

# HUMAN CREATION, IMAGINATION AND AUTONOMY

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CASTORIADIS' SOCIAL AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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### Introduction

Cornelius Castoriadis has been one of the most important and innovative intellectuals of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Philosopher, revolutionary, co-founder of the legendary group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, practicing psychoanalyst who revised Freudian theory, political intellectual who inspired workers and students during the May 1968 events in France, professional economist in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, recognized hellenist, distinguished representative of the radical left and supporter of the project of autonomy.

As Jürgen Habermas states, Cornelius Castoriadis undertook "...the most original, the most ambitious and the most profound task to view ... the liberating interference of history, society, inner and outer nature, as an act".<sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz refers to him as an intellectual "to whom we owe a precious elucidation of politics and philosophy",<sup>2</sup> Edgar Morin names him "a titan of the spirit",<sup>3</sup> and Axel Honneth characterizes him as "the last representative and renovator of the tradition of the European Left and the creator of an influential theory".<sup>4</sup> According to Hans Joas,

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Suhrkamp, 1985, p. 380.

<sup>2</sup> Octavio Paz, "Itinerarium, Kleine politische Autobiographie", in *Frankfurt Allgemeine*, 1993, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Morin, « Castoriadis: un titan de l'esprit (necrologie) », in *Le Monde*, 30 December 1997, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Axel Honneth, "Die Kreativität des Sozialen: Zum Tode von Cornelius Castoriadis", in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 30 December 1997.

Castoriadis's theory is "...the most original contemporary attempt to express a political philosophy through the notion of creativity".<sup>5</sup>

However, for a long time, his ideas, circulated broadly, and became more famous than his name. What mainly contributed to his fall into oblivion was the fact that he had to publish using various pseudonyms, in order to avoid deportation from France. It was during the 1970s, when he gained French citizenship, that he started to publish using his real name. Only then did the intellectuals of his time, and especially the radical students, discover the person hidden behind the ideas that inspired their movement.

Castoriadis systematically avoided the circles of the Parisian intellectuals and remained on the fringes of academic society. Intellectual trends and fashions, such as existentialism, structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism,<sup>6</sup> did not attract him, and often became targets of his harsh and ironical criticism. However, he did not work in total isolation. He was a member of a group of workers and intellectuals who refused to submit to any kind of authority that would limit the freedom of expression.<sup>7</sup> He tried hard to remain a democratic thinker as well as a citizen with the ancient Greek meaning of the word<sup>8</sup>, a kind of modern Socrates who frequented the *agora* in the companion of fellow intellectuals, students, and workers. Castoriadis's independent mind and radical thinking, which have been echoed by his group, have contributed to the emergence of a non-communist Left in post-war France, as well as in other European countries. "I believe that I have offered a new understanding of the human society and of the human history as a creation and not as a submission to timeless historical laws",<sup>9</sup> Castoriadis has said about himself.

In this article I aim at a critical, though sketchy, assessment of his work as a whole. The main difficulty I have to deal with is that his

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Joas, *Pragmatismus und Gesellschaftstheorie*, Suhrkamp, 1999, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> A term introduced by Jean-François Lyotard, former member of the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

<sup>7</sup> Similar ideas supported the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, published by the homonymous group.

<sup>8</sup> *Polites*, that is an active member of *polis*, participating in the everyday decision making and respectful of social institutions and the laws of the city. The opposite is *idiotes*, the citizen who is indifferent to matters that affect the community and withdraws to his private life. In this meaning of the word originates the contemporary refashioning of the word *idiot* in many European languages.

<sup>9</sup> "Πιστεύω ότι προσέφερα μιαν καινούργια κατανόηση της ανθρώπινης κοινωνίας και της ανθρώπινης ιστορίας ως δημιουργίας και όχι ως υποκείμενης σε αδήριτους ιστορικούς νόμους" in Teta Papadopoulou (ed.), *Of Cornelius Castoriadis: We are Responsible for our History*, Athens: Polis, 2000, p. 47.

political theory and philosophical thinking resemble more a collection of strings of thoughts, a universe of loosely connected propositions, than an organized system of ideas. He never tried to establish a finished, and therefore closed, theory of revolution, of society, or of history. In his own words: “Thinking is not building cathedrals or composing symphonies. If the symphony exists it is the reader who must create it in his own ears”.<sup>10</sup> He blurs the boundaries of different epistemological fields<sup>11</sup> and develops a thought inseparable from political activity. New terms appear constantly in his work, and old ones are subverted in his attempt to elucidate the world.

However, this ‘magmatic’<sup>12</sup> quality of his work should not discourage us from its examination. Instead of dividing his work into specific periods or stages (early- middle-later), thus ignoring its theoretical fluidity and inter-scientific nature,<sup>13</sup> it would be preferable to proceed with a critical reading based on the main notions and ideas that appear in his writings. Relevant to such an examination are terms like ‘autonomy’, ‘radical imaginary’ ‘creativity’ etc. I will attempt to clarify the effectively operating meaning of these terms, following his elaborations in his work and especially in his largely influential book *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.

