**Imagination and Organization:**

**A Review of Cornelius Castoriadis’s *The Imaginary Institution of Society***

*The* *Imaginary Institution of Society* (hereafter IIS), published in French in 1975 and in English in 1987, is Cornelius Castoriadis’s undisputed *Magnum Opus* (Curtis, 1997). It is very much a book of two halves. The first part, *Marxism and Revolutionary Theory*, was written in 1964-1965 (whilst Castoriadis was working as an economist at the OECD) and has its roots in his involvement with the legendary journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (which he co-founded with Claude Lefort in 1949), now generally credited with providing the intellectual inspiration for the May 1968 uprising. It furnished a theoretical outline for Castoriadis’s break with the Communist Party as he realised that the states that had elevated Marxism-Leninism to an official ideology had created what he called ‘totalitarian bureaucratic–capitalist regimes’. Castoriadis saw his own work not as a rejection but a radicalization of Marxism: "Starting from revolutionary Marxism, we have arrived at the point where we have to choose between remaining Marxist and remaining revolutionaries" (p. 14[[1]](#footnote-1)). Later Sartre would grudgingly admit that Castoriadis had been ‘right at the wrong time’, to which the ever-combative Castoriadis replied that Sartre had been ‘wrong at the right time’.

*The Social Imaginary and the Institution*, the second part of IIS written in the early 1970s, provides the groundwork for the development of Castoriadis’s philosophy which he would refine in later years. It is very much to this second part of the book I will devote the rest of this review as it has the most direct relevance for management and organizational scholars. It contains the core of Castoriadis’s contribution, “his extraordinary expansive insights regarding the imaginary, which have no obvious parallel in contemporary social theory” (Arnason and Beilharz, 1997: viii). The exploration of this ‘imaginary’ which is so central to Castoriadis’s body of work touches upon two important but to date largely unrelated themes in the management literature: *creativity* and *institutionalization.* Joas (1989: 1191), in an earlier review of IIS, explained the book’s title thus: “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”.

In contrast to Lacan’s notion of imaginary (viz. the mirror stage) which has acquired a certain degree of popularity in our field, Castoriadis’s ‘imaginary’ is not specular: “The imaginary of which I am speaking is not an image *of.* It is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question *of* ‘something’. What we call ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are its works” (p.3). Furthermore, “this imaginary has no flesh of its own, it borrows its substance from something else” (p.159). It can take on its *gestalt* only through the ‘social-historical’ or the (individual) ‘psyche’: “As social-historical, it is an open stream of the anonymous collective; as psyche... it is representative/ affective/ intentional flux” (p.369). At the level of the individual Castoriadis talks about the ‘radical imagination’; at the socio-historical level about ‘social imaginary significations’. For Castoriadis imaginary significations “are obviously not what individuals represent to themselves, consciously or unconsciously, or what they think. They are that by means of which and on the basis of which individuals are formed as social individuals, capable of participating in social doing and representing/saying ...” (p.366). As such he offers us a much richer concept, one pregnant with meaning, than the rather anodyne substitution of ‘imaginary’ for ‘a set of shared beliefs about something’ we tend to encounter in the field of management and organization studies.

The key question that concerns Castoriadis is how the ‘new’ can come into being in a linguistically instituted universe[[2]](#footnote-2). Imaginary significations help provide an answer in that they represent a surplus of meaning, a “capacity to see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is” (p. 127), which transcends all determinants and presuppositions (Arnason, 1989). They thus form a creative potential, a *vis formandi*, that is immanent to the anonymous collective as well as to singular human beings. They also articulate the world in the double sense of imposing form on it and giving access to it and function as “the invisible cement holding together this endless collection of real, rational, and symbolic odds and ends that constitute every society, and as the principle that selects and shapes the bits and pieces that will be accepted there” (p. 143). Castoriadis hence talks about the *instituting imaginary*, but more of this later.

The basic anthropological trait that distinguishes the human species for Castoriadis is not the universal innateness of reason but that of the *imagination*. He thus wants to develop 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” (p. 185). It is because the radical imagination exists “that ‘reality’ exists *for us* – exists *tout court* – and exists *as* it exists” (Castoriadis, 1997: 321) and any human being can, in principle, re-imagine what another human being has imagined. Creation then means the positing of new determinations. The created form is irreducible to the already-there; it cannot be composed from what is already there. In this sense creation is *ex nihilo*, but it is certainly not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo* as he states repeatedly throughout his work: “Neither in the social-historical domain nor anywhere else does creation signify that just anything can happen just anywhere, just anytime and just anyhow” (ibid.: 370). The institutions and social imaginary significations of each society are free creations – Castoriadis writes about the “irruption of the instituting imaginary in and through the activity of an anonymous collective” (ibid.: 333) – but they are always creations under constraints (a list of which runs into pages in the book). His is not a philosophy of indetermination. Castoriadis’s idea of creation implies indetermination only in the sense that the totality of what is, is never so totally and exhaustively ‘determined’ that it might render impossible the surging forth of new determinations. Thus for Castoriadis someone like Newton did not simply ‘discover’, “he invented and created the theory of gravitation; but it happens (and this is why we are still taking about it) that this creation encounters in a fruitful way *what is*, in one of its strata” (ibid.: 396). He rejects the idea of an absolutely disordered universe and postulates that there is something in the world independent of humans that corresponds to the organization (by classes, properties, and relations) by means of which we constitute our world: “The effectively actual world can be effectively organized only if it is organisable, and this is an attribute of the world, not of the subject” (ibid.: 366). For us to be able to organize for ourselves a world starting from X, X has to be organisable in the first place.

