



## Remembering and Imagining in Human Development: Fairness and Social Movements in Ireland

Power, Séamus A.

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Séamus A. Power

The ways in which people remember the past have implications for how they act in the present (Bartlett, 1932; Halbwachs, 1992; Power, 2016, 2017; Wagoner, 2017; Wertsch, 2008). People use the past. They use the future too (Power, 2017; Vygotsky, 1931; Wagoner, Brescó, & Awad, 2017; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; Chap. 2, this volume). Remembering and imagining can be understood as dynamic sociocultural processes that are simultaneously individual and collective. In this chapter, I utilize the theory outlined by Zittoun and Gillespie (2015; Chap. 2, this volume) to conceptualize imagining as a dynamic sociocultural process that can occur on both individual and group levels. In particular, I draw on their “looping metaphor” to illustrate the ways in which imagining futures is a form of escape from the immediate present, often by reflecting on the past, to inform versions of possible futures. They state: “We propose that imagination is disengaging from the here-and-now of a proximal experience, which is submitted to causality and temporal linearity, to explore, or engage with alternative, distal

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S. A. Power (✉)

University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

e-mail: [seamusapower@uchicago.edu](mailto:seamusapower@uchicago.edu)

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experiences, which are not submitted to linear or causal temporality. An imagination event thus begins with a decoupling of experience and usually concludes with a re-coupling. Thus, imagination is a loop” (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015, p. 40).

I elaborate their approach in two ways. First, I conceptualize remembering and imagining as dual processes of human development that can be thought of as being linked like an infinity symbol. There is a continuous looping from the past to the future, and back again, always converging on the focal point in the center. This elaboration does not imply symmetry regarding the equal weight both the past and the future have on appraisals, perceptions, thoughts, and actions in the present. Rather, the metaphor is meant to illustrate the continuous temporal interconnections between remembering and imagining and the impact these dual processes have on the present, as well as how the past and future are understood and used. Second, I illustrate the ways moral appraisals in the present—specifically, how people judge what are and are not considered fair and unfair economic practices—are informed by remembering and imagining.

I draw on ethnographic observations and interview data to illustrate how remembering and imagining motivated civic engagement and discontent in the context of the economic recovery following the 2008 financial collapse in the Republic of Ireland. Specifically, I examine the role these dual processes had in galvanizing, justifying, and maintaining social movements when people imagined water services would be privatized. In the Irish case, perceptions of increasing unfairness of distribution of income and wealth are central to imagining a more problematic future Irish society. Protesters felt justified in demonstrating to mitigate this immoral projection. They want a fairer and more equal future.

## **Remembering, Imagining, and Perceptions of Fairness**

Recalling the past occurs at the intersection of the mind and society, between people and the world they inhabit. People use the past. And because the past is reconstructed—intentionally or not—it involves an

element of imagining. This is because individuals, and societies, remember a version of what occurred, not the actuality of it. In this way, collective remembering is a dynamic sociocultural process (Bartlett, 1932; Halbwachs, 1992; Power, 2016, 2017; Wagoner, 2017; Wertsch, 2008). This view of remembering is influential in conceptualizing how and why people recall, and for what reasons (Wagoner, 2013, 2017). In contrast, relatively little has been written about how and why people imagine both the past and future, and the impact of what is imagined on their psychological functioning in the present.

The future is not a *tableau rasa*; it is not a blank canvas (Pinker, 2003). There are always tensions between realities and possible futures. This is particularly relevant because people live in hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Asymmetries and injustices about how power and economic resources are distributed can underlie people's conceptualizations for what the future should look like. Consequently, different social groups can have different conceptualizations of the future from their past and present social and economic orientations. In this context, perceptions of what is and is not fair play a key role. Fairness is a ubiquitous moral principle (Haidt, 2012, 2013; Jensen, 2015; Power, 2017; Starmans, Sheskin, & Bloom, 2017). Yet, different social groups, who live in hierarchical societies, differ on what is and is not considered fair. Even if the fundamental desire of people's imaginations is to make the world a better place, visions for a morally good life vary across time and cultures (Power, 2011b; Shweder, 1991, 2003). The problem is when these visions of the future clash.