### Praxis and Elucidation – The Birth of the “Project of Autonomy”

In the early 1950’s Castoriadis already considered the Soviet regimes and the Western liberal oligarchies as two different sides of contemporary bureaucratic capitalism. This uniform rejection led to his characterization as a communist by the French Government and as a traitor by the communists. The analysis of the USSR he formulated by

<sup>10</sup> “Σκέπτομαι δεν σημαίνει οικοδομώ Παρθενώνες ή συνθέτω συμφωνίες. Τη συμφωνία, αν υπάρχει, πρέπει να την δημιουργήσει ο αναγνώστης μέσα στα ίδια του τ’ αυτιά “ in Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Kathleen Blamey (tr.), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Prominent among others and easily discernible in his work are the fields of philosophy, politics and sociology, with strong influences from psychoanalysis, anthropology, linguistics, physics and biology.

<sup>12</sup> *Magma* is a term coined by Castoriadis himself. Its literal meaning in Greek is “a soft and thick substance, a mixture that contains different elements moulded together”.

<sup>13</sup> Political activists usually focus on his political articles published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Academics focus on his philosophical and sociological texts, mainly related to economics, social theory, and psychoanalysis. The inability to appreciate the interdependent relations of different influences in Castoriadis’s theory, leads to an arbitrary smoothing of complexity and a misleading homogenizing of variety.

examining the modes of production dominating in it, has shown that the Soviet regime was not a degenerated proletarian state, but a new system of domination headed by a corrupt bureaucracy. He claimed that Soviet economy, controlled by an exploitative party elite, produced a surplus, based on the over-laboring of the workers, and facilitated non-productive consumption by an authoritarian class, the bureaucracy.

Castoriadis then deepens his analysis in order to include the contemporary capitalism and describes the new exploitative regime, which will, from then on, be referred to as bureaucratic capitalism. This unorthodox but original scrutiny of Marxist theory, as a result of his criticism of Stalinism, based on the sociological work of Max Weber on bureaucracy,<sup>14</sup> became the starting point for the rejection of Marxism some years later.

Castoriadis has sought to formulate a new political theory, rooted in the concept of 'autonomy', as opposed to other inadequate leftist concepts, such as 'revolution', 'revision' 'necessity' etc. He proceeded to the examination of the Marxist doctrine, underlining its weaknesses and especially its political distortions and faulty applications. Other philosophers, such as Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci, had also devoted studies to an examination of the work of Marx. All of them offered different interpretations of Marxist thought within its boundaries, but not a new revolutionary theory or an overall and radical criticism or rejection of Marxism.

In order to correct Marx's economically reductionist approach to identity and culture, Castoriadis has tried to renew the revolutionary project by inserting the concept of the radical imaginary into it. In order to do so he has focused on the relation between *theory* and *praxis* and in so doing has tried to redefine both terms. Theory is "a doing, the always uncertain attempt to realize the project of clarifying the world",<sup>15</sup> when praxis "a doing in which the other or others are intended as autonomous beings considered as the essential agents of the development of their own autonomy".<sup>16</sup> Castoriadis tries to transcend the traditional distinction

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<sup>14</sup> Castoriadis was the first to translate, together with Alekos Ioannidis, Weber's introduction to *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. He also edited the notes and added an "Introduction to the Theory of Social Sciences". These texts were included in the second issue of the *Archive of Sociology and Ethics* (Athens), and have been re-published in Cornelius Castoriadis, *Early Essays*, Athens: Ypsilon, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> "ένα πράττειν, η πάντοτε αβέβαιη προσπάθεια να πραγματοποιηθεί το πρόταγμα μιας διαύγασης του κόσμου" in Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Kathleen Blamey (tr.), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> "αυτό το πράττειν, μέσα από το οποίο σκοπεύουμε τον άλλο ή τους άλλους ως αυτόνομα όντα, και τους θεωρούμε ως τον ουσιαστικό παράγοντα της ανάπτυξης της ίδιας τους της αυτονομίας" Ibid, p. 75.

between theory-praxis introducing the notion of *elucidation* that he defined as “the labor by means of which individuals attempt to think about what they do and to know what they think”.<sup>17</sup>

Elucidation is a central notion of his thought and it is projected upon “the total of the human experience, that means the thought about everything thinkable. It is the thought that tries to elucidate even the understanding, even the explanation”.<sup>18</sup> Theory, as an elucidated doing, and praxis as an elucidated action, are inseparable, as long as they both aim at the individual and social autonomy. *Autonomy*, at an individual and collective level, connects theory and praxis. Castoriadis, decisively giving up the Marxist terminology, defines revolution as a project of autonomy that emerged from the social-historical context and regards the radical transformation of society a task depended on the autonomous activity of people. The project of autonomy is not founded on some spurious financial necessity and is not guaranteed by any kind of objective (natural or historical) law.

