

Imagination and Interpretation¹

On the dialogue between Cornelius Castoriadis and Paul Ricoeur

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On March 9th, 1985, Paul Ricoeur and Cornelius Castoriadis met at the studio of the France Culture “Le Bon Plaisir” radio broadcaster. In 2016, the transcript of their dialogue, their only public debate, was published [1]. This publication is significant not only because it highlights the points of convergence and divergence between the two prominent thinkers, but also because the issues they discuss: the relation between society and history, tradition and creativity, imagination and collective action, are relevant to the philosophical and political discourse of our time.

It is apparent in their dialogue that the two philosophers share a common ground, as regards the eminence of the imagination in human existence and culture, the refusal to reduce politics to the economy and their shared emphasis on the relation between consciousness and society. However, these are also significant points of divergence, since Castoriadis considers imagination creative and radical, while Ricoeur considers it more interpretative. Moreover, Castoriadis considers the self-institution of society an ex nihilo creation of a proper world, while for Ricoeur it is an interpretation of a given, though not fixed, world horizon. Castoriadis insists on the project of individual and social autonomy through democratic social transformation, and the possibility of actually overcoming heteronomy. Heteronomy is used by Castoriadis to define alienation both on the level of the individual, as the domination of unconscious drives and internalized norms over the conscious self, and on the social level, as the instituted authority that sanctifies dominant institutions and conceals the fact that these institutions are society’s own creations. On the other hand, Ricoeur considers social heteronomy as a necessary ‘evil’ (le mal) of the political sphere that can be contained but not eliminated from social existence.

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Castoriadis began the dialogue with a humorous reference to his incomplete dissertation on the “imaginary element”, which remained “elementary and imaginary^[2]”, and which was the reason for his first acquaintance with Paul Ricoeur. The two thinkers met for the first time in 1967 in Nanterre, when Castoriadis asked Ricoeur to supervise his dissertation on “The Imaginary Element in History”, which, would, however, never be completed. Their encounter occurred after Castoriadis had broken with Marxism and turned to psychoanalysis and ontology. He had accused Marx of adopting essential elements of the dominant capitalist worldview, such as scientific rationalism, the predominance of the economy, and dominance over nature. Then he undertook the task to combine action and theory within the praxis of autonomy beyond Marxist dialectics, while his main philosophical ideas such as autonomy, and his emphasis on the creativity of the instituting imaginary in and through the activity of an anonymous collective, first appear in that political context^[3].

When Castoriadis published his magnum opus, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, in 1975, the reasons that led him to the rupture with Marxist rationalism also led him to a rupture with traditional philosophy, to which he assigns the label ‘ensemblistic/identitary’^[4]. Thus, while Ricoeur presented his own critique of Marx during his Chicago lectures, Castoriadis moved on to a critique of the western philosophical tradition more generally.

Castoriadis uses the term ‘ensemblistic/identitary’ to describe the traditional ontology and logic that is based on the axioms of identity and non-contradiction, which considers the definitive and unchangeable Being as the only true Being. On that theoretical ground rationalistic or tautological philosophical systems that try to reduce ontological multiplicity to some transcendent uniformity and temporal becoming to static eternity are constructed. Castoriadis claims that this leads traditional philosophy to obscure the inseparable connection between society and history, existence and temporality and to negate ontological creativity and time itself. Without the acknowledgment of ontological creativity and historical relativity, he argues, we cannot understand how human activity transforms the world and how society creates its own history.

According to Castoriadis, what this traditional (ensemblistic/identitary) logic fails to understand is the creative or poetic dimension of reality, which is densely interwoven with the ensemblistic/identitary dimension. This means that the creation of

new forms or beings cannot be reduced to previous conditions, such as the emergence of life. Traditional ontology aspires to reduce the plurality of beings, ontological multiplicity, to a single unified Being or principle. However, Castoriadis claims that there are ontological levels or strata that cannot be reduced to a single principle or to each other, such as the natural physical stratum, the living being, the human psyche and the social-historical, each with unique attributes that constitute different proper worlds. Time is the emergence of alterity, the creation and destruction of new forms, and both the tautological and the creative dimensions are interwoven within time and space.

The notion that Castoriadis uses to describe ontological stratification is the *magma*: “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 [5].”

