For A Critical Creativity:

The Radical Imagination of Cornelius Castoriadis

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Introduction

“ ‘Creation’, therefore, offers itself for definition as that which is enacted freedom and which includes and expresses in its incarnation the presence of what is absent from it or of what could be radically other. Abstraction makes this postulate obscure. Clarity and familiar recognition lie in its application” (Steiner, 2001: 108 – emphasis in original).

‘Creativity’ is today associated with not only artistic and aesthetic endeavors but seen as a key contributor to national competitiveness, regional development, corporate strategic advantage, entrepreneurial potential, individual capacity and even general welfare. Indeed, there are continuous calls for greater amounts of creativity and imagination to help develop what has been called a ‘creative economy’ (United Nations, 2010). The concept of creativity, whilst generally conceived as an individual faculty or capacity, has thus become a socio-economic ‘good’ (in both senses of the word) in a market oriented society, which can and should be harnessed by corporations and institutions more generally.

In this general enthusiasm for all things creative, one question that has remained underexplored is how this ‘socio-economic good’ has been colonized by the cultural matrixes of power relations, and it is precisely this question that a critical creativity approach is interested in. What traditional approaches to creativity fail to make explicit is how people are always “locked into wider systems, including cultural worldviews and technological systems, that shape people’s sense of what is permissible, desirable and possible” Szerszynski & Urry (2010: 3). Descriptions and definitions of creativity and its application (such as, for example, in the ‘creative class’ or the ‘creative economy’) are necessarily entangled with specific imaginaries of how society is, and how it ought to be. In other words, creativity is always-already social, and in our current historical moment this sociality is very much a neo-liberal one. Haiven (2011:115), for example, highlights the way that capital operates through the creativity and agency of social actors “as it comes to influence the negotiation of social value and orient it toward its own perpetuation and expansion”.

In such a situation, it is paramount that researchers in creativity do not merely parrot statements about creativity as a universal tonic, but also strive to position creativity socially, and inquire into the manner in which a specific socio-political context can color and skew our notions of the selfsame. Rather than seeing creativity through a specific ideological situation, scholars of creativity need to be open both to the radical openness of creativity and the manner in which notions of creativity can be positioned and utilized for ideological ends. For instance, the current discourse regarding creativity positions this as a function of the market economy, always ready to be marsahled into value creation, and as the very bedrock of innovation and thus progress. While this seems like an obvious truth – even a trivial one – in our context, a more objective analysis of creativity would inquire into whether this is true by necessity, or just true in our current context. Might creativity, which is after all supposed to be a capable of endless re-generation and renewal, in other context work against value-creation? Could there be a world/situation in which creativity is not an important force in the economy? Such questions might seem far-fetched, but they address the ontology of creativity, and the issue of whether we can take the current viewpoints on creativity as universally given and eternally true, or as specific instantiations of the creative dynamic.

Consequently, we aim in this chapter to bring to the fore an alternative discourse of creativity: one that is political, historical and social through and through, and yet one that takes the idea of creation ex nihilo and individual freedom seriously. It is also one that does not shirk thinking about the very nature of creativity, something which is largely bypassed in the majority of mainstream work through rather lazy operational definitions[[1]](#endnote-1). Following Purser and Montuori (1999: 354), we suggest that if we really need (and want) to change our thinking about institutions and organizations, “we will also have to change our thinking about creativity”. We believe that an engagement with the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis provides such an opportunity to “change our thinking about creativity” and support the development of a critical creativity approach.

Such an approach would serve as a kind of creative counter-balance to the prevailing bias of optimism and even messianism in much of what is written on creativity, as it would work from the assumption that the moral and social position of creativity is not given, but rather part of a complex social negotiation. Rather than seeing creativity as one thing or another, as representing one kind of value or another, a critical creativity studies would work from the perspective that all forms of creativity are culturally contingent, and that statements about their importance can only be fully understood as a form of reification. In the modern case, where creativity is seen as economically central, this reification needs to be vigorously questioned not only for strictly scholarly reasons – seeing as the role of research should not be to reinforce prevailing attitudes but inquire into possibilities and potentialities – but also due to the fact that a reified notion of creativity can function as part of an oppressive ideology. This might today best be seen in the tendency to see creativity as an imperative rather than a choice for the modern worker (”You have to think outside the box!”), and thus part of a potentially exploitative regime. It is here we turn to Castoriadis for an ontological inquiry into the nature of creativity, in order to critique notions of creativity which disregard such possibilities.

