

THE RADICAL FREEDOM OF THE IMAGINARY IN CASTORIADIS

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ABSTRACT: Castoriadis' logic-ontology of Magmas provides the philosophical presupposition for a real democracy anchored on the radical freedom of the imaginary, which breeds an ontological novelty, manifested primarily in the psyche and the social-historical. As such, Castoriadis' radical freedom of the imaginary bears some groundbreaking philosophical, epistemological and political consequences. Firstly, it breaks with the "determinacy principle" penetrating most part of traditional philosophy and modern science. Secondly, it introduces an alternative epistemological approach by rendering the living being a *for itself* developing in terms of constant creation and destruction. Thirdly, and most importantly, it creates *per se* a novel political paradigm, crystallized in the project of individual and collective autonomy, which opposes equally, yet differently, both Marxism and liberalism, for it consists in the radicalization of democracy through the establishment of social freedom, that is, the equal opportunity for people's participation in politics.

KEYWORDS: the novel, indeterminacy, creation ex nihilo, radical imaginary, social imaginary, individual and collective autonomy, direct democracy

INTRODUCTION

How does a novel ontological form emerge? What is the "novel"? What is the relation of the imaginary to "the novel"? What is the impact of the emergence of "the novel" on philosophy, epistemology and politics? I attempt here to sketch out some answers to these questions based on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, a contemporaneous Greek-French philosopher, best known to the general public for his political philosophy, initially presented in the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* from 1949 till 1965 and evolved thereafter in his later writings. His project of individual and collective autonomy, following his critique of capitalism and

Marxism, is the most prominent reference point of his work. But it is often neglected in the literature the relation of his political project to a particular ontology Castoriadis was working on, after moving to Paris in 1944 to obtain a Ph. D. in philosophy¹. Castoriadis did not complete his Ph. D. thesis, for he devoted himself to political thinking, the latter crystallized in the articles he wrote in the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, of which he was the co-founder along with Claude Lefort. It remained almost completely unknown, till the recent publication of some of his early manuscripts², that, alongside his writings in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Castoriadis was elaborating a logic-ontology that would be more clearly formulated in his later writings, that would bring about a break with Hegelo-Marxism and traditional philosophy.

In this article, I focus on the concept of the imaginary in the thought of Castoriadis by examining how a novel ontological form emerges. To activate the political project of Castoriadis in the creation of new paradigms of institutionalizing and present new solutions to the pressing social and ecological issues of our times, we need to come to grips with Castoriadis's ontology; to understand in depth how the novel is conceived; in which fashion it emerges in nature, the psyche and the social-historical world respectively; how nature, the psyche and the social-historical interact in the emergence of the novel; which are its ontological-philosophical, scientific and political implications.

The paper begins by demonstrating the main features of Castoriadis's logic-ontology of Magmas, that is, the indeterminacy of ontological creation. It then goes on to show that, in Castoriadis, the locus par excellence of ontological creation is the radical imaginary of the human psyche and the social imaginary of the anonymous collective. It makes the case that Castoriadis's conceptualization of the imaginary generates some major philosophical, epistemological, and political breakthroughs that shake up the foundations of modern philosophy, epistemology and political theory. To some extent, Castoriadis's ontology reflects the contemporaneous breakthroughs in physics, psychoanalysis and biology. From a strictly political standpoint, Castoriadis's

¹ Nicolas Poirier, "La pensée philosophique de Castoriadis à l' époque de *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" in *Cornelius Castoriadis. Réinventer l' autonomie*, sous la direction de Blaise Bachofen, Sion Elbaz et Nicolas Poirier, Éditions du Sandre, Paris, 2008, pp. 59-72; Nicolas Poirier, *L' ontologie politique de Castoriadis, Création et Institution*, Édition Payot & Rivages, Paris, 2011, pp. 21-33.

² Cornelius Castoriadis, *Histoire et Création, textes philosophiques inédits (1945-1967)*, Édition du Seuil, Paris, 2009.

conceptualization of the imaginary introduces a radical notion of freedom that sustains philosophically his project of individual and collective autonomy, striving towards a democratic and ecological reorientation of society. My core argument is that, in Castoriadis, direct democracy is the expression of a social freedom, deriving from the “evolution” of the “elementary” imaginary of the living being into the radical imaginary of the psyche and the social imaginary of the anonymous collective. Social freedom stems from the autonomization/rupture of the social-historical from nature. Contrary to potential naturalistic misinterpretations of Castoriadis’s concept of freedom, my main aim here is not to ascribe the concept of autonomy in the natural world or physis, but to stress the social dimension of freedom, anchored philosophically on Castoriadis’s logic-ontology of Magmas, which holds the ontological preconditions for a postfoundational theory of direct democracy.

