

## **Cornelius Castoriadis: Thinking about Political Theory**

In recent years the corporate-state apparatus has vastly increased its domination over the social imagination. Much of this development has hardly been noticed, since it has occurred through the further development of pervasive background conditions of late capitalist society: the saturation of the culture with consumptionist images, state and corporate hegemony over mass communications media. However, the qualitative advance in the manipulation of consciousness becomes strikingly evident in times of crisis, as has been seen in the mobilization of the public through militaristic and nationalistic images during the periods of the Gulf War, the War in Yugoslavia and most recently, the War in Afghanistan.

Just as military technology has increased greatly in effectiveness in recent years, the techniques for the manipulation and control of media images by the corporate-state apparatus have advanced enormously (though the latter development has somehow received less coverage on CNN). At the same time, we have seen dissident forces such as the anti-war, anti-militarist movement become more and more ineffectual. Much as the Spanish exiles refought the Civil War from Toulouse for almost four decades, the mainstream of the American left has been refighting the same imaginary war for almost three decades and counting. Meanwhile, the corporate-state apparatus has learned how to achieve not only “air supremacy” but also supremacy *imaginaire* — supremacy over the imagination. Such seemingly noteworthy realities as intensifying global social and ecological crisis can remain conveniently invisible in the resulting imaginary universe.

It is certainly a good time to reassess the state of the social imagination and its political implications. And in any such reassessment it would be difficult to ignore the significance of Cornelius Castoriadis, for among contemporary social theorists, none has done more to inspire analysis and inquiry in this area. In the four years since his death some have found inspiration in Castoriadis for a radically democratic ecopolitics (a topic I hope to explore on another occasion). In some cases his thought has been used in defense of a new sectarian “line,” that rather crudely instrumentalizes his ideas, destroying their philosophical depth and radicality. Others have reduced his thought to another episode in the burgeoning academic field of “French theory,” neglecting the revolutionary political dimension of his thought. But despite these abuses, anyone interested in a comprehensive, dialectical theory of society, a liberatory, transformative politics, and above all, an adequate politics of the imagination needs to come to terms with both the crucial insights and the limitations of Castoriadis’s thought.

The central concept in Castoriadis’s reformulation of social theory is the radical imaginary. He begins with the thesis that every society “institutes itself” through the creation of “social imaginary significations.” The radical imagination institutes by “constituting new universal forms” that result in shared social meanings.<sup>1</sup> Its radicality comes from the fact that it is “the emergence of something new” in history that is the result of “unmotivated creation.”<sup>2</sup> Its creative activity is unpredictable through any “series of logical operations,”<sup>3</sup> and results in “the emergence of radical otherness” and “non-trivial novelty.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is radical even in deeper ontological and epistemological senses, because the most fundamental elements of social understanding depends on it. Thus, even a society’s conception of the “rational” and the “real” presuppose “the primary and unmotivated positing of areal and arational significations”<sup>5</sup> related to the social imaginary.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cornelius Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 3, trans. and edited by David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>Cornelius Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1, trans. and edited by David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup>Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 184.

<sup>5</sup>Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

For Castoriadis, the classic example of the revolutionary nature of the social imaginary is the instituting of capitalism by the bourgeoisie. That revolutionary class not only expanded the forces of production and replaced existing relations of production with new ones; it also created “a new definition of *reality*, of what *counts* and of what *does not count* — therefore, of what *does not exist* (or nearly so: what can be counted and what cannot enter into accounting books).”<sup>6</sup> Modern capitalism can be understood both as the further development of a traditional logic of domination that has been central to Western society, and as a historical break in which this logic is developed in a qualitatively new manner.

Castoriadis sees the “core” of the traditional Western ontology in a mode of thought and valuation that he calls “*identitary* or *ensemblist* logic.”<sup>7</sup> This logic conceives of all objects, whether in the natural world, the theoretical world, or the world of subjective experience, as distinct and well defined. Furthermore, it takes all realities as consisting of elements that can be assembled into wholes, disassembled and reassembled into new wholes.<sup>8</sup> The paradigm for such thinking is obviously mathematics. Castoriadis attributes the compelling quality of this logic in large part to the fact that it is an inescapable element of any society, and is necessary for language, social practice, and indeed survival.<sup>9</sup>

However, beyond its social utility, this logic contains within itself the seeds of domination of humanity and nature. It is capable of becoming a kind of “madness of unification” that seeks to annihilate all difference and otherness and reduce all realities to its own terms.<sup>10</sup> The project of economic, political and technological domination initiated by the bourgeoisie has over the past several centuries been inspired by this very madness, which has defined rationality and “the end of knowledge” in terms of “the mastery and possession of nature.”<sup>11</sup>

For Castoriadis, this modern project of domination is a specific instance of a generalized condition of social alienation that has spanned history. Social alienation in all its forms is a process in which “imaginary significations” become autonomous. Society loses awareness of the fact that its social institutions are the free creations of

---

<sup>6</sup>Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>7</sup>Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution*, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>8</sup>Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), p. 209.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, p. 208.