Castoriadis’s political philosophy, built around the interplay between the institution and the individual[[2]](#endnote-2), provides the basis for his efforts to elaborate an ‘ontology of indeterminacy’ (Smith, 2012). Castoriadis (1993: 1) considers the history of mainstream philosophy very much as the elaboration of reason. This has entailed, he suggests, the “covering over” of the “positive rupture of already given determinations, of creation not simply as undetermined but as determining, or as the positing of new determinations”. He sees the imagination “in its essence rebellious against determinacy” (ibid.: 2) and the historical as inseparable from the social; it does not exist as a determinate chain of events. The contingency of natural processes in human history is mitigated because human beings “can provide new responses to the ‘same’ situations or create new situations” (Castoriadis, 1987: 44). “For what is given in and through history,” according to Castoriadis (1987: 184), “is not the determined sequence of the determined but the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, non-trivial novelty.” In a variety of writings Castoriadis works out a way of thinking about “the fact that something other than what exists is bringing itself into being, and bringing itself into being as new or as other” (Castoriadis, 1987: 185). For Castoriadis (2005: 125) creation truly means creation ex nihilo, the bringing into existence of a form that was not there, “the creation of new forms of being... of forms like language, the institution, music, painting...” and it is precisely the human capacity for creation that shows us why the essence of Man cannot be logic or rationality qua operant logic. In other words, the productive function of creativity is for Castoriadis an open issue, and not guaranteed to fit neatly into any given societal or economic arrangement. In extension, this also points to an understanding of Man as free from any determinant logics of production or value creation.

“A general science of man, research bearing upon the genus homo, is therefore precisely this: research bearing upon the conditions and the forms of human creation. Creation means the capacity to bring about the emergence of what is not given – not derivable, by means of a combinatory or in some other way – starting from the given. Right away, we think that it is this capacity that corresponds to the deep meaning of the terms imagination and imaginary, once we have abandoned the superficial ways these terms have been used. The imagination is what allows us to create for ourselves a world – or to present to ourselves something of which, without the imagination, we would know nothing and we could say nothing (Castoriadis, 1997: 104 – emphasis in original).”

Fundamentally what Castoriadis tries to account for is the creation of things that are radically new, a creation arising out of the inherent potentials of the imaginary. This imaginary is an ultimate determination; it cannot be accounted for by anything else. For Castoriadis, history is the creation of meaning and there can be no ‘explanation’ of a creation; there can be only a comprehension ex post facto of its meaning (Joas, 1989). Castoriadis’s philosophy is ultimately driven by the basic question: “How are a multiplicity of social-historical worlds, in all their novelty and alterity, possible” (Gaonkar, 2002: 6)? What he offers in response is a philosophy of creativity, novelty, and articulation (Joas, 2002) in which he advocates a subjectivity “that is critically and lucidly open to the new; it does not repress the works of the imagination (one’s own or others’) but is capable of receiving them critically, of accepting them or rejecting them” (Castoriadis, 1997: 112). He elaborated these ideas most fully in what his translator (Curtis, 1997) called his magnum opus: The Imaginary Institution of Society (Castoriadis, 1987), in which he rethinks Marx’s theories of society whilst giving a central role to the power of creative ideas (Strauss, 2006). Whilst Joas (1989: 1191) in a review essay suggests that the title “may at first seem strange to the reader”, he helpfully elucidates its main thrust: “society is the result of an institutionalization process, and this process, because it arises from the imaginary, from the human capacity to conceive meaning, has an irreducibly creative dimension”. Yet, the centrality of the imagination in Castoriadis is not just a matter of a theoretical approach to the functioning of the human mind and its social consequences, but also a deeply political issue (Dews, 2002). This is something we will return to at the end of our chapter.