Indeterminacy and Creation

Castoriadis’s ontology consists in the Logic of Magmas, the basic properties of which are indeterminacy and creation. Whereas it is no place here to analyze *in toto* Castoriadis’s Logic of Magmas, suffices to mention that Being is a magma or, in other words, Chaos or Abyss marked by indeterminacy and creation, thus echoing the notions of infinity and Chaos in Anaximander and Hesiod respectively³. In the framework of Castoriadis’s ontology, Being is Chaos or Abyss, unfolding in a multiplicity of two modes: difference and otherness⁴. Difference follows what Castoriadis calls as “the ensemblistic-identitary Logic” or, for brevity, the ensidic Logic, originating in Aristotle’s Typical Logic and further elaborated by contemporaneous Mathematics set theory. Georg Cantor, the

³ According to Castoriadis’s reading of Anaximander, the notion of infinity does not merely signifies the endless (the *atermon*), which was attributed by Aristotle to Anaximander and has prevailed in Mathematics ever since. In Anaximander, the notion of infinity refers to the indeterminate in quality and quantity or, in other words, the empirically non-representable. As for Castoriadis’s reading of Hesiod’s notion of Chaos, chaos signifies the void of the world, an open space with indeterminate limits, and the amorphous mixture, whereby novel ontological forms emerge. In short, for Castoriadis, Anaximander’s notion of infinity tangles with Hesiod’s notion of Chaos, as long as they both conceptualize the indeterminacy of Being’s self-creation. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce, 1. D’Homère à Héraclite, Séminaires 1982-1983*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, mars 2004, pp. 163-201.

⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. Ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

founder of set theory, defines a set as a collection of distinct elements of our observation or thought into an organic whole, the interrelations of which can be fully determined according to the laws of Mathematics⁵. For Castoriadis, the concept of difference applies to the deduction or abduction of a novel ontological form from a predetermined set of elements on the model of Mathematics set theory. Difference refers to the recomposition of already existent set of elements. Otherness, instead, points to the creation of new forms of Being, surpassing predetermined sets of elements. Otherness is an attribute of time *per se*.

Time is being insofar as being is otherness, creation and destruction (...) Time is creation and destruction – that means, time is being in its substantive determinations.⁶

It is no place here to go through Castoriadis's notion of time in full detail⁷. Suffice to note that, for Castoriadis, Being is temporal and time is otherness in terms of the creation and destruction of ontological lifeforms. The creation of a novel form presupposes the destruction of a previous form and the alteration of the latter by/into the former⁸. The novel emerges on the grounds of the old, but the old enters the novel in terms of the novel⁹. The novel is not a hybrid of the old, but an otherness carrying the old within itself. In this sense, otherness is irreducible, indeducible, and non-reproducible¹⁰. Otherness is a creation *ex nihilo*, that is, neither *cum nihilo* nor *in nihilo*. But what does *ex nihilo* mean?

Being is creation, *vis formandi*: not creation of “matter-energy”, but creation of forms. Of that creation, there exist each time necessary but not sufficient conditions. Creation as to the form, the *eidōs*, is *ex nihilo*; but it is neither *in nihilo* nor *cum nihilo*¹¹.

Castoriadis does not purport to violate the second law of thermodynamics

⁵ Georg Cantor, ‘Beiträge zur Begründung der transfiniten Mengenlehre (I)’, *Mathematische Annalen*, 46 (4), 1895: pp.481-512.

⁶ Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, p. 395, p. 399.

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the concept of time in Castoriadis's, including its relation to the concept of time in contemporary physics and its convergencies and divergencies from the concept of time in Bergson, see: Vangelis Papadimitropoulos, ‘Indeterminacy and Creation in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis’, *Cosmos and History: the Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2015, pp. 256-268.

⁸ Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, pp. 396-401.

⁹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *A Society Adrift, Interviews and Debates: 1974-1997*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2010, p. 54.

¹⁰ Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, p. 395.

¹¹ Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, pp. 250-254

according to which matter-energy remains constant over time. He states that Being is not a creation *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*, but from within and by a preexisting form of Being. Nothingness is neither the substratum of Being nor a negativity deployed in terms of a reversed positivity, as introduced by Hegel. Nothingness lies in the indeterminacy of the creation of a new form inasmuch as the latter is subjected to necessary but not sufficient conditions. The *novel* is tied to necessary conditions – it is not created whatsoever. Yet, it transcends necessity by transforming into originality. For Castoriadis, there is no strict sense of causality. The latter stems from what Castoriadis calls as “the determinacy principle”, that is, a central tendency of inherited thought to ascribe to Being an essence, be it either God’s mathematical forms in Plato’s *Timaeus*; or God’s rationality in Aristotle’s naturalistic account of Being; or Kant’s transcendental subject; or Hegel’s Absolute Spirit; or Marx’s historical materialism. “The determinacy principle” implies that we could deduct or abduct from a universal substance or driving force the entire multiplicity of Being’s types and elements and, thus, discover its organic structure by applying its Logic of identity-unity, which can provide for a scientific reasoning premised on necessary and sufficient conditions. It is the same reasoning that originates in Aristotle’s Typical Logic, evolving into the scientific logic of modern positivism. In this sense, Being is the natural unfolding of its a priori Logic. Being is deterministic and, in a sense, tautological.

Castoriadis holds, instead, that strict causality applies to Being’s mode of difference immanent in all sorts of sets of elements determined according to Mathematics sets theory. Alternatively, the mode of otherness corresponds to the indeterminacy of creation, for which there are no sufficient, but only necessary conditions, inasmuch as otherness emerges as a creation *ex nihilo*, that is, a creation that cannot be reduced to a mechanistic causality¹². We cannot provide, for example, a comprehensive account of why, and mostly how, Einstein discovered the theory of relativity or Kafka wrote *The Castle*. We can describe some necessary conditions, outline some intrinsic connections between Einstein’s theory of relativity and past physics or Kafka’s *The Castle* and past literature, but neither is causally reduced to nor deducted by Newton’s mechanics and past literature.

