

# THE KNIGHT'S MOVE INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON CASTORIADIS' IDEA OF HUMAN CREATION GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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## ABSTRACT

Since all contributions gathered in this monographic issue of "Ethics & Politics" thoroughly interrogate Castoriadis' contribution to contemporary philosophy from different perspectives, dwelling on its originality but also its difficulties, grey areas, and contradictions, in these introductory pages I will limit myself to showing how his idea of "human creation" as ontological genesis, with its fruitful aporias, constitutes a retort to the non-existence of the Archimedean point animating the continuous apparition and re-aparition of the "ontological *hybris*". In this sense, the philosophical idea of ontological creation could be seen as akin to the Knight's move. A winning move, at the same time clever and indirect, through which Castoriadis' thought avoids the opposite pitfalls of rationalism and skepticism and invites us to face the human impossibility of finding a universal and necessary foundation for the institution of social norms – without which, however, humanity could not exist.

## KEYWORDS

Archimedean point, Ontological *Hybris*, Being-able-to-be-otherwise, Institution of significations, Praxis.

"To think is not to exit the cave, nor is it to replace the uncertainty of shadows with the clear-cut contours of the things themselves, the flickering glow of a flame replaced by the light of the true Sun. It is to enter into the Labyrinth; more exactly, to make be and make appear a Labyrinth, when one might have remained "stretched out among the flowers, facing the sky." (Rilke, *Immer wieder...*). It is to become lost amid galleries that exist only because we tirelessly hollow them out, turning round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac, access to which has been closed off behind where we had stepped—until this rotation opens up, inexplicably, some cracks in the wall wide enough for us to pass through. Undoubtedly, the myth was meant to signify something important when it made the Labyrinth the work of Daedalus, a man"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *Préface*, in Id., *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Seuil, Paris 1978, pp.7-8 (see the anonymous English translation of this book readable here: <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-1.pdf>).

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL RELEVANCE OF CASTORIADIS' LEGACY

This monographic section of "Ethics & Politics" is intended to celebrate the centenary of Cornelius Castoriadis' birth, which coincides, moreover, with the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death at the end of December 1997. I would first like to thank the editors of "Ethics & Politics" who agreed to host such a long Symposium, rich in contributions and ideas, which finally confirms the philosophical relevance of Castoriadis' work and heritage

A special thank also goes to Bernhard Waldenfels, one of the most relevant and prominent contemporary philosophers, who - in agreement with the Suhrkamp publishing house, to whom our gratitude also goes - allowed us to publish the Italian translation of one of his philosophical texts on Castoriadis: "Revolutionary Praxis and Ontological Creation". At the beginning of this text, Waldenfels also recalls his personal encounters with the Greek-French philosopher, later evocated in diary form in his *Reisetagebuch eines Phänomenologen*<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to it, it is important to signal the remarkable paper by Philippe Caumières, one of the better-known French scholars, who has already worked extensively on Castoriadis' thought, and the very interesting contributions by three colleagues working in Greek Universities - Dionysis Drosos, Vicky Iakovou, and Fotini Vaki - whose presence testifies to the growing attention and interest in Castoriadis's thought in his native country.

The remaining nine essays of the present Symposium are all authored by Italian scholars. Only a few years ago, this level of involvement with Castoriadis's thought would have been simply impossible. The essays published in this monographic section of *Ethis & Politics* are proof of the vitality of Castoriadis' work, whose reception in Italy (due essentially to the indefatigable mediation of Pietro Barcellona<sup>3</sup>, whose death will never be mourned enough), has been belated, slow, and controversial, but seems now to be heading towards a secure future<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See Bernhard Waldenfels, *Reisetagebuch eines Phänomenologen. Aus den Jahren 1978-2019*, edited by Hans-Helmuth Gander, Ergon Verlag, Baden Baden 2020, pp.31, 34-35, 316-317, 331 (in open access here: [https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/9783956507700.pdf?download\\_full\\_pdf=1](https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/9783956507700.pdf?download_full_pdf=1)).

<sup>3</sup> See Pietro Barcellona, *Introduzione*, in C.Castoriadis, *L'istituzione immaginaria della società (parte seconda)*, edited by Fabio Ciaramelli, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1995, pp. VII-XXIX (in open access here: [https://www.academia.edu/28616799/C\\_Castoriadis\\_Listituzione\\_immaginaria\\_della\\_societ%C3%A0](https://www.academia.edu/28616799/C_Castoriadis_Listituzione_immaginaria_della_societ%C3%A0)). It should be added that in the fertile production of Pietro Barcellona (1936-2013), from *Lo spazio della politica*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1993 onwards, references to Castoriadis' thought are always constant and decisive.

