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for the Modern Greek Studies Association  
of Australia and New Zealand (MGSAANZ)  
Department of Modern Greek  
University of Sydney NSW 2006 Australia  
Tel (02) 9351 7252 Fax (02) 9351 3543  
E-mail: [Vrasidas.Karalis@modern.greek.usyd.edu.au](mailto:Vrasidas.Karalis@modern.greek.usyd.edu.au)

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MODERN GREEK STUDIES  
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)

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Address for all correspondence and payments

MGSAANZ

Department of Modern Greek, University of Sydney, NSW 2006 Australia

Tel (+61-2) 9351 7252 Fax (+61-2) 9351 3543

E-mail: Vras@arts.usyd.edu.au

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Το περιοδικό φιλοξενεί άρθρα στα Αγγλικά και τα Ελληνικά αναφερόμενα σε όλες τις απόψεις των Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών (στη γενικότητά τους). Υποψήφιοι συνεργάτες θα πρέπει να υποβάλλουν κατά προτίμηση τις μελέτες των σε δισκέτα και σε έντυπη μορφή. Όλες οι συνεργασίες από πανεπιστημιακούς έχουν υποβληθεί στην κριτική των εκδοτών και επιλέκτων πανεπιστημιακών συναδέλφων.

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**Dr Craig Browne**

## CASTORIADIS ON THE CAPITALIST IMAGINARY

The virtual dissolution of notions of a social alternative to capitalism has in large part shaped the two most influential contemporary perspectives in social theory: postmodernism and globalisation. At the same time, new modes of protest and resistance to capitalism have evolved in the advanced western nation states, as well as other parts of the world. These anti-capitalist movements are set apart from earlier socialist struggles by their global dialogue, historical reflexivity and occasional appreciation of their own entanglements with capitalism. Although the critique of capitalism has not ended, it no doubt needs to be refocused. Cornelius Castoriadis' writings on the capitalist imaginary make a signal contribution to this task, they suggest another direction in critical theory. Even Castoriadis' severest critics appreciate the originality of his conception of the imaginary institution of society and its commitment to the extension of the project of autonomy (see Habermas 1987a).

In the first instance, Castoriadis' general conception implies that to inquire into the capitalist imaginary is to focus on the overdetermination of material conditions and class relations by the symbolic horizon of capitalism. Social imaginaries, Castoriadis (1987, 3) contends, are founded in neither real, nor rational determinations; rather it is the instituted imaginary that is the condition of the possibility of the determination of the real and the exercise of rationality. In other words, contrary to the ideological self-definition of capitalism, it is the imaginary, or the symbolic horizon of meaning which the imaginary institutes, that establishes the alleged rationality of capitalism and its apparent coherence as a systematic form of social organization. Most critiques of economic reason have rarely put this facet of capitalism into question, even though the dependence of economic rationality and action on a broader substrate of cultural meanings has been widely known since Max Weber. It will be argued that Castoriadis' writings point to a more complex and rich understanding of capitalism, yet ultimately the critique of capitalism from this perspective leads to an interrogation of the central trait of logical thought.

It is important to note at the outset certain distinguishing features of Castoriadis' elucidating of the capitalist imaginary. There is the specific content he attributes to the capitalist imaginary; this content can only partially demarcate it from other social imaginaries because, in Castoriadis' opinion, social imaginaries are not wholly determinable and therefore cannot be completely demarcated. Nevertheless, there is a broad orientation of rational mastery, or properly pseudo-rational mastery that is distinctive to the capitalist imaginary (Castoriadis 1991).

It is also necessary to clarify some of the properties which are constitutive of social imaginaries in general, even though each imaginary gives rise to a specific social-historical institution. In fact, Castoriadis (1987) warns against the attempt to derive an imaginary from its formal components, believing this to be one of the major failings of structuralist anthropology and linguistics. In his view, the distinction between form and content breaks down in the case of the imaginary. Like all social imaginaries, the capitalist imaginary is instituted in double form. First, there is the imaginary institution proper, that is, the institution of a web of collective significations and meanings. Second, there is the duplication at the level of institutions of the social imaginary or the symbolic form of capitalism. Of course, the distinction drawing attention to this duplication is entirely analytic, the two modalities of the imaginary are interlocked. Social imaginaries involve the creation or 'instauration' of symbolic 'figures' and 'forms' that, as has already been noted, are neither real nor rational. Rather, these figures and forms establish horizons and frameworks of 'world-interpretation'. In this sense, capitalism constitutes a horizon of meaning, as well as a set of social relations and social practices.

According to Castoriadis, the imaginary is a creation of social-historical activity and, at the same time, a system of meaning that in most cases denies this social-historical instituting activity. In general, this denial has taken the form of explaining or legitimating the institution of society through some reference to an extra-social source and origin, like the will of God and the natural foundation of the nation. What this work of the imaginary creates is the illusory notion of a necessary and inevitable order of the world. In virtually all social-historical cases, the origin of the institution in collective social practice is disguised. Put differently, the social imaginary is in each case the creation of a kind of ontology and a mode of everyday epistemology congruent with this ontology. It is for this reason that Castoriadis (1987) describes social imaginary significations as being like 'invisible cement'. The capitalist imaginary operates then, as do most other social imaginaries, through the institutionalising of a type of symbolic closure. The one exception is the imaginary of the project of individual and collective autonomy.

