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# IMAGINING COLLECTIVE FUTURES

Perspectives from  
Social, Cultural, and  
Political Psychology

EDITED BY  
Constance de Saint-Laurent,  
Sandra Obradović, Kevin R. Carriere



# Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture

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Both creativity and culture are areas that have experienced a rapid growth in interest in recent years. Moreover, there is a growing interest today in understanding creativity as a socio-cultural phenomenon and culture as a transformative, dynamic process. Creativity has traditionally been considered an exceptional quality that only a few people (truly) possess, a cognitive or personality trait 'residing' inside the mind of the creative individual. Conversely, culture has often been seen as 'outside' the person and described as a set of 'things' such as norms, beliefs, values, objects, and so on. The current literature shows a trend towards a different understanding, which recognises the psycho-socio-cultural nature of creative expression and the creative quality of appropriating and participating in culture. Our new, interdisciplinary series Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture intends to advance our knowledge of both creativity and cultural studies from the forefront of theory and research within the emerging cultural psychology of creativity, and the intersection between psychology, anthropology, sociology, education, business, and cultural studies. Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture is accepting proposals for monographs, Palgrave Pivots and edited collections that bring together creativity and culture. The series has a broader focus than simply the cultural approach to creativity, and is unified by a basic set of premises about creativity and cultural phenomena.

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Constance de Saint-Laurent  
Sandra Obradović • Kevin R. Carriere  
Editors

# Imagining Collective Futures

Perspectives from Social, Cultural and  
Political Psychology

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macmillan

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# 1

## Introduction: What May the Future Hold?

Constance de Saint-Laurent, Sandra Obradović,  
and Kevin R. Carriere

We have, both individually and collectively, always tried to imagine what the future may hold. From Athen's Pythia to modern-day algorithms trying to predict our shopping behaviours, we have always sought ways to anticipate what tomorrow may be like. On the one hand, there is tremendous power associated with being able to see the future, because of what it could allow us to do: gather riches, control others by anticipating what they may do, avoid death (at least temporarily), or, in the best of cases, even change the course of time. It is quite literally called a "power" in fiction, and there are whole industries claiming to be able to show us what

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the future may hold—from very serious consultancy firms and data companies to the medium in the local ad section of the newspaper claiming to have “a third eye”. On the other hand, there is something both fascinating and terrifying about being able to know what will come next, in lifting the mystery and being able to go against the course of time. Even in fiction, characters who are given the power to look into the future can only see very limited parts of it—as Frodo looking down Galadriel’s mirror (Tolkien, 2009)—or it is at the price of their safety and sanity—as the “precogs” in Philip K. Dick’s *Minority Report* (Dick, 2002).

Indeed, much energy and effort has been devoted to the question of the future. In the literature, science fiction and the anticipation genre have considered where technology may bring us, exploring what the future may look like some thousands of years down the line. Asimov, one of the most prolific and brilliant science fiction authors of our time, even imagined the emergence of a science that would use psychology and history to predict the future (Asimov, 2004). Utopias and dystopias, with their decisively more political perspective, have tried to imagine the best and the worst human societies that could await us. In science, modelizations and statistical analyses have tried to predict everything from the weather to the characteristics of the world population in a hundred years. Behavioural sciences, attempting to predict how we may conduct ourselves in different situations, have been on a constant rise, becoming once more the most prominent form of psychology. Their findings have been applied in economics, marketing, and politics, and have changed the way we understand the world. And at a more mundane level, newspaper and media outlets have tried to predict anything from the result of upcoming elections—with more and more surprises—to the new features of the latest iPhone.

This tendency is not new, and not all attempts have been equally successful. On the one hand, the sales of 1984 have rocketed in the United States since the last presidential election, and some have argued that Orwell forecasted post-truth when he wrote:

For, after all, how do we know that two and two make four? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable – what then? (Orwell, 2003/1949, p. 162)

On the other hand, Herbert Hoover, the then president of the United States, famously said in June 1930: “Gentlemen, you have come sixty days too late. The depression is over.” If we must admit that people are not always extremely good at predicting the future, looking at how past generations have imagined how we would live is as fascinating as it can be, at times, hilarious or surprisingly accurate.

