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Title:	Plurality and indeterminacy: revising Castoriadis 's overly homogeneous conception of society
Year:	2012
Journal:	European Journal of Social Theory
Volume:	15
Issue:	4
Pages:	488-504
URL:	http://doi.org/10.1177/1368431011432372
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Plurality and Indeterminacy: Revising Castoriadis's Overly Homogeneous Conception of Society

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Abstract: Despite its ground-breaking character, Castoriadis's theory of society remains in some respects caught up in conceptual difficulties common to social theory generally, particularly the problem of conceptualizing social unity without resort to an understanding of society that downplays heterogeneity and over-emphasizes the homogeneous. Unlike many other theoretical approaches and traditions, Castoriadis's work also offers a possible path out of this dilemma in the form of philosophical innovations which could enable us to conceptualize social unity without flattening the heterogeneous characteristics of the social. Castoriadis sometimes fails to recognize the full implications of his own rejection of ontological determinism, and so ends up proposing a far too deterministic and homogeneous model of social types. This essay aims to show how this might be remedied by drawing on Castoriadis's own fundamental insights.

Keywords: Castoriadis, Plurality, Indeterminacy, Magma, Closure

The Problem of Social Unity

It would be implausible to claim that Castoriadis ignored social division and conflict. Half a lifetime of Marxism, his interest in workers’ movements, and his analysis of the operation of the competing imaginaries of autonomy and rational mastery all testify to the contrary. Nonetheless, when it comes to conceptualizing society, he, like others, tends to concentrate on what gives society its unifying order and orientation.

For Castoriadis, social imaginary significations fulfil this unifying function. Social institutions incarnate social imaginary significations. Social institutions that incarnate the same social imaginary significations ‘go together’; they are consistent and integrated. In this way, social imaginary significations create a socio-cultural world. (Castoriadis, 1987: 135-56) There are two reasons why social imaginary institutions create a unified world. Fundamentally, unity is understood as characteristic of ‘worlds’ as such. Additionally, the unity of the social world is guaranteed by that world’s singularity. It is one world. The singularity of this world reflects the singularity of its source. Social imaginary significations are created by each particular society, and through and with them each particular society creates itself. Insofar as each society is ‘one’, the world of social imaginary significations and the instituted social world will also be ‘one’. It will in each case be the world of that society in the twin senses: it belongs to or goes with that society, and it is the work or creation of that society. Finally, the unity of the social world is guaranteed by the tendency of the world of social imaginary significations and institutions to establish and maintain itself in closure. This

closure means primarily that the world resists change. But it also means being closed to the outside, to the new, the other and alien. (Castoriadis, 1991a)

It is not difficult to see how such a conception of society might represent a barrier to the understanding of external relations between societies and diversity and plurality within a society. If our understanding of society is based on this conception of a unitary social source and cultural structure, how are we to understand societies that encompass disunity and diversity? This question is a pressing one in our times, when so many existing national societies are multicultural in nature. The question is all the more pressing if our aim is autonomy. How is autonomy to be achieved in these circumstances? It would seem that the unitary nature of the source of social self-creation is at least partly what provides the basis for the emergence of a collective subject capable of autonomy. But what if the source of social self-creation is not unitary? How are diversity and disunity to be accounted for? How must they impact upon the aim and projected operation of social autonomy?

It is not only the contemporary situation that makes such questions important. All societies encompass diversity and disunity; what differs across history and geography is only the degree to which this is so (doubtless also the precise nature of the diversity and disunity, which need not be the same everywhere). If our theories of social creation and change are to be useful, they will need to account for this characteristic of real societies.

Accounting for the functioning of social wholes without denying the existence of diversity and disunity is a common difficulty. It is one thing to perceive the problem; it is another to

understand why it arises; and yet another to recognize how it might be avoided. The more keenly we are aware of the reasons for the dilemma, the more we understand that it is not accidental but emerges organically from the problem of accounting for society and sociality, the more difficult extricating ourselves from the dilemma may seem. This problem is common to social theory generally, and its roots extend into the broader problematic of subjectivity, whose history is largely coextensive with modern Western philosophy. If we wish to examine the problem as it appears in the context of Castoriadis’s social theory this is not because we wish to show that it appears here yet again, as it has elsewhere. On the contrary, the justification for examining this problem in the context of Castoriadis’s work is that in this work a new and promising way out of the dilemma emerges, one which Castoriadis offers and elucidates in a highly original manner, but which he fails to take hold of and utilize as fully as possible.

Coherence and Social Self-Creation

Our problem is this: how to adequately theorize coherence without tying it to a conception of unity whose implications lead to undesirable theoretical consequences. I want to focus here on the concept of ‘coherence’ as opposed to ‘cohesion’ qua ‘the clinging together of parts’. By ‘coherence’ I intend the mutual intelligibility and meaningfulness of signifying structures.