Creativity, Phantasy, Imagination and the Imaginary – A Brief History

“The Imagination is one of the highest prerogatives of man. By this faculty he unites, independently of the will, former images and ideas, and thus creates brilliant and novel results” (Darwin, 1871: 70).

Precisely because the “magnetic field” around the concept of creativity has become so exceptionally charged (cf. Steiner, 2001:14) – because it has become overpopulated by meanings accreted in recent years which capture it in a particular operant logic – we will make a historical backward step (reculer pour mieux sauter as the French would say) and trace the common connotations of concepts like creativity/imagination/phantasy/imaginary; concepts that are historically homologous and are all pointing to some common crucial dimension of what it means to be human. What we will find in this short historical overview are “successive movements of discovery and covering back over... the question of the imagination” (Castoriadis, 1993: 3). Castoriadis in this context talks about the “scandal of the imagination”. Each time a crucial breakthrough is “followed immediately by a strange and total forgetting” (Castoriadis, 1993: 2) so that the most fecund notions about creativity and the imagination are continuously subjugated or forgotten. Due to space constraints this section will offer something of a crash course through the history of these concepts, from the establishment of the hierarchy of faculties (where imagination first occupies a position inferior to that of reason and later supplants it) through a phenomenological approach where human freedom becomes intimately bound up with imagination, to arrive finally at Castoriadis’s particular take on creativity and the radical imaginary.

The first conceptualisation of the imagination can be found in Aristotle’s De Anima (On the Soul), his major treatise on the nature of living things. Aristotle suggested that the soul never thinks without phantasm, that is to say, without imaginary representation. But, as Castoriadis (2005) points out, the concept was soon to be abandoned again (even by Aristotle). It was only in the seventeenth century that attention focused again on Aristotle’s conception of fantasy as lying halfway between perception and thought. Hobbes (1651) drew the distinction between the Latin imaginatio and the Greek phantasia, with the former applied to the imagining of an object no longer present, and thus constituting a “decaying sense.” But, as Iser (1993:173) remarked, Hobbes then confused the issue by calling this remembered perception phantasia: “This decaying sense ... I mean fancy itself, we call imagination.” In the 18th century Dr. Johnson – unlike Hobbes – considered imagination no longer a “decaying sense” but as something linking past, present, and future together and defined it in his famous Dictionary (1755) as “the power of forming ideal pictures; the power of representing things absent.” The “decaying sense” now had become the power of reconception. That such a definition should find its way into the Dictionary is evidence of the ascendance of its currency in the 18th century. Another interesting development in the latter part of the 18th century is that for the first time we find an awareness of the possibility of creativity not only in science and the arts, but also in the political sphere. As Joas (1996: 115) phrased it: “Revolutionary action means acting in freedom. It can signify both the creation of that freedom and also action taken under conditions of already created freedom”[[3]](#endnote-3). No longer did fantasy, creativity, or imagination occupy a lower rank in the hierarchy of the faculties, subordinated to reason[[4]](#endnote-4). For the most important 18th century thinkers it had become “a kind of magical faculty in the soul, which, tho’ it be always the most perfect in geniuses, and is properly what we call a genius, is however inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding (Hume, 1739: 24)”. Hume again raised the question as to the role in perception of the imagination. For him, the continuity and identity of an object perceived could be ascertained only with the aid of an imaginary component, which means that an impression could be formed only if actual perception was combined with non-actual perception or imagination. Yet the very nature of the imagination remained mysterious to him. By the end of the 18th century imagination had become ‘incomprehensible’ with Kant (Iser, 1993) although Castoriadis (1993: 3) credits Kant “for the question of the imagination again to be posed, renewed, and opened in a much more explicit and much broader fashion – but just as antinomical, untenable, and uncontainable”.