In 1900, John Elfreth Watkins Jr. collected the predictions for the next hundred years of eminent scientists of his time, and they are a wonderful example of the wide spectrum on which (informed) guesses about the future can be placed. It is a heteroclite list of forecasts, although many seem to be oriented towards science and technology and none predicted the important social changes of the twentieth century, including the fact that it would no longer be acceptable to have only men participate in the elaboration of such a list. Some predicted “peas as large as beans”, that “university education [would] be free for everyone”, or that we would all be able to “walk ten miles”, and that someone who could not do so would be “regarded as a weakling”. Others imagined that “stores purchases [would be made] by tube”, that “vegetables [would be] grown by electricity” because “winter [would be] turned into summer”, or, almost anticipating the internet, that “man [would] see around the world [because] persons and things of all kinds [would] be brought within focus of cameras connected electrically with screens at opposite ends of circuits, thousands of miles at a span” (Elfreth Watkins, 1900, p. 8). What becomes clear, when reading these predictions, is that the future tends to be imagined as the prolongation of current changes one is experiencing—hence the fact that many of the examples above would very well fall within the area of expertise of the scientists interviewed by Elfreth Watkins. In other words, how we imagine the future is frequently bound to existing social knowledge of the present, and it is either seen as a prolonging—or alternative—to the current reality.

## The Question of the Future in Psychology

In 1968, Maslow argued that “no theory of psychology will ever be complete which does not centrally incorporate the concept that man has his future within him, dynamically active at this present moment.” (p. 15).



Yet, despite the centrality of the future in particular, and temporality in general, to human thought and behaviour, less work has explored the explicit role of imagining the future within the field of psychology. Among those who have, concepts such as “mental time travel” (MTT; Epstude & Peetz, 2012; Storm & Jobe, 2012; Tulving, 2002), “futuring” (Sools & Mooren, 2012) or “anticipatory representations in the making” (Philogene, 1999) have been developed to help us understand the complexities of future-oriented thinking. Perhaps this lack of focus comes from a poor understanding of what imagining the future actually *does* for individuals and social groups. As Zittoun (2013) argues, “[a] person who imagines some future event is not doing something useless. Just the contrary – imagining potential future events makes it possible to strive towards them or – in the case of adverse imaginary events – to try to avoid them.” (p. 3). This process of imagination extends not only to how we anticipate the development of our personal lives, but also how we envision the future of our social groups, be they micro-groups such as families, or macro-groups such as nations or even the fate of humanity itself. Imagination thus plays a crucial part in human thinking and behaving. Within research on memory, for example, Storm and Jobe (2012) draw on a series of experiments to illustrate that there are important differences in the consequences that remembering the past and imagining the future have on the memory. Namely, their study illustrates that “under conditions in which remembering and experienced event does cause forgetting, imagining a non-experienced event does not.” (Storm & Jobe, 2012, p. 233). Thus, it becomes crucial to consider imagining the future as linked to representing the past, but not identical in terms of the underlying psychological processes and consequences.

However, while research such as that mentioned above is crucial and moves us in the right direction in terms of understanding “futuring” or “mental time travel”, they remain focused on the individual, disregarding the extent to which individual imagination is influenced, and shaped by, the larger social world in which he exists. For example, imagining the future becomes possible by drawing on the semiotic resources available to us from our sociocultural contexts, which vary from one place to the next. Equally, in contexts of conflict and war, the ways in which individuals imagine their personal future becomes intimately linked with the

anticipations they hold for their social groups, whether these relate to changing intergroup relations, power dynamics, or political ideology.

Consequently, while it seems that literature, natural and behavioural sciences, popular culture, and the media have all attempted to imagine (and more importantly, predict) what our future may be like, less has been said about the role of the social sciences, especially in their more critical forms, as may be embodied in social, cultural, and political psychology. Have we left future predictions in the hands of data scientists and experimentalists, looking down at their attempts to model a reality that we believe eludes them? Or to the mediums and other adepts of the occult, observing them as the exotic remnants of superstitious practices? In this introduction, we would like to argue that quite the contrary, much of the social sciences and humanities—including social, cultural, and political psychology—have been as intrigued and fascinated with the future as other fields, but they have done so more indirectly. First, they have been primarily interested in how we construct collective futures—and not so much in predicting these futures themselves. Second, they have often approached this question indirectly, through topics such as collective memory, social identity, collective action, or imagination. This is reflected in the contributions to this book, where each chapter takes (at least) one of these topics as a point of departure. Let us consider each in turn and how they relate to the construction of collective futures.