¹² Cornelius Castoriadis, *Fait et à faire*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1997, pp. 21-22.

For Castoriadis, Being does not consist in the laws of Mathematics set theory, but in the logic-ontology of Magmas. At a first glance, the very term “logic-ontology of Magmas” is contradictory inasmuch as it indicates the ensidic dimension of Being. But the ensidic is only one dimension of Being. The other dimension belongs to the ontology of Magmas.

A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations, but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations.¹³

The logic-ontology of Magmas does not consist in a composition of ensemblist organizations but in a web/network dense with multivocality, wherein each ontological category is co-determined by the set of elements it applies to¹⁴. A magma is a qualitatively different mode of Being that transcends ensemblist organisation. Castoriadis attempted to construe an explicit Logic of Magmas, but, as he himself admits, he did not succeed in doing so¹⁵. He stressed, however, the need to create a novel Logic in the ontological form of Magmas.

We think that we can, that a new logic can, should, and will be elaborated. For in the end there can be no escaping the need to forge a language and ‘concepts’ adequate to deal with such objects of study as ‘elementary’ particles, the cosmic field, the self-organisation of the living being, the unconscious of the social historical. This new logic will be able to take account of what, in itself, is neither a disorganized chaos giving rise to ‘impressions’ out of which consciousness can freely tailor ‘facts’, nor a system (or a well-articulated sequence, whether finite or infinite, of systems) of neatly divided ‘things’ in an orderly alignment with each other; yet which nonetheless also remains ‘in part’ capable of being grasped in a certain manner – and in a manner, moreover, which continues to present a ‘partial’ testimony to the relative freedom of consciousness vis-à-vis the given. This new logic will not supersede set-theoretical logic, nor simply adjoin itself to it. By virtue of the very nature of our language, the only relationship it could entertain with set-theoretical logic would be circular, since it would itself, for example, have to employ ‘distinct’ and ‘defined’ terms in order to be able to say that what there is, or can be thought or said, is not in its ultimate essence organized in accordance with the modes of the distinct and the defined.¹⁶

¹³ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Polity Press, UK, USA, 1987, p. 343.

¹⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, The Harvester Press, London, 1984, p. 218.

¹⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, UK, USA, 1997, pp. 290-318.

¹⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, The Harvester Press, London, 1984, pp. 216-217.

The circular relation of an incomplete or yet to be completed logic-ontology of Magmas to the set-theoretical logic escapes the tautological cycle of ontological creation inasmuch as otherness resides in the indeterminate spiraling of cosmos and the imaginary.

The Radical and Social Imaginary

In Castoriadis's ontology, Being is divided into three entangled but separated strata: the *physis*, the psyche, and the social-historical¹⁷. *Physis* is the first stratum of Being, split into the non-living being (inorganic nature) and the living being (organic nature). The non-living being consists solely in the ensemblistic-identitary dimension or, for brevity, the ensidic Logic, according to which nature can be divided into sets of distinct elements analyzed in terms of Mathematics set theory. The living being, instead, features three additional properties: intentionality (*l' intention*), affect (*l' affect*) and representation (*la représentation*).

Intentionality resembles Aristotle's notion of *automaton* and what continental philosophy refers to as the "for itself" (*pour soi*). It points to an elementary finality aiming at the self-preservation of the species through self-reproduction. Finality is accompanied by the feeling of pleasure (*plaisir*) and displeasure (*deplaisir*). Yet, however similar seems at first Castoriadis's notions of intentionality and affect with Aristotle's notions of *automaton* and *orekton*, Castoriadis's conceptualization differs radically from Aristotle's thinking. In Castoriadis, there is no God assuming the role of the first unmoved mover (*proton kinoun akineton*), driving nature's *automaton* and *orekton*. Castoriadis's notion of the living being echoes Aristotle's dynamic interpretation of organic nature, but it simultaneously dissociates from a Typical Logic that evolves into the mechanistic worldview of the Classical age, firstly introduced by Descartes and developed later on by Newton and Laplace, eventually culminating in the scientific determinism of modernity. Castoriadis does not consider the living being a mechanistic automaton, the self-reproduction of which is explained in terms of causes and effects.

In contrast to ensidic Logic, Castoriadis conceives of the living being as a "for itself" evolving according to the temporal otherness of biological autonomy.

¹⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Polity Press, UK, USA, 1987, pp. 229-336.

Castoriadis draws from Francesco Varela's notion of biological autonomy to describe the way representation functions in the living being. In 1979, Varela, in co-operation with his teacher Humberto Maturana, introduced the notion of biological autonomy, which differentiates from the notion of Aristotelian teleonomy¹⁸. Biological autonomy refers to the capacity of nature's flora and fauna to filter out inorganic matter via its sensory organs cognitive-information closure. That is to say, each biological species, be it a plant or animal, performs a unique sensory interaction with inorganic matter. It is due to this uniqueness that nature's vast biodiversity unfolds before us. Each living being discerns between "noise" and a useful for itself inorganic matter, transformed into organic information for the purposes of self-preservation and self-reproduction.