A brief excursus will help elucidate what is meant. Wittgenstein is known to have been concerned in his later philosophy with forms of life as the basis for shared understandings. A crucial expression of Wittgenstein’s view is the following:

‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?’ – It is what humans say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life. (Wittgenstein, 1958: 88, s241)

Stanley Cavell observes that what Wittgenstein is pointing to is not agreement in the sense of a consensus of opinions. Wittgenstein’s German word is übereinstimmen.

The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures. That a group of human beings stimmen in their language ueberein says, so to speak, that they are mutually voiced with respect to it, that they are attuned top to bottom. (1979: 32)

We agree *in* the language we use, not *about* the language we use. It is a condition of either agreeing or disagreeing that we speak the same language, that we can communicate with each other, and thereby make ourselves and our (harmonious or conflicting) opinions mutually intelligible. But this ‘speaking the same language’ entails more than just using the same terms to refer to the same objects. As the euphemistic use of this phrase suggests, it also signifies sharing common objects, recognizing common objects as real and meaningful.

For Castoriadis, this being *attuned* concerns the world of social imaginary significations. If it is true that Castoriadis presents an overly unified vision of society, this is related to the way in which unity is theoretically connected to the issue of coherence. In this, he is caught in a conceptual knot experienced by most social theorists: if the social world hangs together, if it operates coherently despite overt conflicts, mustn’t this mean that there exists some unitary principle underlying the totality and shared by all its components? There is a tendency for this underlying principle to be construed as all-pervading consensus. Castoriadis is not guilty of this, but his account of social coherence does depend on the operation of unitary principles. Consider how he describes the nature of central imaginary social significations. The totality of the social world is constituted by one or a few central imaginary significations. (Castoriadis, 1987: 143) The role of these central imaginary significations is to create a unified social world. Castoriadis glosses this role in terms of answers to a number of fundamental questions: ‘Who are we as a collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking?’ (1987:146-7) This *we* towards which the answers are addressed is not a pre-existing substantial entity, but that which these very answers constitute – by defining this *we* the collectivity is brought into being. What requires emphasis is the fact that this collectivity is understood as constituted by a *unified* set of such questions and answers. What guarantees social unity is the consistency and unity of these. This need not mean that the collectivity itself is conceived of as unitary. It is often the case that the ‘we’ is conceived of as consisting of a diversity of groups, with the answers to the fundamental existential questions differing for each. What is crucial is that these different answers constitute a co-ordinated and consistent whole.

It is clear from Castoriadis’s account that this unity is a consequence of the unity of the creative source of the imaginary significations. Society is the creator, the author. *It* defines itself. (1987: 147) Paralleling the collective first person, the *we* of the collectivity which receives the answers, we have the *it* of the society which gives them. In both cases, we are dealing with unities. The unity of the former, constituted by the significations themselves and their action, flows from the unity of the latter, the authorial *it* of the collective anonymous. *It*, society, tells its story; therefore it can tell one story, whole and self-consistent.

That this is Castoriadis’s view is confirmed in his own words. ‘Let us set the question in the broader context of society, of the social unit, as I see it. It is a group of human beings defined by the fact – making it *one* society – that there is *one* overall institution of society, a social imaginary holding the society together and through which those individuals belong to it.’ (2010a: 86) [Emphases in the original.] It is no scandal for Castoriadis to have sought and found a principle of social unity. Societies do indeed hang together; they function as consistent wholes. And it is difficult to see how they could exist at all if they did not, at least within a certain degree of tolerance. What is crucial is not so much this discovery of unity, but how this unity is understood. Castoriadis argues that fundamental categories such as unity need to be understood in connection with the reality of fundamental ontological realms, that they acquire their full significance only in the context of their concrete application within such realms. (1984: 217-20) How we understand the unity of a society can have serious implication for our ability to conceptualize its apparent opposites: disunity and diversity.

How, then, is unity understood in Castoriadis’s theory of society? There are, as indicated, two instances of unity - the unity of the creative source and the unity of the created result – and

the unity of the former guarantees that of the latter. There is also an underlying identity of these two, since what we are dealing with here is a case of self-creation, which signifies that the creator and the created are, at bottom, one. The philosophical complexities of the idea of self-creation need not detain us here. What matters here is the way unity is conceptualized at each end of this process. We will need to critically assess each of these unities, attempting to elucidate how unity is understood in each case. We will then explore the implications of these conceptions of unity, and finally we will attempt to show how they might be reconceptualized in a more open manner. As a preliminary conclusion, we can say that in the case of the creative source unity is understood as *singularity*, whereas in the case of the created result unity is understood as *closure*.