First, collective memory—and more generally, memory—has frequently been connected to the imagination of the future on two grounds: that memory has a directive function and may actually be more about the future than about the past (e.g., Bartlett, 1932; Schacter & Addis, 2007), and that both remembering and imagining share, as psychological processes, many characteristics (Mullally & Maguire, 2013). While very few empirical studies had so far directly explored the links between the two, it is quite commonly accepted, in collective memory studies, that they are deeply connected (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). This is, we believe, because collective memory answers, for people, a question that is fundamental to understand and imagine where the future may lead us: Where are we from? Indeed, knowing where we come from means knowing the road travelled to the present, helping us to project where it may take us in the future. Being aware, for instance, of the tremendous changes agriculture

brought, compared to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, can help us anticipate that advances in the way we deal with our resources can fundamentally change our social organization, and thus, to imagine such changes in the future and the consequences they may have. As a result, the relations between collective memory and the imagination of the collective future are at the heart of the works presented in Chap. 4 (by Constance de Saint-Laurent), Chap. 6 (by Ignacio Brescó de Luna), Chap. 8 (by Cristian Tileăga), and Chap. 13 (by Mario Carretero).

Second, studies on social identity—and more generally, how we construct a sense of self and belonging—implicitly emphasize the importance of the future, as identities are seen as continuous and projected on to the future (Sani et al., 2007). In other words, those researchers working on social identities often consider these as fluid constructs in constant state of “becoming”, where imagining the future can, at times, be an active process of resistance and positive social change (Cinnirella, 1998). Indeed, answering the question of “who we are” has consequences in terms of which actions and choices become desirable, necessary, or possible in the future. Considering humanity to be essentially belligerent, for instance, would make it difficult to imagine a peaceful future. And seeing one’s social group as fundamentally different than others may encourage some to believe that their community would need to become independent to thrive. Furthermore, how we construct a sense of in-group belonging and continuity also has implications for intergroup relations, and who is considered a friend or a foe. These complex interrelations between social identity, intergroup relations, and collective futures are explored in Chap. 9 (by Caroline Howarth & Cathy Nicholson) and Chap. 12 (by Sandra Obradović).

Third, research on collective action—whether it is on protests, grassroots movements, cooperatives, and so on, or at a smaller scale, on collaboration and joint intentionality—has also proven to be future-oriented. On the one hand, it generally focuses on coordinated action as it unfolds, and thus, also in how participants anticipate and plan for the more or less immediate future (Jasper, 1998). On the other hand, participants in collective movements often come to realize the “power of the crowd”—one of the exhilarating aspects of protests and demonstrations—and thus to revise what they think may be possible in

the future. That is, it may lead people to reverse the question of where may the future lead us to ask: Where could we take the future? At a more fundamental level, then, collective action raises the question of what we believe that we could collectively do, with tremendous consequences for how we imagine the future. Indeed, believing that the crowd has the power, for instance, to overthrow the global economic tendency would allow one to imagine a very different—and probably brighter—future than one could imagine by believing that the crowd would never come together and achieve such an aim. Collective action and how people who engage in it imagine the collective future is the focus of Chap. 5 (by Vlad Petre Glăveanu), Chap. 10 (by Eman Maarek & Sarah H. Awad), and Chap. 11 (by Seamus Power).

Fourth, and quite unsurprisingly, researchers working on imagination have also been interested in how people construct representations of the collective future. In particular, they have been concerned with what resources people use and what they are able to imagine; that is, in understanding how we construct what we believe to be possible. Looking back at the predictions for the next hundred years proposed by those Elfreth Watkins interviewed, for instance, we can see that most relate to the technological advances of the late 1890s, and propose more a continuation of the changes that were going on at the time than a real anticipation of radical novelty. Understanding how people imagine what is not there, and how they open up possibilities that were not imaginable before, is thus crucial to the study of how collective futures are imagined. These questions are discussed in Chap. 2 (by Tania Zittoun & Alex Gillespie), Chap. 3 (by Kevin R. Carriere), and Chap. 7 (by Sandra Jovchelovitch & Hana Hawlina).