For Castoriadis, ontological creativity is the reason for historical relativity. Every human society creates its own history, establishes its own institutions and a unique public space and public time that cannot be attributed to extra-social forces, such as God, or human nature, which means that there are no historical laws or destiny. The social-historical is the proper world of human existence, created by the anonymous collective imaginary and realized in institutions and human activity, which leans on the natural environment but is not determined by it.

As an example of ontological creativity, Castoriadis mentions the Being-for-Itself[6] (*être pour soi*), the being that institutes itself and whose finality refers to itself[7]. Such is any living being, from the simplest to the most complex species, that creates a variety of assessments of its environment and informs its proper world according to its own senses, for self-preservation and reproduction.

The distinction between any other living being and humanity, according to Castoriadis, is the deformity of human imagination [8], which creates a constant flux of psychic images that generate urges aiming to ends other than the basic biological purpose of self-preservation [9]. Psychic intention is arbitrary, its content is imaginary, its passion illogical. Human psyche is a distinct being-for-itself whose sufficient and necessary condition for survival is society, which transforms the psyche into a functional individual, in

accordance to the dominant social images and significances. These are the creation of another psychic pole, the anonymous social imaginary (imaginaire), which is transmitted through language, custom and social behavior. Ricoeur also pointed out the importance of the involuntary, as he named it, element of the social background in the constitution of the conscious ego, but, as we will see, he gives more emphasis to the symbolic over the imaginary.

For Castoriadis, the social imaginary is responsible for providing reality with a coherent meaning available to the individual psyche in order to reconcile the trauma of the breakup of the initial psychical monad that comes with birth. Castoriadis refers here to Freud and perceives the newborn psyche as an enclosed unity of meaning, being and pleasure, that is broken up through socialization and the separation of the Self and the Other, with the Other remaining a necessary component of the constitution of the Self [10]. Creative imagination, which Castoriadis calls primary or radical, and which precedes productive imagination, is the source of every signification and representation, the common root of both the real and the symbolic.

On this path Castoriadis met Paul Ricoeur, who also places imagination at the center of existence. In his doctoral thesis, titled *Philosophie de la Volonté I: Le Volontaire et l'Involontaire*, Ricoeur maintains that the polarity between subjective and objective is constitutive of human experience. The involuntary, manifested as objective environment, as bodily functions, as the network of relationships with others, determines and complements voluntary intention, selection and action. Ricoeur insists that man is not an isolated ego, but “this plural and collective unity in which the unity of the destination and the difference of destinies are to be understood through each other” [11]. To rephrase this, the individual self is not a static solitary entity but a dynamic plexus of relations where the others always participate, in actuality or in memory, as persons or influences, and where the individual is always signified in relation to others and to a common world. This unity is achieved through mutual recognition and shared communication. For Ricoeur, communication and recognition provide us with meaning when our activity corresponds to the pre-existing structure of the world. Our actions become meaningful within cultural and natural contexts, which are not our subjective creations, but precede and define our conceptual orientation. However, new meaning emerges, in any given context, within the process of communication and language that allows constant re-interpretations. The mental faculty that ensures the

openness and fluidity of meaning, as well as the possibility of mutual recognition, is imagination.

In this context, as M. Foessel notes, imagination “allows meaning to be understood, the world to be expressible and action to be feasible” [12]. Since understanding requires recognition and communication, Ricoeur turns to language and symbolism. “The symbol creates thought [13]” he contends, delimiting the imaginary in favor of the symbolic, which will lead to a devaluation of imaginative creativity in favor of interpretation. For Ricoeur, imaginary meaning is not an arbitrary creation, but rather a free, non-regular re-interpretation of elements already given to human experience by the world and culture. Hence, interpretation is free and diverse but does not constitute the creation of a new form or being. For Ricoeur, imagination is interpretative. Self-understanding of pre-existing meaningful contexts is made possible through images preserved in memory and imagination by literary tradition, which determines the cultural context in which we live and which is offered to interpretation. [14] This notion will also mark Ricoeur’s “linguistic” turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