The fact that social imaginaries generally institute a symbolic closure should not obscure the critical significance of creation. One of the major claims of Castoriadis'

theory is that the radical imaginary of instituting society has neither been properly recognised, nor adequately characterised. This lack of recognition is due, in his opinion, to the very idea of radical creation being incongruent with the basic principles of the dominant western logic and epistemology. That is, this creation is radical in the sense of it being impossible to exhaustively determine and it is also a creation that is in certain respects entirely self-generating. These are precisely the qualities of the instituting social imaginary and they are indicative of its power to give rise to new images and significations. Castoriadis highlights this in stating that: 'Society brings into being a world of significations and itself exists in reference to such a world' (Castoriadis 1987, 359).

Since it is the by way of the imaginary that significations can represent and refer to things other than themselves, there is a permanent tension between the closure created by the instituted social imaginary, on the one hand, and the tendency to 'perpetual self-alteration' associated with the imaginary animating significations, on the other. Still, it is through the imaginary instituting stable and fixed forms that any society acquires coherence. Indeed, this stability and fixity of 'instituted society' constitutes the backdrop to the historical tendency to the occlusion of the imaginary. It also emphasises the point that to speak of capitalism is already to imply a coherence of a potentially indefinite number of elements. This coherence is created not by the simple relating of elements but through, Castoriadis argues, the social imaginary.

The congruence between symbolic closure and the present perceived loss of social-historical alternatives to capitalism indicates that there are substantial grounds for attempting an elucidation of the capitalist imaginary, whilst explicating the lines of analysis present in Castoriadis' own interrogation of this theme. It can be plausibly argued that in recent decades there has occurred a quite radical and intensive mobilisation of the capitalist imaginary. This mobilisation has taken various forms, from the rise of neo-liberal philosophy and political economy with its attendant consequences of privatisation and declining social protection, through the possible creation of a new imperial order and consumerist redefinitions of the autonomous subject, to the appropriation of the very symbols and discourse of opposition to capitalism. Despite the welter of exemplary trends, the distinctive character and constitutive features of this mobilisation could be better understood. In particular, there is a need to understand how the capitalist imaginary constitutes the cultural horizon of globalisation, since this imaginary undergoes permutations, not only historically and geographically but also in relation to the different segments of capitalist production, distribution and exchange. The former cross-border mutations can be seen in the diffusion of capitalism in post-communist societies, whereas the tensions between exchange value and use value, the ethos of production and consumerism, evidence the imaginary investment of the world with meaning as well as the power of



creative – and destructive – synthesis. The unity of this manifold diversity is appreciated in conceptualising capitalism as a social imaginary. According to Arnason, imaginary significations are ‘multiform complexes of meaning that can give rise to more determinate patterns and at the same time remain open to other interpretations’ (Arnason 1989, 335).

The concept of the imaginary draws attention to the overarching goals and purpose of capitalism, which themselves originate in social processes of ‘world-constitution’. In this sense, the imaginary of capitalism is deployed in the contemporary mobilisation of neo-liberal globalisation, but its features also appear in such radically reworked contexts as those of ‘cargo cults’ (Crapanzano 2004). This variation and adaptation illustrate the synthesising aspect of the capitalist imaginary’s symbolisation and signification.

The symbolic attributes of the current mobilisation of capitalism have drawn the attention of a number of influential contemporary theorists. In many instances, they explicitly apply concepts of imagination and the imaginary to global capitalism, and especially its processes of consumption. Arjun Appadurai, for instance, considers that the ‘world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life’ (Appadurai 1996, 31).

This concretising of the imagination as an organized field of social practices is no doubt informed by Castoriadis’ contention that the imaginary needs to be rethought and that it is necessary to thoroughly revise the received idea of the imaginary as fiction and the misrepresentation of reality. In some accounts, postmodernism is the realisation of the reality of the imaginary regime of the symbolic (Baudrillard 1983; Kearney 1988). Despite their power to illuminate, these applications of the ideas of imagination and imaginary to commodity aesthetics and the contemporary mass media generally involve an insufficient appreciation of the complex philosophical problem that orients Castoriadis’ elucidation of the imaginary institution. It is also important to emphasize the distinctiveness of Castoriadis’ position, because Charles Taylor (2001; 2002; 2004) has recently proposed a notion of modern social imaginaries. One that is more substantial than postmodernist conceptions of the imagination of consumer desire and the hyper-reality of the mass media. Like Castoriadis, Taylor emphasises the generative property of culture and the creation of collective worlds of meaning. Similarly, Taylor likewise appreciates social imaginaries’ legitimising of social structures, as well as how the resultant constructed coherence is based less in logical organization and more in relatively indeterminate symbolic associations and images (Taylor 2001, 188-189).

