is all but unremarked in the secondary literature. Timo Helenius discusses it at length in his excellent doctoral thesis. See: Timo Helenius, *The Culture of Recognition: Another Reading of Ricœur's Work* (Lanham: Lexington Books, Forthcoming). I thank George Taylor for drawing this work to my attention.
- <sup>12</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977 [1965]), 9 ff.; cf. Paul Ricœur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (London: Continuum, 2005), 12.
- <sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 11-2.
- <sup>16</sup> See Paul Ricœur, "Study 7: Metaphor and Reference," in *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello SJ (London: Routledge, 2003), 255-301.
- <sup>17</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978); Ricœur, "Review of Nelson Goodman's 'Ways of Worldmaking'."
- <sup>18</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative I*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 54 ff.
- <sup>19</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative I*, 54.
- <sup>20</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative I*, 57.
- <sup>21</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.
- <sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative I*, 57.
- <sup>23</sup> Alexander developed the strong program of cultural sociology in collaboration with some of his students, e.g. Philip Smith and Ron Jacobs. As such, this perspective is sometimes known as the Yale School approach to cultural sociology. Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics (with Philip Smith)," in *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12.



- <sup>24</sup> For example, Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 207, cited in Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 10.
- <sup>25</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Ideology and Utopia as Cultural Imagination," *Philosophic Exchange* 7, no. 1 (1976), 110.
- <sup>26</sup> The key idea that Ricœur kept in his meaning of symbols is the centrality of meaning – and our grasp of the world – can only ever be indirect.
- <sup>27</sup> Arnason, "Merleau-Ponty and Max Weber: An Unfinished Dialogue." See also Suzi Adams, *Castoriadis's Ontology: Being and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), especially the "Excursus" on Arnason's phenomenology, 113-6.
- <sup>28</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology."
- <sup>29</sup> See the discussion later in the essay for an overview of the trans-subjective dimension of social life.
- <sup>30</sup> The semiotic challenge of course involves more than this, but detailed discussion of all its aspects (including the Freudian aspect) are beyond the scope of this essay. For present purposes, I take on board Ricœur's hermeneuticization of 'the subject' and concomitant critique of the philosophy of consciousness, to mean a subject mediated by social discourse (the text, in Ricœur's terms), and do not pursue discussion of it further here. Like Ricœur's own example (see: Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 244), I shall provisionally bracket the question of the subject.
- <sup>31</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, trans. Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).
- <sup>32</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, 5.
- <sup>33</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, 7.
- <sup>34</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, 37.
- <sup>35</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, 12.
- <sup>36</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, 147.
- <sup>37</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 241-2.
- <sup>38</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 241-2; emphasis added.
- <sup>39</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 242.
- <sup>40</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 242.
- <sup>41</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 242.
- <sup>42</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 3-53; Paul Ricœur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action

Considered as Text," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and John B. Thompson (New York: Continuum, 2008), 145.

- <sup>43</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 242.
- <sup>44</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Structure et signification dans le langage," in *Pourquoi la philosophie?*, ed. G Leroux (Montreal: Saint Marie, 1986), 101.
- <sup>45</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Structure et signification dans le langage," 101.
- <sup>46</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 245.
- <sup>47</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 116; emphasis added.
- <sup>48</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 116.
- <sup>49</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 246.
- <sup>50</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 246.
- <sup>51</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 247.
- <sup>52</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 247; emphasis added.
- <sup>53</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Structure, Word, Event," in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Robert Sweeney (London: Continuum, 2004), 77-94.
- <sup>54</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 250.
- <sup>55</sup> Ricœur, *Husserl*, 5-6.
- <sup>56</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 251.
- <sup>57</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 251.
- <sup>58</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 252.
- <sup>59</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Preface," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and John B. Thompson (New York: Continuum, 2008), xi; emphasis added.
- <sup>60</sup> Ricœur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," 141.
- <sup>61</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 251.
- <sup>62</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 253.
- <sup>63</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 252.
- <sup>64</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 252. The quotation at the end of this passage cites p. 23 of Lévi-Strauss's famous "Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss", in "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 262, n. 24.