Castoriadis observes that the unique sensory filtering of nature's ensemblistic-identitary dimension by each living being, explicated by Varela and Maturana in terms of a biological autonomy, constitutes *per se* an heterogeneous ontological creation, an alteration that develops "*for itself*" into a sensorial and logical closure, thereby sustaining the unique "subjectivity" of each living being. "Obviously, in all this we are not presupposing, in the living being, any "subjectivity" of the kind familiar to us. We are presupposing, however, the evident fact that each living being (each living species, at least—an olive, a tree, a starfish, a cicada) forms and informs, organizes the world, after its own fashion (. . .) The living being creates new forms, and, first of all, creates itself *qua* form or rather super-form that integrates and deploys itself in an innumerable multiplicity of categorial forms specific to the living being (nutrition, metabolism, homeostasis, reproduction, sexuation, etc.), while at the same time it multiplies itself by differentiating itself into different species"¹⁹.

Hence, for Castoriadis, representation does not consist neither in a photograph of nature nor in a passive processing of external data in terms of an input-output pattern, as interpreted by behaviorism and a vast part of cognitive science, including information theory and artificial intelligence. The living being is not a calculative "machine" processing stable external stimuli. To be accurate, there are no stable external stimuli in nature, namely, no colors, sounds, and

¹⁸ Francesco Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy*, North Holland, New York and Oxford, 1979.

¹⁹ Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, pp. 349-351.

smells, but radiant energy and electromagnetic waves, filtered as colors, sounds and smells by each living being's specific sense. "Thus, for us humans as simple living beings, polarized light does not exist (whereas it is of utmost importance for the bees or the sea turtles), as well as radio waves do not exist for none earth living being"²⁰.

Jeff Klooger rightly points out that, for Castoriadis, the living being is not reduced to the gene as to its specific traits or predispositions, but as to the reproduction of the species *per se*. As species, the living being is encoded in the gene and reproduced as such. The cow will give birth to a calf in accordance with the genetic make-up of the given species. The predispositions and traits of the living being are reduced to the DNA in terms of necessary but not sufficient conditions. The genetic make-up of the living being echoes Aristotle's notion of potentiality, which depends on the actual conditions of the environment, including the psyche and the social-historical. Biology relates to nature in a way that does not contravene nature's laws. Yet, biology is not reduced to physics. "The physical universe and its laws may be regarded as the necessary condition for the emergence of the living being, but they are not their sufficient condition; they determine neither *that* life shall emerge nor *what* shall emerge as life"²¹. The living being's actual development is an indeterminate function of genetic predispositions and specific environmental conditions (inorganic nature).

For Castoriadis, one of the most crucial drivers of the living being's self-development is the intentionality of affect, represented by "the elementary imaginary". The living being encapsulates Varela and Maturana's notion of biological autonomy by evolving into a "*for itself*" that filters the ensidic dimension of nature via its unique sensory filter. The "subjective" filtering of nature via the representation of the living being stems from what Castoriadis has coined "the elementary imaginary" (*une imagination élémentaire*), which is the initial form of the radical imaginary, corresponding to the body or, otherwise, to the living being's "animal psyche"²². The elementary imaginary mirrors the representational transformation of nature's ensidic dimension into the living being's diversified

²⁰ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Human Domains*, Ipsilon, Athens, 1995, p. 350 (In Greek).

²¹ Jeff Klooger, *Castoriadis: Psyche, Society, Autonomy*, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2009, p. 94.

²² Castoriadis, *Fait et à faire*, pp. 294-336.

sensorial and logical closure (*clôture*). To put it crudely, for Castoriadis, nature bears in itself a sort of primordial imagination, evolving from the elementary imaginary of the living being into the radical imaginary of the psyche and the social imaginary of the anonymous collective.

We can, therefore, trace the “origin” of ontological novelty in the first stratum of the imaginary, that is, the elementary imaginary of the living being, unfolding in the form of a representation fueled by affect and intentionality. I use the term “origin” here not in a linear fashion, but in terms of rupture and mutation. The elementary imaginary transforms into the second stratum of the imaginary, that is, the radical imaginary of the human psyche that emerges out of the biological over-development of the central nervous system, the latter accompanying the autonomization of the feeling of pleasure. The autonomization of pleasure reflects the domination of representational pleasure over sexual pleasure, following the biological-organic defunctionalization of pleasure, thereby resulting in the autonomy of the radical imaginary from the biological functionality of the living being’s organic self-preservation and self-reproduction. Thus, the autonomy of the feeling of pleasure develops in the free intentional / affective / representational flux of the human psyche.

We can now relocate the conception of the novel in the radical imaginary or, in other words, in the free intentional / affective / representational flux of the human psyche, which, as such, is not reduced to the causality of the ensidic dimension of nature. Whereas autonomy for the living being concerns “functionality”, autonomy for the human psyche is totally dysfunctional. The radical imaginary consists in the capacity of human psyche to disengage from the purely organic functions of the body that serve exclusively the self-preservation of the living being. Whereas the capacity of the elementary imaginary to see an image (perception) is found in every living being, the radical imaginary expands this capacity by positing that which is not there. The radical imaginary is not merely a mirror of nature, but a creation *ex nihilo* of novel imaginary significations. Whereas the elementary imaginary of the living being is enslaved into functionality, the radical imaginary of the human psyche breaks with the ensidic dimension of nature through the autonomization of imagination.

