



Social Imaginaries of the Emigration of Young People from Tetouan in Vulnerable Situations

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Introduction

Contemporary migratory movements constitute one of the most decisive social phenomena for understanding current global dynamics. Although human displacement has historically been a constant, in recent decades international migration has intensified to become a structural component of social, economic, and symbolic life across broad regions of the world. In this context, mobility between the northern region of Morocco and Europe occupies a singular place. Geographic proximity, the history of flows, the centrality of the Hispano-Moroccan Ceuta and Melilla borders, and persistent deep economic inequalities have shaped a transit space and circulating imaginaries. Migration, in this context, is both a material fact and a symbolic construction that shapes desires, expectations, and decisions (De Haas, 2021; Carling & Collins, 2018).

This article situates itself at the intersection of mobility and social symbolism, addressing migration not only as displacement but as an imagined project. That is, as a horizon of meaning that precedes action and is sustained by collective narratives, socially shared images, sedimented beliefs, and discourses circulating among families, peers, communities, and the media. This perspective, grounded in social imaginaries theory, enables understanding migration from the logic of the meanings subjects assign to the act of leaving and the life aspiration “on the other side” (Castoriadis, 1975; Pintos, 2000; Baeza, 2011). The focus is not solely on analyzing the structural causes of mobility—poverty, unemployment, state fragility—but on exploring how these conditions intertwine with symbolic matrices that legitimize, motivate, and endow sense to the decision to emigrate. The case of northern Morocco, and particularly the city of Tetouan, is paradigmatic. It is a region that combines colonial legacies, strong links with Europe, a precarious economy, and everyday contact with success narratives—real or imagined—of those who have managed to migrate. In this environment, children and young people who are orphans or abandoned, welcomed into protective communities or institutions, form a group especially exposed to the construction of idealized migratory imaginaries. As shown in the original research on which this article is based, their everyday life is permeated by narratives about progress, well-being, and mobility that project Europe as the possibility of a radically different future. For many, migration constitutes a vital horizon, an “escape mechanism” and a promise of symbolic and material fullness.

The central problem guiding this article can be formulated as follows: how are the social imaginaries of emigration constructed among these youths and what implications do they have for the potential

action of migrating, particularly in relation to the pursuit of well-being, personal development, and social improvement? This question opens a complex interpretive field that requires integrating contributions from the sociology of the imagination, symbolic anthropology, social psychology, mobility studies, and constructivist epistemology. The emphasis lies on understanding the process by which desires, fantasies, and expectations transform into concrete motivations to undertake migration—sometimes irregular and high-risk—and how these imaginaries are sustained, transformed, or collapsed along the migratory process.

From a theoretical standpoint, this article adopts a perspective that combines three pillars:

1. The theory of social imaginaries, which allows analyzing how collective meanings that orient perception of reality and action are constructed (Castoriadis, 1975; Pintos, 2000; Baeza, 2008).
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The general objective is to analyze the social imaginaries of emigration produced in a group of vulnerable Tetuan youths, considering how these imaginaries shape ideas of development, well-being, and success, and how they influence the real or imagined possibility of migrating. Three specific purposes follow from this objective: (a) examine the symbolic elements that compose those imaginaries; (b) identify the actors and systems involved in their production—family, peers, media, institutions, transnational networks; and (c) discuss the theoretical implications of understanding migration from the perspective of the imaginary and not solely from structural factors. This article is built from original ethnographic research conducted in a protected community in Tetouan, where the researcher lived with the youths for one hundred days. Although the article presents itself as theoretical—its aim is conceptual and analytical—the empirical density of that fieldwork provides material for illustrating and refining the theoretical reflection. From this combination, the article's contribution is twofold: (1) it offers an interpretive reading of the migratory phenomenon from social imaginaries, useful for studying the deep motivations of mobility, and (2) it presents a conceptual discussion applicable to public policies, social interventions, and contemporary theories of migration. The article's structure is as follows. First, a theoretical framework develops the genealogy of the concept of social imaginaries, its main contributions, and its articulation with migration studies. Second, the original methodology supporting the analysis is presented, based on an ethnographic and constructivist approach. Third, the discussion examines how youths construct imaginaries of emigration and the implications for their potential action. Finally, conclusions are offered, oriented both to theoretical reflection and to the study's practical application.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social imaginaries: genealogy and state of the art