Castoriadis’s view of creativity is one that is intimately interwoven with the process of institutionalization. The institution of the social-historical always involves both the creation of radical otherness and the workings of what he calls ‘ensemblistic-identitary logic’ (the determinate and the necessary)[[3]](#footnote-3). Ensemblist-identitary logic comprises two components which society needs in order to function, to have a grasp on the world, and even to make present to itself its imaginary significations. These concepts, which he introduces in chapter five of IIS, are *legein*, or the component of social representing and language (positing-counting-saying), and *teukhein*,or the component of social making/doing (assembling-fabricating-constructing): “Society cannot represent things and represent itself, speak and speak (of) itself, make things and make itself without at the same time applying this ensemblistic-identitary logic which can establish institutions and institute itself only by instituting *legein* and *teukhein* as well” (ibid.: 204). From this follows Castoriadis’s distinction between *instituted imaginary* (“given structures, ‘materialized’ institutions and works”; p. 108) and *instituting imaginary* (“that which structures, institutes, materializes”; p.108). This instituting imaginary is not simply some kind of foundational happening upon which language and material institutions arise once and for all. It is always there, continuously transversing the social. It is this institution of society that determines what for that society is real and what is not so. Each society is in a way a creation of the world that is valid for it; its own or proper world and its identity is this system of meaning-giving. In other words, society, as always-already instituted, is also a self-creation (as the work of the instituting imaginary). The individual subject constitutes him or herself by means of a social process wherein one gains access to the order of the instituted imaginary. Yet, the primacy of the radical imagination also implies the ability to question and lucidly examine the social significations of this instituted imaginary. It is this ‘putting into question’ of the instituted imaginary that determines the health of both individuals and societies for Castoriadis. What he would denounce in a series of later essays critical of modern society is precisely: “The denial of the instituting dimension of society, the covering up of the instituting imaginary by the instituted imaginary, [which] goes hand in hand with the creation of true-to-form individuals, whose thought and life are dominated by *repetition* (whatever else they may do, they do very little), whose radical imagination is bridled to the utmost degree possible, and who are hardly truly individualized” (Castoriadis, 1991: 163).

Reading IIS, as the careful reader may have made out from my selection of quotations, is not an easy task, and this may perhaps explain why the book has become a ‘forgotten’ classic. Castoriadis creates a philosophical language all of his own in IIS by introducing terms like ‘ensemblistic-identitary’, ‘legein’, ‘teukhein’[[4]](#footnote-4), and even the concept of ‘imaginary’ has a real strangeness about it (the reader can find many more such terms in the book, such as ‘magma’, ‘ensidic’ and so on). This has led some commentators to accuse him of using “wild and incomprehensible terms... that turn out to have perfectly ordinary meanings” (Berman, 1998: 36). Yet, in doing so Castoriadis is theoretically consistent in that he makes language bring in ‘new’ determinations without immediately subordinating them to the significations and determinations both author and reader have already acquired, which would simply reduce his thinking to known categories. As Castoriadis (1997: 305) put it, “the ensemblistic ‘part’ is ‘everywhere dense’ in natural language”. It is impossible to speak in any context whatsoever, without utilizing ensemblistic-identitary operators. He finds this process also at work in the writings of Hegel and Marx, for example, who “can say what they have to say that is fundamental about society and history only by transgressing what they believe they know about what being and thinking mean, and who finally reduce it, by forcing it to enter into a system that cannot contain it” (ibid.: 204). So his work is really about using the resources of ensemblistic-identitary logic to somehow transgress it. It is an attempt to render strange what has become too familiar and hence becomes a means of reinvigorating our thinking. Castoriadis’s focus on the very act of thinking, much more than on the construction of a perfectly coherent theoretical framework, is really key to understanding this challenging book. It is summarised rather beautifully in the preface of another book from the late 1970’s (perhaps the next candidate for a ‘classic review’?) which therefore serves as an appropriate ending:

“To think is not to get out of the cave; it is not to replace the uncertainty of shadows with the clear-cut outlines of things themselves... To think is to enter the Labyrinth. . . . It is to lose oneself amidst the galleries which exist only because we never tire of digging them; to turn round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac whose entrance has been shut off behind us—until, inexplicably, this spinning around opens up in the surrounding walls cracks which offer passage [*fissures practicables*]” (Castoriadis, 1986: ix-x).

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1. All unattributed quotations in this review will refer to IIS. All emphases are as in the original text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joas (2002: 510) remarks in this context: “He [Castoriadis] fully accepts the linguistic turn, but he wants to secure the possibility of novelty and creation against the view of a linguistically closed universe. Therefore the investigation of our experience of articulation, of the tension between what has already been said and what has to be said, becomes crucial”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He clarifies the concept in an interview from 1981: “In the ensemblistic-identitary dimension, the institution of society operates (acts and thinks) according to the same schemata that are active in the logico-mathematic theory of sets [*ensembles* in French]: elements, classes, properties, relations, all that being posited as clearly distinct and well defined. The basic operative schema here is the schema of determinacy: in this domain, existence is determinacy; in order for something to exist, it must be well defined or determined. On the other hand, in the imaginary dimension, existence is signification. Significations can be spotted, but they cannot be determined. They are indefinitely linked to one another by means of the mode of relation that is *referral…* (Castoriadis, 2010: 72) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As he later pointed out, legein and teukhein are not concepts of Greek Philosophy but Greek words he used to name new concepts (Castoriadis, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)