Castoriadis gave a brief but potent definition of autonomy during an interview, where he explained: “You know, in the word autonomy, two roots exist. *Αυτός* (me, myself) and *νόμος* (law). But most people think of the root *αυτός* and forget the root *νόμος*. Autonomous is he who gives to himself a law. Of course, I wouldn’t call autonomous a person that fulfills his wishes without any control ... This also applies to society. Social and collective life cannot exist without an organization and without a minimum of social rules and purposes ... The autonomous society is a society that knows that there is no transcendence, no transcendent source of institutions and laws, no life after death (a thing that the ancient Greeks, who did not believe in life after death, knew). The members of this society know for sure that, what is going to happen, has to be done by them, and then offered to themselves and to the society as a whole. It’s a society that knows the art of making institutions and laws for itself. This sort of ‘self employment’ guarantees the project of autonomy and defends the interests of society, since it allows its members to exist as autonomous individuals within its framework”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “η εργασία μέσα από την οποία οι άνθρωποι προσπαθούν να σκεφτούν αυτό που κάνουν, και να γνωρίσουν αυτό που σκέπτονται “ Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> “το σύνολο της ανθρώπινης πείρας, δηλαδή η σκέψη επί παντός του σκεπτού. Είναι η σκέψη που προσπαθεί να διαγώσει ακόμη και την κατανόηση, ακόμη και την εξήγηση” in Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy and Science*, Athens: Eurasia, 2004, p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> “ Ξέρετε, στη λέξη αυτονομία υπάρχουν δυο ρίζες: *αυτός* (εγώ, ο ίδιος) και *νόμος*. Όμως οι περισσότεροι άνθρωποι σκέπτονται τη ρίζα *αυτός* και ξεχνούν την ρίζα *νόμος*. *Αυτόνομος*, λοιπόν, είναι εκείνος που δίνει στον εαυτό του έναν νόμο. Φυσικά δεν θα αποκαλούσα αυτόνομο όποιον εκπληρώνει απλώς τις επιθυμίες του

### The Turn to Psychoanalysis and the Discovery of the “Radical Imaginary”

Studying the concept of the psyche, Castoriadis discovered a new ontological space, a mode of Being that remained unspotted by traditional philosophy. This mode is opposed to the perception of Being as a determinate entity and has been referred to by the Greek word *magma*. The views of Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and others, concerning the “death of the subject” and the “death of man” were judged by Castoriadis as simply reactionary and even damaging. He argued, against Lacanian and Freudian theories, that psychoanalysis, like pedagogy and politics, but in a different way, aims at achieving the autonomy of the subject.

In his psychoanalytic practice, but also in his lectures and books, Castoriadis has developed a different approach to the Freudian theory, based on the idea of the “psychic monad” is, in fact, violently socialized, but always maintains a trace of its primary state. According to this approach, dreams, repressions, and speech lapses, indicate the existence of an undeletable asocial core of the psyche which, at the same time, because of its merely partial socialization, represents the inexhaustible spring of the project of autonomy.

Castoriadis claims that, within the Freudian theory, the procedure of ‘phantasmization’ (‘imaginization’) is not sufficiently interpreted, because of the degradation of the creative dimension of the imagination. Accordingly, the social-historical, the society, as institutive of the socialization of the psyche, is also degraded. Therefore psychoanalysis, as exercised by the majority of psychoanalysts, functions mainly as a procedure of adaptation of the subject to the demands of the society.

Although Castoriadis criticized Freud, he always remained Freudian when practicing psychoanalysis. From his mildly re-visionary criticism I have chosen three prominent points: a) The reconstruction of the

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*χωρίς κανένα φρένο και χωρίς κανένα έλεγχο... Το ίδιο ισχύει και για την κοινωνία. Δεν μπορεί να υπάρξει κοινωνική και συλλογική ζωή χωρίς οργάνωση και χωρίς ένα minimum αξιών και σκοπων..... Η αυτόνομη κοινωνία – όπως την εννοώ- είναι μια κοινωνία που ξέρει πολύ καλά ότι δεν υπάρχει υπερβατική πηγή των θεσμών και των νόμων, ότι δεν υπάρχει μετά θάνατον ζωή (πράγμα που γνώριζαν οι αρχαίοι Έλληνες, οι οποίοι δεν πίστευαν στη μετά θάνατον ζωή). Είναι μια κοινωνία που τα μέλη της ξέρουν πώς ό, τι είναι να γίνει, πρέπει να το κάνουν αυτά τα ίδια και να το προσφέρουν στον εαυτό τους και στο κοινωνικό σύνολο. Είναι μια κοινωνία που ξέρει ότι η ίδια φτιάχνει τους θεσμούς και τους νόμους της. Και αυτό ακριβώς της επιτρέπει να υπάρχει ως αυτόνομη κοινωνία, όπως επιτρέπει στα μέλη της να υπάρχουν ως αυτόνομα άτομα μέσα σ’ αυτήν την κοινωνία.’’ in Of Cornelius Castoriadis: *We are Responsible for our History*, op. cit., p. 49.*

imagination as radical imagination, b) The definition and the objective of psychoanalysis, c) The renewal of the notion of sublimation.