<sup>10</sup>Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution*, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, p. 272.

human beings, and these institutions take on an aura of sacredness and inherent authority. Yet social alienation and heteronomy cannot be traced entirely to disordered or restrictive social practices and forms of false consciousness. For Castoriadis, “an institution of society which institutes inequality corresponds much more ‘naturally’...to the exigencies of the originary psychical core, of the psychical monad which we carry within us and which always dreams, whatever our age, of being all-powerful and at the center of the world.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, social hierarchy builds in some ways on foundations within “the individual’s psychical economy”<sup>13</sup>

Despite Castoriadis’s break with classical Marxist analysis, his central political project is in a sense the development Marx’s concept of the “End of Prehistory.” For Marx, world history has thus far been the history of collective self-alienation in which the products of human creative activity have become alien forces that fetter humanity. The end of prehistory will signal not only the reclaiming by humanity of the alienated products of its own activity, but also the reclaiming of the creative activity itself. Castoriadis develops this theme by focusing on the necessity of reappropriating what he sees as the deepest dimension of this creative activity — the radical imaginary.

Castoriadis contends that there are two imaginary poles that have structured the Western societies in recent centuries. On the one hand there is “the capitalistic nucleus” consisting of “the imaginary signification of unlimited expansion of pseudorational mastery over nature and over humans” and another nucleus centering around “the project of social and individual autonomy,” (alias “the emancipatory project,” “the democratic movement,” or “the revolutionary movement”).<sup>14</sup> He claims that the autonomy project, which has its origins in ancient Athens, “has dominated Western European history since the end of the Middle ages.”<sup>15</sup> Its modern history begins with the bourgeois revolt against feudalism, spans the period of the great revolutions and the workers movement, and continues into recent times

---

<sup>12</sup>Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 135.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 221; Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* Castoriadis’s insights concerning the crucial contribution of Athenian culture to the development of democracy and critical thought, and his rejection of the contributions of other pre-modern cultures, are both worthy of attention.

in the social movements of women, gay people, students, and ecologists.

The goal of this project, according to Castoriadis, is a society in which the community realizes that the fundamental rules by which it organizes itself come not from God, nature or even any historical necessity or inherent structure of rationality within history, but from its own creative choice. Post-revolutionary society according to Castoriadis, “will be a society that self-institutes itself explicitly, not once and for all, but continuously.”<sup>16</sup>

Castoriadis is certainly one of the preeminent modern theorists of both the imagination and of social liberation. However, an examination of his analysis of the imaginary and his formulation of the “autonomy project” reveals certain deep problems. While the former seeks to undercut the imperious Prometheism of the “capitalist nucleus” with its “identitary logic” and the accompanying project of economic and technological domination, the autonomy project seems to retain a certain residual element of “heroic will to power.” Castoriadis seeks to avoid the decentering and loss of integrity of the self (and of the social collectivity as historical subject) that would come from tracing the roots of the imaginary in larger social realities. His solution is the theory of imaginative creation *ex nihilo* and the attribution of autonomous creation to individuals and to the collectivities they constitute. But there is a basic inconsistency between such a conception of autonomy, which locates agency within the subject, and radical creation, which always finds the sources of agency elsewhere. In reality, the radical imagination has always demolished the illusions of autonomy, and Castoriadis was not prepared to come to grips with this challenge.

One of the strengths of Castoriadis’s theoretical project is his effort (in part successful) to avoid two errors. On the one hand, the imaginary been looked upon reductively as a mere superstructural phenomenon, while on the other it has been interpreted abstractly and idealistically as the spontaneous product of individual consciousness. For him, the imaginary is more than either of these views concedes: it is an instituted social reality that operates as a material force in history. However, although Castoriadis escapes some forms of idealism, his “autonomy project” seems ultimately to succumb to this snare. He offers no mediating link between the reality of the imaginary as a form of collective social creation and the concrete historical project of

---

<sup>16</sup>Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

creating an autonomous, self-managed society. One has no reason to believe that merely pointing out (and to whom — certain political theorists?) that humanity can autonomously create imaginary significations and that culture can be the free expression of human creativity will motivate large numbers of human beings to actually struggle for autonomy or engage in revolutionary cultural creativity. Nor does it indicate why, indeed, they ought to.