Self-Creation, Singularity and Closure

According to Castoriadis, society creates itself. But what is it that creates and what is it that is created? What sort of thing is society? First, how does Castoriadis understand the creative dimension of society: society as creator? Castoriadis always insists that this creative dimension of society is just that, a *dimension*, an aspect. It should not be construed as an agency separate from the society which it creates. Castoriadis labels these two dimensions of society as *instituting society* and *instituted society*. We will understand the significance of this distinction if we say that society is instituting *when* and *insofar as* it creates new institutional forms and society is instituted *when* and *insofar as* it maintains and reproduces existing institutional forms. Instituted society does not therefore stand opposed to instituting society as a passive result. Instituted society is living society, active, productive. But this activity is

focused upon a recreation of the same rather than a creation of the new. (Castoriadis, 1987: 369-373)

It is clear even from this account that the unity of society is paramount for Castoriadis. We must not view society as divided between instituted and instituting agencies. It is one society. But how is it one if this unity encompasses distinctions such as this? First, we must consider how the instituting, creative dimension is conceived. Society is self-creating in the way all selves are. When Castoriadis comes to analyse the self, or the for-itself, he adds society to the list of such entities, alongside the living being and the human psyche. (1997a) Society is not, however, to be understood as a subject.

Not only is creation for this ontology and logic a dirty word [The traditional ontology and logic of determinacy.]...but also this ontology is inevitably driven to ask: Creation by whom? Yet creation, as the work of the social imaginary, of the instituting society...is the mode of being of the social-historical field, by means of which this field is. Society is self-creation deployed as history. To recognize this and to stop asking meaningless questions about ‘subjects’ and ‘substances’ or ‘causes’ requires, to be sure, a radical ontological conversion. (1997b: 13-14)

It is strange to admonish others for insisting on answering a question one has effectively answered oneself. Who creates society? Society does. That is the nub of the idea of social self-creation. There are reasons for doubting that society is a subject, a substance or a cause in any of the traditional understandings of these terms, but to say that society is self-creation is to answer the question Castoriadis implies should not be asked, it is to specify who is creating. Who or what: the distinction is not important in this context, though of course we do

not want to confuse a thing for a person. The important thing is that we have answered the question of the source of the creation, of the creative agency.

It may be that Castoriadis wants to dissuade us from thinking in terms like ‘agency’. This is the significance of saying society ‘is self-creation deployed as history.’ Society is an action rather than an actor. Society is *self-creation* not *the self that creates itself*. Part of the meaning of this phrase is the idea that self-creation is permanent and ineluctable, that it is society’s mode of being. Society is ceaselessly creating itself; this is how it exists. Self-creation is not one activity amongst others, but the activity by virtue of which society exists at all and always. Nevertheless, as soon as one declares that society is *the work of* the social imaginary or instituting society, one has identified an agent, a *who* or *what* responsible and indispensable for the activity concerned. It may be that the agent does not exist independently of the activity or prior to it, that, on the contrary, it exists only insofar as that activity continues. But this does not eliminate the agency. And indeed, the agency of society as agent of its own self-creation is not something that could easily be dispensed with in Castoriadis’s philosophy, since it is through recognizing this agency as internal to society, and therefore at least co-dependent on us as social actors, that the hope for social autonomy arises and depends.

No doubt part of the significance of Castoriadis’s preference for the term ‘social-historical field’ over the concept of a social subject is a desire to move towards a more pluralized and distributed conception of social agency. Notwithstanding contrary indications in his work, this puts Castoriadis in sympathy with our later conclusions here – or vice versa.

Castoriadis’s conceptions of closure and social homogeneity remain issues, however.

(Though for Castoriadis society is a self, there are important differences between different levels of self. Most important is the greater indeterminacy of the peculiarly human forms. This confers greater plasticity, but also makes the question of unity more problematic. A human psyche is not ‘one’ in the same way or to the same degree as a living being, and this applies *a fortiori* to a society. We explore some of the implications of this below.)

For society to exist, it must create itself as a world, a unified whole comprised of integrated parts which are complimentary and presuppose one another, and which act in reciprocal ways due to their shared embodiment of central principles – of social imaginary significations. This world of society is not unchangeable. Another part of the meaning of Castoriadis’s description of society as *self-creation* (as opposed to merely *self-creating*) is that change is constant and ineluctable. Society is always creating and recreating itself, and can do no other. This self-transforming agency of society takes the form either of the collective anonymous or of the autonomous collectivity. In each case we are dealing with a kind of unity. The collective anonymous, the no one, creates its society, and creates it all of a piece, as one self-consistent and coherent world. The autonomous collectivity acts as an agent of judgement and decision which sits atop the volcano of social creativity. It does not eliminate or absorb the wellspring of social creation, but adjudicates about its products and steers its energies. This collectivity encompasses multiplicity, but endeavours to act in a united manner. It aims for that type and degree of unity necessary for effective self-determination.

In what manner does social change occur? According to Castoriadis, outside autonomy, societies change largely behind the backs of social actors. The action of social actors is indispensable; only through their action is change effected. But they do not recognize this. Even if they recognize themselves as immediate and effective agents of change, they nevertheless attribute the change to an extra-social agency as the ultimate and governing source. Most often, change is rendered invisible. This is achieved by a process of habilitation, where anything new is construed as *the same*, as a confirmation of tradition. The value of tradition is never challenged by novelty. Tradition is revered and preserved, and is guaranteed insofar as the new does not appear as disruption, but as confirmation of it.