His most important contribution is the notion of the *radical imaginary* (institutive and instituted) at the level of society as a whole. The use of this term, as a hermeneutic tool, had three crucial consequences. First, the formulation of the concept of *magma*. Being, he claimed, exists in a magmatic way and, therefore, the Being of the social-historical, of life, and the psyche is also magmatic. Second, it encourages the understanding of a society's coherence, and of the 'social-historical' in general, as creations of the social imaginary. Finally, it renders possible the constant emergence and renewal of the project of autonomy.

Castoriadis defines the subconscious as "an indissociably representative/ affective/ intentional flux"<sup>20</sup> that cannot be understood as subjected to determinacy. In other words, the psyche is the primary cause of the emergence of representations. Representation is not a just an enactment of the real. The first representation, as well as the ability to create representations, emerge *ex nihilo* from the psyche. This primary 'phantasmaticization' is called radical imagination and "pre-exists and presides over every organization of drives, even the most primitive ones, that it is the condition for the drive to attain psychical existence, that the drive borrows 'at the start' its 'delegation by representation', its *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* from a backdrop of primal representation (*Ur-vorstellung*)".<sup>21</sup>

Primitive organization for Castoriadis is simply the state in which a distinction between the self and the rest of the world cannot be made, where difference has not yet emerged, where each intention is fulfilled before its articulation: "Once the psyche has suffered the break up of its monadic 'state' imposed upon it by the 'object', the other and its own body, it is forever thrown off-center in relation to itself, orientated in terms of that which it is no longer, which is no longer and can no longer be. *The psyche is its own lost object*".<sup>22</sup>

Breaking up with the primal state is unavoidable, as it is impossible for the psyche to survive without undergoing the process and procedure of socialization. During socialization the psyche internalizes, through

<sup>20</sup> "ενιαίος παραστασιακός/αισθηματικός/προθεσιακός ρους" in Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, op., cit., p. 274.

<sup>21</sup> "προϋπάρχει και προεδρεύει κάθε οργανώσεως, και της πλέον πρωταρχικής, της ενορμήσεως, ότι αποτελεί την προϋπόθεση της πρόσβασης της τελευταίας στην ψυχική ύπαρξη και ότι, "στην αρχή", η ενόρμηση δανείζεται την "παραστασιακή της εκπροσώπηση" την *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* από ένα απόθεμα αρχικής παράστασης (*Ur-Vorstellung*)" Ibid, p. 287.

<sup>22</sup> "Η ψυχή είναι το ίδιο της το χαμένο αντικείμενο" Ibid, pp. 296-297.

institutions, the instituted, by the social imaginary, significations, which it is incapable of creating on its own. Socialization is a unified procedure of ‘psychogenesis’ and ‘sociogenesis’ that concludes in the creation of the social individual: “Imposing socialization on the psyche is essentially imposing separation on it. For the psychical monad, this amounts to a violent break, forced by its ‘relation’ to others, more precisely, by the invasion of others as others, by means of which a ‘reality’ is constituted for the subject, a reality which is at once independent, malleable and participable, and the dehiscence (never fully realized) between the ‘psychical’ and the ‘somatic’”.<sup>23</sup>

Castoriadis named the first stage of socialization, which is indispensable for the further formation of the subject, “triadic phase” (subject, the other, object). Identifying *the other*, the mother in this particular case, the subject opens up, through the language the mother speaks, to society. The speaking mother incarnates the social institution and the social imaginary significations this institution includes. The subject sublimates, through contact with the mother, the social imaginary significations. Castoriadis transcends the Freudian limits defining sublimation in a radically different way, as “a process by means of which the psyche is forced to replace its ‘own’ or ‘private objects’ of cathexis (including its own ‘image’ for itself) by objects which exist and which have worth in and through their social institution and out of these to create for itself ‘causes’, ‘means’ or ‘supports’ of pleasure”.<sup>24</sup> With this notion of sublimation Castoriadis has paved the way for a psychoanalytic social theory according to which: a) The subject is understood, in its creativity, as institutional formation within society, b) In the core of institutions we meet the radical imaginary.