In the 20th century the notion of the imagination as crucial for perception and reconception was to be taken up again in phenomenological approaches. For Husserl fantasy “is through and through modification” (cited in Iser, 1993: 202). It is to be grasped only through its effects; and whenever it is released, what is, cannot remain the same. For phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau Ponty the world is always-already structured as a result of the activity of our imagination. We are never simply aware of a mass of reality; our surroundings are always pregnant with patterns of salience and significance which derive from how we imagine the world is (or could be). Sartre takes Husserl’s thinking one step further and sees imagination as intimately bound up with freedom. What is essential for Sartre is that human beings can imagine the world or any part of it being different from the way it is. Conversely, for human consciousness to be able to imagine, it has to be able to escape from the world by its very nature; “it must be able to stand back from the world by its own efforts. In a word, it must be free (Sartre, 1940: 185)”. No longer can the imagination be isolated as just an ‘extra’ faculty independent of consciousness; it now has become foundational to thinking and consciousness per se. To cite a famous turn of phrase which also serves as epigraph to Sartre’s The Imaginary:

“We may therefore conclude that imagination is not an empirical power added to consciousness, but is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom; every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant with the imaginary in so far as it is always presented as a surpassing of the real”. (Sartre, 1940:186)

Perception and ideation now embody “the two main irreducible attitudes of consciousness” (ibid.: 138), with the act of perception directing intentions toward a given object, and the act of imagining involving an object that is “being grasped as nothing and being given-as-absent” (p. 209 – emphasis in original). While perception grasps a given object, the mental image links consciousness to an object that is not given and so has to be supplied. Such an image always presents its object as “being given-as-absent” and it can do so only by drawing on memory, knowledge, and given information in order to fashion it[[5]](#endnote-5). It is only through the mediation of the imaginary that we are able to conceive of the real in the first place and to make the elementary distinctions between form and content, object and image (Iser, 1993). For Sartre (1940) a key function of the imagination then is to summon the absent into presence, to produce the ‘irreal’ as he puts it. Because consciousness is free, “there is always and at every moment the concrete possibility for it to produce the irreal (p.186)”. Unfreedom, conversely, is equated with a consciousness “totally bogged down in the existent and without the possibility of grasping anything other than the existent (p.187)”. The very act of producing mental images (and the same could be said for the experience of being caught up in a piece of music) somehow lifts us out of the condition we were in before, as our immediate reality makes way for the irreal presence of the absent. Iser (1993: 196) elaborates: “the ‘nothing’ inherent in the imaginary object becomes ‘creative’ as it causes an almost total turnabout of our condition, and this turnabout may go so far as to make our present existence unreal”. In other words, in the process of imagining something determinate is cancelled, pushed into latency, or derealized in order to release the possibilities inherent in the given.

Castoriadis’s Imaginary

“I say imaginary, because the history of humanity is the history of the human imaginary and its works. I am talking about the history and the works of the radical imaginary, which appears as soon as there is a human collectivity: there is the instituting social imaginary, which creates the institution in general (the form institution) and the particular institutions of the society under consideration, and there is the radical imagination of the singular human being.” (Castoriadis, 2005: 123 – emphasis in original).

Building on the work of Sartre who demonstrated how the imaginary is constitutive of human consciousness, for Castoriadis not only the subject but also society are ‘made’ into what they are, first and foremost by the imaginary (Kenway and Fahey, 2009). Any notions of creativity and imagination that limit themselves to the subject within a psychological horizon are inadequate. Just as for Sartre, for Castoriadis (1987: 159) this imaginary “has no flesh of its own, it borrows its substance from something else”. As such it is a kind of ‘non-being’. The imaginary can take on its fluid gestalt only through the ‘social-historical’ or the ‘psyche’: “As social-historical, it is an open stream of the anonymous collective; as psyche/soma it is representative/affective/intentional flux” (ibid.: 369). The imaginary now has to be considered as a potential source of creativity and freedom for both individuals and societies. Castoriadis thus posits the imaginary at two poles that cannot exist one without the other and which are irreducible to each other; as the radical imagination of the psyche and as the radical imaginary (or instituting social imaginary) at the social-historical level: “the question of the psyche... is inseparable from the question of the social-historical, two expressions of the radical imagination – here, as radical imagination; there as social imaginary” (ibid.: 274).