However, imagining the future can be motivating and pragmatic for different social groups. Imagining protectionist policies, the curtailment of civil liberties, or privatization of natural resources, such as water, can motivate protests against perceived unjust or unfair executive orders, policies, or government and corporate intentions. Imagining societies where these policies and orders are not curtailed, where democratic means are not used to restrain a monopoly on power, can justify protests and the development of social movements.

Projections, in the form of views of the collective economic misfortune, are just one example of how thoughts of the future can inform reactions and attitudes in the present. Imagining possible dystopian

futures for a person's version of the good, moral, meaningful life is another. Images of a perceived unfair future lead to civic discontent in the near present. In Bolivia, for example, the government's privatization of the country's water supply at the turn of the millennium was met with street protests and the overthrowing of the government. Bolivian citizens imagined their water supply being controlled, monetized by outside corporations, to the exploitation and detriment of ordinary citizens. This was deemed unfair. They rejected this future that was becoming ever more likely. Protesters can be seen as modulating the decisions—and their perceived future implications of these bills, laws, and orders—via civic engagement, like demonstrating.

In this way, individual imagining of collective futures, much like collective remembering of the past, is a contested phenomenon. James (1880/2001) stated: "There are imaginations, not 'the Imagination,' and they must be studied in detail" (p. 170). One way to examine imaginations is to consider the moral foundations underlying visions for the future and their consequences for how people act in the present.

This is because the leaving of the present—via the process of imagination—has transformative implications for the here and now. People use the past and the future to sculpt their subjective realities. This temporal account of activity—highlighting the role of remembering and imagining—has implications for how we understand human development. More specifically, it provides a framework for conceptualizing the dynamics of social movements. It provides a model to think about the moral motivations behind, justifications for, and projections of demonstrations, democratic engagement, and social change.

### ***Deprivation—Protest Paradox: Anti-water Protests in the Republic of Ireland***

Ireland was adversely affected by the 2008 global financial collapse. In prior work, I identified the *Deprivation—Protest Paradox*: when the economy collapsed, the Irish generally accepted harsh austerity without protesting. However, when Ireland had the fastest growing economy in Europe in 2014 and 2015, there had been frequent demonstrations,

clashes with the police, the refusal to pay taxes, and other forms of civic unrest (Power, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, *forthcoming-a, b*; Power & Nussbaum, 2014, 2016). Data from interviews with public elites and unemployed Irish youth illustrated common cultural and moral patterns of thought, appraisal, and action—steeped in remembering Irish history—that were used to explain and justify the passive response to hardship and suffering caused by austerity. People remembered violent aspects of Irish revolutionary history. They purposely distanced any potential utility of protest or riots as legitimate acts to generate change as the economy collapsed. People used the past to create a peaceful present. The focus of this chapter, however, is the water protests, which began to arise in 2014 during a period of rapid economic growth.

On December 28, 2014, Michael D. Higgins, the current president of the Republic of Ireland, signed a controversial Water Services Bill into law. For the first time in their history, the Irish public would have to pay directly for the water they consume in the form of quarterly bills.

Ireland previously had water charges that were abolished by the Labour Party in December 1996; afterwards, Irish citizens paid for their water through general taxation. In 2010, as part of a €85bn EU-IMF bailout, the Irish government agreed to reintroduce water charges in three years. At that time, water charges were ubiquitous around the world. Until their reintroduction in 2014, Ireland was one of the few countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development not to directly charge for water consumption.

The Labour Party initially opposed directly charging Irish citizens for water services. Yet, after the 2011 general election, their stance shifted. They formed part of a coalition government, led by Fine Gael, and this coalition drafted a new bill to again directly charge the public for water services. They did not lower other tax rates that were previously increased to pay for water services. A semi-state company, Irish Water, was established to oversee the introduction of water services in 2013. It was part-owned by the Irish government, and by implication, the Irish people. It also had private shareholders. The founding of Irish Water coincided with a sharp economic recovery.

The Irish had endured austerity as the economy collapsed. They expected to reap the benefits of an economic recovery. However, only

some people profited from the economic upturn. This was deemed very unfair. People felt deprived relative to other groups in Irish society. Instead of feeling the effects of an economic recovery, Irish people had to pay for the water they consumed. In the context of an economic recovery, people had less money. Therefore, the enactment of the water services law was met with strong opposition from sectors of the Irish public, most visibly in the form of demonstrations.