Castoriadis calls this type of society *heteronomous*. What characterizes it - apart from the attribution of social creation to an external source – is the *closure* of the social world. The absorption of the new by the old is part of this. Closure signifies that the social world is self-sufficient and resistant to alteration. This is achieved by maintaining a system of meaning whereby everything is interpreted according to already existing categories and formulas. Nothing escapes this power to absorb and interpret, to give meaning. But this universal capacity is obtained at the cost of a refusal/inability to perceive and accommodate anything that does not conform to the established pattern. (Castoriadis, 1997c)

According to Castoriadis, closure is a characteristic not just of heteronomous societies, but of self-created worlds generally. The world of the self is essentially closed. (1997a, 1997d)

‘[T]he living being exists in and through *closure*. In a sense, the living being is a closed ball. We do not enter into the living being. We can bang on it, shock it in some way, but in any event we do not enter into it: whatever we might do, it will react *after its own fashion*.’

(1997a: 149) This shifts the meaning of closure significantly. Whereas previously we were talking about characteristics of a cultural system, now we are talking about the characteristics of the agent itself. Part of this discrepancy can be removed if we recognize that, as a self-created being, no self can be understood as independent of the world it creates; this world is not really external to the self, but an intrinsic and essential part of it. This said, the shift remains, and it concerns this: whereas previously ‘closure’ signified acting in a fixed and unchanging fashion, here ‘closure’ signifies acting in an idiosyncratic manner. This explains why Castoriadis maintains that breaking the closure of heteronomous societies still leaves a situation of closure, since any society, like any self, must continue to act and interpret in its own fashion. (1991a) Failing to recognize the difference between these two senses of closure risks obscuring the difference between heteronomous closure and any autonomous alternative.

What produces closure, in either sense, is the way the created world proceeds from a singular source and is fixed into a unified and self-consistent pattern by that singular source. For Castoriadis, closure in its heteronomous form is not an inevitable destiny for society. The way in which the social world is created can change. What Castoriadis envisages as the autonomous alternative to heteronomous closure is a society that invests itself in a never-ending project of breaking the closure of its world. Closure remains a permanent risk, and must therefore be challenged and broken again and again by a committed self-interrogation. (1991a) Whilst openness to self-questioning is vital for autonomy, the picture Castoriadis paints of a perpetual pattern of closure and breaking neglects the possibility of establishing a type of society in which the contrast between closure and openness is less stark.

The relationship between closure and the source of creation remains, however. The result is a model in which heteronomous societies are seen as uniformly closed, and the only truly significant variation in the pattern of heteronomous closure is that which occurs with the emergence of the project of autonomy. This produces a flattened picture of human society, and is inadequate for many reasons. What concerns us here is how this understanding creates a vision of society as essentially and always homogeneous with regard to its creative source. The coherence of society must be accounted for, but is it necessary and justifiable to trace that coherence to the origin of the social world in a singular creative source?

Heterogeneity and Plurality

My argument here echoes aspects of Habermas’s criticism of Castoriadis. Habermas identifies a relationship between Castoriadis’s understanding of self-instituting society and a concept of the subject: ‘The self-instituting society replaces the self-positing subject; what gets instituted is a creative world-interpretation, an innovative meaning, a new universe of significations.’ (1987: 330) This accusation is wrong if we understand ‘the subject’ in the fullest sense of ‘person’ or conscious agent. But Castoriadis’s placement of society in the category of the for-itself, and his insistence on society as an agent of creation, means that society occupies a role which parallels the self-positing subject.

Habermas interprets Castoriadis through the lens of his own theoretical stance, and so he is blind to some important aspects of Castoriadis’s approach, distorting others. But his accusation that Castoriadis’s conception of social self-creation leaves a gap between what Habermas calls intramundane intersubjective praxis and anonymous world-creating is fair.

(Unfortunately there is not space here to explore that deficiency or possible remedies for it.)

Habermas is also right to see a link between this aporia and the difficulty of theorizing intersubjectivity on the basis of Castoriadis’s theoretical premise. (1987: 332-4) ‘In the socially institutionalized world view, everyone is previously in mutual agreement with everyone else, a priori, as if there were a transcendental consciousness....Castoriadis cannot provide us with a figure for the mediation between the individual and society.’ (1987: 334)

Habermas identifies a real problem here, but misnames it. The problem is not mediating between the individual and society. For Castoriadis, the individual *is* society. The individual is fabricated by and for the society, so there can never be any problem of integrating the individual into society, or accommodating the individual within the social world. (Insofar as there is a problem, for Castoriadis it is that of finding a socially viable way of dealing with the asocial constructions of the human psyche. The solution to this problem is generally a combination of sublimation and repression.) No, the problem here is that of accommodating heterogeneity. For Habermas the individual represents heterogeneity, and this is why he construes the mediation of the individual and society is a problem. On the other hand, Castoriadis’s approach denies any problem exists, *but does so only by denying heterogeneity*. Whether this heterogeneity has its basis in the individual or some other social entity is unimportant. It is the difficulty of theoretically accommodating heterogeneity that is the problem, and this is related to the understanding of social self-creation.