The concept of social imaginaries has a broad, multidisciplinary genealogy located at the intersection of sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies. Although its contemporary formulation is associated with the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, its roots go back to classic debates about the symbolic, collective conscience, and imagination. The earliest antecedents can be identified in Émile Durkheim, who in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912/1993) established that every society produces collective representations that orient action and transcend individual consciences. These representations, inscribed in the distinction between the sacred and the profane,

constitute a symbolic framework that shapes social life. Although Durkheim did not use the term social imaginary, he laid the foundations for understanding how the social creates meanings later taken as realities. Parallely, Gaston Bachelard (1960) recovered imagination as an ontological force and not as a simple distortion of reality, asserting its creative dimension in the configuration of symbolic worlds, especially through poetic images and archetypal elements. His influence is evident in much of the later French tradition (Durand, Maffesoli, Corbin). In the psychological field, Carl Gustav Jung introduced the notion of the collective unconscious and universal archetypes, deep images that emerge in myths, dreams, and shared narratives (Jung, 1982). His proposal—though criticized from sociology—opened the door to understanding the imaginary as a symbolic repository that exceeds the individual. A turning point in American sociology was the rise of symbolic interactionism, led by Mead, Blumer, and the Chicago School. From this perspective, social meanings are not given but constructed in daily interaction. The symbol is the matrix from which images are produced and actions guided (Blumer, 1969). This approach is key to understanding how youths construct images of migration from discourses, rumors, and observations of their surroundings. In European tradition, Gilbert Durand's (1960) contribution was decisive: he articulated an anthropological theory of the imaginary based on universal symbolic structures, distinguishing between diurnal and nocturnal regimes, and showing how myths, narratives, and archetypes organize ways of interpreting the world. The works of Henry Corbin (1997) and Mircea Eliade (1968, 1999) deepened the symbolic and archetypal study from a religious dimension, underscoring the importance of imagination for spiritual and cultural experience. Later, Michel Maffesoli (1984) and Georges Balandier (1982) developed analyses on everyday life, postmodernity, and urban tribes, showing how the imaginary articulates identities, belonging, and social practices in complex societies. The conceptual rupture, however, comes with Cornelius Castoriadis, who coined the term social imaginaries. In *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975), Castoriadis argues that society is instituted through imaginary significations that interpret and act in the world. He distinguishes between the instituting imaginary (creator, producer of new meanings) and the instituted (set of stabilized significations). Social reality, for Castoriadis, does not exist outside the imaginary: it is created from it. In the Spanish-speaking world, Juan Luis Pintos and Manuel Antonio Baeza stand out. Pintos (1995, 2000) integrates social imaginaries within a systemic-constructivist perspective: they define imaginaries as socially constructed schemes that allow perception, explanation, and intervention in what each social system considers real. His "lenses" metaphor is key to understanding how they operate invisibly. Baeza (2000, 2008), from a phenomenological orientation, emphasizes that imaginaries provide vital meaning, enabling people to act according to what they believe is possible, desirable, or true. Contemporary contributions, such as Beriain (2003), Bergua (2005), and Carretero (2003), have deepened the relationship between imaginaries and modernity, self-production, and the plurality of contexts of meaning (polycontextuality), especially relevant in societies traversed by globalization processes. In summary, the study of social imaginaries helps understand how people construct meaning, interpret their world, and justify actions based on socially shared significations.

2.2. Social imaginaries and action

The link between imaginaries and action is one of the central theoretical axes of this article. Social imaginaries not only organize world perceptions but also guide concrete practices, decisions, and life projects.