In this chapter, I illustrate how anti-austerity protesters in Ireland, following the 2008 global economic crisis, draw on the past to motivate and justify their actions in the present, and to articulate their visions for a more economically fair and equal nation. In this sense, the way people draw on the past has implications for how they orientate toward, and act to achieve, their collectively imagined futures. My analysis of interviews with anti-austerity protesters at a series of national protests in Dublin, Ireland, and interviews and urban ethnographic observations with a core group of anti-water-charge protesters in a small Irish city reveal imaginings of an immoral future where water is privatized. This privatization is seen as a further manifestation of unfair austerity and a further step toward a widening gap between the rich and the rest. Protesters use this dystopic projection to loop back from imagining this future and feel motivated and justified to protest in the present. Their aim is to create a more equal and fair future society.

## Remembering and Imagining the Privatization of Water

I spoke with a young man in his early 20s as we walked together on one demonstration in January 2015. He told me he went to earlier protests in Ireland aimed at highlighting the importance of having a referendum on gay marriage. A referendum did take place, legalizing gay marriage in Ireland the previous year. That was his first engagement with demonstrations, although he said, “I have been political all my life.” Like the majority of my respondents, he too identified a gap between a rosy narrative he was hearing in terms of economic recovery, and his lived reality (see

Power, 2017, [forthcoming-a](#), [b](#)). He went to university during the economic recession—paid for by himself, he said—to study accountancy. Weathering austerity in the sanctuary of university, he believed he would reap the rewards of his hard work. On graduating, he found full-time and permanent work impossible to find. He told me he works on a controversial “job-bridge scheme.” This program requires people to accept jobs that are offered to them for a slight pay increase on their core social welfare payments. The disjunction between expectations for an imagined future and lived subjectivities in the present creates frustration (Power, 2018 [forthcoming-a](#), [b](#)). The Irish protested during an economic recovery when a new charge on water was introduced. It was the final straw. When I asked this respondent why he was protesting today, he told me:

The aim of today’s protest is to stop the privatization of essential services. This has been an agenda that has been followed throughout this country over the past twenty years an agenda that has roots in neoliberal economics, which is a doctrine that preaches that the state should not have assists, that the state should not provide services, everything should be left to the private market, which I feel is completely wrong because the private market cannot provide essential services to the poorest people in society. Because, why does a business exist? To produce, to make a profit, you cannot make a profit for providing services for people who do not have money. So that is the aim here. Water is an essential service, no human being can live without it, and it should not be in the hands of the private sector.

This response reveals how the dual processes of remembering and imagining inform moral judgments that legitimize and justify protest. This interviewee begins answering my question about the aims of the protest by leaving the here and now and by articulating a future scenario where the Irish government sells the semi-state Irish Water (the company set up to administer the water charges in Ireland) to a private corporation. My respondent imagines a continuation of a recent historical trend in Ireland: the privatization of state owned companies. For example, the Irish government sold the semi-state airline company, Aer Lingus, in the mid-2000s. He made a moral judgment when he said, “I feel (this) is completely wrong.” Imagining the privatization of the “essential” water



services in Ireland, by drawing on neoliberal policies of the past, he justifies the aims of the protest: stopping Irish Water now, before an essential service is out of the control of the State, and by implication, out of the control of Irish people.

Imagining the privatization of Irish Water is an omnipresent theme across my interviews with demonstrators. I spoke to a married couple, who told me they were both retired, meaning they were over the age of 65. During the course of our interview, the woman spoke more, although the man chimed in to agree and extend points his wife made. I spoke to them as a protest got underway: people began marching from Connolly train station in Dublin toward the city center. When I asked, “Why are you guys here today?” the woman told me:

We are protesting about the water charges. They (the government) brought it in, it was set up as a company (Irish Water), with shares in it, but what is going to happen, in a few years down the road, they will be forced to sell it to repay the company and this thing happened in Bolivia a couple of years ago and the people could not afford (to pay), they wanted a loan from the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the IMF gave them a loan on the condition they privatize their water and the water got so expensive that the people couldn't afford water. There was a revolution in the country, the government had to leave the buildings by helicopter, and the company was thrown out of the country. People don't want to see this happening to this country.