I do not think the answer is the one Habermas proposes, which involves the discovery of a latent rationality embedded in communicative action which is universalizable as a set of principles guiding action. I think instead the problem can be ameliorated by recognizing the essential plurality of society, a plurality which is not equivalent to the multiplicity of discrete

individuals, but is the basis for all true individuation. If Castoriadis fails to recognize such plurality adequately, then his work also offers conceptual tools that can aid such recognition. Castoriadis’s conception of self-creation encompasses plurality and pluralization as essential characteristics. Coupled with an understanding of the self which views all selves as built upon internal division and alterity, this leads to a conception of the self – social or otherwise – much more amenable to heterogeneity.

If the self presupposes some kind of unity, it is also true that it exhibits and presupposes plurality. No self is simple and homogeneous: none consists of a pure and uniform substance. All selves are complex, articulated wholes, encompassing internal division and differentiation. This is so for living beings. All organisms are complex wholes, with internal structure and division into parts. The unity of action of the living being is the result of a co-ordination of its internal elements; it is never the motion of a simple substance. The complexity of this internal structure varies. Multi-cellular organisms are constructed through anatomical and functional division, and the units out of which these complex creatures are built have themselves the structure of selves. The individual cells and biological systems of multi-celled organisms possess the essential characteristics of the *for-itself*, but the independence of these selves is sacrificed for the co-ordinated activity and shared ends of the organism as a whole. Such organisms are really communities of selves. The overarching self or ‘psyche’ of such complex organisms is a product of the co-ordinated activity of its internal selves and systems, one of those products being the maintenance of systems designated with the task of providing orientation for the organism as a whole – though this command function is never total.

We cannot transpose this picture without alteration to other levels of the self, but in each case we find complexity and plurality, including a plurality of selves internal to almost any self we may identify. In the case of the human psyche, we find a plurality of psychological processes, which psychoanalytical theory construes as psychological instances or agents. Whether we agree with this nomenclature and the accompanying theoretical divisions, some internal division is evident, and the processes involved possess characteristics and exhibit sufficient independence to warrant regarding them as selves. These selves are not permanent and unchanging structures. They are the product of a history in which the psyche alters itself, dividing and giving birth to new selves with new types of organization, aims and objects. This division and creation of new selves is also evident in the biological realm, the difference between the biological and psychological relating chiefly to the latter’s greater plasticity and defunctionalization (what Castoriadis terms the ‘autonomization’ of the psyche). (1997a)

The picture of the self that emerges incorporates plurality and pluralization. The self is comprised of many selves, and it actively produces and gives rise to other selves. We can see how this picture might also apply to society, but again we should be wary of assuming perfect parallels with other levels of self. In the case of society we have a self that encompasses and builds on the foundation of selves of other types. Society builds on the human being as organism and as psyche, but these never become other selves within the social self in the way that the biological selves within the multi-cellular organisms are selves of the same type as the organism as a whole, co-ordinated and integrated with the totality. We might be inclined to view social individuals in this way. The social individual is a being that is produced by the mutual action of the human psyche and society, whereby the psyche transforms part of itself so as to become social, to become society in the form of the social individual. Castoriadis

assumes that, for the most part, this production is a regular process resulting in a determinate product – he labels it ‘fabrication’, as opposed to the more indeterminate and open-ended ‘creation’. (1991b: 148-9, 1991c: 133-4) This makes it seem that social individuals are essentially the same. There will be differences of temperament based on the influence of the unsocialized dimension of the psyche, and there will be differences based on social role, class and so forth; but these different social types will all equally be representative products of a social totality based on the integration and inter-relationship of such types. This view of the social individual is one Castoriadis insists on for heteronomous societies. In his view, it is only within societies that have broken heteronomous closure that genuine individuation can begin – meaning that only in such societies can there be creation of genuinely idiosyncratic forms of individual being. (1991b: 146)

This view assumes too great a perfection and determinacy in the normal processes of socialization that produce social individuals. Determinacy is something Castoriadis teaches us to be sceptical about, and here too we should be suspicious that the degree of determination society pretends to may be less than what it achieves. Socialization is a complex and imperfect process, and since it involves creative action, it also involves a degree of indeterminacy. It is not just a matter of accidents hindering the production of perfect social individuals. The fact that creativity is required to effect the production of the social individual introduces an element that cannot be subsumed within a deterministic model. Something different and new may always emerge, and whatever emerges is never likely to be a perfect replica of the model. Usually it will be adequate. Sometimes, however, it will vary in significant and unpredictable ways, which may involve the emergence of genuinely new characteristics.