From classical sociology, Weber (2002) already noted that social action is oriented by subjective meaning. This meaning is not purely individual but the result of cultural structures that shape expectations. Giddens (1991), in turn, introduces the notion of reflexivity to explain how subjects build biographical projects in contexts of risk and uncertainty. In the field of imaginaries, Castoriadis (1975) holds that social imagined significations are the frameworks from which subjects interpret and act. Pintos (2000) reinforces this idea by stating that the imaginary allows "operating" on a reality that, without these schemes, would be unintelligible. In social psychology, literature on aspirations,

desires, and expectations shows that action is configured as a balance between structural conditions and subjective future perceptions (Appadurai, 2004). Desires—as the original thesis notes—are largely constructed through circulating narratives, success models, and mobility narratives. In contexts of emotional precarity—orphanhood, abandonment, lack of adult references—the imagination takes on a compensatory function: allowing the projection of possible horizons when the present appears as a limit (Frankl, 2004). Fantasies and expectations are not mere illusions; they operate as engines of action, especially among adolescents and youths (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). In synthesis, imaginaries can motivate high-risk actions—such as undertaking irregular migration—when they become the only imagined path to achieve well-being, identity, or belonging.

2.3. Migration imaginaries

The construction of migratory imaginaries is a well-established field within migration studies. Recent research has shown that the decision to migrate does not depend solely on economic or structural factors, but also on perceptions, aspirations, and meanings.

Authors such as De Haas (2021), Carling and Collins (2018), Carling and Schewel (2018), Sayad (2010), and Crawley & Skleparis (2018) have demonstrated that migration is always imagined before being lived. Migration as a project is shaped by images of success, mobility narratives, transnational social networks, media discourses, and experiences of relatives or acquaintances.

In the Moroccan case, migratory imaginaries are linked to Europe as a space of prosperity, modernity, and dignity. Recent studies (Cherti & Collyer, 2015; Alioua, 2020) show that for many Maghreb youth, Europe functions more as a “symbolic horizon” than as a concrete destination.

Moreover, digital communication networks—WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook—intensify the circulation of idealized images (Schapendonk, 2020). The success narrative, even when exceptional, becomes an aspirational model.

Irregular or “risky” migration—often called *haraga*—is not seen as a failure but as a test of bravery, masculinity, or determination (Ben Yahia, 2018). From this perspective, migratory imaginaries not only legitimize action but also confer added symbolic value.

2.4. The Moroccan case: Tetouan and the symbolic border

The north of Morocco presents specific characteristics that intensify migratory imaginaries:

- **Geographic proximity:** Tetouan lies only about 42 km from Europe, making the border a highly meaningful space.
- **Colonial history:** Spanish presence for decades generated acculturation processes and persistent cross-border networks.
- **Informal economy and structural inequality:** reinforce the perception of Europe as a source of opportunities.
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Regional studies (Maâ, 2019; Berriane, 2021) show that the north of Morocco is one of the territories where migratory imaginaries have the greatest symbolic intensity and social legitimacy.

2.5. Childhood and vulnerable youth: narratives and future desires

Children and youths in abandonment or orphanhood live vulnerabilities that significantly condition the production of imaginaries. The lack of attachment figures, material precarity, and institutional fragility contribute to migration becoming the only imagined horizon of improvement.

The literature on vulnerable youth notes that the absence of adult references and the desire for early autonomy foster risky migratory projects (Martín-Pérez & Moreno, 2019). In these contexts,

imagination acts as a space of symbolic compensation, allowing the projection of idealized futures when the present lacks stability.

Peers' discourses—often laden with idealizations—carry decisive weight in meaning-making. Horizontal socialization, typical of protective communities, intensifies the circulation of migratory narratives, reinforcing the idea that leaving is a natural, legitimate, and, above all, possible option.

3. Methodology

3.1. Epistemological approach

This article develops theoretical reflection supported by a prior ethnography-inspired investigation. Although the purpose is not to present empirical results, the deep understanding of the emigrants' social imaginaries rests on fieldwork conducted in a protected community in Tetouan. From this perspective, the methodology functions as an epistemological anchor: it situates the origin of interpreted material and justifies the relevance of the theoretical approach adopted.

The epistemological framework sits within interpretive, constructivist tradition, assuming that social reality is not a given fact but a mediated construction of meanings. This orientation is particularly pertinent for analyzing social imaginaries, understood—following Castoriadis (1975) and Pintos (2000)—as webs of collective meaning that give sense to action. Interpreting these imaginaries requires an approach capable of capturing narratives, symbols, metaphors, and narratives organizing subjects' experiences.

Furthermore, the analysis draws on a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, conceiving meanings as emerging from lived experience and daily interaction. This methodological choice recognizes that migratory imaginaries are not reduced to explicit discourses: they also express themselves in gestures, silences, expectations, emotions, and ways of inhabiting the present. Therefore, although the article is theoretical, it maintains an ongoing dialogue with the qualitative density produced in fieldwork.