Yet, Taylor’s notion differs from Castoriadis’ in its lesser insistence on the constitutive tension between the imaginary of instituting society and that of instituted society. Probably reflecting the communitarian background to Taylor’s understanding of culture, a greater emphasis is placed on the role of the imaginary in the moral integration of society.

In Taylor's conception, there is consequently less accentuation of the radical creativity of the social imaginary. This difference is apparent in the contrast that can be drawn between Taylor's discussions of the historical translation of theoretically elaborated conceptions into collectively held imaginaries and the seminal importance to Castoriadis' arguments of the extent to which an appreciation of the imaginary entails a questioning of the prioritising of theory and a recognition its distortion of practice. It is on these grounds that Taylor's suggestion that the idea of mutual benefit is central to the modern social imaginary could be criticised.

From his early *Socialism or Barbarism* writings, Castoriadis' (1988a; 1988b; 1993) arguments were deeply informed by Max Weber's (1930; 1948a; 1948c) interpretation of the institutional and personal consequences of the extension of western rationality. Castoriadis' account of the phase of bureaucratic capitalism adapts aspects of Weber's theses concerning the fate of modernity: as portending a loss of freedom with the predominance of legal-bureaucratic authority and a loss of meaning with the disenchantment of the world and the irresolvable plurality of value perspectives. Even so, the apparent continuity of interpretations should not obscure a subtle but nonetheless substantial shift in problematic. Castoriadis initially resituates Weber's arguments from the perspective of the Marxian problem of praxis. Praxis means here the capacity for human freedom and the creative constitution of the material conditions of existence. This understanding of praxis is implied in Marx's social redefinition of the problem of autonomy; its complementary critical diagnostic notion of alienation forms an important backdrop to Castoriadis' elucidations of the capitalist imaginary. More broadly, a reinterpretation of the problem of alienation shapes Castoriadis' (1987) subsequent attempt to define the social bond as produced through symbolic meanings, rather than the material conditions of production. From this initial praxis philosophy standpoint then, Castoriadis (1988a; 1988b) sees bureaucracy as one mode of framing the relationship of instituting society to instituted society. At that time, he defined the basic contradiction of bureaucratic capitalism as the antithesis between the need to lay hold of workers' creative capacity and the exclusion of them from autonomous control and determination of production. In fact, workers' creative ability to depart from bureaucratic norms and executive control in the face of new conditions and problems was seen as the condition for the rational functioning of capitalist organizations. This analysis suggests an understanding of action that constitutes the basis for criticising Weber's belief in the equation between bureaucracy and rationality. In one sense, the nucleus of the program for a theory of the imaginary, and specifically of its capitalist institution, is already apparent in this critique.

There are two substantial continuities implied in these arguments that will serve to further differentiate Castoriadis' interpretation of the capitalist imaginary from comparable

analyses. The first is the idea of a closer continuity between capitalism and bureaucracy than is the case in interpretations that highlight the centrality of the market to the former. In this respect, the critically distinguishing features of capitalism are not those attributed to it by liberal theory and classical Marxism, but ones that have a broader social and cultural foundation. The intended correction of these theories points to the second continuity implied in Castoriadis' *Socialism or Barbarism* analyses. It too builds on Weber's (1948a) theorising of formal rationality, without accepting all aspects of Weber's political critique of socialism. On this analysis, there is an appreciable continuity between capitalism and socialism, particularly when socialism is conceived in terms of nationalisation and state control. Capitalism and state socialism could be seen as offshoots of a similar project or projects. To be sure, Castoriadis' *Socialism or Barbarism* writings do not understand this project as one of world-making; instead these two continuities ground a critique of the Marxist understanding of historical development and its misconception of the conditions of the supersession of capitalism. From this typological perspective, existing state socialism was actually a variant of state bureaucratic capitalism and, in part, Castoriadis develops the notion of the social imaginary in order to be able to account for the hold of capitalism over the aspiration of its revolutionary transformation. Castoriadis extrapolating of the theses of a loss of meaning and a loss of freedom in the notion of the imaginary can be interpreted as extending Weber's program of a social theory of civilization. In effect, the capitalist imaginary is constitutive of a civilization and it posits a kind of theology. Like the world religions, capitalism produces an image of the world and an image of the transcendence of the world, yet these images are peculiarly deficient in the range of meanings they make available.