The concretization of the significations of the social imaginary, as a means to produce meaning in the psyche, is the work of the institutive social imaginary and cannot be reduced to functionalist explanations or to some natural necessity. Society is one more ‘auto-invention’, similar to the ‘auto-constitution’ of the subject, that socializes the psyche allowing

<sup>23</sup> “Η επιβολή του χωρισμού στην ψυχή είναι ουσιαστικά επιβολή του χωρισμού. Ισοδυναμεί, για την ψυχική μονάδα, με μια βίαιη ρήξη που προκύπτει αναγκαστικά από τη “σχέση” της με τους άλλους, ειδικότερα από την εισβολή των άλλων ως άλλων, ρήξη μέσω της οποίας για το υποκείμενο αφ’ ενός μια “πραγματικότητα”, συγχρόνως σαν ανεξάρτητη, ευλύγιστη και μεθεκτική, και αφ’ ετέρου ο σχισμός (ποτέ τελείως εκπληρωμένος) ανάμεσα στο “ψυχικό” και “σωματικό”” Ibid, p. 301.

<sup>24</sup> “Η διαδικασία με την οποία η ψυχή εξαναγκάζεται ν’ αντικαταστήσει τα “δικά της” ή “χωρίς” επένδυση “αντικείμενα” (μέσα στα οποία συμπεριλαμβάνεται και η ίδια η “εικόνα” που έχει για τον εαυτό της) με αντικείμενα που υπάρχουν και αξίζουν/ισχύουν μέσα στην κοινωνική τους θέσμιση και μέσω αυτής και να τα καταστήσει “αιτίες”, “μέσα” ή “στηρίγματα” πόθου γι’ αυτήν.” Ibid, p. 312.

it to access her particular world. This world contains the ‘magma’ of the social imaginary significations as represented in social institutions. Via magma the society provides psyche with sense, as a reaction to her persecution by the primal state of representative omnipotence.

Castoriadis postulates that every society self-institutes herself by instituting the magma of social imaginary significations, usually without acknowledging it, whereas, at the same time, it develops practices to disguise this self-institution. The acknowledgment of the self-institution process by a society is what indicates the existence of an autonomous activity. Autonomous society corresponds to a break up with heteronomous society which, in its turn, corresponds to a break up of the autonomous subject (which is characterized by self-reflection and deliberation) in relation to the object.

According to Castoriadis, who turns to psychoanalysis for an account of contemporary impulses for autonomy, the psychoanalytic cure is an instance of realization of political autonomy. Just as psychoanalysis aims at helping the individual to become capable of self-reflective deliberation, in a similar way the emancipatory project of democracy seeks to foster collective decision-making and reasoned judgments. In Castoriadis’s work the issue of the psyche cannot be separated from the issue of the socio-historical, since both are undeniable manifestations of the radical imaginary.<sup>25</sup> This perception, however, strongly affects the definition and the objective of psychoanalysis itself. Castoriadis defines psychoanalysis as a practical-poetical activity, clarifying that: “I name it poetical because it is creative. The outcome is, or should be, the self-decay of the analyzed, that means, strictly, the emergence of a different being. I name it practical, because I call praxis the elucidated activity, the object of which is the human autonomy and for which the only medium to reach that object is the autonomy itself as it evolves”.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to Freud, who was probably more moderate as far as the aims of analysis are concerned, Castoriadis proposes the establishment of a different relation with the unconscious and the creation of an autonomous subject, a subject that can fulfill the project of autonomy on the individual level. During analysis the self-reflective subject, with the

<sup>25</sup> The previously mentioned break-ups are also manifestations of the radical imaginary.

<sup>26</sup> “Την ονομάζω ποιητική γιατί είναι δημιουργική. Το αποτέλεσμα της είναι ή πρέπει να είναι, η αυτοαλλοίωση του αναλυόμενου, δηλαδή, αν σκεφτόμαστε αυστηρά, η ανάδυση ενός άλλου όντος. Την ονομάζω πρακτική, γιατί ονομάζω πράξη εν γένει την διαυγασμένη δραστηριότητα, το αντικείμενο της οποίας είναι η ανθρώπινη αυτονομία και για την οποία το μόνο μέσο για να φτάσει αυτό το αντικείμενο είναι αυτή η ίδια η αυτονομία καθώς εκτυλίσσεται.” in Cornelius Castoriadis, *Lectures in Greece*, Athens: Ypsilon, 1999, p. 84.

help of the psychoanalyst, attempts to elucidate the unconscious, when the latter is trying to gain the greatest possible level of autonomy. This view can be considered as a Freudian rephrasing of the Socratic “know thyself” as opposed to the reigning technical, pharmaceutical, and occultist approaches to the problems of the psyche. Castoriadis argues that the objective of analysis is to secure the autonomy of the analyzed, and this cannot be achieved via the domination of conscience over the unconscious, but only through the creation of an elucidating relation, where the subject has a knowledge of its drives as complete as possible. Elucidation encourages reflection over these drives, and this deliberation finally leads to a dilemma: which of these drives is going to be fulfilled.