<sup>4</sup> An important moment in the revival of philosophical interest in Castoriadis's work among Italian scholars is certainly represented by Alfredo Ferrarin's article, *La prassi, l'istituzione, l'immaginario in Castoriadis*, in *Discipline Filosofiche*, XXIX, 2, 2019, pp.121-150.

## CASTORIADIS AND “THE SHORT TWENTIETH CENTURY”: BARBARISM WITHOUT BARBARIANS

Nevertheless, the more time passes, the more one realises that Castoriadis was in every respect, to quote the subtitle of Hobsbawm's famous book, a child of the “short twentieth century”<sup>5</sup>, and exactly for this reason he seems to be quite alien to the philosophical mindset prevailing today. All the most significant moves in his life as a militant, as a professional (first as an economist, then as a psychoanalyst) and as a theorist have been inspired by his concern for revolution, understood not so much as a one-off event but as a permanent self-alteration of society, which obviously takes upon itself the responsibility for such a process of self-transformation.

In a letter addressed in October 1963 to the readers and sympathisers of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Castoriadis wrote: “If the term barbarism has a meaning today, it is neither fascism, nor misery, nor a return to the Stone Age; it is precisely this 'air-conditioned nightmare', consumption for consumption's sake in private life, organisation for organisation's sake in collective life and their corollaries: privatisation, withdrawal and apathy towards common affairs, dehumanisation of social relations. This process is well underway in the industrialised countries, but it generates its own opposites (*Si le terme barbarie a un sens aujourd'hui ce n'est ni le fascisme, ni la misère, ni le retour à l'âge de la pierre; c'est précisément ce 'cauchemar climatisé', la consommation pour la consommation dans la vie privée, l'organisation pour l'organisation dans la vie collective et leurs corollaires: privatisation, retrait et apathie à l'égard des affaires communes, déshumanisation des rapports sociaux. Ce processus est bien en cours dans les pays industrialisés, mais il engendre ses propres contraires*)”<sup>6</sup>.

Through an implicit quotation of Henry Miller, whose memoir *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, originally published in 1945, was translated in French in 1954 (*Le cauchemar climatisé*, Gallimard), Castoriadis describes a social and cultural situation where consummation represented the only value able to motivate psychical energies of the social individuals. At that moment, however, such a result of modern capitalism was still perceived as a nightmare. On the contrary, thirty years after, during the 1990s, it becomes the “general pattern of identification, presented by institution to society, proposed and imposed by the same institution to individuals as social individuals (*le modèle indentificatoire général, que l'institution présente à la société, propose et impose aux individus comme individus sociaux*)”. The ideal goal of such pattern is represented by “the individual who gains as much as possible and

<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Abacus, London 1994.

<sup>6</sup> C. Castoriadis, *Postface à « Recommencer la révolution »*, in Id., *L'expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, vol. II, *Prolétariat et organisation*, 10/18, Paris 1974, p. 351 (now in C.Castoriadis, *Quelle démocratie ?*, tome 1, *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*, edited by E.Escobar, M.Gondicas, P.Vernay, vol.VII, Éditions du Sandre, Paris 2013, p. 159.

enjoys as much as possible; it is as simple and as banal as that. This is being said more and more openly, which does not prevent it from being true (*l'individu qui gagne le plus possible et jouit le plus possible; c'est aussi simple et aussi banal que cela. Cela se dit ouvertement de plus en plus, ce qui ne l'empêche pas d'être vrai*)<sup>7</sup>. The economic is the sole motive for human actions and individuals are driven only by the attainment of their private enjoyments.

Even if, according to Constantine P. Cavafy's *Waiting for the barbarians*, quoted once by Castoriadis<sup>8</sup>, barbarians "haven't come", barbarism seems to be the only appropriate name for such a situation. Of course, it is a barbarism "without barbarians"<sup>9</sup>, but also without the perception of a feasible alternative.

Already towards the end of Castoriadis' life, the process underway in the industrialised countries, just before it entered the stage of globalization, no longer seemed to "generate its own opposites".