What this brief overview has aimed to show is twofold. First, it was to outline the fundamental questions that are connected to the imagination of the collective future, and how it resonates with profound human interrogations, making of it both a complex and fascinating topic. These questions are: Where are we from? (Collective memory); Who are we? (Social identity); What can we collectively do? (Collective action); What is possible? (Imagination). The second aim of this overview was to highlight that the question of how we imagine the future, especially in its collective form, is linked to important fields of study in social, cultural,

and political psychology. And it is, in large parts, what led us to this choice of disciplinary delimitation, beyond our own expertise and interests: Because we believed that these three types of psychology—that are deeply interconnected—all had much to contribute to the discussion of the imagination of collective futures. As these four categories are not mutually exclusive, they do not serve as the basis for the structure of this book. However, they represent the four main topics from which the various authors have explored the question of the collective future.

## Structure and Outline of the Book

This book is divided into three sections of four chapters, each reflecting the area of expertise of the authors and the perspective from which they have approached the question of how we imagine the collective future. The first section regroups contributions from researchers working primarily on the processes of imagination, creativity, and memory, and who have explored their role in the construction of collective futures. The second section includes chapters from scholars studying the collective dynamics of society. Each chapter investigates how social phenomena and representations shape how the collective future is—or can be—imagined. Finally, in the third section, researchers working on specific collective movements or social issues developed case studies exploring the role of the imagination of the future in the creation of new initiatives and actions in the present.

Chapter 2, by Tania Zittoun & Alex Gillespie, presents a sociocultural model of imagination, and applies it to the imagination of collective futures. This model is illustrated with two historical cases studies—the landing on the moon and socialism—showing how these collective imaginations became concretized. In Chap. 3, Kevin R. Carriere uses two case studies—the history of the book *The Jungle* and the Harry Potter Alliance—to show the power of literature in the construction of the future. In particular, he shows how literature can help us imagine futures that previously seemed impossible, and can serve as the basis for collective action. In Chap. 4, Constance de Saint-Laurent explores the relations between memory and imagination, both

in their individual and collective forms. Building on different studies on collective memory, she argues that collective memory frames collective imagination, provides contents and examples, and participates in the construction of generalized representations of the world, that in turn guide the imagination. In Chap. 5, Vlad-Petre Glăveanu builds on his work on creativity and activism to develop a perspectival model of how we imagine the collective future. Using three case studies from the United States, Columbia, and Turkey, he shows how the future is always constructed from a certain perspective and with a certain representation of the other.

In Chap. 6, Ignacio Brescó introduces the concept of “prolepsis” to explore how imagining the future relates to collective memory. He explores not only how the past shapes the present, but also how processes of imagining a certain future allow us to reconstruct the past, thus making of imagination a tool to move through time. In Chap. 7, Sandra Jovchelovitch and Hana Hawlina consider the function of utopias and utopian thinking in relation to how we understand our selves and social worlds. They discuss how imagination is a part of both the mental activities of humans as well as our capabilities of socially organizing the world. They explore the necessity, but also the dangers, of utopian thinking, highlighting its role in opening up avenues for social change to take place in the present. Cristian Tileăga, in Chap. 8, considers the role of experts in dealing with troubles past with the intention of constructing a different, more progressive future. Focusing on Romania and how the communist past was dealt with by experts in the Tismaneanu Report, Tileăga argues that the process of constructing communism as an “Other” allowed for the construction of a positive representation of the Romanian people in the past, present, and future. Lastly, in the final chapter of this section, Chap. 9, Cathy Nicholson and Caroline Howarth consider how imagining the future occurs in contexts of intergroup conflict, where collective imagination becomes intimately bound to not just the in-group, but also the out-group. The authors question whether imagining the future in this context always entails a future where conflict continues, or whether there are ways in which alternative, more peaceful, representations can be developed. As the authors argue, concepts such as *thema* and narratives can

help unravel these complexities that define intergroup relations and meaning-making in the context of imagining the future.