If the subject of psychoanalytical research is to establish an elucidating relation between the ego (self) and the unconscious, it has to realize from the very start that the ‘ego’ is a social construction. It has to realize that the ego is preset to function within a certain social structure, reproducing it through the internalization of the same institutions that shaped it. It is clear that the project of autonomy, on an individual level, cannot be separated from the existing institutions of society and, therefore, the emancipation of the radical imaginary of the subject is only partly possible in a society which has not yet realized that its institution is an outcome of the radical social imaginary.

Within the contours of this interpretation, psychoanalysis, like a truly democratic politics and education, aims at forming a self-instituting society with people who acknowledge that they are the creators of institutions and as such do not believe in eternal values and ‘objective’ truths. To sum up, psychoanalysis aims at achieving the institution of an autonomous society, through the action of autonomous people, aware of the fact that the meaning of existence can be created only by their own elucidated practice for which they are exclusively responsible.

### **Creation and Imagination as the Sources of Democracy – The ‘paradigm’ of Athenian Democracy**

The concept of ‘creation’ is central in Castoriadis’ questioning. Contrary to the traditional perception of the concept in Western metaphysics, creation is not an attribute of an ontologically superior principle for him, not an infinite, eternal and omnipotent entity that is the cause of existence. Being itself is creation, in other words the emergence of new entities, such as time itself. As a result, the institution of society and the unfolding of history is also creation. Castoriadis suggests a conception of history as an imaginary creation that cannot be reduced to any premeditated plan, natural, rational or divine. It is self-created. Self-

-created *ex nihilo*, but not *cum nihilo* or *in nihilo*.<sup>27</sup> The exclusion of creation *ex nihilo*, within the larger part of inherited thought, is consistent only with the suppression of imagination.

Imagination, according to Castoriadis, has remained basically invisible for “traditional philosophy” and therefore unseen by it. In his work *On Psyche* Aristotle outlined the ideas that formed the prevailing perception of imagination in “traditional philosophy”, in which imagination is regarded as representational or just combinatory ability. Aristotle, however, renegotiated the matter of imagination at the end of the same work in a way that contravened the normative separation of sensation and intellect. Unfortunately, his effort was not continued by his successors. At the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century Martin Heidegger observed that Immanuel Kant had given special attention to transcendental imagination in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), but gave it up some years later in the second publication of his work. Heidegger describes this turn as a withdrawal, when facing the consequences of such a perception of imagination. However, he himself did not either refer to the imagination in the rest of his own work. Castoriadis observes that, although Sigmund Freud always referred to ‘phantasms’, he always avoided to examine and name this unique quality of psyche.

For Castoriadis, imagination renders the relation of the mind and the world possible. “The Imaginary”, he writes, “is the subject’s whole creation of the world for itself”<sup>28</sup>. He conceives the radical imaginary (radical as genuinely creative) as an unjustifiable *vis formandi*. Unjustifiable does not mean isolated or unconditioned. Radical imaginary, either as radical imagination (at the level of the individual), or as radical social imaginary (at the level of society), is grounded primarily on nature. It creates reality by creating new ontological forms, for instance institutions. Of course, all institutions have an ensemble-identifying dimension and they are permeated by the need for rational construction of a strong identity. The ensemble-identifying logic, however, is an inseparable part of thought, and as such a creation of the radical imaginary. In the same vein, the relation between nature and ensemble-identifying logic is understood as a creative meeting. Nature can be organized in an ensemble-identifying way by rational beings as long as its mode of Being is that of magma. Magma can be exploited in an unlimited way without ever becoming exhausted. Psyche, society, and history are self-creations of the radical imaginary that are represented as magmas.

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<sup>27</sup> Suzi Adams, “Interpreting Creation: Castoriadis and the Birth of Autonomy”, in *Thesis Eleven*, 83:25 (2005), p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain*, In Castoriadis, 1997, p. 5.

In 1978 the first volume of the *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*<sup>29</sup> is published, where the questioning of the second part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* is expanded. Castoriadis's interest has gradually turned towards ancient Greece. That turn has taken place, because the "project of autonomy" has extended from ancient Greece to the present day for him. The sociologist Edgar Morin wrote: "As against the dominant conceptions, for which the imaginary is nothing but illusion or superstructure, Castoriadis reintroduces it at the root of our human reality, just as against those conceptions unable to conceive the notion of the subject, Castoriadis recovers the constituents of the subject ... and underlines the radical importance of the emergence of the autonomous subject in the Athenian democracy some 2500 years ago".<sup>30</sup>

For Castoriadis, the only way to be autonomous in a society is to participate in the procedures of law-formation, to be equal with others, when deciding about the definition and imposition of a law and to agree with the way it was written. Some societies believed that laws were given by God, so they could not possibly be unjust. These are heteronymous societies, because they are slaves of their own laws. It was Ancient Greece, and then Western Europe (with the movements of Renaissance and Enlightenment), that protected and expanded certain liberties that our society still enjoys.