This is even more true nowadays, when the *Zeitgeist* seems to have completely abandoned any idea of individual and collective responsibility for the social situation, which appears in the true sense of the word unchangeable. Our times appear exclusively concerned with finding and exhibiting objective guarantees that (would) allow social processes to be inscribed in continuity with their allegedly natural (or in any case allegedly real) foundations. This relevant gap makes Castoriadis himself, and his philosophical proposals, partially out of date or untimely, *unzeitgemäß*, but also perhaps more worthy of being listened to and questioned.

Just two examples will suffice. Based on his firm rejection of ontological monism, his reflections on *physis*, which are more and more present in his later writings, prove to be completely irreducible to the neo-naturalism, which became prevalent in contemporary philosophy and in its "realistic" turn. The same can be said of his dogged denial of any form of rational foundation not only of ethics or politics, but more generally of the institution of society and of its fundamental meanings.

## THE "ARCHIMEDEAN WISH" AND ITS FRUSTRATION

<sup>7</sup> C.Castoriadis, *La crise du processus identificatoire*, in Id., *La montée de l'insignifiance. Les carefours du labyrinthe IV*, Seuil, Paris 1996, p.131.

<sup>8</sup> C.Castoriadis, *Réflexions sur le 'développement' et la 'rationalité'*, in C. Castoriadis, *Domaines de l'homme. Les carefours du labyrinthe II*, Seuil, Paris 1986, p.155.

<sup>9</sup> "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? /Those people were a kind of solution" (Cavafy). For a more developed analysis of this idea, let me refer to Fabio Ciarraelli, *Barbarie sans barbares*, to be published in *Phénoménologie, esthétique, politique. Mélanges offerts à Danielle Lories*, edited by Olivier Depré and Sylvain Camilleri.

Actually, for Castoriadis, “that which is, as it is, allows us to act and to create; it does not dictate anything. We make our own laws; that is why we are also responsible for them (*ce qui est, tel qu'il est, nous permet d'agir et de créer; et il ne nous dicte rien. Nous faisons nos lois; c'est pourquoi aussi nous en sommes responsables*)”<sup>10</sup>.

This human responsibility cannot be attenuated by any ontological warranty which could give objectivity, namely universality and necessity, to the social and historical institutions. In this sense, Castoriadis' thought makes no concession to the advocates of the “Archimedean wish”<sup>11</sup> for an objective or absolute point from which it would become possible “to unhinge the world” or to give permanent stability to theory and practice. Such a wish is condemned to an unavoidable frustration because it would imply, in Castoriadis' terms, the “wish to leap into the immediate absolute, that is to say into nothingness”<sup>12</sup>.

According to the classical and modern philosophical tradition, only the access to a full objectivity, independent from any human intervention, could guarantee a reliable theoretical foundation. Consequently, the main task of philosophy would consist in measuring theory and praxis on the universal and necessary determinacy of reality. When Castoriadis denounces “the phantasies of an ideology which refuses what is in the name of a desire directed at a mirage (*les phantasmes d'une idéologie qui refuse ce qui est au nom d'un désir qui vise un mirage*)”, namely “(fictive) Being”<sup>13</sup>, he refuses to enter the *querelles* of the “inherited thought” and seeks a way out.

## THE KNIGHT'S MOVE IN CASTORIADIS' WORK

The philosophical idea of human creation, which most of the texts collected in this issue – starting with Waldenfels' essay – analyse and question from different points of view, can be considered as Castoriadis's reaction to the impossible fulfilment of the Archimedean wish, and in this sense it constitutes the knight's move at the core of his work.

“The knight is the only chess piece that can overturn all the others”, with these words the Italian writer Andrea Camilleri introduced one of his most hilarious

<sup>10</sup> C. Castoriadis, *La logique des magmas et la question de l'autonomie*, in Id., *Domaines de l'homme*, cit., p. 413. On the notion of revolution, see C.Castoriadis, *Héritage et révolution*, in Id., *Figure du pensable. Les carrefours du labyrinthe VI*, Seuil, Paris 1999, pp. 129-144.

<sup>11</sup> Such a formula is even more interesting, if we consider that it comes from an author who was not particularly fond of psychoanalysis: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> C.Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Seuil, Paris 1975, p. 156 (*The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by Kathleen Blarney, Polity Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 114).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 155 (English translation, p. 112).

novels, entitled precisely *The knight's move*.<sup>14</sup> The same metaphor was also evoked by Vittorio Foa's autobiography, who began his political life in Fascist prisons, and for whom "after the decline of its great historical currents, socialism can only reappear with autonomy"<sup>15</sup>.

