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The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Apr 18, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/an-introduction-to-cornelius-castoriadis-work/>

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An Introduction to Cornelius Castoriadis' Work

Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997), the philosopher of social imagination, was a political activist and a revolutionary theorist. Castoriadis, after his education in Athens and his arrival in Paris in 1945, founded with Claude Lefort and others the group and journal "Socialisme ou Barbarie" (1949-1965), while working simultaneously as a professional economist at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. In order to avoid deportation from France, Cornelius Castoriadis wrote his political texts under pseudonyms (namely Chaulieu, Cardan, Coudray) until his naturalization as a French citizen at the end of the 1960s. English translations of his writings were circulated at that time by "Socialisme ou Barbarie"'s sister organization in London, "Solidarity". Many of his ideas in this period inspired the May 1968 movement in France. At the beginning of the 1970s, Castoriadis became a practicing psychoanalyst. He was close to the so-called Quatrième groupe, which split from Ecole Freudienne ruled by Jacques Lacan: Piera Aulagnier [1923-1991], one of its founders after her break with Lacan, was his wife at the time. He was later directeur d'études at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. His most important book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, was published in French in 1975. In the last years, Castoriadis's entire work in its philosophical, political and psychoanalytical implications was given a new and more careful attention in the English-speaking world.

Castoriadis's starting point is the observation of a profound analogy between the questions and the tasks confronting politics, with its goal of social autonomy, and those confronting psychoanalysis in its effort to foster individual autonomy. Castoriadis proposes to reflect both on politics and psychoanalysis in an attempt to offer a new account of the irreducible tension existing between the singular dimension of the human being rooted in the psyche and the anonymous collective dimension, which is at once social and historical. This irreducible tension provides the texture of the concrete existence of the individual, provided one takes care not to reproduce an abstract separation (already denounced by Marx) or an opposition between the individual and society.

Nevertheless, despite a radical difference between the psyche and the social-historical beyond or "before" the social individual, both share a common element: the presence and the relevance for both of a non-functional meaning, that is to say, of a level of meaning which is neither deduced from reality nor based on rationality but created by the imaginary. This nonfunctional meaning allows us to recognize the dividing line between the human and the nonhuman. Castoriadis writes (*World in Fragments*, p. 262): "We must postulate that a break in the psychological evolution of the animal world occurs when human beings appear [...]. Hegel said that man is a sick animal. We must say much more than that: man is a mad animal, radically unfit for life. 'Whence' not as 'cause', but as condition of what is the creation of society".

The human being is capable of forming representations according to his imagination and to his desires. In this sense man becomes a being able to fulfil his desires through representations, by virtue of the autonomization of imagination. "Originally", wrote Freud (1), "the mere existence of a representation [Vorstellung] was a guarantee of the reality of the represented". At this originary level which persists in the unconscious all desires are not simply fulfillable but always already fulfilled.

Castoriadis's psychoanalytical work suggests a new reflection on the uncanny [unheimlich] character of this abysmal and originary human ground, which is never fully mastered by social-historical institutions. This point allows us to develop a renewed conception of the originary, as radically irreducible to the immediate. Indeed, according to traditional speculative philosophy's main project, thinking the origin means to get at the originary in its (alleged) simple immediacy, that is to say, in its ontological direct givenness to intuition. This kind of unmediated accessibility to the origin is a fundamental prerequisite of speculative thinking: the aim of the philosophical gaze is the achievement of the original and originary self-givenness of Being in its direct immediacy. Such an immediacy is what belongs properly to Being, what constitutes it. Consequently the desire which feeds speculation is a nostalgic one, because its aim is the return to the originary. Here telos and arche coincide.

According to Castoriadis, such a nostalgia for origin is the impossible regression to "what comes before desire" (2), a kind of phantasmatic regression to an originary phase dominated by the pleasure principle, in which "one did not know that one was 'condemned to desire'" (3). This condemnation will always be rejected by our psyche's deepest tendencies, in a rejection which reveals itself by a refusal of the immediate inaccessibility to the origin. That originary phase of psychical life characterized by Freud's "hallucinatory wish-fulfillment" (4) is what provides the nostalgic desire for origin with its radical aim.

Therefore, access to the order of meaningfully organized experience requires from the psyche an alteration of its desire. It is impossible to separate the individual from social implications in the goal of autonomy. This is why psychoanalysis questions radically any theoretical approach to the human world that would posit from the outset the self-identity of consciousness or of reason, its simple and originary immediacy as transcendental origin of meaning. That would somehow precede and make possible its identification with, and its differentiation from, all exteriority. Indeed, if one starts with a prior and already given subjective identity, the very principle of the origin would spring only from the interiority of a pure self-presence in which case an immediate self-identity would precede the movement of its constitution, and its temporality would be shielded from all discontinuity.