For Castoriadis the radical imaginary is the unfathomable precondition for the institutionalization of society. It is an ultimate that needs society as a medium for its appearance, just as society needs it in order to become institutionalized: “Beyond the conscious activity of institutionalization, institutions have drawn their source from the social imaginary”, (Castoriadis, 1987: 131). This social imaginary that creates language and that creates the very form of the institution is for Castoriadis (1997: 106) the creative capacity of the anonymous collective: “This capacity is realized each time humans are assembled and it gives itself, each time, a singular instituted figure in order to exist”. As we outlined in the introduction to this chapter, Castoriadis starts from a basic observation: The emergence of the radically new in human history. This leads him to postulate a creative potential, a vis formandi, that is immanent to human collectivities as well as to singular human beings (Strauss, 2006). He calls this the instituting social imaginary. Once created, both social imaginary significations and institutions crystalize or solidify, and this is what Castoriadis calls the instituted social imaginary. The instituting social imaginary involves institutions. But what animates these institutions are significations that refer neither to reality nor to logic; hence Castoriadis calls them social imaginary significations. He also refers to these social imaginary significations as the “immanent unperceived” (p.108). Examples of such social imaginary significations include the God of monotheistic religions, ‘the State’, or ‘the commodity’. As he puts it: “No one has ever seen a commodity: one can see a car, a kilo of bananas, a metre of fabric. It is the social imaginary signification commodity that makes these objects function as they function in a commercial society. The unperceived is immanent, since obviously for a philosopher God is immanent to the society that believes in God, even if this society posits Him as transcendent” (Castoriadis, 1997:108).

It is here that Castoriadis highlights the problematic of creativity research. By reducing and reifying the same into something that supports existing social and economical structures, creativity research can quickly become the very enemy of creativity by ignoring or marginalizing the ontology of imagination and replacing this with the instituted social imaginary. In such an imaginary, creativity can be domesticated as a handmaiden for capitalism and already known economic functions, and thus made into a pale shadow of its own revolutionary potential. Rather than seeing creativity as pointing towards the emergence of the radically new, it is often posited as the power that develops the already existing: The better phone, the improved entertainment technology, the innovative business model (in an already known industry).

Instead of terms from inherited ontology, Castoriadis (1987) outlines his basic premises here in those of semiotics: “The main reason is that, in the case of the imaginary, the signified to which the signifier refers is almost impossible to grasp as such, and, by definition, its ‘mode of being’ is a mode of non-being” (p. 141). Whilst the signifiers involved in the social imaginary have a constitutive signification for society, the signified referred to by the signifier is of a special type precisely because an analogue is not to be formed in accordance with perception. Precisely because the signifier that does not point to a given real object (one cannot simply perceive God, capitalism or the commodity; they do not lean on our world of lived experience) it disperses what it is meant to figure by constantly borrowing references from other significations. This means that this ‘floating signifier’ is itself turned into a signified; the immanent unperceived. Or as Iser (1993: 215) put it: “... imaginary significations are those for which there is no specific code-governed signified, so that the signifier points to an empty space, allowing for a nonbeing to be posited as a signified”.

In and through language are given the social imaginary significations that hold a society together. Language shows us the social imaginary at work as instituting imaginary and like all social institutions, language too has what Castoriadis calls its ensemblist-identitary dimension, the equivalent of the structuralist code. But code cannot capture the open, inventive, and unruly character of signifying practices. Thus alongside a strictly logical (the ensemblist-identitary) dimension (every language has to be able to say one plus one equals two) sits a properly imaginary dimension (Castoriadis, 2005). The operations of the ensemblist-identitary logic are represented through the notions of legein and teukhein by Castoriadis. It is these operations that establish signs that posit imaginary significations and hence provide the imaginary with meaning: “The instrumental institution of legein is the institution of the identitary-ensemblist conditions for social representing/saying. The instrumental institution of teukhein is the institution of the identitary-ensemblist conditions for social doing. The two institutions mutually imply one another, they intrinsically inhere in one another, and each is impossible without the other” (Castoriadis, 1987: 370). For Castoriadis, the imaginary is always present in the Magma[[6]](#endnote-6) as the ‘other’ of the determinate, and Magma is always being transformed through the social processes of doing and organizing (teukhein) and saying and representing (legein). These operations involve both the positing of meaning, and the unintentional accretion of meaning since imaginary significations do not refer to any real world of objects (FitzPatrick, 2002).