The fundamental idea of human creation plays a similar role in Castoriadis' thought, because it shows all its philosophical fecundity precisely in its capacity to constitute an indirect but effective rejoinder to certain *impasses* that paralyse the inherited thought.

By claiming the radical, though not absolute, character of "human creation", Castoriadis rejects the traditional alternative between objectivism (transcendent or transcendental) and arbitrariness. In other words, the demystification of universal and necessary objectivity (which classical thought attributed to the nature of things, and modernity attributed to the a priori of human reason) in no way entails the triumph of individualistic skepticism, but the assumption of ontological, ethical, and political responsibility for human creation.

## THE QUESTION CONCERNING "WHAT MAKES THAT THERE IS HISTORY?" AND THE ROLE OF CREATION

In an important text on Freud, Castoriadis formulates this capital question: "What makes that there is history, in the strong sense of the word? (*Qu'est-ce qui fait qu'il y a histoire, au sens fort du terme ?*)"<sup>16</sup>, and he detects the answer to this question in "the massive fact of social-historical creation"<sup>17</sup>, although the latter has been the object of several philosophical attempts to conceal it.

After the publication of many posthumous writings<sup>18</sup>, it may be useful and appropriate to return to the Prefaces of two major works (*L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 1975, and *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, 1978). A close reading of the two

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Camilleri, *La mossa del cavallo*, Sellerio, Palermo 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Vittorio Foa, *Il Cavallo e la Torre. Riflessioni su una vita*, Einaudi, Torino 1991. His reference to autonomy can be found in Id., *Lettere dalla giovinezza*, Einaudi, Torino 1998, p. XV.

<sup>16</sup> This passage deserves to be quoted in full: "What makes that there is history, in the strong sense of the term, whereas psychoanalysis would lead (and, in the vast majority of cases, rightly so) to consider the repetition and reproduction of what exists, ensured by the very nature of the process of socialisation of the human being, as the prevalent feature of human societies?" [*Qu'est-ce qui fait qu'il y a histoire, au sens fort du terme, alors que la psychanalyse conduirait (et, dans l'immense majorité des cas, à juste raison) à considérer la répétition et la reproduction de l'existant, assurées par la nature même du processus de socialisation de l'être humain, comme le trait prévalent des sociétés humaines ?*], C.Castoriadis, *Freud, la société, l'histoire*, in Id., *La montée de l'insignifiance*, cit., p. 148.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed and complete review of Castoriadis' works, translations and so-called secondary literature, see the international bibliography, periodically updated by David Ames Curtis, in "Cornelius Castoriadis Agora International Website": <https://www.agorainternational.org/>.

Prefaces, and particularly of the second one, helps one not to lose sight of the essential, namely the reference to *history as creation*.

This fundamental connection is what Castoriadis' thought aims to make clear already in the 1975 Preface of *L'institution*, where we can read: "History is essentially *poiesis*, not imitative poetry, but creation and ontological genesis in and through individuals' doing and representing/saying. This doing and this representing/saying are also instituted historically, at a given moment, as thoughtful doing or as thought in the making (*faire pensant ou pensée se faisant*)"<sup>19</sup>.

In the 1978 Preface to *Les carrefours*, the reference to human creation as ontological genesis (as the "emergence of *other* figures of the thinkable"<sup>20</sup>: thus, not simply constituted by a different way of combining or assembling forms or figures still present) plays a strategic role and better clarifies in what sense the reference to the idea of human creation constitutes the knight's move of Castoriadis' thought.

## THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN CREATION BEYOND RELATIVISM AND ABSOLUTISM

The starting point of this Preface is "to elucidate the strange fact of knowledge"<sup>21</sup>. Castoriadis speaks of *elucidation* and not of explanation or theorization, because there is no general, systematic, and absolute *theōria*. On the contrary, he adds that "there is, certainly, the *factum* of experience or of knowledge. Yet equally, and just as importantly, there is the *factum* of error (I am not talking about errors in calculation) and especially of uncertainty. And there is the *factum* of the entanglement of the two. What a platitudinous illusion to believe in a simple, sharp, and clear-cut division between them. A platitudinous illusion, too, to believe that anything goes. These two illusions share nearly the whole contemporary stage: Positivism, Scientism, Rationalism, and Structuralism, on the one hand; Irrationalism, naive Relativism, hasty and superficial denunciations of 'Science' and 'Knowledge', on the other. Their common ground? The childish belief that we could ever escape the question of truth, by resolving it once and for all—or by declaring it meaningless."<sup>22</sup>