- <sup>65</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 255.
- <sup>66</sup> Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," 255.
- <sup>67</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Imagination in Discourse and Action," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and John B. Thompson (New York: Continuum, 2008), 178.
- <sup>68</sup> It is however the subject of an essay in-progress, provisionally entitled: Rethinking Ricœur's "'Long' Intersubjective Relations": Institutions, the Anonymous Collective, and the Trans-Subjective Element of the Social Imaginary.
- <sup>69</sup> Paul Ricœur, *La sémantique de l'action* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1977), 13.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup> Paul Ricœur, "A Response," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xi.
- <sup>72</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 115.
- <sup>73</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 118; emphasis added.
- <sup>74</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 118.
- <sup>75</sup> For reasons of space, I shall bracket the question of 'hermeneutical distance'/'distanciation' from the present discussion.
- <sup>76</sup> E.g. Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 106 ff.
- <sup>77</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 64-5.
- <sup>78</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 126.
- <sup>79</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Science and Ideology," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 243.
- <sup>80</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, 6. printing (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 65.
- <sup>81</sup> Ricœur, "Science and Ideology," 255; emphasis added.
- <sup>82</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 127.
- <sup>83</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 108.
- <sup>84</sup> Ricœur, "Structure et signification dans le langage," 105-6.
- <sup>85</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*.

- <sup>86</sup> Ricœur, "Structure et signification dans le langage," 105-6.
- <sup>87</sup> Ricœur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," 144.
- <sup>88</sup> Ricœur is quoting Althusser here.
- <sup>89</sup> Ricœur is quoting Althusser here, also.
- <sup>90</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 144-5.
- <sup>91</sup> 'The Imaginary and the Institution' was first published in 1964-5, and was later included as part of Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Paris: Polity Press, 1987). He later retreated from these insights and focussed more fully on elucidating the being of social imaginary significations, as seen in the final chapter of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. To my knowledge, this is the only essay in which Castoriadis so fully discusses the symbolic and symbolism in relation to the imaginary element. There is a further discussion of the symbolic and the imaginary in an archival fragment that was part of his unfinished masterwork, *The Imaginary Element*. This essay, 'The Imaginary as Such', has been recently translated into English, see: Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Imaginary as Such," trans. Johann P. Arnason, *Social Imaginaries* 1, no. 1 (2015), 59-69. See also Arnason's introduction to this posthumously published essay: Johann P. Arnason, "An Introduction to Castoriadis's 'The Imaginary as Such'," *Social Imaginaries* 1, no. 1 (2015), 53-8. For further discussion, see Adams, *Castoriadis's Ontology*.
- <sup>92</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 307.
- <sup>93</sup> Ricœur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," 141.
- <sup>94</sup> Ricœur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," 161.
- <sup>95</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 255.
- <sup>96</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 11.
- <sup>97</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 307.
- <sup>98</sup> Ricœur, "Intellectual Autobiography," 38.
- <sup>99</sup> Ricœur, "Science and Ideology," 230.
- <sup>100</sup> The first chapter of *Ways of Worldmaking* – 'Words, Works and Worlds' – was first presented in Hamburg on the occasion of Cassirer's 101st birthday, and was, of course devoted to a critical engagement with Cassirer's thought. Ricœur's engagement is not directly with Cassirer but with Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*. See also Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1968).
- <sup>101</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello SJ (London: Routledge, 2003), 273.
- <sup>102</sup> Ricœur, "Intellectual Autobiography," 28.

<sup>103</sup> Ricœur, "Imagination in Discourse and Action," 171.

<sup>104</sup> Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 273; c.f. 274 ff.

<sup>105</sup> See Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, Chapter 3, "Metaphor and Symbol." for a detailed discussion of Ricœur's interpretation of the overlap and differences between symbol and metaphor.

<sup>106</sup> For an account of the productive imagination in Ricœur's thought through a phenomenological lens, see George H. Taylor, "The Phenomenological Contribution of Ricœur's Philosophy of the Imagination," *Social Imaginaries* 1, no. 2 (2015), 13-31.

<sup>107</sup> Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 273.

<sup>108</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 309.

<sup>109</sup> Ricœur, "Review of Nelson Goodman's 'Ways of Worldmaking,'" 212.

<sup>110</sup> I would like to thank Johann Arnason and George Taylor for their generous and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I would also like to thank Eileen Brennan and an anonymous reviewer for their feedback; it helped me to clarify my argument at important junctures. Finally, a big thank you to Erin Carlisle for her unstinting help with the references and formatting!