The answer provided by this woman chimes with that of the previous respondent, and also elaborates on his future projections. This retiree also uses imagination and memory to justify her reasons for being on the protest. She initially spoke in the present tense: “We are protesting about the water charges.” But in her next sentence, she draws on the past and projects in to the future to explain her opening statement. In the recent past, the government established the semi-state Irish Water company, yet suggests that in the future it will be privatized. There is an implicit moral judgment articulated by the respondent: the privatization of water is morally wrong. She imagines a revolutionary scenario occurring in Ireland similar to the one that happened in Bolivia. When water services

were privatized in that country, the corporation overseeing water and sanitation services charged prices for water consumption that some citizens deemed unfair. When this natural resource is threatened—a “fundamental human right,” as many of my respondents referred to it—violent protest can occur. My interviewee implies a similar future awaits Irish people if water services are privatized. Therefore, it is imperative to stop this imagined privatization in the present. Memories of the Bolivian situation inform how this respondent imagines a future Ireland that leads to democratic action in the present. I heard a common chant at these national protests that confirms an anti-privatization sentiment: “From the rivers to the sea, Irish water will be free!”

Remembering the past informs imagined representations of the future and can impact thoughts and behaviors in the present. This line of logic extends beyond the concrete representations of what the future holds—such as the privatization of water services—to a more general articulation of an unfair and dystopian society.

Once the national demonstrations reached their end point, there were a series of speeches given by left-wing politicians, community activists, poets and musicians, and trade unionists. Each speech reflected some of the discourse from the interviews: people highlighted a variety of social injustices beyond water charges. In one speech, a community activist drew on a violent past to generate a picture of a more dystopian future and to raise the possibility of a utilitarian society. He stated:

Irish water is a symptom, the IMF (International Monetary Fund) is the disease. And until everyone here has realized that, and joined the dots, and realizing that this isn't just about the water, it's about the prostitution of this island...it's about how they bought and sold us like cattle at a market, and we swallowed what they told us and tore ourselves apart. It is meant to be divisive; it's not about them and us. Instead we should unite again, to stand as men, women and children, whose time has come to say the system isn't working and there must be a better way. There must be a fairer future where our children won't be forced to leave, where they find a future where they believe this island will belong to us once more and not the corporations that have risen to the fore. But for all that we march, we need to keep this in perspective: that the privatization of water is an IMF directive. And

the IMF themselves, for those who cannot yet see, are trying to write the manuscript for modern history. So it's not as simple as demanding that water charges are abolished, to my understanding it is their objective to demolish the notion of a nation-state for all that it once stood for.

This activist created two competing visions for the future. First, he draws on the past privatization of Ireland to project an image where there is continued “prostitution” of Irish resources, including water. This makes an inequitable Ireland: a division between “them and us,” between those that benefit from neoliberal privatization espoused by the IMF and those who do not. Increased corporate influence in Ireland, he warned, will erode the nation-state, and by implication, increase inequality. But he also imagines and articulates a future where all citizens “unite” to create a more moral and “better” system. In this more moral framework, which is difficult to precisely visualize, he imagines that “our children” will have a “fairer future.” One concrete effect of this more moral nation-state is to mitigate waves of historical migration from Ireland during times of economic hardship (see Power, 2015, 2016, 2017).

In the localized Irish context, imagining the future is informed by the past. It galvanizes, legitimizes, and drives protests in the present. Interviews and ethnographic data reveal imaginations of the future are proximal and distal. The two interview extracts are proximal: the imaginings are specifically grounded in immediate fears of privatization of Irish water. The speech extract reveals a distal imagining: it is a general articulation of dystopian effects of neoliberal policies: the eroding of the nation-state, and country specific ways of living a moral life. A second distal narrative for a future society was articulated: a more utopic and fair society, a return to the moral norms, of a fair, and inclusive, nation-state.

## Conclusion

Protesters articulate what ought to happen in order to make Irish society more equitable. It is the leap from what is happening, to what should be happening, that motivates and justifies protest in order to realize their imagined Ireland. In order to add legitimacy to their idealized future

society, they locate their imaginations by detailing past examples where privatization of resources, both in Ireland and abroad, are remembered and are used to articulate what they perceive will happen in Ireland. The imaginings of current protesters assist in realizing the next step of these previous ambitions for a fairer Ireland where there is social and economic equality for all. In the Irish case, however, protesters recall the past to strive toward their imagined social worlds.