In reworking Weber's theses of a loss of freedom and loss of meaning, Castoriadis' interpretation of bureaucratic capitalism anticipates Habermas' (1987b) later theory of the colonisation of the lifeworld. Habermas' theory of the displacement of the principles of communicative action by bureaucratic power and exchange value is similarly inspired by Weber, but Castoriadis' praxis perspective arguably has a better purchase on the pathological consequences of these developments. It is less tied to the functionalist frame of analysis of Habermas' account and it suggests that a more radical reinterpretation of rationality is required than the shift from the philosophy of the subject to the paradigm of communication. For Castoriadis, the capitalist imaginary entails a process of emptying the world, experience and subjectivity of meaning. Of course, it also generates meanings and values, so the loss of meaning takes the specific form of an indifference to things inherent in the logical order of capitalism. Like Marx (1976), Simmel (1990) and Adorno (1973; 1987), Castoriadis considers that this loss of meaning is the outcome of the original exchange principle of reducing qualitative differences to numerical quantities

of value. From a comparative perspective, it is also partly a consequence, as Weber (1948a; 1948b) appreciated, of the disenchantment of metaphysical, religious worldviews. Although, in Castoriadis' opinion, this dimension of the loss of meaning is by no means an inevitable corollary of disenchantment and secularisation. In short, the capitalist imaginary is unable of itself to institute a signification that offers a substantive system of value and a positive interpretation of the social order. According to Castoriadis (1987; 1993), the capitalist imaginary instead represents a radical institutionalisation of the formal logical principles of identity and sameness. Despite the effectiveness demonstrated by the historical consequences of the capitalist imaginary, it is on account of this loss of meaning a project that is intrinsically contradictory.

Castoriadis' notion of the imaginary distinctively aims at elucidating the interconnection between capitalism as a culture and capitalism as a system of domination. It is necessary to comprehend the capitalist signification of an overall purpose to establish this connection, in spite of the loss of meaning it ultimately entails. Castoriadis contends that the capitalist 'social imaginary can be encapsulated' in the following sentence: 'The central aim of social life is the unlimited expansion of rational mastery.' However, he claims that on closer inspection, this 'mastery is a pseudomastery, this rationality is a pseudo-rationality' (Castoriadis 1997b, 240). The fallacious character of this rational mastery 'does not stop it from being the core of the social imaginary significations now holding society together'. In the first instance, the capitalist imaginary originally constituted a new investment in the domination of nature. It therefore goes together with the devaluation and disenchantment of nature into a realm potentially open to human domination and control. At the same time, the exercise of reason, rather than magic and ritual practices, was to be the basis of this mastery of the world. On Castoriadis' analysis, the understanding of the distinctively modern perspective of the disenchanted 'rationality' of capitalism should be qualified with respect to both its political and cultural components. This alleged rationality of capitalist culture can be traced to premodern constituents and its central idea of the necessity of progress derives from a transformation of a religious and theological signification.

'With the Judeo-Christian religion and theology the notion of unlimitedness, of a without-ending, of infinity, acquired a positive sign – but one which remained, in a way, without social or historical relevance for over ten centuries. The infinite God is elsewhere, and *this* world is finite; there is for each being an intrinsic norm corresponding to its nature as it has been determined by God. ... The transformation occurs when infinity invades *this* world.' (Castoriadis 1991, 183)

One of the distinctive features of the capitalist imaginary is precisely its inhabiting of the world. The reinterpretation of the notion of infinity generates a notion of unlimited accumulation and the potential for unprecedented ecological degradation. This domination is both real and pseudo-mastery, since it is founded in a logic that cannot master itself or establish its own limitations. In fact, the project of unlimited rational mastery is a potentially eternal problem, particularly because the 'self-sustaining expansion of rational mastery transcends all specific goals' (Arnason 1989, 327). At the same time, Castoriadis argues that the capitalist imaginary has the power to reorient existing significations and institutions. For example, Castoriadis (1997a, 15-16) notes how the centralized state apparatus created by the absolute monarchy and designed to serve absolute power 'became the ideal carrier of the impersonal rule of capitalist rationality'. Similarly, the capitalist imaginary animates and orients modern science, without entirely subsuming science under the project of rational mastery. Modern science is also animated by the alternate modern imaginary of the project of autonomy and it is to this that it owes the persistence of some of the central tenets of lucid inquiry and free deliberation.

It is partly owing to its grounding in the two modern imaginaries that science can be an integral participant in the elaboration of the project of unlimited rational mastery and also able to sometimes call into question this project on the basis of scientific research, such as in the case of findings of ecological degradation. Even so, two of the core 'postulates' of the capitalist imaginary have been especially instituted in association with modern science: '(1) the virtual omnipotence of technique; (2) the "asymptotic illusion" relating to scientific knowledge' (Castoriadis 1991, 186). Of course, the latter illusion underpins the essential modern significations of progress and rational development. As a consequence, the integrity of these two postulates with the capitalist imaginary mean that this imaginary cannot be called into question without interrogating at the same time the meaning and purpose of modern science. In particular, the project of unlimited 'rational mastery' has been without a doubt an aspiration to which modern science has subscribed. In many respects, Castoriadis claims that science substitutes for religion in relation to questions of the current limits and possibilities of human existence. The full import of contemporary 'technoscience' can be recognised only in light of this consideration (Castoriadis 1991).