Castoriadis implies that a realization that society makes its own rules according to its own free decision will somehow have revolutionary implications. But late capitalist, late modern “cynical reason” accepts none of those illusions, and yet has no vision of liberation. The idea of autonomous value-creation was also at the core of a certain fascist conception of an elite of *Übermenschen* who are “beyond good and evil.” And it is a notorious fact that Sartre thought that the existentialist conception of free self-creation might lead to Communism, or perhaps Maoism, or perhaps anarchism, but the connection with any of them was never made quite clear. Something more was needed, and it is difficult to find it in Castoriadis either.

Castoriadis’s conception of the imaginary is at once too radical and not radical enough. It is radical in grasping the irreducible, creative dimension of the imaginary, but not radical enough in overlooking its rootedness. It is true, as Castoriadis notes, that there are cultures in the Pacific, for example, “whose technical ensembles are closely akin but which differ among themselves and greatly as our culture differs from that of the European fourteenth century.”<sup>17</sup> And this refutes any technological or other reductionism. But how much of this difference can be attributed to the radical imaginary? A great deal can be correlated with the existence of either patriarchal or non-patriarchal social structures, which have material and not only imaginary determinants (patriarchy was not created *ex nihilo* and diverse patriarchal cultures show considerable institutional continuity). An adequate understanding of such cultures requires attention both to those elements that are irreducibly unique and seemingly “unmotivated,” and to those that can be explained through an investigation of social determinants. And these determinants, including the imaginary ones, must be investigated in all their complexity.

Unfortunately, one does not find in Castoriadis’s work a great deal of empirical investigation of the imaginary. We might compare

---

<sup>17</sup>Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

Castoriadis work with that of Gilbert Durand, who, in his magnum opus, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*,<sup>18</sup> investigates its rich content over history in minute empirical detail. Though Durand was engaged in a structuralist rather than a politically liberatory and socially transformative project, any success of the latter approach to the imaginary will depend on a similar immersion in the phenomena.

Thus we must ask, not only in regard to the vast expanse of history, but also in relation to our own society, to what extent there is “a” social imaginary and to what extent is there an “imaginary of imaginaries.” We must recognize that the imaginary is regional, not territorial, and devote careful attention to the various imaginary regions that are interrelated and mutually determine one another in very specific though complex ways. An understanding of the contemporary imaginary requires a detailed inquiry into the dialectic of many imaginary regions. These include the productionist and consumptionist imaginaries, the statist and nationalist imaginaries, and the patriarchal imaginary, to mention some of the most important ones.

When Castoriadis does approach the phenomena more concretely, he focuses very heavily on the technical dimension of the dominant imaginary — that which relates to the ensemblist-identitary logic and productionist image of a powerful, rational, and effective technological system. But it is essential to point out that consumptionist ideology and the consumptionist imaginary performs much the same legitimating function, and can do it through images such as “caring for nature.” In the consumptionist imaginary utopia, we can, in more senses than one, recycle ourselves into oblivion.

In Castoriadis’s analysis, it is “the economy that exhibits most strikingly the domination of the imaginary at every level — precisely because it claims to be entirely and exhaustively rational.”<sup>19</sup> And this is true, But this is only (at most) half of the picture. In the productionist/technical realm such “rationality” prevails (instrumental-technical-bureaucratic rationality). But in the consumptionist sphere, the irrational reigns. And in the economic as a whole one finds a perverse dialectic between this rationality and irrationality. The realm of consumption is the realm of fetishism, of mysterious, quite irrational

---

<sup>18</sup>Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (trans. of 11th French edition; Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999). The most important contemporary work on the imaginary in France has been done not under the influence of Castoriadis, but rather in relation to the intellectual lineage, George Bachelard-Gilbert Durand-Michel Maffesoli.

<sup>19</sup>Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution, op. cit.*, p. 156.

powers, and of the harnessing of desires that are neither rational nor transparent (often even to those who exercise the techniques of manipulation).<sup>20</sup>

Despite Castoriadis's movement in the direction of political ecology in his later work, he never reformulated the central themes of his philosophy in the light of ecological thought. Had he thus reconsidered his theory of the social imaginary he might have undertaken a comprehensive ecology of the imagination, which would then have taken him back in the direction of dialectical social thought that he largely abandoned in his formulation of the radical, unconditioned nature of the imaginary. We can, however, taking off from Castoriadis's illuminating insights and oversights, undertake this project. In doing so, we will find it necessary to engage in a careful exploration of the various regions of the imaginary, paying close attention to the phenomena, to investigate the material basis for imaginary transformations and the politics of the imagination as a concrete social practice, and to analyze the dialectical interaction and mutual determination between the imaginary and other social realms.

---

<sup>20</sup>See Joel Kovel, *The Age of Desire: Reflections of a Radical Psychoanalyst* (New York: Pantheon, 1981) for what seems to me still to be the best detailed analysis of the consumptionist, productionist and other fundamental institutional, ideological and imaginary dimensions of society as exhibited in contemporary subjectivity.