For Castoriadis the institution of the social-historical and the creation of imaginary significations involves both the creation of radical otherness (the new) and the workings of ensemblist-identitary logic (Zerelli, 2002). There is thus always an irreducible tension between the instituting and the instituted society in that the new institutions need to take account of the already instituted (Adams, 2005). He excludes there being absolute ruptures or unbridgeable chasms since it is only through the support lent by the available significations (or instruments or institutions in the narrow sense) that new meaning can emerge (Ciaramelli, 1997): “The institution of society by instituting society leans on the first natural stratum of the given – and is always found (down to an unfathomable point of origin) in a relation of reception/alteration with what had already been instituted” (Castoriadis, 1987: 369). Society, as always-already instituted is irreducible to itself because it permanently subject to the workings of the instituting imaginary, which vertically transverses it. As (Ciaramelli, 1997: 62) put it: “The temporality of the social-historical is the permanent self-alteration of society, which makes it live even during moments of almost absolute social stability”. Practices of autonomy and freedom are played out in the space between what is new (the instituting society) and what is given (the instituted society).

Castoriadis understands the problem of the new or freedom in modern terms as having the structure of an abyss, that is, as being fundamentally groundless (Zerelli, 2002). Ensemblist-identitary logic and causal determination continuously cover over that abyss by reducing the new to some version of the old. In The Imaginary Institution of Society, creation ex nihilo seems to above all refer to the creation of a world of core social imaginary significations. It is foremost an imaginary world, in the sense that Castoriadis lends it, which brings the world into being ex nihilo as an absolute creation: the imagined world of signification brings the world into being as the world (Adams, 2005). Yet there is from the outset a consistent and deliberate ambiguity and tension in Castoriadis’ thought on creation ex nihilo (Adams, 2005). In speaking of creation ex nihilo, Castoriadis qualifies it by noting that it is the primary social imaginary significations that create object ex nihilo and organize the world. Creation is ex nihilo, since the created form is irreducible to the already there - but in no way is creation in nihilo or cum nihilo, as Castoriadis has often stated (Ciaramelli, 1997). The social imaginary has to contend with different orders of constraints such the external (those imposed by the natural strata, especially biology), and the historical (the reproductive inertia within the instituted society) but none of those constraints warrants a deterministic reading (Gaonkar, 2002). Indeed, throughout Castoriadis’ work a constant feature of creation ex nihilo is its unmotivated and undetermined character (Adams, 2005). Even at the individual level he posits the psyche as having a magmatic mode of functioning: its processes can be elucidated and interpreted, but not explained. Within the whole of existence Castoriadis detects the presence of an unmotivated, undetermined vis formandi, which becomes manifest to individuals in and through the libido formandi proper to the human domains of existence (Ciaramelli, 1997). There exists a permanent clash between the social order of imaginary significations and the spontaneous flux and flow of representations, affects and desires which forms the creative core of the individual mind, a flux which must be regimented and controlled if the subject is to orient him or herself toward a life lived in common (Castoriadis, 2005). This radical imagination of human beings must therefore be channelled and regulated if they are to be made to conform to life in society. Through socialization they absorb the institution of society and its significations and when this socialization takes place, the most important manifestations of radical imagination are, up to a certain point, stifled, its expression is made to conform and becomes repetitive (Castoriadis, 2005).

Critical Creativity and Castoriadis

In a series of late essays from the 1980s and 1990s Castoriadis provides a rather bitter analysis of present-day Western societies, observing an absence of creativity and future visions. These societies attempt to cover over the traces of their contingent social institution, presenting themselves as the product of a pre-social or extra-social, and thus eternal and unchanging source. This involves the denial of the instituting dimension of society, the covering up of the instituting imaginary by the instituted imaginary. At an individual level it is reflected in individuals whose life is dominated by repetition and whose radical imagination is bridled to the utmost degree possible. In an essay from 1996, written a year before his death, he talks about an “exhaustion of the imagination and of the imaginary in the domains of philosophy and of science, and there is also, manifestly, exhaustion of the political imagination and of the political imaginary (Castoriadis, 2005: 141). He also introduces an emerging human type: the reflexanthrope, “a type of being that is kept on a leash and maintained in the illusion of its individuality and of its liberty by mechanisms which have become independent of all social control and which are managed by anonymous apparatuses already well on the way to achieving dominance” (Castoriadis, 1997: 115).