In Chap. 10, Eman A. Maarek and Sarah H. Awad focus on how imagination can be used to maintain momentum in times of rupture and social change. Their work follows three case studies of cooperatives in Egypt and how imagining the future assisted in a decentralized form of resistance against the state. Seamus Power, in Chap. 11, provides a reflection on the links between moral psychology and collective imagination within collective action. Using narratives from Irish protesters during a debate on the privatization of water, he links up the interaction of morality and imagination and shows an imagination through a drive for justice. In Chap. 12, Sandra Obradović identifies a case of how collective imagination can come in conflict with collective identity through its representation as a discontinuity (or rupture) from the past. She draws on empirical work from Serbian to examine how citizens represent their nation's future in times of socio-political change, illustrating how imagining the future can tell us a lot about the present, and the fears which underlie political attitudes towards change. Mario Carretero presents his work on formal and informal historical education and its relation to imagination in Chap. 13. Using the novel *1984* as a backdrop, Carretero argues that control of the past by historical education, both in classrooms and museums, directly constricts how we imagine the future.

Finally, Ivana Marková provides a synthesis of these works in her conclusion. Her insight into the contributions delineate two different approaches to our discussion of collective imagination—of either removing ourselves from the current moment or being constantly active in the present moment of our lives. Her discussion on imagination through the view of Heidegger focuses on how imagination transverses through societal transformation and guides the generation of images.

This project started as an imaginative idea—can we bring together contributors from a wide range of perspectives to weigh in on how they see collective imagination playing out in their work? By drawing together works from social, cultural, and political psychology, the authors of this volume provide valuable theoretical and empirical insights into the topic of imagining collective futures, hopefully convincing the readers of this

volume of the significance of both imagination and the future in the psychology of human thought and behaviour.

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# Section I

Imagining the Future



# 2

## Imagining the Collective Future: A Sociocultural Perspective

Tania Zittoun and Alex Gillespie

The present chapter examines how groups imagine their future from a sociocultural perspective. First, we present our sociocultural model of imagination and its three dimensions, before building on it to account for how collectives imagine the future. We maintain that it is a mistake to assume that because imagination is “not real”, it cannot have “real” consequences. Imagination about the future, we argue, is a central steering mechanism of individual and collective behaviour. Imagination about the future is often political precisely because it can have huge significance for the activities of a group or even a nation. Accordingly, we introduce a new dimension for thinking about collective imagination of the future—namely, the degree of centralization of imagining—and with it, identify a related aspect, its emotional valence. Based on two examples, we argue that collective imaginings have their own developmental trajectories as

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they move in time through particular social and political contexts. Consequently, we suggest that a sociocultural psychology of collective imagination of the future should not only document instances of collective imagining, but also account for these developmental trajectories—specifically, what social and political forces hinder and promote particular imaginings.

## A Sociocultural Model of Imagination

Psychology has mainly studied imagination among children (e.g., Harris, 2000; Singer & Singer, 1992), adults (i.e., training creativity; Karwowski & Soszynski, 2008), and in small groups (i.e., brainstorming and innovation; Brown & Paulus, 2002). In contrast to these approaches, that tend to focus on the outcomes of imagination, and based on a large review and synthesis of the literature, we have adopted a sociocultural perspective on imagination; building on the works of L. S. Vygotsky, G. H. Mead, but also D. W. Winnicott and many others, we have progressively defined the core dynamics of imagination. In this first section, we present our basic model of imagination, the sequence of imagination, and the three analytical dimensions we have proposed to account for its variations.