This explains the existence of individuals who are out of step with their society. Most of these have no effect upon society but merely fail to function as social individuals. Some may have an effect, however; not on their own, but as proponents of change who find receptive audiences. The heterogeneity within society, even societies of a heteronomous type, is thus partly related to heterogeneity amongst individuals. But it is not limited to this. Society creates plurality and heterogeneity. Individuals are essential agents of pluralization, but they are not its sole basis. If society is creative, and if this creation is spontaneous and undetermined, then new social principles, new social imaginary significations, will emerge. Castoriadis seems to envisage this emergence chiefly as a transformation of society as a whole. A new imaginary signification emerges, and this produces a new society. Instituted society is always likely to resist such alteration. This means conflict between social elements defending the existing institution of society and others promoting new institutions. Castoriadis also acknowledges the possibility of a number of social imaginary significations struggling within the social-historical field. The primary example he discusses is the battle between the imaginaries of rational mastery and autonomy in modernity. This struggle is concretized in conflicts between social groups which carry and promote one or other of these imaginaries, and the social world as a whole is a co-creation of the two.

These models of social transformation are still not sufficiently sensitive to the variability implied in the notion of the spontaneous creation of social imaginary significations. As we have argued, insofar as Castoriadis’s manner of discussing social self-creation suggests that the source of social creation is singular, we should instead recognize it as plural. A transformation of the whole of a society must obviously involve the whole society. But social

creation as the creation of new social imaginary significations which have the potential to effect a total transformation need not be the act of a singular creator representing society as a whole. The creation of social imaginary significations can occur anywhere and anytime. Any individual or group can be the agents of such creation. We can think of this distributing of creativity within the social-historical field in terms of a distribution of the capacity for instituting, what Castoriadis terms the radical imaginary. The radical imaginary is not housed in any one sector of society, nor can it be brought into operation only if society acts as a totality. The radical imaginary inheres in all representatives of the social-historical field. Its activation by and through one individual or group does not preclude its activation elsewhere through others. The creativity of the social-historical field is an effervescence that can result in multiple, potentially antagonistic and genuinely alternative acts of creation.

Thus, social creation is not a singular act by a singular agent. Society may be a self, but the creative agency of this self is not located in a singular agent, but distributed throughout the social-historical field. How are we to understand the multiplicity of this agency, its distributed character? How are we to understand social worlds in which organizing principles (social imaginary significations) emerge, spread, collide, flourish or decline in ways that are not predictable or regular? How are we to understand the unity and coherence of a social world that may comprise a multiplicity of worlds, each with its own mode and principle of organization? Are these internal worlds fully formed worlds, or something less (or other); and is the general social order a world in the full and determinate sense we may have imagined previously if it can encompass such internal heterogeneity?

What is required is more than just a shift in the number of the pronoun employed when we speak of society, from the singular ‘it’ to the plural ‘they’; although such a shift might have value as a marker of the plurality of the agency in question. The alteration of society must be thought of as something like the net sum of disparate acts and forces, rather than the result of a singular act by a unified agent. But even if we adopt this conceptual change, we are left with the task of thinking the unity that underlies the multiplicity of social agency. The social ‘they’ of a single society is not just any collection of social actors. There is a unity to this multiplicity that a collection of social actors drawn randomly from disparate societies would not possess. How are we to think this unity?

The Unity of a Magma and the Incompatibility of Closure and Indeterminacy

Castoriadis’s concept of *magma* can help us in this connection. A ‘magma’ is a collection that combines fundamental indeterminacy with partial and multiple determinations. It is the opposite of a set or ensemble, which is a collection based upon a thorough-going determinacy. Castoriadis describes the mode of being of a magma most vividly when speaking of the representational world of the human psyche.

We have to think of a multiplicity which is not one in the received sense of the term but which we mark out as such, and which is not a multiplicity in the sense that we could actually or virtually enumerate what it ‘contains’ but in which we could mark out in each case terms which are not absolutely jumbled together. Or, we might think of an indefinite number of terms, which may possibly change, assembled together by an optionally

transitive pre-relation (referral); or of the holding-together of distinct-indistinct components of a manifold; or, again, of an indefinitely blurred bundle of conjunctive fabrics, made up of different cloths and yet homogeneous, everywhere studded with virtual and evanescent singularities. And we have to think of the operations of identity logic as simultaneous, multiple dissections which transform or actualize these virtual singularities, these components, these terms into distinct and definite elements, solidifying the pre-relation of referral into relation as such, organising the holding-together, the being-in, the being-on, the being-proximate into a system of determined and determining relations (identity, difference, belonging, inclusion), differentiating what they distinguish in this way into ‘entities’ and ‘properties’, using this differentiation to constitute ‘sets’ and ‘classes’. (1987: 344)