When entering the realm of the human psyche, intentionality transforms into desire. The radical imaginary of the human psyche lays the ground for the

interplay between the subconscious and the conscious. For Castoriadis, though, the interplay of the subconscious and the conscious surpasses the Freudian conflict between purely sexual pleasure and societal repression, for it takes the form of a representational pleasure that dominates sexual pleasure, thereby transposing itself into the social imaginary of the anonymous collective, the latter reflecting the magma of the imaginary significations of the social-historical. For Castoriadis, the real conflict is not the one between sexual pleasure and the relevant repression of society, but the one between the monadic core of the psyche and society, that is, between the primitive urges of the psyche and *the instituted*²³.

The conception of the novel emerges now anew on the basis of the sublimation of the primitive urges of the human psyche into society via the instituted imaginary significations of the anonymous collective. The radical imaginary of the human psyche transforms into the social imaginary of the anonymous collective via the creation of an inter-general representation, a common or social representation that crystallizes the magma of the imaginary significations of the social-historical into the meaning of language²⁴. For Castoriadis, there can be no thought without or outside language. It is for this reason that the word “Jesus” echoes the same to all adherents of Christianity, and the word “cow” holds the same religious meaning for all adherents of Hinduism. In this sense, the creation of the novel surpasses the sublimation of the psyche into society, inasmuch as it transcends the boundaries of the conflict between the psyche and society, re-establishing anew the self-institutionalization of society on the basis of the constant friction between the instituting power of the radical imaginary and the instituted power of the social imaginary. Therefore, the “final” *locus* of the novel is the social-historical, wherein the radical imaginary constantly interacts with the social imaginary, since the sublimation of the psyche into society is a never-ending two-way process.

The Social-Historical

Castoriadis’s conception of the imaginary has a number of critical philosophical, epistemological and sociopolitical implications. Firstly, the ontological

²³ Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, pp. 294-316.

²⁴ Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 246.

indeterminacy that sustains the creation of the novel breaches the “determinacy principle” of traditional philosophy. In Castoriadis’ ontology, there is no universal substance, no essence, no driving force, no origin nor foundation of Being. The only existent “principle” is the indeterminacy of creation, being itself an immanent cause and effect: the freedom inherent in the radical imaginary of the human psyche; the freedom, thus, hypostatized in the ontological creation of the novel, as manifested in the evolution of the social-historical.

Secondly, the freedom of the social imaginary breaks with the determinism of natural science, for it introduces an alternative epistemological conception of nature, reflecting the evolution of natural sciences in the 20th century. Nature is not perceived by Castoriadis in terms of the ensidic Logic of Mathematics set theory, according to which nature is a superset of sets, composed by structural elements, the logical relations of which organize the function of the system as a whole. The ensidic dimension is immanent in nature. Yet, nature transforms into the magma of the imaginary significations of the social-historical. Nature is not a synthesis of once and for all given (chemical) elements, composed and recomposed on the basis of some eternal biological or probabilistic laws. Nature is a permanent ontological self-creation and destruction of forms; a constant emergence of new domains and “laws” on the debris of the old ones. Science is not an autonomous development of ensidic Logic, but a social recreation of nature. Imagination intrudes scientific explanation in the form of a signification that transforms the ensidic dimension of nature. Castoriadis thus introduces a social-historical perspectivism, intending further to democratize technoscience according to the magma of the imaginary significations of the anonymous collective.

Suzy Adams is right to argue that Castoriadis’s conception of nature radicalizes Aristotle’s notion of *physis* in two ways: it transcends the qualitative movement and change (*alloiosis*) of *physis* into the creative emergence of *otherness*, while, at the same time, it disengages from a teleological conception according to which *physis* tends to an end predetermined by God, that is, the “first unmoved mover” driving the qualitative movement and change (*alloiosis*) of *physis* propelled by the *eros* of the form²⁵. Adams makes clear that the primary locus of otherness

²⁵ Suzy Adams, ‘Castoriadis’ Shift towards *Physis*’, *Thesis Eleven*, Number 74, August 2003, pp. 105-112.

is not nature itself but the human psyche and society. Nature, as the first stratum of Being, only partakes in the ontological conditions of indeterminacy and creation, evidenced first and foremost in the radical imaginary of the human psyche. To reiterate, the evolution of the imaginary from the living being into the psyche and the social-historical is not linear, but a discontinuous process of rupture and mutation; hence the creation *ex nihilo* that goes beyond any deterministic reductionism and causality. Society disengages from nature through the autonomization of the social imaginary. It is by this sense that Castoriadis's conception of Being, as a creative emergence of *otherness*, contrasts the mechanistic view of cosmos in the Classical age and the concomitant positivism of modernity that perpetuates Aristotle's teleology. To the degree that nature is transformed by the social imaginary, it is irreducible to the determinism of positivism. It exits ensidic Logic and enters the logic-ontology of Magmas. The social imaginary transcends the metaphysical boundaries of materialism and idealism, for it produces an alternative epistemological approach, assimilating the scientific discoveries of the 20th century.

Are we imposing our schemata – or new schemata – on a new layer of reality, or have we encountered something indicating that some schemata actually do correspond to something beyond our comprehension? It is always both²⁶.