In 1975, the year in which Castoriadis’ *Imaginary Institution of Society* was published, Ricoeur published *Le Metaphore Vive*, where he highlights metaphor as the imaginative innovation within language. Metaphors generate new significations and are essentially an imaginary reconstruction of meaning. In ordinary speech, a metaphor is a vector of the multiple possibilities of meaningful re-interpretation that can be achieved through imaginative innovation. Imagination produces a common, socially valid meaning as a metaphorical background. Thus, Ricoeur correlates phenomenology with hermeneutics, expanding the hermeneutical method from textual analysis to the interpretation of the interaction of the Self with the Other. From Husserl he adopted the concept of the *Welthorizon*, or world horizon, the unified and unifying ontological world background that makes experience possible. In relation to the interpretation of the metaphor as a transformation of meaning, Ricoeur stresses the distinction between the obvious meaning and the concealed or hidden meaning. He considers philosophy to be an interpretive activity that traces a hidden meaning within the context of the obvious meaning that comes to light through culture [15].

It is important that Ricoeur was a faithful member of the French Reformation Church, and the idea of God as an actual being, as *the* form of Being, intertwined with the social significance of the

Sacred, provides him with the metaphysical foundation of an unimaginable world-meaning and the transcendental bridge of from the interpretation of texts to the interpretation of Being. This theological component of the world limits the creativity of imagination to reinterpretation.

In that same year, 1975, Ricoeur, while lecturing at the University of Chicago[16], also criticized Marx for separating social phenomena between “superstructure” cultural elements and “base” economic relations. Ricoeur emphasizes the central role of the “tradition of authority”, which incorporates new institutions into long-lasting historical narratives. Ricoeur locates the main social antagonisms within the tension between tradition and innovation, since tradition sets the framework for innovation and social transformations are more successful when they are part of the ‘tradition of authority’. Somehow, the “evil” of dominance, authority and alienation seems to remain as a residue through social transformations, although each social construct is in itself new in relation to the former. Thus, History can be understood through the historical narrative that refers to a historical structure, which of course remains open to restructuring. Temporality is considered a nexus of chronological and historiographical narratives, as analyzed in Ricoeur’s later work *Temps et Récit*.

On the contrary, Castoriadis insists on the possibility of overcoming social heteronomy through the establishment of social autonomy. For Castoriadis, the tension exists between the instituted social imaginary and the *instituting* social imaginary, in other words, between the consolidation of institutions and the creativity of society. Thus, autonomy means direct and reflective self-government, where institutions are placed under public democratic deliberation and individuals, as free subjectivities, are equally involved in political power.

In his article “Time and Creation”, Castoriadis agrees with Ricoeur’s analysis , that there are two main traditional philosophical approaches to temporality. [17] One is the *objective or cosmological* approach, presented in Aristotle’s *Physics*, which considers time an objective attribute of reality, the measurement of the movement of natural change and deterioration. The other is the *subjective or phenomenological* approach, presented in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, which considers time a subjective phenomenon, the internal rhythm of personal experience and existential anxiety. Both approaches, Castoriadis notes, fail to

address the question of *time per se*, time in-itself which lies above subjective experience, and beyond natural change, encompassing and unifying them.

Both approaches, Castoriadis asserts, propose a rigid division between subjectivity and objectivity, ignoring society, where *time is history*, where subjects and objects are represented and invested with imaginary social significations, where subjectivity and objectivity are combined into social meaning.

Castoriadis claims that the real antithesis is located between the psyche and society, since the actual individual himself/herself is already a social institution, informed by language and culture. Even our subjective perception of ourselves is mediated by words, norms and images that do not belong to ourselves but refer to a public imaginary, already instituted before we were born.

Secondly, the division is also false on an epistemological level, since the very conception of any object (as a signified and evaluated object), can only be constituted by the subject according to the dominant social imaginary significations that are already invested in the object. For example, the meaning or value of a tool cannot be restricted to just its practical use, because it connotes also ideas, concepts and attitudes and symbolizes a broader culture. The subjective and the objective dimensions cannot be ultimately divided. Their intrinsic connection remains incomprehensible only if we continue to ignore the social-historical dimension that our collective existence and activities generate which transfigures, interconnects and signifies everything that exists within the scope of humanity.