In sum, the epistemological approach rests on three pillars: (a) meaning construction as a foundation of social life; (b) the need for an interpretive approach to understand imaginaries; and (c) the reflexive integration of ethnographic material to refine theoretical development.

3.2. General design of the original investigation

The thesis supporting this article was developed through an ethnographic setup focused on prolonged cohabitation with a group of adolescents and youths residing in a protected community in Tetouan. The fieldwork lasted a total of 100 days, during which the researcher shared the group's daily life, participated in activities, observed interactions, and collected narratives, informal conversations, and spontaneous expressions of imaginaries.

3.2.1. Contexto institucional

The protected community provides shelter to minors and youths in orphaned, abandoned, or socio-familial vulnerability. This institution constitutes a unique space for studying migratory imaginaries, given that residents share a history marked by insecurity and material and affective precarity. Community living also intensifies the circulation of discourses, idealizations, and mobility narratives that contribute to constructing future horizons.

3.2.2. Técnicas utilizadas

Although ethnography privileges participant observation as the main technique, the work also included:

- Informal conversations naturally held during daily activities.

- Active listening to spontaneous biographical narratives.
- Reflective field diary recording perceptions, significant scenes, and recurring symbols.
- Attention to collective dynamics, such as games, discussions, and everyday rituals revealing the strength of certain imaginaries.

No formal structured interviews were conducted, in line with the immersive character of the adopted approach.

3.3. Theoretical value of the design

Although the article's aim is theoretical, the original methodology plays a central role in understanding the studied phenomenon. Its value lies in three aspects:

3.3.1. Embodied capture of the imaginary

Social imaginaries do not always manifest explicitly in formal discourses. In contexts of vulnerability, they emerge through metaphors, dreams, jokes, drawings, imitations, silences, or seemingly trivial phrases. Ethnographic immersion enabled capturing them in lived dimension, far from responses conditioned by more intrusive techniques.

3.3.2. Link between subjectivity and structure

Participant observation helped understand how migratory expectations are built in dialogue with structural conditions—poverty, lack of opportunities, inequality—yet mediated by collective narratives and shared symbols. This reading is key to sustaining the article's main theoretical argument: migration as an imagined horizon.

3.3.3. Heuristic potential for migration theory

The ethnography-generated material provides examples and scenes that illustrate complex conceptual processes: how youths negotiate desires, how success stories circulate, how fear of failure or risk is managed, and how Europe becomes a symbolic space more than a geographic one. These elements are not presented here as empirical data but as theoretical catalysts feeding conceptual reflection.

4. Theoretical discussion

Understanding the social imaginaries of emigration among Tetuan youth in vulnerability requires integrating different levels of analysis: the collective meanings circulating in Moroccan society, the structural conditions of precarity, transnational success narratives, and the subjective processes by which youths construct future horizons. This section articulates these levels to offer a broad theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon.

4.1. Migration as symbolic horizon of possibility

An analysis of migratory imaginaries in Tetouan shows that emigration is not presented only as a practical project but, above all, as a symbolic horizon of possibility. In contexts marked by lack of opportunities, abandonment, and emotional precarity, migration functions as an imaginary device allowing the projection of a different, more dignified and livable future.

Following Castoriadis (1975), this horizon can be affirmed as an instituting imaginary significations: creates possibilities where material conditions deny them. Migration is conceived as an act of self-creation, a mechanism to rewrite one's biography, in line with theories of biographical reflexivity (Giddens, 1991) and imaginative capacities to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).

In this sense, migration acquires a dual nature:

- **Instrumental:** escape poverty, seek work, access services.
- **Symbolic:** achieve recognition, dignity, prestige, masculinity or adulthood.

The symbolic dimension, however, appears endowed with greater potency. The promise of migration is, above all, a promise to become someone else (Diz-Casal & Riffo-Pavón, 2022).

4.2. Circulation of narratives and imaginaries construction

Migratory imaginaries are built from narratives circulating intensely among youths: success stories from relatives who sent remittances, videos on social networks showing a comfortable life in Europe, rumors about job opportunities, and even urban myths about crossing the border with ease.