Not only does science discover, but also recreates nature in the playful experimentation between the known and the unknown. Science is a constant recreation of the known and the unknown. There are no strict boundaries between nature and the human observer. We cannot decide whether what we observe comes from the observed or the observer – except of course in trivial cases. “So the question of the ultimate origin of our knowledge is undecidable forever – that is, the principle of undecidability of the origin”²⁷. The undecidability principle presupposes the indeterminacy of creation, which sustains the radical freedom of the novel. For there is nothing novel in a predetermined context of absolute laws except the eternal repetition of the already given, demonstrated either in a purely theological context or in the cryptotheological context of a conservative scientific positivism. Thus, the radical

²⁶ Castoriadis, *A Society Adrift*, p. 59

²⁷ Castoriadis, *A Society Adrift*, p. 59.

freedom of the imaginary contrasts a basic tendency of positivism in modernity, which builds on Descartes's program of rendering human the master and possessor of nature, thereby culminating in what Castoriadis coined "the rational mastery" of the unlimited expansion of economy and technology in nature and society²⁸.

The third, thus, and probably most important consequence of the radical freedom of the imaginary concerns the paradoxical twist of technoscience from the Industrial Revolution onwards into the rational mastery of the unlimited expansion of economy and technology into nature and society. The rational mastery designates the excess of overdevelopment, depicted in the disastrous application of ensidic Logic in nature and society, resulting in the ecological crisis of our era. For Castoriadis, what is radically novel from modernity onwards is the devastation of a biosphere of 2 billion years by a capitalist system aged 200 years. The rational mastery of the unlimited expansion of economy and technology has caused an unprecedented abuse of nature and society.

Despite the indisputable fact that the explosion of the novel in the positive sciences has generated countless beneficial effects to everyday life, we are, at the same time, facing a multidimensional ecological crisis, raising serious bioethical concerns regarding the quality of food, the greenhouse effect, the sustainability of the planet, biodiversity, the mapping of the human genome, and so on. As Castoriadis emphatically points out, scientists are most often driven by short-termism, leaving out the long-term effects of their actions on the environment and on society. "In other words, given a linear time and an infinite temporal horizon, we act as if the only significant interval of time was the very near future"²⁹.

The commercialization of the "feasible" at any cost is a symptom of a greedy neoliberalism causing the economic crisis of 2008. The "bubbles" of the American bank elite testify to the global market becoming a planetary casino, whereby the unlimited quantification of the ensidic Logic and the subsequent commercialization of the "feasible" sustain a social Darwinism creating winners

²⁸ Vangelis Papadimitropoulos, 'The Rational Mastery in Castoriadis', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 29 (3), 2018, pp. 51-67.

²⁹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, edited by David Ames Curtis, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, p. 195.

and losers in the “natural” selection of the market. The neoliberal commercialization of the “feasible” crystallizes the rational mastery of the unlimited expansion of economy and technology in nature and society. Neoliberal capitalism thus perpetuates the jungle of nature into society by cannibalizing both nature and society.

Castoriadis juxtaposes against neoliberalism a radical notion of political freedom premised on the ontological indeterminacy of creation, which formulates the philosophical presuppositions for a real democracy embedded in his project of individual and collective autonomy. Political freedom translates into self-governance through democratic deliberation, aiming at the self-institutionalization of the laws governing the public and private sphere. Similarly to ancient Greek democracy, Castoriadis distinguishes three spheres of society: the private sphere (*oikos*), the private/public sphere (*agora*) and the public sphere (*ekklesia*). ‘Democracy is the correct articulation of those three spheres, with the public sphere becoming really public’³⁰. The seeds of ancient Greek democracy found fertile ground in the social movements of the 17th and 18th centuries in West Europe. Castoriadis, thus, locates two major moments of autonomy in modernity: liberalism and Marxism.

Yet, his project opposes equally, but differently, both Marxism and liberalism, for it consists in a positive freedom re-locating the negative freedom of liberalism into the self-government of all domains of society through the radicalization of the citizens’ equal right to participate in politics. Castoriadis engages in the contemporary discussion over *the political* and *politics*³¹ to elaborate his concept of self-institutionalization. In this framework, the institution manifests in two forms: *the instituting* and *the instituted*³². *The instituted* is based on the instituting capacity of the social imaginary. It is a creation of the anonymous collective that produces a radical ground-power, or primordial power, necessary for the self-preservation and self-perpetuation of the human species. Primordial power constitutes an explicit power, termed *the political*, which manifests itself in law, tradition,

³⁰ Castoriadis, *A Society Adrift*, p. 5.

³¹ Oliver Marchart, *Post-foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

³² Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, edited by David Ames Curtis, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, pp.143-174.

language, religion, technique, etc. Yet, *the instituting* transcends *the instituted*, as it refers to the autonomy of the anonymous collective to transform *the political*. Whereas societies have been mostly developed on conditions of instituted heteronomy, with the essential constituent of it being the representation of an extra-social source of *nomos* (be it the myth, the tradition, the religion, etc.), autonomy refers to *politics* as the potentiality of constantly questioning *the political*.

Castoriadis's notion of positive freedom surpasses the negative freedom of liberalism, for it exceeds the passivity of rights by re-introducing the Aristotelian ideal of the citizens to be able to rule and to be ruled. As Konstantinos Kavoulakos quite accurately mentions, the three basic values of a real democracy are the following: 1) the positive freedom of opinion and action in a "rational" level of self-limitation 2) the abolition of every "natural" hierarchy, which implies the equality of all citizens regarding their opportunity of participating in the formulation of the law of society 3) the potential for the constant revision of justice. "Freedom, equality and justice are the fundamental values the societal bond is based on in an autonomous or democratic society"³³.