In fact, the expectation that modern science is capable of addressing these questions is similarly indicative of the loss of perspective characteristic of an imaginary focussed upon the means of progress and development. Castoriadis therefore extends Weber's analysis of how western rationality subordinates the problem of ends to that of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the means. Whilst this rationality seems indifferent to ends owing to its transcendence of specific goals, it has general ends that are nevertheless

defined within the horizon of the capitalist imaginary and this is why it is resistant to value systems incompatible with them. For Castoriadis, the alternate possibility of expanding the project of autonomy means that Weber's pessimistic conclusion that rationality can neither be renounced, nor provide an answer to problems of value and meaning, is quite profound in its assessment; however, it is not the only conclusion available to a reflective and lucid practice. Reflective and lucid practice would aim at enhancing the project of autonomy's determination of the purpose of science; it suggests the alternative of the fullest possible democratic deliberation over the ends of science.

The consequences of the capitalist imaginary are so pervasive that it has even set the terms of most of the apparent opposition to it. For instance, Castoriadis (1987) claims that the Marxist philosophy of history represents an unsatisfactory extension of this logic of pseudo-rational mastery, with its extrapolation of the notion of infinite progress. It was on the basis of this extrapolation from the idea of infinity that history could be considered a directional process of change. In this way too, the notions of progress and development could perform a similar function to the explicitly theological significations of religious imaginaries and the imaginary of unfinished rationality provide capitalism with a somewhat equivalent legitimation. That is, it is socially and historically instituted, yet functions as a point of reference that is effectively extra-social. In fact, Castoriadis argues that Marx and Engels imported the capitalist imaginary into the workers' movement, thereby distorting also Marxist theory and political-practice. Accordingly, Castoriadis critique of this consequential importation reveals significant dimensions of the capitalist imaginary; dimensions animated by the signification of rational mastery.

Like the capitalist imaginary, Marxist theory grants primacy to the economic and the material conditions of production. This leads to Marxism's problematic retrospective projection of the centrality of production to all forms of society. Besides the theoretical fallacy of such a projection, the prioritising of the material conditions of production involves a subordination of politics. That is, politics in the proper sense of addressing the instituting of society in a lucid and reflective manner, yet, as Hannah Arendt (1959) also argued, politics in this sense cannot be resolved into rational mastery. Moreover, Marx's displacement of politics does not just emphasise the primacy of the economic dimension of the institution, it also incorporates a critical aspect of the capitalist imaginary's justifications for hierarchical domination. These are the variant justifications of the bureaucratic-technical distinction between direction and execution, such as that of the necessity to 'rationality' of the distinctions between theory and practice, and mental and manual labour. In the case of Marx's theory, the incorporation of key elements of the capitalist imaginary would lead to outcomes that contradicted its basic intentions, so that, for instance, the critique of political economy became another political economy,

the founding of theory in practice concludes in an attempt to establish a rigorous theory immune from the contingency of practice. For Castoriadis, the deep-seated reasons for these reversals have to be interrogated beyond the frame of Marx's theory. It would eventually lead him to a critique of identity thinking from the standpoint of his elucidation of the imaginary.

The critique of Marxism's theoretical complicity with the capitalist imaginary does not mean that Marx lacked insight into this imaginary. In particular, Marx's (1976) account of the 'fetishism of commodities' instances how this imaginary combines elements that would not otherwise be logically associated. It also illustrates the way in which the imaginary investment of meaning can make an arbitrary combination appear a logical association and legitimise the subject's alienated identification with an object. In one sense, Castoriadis considers that the illusion of modern society is precisely that it wants to believe that fabricated connections and false logic belong to past societies. It is unable to admit the existence of the social imaginary, even though it inhabits the material world of commodities and is fundamental to capitalist exploitation of labour. Castoriadis (1987, 157-158) makes this point in no uncertain terms in stating that to 'treat a person as a thing or as a purely mechanical system is not less but more imaginary than claiming to see him as an owl; it represents an even greater plunge into the imaginary. For not only is the real kinship between a man and an owl incomparably greater than it is with a machine, but also no primitive society ever applied the consequences of its assimilations of people with things as radically as modern industry does with its metaphor of the human automaton.' In fact, the decline of meaning intrinsic to the capitalist imaginary is evident from the fact that, according to Castoriadis, archaic 'societies always seem to preserve a certain duplicity in their assimilations, but modern society takes them, in its practice, strictly literally in the most naïve fashion' (Castoriadis 1987, 157-158).

Marx too, was not free of this naïveté in attempting to base socialism in the immanent development of capitalism. His insight into the imaginary signification of commodity fetishism is also limited by the reductionist assumption that it is a 'consequence of a "logic" following from this mode of production' (Castoriadis 1987, 355). In part, this critique applies to Lukacs's (1971) similarly insightful theory of reification and its central idea that every historical period constitutes and is constituted by a specific relation to objectivity.