We conceive of imagination as the process by which a person temporarily decouples his or her flow of experience from the here-and-now of his or her proximal sphere of experience. This decoupling can be described as a loop, a little voyage to a distal sphere of experience, before looping back to the proximal sphere of experience and recoupling with the immediately present socially shared reality (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). For instance, a child in math class dreamingly looks out of the window and imagines building a hut in a tree, a dragon that comes to attack, and his glorious defence; he comes back from his daydream with a smile on his face, which leads the teacher to ask what was so funny. A teenager comes back upset from a meeting with friends, locks herself up in her room, listens to her preferred rock band, and is deeply moved again and again when listening to the lyrics or certain melodic phrases; she comes to dinner calmed down. A scientist needs to conceptualize the consequences of time-space relativity, and imagines sitting on a beam of light; his clarity

of conceptualization convinces a sceptical audience. A novelist is dissatisfied with his current life, and engages in an exploration of his lost childhood, re-experiencing the tastes and smells of his childhood home; with time, he writes a novel which will be considered a milestone in European literature. An older person sees her mobility decline, and she imagines life in a nursing home and possible rearrangements of her life; this leads to practical changes in the layout of her home and the introduction of assistive devices.

In all these examples, imagination involves a three-step sequence. First, there is a *trigger*—usually, disruptions of some kind questioning a person's involvement in a current conduct that initiate the person's uncoupling from the proximal sphere of experience (boredom in class, frustration with friends, limits of physical explanation, etc.). Second, the burgeoning loop of imagination utilizes *resources*—drawn from a wide range of semiotic and material elements previously internalized by the person along the life course, or present in the immediate environment, through the presence of others, the affordances of the setting, or the power of guidance of complex artefacts. For example, the child's imagination utilizes the view of the tree out of the window, his experience of tree-climbing, and stories about dragons; the teenager uses the recording of the rock band; and the elderly person uses stories and images of assisted living. Regarding the semiotic processes of imagining, we agree with other authors that imagination demands a complex decomposition and rearrangement of all this semiotic material, loaded with emotions and embodied experiences, into new synthesis (Vygotsky, 1933). The dynamics of imagination thus resemble dream work (Freud, 2001; Singer & Singer, 1992; Winnicott, 1996). The fact that imagination occurs in distal spheres of experiences implies that it is liberated from the laws (social, logical, material, temporal, spatial, etc.) that govern proximal spheres of experiences located in specific social and material settings. When imagining, causality can be undone; children can fly; scientists can sit on beams of light; and one can regain lost abilities. Third, the sequence ends with a *return*—when the person loops out of imagining, and recouples with her proximal circumstances, a few seconds or hours older. Although no dragons will lay slain, there will always be outcomes. These outcomes can be temporary emotional changes (e.g., in the example with the teenager),

they can be important life decisions (e.g., choosing not to go to a nursing home), or the outcomes can be the production of new semiotic or material elements (e.g., new theories or the basis for a new novel). Hence, some people's imaginings are crystallized into cultural artefacts (e.g., novels, films), which then can guide the imagining of others (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). In that sense, imagination can feed into an expansion of our collective experience (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013).

To build a theoretical integration, we have identified three core dimensions to describe the variety of imaginings in which people engage. The first dimension is that of *time orientation*: imagination can be oriented towards the past (such as when one re-experiences aspects of one's childhood in the taste of a cake); the future (such as when imagining a future life in a nursing home); or alternative presents (such as defending the tree-hut from a dragon). The second dimension is the *semiotic distance* of the imagining, some being rather concrete and close to embodied experiences (such as imagining climbing a tree) while others demand generalized experiences (such as imagining the speed of light). The third dimension is *plausibility*; this accounts for the fact that in certain social, cultural, and material conditions, imaginations can have a more or less degree of likelihood or possible realization. Hence, fighting a dragon is impossible for most children; yet, there is a small degree of plausibility if that child lives in Indonesia, habitat of the Komodo dragon. Imagination about living in a nursing home is very plausible for many people in contemporary society.

Theorizing imagination in terms of three steps and dimensions allows for a rich description and analysis of diverse instances of imagination. It also allows us to understand the complex cultural guidance shaping people's imagination of the past and people's future life trajectories. For instance, Welzer and colleagues have shown that social discourses have so much attributed the responsibility of WWII German war crimes to the "bad" Nazis, that younger generations can only end up remembering their parents' or grandparents' actual implication in the war as heroic resistance (Welzer, 2005, 2008; Welzer, Moller, & Tschuggnall, 2013). In a very different context, we have shown how a young woman's imaginings of herself and her possible future are selectively validated or rejected by