Castoriadis equally opposes Marxism on various grounds. Marx was led to narrow down greatly the field of self-institutionalization to the level of production and economy, leaving aside the political question, that is, the question of power itself, in the assumption that the latter will be resolved spontaneously in the higher phase of communism, after the main theorem of revolution will have been applied. Marx was equally sedated by the economism of capitalism in placing the economy at the center of politics; in adopting, in other words, capitalism's central imaginary, as epitomized in the model of *homo oeconomicus*³⁴. Finally, the theoretical approach of the later Marx took dominance over the revolutionary element of the younger Marx. In the so-called socialist states of the former Eastern Bloc regimes, Marx's project was interpreted in a positivist manner to such an extent that the revolutionary project of the younger Marx was transformed into the political dogma of Leninist-Stalinist Marxism.

Castoriadis's model of direct democracy contrasts the representative and procedural model of democracy, adopted by either liberal or social democratic

³³ Konstantinos Kavoulakos, 'Freedom and Democratic Politics in the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis', *Psyche, Logos, Polis*, Hommage to Cornelius Castoriadis, Ipsilon, Athens, 2007, p. 219 (In Greek).

³⁴ Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.

political theories like those of Rawls and Habermas. Castoriadis has developed an extended critique of representative democracy, following Rousseau in the argument that the citizens under such a regime are free to participate in politics once every five years. As such, representative democracy is the window-dressing for a liberal oligarchy infused by the rational mastery of capitalism, as propagated by corporate lobbying and the corresponding manipulation of the public opinion, aiming at keeping the citizens within the private sphere of consumerism, conformism and cynicism. Hence, the public sphere is controlled by the private sphere of the economic and political elite that prescribes to a large extent the content of both private/public and private sphere. As Castoriadis puts it:

Paradoxically, today's pseudodemocracies in the West have in fact rendered the public sphere in large part private: the decisions that really count are those made in secret or behind the scenes (of the Government, the parliamentary system, and the party Apparatuses). A definition of democracy as good as any other is: It is the regime in which the public sphere becomes truly and effectively public—belongs to everyone, is effectively open to the participation of all³⁵.

For Castoriadis, direct democracy should be the field of the emergence of the novel *par excellence*, for only real democracy could emancipate society from “the liberal oligarchies” of our times³⁶. A real democracy permits the highest degree of the radical freedom of the novel through an ontological openness, the political risk of which reveals the tragicalness of freedom itself. But even if we freely choose the Hellenic-West tradition of autonomy, as Agnes Heller claims Castoriadis does, why does this free choice not result in the reversed mastery of one freedom over another?³⁷ Besides, it is the same tradition that gave birth to both Enlightenment and fascism. Heller wonders then how direct democracy can be secured against turning into a fascist regime. Castoriadis is alert to the excesses of the rational mastery, resulting in the devastation of the environment, the monstrosities of socialism and nazism, the capitalist economic crises, the repression of minorities and so on. Castoriadis does not render the Hellenic-Western tradition superior

³⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘Democracy as procedure and as regime’. in *The rising tide of insignificance*, translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service, 2003, pp. 340-341.

³⁶ Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 173.

³⁷ Agnes Heller, ‘With Castoriadis to Aristotle; from Aristotle to Kant; from Kant to Us’, *Autonomie et Autotransformation de la société, la philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis*, edited by Giovanni Busino, Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1989, pp. 168-171.

to all others, but he highlights one dimension of this tradition—that is, autonomy and democracy—against every totalitarianism that abolishes autonomy and democracy³⁸. The only rational criterion of autonomy is the abolition of heteronomy per se, meaning the inalienable right of people to choose by and for themselves via a regime of direct democracy that can revise and correct its mistakes over time.

Castoriadis was not a politician. He, therefore, abstained from articulating a concrete political planning for the realization of his project, since any single theoretical planning of direct democracy is a self-contradiction in terms. Direct democracy cannot but be plural, practical and collective. Castoriadis rejected the current political system *in toto*, relying solely on the autonomous activity of individuals and collectivities. Interestingly, we are witnessing today a number of decentralized and self-managed initiatives emerging on the model of platform cooperativism and Commons-based peer production, supported by the Internet and free/open source software/hardware³⁹. Several projects and case studies echo today Castoriadis's vision of real democracy in several respects. However, movements such as platform cooperativism and the Commons face multiple barriers: a lack of access to resources and capital, a significant gap in managerial and technical skills, sectoral and operational isolation in a number of subsectors, and a lack of public policy and institutional support from both the state and larger cooperatives. The Commons still depend largely on financial and technological systems managed by corporate capital and neoliberal state policies⁴⁰. In Castoriadis's terms, the Commons are still largely heteronomous rather than

³⁸ Castoriadis, *Fait et à faire*, p. 63.