For Castoriadis, the antithesis between the psyche and society is bridged by the conscious ego, socially informed through education and communication that transforms inner drives to internalized social norms and dominant significations. Language is the carrier of social significations in the broader sense of communicative expression that includes oral, corporeal and visual semantics.

These significations, that regulate personal feelings, drives and conceptions, precede every person, since society is in-itself a magma of imaginary significations, norms, social structures and behavioral patterns. Consequently, human subjectivity and individuality are, for Castoriadis, historical categories and not anthropological constants. In simpler words, the concept of the free, autonomous individual does not appear in *any* society, but in a society that recognizes the

concept of a free, autonomous community. Individuality and human subjectivity are significations that have risen from the struggle against heteronomy and absolute authority. Subjective temporality is also interconnected with the broader magma of social time which emerges on the surface of the even broader magma of natural time, all of the above forming, without ever covering the magma of Time in-itself [18].

Thus, for the atheist Castoriadis, history, inherent in every society, is the place and the result of a radical human creation. As regards Castoriadis, God is a primary social imaginary signification [19], a human creation. For Castoriadis, instituted religion that conceals the ontological Abyss and negates mortality and human freedom is the foundation of heteronomy. In Greek the word hierarchy, authority of the sacred reveals religious authority as the origin of State authority, which is the instituted form of political heteronomy.

In contrast, Ricoeur views human creation as re-creation, since radical creation, belongs only to God, which exists as the metaphysical unity of the concealed, primal meaning of the world. For Ricoeur a heteronomous element is always present in the form of the evil that resides in the political sphere, and while he does not place God as the subordinator of human activity in any sense, he does perceive the sacred element as part of the involuntary necessary constituent of the human *Welthorizon*, an immanence of heteronomy.

It is not so strange that Ricoeur made a mistake during their radio dialogue, calling Castoriadis' magnum opus as '*The Imaginary Production of Society*'. This also reveals Ricoeur's disagreement with the Castoriadean idea of *ex nihilo* creation. Although Castoriadis insists that *ex nihilo* does not mean *in nihilo* nor *cum nihilo*, for Ricoeur *ex nihilo* means nothing.

In conclusion, Ricoeur views human imagination manifested through the interpretation of a concealed primal meaning offered by the structure of the world, open to countless different re-interpretations, because the imaginary is ultimately interpretive. Castoriadis, on the other hand, insists that human imagination is radically creative, the source of arbitrary social imaginary significations, the source of society and reality.

The dialogue between Castoriadis and Ricoeur reinvigorates the philosophical discourse on imagination, social creativity and

collective action. The convergent points of their theories, the primacy of imagination, the openness of human history and the affirmation of free collective action refer to the central problematic of modernity, the tension between structures of instituted authority and society's instituting power. However their perspectives diverge, since Ricoeur is more conservative, stressing the traditional element of instituted authority, while Castoriadis is radical, emphasizing human creativity and the possibility of social autonomy and direct democracy. Despite their disagreements, their personal relationship was a relation of mutual recognition.

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[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Cornélius Castoriadis: Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social*, ed. Johann Michel, (Paris: Editions EHESS, 2016).

[2] Ibid. 39

[3] *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. David Ames Curtis (London: Blackwell, 1997) p. 372.

[4] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 170-186.

[5] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 342.

[6] A term used also by J.P. Sartre's phenomenological existentialism.

[7] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The State of the subject today*, trans. David Ames Curtis in, *World in Fragments*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 145.

[8] Ibid. p. 142.

[9] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp.291-294.

[10] *The Castoriadis Reader*, pp. 357-8

[11] P. Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986) p. 138

[12] M. Foessel, «Paul Ricoeur ou les puissances de l'imaginaire» in *Paul Ricoeur: Anthologie*, (Paris: Seuil,, 2007).

[13] P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 257.

[14] P. Ricoeur, «Intellectual Autobiography», in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, (Chicago: Open Court, 1995).

[15] P. Ricoeur, «Existence and Hermeneutics», in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, (New York: Beacon Press, 1978) pp. 101 & 106.

[16] *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986)

[17] Cornelius Castoriadis, «Time and Creation», trans. David Ames Curtis in, *World in Fragments*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997)

[18] Cornelius Castoriadis, «Time and Creation», trans. David Ames Curtis in, *World in Fragments*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 386.

[19] *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 143.