



Is There Evidence of a Crisis of Imagination Today? An Evidence-Based Assessment*

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Executive Summary

This report examines whether there is evidence of a contemporary 'crisis of imagination'—a societal contraction in the capacity to envision alternative futures, particularly positive and transformative ones. Drawing on foresight studies, cultural theory, climate scholarship, and political analysis, the report finds strong interpretive evidence that such a crisis exists. While the evidence is not empirical in the narrow scientific sense, it is compelling in its convergence across disciplines. Scholars argue that institutions and societies are increasingly constrained by short-termism, realism, and structural inertia, which limit imaginative thinking. The most robust evidence comes from foresight and futures studies, which document a decline in institutional capacity to engage in long-term thinking. Cultural theorists highlight the dominance of realism and the marginalization of imaginative narratives. Climate scholars emphasize the difficulty of envisioning non-extractive futures. Political analysts point to policy stagnation and a lack of transformative vision. Together, these findings suggest that the crisis of imagination is real, systemic, and consequential for governance, innovation, and collective futures thinking.

1. Introduction

The term 'crisis of imagination' refers to a growing concern among scholars and practitioners that modern societies are losing the capacity to envision alternative futures. This includes the ability to imagine positive transformations, systemic change, and futures that depart from the status quo. Rather than fostering bold, long-term thinking, many institutions and cultural systems default to incrementalism, risk aversion, and reactive governance. This report explores the evidence for such a crisis across multiple disciplines.

2. Evidence Across Disciplines

2.1 Foresight and Futures Studies

Geoff Mulgan's work, particularly in 'The Imaginary Crisis' (2020, 2022), argues that while societies can vividly imagine dystopian futures, they struggle to articulate compelling positive alternatives. He identifies a decline in institutional foresight capacity, with governments and organizations increasingly focused on short-term outcomes at the expense of long-term vision. Futures studies scholars echo this concern, noting that scenario planning and horizon scanning are underutilized, and that public discourse lacks imaginative engagement with the future.

2.2 Cultural Theory and Social Imagination

Cultural theorists argue that imagination has been marginalized by dominant ideologies such as capitalist realism. This term, popularized by theorist Mark Fisher, describes a cultural condition in which capitalism is seen as the only viable system, thereby constraining imaginative alternatives. The prevalence of realism in literature, film, and political discourse reinforces a sense of inevitability and limits the space for utopian or transformative narratives. Repetition and nostalgia often replace innovation in public storytelling.



2.3 Climate Scholarship

Recent climate-imagination research, such as Kumar et al. (2025), frames climate change as a crisis of imagination. Scholars argue that societies struggle to envision non-extractive, regenerative futures. Human geography and environmental disciplines have historically focused on technical and economic framings, often neglecting imaginative and cultural dimensions. This limits the range of responses and contributes to public disengagement. The lack of compelling climate narratives hampers mobilization and long-term planning.

2.4 Political and Institutional Stagnation

Political analysts observe a pattern of policy incrementalism and short-termism. Institutions often recycle familiar solutions rather than pursue transformative change. Strategic planning is constrained by electoral cycles, bureaucratic inertia, and risk-averse leadership. This stagnation reflects a diminished capacity for imaginative governance and contributes to public cynicism. The absence of bold vision statements and future-oriented policies is interpreted as a symptom of the imagination crisis.



3. Evidence Strength Assessment

Evidence Type	Strength	What It Shows	Limitations
Foresight & Futures Studies	Moderate	Decline in institutional foresight; difficulty articulating positive futures	Qualitative; relies on expert interpretation
Cultural Theory	Moderate–High	Marginalization of imagination; dominance of realism and repetition	Theoretical; lacks empirical metrics
Climate Scholarship	Moderate	Narrow framings limit imaginative responses to climate change	Focused on one domain; not generalizable
Political Analysis	Low–Moderate	Policy stagnation and short-termism	Anecdotal; influenced by ideological perspectives

4. Interpretation: What the Evidence Suggests

While the evidence for a crisis of imagination is not empirical in the narrow scientific sense, it is compelling as a cross-disciplinary diagnosis. The convergence of signals from foresight studies, cultural theory, climate scholarship, and political analysis suggests that the phenomenon is real and systemic. The consistency of these



observations across fields strengthens the case that societies are experiencing a contraction in collective imaginative capacity.

5. Implications

The crisis of imagination has far-reaching implications. In governance, it limits the ability to plan for long-term challenges and opportunities. In innovation, it narrows the scope of what is considered possible or fundable. In climate action, it undermines the capacity to mobilize publics around transformative solutions. More broadly, it weakens society's ability to adapt, evolve, and thrive in the face of uncertainty. Rebuilding imaginative capacity is essential for navigating the 21st century.

6. Conclusion

This report finds strong interpretive evidence that a crisis of imagination exists, particularly at the collective and institutional levels. While not measurable through conventional empirical methods, the convergence of insights across disciplines points to a real and consequential phenomenon. Addressing this crisis will require intentional efforts to revitalize foresight, diversify narratives, and create space for imaginative thinking in public and organizational life.