In Castoriadis' (1987, 155) opinion, twentieth century developments demonstrate that Marx's insight into the signification of the capitalist imaginary needs to be institutionally extended from the market to the bureaucratic organization. One of the chief achievements of Lukacs's theory was precisely to extend the recognition of the tendency of reification from the realm of exchange value to the forms of bureaucratic-managerial

organization. Lukacs's expansion of those institutional structures that are subject to reification drew extensively on Weber's theory of rationalisation and its analysis of rationalisation's potentially irrational ordering of the world. In Castoriadis' opinion, though important Lukacs's expansion is insufficiently far-reaching; Lukacs' critique of the reification of modern reason remained within the parameters of that which it criticised. Indeed, reflecting the weight of the inherited logical-ontological tradition of thought, it results in Lukacs's displacement of the presumed source of a resolution to crisis of capitalism: the constituting class subject of the historical process. The practical-political consequences of this displacement are apparent in Lukacs's acceptance of the authority of theory of the communist party. The autonomous practice of the working class was found to be too indeterminate and instead the party supposedly possessed the correct theory in advance of political practice. Theory had to meet inherited thought's ontological and epistemological expectation of determination. According to Castoriadis, the basic precondition of determination is the self-sameness or identity of being. In other words, identity logic is based in the fixed definition of object and, by implication at least, the principle of determination privileges the instituted dimension of society over the creativity and innovation of instituting society.

The principle of determination that has shaped western thought is opposed, in Castoriadis' (1987) view, to notions of the multiplicity and an understanding of change as radical alterity. As has been commented upon, scientific rationality is one elaboration of this principle of determination and underlying this principle is the more primordial logic of identity. Identity logic exists prior to science, it is a precondition of everyday practices and it has, for this reason, a 'proto-instituting' as well as instituting dimension. For instance, identity logic is the prerequisite of the consistency of propositions and the notion of contradiction. The critique of the logic of identity seems to have always been an implicit point of reference in Castoriadis' writings, even though its philosophical elaboration occurred after a period of political writings. He has commented that the theme of the dissertation he originally came to France to write was that any attempt at a rationally constructed philosophical system leads to blind alleys, aporias and to antinomies (Castoriadis 1993, 38).

This theme was to have been developed mainly with reference to Hegel's dialectical philosophy. Yet, this same argument was basically brought to bear on Marx's account of capitalism, since the logic of identity thinking is incorporated into Marx's systematic analysis of capitalism and determines its major deficiencies. The intentions behind these arguments have affinities with Adorno's (1973; 1990) parallel critique of identity thinking. Both Castoriadis and Adorno believe that identity logic contains the nucleus of technological rationalisation and that through its practical extension a totalising form of



domination comes to be realised. In each case, the critique of identity is an essential part of an attempt to disclose the deep structure of the mentality of capitalism in Western culture. While Castoriadis broadly agrees with Adorno's critical finding that identity logic is immanent in the structure of conceptual thought, he believes that its insufficiencies are of a somewhat different order. The logic of identity is itself, in his view, dependent for its effective operation on the synthesising powers of both the social imaginary, as well as the radical imagination of the individual psyche. At the same time, neither the social imaginary nor the radical imaginary of the psyche can be reconstructed through the categories of identity, since ultimately they are not reducible to formal determination and they manifest different modes of temporality. In my opinion, Adorno's critical theory concurs largely with this analysis without being able probably to articulate its implications. Following Castoriadis' line of analysis, the necessity of the unlimited interrogation of the logic of identity is a condition of its reorientation, but a reorientation is possible only through the transformation of the relationship of instituting to instituted society.

The critique of identity logic undertaken by Castoriadis demonstrates that an effective critique of the capitalist imaginary cannot be limited to the rationality criteria of refutation and contradiction. In fact, any critique of the capitalist imaginary has to take into account the complications that derive from the resonance that the totalising goal of rational mastery finds in the human psyche and the form of symbolic closure specific to this social imaginary. In Castoriadis' (1987) view, the individual is always a fabrication of a particular society; this fabrication is conditional on a rupturing of the unconscious monadic core of the human psyche and the individual's subsequent cathecting of the social imaginary significations that the institution makes available. In this sense, even under the conditions of acquiring the distance to criticise and to act autonomously, the individual is always bound to the institution of society that has fabricated them. However, the project of rational mastery has certain analogies with the primary narcissism of the earliest phase of the human psyche, since during this phase there is no world of meaning external to itself and there is also total and immediate gratification. In short, the fantasy structure of total mastery is able to interpolate the subject through significations that recall something of the phase of primary narcissism. For example, there is the illusion of omnipotence to be found in the way in which capitalist society constructs its relationship to the natural world and the sublimated gratification of consumption. Even more consequentially, the primary signification of – to use Weber's terms – 'this worldly' infinity excludes the question of limits and therefore death itself, whereas previous theologically and religiously based imaginaries simultaneously revealed the prospect of death and offered themselves as the means for transcending the 'abyss' (Castoriadis 1997a, 325). According to Castoriadis, this too demarcates the capitalist imaginary in terms of the

nature of the cathexis it generates, because on his account the unconscious is incapable of acknowledging the possibility of its own death.