For Castoriadis, the world of a society’s imaginary significations, and therefore society itself, is also a magma. Castoriadis sometimes fails to realize the full implications of this concept — unsurprisingly, since these implications are far-reaching and have been explored only minimally, even by Castoriadis himself. As Castoriadis reminds us, the pull of the traditional ontology of determinacy is so great that without constant vigilance we find ourselves automatically slipping back into a mode of thinking which construes all being according to the model of ensembles. Such thinking can intrude in ways that are far from obvious. Talking about society as an ‘it’ and about ‘its’ acts of self-creation risks falling into this trap. We may excuse this language as a kind of shorthand, not to be taken literally. Castoriadis may have taken such a view. He understood that all our attempts to elucidate the mode of being of magmas involve employing terms loaded with contrary assumptions and tendencies. There is no harm in emphasizing this point to readers who may remember only those phrases in which society is spoken of in such shorthand terms and not the warnings against interpreting this literally. But there is more here than a matter of language. Castoriadis’s understanding of society contains interpretations that do not sit well with the conception of it as a magma, and

the interpretations in question are central to Castoriadis’s understanding of society. I am thinking particularly of his understanding of social closure.

The base meaning of ‘closure’ is ‘determinacy’. This meaning carries different connotations in different contexts. The social world is closed/determinate in the sense that it resists change and refuses entry to the new or other. The living being is closed/determinate in the sense that it is always the origin of its own action and acts in its own fashion; this too means that it does not allow entry to the extraneous or heterogeneous. Interpreted strictly, such a view of closure is inconsistent with the understanding of magma as a mode of being. Entities that have the mode of being of a magma cannot be closed fully or perfectly, because they cannot be fully or perfectly determined. The only type of being that could be closed in this way is an ensemble, because it could be perfectly defined in its identity. For magmas, the boundary between the self and the non-self cannot be perfectly fixed and maintained, because that which constitutes the self cannot be fully determined. This does not mean that no difference exists between self and other, only that no division is perfectly clear and inviolable.

Castoriadis is concerned to mark the difference between societies that are relatively labile and open to external elements and those that are relatively stable and resistant to the heterogeneous. This is an important difference and well worth noting. The question is whether one can do so adequately under the rubric of ‘closure’, and whether in attempting to do so one does not risk oversimplifying our understanding of the mode of being of society.

The concept of closure is inadequate for articulating societal identity and unity, whether in terms of a single society’s relations with alien societies, or internal relations between heterogeneous elements within a single society. In the first case, we find Castoriadis asserting that, just as nothing ‘enters into’ a self, instead the self creates something, possibly in response to the external world, thereby effecting a change in itself from the inside, so too nothing alien enters into the social world of a society, rather the society creates interpretations of the alien according to significations that already operate internally. (2010b: 54) There is truth to this. However, the way Castoriadis talks about the closure of heteronomous societies, it seems that nothing new can ever emerge in them, that they are impervious to external influences, imperturbable, and that the story they tell themselves about themselves and their world is not altered in the slightest by encounters with other societies, which are never more than occasions for re-entrenching the status quo. Granted there is a conservative tendency in such societies that means they resist drastic alteration, especially to their core imaginary significations, this vision of social closure is still too absolute. It leads to the conclusion that social change can only ever be the result of spontaneous and internally driven transformation, with no role for change driven at least partially by encounters which oblige a society to act upon and alter its own imaginary world or elements of it. Overall, there is less recognition than there should be in Castoriadis’s work of the obligatory nature of the self’s responses to encounters with the environment.

(Whenever the issue of the self’s representation of its environment is raised, the question of interpretation is also encountered. There is a considerable secondary literature on the significance of interpretation in relation to Castoriadis’s concept of the imaginary. I cannot engage directly with this literature here, though I hope to do so elsewhere. In what follows I

merely attempt to indicate the need to distinguish between interpretive aspects of encounters with the external world – the world-disclosive dimension of the imaginary explored by Arnason (1989, 2007), Adams (2007, 2011), Klooger (2005, 2009) and others – and the role of interpretation in encounters between imaginary constellations.)

From the fact that in exceptional instances (infantile anorexia) a self can remain oblivious to external stimuli, Castoriadis seems to form the view that all responses are optional. If it is sometimes possible to ignore encounters with the outside world, this does not mean that such responses – and ignoring a stimulus is still a type of response – are possible in all circumstances. On the contrary, the self is usually obliged to respond in some way, and in responding it necessarily changes itself – not always radically, to be sure, but radical change is a possible result, especially cumulatively. Castoriadis recognizes that heteronomous society’s battle against its own spontaneous internal self-altering creativity is ultimately a losing one. What needs to be recognized additionally is the inevitability of change as the result of encounters between societies.