This circulation operates similarly to what Pintos (2000) terms “structures of perception” that configure what the subject considers real and possible. Although these narratives do not always correspond to generalizable experiences, their strength lies in repetition and legitimizing function: if others have achieved it, it is possible for oneself as well.

Moreover, the protected community functions as a space of strong horizontal socialization. The absence of stable adult references heightens the centrality of the peer group, whose narratives function as a dominant symbolic matrix. This aligns with Zittoun and Gillespie (2015): in contexts of uncertainty, collective imagination becomes a coordinated tool to orient oneself in the world.

In these exchanges, Europe appears as an idealized destination, a space of symbolic plenitude where current vulnerability is suspended. Information contradicting this idealization—for instance, stories of failure or deportation—tends to be minimized, reinterpreted, or discarded, showing a mechanism typical of instituted imaginaries: preserving significations that ensure coherence and continuity.

4.3. The success imaginary and migratory masculinity

One of the structural elements of migratory imaginaries in northern Morocco is the association between migration and masculinity. The harraga figure—youth who crosses the border irregularly—is constructed as a symbol of courage, audacity, and determination. Recent literature (Ben Yahia, 2018) shows that in many Maghreb contexts migration stands as a rite of passage into adulthood, a gesture demonstrating sacrifice and agency.

Among Tetuan youths in vulnerability, this dimension is amplified. Migration becomes the only route to experience autonomy and recognition. From this logic, the migratory project is not only an economic strategy but a deep identity process.

4.4. Tension between origin imaginaries and destination realities

Another central dimension is the distance between origin imaginaries and destination realities. Migration literature shows that real migration rarely matches imagined migration (Sayad, 2010; Carling & Collins, 2018). The welfare promise is often replaced by experiences of precarious legal status, exploitation, and emotional loneliness.

However, this contradiction does not erase the imaginary: it transforms it. Youths rework tales of failure as exceptions, attributing them to particular situations and keeping the core idealized project intact. This confirms imaginaries are not primarily designed to describe the world but to endow it with meaning.

4.5. Migration decision as product of an ecology of meanings

The theoretical discussion suggests migration cannot be explained solely by economic, structural, or institutional factors. Migration results from an ecology of meanings where converge:

- Adverse material conditions.

- Vital frustration and lack of near horizons.
- Desires for recognition and autonomy.
- circulating narratives about mobility.
- Idealized images of Europe.
- Identity reconfiguration during adolescence.
- Absence of stable emotional references.
- Peer group influence. This ecology confirms the theses of De Haas (2021) and Carling (2018): migration is always a combination of aspirations and capabilities, where aspirations are deeply determined by social imaginaries.

5. Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this article helps understand the theoretical strength of social imaginaries to explain the migratory projects of vulnerable youths in northern Morocco. Although the empirical experience is subordinated to the text's theoretical objective, it constitutes a fundamental axis for interpreting how these imaginaries operate in daily life and in constructing future horizons. Five core contributions can be condensed as follows:

- Migration functions as a central imaginary significations. More than an economic project, it is a symbolic horizon that gives meaning to life and articulates expectations, desires, and narratives of improvement. In contexts of precarity, this horizon takes on extraordinary intensity.
- circulating narratives are the main engine of migratory imaginaries. Stories of success, digital images, and rumors shape structures of perception that legitimize migration as a viable and desirable path, even when conflicting with objective information.
- the peer community acts as a space that produces and reproduces imaginaries. In the absence of stable adult references, youths find in the group the symbolic validation of their migratory aspirations and the consolidation of an identity projected beyond the country of origin.
- migratory imaginaries articulate identity and mobility. Migration becomes a device for identity construction, especially in relation to models of masculinity, autonomy, and recognition.
- Understanding migration from social imaginaries broadens the analytic framework of migration studies. It allows integrating symbolic dimensions that structuralist approaches tend to underestimate and provides useful tools for public policy, social intervention, and new research directions on youth mobility.

In conclusion, migration cannot be understood solely as a material strategy: it is an imaginary construction that expresses forms of desire, meaning, and the search for dignity. Recognizing this symbolic dimension allows not only to refine theory but also to comprehend the human depth of those who undertake these projects, especially at such young ages and under life conditions marked by fragility.

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