The alternate modern social imaginary of the project of autonomy makes possible the fabrication of individuals that are not entirely attached to the capitalist imaginary. Yet, the project of autonomy has its origins in the rupturing of the closure of the instituted social imaginary. According to Castoriadis (1991), this rupture occurs twice in history: first, in ancient Greek, or properly Athenian, democracy and a second time in the modern western world, commencing with the first self-governing city states of thirteenth century Italy and sporadically appearing subsequently in movements for autonomy and self-determination. One aspect of the project of autonomy is recognition of the social origins of the institution of society. Yet, this recognition has also been limited and undermined by the capitalist imaginary. The specificity of the symbolic closure of the project of rational mastery has already been signalled, but it is important to emphasize that its foundation in the logic of identity gives it a peculiar claim to be free of the illusions of transcendence and to be simply immanent. Indeed, there is a certain element of truth to this claim; as Castoriadis' (1987; 1997a) discussions of mathematical set theory demonstrate, the logic of identity is a condition of any social organization. This does not mean, of course, that social organization is derivative of this logic, rather that it is always a dimension of human practices and it is realised in specific imaginary forms. In this context, it is important to highlight that the signification of the capitalist imaginary is that it is actually congruent with the logic of identity. Hence, unlike other social imaginaries, like those of the world religions, which appear further elaborated in their symbolic and signifying dimension, the capitalist imaginary's claim to be simply an extension of identity logic obscures the fact that it is the instituted social imaginary that in every case makes possible the seeming correspondence between the world image and the world itself. The denial of its instituting that is constitutive of the symbolic closure of the capitalist imaginary has therefore specific characteristics and it is critical to appreciate this in order to properly comprehend the capitalist misrepresentation of rationality. In particular, comprehending this pseudo-rationality is decisive because to call into question the relationship between world image and the world itself will always require some exercise of the logic of identity.

There can be little dispute concerning the significance and originality of Castoriadis' elucidation and interrogation of the capitalist imaginary. Its limitations are, however, broadly tied up with the less developed aspects of his general conception of social imaginaries. It is true that the philosophical explication of the notion of the imaginary has proceeded well beyond the elaboration of more detailed accounts of its specific forms of deployment. Castoriadis' later works gave priority to critiquing the limitations of the

philosophical principle of determination and demonstrating the occlusion of the imaginary by inherited thought. The discrepancy then, between the philosophical articulations of the imaginary and social-historical specification has opened the way for criticisms of Castoriadis' approach to the social imaginary. For instance, Gaonkar (2002) has criticised Castoriadis' approach for taking multiplicity for granted on account its understanding of creation and hence for not considering that the multiplicity of social imaginaries is a problem requiring more detailed specification. It is by no means clear that this criticism is justified in quite this form, but it does give some insight into the methodological perspective of authors associated with the journal *Public Culture*, like Charles Taylor, and their attempt to utilise a concept of social imaginaries. The centrality of the notion of identity to Castoriadis' later elucidation of the capitalist imaginary does nevertheless suggest a potentially limiting conception. Owing to this thesis, it may well be less able to account for variations and permutations in the capitalist imaginary than could be first supposed from the more general understanding of social imaginary significations. There is a sense in which the attempt to philosophically deepen the earlier critique of bureaucratic capitalist domination by way of the critique of the logic of identity compels Castoriadis' theory to reach conclusions not dissimilar to those present in Weber's (1930, 181) vision of an ineluctable iron cage of modernity and Adorno and Horkheimers' (1979) assessment of the seamless integration of the totally administered society. Castoriadis' (1991; 1997a) commentaries on the waning of creativity in the present era of generalised conformism evidence similar sentiments. Despite this assessment of the decline in opposition to the capitalist being incisive and in certain respects undoubtedly correct, it would be wrong to understand these trends as part of a general telos of the capitalist imaginary. Since this would be to simply repeat the positions, like evolutionary and developmental interpretations of history, which Castoriadis has criticised; in my opinion, this potential mistake becomes a possibility once such diagnoses are tightly linked to the critique of the logic of identity. At the same time, it may be a potential mistake that has to be risked in order to fully appreciate the conditions of the critique of the capitalist imaginary.

The critique of the capitalist imaginary has to be grounded in the project of autonomy, as this is clearly a prerequisite for the lucid interrogation of the instituting of identity logic. Be that as it may, as commentators have recurrently noted, the complex entanglements and interplays of the two modern projects: of autonomy and unlimited pseudo-rational mastery warrant far more detailed consideration (Arnason 1989; 2001; Wagner 2001). The radical juxtaposition of the two projects may be true to their respective principles and an important corrective to the confusions of contemporary political philosophy, particularly those of recent liberalism. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for scrutinising the probable social-historical connections. Peter Wagner reads Castoriadis

as asserting 'the double character of the imaginary signification of modernity, and both elements of that double signification are seen, at first sight, as independent the one from the other. The search for a relation between them leads to the idea of a parallel emergence, linked by a common historical context, namely the struggle against the Old Regime' (Wagner 2001, 4).