Castoriadis wants to make us see again and again that what is happening in our society is not inevitable and very much believes that a different organization of society is possible (Smith, 2012). His is a view of society in which the norms and laws that society lives by are very much those which it posits for itself; they are not determined by any extra-social laws or forces (be they religious, economic, or ancestral). For Castoriadis (1987: 215) the key question to ask to determine the health of a society is: “To what extent . . . can society truly recognize in its institution its own self-creation?” It is because there is radical imagination, and not simply reproduction or recombination of the already seen “noncongealed, unsettled imagination, imagination not limited to already given and known forms” (Castoriadis, 1997: 111) that there is reason for hope. As Haiven (2011: 117) put it, “even amid its rampant commodification, imagination remains a space of difference and complexity ultimately untamable by capital, an eternal source of resistance and antagonism, of negation and potentiality.

If we are to engage seriously with Castoriadis’s thought we have to acknowledge that creativity can have no eternal, definite, uncontested content giving us somehow privileged access to the new and valuable. Creativity involves projecting oneself into a future situation which is opened up on all sides to the unknown, which, therefore, one cannot possess beforehand in thought. As language itself is an expression of the ensemblist-identitary dimension, no single definition can capture the range of meanings the term creativity evokes. Indeed, language is the institution par excellence. As Castoriadis (2005:153) put it, “How could I talk about the institution in a language that professes to be rigorous, formalized, or formalizable to an indefinite degree, and so on, when this language itself is an institution, perhaps the first and most important of institutions?” Castoriadis’s unusual vocabulary which we have explored in the preceding pages – legein, teukhein, ensemblist-identitary, magma, and so on – reflects in a way the work of the instituting on the instituted. It is his attempt to render strange what has become too familiar and hence a means to reinvigorate our thinking. Castoriadis’s radical imagination has to be seen therefore not simply as good thing (or bad thing for that matter), “but the tectonic and ever-shifting substance of our social reality that both hardened into social institutions and swept those institutions away. The imagination was that elemental substance not only of our minds but of our social reality” (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2011: 14).

Now that themes of creativity and imagination have taken on a new centrality in our particular socio-historical moment, not only to people’s lives and aspirations but to the capitalist economy as a whole (cf. Haiven, 2011), a turn to Castoriadis’s work provides a strong steer as to how we might politicize these concepts anew. It would involve a search for an answer to the question of “how to develop democratic practices that attenuate the ensemblistic-identitary logic which denies the contingency of human action and thus freedom” (Zerelli, 2002: 541). This search for significations of political action in terms other than those inherited from the Western philosophical tradition and its identitary logic and ontology would acknowledge and celebrate the fundamental indeterminacy of what exists. Such a turn would also involve a questioning as to what might be hidden from our current perspective and temporal frame and it requires us to think how we can reconfigure the realm of the possible and the sensible (Rancière, 2004). If we take serious a critical creativity perspective we would have to reject sunny descriptions of creativity as an Apollonian rational process that flies from discovery to discovery. Creativity then is not something that can be simply ‘managed’ or ‘utilized’ (as utility inevitably imposes its own structures on experience), “but something wildly transformative... that re-stitches the tissue of consciousness... [and] permits an opening to thought about what is possible” (Yusoff, 2010: 83). It has to do with making a radical cut in the fabric of experience, one that truly disrupts us and changes the way we say, make and do things; not something that simply mimics the accumulation of experience that we are sold in the marketplace and which is typical of so many creativity training courses. Such a move takes us away from the idea of creativity as ‘something extra’, something to call upon when vertical/rational thought reaches an impasse, as if ‘creativity’ were simply a special weapon in the armoury of the ever-so-rational homo œconomicus[[7]](#endnote-7). In this sense, the key function of creativity might be to provide a counterweight to the actuality of the world – or more precisely its ensemblist-identitary dimension in Castoriadis’s vocabulary – and to make us think how we might be otherwise. In doing so, “the imagination extends, pushes, challenges, and confides to us what the human is” (Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011: 529), rather than featuring as some kind of super-problem solving device (Rickards, 1999) within clearly (even though not explicitly) delineated societal parameters. To put it somewhat poetically with Iser (1993: 240), creativity then involves a “continual regaining of what human beings have never lost”.