Now, the life of the soul the real core of human singularity is original self-production or self-engenderment (of what is one's own), but it is so precisely because an originary complication of the "same", due to a perpetual upsurge of the other within a space and a time that "the same" must first conquer as its own. From the beginning the originary lacks immediacy. Still the psychical sphere, in its folding back upon itself, must be able to conquer self-reference, which constitutes it but is not given in advance, by struggling against the threat of alienation, ceaselessly represented by that strangeness that haunts even that which is one's own. In this uncanny strangeness of the familiar, we can, and must, recognize the Chaos or the Abyss of Being from which, according to Castoriadis, the human being emerges.

The threat of alienation is represented here first of all by a figure of alterity that cannot be expelled outside, for it constitutes the obscure ground of the self, yet the self will appropriate it without ever completely succeeding in doing so. The folding back upon itself of the origin presupposes the divergence of self from itself. With this shift the psyche drags a foreign weight localized within but unlocalizable outside, even while opening up the time that is the being of the psychical. The core of what is one's own is constituted, therefore, by an appropriation following an originary dispossession: psychical life is instituted only upon the assumption of a lack. That is why, as Castoriadis says, "the psyche is its own lost object [son propre objet perdu]" (5). But what has been lost is the plenitude of an originary identity that was never possessed. This is the paradox of a loss that precedes what would be lost, the absence of a presence to the self that is forever adjourned, forever to be conquered. This is the originary that never was and will never be immediate. Thanks to psychoanalytic theory, "the radical foreignness of the madman has given way to the disquieting strangeness [das Unheimliche or the uncanny] of something which is familiar and which has become, by turns, too close and too distant [d'un familier tour à tour trop proche et trop lointain]" (6). On this basis, one can recognize the mark of an irreducible strangeness even within the most familiar intimacy of what is one's own one that can hardly be exorcized through an expulsion into the exteriority of an outside. The self-alteration of desire, one's own access to reality, and the conquest of an identity arise from this lack of the

originary's immediacy.

The psyche, then, passes from an originary lack of a never possessed simple origin to an originary alteration of desire, whereby it discovers that it is condemned to create essentially contingent and perishable meanings.

The psyche emerges for Castoriadis out of this abysmal Groundlessness of Being by giving it form and figure. It passes from the atemporal night of self-identical Being to the original order of meaning, representation and desire. But in this movement through which the psyche makes itself temporal, the recall of the lost and ever presupposed origin still makes itself heard in the form of the regressive tendency of drives, the nostalgia for the originary state of quietude. The origin of psychological life, which is also the origin of meaning, brushes up against the originary non-sense, the eternity of the repetition of the Same, the inorganic night of identity, which threatens with insignificance the entire building of meaning created by human beings.

This is why the return of the origin, desired by nostalgia, would amount to no more than the death of the desire itself. Instead of returning to an allegedly preexisting and lost unity, the movement of desire tears the psyche away from its monadic solitude by opening it to the creation of meaning. In fact, what surges forth from the originary, and escapes the immediacy of an intuitive grasp, is the imaginary and symbolic articulation of a nonfunctional meaning.

The constitution of the subject, whose identity does not go without saying from the outset, must be reduced to the temporal layout of the soul's life that is, to the emerging of the psyche as appropriation of what is one's own, starting from its primordial fragmentation. The psyche traces out the original movement of a folding back upon itself. This folding back movement is a sort of minimal crispation or contraction of Being's abyss from which a "self" detaches itself. This self is still not the same, not yet a subject, which it will become only by going beyond the originary phase of hallucinatory self-fulfillment. But this is possible only by means of the socialization of the psyche that is, by means of an institution of significations other than psychological ones, significations which are, nonetheless, capable of satisfying the demand for meaning which constitutes the psyche. The subject is, therefore, not self-constituted but rather does constitute itself by means of a social process that gives access to the order of instituted significations.

Notes:

(1) Sigmund Freud, "Negation", S.E., XIX, p. 237.

(2) *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by K. Blamey (Oxford: Polity, 1987; paperback edition in 1997) p. 293.

(3) Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, *La violence de l'interprétation* (Paris: PUF 1975) p. 65.

(4) Sigmund Freud, "The Metapsychology of Dreams", S.E., XIV, 228.

(5) Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution*, cit., p. 296-7.

(6) Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, op. cit., p. 20.