Leaving the here and now through the process of imagining, is a dynamic cultural psychological process (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; Chap. 2, this volume). As my discussion of the Irish case illustrates, the content of imagining is informed by localized sociocultural, historical, economic, and legal contexts. The analysis dovetails with previous research that suggests imagining and remembering are dynamic sociocultural processes (Bartlett, 1932; Halbwachs, 1992; Power, 2016, 2017; Vygotsky, 1931; Wagoner, 2017; Wagoner et al., 2017; Wertsch, 2008; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; Chap. 2, this volume).

Imagining and remembering are two interrelated and fundamental psychological processes of human development that inform how people think, feel, and act in the present. Specifically, these processes impact people's motivations and justifications for making moral appraisals and participating in social movements. In the localized Irish context, people remember past privatizations of essential resources, and imagine the same fate for water services in Ireland. They articulate these imaginations and loop back around from these projections to act in the present. They protest to mitigate imagined efforts to privatize water. The content of their imaginations is informed by history. People draw on related historical examples of perceived unfair neoliberal agendas, such as the privatization of water in Bolivia, and highlight their detrimental effects, to inform their imagination of a likely scenario playing out in the Irish context.

Imagining is not necessarily a moral enterprise. But it can be. In the Irish case study, people's conceptualizations of the future are informed by moral judgments. They articulate imagined immoral societies, with greater economic inequality, social injustice, and unfairness. They use the future. Once they create this image, they loop back to the present to justify their social movement. The Irish respondents I spoke to are demon-

strating in order to effect social, political, and economic change. Their aim is to create a fairer, decent, and inclusive society. Imagination is one process used to articulate moral societies and to actualize them. These visions of the future are grounded in imagined interpretations of past blueprints for Irish society. Although people live in hierarchies with uneven distributions of power and resources (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), imagining more economically equal societies is a way people try to mitigate perceived unfair social systems. There is not one best version of society to strive toward (James, 1880; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; Chap. 2, this volume). There is no consensus on one good, true, beautiful, meaningful, and efficient way to live (Power, 2011a; Shweder, 1991, 2003). Perceptions of what is, and is not, considered fair also vary between groups (Haidt, 2012, 2013; Power, 2017). Therefore, imagining possible futures is a contested process. Perceptions of increasing unfairness, unequal power dynamics, and greater economic inequality lead to imagining a dystopian future.

This helps explain why my respondents imagined more unequal and dystopian versions of Ireland if water, and other essential services, continued to be privatized. It also explains why they imagined alternatives: ways to stop morally repugnant visions becoming a reality. Imagining increased social injustices caused by neoliberal free-market privatization, and acting in the present to stop free-market forces by demonstrating, is an articulation of a moral agenda. It is morality in action: an attempt to create a future society that's fairer for generations to come. "I'm here today for my grandchildren. I don't want them to be left with the burden," one respondent told me.

The looping metaphor outlined by Zittoun and Gillespie (2015) can be elaborated. Based on the evidence presented here, remembering and imagining can be conceptualized as being like an infinity symbol. There is a continuous looping from the past to the future, and back again, always converging on the focal point of the present. This is meant to illustrate the continuous temporal interconnections between remembering and imagining and the impact these dual processes have on how people think, feel, and act in the present.

Unacknowledged by the respondents quoted here is an alternative moral agenda for the future. Proponents of free-market democracy might

argue unequal economic development is still progress. The rising tide lifts all boats. Industrial capitalism has generated economic value that has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, increased life expectancy, and increased educational opportunities in a short period of historical time. Privatization can lead to better products and services for consumers and stimulate further economic growth. But respondents were ubiquitous in their condemnation of privatization of water. There was no space to engage with alternative narratives of capitalism or alternative versions of moral societies (see Power, 2017).

There are as many versions of the future available as there are people to imagine them. Maybe even more. But the reality of achieving these societies is curtailed by what can be imagined. This is informed by the weight of the past: by social, cultural, economic, and historical norms, that impact what should be, can be, and is, achieved. The role of morality—particularly, perceptions of fairness—cannot be underestimated in shaping what is imagined. Protesters in social movements are moral actors. Through the process of imagination, they envisage near and distant futures that are often immoral because they are deemed unfair. Protesters use the future. They articulate immoral futures to galvanize, motivate, and justify actions in the present—always steeped in historical and remembered contexts—to create more moral and utopic societies.

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