In order to stay true to the notion of creativity and imagination that Castoriadis champions, then, we would have to establish a mode of thinking about creativity that does more than merely pay lip-service to the beneficial qualities of the creativity we recognize in our current situation and socio-economic context, and which is prepared to challenge notions of creativity that would position this as something already given and known. A critical creativity studies would – in the spirit of Castoriadis – raise issues of how power-structures affects creativity, celebrate the creativity of marginalized individuals and unsuitable or illicit creativity, continuously stay alert to the possibility of alternative forms of creativity, expose the propagandistic and ideological uses of creativity, critique managerialist uses and corporate misuses of creativity, just to mention a few things. By doing so, a critical creativity studies could develop our understanding of how creativity affects contemporary society both through its own functioning and by being marshalled by other societal forces (such as institutional, political, or corporate ones).

By taking creativity seriously as a concept “in play” in contemporary society, a critical creativity studies would serve to show how this concept is being utilized in specific ways by e.g. the corporate world, and that these usages needn’t be seen as definitional for the concept – in fact, and again following Castoriadis, showing how this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what creativity is. Similarly, a critical engagement with creativity could serve to change the discourse by making simplistic calls to it less easy to sustain. In this manner, an engagement with Castoriadis can in fact strengthen the concept of creativity by disallowing clichéd and trivial invocations of the same.

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NOTES

1. The rhetorical trick of acknowledging the complexity of the concept and then quickly sidestepping key issues through the provision of an ‘operational definition’ is common to much creativity literature. To quote just one example: “It’s a slippery concept, creativity: every time you get close to coming to grips with it, it seems to slip away, as indefinable as ever… So what precisely is creativity? As anyone who has delved into the question of what exactly constitutes it will know, the notion of creativity means something very different from one individual to another. It is for this reason that we offer our own definition from the outset as follows… (Bills and Genasi, 2003: 1)”. Rehn and De Cock (2009) deconstructed some of the key propositions making up most traditional definitions of creativity (novelty, uniqueness, usefulness) thus bringing to the fore the irreconcilable discourses about creativity which are (badly) hidden by lazy operational definitions. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To quote Castoriadis (1997:105), “Man is psuché; soul, psyche in its underlying strata, unconscious. And man is society; he is only in and through society, its institution, and the social imaginary significations that render the psyche fit for life. And society is always also history; there never is –even in a primitive society – a frozen or congealed present”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Castoriadis (1987) would later develop the understanding of the notion of revolutionary action as creative collective political action. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The imagination had occupied a lower rank because through its link to the senses and memory it was present as a latent subversion and even defiance of a reason-dominated hierarchy (Iser, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Castoriadis (1993: 4) was to pick up on this conceptualisation of perception: “It would not suffice to say that perceiving presupposes imagining. To perceive is to imagine, in the literal and active sense of this term. To perceive (as well as to remember) is a species of imagining, perception a variant of representation”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Castoriadis (1987) defines Magma as: “the mode of being of what gives itself before the identitary or ensemblist logic is imposed” (p. 343). He elaborates: Let us try then, by means of an accumulation of contradictory metaphors, to give an intuitive description of what we mean by Magma (the best intuitive support the reader can present to himself is to think of ‘all the significations of the English language’ or ‘all the representations of his life’). 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 (p.344)”. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Indeed the commonplace that it is reason or rationality that is constitutive of humanity has to be seen as just one possible (and challengeable) anthropological model. Clearly, what this model offers is a form of agency required to survive and prosper in a market society which in turn strengthens the power and effectiveness of markets as networks of innovation (Callon, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)