Focusing on the Athenian democracy of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Castoriadis highlights the immediate democratic procedures as opposed to those of modern representative democracies and, at the same time, develops a more radical new understanding of the ancient Greek world. The simultaneous appearance of philosophy and democracy in ancient Greece constitutes, for him, not simply a social-historical accident, but the break up of an ontological enclosure and the emergence of the project of autonomy. It constitutes a break-up because for the first time in the history of humanity society recognizes itself as the creator of its institutions. The project of autonomy was born in Athens as a specific demand for the self-institution of society.

This break-up has set the example for the Renaissance and afterwards for the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. From then on philosophy and politics are closely linked to the project of autonomy, as it was manifest in the middle-class struggle against the Church and the King, in the American, French and Russian revolution, in the Hungarian and Czech resistance to Soviet oppression, in the uprising of May 1968, in the workers' movements, in organizations fighting against racism and

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<sup>29</sup> This work was completed in six volumes, the last of which appeared in 1999, two years after Castoriadis's death.

<sup>30</sup> Edgar Morin, op. cit.

in support of women, minorities and oppressed groups in western societies.<sup>31</sup> For Castoriadis politics is an elucidated collective activity that deals with social institutions as a whole. The key-word that connects politics to philosophy, apart from 'autonomy', is 'elucidation'. What is important about the Athenian democracy is the movement for the establishment of democracy that includes an elucidation of institutions, philosophy in practice. The *demos*<sup>32</sup> establishes democracy and, at the same time, practices philosophy: it poses the question of the origin and the foundation of law, creating a public sphere of thought where philosophers remain *polites*.

Regardless of his admiration for the Athenian democracy and his staunch support for immediate democratic procedures, Castoriadis did not indulge in idealization nor has avoided to condemn the place of women and slaves in ancient Attica. Athenian democracy is by no means an ideal example, but it does constitute a motivating force for emancipated thought and political activity that aim at achieving a democratic society. He believes that culture, as well as education, consist of something, within social institutions, which transcends the dimension of simple functionality. He considers the crisis of modern society as cultural crisis. The cultural crisis in capitalism is not just the exclusion of the largest part of society from cultural activities (an exclusion that derives from the destruction of the psychical and social conditions which allow participation), but mostly demonstrates the capturing of the imagination and creativity of the people.

Castoriadis, as I have already mentioned above, has fiercely criticized contemporary "trends" such as post-structuralism and deconstruction. In that way, he treated a great variety of theoretical 'tools' that proved to be very interesting in the framework of cultural theory, as means for political intervention. He also offered a new approach to modernity. Modernity is interpreted as magma of magmas, where the magma of social imaginary significations of autonomy and the magma of social imaginary significations of capitalism coexist. The former, as a project of autonomy, is expressed and developed within the movements of women, students, workers etc... The latter appears as a demand for limitless domination of pseudo-rationalism over people and nature and provokes a constant crisis in modern society.

Castoriadis links the existing cultural crisis with the generalized conformism of people and their withdrawal from political activity. A

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<sup>31</sup> Castoriadis has recognized that these movements were the new forms of struggle against modern capitalism and living proof that the proletariat cannot be considered any longer as the exclusive proponent of revolution.

<sup>32</sup> The common people of an ancient Greek state (OED).

renewal of culture is unconceivable without the emergence of a new social-historical movement that will introduce the project of autonomy as a medium for a democratic society.

Democracy for him is not just the institutionalization of an equal and real *participation* of everyone in political power, but the equal *distribution* of authority to all citizens and to all sectors of society. It may seem that he adopts a functional view of society. In reality his version of democracy emphasizes two central principles, closely linked: *liberty* and *equality*. Liberty is conceived as the individual's ability to shape up his/her life (mainly, but not exclusively, through participation in social life), and society's reconsideration of tradition, so that its self-instituting process is rendered possible. This process does not take place having as its unique goal to create a certain kind of an elucidated and participatory human type, but aims at creating "human beings who live together with beauty, who live together with wisdom and that cherish the common good".<sup>33</sup> Moreover, democracy is not an idealized state of affairs, or a heavenly situation. On the contrary, it is bound, as a constant self-instituting of society, to remain incomplete.

Self-limitation, an essential element of democracy for Castoriadis, stems from the awareness of mortality, on an individual and collective level, that can only be reached by self-reflective citizens that have been educated *in* and *through* democracy *for* democracy. This education cannot be accomplished without the emergence of a different culture and the realization that self-instituting is an endless process, a limitless questioning of significations produced by society itself, without the safety net of eternal origins, or any kind of moral guarantee. Thus, the process towards autonomy is necessarily open-ended: "We have to create the good under imperfectly known and uncertain conditions. The project of autonomy is end and guide, it does not resolve for us effectively actual situations".<sup>34</sup>

Democratic society, in Castoriadis's theory, is formed by people who do not find any kind of meaning or truth outside the boundaries of what they themselves have created. As he points out: "Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world, of its own world".<sup>35</sup> This is the crux of his theory: to acknowledge the irreducible creativity of human beings in given social and historical circumstances.