³⁹ David Bollier, and Silke Helfrich, *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, Levellers Press, 2012; Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990; Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006; Vasilis Kostakis and Michel Bauwens, *Network Society and Future Scenarios for a Collaborative Economy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Vangelis Papadimitropoulos, 'Socialisme ou Barbarie: From Castoriadis' Project of Individual and Collective Autonomy to the Commons'. *TripleC* 14(1), (2016), pp. 265-278; Vangelis Papadimitropoulos, 'From Socialism to Open Cooperativism: Convergences and Divergences in the work of Castoriadis, Olin Wright and Bauwens and Kostakis', *Global Journal of Human-Social Science (F)*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, Version 1, 2018, pp. 7-20; Vangelis Papadimitropoulos, 'Reflections on the Contradictions of the Commons', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 50(2), 2018, pp. 317-331; Vangelis Papadimitropoulos, 'The Politics of the Commons: Reform or Revolt?' *Triple C* 15 (2), 2017, pp. 565-583.

⁴⁰ Kostakis and Bauwens, *Network Society and Future Scenarios for a Collaborative Economy*, p.356.

autonomous.

Therefore, for the Commons to flourish, an adequate state support is necessary. The state can facilitate the transition to a decentralized and self-managed economy by various means: funding, education, infrastructures, the legal system, and so on. I am not suggesting here that autonomous movements should resort to any sort of state paternalism to sustain themselves. I am not insinuating any contradictory claim that heteronomy has to support autonomy in order for the latter to abolish the former in the long run. I am rather pointing to the destatification or commonification of the state, as illustrated, for example, by Nick Dyer-Witherford and Vasilis Kostakis and Michel Bauwens respectively⁴¹. Individual and collective autonomy cannot depend on a central authority subject solely to representative democracy. Destatification devolves administrative power to a multiplicity of associations. The role of government is redefined to support collective initiatives rather than substitute for them, diffuse rather than concentrate control, nurture social transformation from the bottom up rather than engineer it from top down. The state should transform into mini-states of commons-based peer production ecosystems that implement direct democratic procedures and practices. Social freedom cannot but rely on the autonomous activity of individuals and collectives. The future, thus, of social freedom could lie on the institutional reconfiguration of the separation of powers, oriented towards the enhancement of individual and collective autonomy across all fields of society.

CONCLUSION

The radical freedom of the imaginary is synonymous to the ontological novelty deriving from Castoriadis's logic-ontology of Magmas and expanding accordingly into his epistemological and political thought. In Castoriadis's ontology, Being is Chaos or Abyss, the main attributes of which are indeterminacy and creation. Being divides into three intertwined but differentiated strata: nature, the psyche and the social-historical. Nature splits in its turn into the living being (flora and fauna) and the non-living being (inorganic matter). The "essential" feature of the

⁴¹ Nick Dyer-Witherford. 'The Circulation of the Common.' Paper presented at Immaterial Labour, Multitudes And New Social Subjects: Class Composition In Cognitive Capitalism- Immaterial Labour Conference – University of Cambridge, 2006; Kostakis and Bauwens, op. cit.

living being is the elementary imaginary. Novelty is a creation *ex nihilo* stemming from the radical imaginary, that is, the free intentional / affective / representational flux of the human psyche, which, as such, is not reduced to the causality of the ensemblistic-identitary dimension of nature, for it consists in the autonomization of the feeling of pleasure and the concomitant domination of representational pleasure over purely organic pleasure. The novel emerges anew on the basis of the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious or, in other words, the sublimation of the primitive urges of the monadic core of the psyche into society. But, at the same time, the novel transcends the boundaries of the sublimation of the psyche into society, re-establishing anew the imaginary significations of society. The novel traverses the free representational pleasure of the human psyche by evolving into the inter-general representation of the social imaginary of the anonymous collective through the creation *ex nihilo* of the magma of the imaginary significations of society. This constant recreation of society reflects in history over time. The main *locus* of the novel is the socio-historical.

For Castoriadis, the radical freedom of the imaginary bears some serious philosophical, epistemological and political consequences. Firstly, it breaks with the “determinacy principle” ruling most part of traditional philosophy and modern science. Secondly, it introduces an alternative epistemological approach, inasmuch as it renders the living being a *for itself* subject to the ontological premises of constant re-creation and destruction. In this vein, science is a playful experimentation between the known and the unknown. Science is not just the discovery but also the recreation of nature. Thirdly, and most importantly, it creates *per se* a novel political paradigm, demonstrated in the project of individual and collective autonomy, which opposes equally, yet differently, both Marxism and liberalism, for it consists in a radicalization of democracy through the establishment of positive freedom, aiming at the equal opportunity of the participation of people in politics. The radical freedom of the imaginary is indicative of the tragicalness of democracy, that is, the virtue of realizing and correcting its mistakes over time. Lastly, direct democracy opposes the rational mastery of the unlimited expansion of technology and economy in nature and in society, which is responsible for the ecological and economic crisis of our times. For Castoriadis, the ecological and democratic deliberation over the usage of technology and economy is *sine qua non* for the sustainability of nature and

prosperity of society.

One of the problems, though, of Castoriadis's political project is the rejection of state politics *in toto*, relying solely on the autonomous movements of individuals and collectivities. And, indeed, we are witnessing nowadays a number of initiatives developing on the model of platform cooperativism and the Commons, thus echoing Castoriadis's project in several respects. However, for these movements to flourish and multiply, the support of the State is necessary – but not sufficient – inasmuch as it can facilitate the transition to a decentralized and self-managed economy and society by various means: funding, education, infrastructures, law, and so on.

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