This failure is partly due to the way Castoriadis models his understanding of the encounter between the social self and other on the encounter between the self and its environment. The environment cannot provide the self with elements of its internal representational world because such elements do not exist in the environment. They exist only insofar as the self creates them for itself. (1997a) But the situation is not exactly the same when we come to consider relations between one self and another, particularly if they are selves of a similar type. In the case of encounters between one society and another, we have in both cases ‘information’ in the form of imaginary significations. The imaginary significations of one

society may be alien to another, not fitting within the world of imaginary significations that prevails within the second society, but they are not the totally opaque objects natural things are. There is something common to all significations which can provide a point of connection between significations alien to a society and significations indigenous to it. Languages are worlds unto themselves, but there are things common to all languages, structures and characteristics, and most importantly the very signifying and imaginary nature of language itself. This is what makes it possible to learn another language and to translate words and ideas from one language to another. This is never a simple matter of transference. It involves the creation of new elements within the new context which respond to and somehow reproduce aspects of the original elements. Nevertheless, this is a very different situation from the representing of non-signifying, non-imaginary objects. In the former case, the nature of the objects themselves facilitates, even invites the process of translation from one context or world to another.

The same problems apply to internal relations between heterogeneous elements within a single society. If the closure of alien societies to one another seems less complete, how much less difficult is it to imagine heterogeneous elements within a single society existing side by side and interacting? If there can be translation of significations from one imaginary world to another, then it is not necessary to envisage any socio-cultural totality as homogeneous in order for it to be viable.

(The work on civilizations by Arnason, Eisenstadt and others points in a promising direction in this regard. The concept of civilization is essentially more open and multifaceted than that of the singular society. Arnason in particular has attempted to utilize Castoriadis’s theoretical

insights and conceptual tools within the problematic of civilizational complexes. (2003; 2007) My work here can be read as a theoretical complement to his more empirically grounded endeavours.)

To return to the idea of attunement: we can understand attunement as the situation in which social actors share key imaginary significations, and so are able to comprehend, converse and operate within the community in which these significations are constitutive. Is attunement, understood in this way, exclusive? Does attunement to certain imaginary significations necessarily cut oneself off from others, and to what degree? This question must be answered in each case rather than as a matter of principle. What we should avoid is imagining this closure in terms that are ultimately incongruent with our understanding of the mode of being of the social, which is that of a magma. We should not imagine attunement to one social imaginary world along the lines of membership in one set or ensemble. Social worlds are never fully determined in the ways that sets are, and thus cannot be closed in the way that sets are closed. Membership of one social imaginary world need not exclude membership of another. Moreover, membership does not entail possession of fixed and determinate properties, and possession of any particular property does not exclude simultaneous possession of other properties, including ones that in some regards and contexts might be contradictory. The unity of a society does not require perfect consistency or the absence of contradictions. Inconsistencies, tensions and opposing properties and tendencies emerge, congeal and crystallize in certain contexts and contingencies, melting away in others. Clearly, ‘membership’ of a social group means something different here from what we may be accustomed to think in relation to set-like things. It is less exclusive and more labile; and the degree of exclusivity and lability cannot be determined in advance, but must be assessed in

each context. It can change over time, and it can change depending upon the specific questions and criteria we bring to the examination of the question, or the specific forces brought to bear in different social-historical circumstances, which themselves may be interpreted as posing different questions and imposing different criteria.

To return to the concept of coherence: what the foregoing implies is that coherence is always partial, never entailing a full and complete transparency, even within one socio-cultural world; nor is this necessary. Likewise, what lies beyond any socio-cultural world need not be completely opaque. Its intelligibility is a potentiality residing in both the social actor who reaches for understanding and the alien cultural element that by virtue of its being as meaning opens itself to interpretation. The resulting coherence is a creative achievement, not fixed or permanent but constantly changing as each society and its imaginary world changes, in part through its contacts with the alien and heterogeneous.

Conclusion

The implications of Castoriadis’s ontological innovations have yet to be explored in depth. They do not lend themselves to formalization, and any formalization risks imposing again a logic tied to a determinist ontology. That does not mean they resist any exploration and elaboration. The mode of being of a magma should not be understood in a monolithic manner: it is not one, uniform mode of being, but a category that encompasses a variety of types, equivalent only in that all depart from the mode of being imagined and demanded by

the ensidic logic-ontology of determinacy. If we are to utilize these conceptual innovations fully, we need to challenge traditional conceptualizations of society. We must learn to think the unity of a society without conflating it with homogeneity; we must learn to imagine a form of unity within which heterogeneity is essential. Such a unity will not be the sort of unity one is accustomed to imagine according to conceptions which base the being of a totality upon the determinacy of both its individual components and the whole. The totality that is a single society is something more fluid and less perfect. A society exists even though the attunement of its members is imperfect and partial. It exists even though its organization is a complex web of partial orderings which are never fully and perfectly integrated. It encompasses disorder – including the emergence of new orderings – as part of its order.

No doubt Castoriadis recognized these characteristics of society. What he seems not to have recognized is that such characteristics are incompatible with anything like the sort of social closure he postulates. I have tried to show how this postulate of closure is linked to the conception of the social self as singular rather than essentially plural and pluralizing. Unity thus comes to be equated with singularity and closure, which undermines the recognition of the fundamental indeterminacy of the mode of being of the social.

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