If this interpretation is correct then there are considerable grounds for focussing specifically on how the capitalist imaginary appropriates and reworks the signification of autonomy. It is not difficult to appreciate, as Castoriadis (1991) himself indicated, such processes of appropriation in relation to the notion of progress that are deployed in extending technical control and the desires of consumerism. In Castoriadis' (1997a) opinion, capitalism without the limiting counter-project of autonomy is an entirely different social-historical animal to the one that encountered it. Although he believes that the project of autonomy is undergoing a process of dissolution, ironically the imaginary of contemporary new capitalism is not one of having replaced the signification of autonomy but rather one of having embraced it. New capitalism seeks legitimacy in the claim that it has dispensed with hierarchical authority and that it promotes the creativity of subjects. The fact that this claim is largely illusory does not make it less effective, because it is buttressed by the historical loss of significant meaning which disguises the retreat into general conformism and the contemporary global redeployment of the capitalist signification of progress. Possibly more effectively than ever before, the capitalist imaginary has colonised the future as well as the present order of globalisation.

Castoriadis' critique of identity thinking from the standpoint of an elucidation of the imaginary reveals intrinsic deficiencies and aporias of the rationality of capitalism. In one sense, this analysis recommences an earlier critique of economic reasoning that, as Castoriadis (1997a, 40) notes, had been lost sight of during the later decades of the twentieth century. In terms of these discussions, the originality of Castoriadis' critique consists in demonstrating that the irrationality of capitalism is less a result of contradictions between factors and elements of the system, since the primary meaning of these contradictions is derivative of the overarching orientation instituted by the imaginary. Instead, it is in showing that the analysis of contradictions deploys the logic of identity without simultaneously being able to adequately elucidate the imaginary that frames any system of elements. For this reason, the implications of Castoriadis' writings are that the proper object of critique and identification are the world-making projects of the instituting imaginary. The project of autonomy posits the relationship of instituting society to instituted society in a manner that is radically different to that of the capitalist imaginary. One institutes a regime of democratic self-limitation and the other a regime of unlimited domination (see Arnason 1989). From the standpoint of the former, it is possible to

envisage the subordination of the capitalist economic system to public deliberation and a wider cultural horizon of meaning oriented to equality as well as individual and collective autonomy. In Castoriadis' opinion, the affirmation this would entail of the substantive values of a democratic regime and the way of life it represents presupposes the possibility of placing the existing institution of society into question, and to these practices the logic of identity can only ever make a limited contribution. By contrast, the capitalist imaginary privileges a different system of value to that of lucid and reflective practices concerning the institution of society.

The foregoing discussion has sought to clarify how Castoriadis' elucidation of the capitalist imaginary pursues questions that were raised earlier in his analyses of bureaucratic capitalism and the persistence of exploitation in socialist societies. The capitalist imaginary is oriented by the signification of unlimited rational mastery, which owing to its internal inconsistencies and manifold destructiveness is actually pseudo-mastery and pseudo-rationality. It is an imaginary that radically extends the application of the logic of identity in order to pursue the aim of unlimited mastery, but the significations associated with this logic produce a peculiar order of indifference and the dissolution of substantively meaningful self-representations of capitalist society. These deficiencies are discernible from the standpoint of the alternative imaginary of the project of autonomy, however it is the capitalist imaginary that continues to sustain the power of instituted society over instituting society. Although they lacked the category, the major social theories of capitalist modernity to varying degrees illuminated some dimension of the capitalist imaginary. Still, in general their critiques of capitalism misunderstood the extent to which they participated in this instituted imaginary. Despite the possibility that further social-historical specification may qualify the philosophical critique undertaken, Castoriadis moves beyond established interpretations in elucidating some of the most difficult and complex layers of the way in which the capitalist imaginary intermeshes with modern subjects understanding of themselves and the world.

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## SECTION FOUR

### BOOK REVIEWS

**Edited by Helen Nickas**

La Trobe University, Melbourne

**Yorgos Chronas**

***99 Poems***

Selected, translated and introduced by Yannis Goumas  
Odos Panos Publications, Athens, 2005

Yorgos Chronas' poetry is not very well known outside Greece. However, within the country, it (together with his editorial work) bears the ring of an almost legendary reputation, due to qualities of style and matter that distinguish it from the dominant forms of poetic writing: qualities such as flexible linguistic structures, fluid imaginative articulation and intense reverence towards the minute shades of feeling.

Greek poetry has been usually recognised internationally for either its grand ideological statements (Yannis Ritsos), its luminous solar metaphysics (Odysseus Elytis), or its melancholic fragmented landscapes of a lost classical past (Giorgos Seferis). Other more recent poets, like Nikos Karouzos or Kiki Dimoula, have also articulated a world of 'strong' experimentation with language and form that makes their work emblematic of an existential dysphoria with regards to the art of writing.

Chronas brought to prominence a rather new practice in the art of writing poetry. He started publishing his poems in 1973, when Greek society was changing, from being insular, to becoming almost abruptly open to the challenges and the dilemmas of the modern European world under the intensified pace of rapid modernisation. By 'modernisation' is meant the act of confronting the existential and societal implications of modernity, something that was not done in the country for a combination of political and structural reasons after the war.

Chronas' poetry matured during the period from the Dictatorship of 1967 until after the Restoration of the Republic in 1974, and portrayed a world in transition experiencing