We will not be able to grasp the originality and scope of Castoriadis's philosophical proposal, and especially of his idea of ontological creation (included its very problematic nature), if we do not emphasize the need to escape from both the illusions just pointed out. What they have in common is the assumption, at once theoretically illusory and politically dangerous, of the ontological and ethical objectivism that constitutes a common thread in the philosophical tradition. Relativistic reductionism is also ultimately a form of absolutism, i.e. objectivism. Castoriadis is quick

<sup>19</sup> C.Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, cit., p. 8 (English translation, pp. 3-4).

<sup>20</sup> C. Castoriadis, *Préface*, in Id., *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, cit., p. 17 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

to point out that “the ascertainment, quite obvious (*la constatation évidente*), that every philosophy is a historical creation has nothing to do with relativism—which as a matter of fact eliminates the problem of creation. It is not only and not so much that relativism “contradicts itself.” It is that every form of relativism is always—if it does not limit itself to stammering and muttering—a form of absolutism. It claims to be able to exhaust that of which it speaks through the enumeration of the relationships in which it would be caught; it has to affirm that the set of these relationships is determinate and assignable. Yet the problem is established precisely by the fact that, in the case before us, the relationships do exist and they do not exhaust their object”<sup>23</sup>.

### THE ONTOLOGICAL *HYBRIS* AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL TASK TO RESEMANTIZE ONTOLOGY

In its theoretical-speculative version, “the inherited thought” presents itself as a philosophy of the determinacy (*Bestimmtheit*) of Being: indeed, this determinacy would be the true object of philosophical knowledge, capable of grasping it in its intrinsic rationality, that is, in its universality and necessity. In this fierce denial of being-able-to-be-otherwise, which instead constitutes the specificity of human action, the “supreme *hybris* of human existence, i.e. ontological *hybris*” shows itself<sup>24</sup>.

To counter this, Castoriadis certainly does not propose the suppression of ontology, but on the contrary the task of resemantize it. The core of his response to ontological *hybris* consists in his reference to *phronēsis* as the practice of a thought that, instead of concealing the radical contingency of being, recognizes and accepts its indeterminacy, its incompleteness, that is, its essential temporality.

Through time, which is “the excess of Being upon itself (*l’excès de l’être sur lui-même*)”<sup>25</sup>, the dimension of creation runs through Being itself and renders impracticable the philosophical project to dominate it, that is to say to fix it in the objectivity of knowledge, which would be supposed to give us absolute criteria of judgement. Consequently, only if the philosophical attitude remains nostalgically bound to the objectivism of universal and necessary Being, would the impossibility or failure of this very objectivism directly result in theoretical skepticism and ethical arbitrariness. The knight’s move is to evade it and revive the power of thought, of its creativity, of its ability to resemantize ontology.

Castoriadis’s reply to the absence of a universal and necessary foundation that would make possible a *theōria* of totality is thus not the denunciation of theory and a relapse into skepticism, but instead a reflection on ontological creation.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> C. Castoriadis, *Institution de la société et religion*, in Id., *Domaines de l’homme*, cit., p. 371.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376.



Such a reflection thus emerges from the need to “give an account of and reason for—*logon didonai*— for everything”<sup>26</sup>: consequently, also for human action, that’s to say for experiences and dimensions of reality which cannot have universality and necessity at their basis.

In a central point of his beautiful 1978 Preface to *Les carrefours de Labyrinthe*, Castoriadis argues that this is exactly what thinking consists of. He writes: “To think, however, is precisely to shake up the perceptual institution in which every site has its place, and every moment has its hour—just as it is to shake up the given institution of the world and of society, the social imaginary significations this institution bears.”<sup>27</sup> And in the same page, he adds that through this “moment of creative tearing”, a “different and fresh [*recommencée*] dawn” takes place, “where, in one go, things take on another figure in an unknown landscape”<sup>28</sup>. From this lacerating and creative shock, set in motion by thought on the basis of what is offered to perception in an apparently obvious way, the specific creativity of human action comes to the surface and shows its structural *being-able-to-be-otherwise*.

<sup>26</sup> C.Castoriadis, *Préface*, in Id., *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, cit., p. 15

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.