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<sup>33</sup> "στην δημιουργία ανθρώπων όντων που ζουν μαζί με την ομορφιά, που ζουν μαζί με την σοφία και που αγαπούν το κοινό καλό" in Cornelius Castoriadis, *Human Spheres*, Athens: Ypsilon, 1995, p. 209.

<sup>34</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *Done and To Be Done*, 1989, In David Ames Curtis (ed.), *The Castoriadis Reader*, England: Blackwell, 1997, p. 400.

<sup>35</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis and the Imagination*, (tr./ed. David Ames Curtis), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 5.

## Conclusion

To sum up, in this article I tried to examine briefly some of the most influential ideas in Castoriadis's work and to explore certain inter-related concepts. Firstly, I briefly discussed his conception of modern capitalism as bureaucratic capitalism, a view initiated by his criticism of the USSR regime. His analysis of bureaucratic capitalism led to a reevaluation of Marxism and, later on, to his distancing from its political philosophy, though not to the rejection of the revolutionary ideal. By looking at notions such as "praxis", "doing", "project" and "elucidation", I tried to show how Castoriadis has sought to redefine revolution as a means for social and individual autonomy.

His break with Marxist theory and his psychoanalytic interests empowered him to criticize Lacan and read Freud in an imaginative, though unorthodox, fashion. This critical enterprise assisted greatly Castoriadis in his conception of the radical imaginary and in his unveiling of the political aspects of psychoanalysis. On the issue of the radical imaginary and its methodological repercussions, I wrote at length, focusing mainly on the radical imagination of the subject. I have also examined the transition from the 'psychic' to the 'subject', and how the latter relies on a reinterpretation of the notion of sublimation.

Finally, taking up the notion of "Being" as a starting point, I have returned to the notion of autonomy, seeking its roots in the ancient Greek world. I then attempt to clarify the meaning of "democracy" and "democratic society". Within this context, I study the notion of the social imaginary and its creations, the social imaginary significations. Their mode of Being (that is, the mode as magma) is related to their play in forming social institutions.

In order to reach a better understanding of Castoriadis's work as a whole, I placed some of his ideas in the context of contemporary European philosophy. It is true that theoretical discourses such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, cultural and media studies, towards which Castoriadis was suspicious and critical, may disrupt traditional disciplinary boundaries, but at the same time they seem to have nothing to say about the most important issues of our times, such as the looming ecological devastation, the depoliticization of public life, the privatization of public resources etc.

Castoriadis's political theory, on the contrary, seems to always be up-to date, when dealing with social problems that simply take different forms through time. He strives to develop a systematic perspective on the irreducible creativity in the radical imagination of the individual and in the institution of the social-historical sphere. In other words, he was one of the few to recognize the imaginative and creative capacities of human beings in their dealings with the world.

His questioning has become a reference point in contemporary social theory and will probably stay that way for a long time to come. Although some of his ideas may be confusing or seem utopian or even irrelevant to our globalized world, it is possible that, through further discussion of his theories and inquiry into both, the radical imagination of the individual and the social imaginary, alternative political practices can be discovered and put into practice in the future.

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\* Note: The translations of titles and extracts from Greek editions, as well as part of the terminology that appears in these editions, are mine.

#### ABSTRACT

During the last decade Castoriadis' questioning has become a reference point in contemporary social theory. In this article I examine some of the key notions in Castoriadis' work and explore how he strives to develop a theory on the irreducible creativity in the radical imagination of the individual and in the institution of the social-historical sphere. Firstly, I briefly discuss his conception of modern capitalism as bureaucratic capitalism, a view initiated by his criticism of the USSR regime. The following break up with Marxist theory and his psychoanalytic interests empowered him to criticize Lacan and read Freud in an imaginative, though unorthodox, fashion. I argue that this critical enterprise assisted greatly Castoriadis in his conception of the radical imaginary and in his unveiling of the political aspects of psychoanalysis. On the issue of the radical imaginary and its methodological repercussions, I'm focusing mainly on the radical imagination of the subject and its importance in the transition from the “psychic” to the “subject”. Taking up the notion of “Being” as a starting point, I examine the notion of autonomy, seeking its roots in the ancient Greek world. By looking at notions such as “praxis”, “doing”, “project” and “elucidation”, I show how Castoriadis sought to redefine revolution as a means for social and individual autonomy. Finally I attempt to clarify the meaning of “democracy” and “democratic society” in the context of the social imaginary and its creations, the social imaginary significations.