

Ricoeur and Castoriadis in Discussion

SOCIAL IMAGINARIES



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Ricoeur and Castoriadis in Discussion

On Human Creation,
Historical Novelty, and
the Social Imaginary

Edited by
Suzi Adams

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Editor's Foreword

Suzi Adams

The radio discussion between Paul Ricoeur and Cornelius Castoriadis took place in March 1985. It is the only direct encounter between these two great thinkers of the imagination and human creativity. While each was familiar with – and occasionally referred to – the other's work, they were not interlocutors in any systematic way. This makes the radio dialogue especially valuable. The dialogue itself is relatively short and sometimes fiery. The fault lines are clear to see. Where, for example, Castoriadis defends an approach to creation *ex nihilo* that rejects an interpretative dimension, Ricoeur repudiates the idea of absolute novelty in favour of a more measured and hermeneutic perspective on human creativity. But as the supplementary essays in this volume clearly demonstrate, critical comparison between Ricoeur and Castoriadis's intellectual projects provides fertile ground for further philosophical, sociopolitical, and historical reflection.

The dialogue is, however, peppered with some persistent misunderstandings. At one point, Castoriadis notes that they seem to be speaking 'at cross purposes'. This can be attributed – at least in part – to the various seminar series that each had given in the years prior to the radio encounter, but which were not published at that time and thus remained unknown to the other. This is especially important in Ricoeur's case, who gave two series of lectures in Chicago in 1975: the first on ideology and utopia as the social imaginary and the second on the more properly philosophical aspects of the imagination. In Castoriadis's case,

his seminars on ancient Greece, delivered at the EHESS in 1982–1983, were a significant source for his views in the radio discussion.

It is an honour to present the English-language publication of the Ricoeur–Castoriadis radio discussion. The French edition was published as *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social* in 2016. It comprised the Ricoeur–Castoriadis dialogue proper and a substantive preface by distinguished Ricoeur scholar, Johann Michel (who, in collaboration with Pascal Vernay, also edited the publication). The English version offers a translation of both the radio dialogue and Michel's preface. It also includes a preface written especially for this edition by eminent Castoriadis scholar, Johann P. Arnason. Each preface offers a thoughtful contextualisation of the Ricoeur–Castoriadis encounter, but it does so from a different vantage point. Additionally, the English-language publication features supplementary essays by Ricoeur and Castoriadis scholars. Four of these – by George H. Taylor, Johann P. Arnason, Jean-Luc Amalric, and Suzi Adams – were commissioned especially for this volume and engage directly with the themes of the radio dialogue. The final essay by François Dosse, who has written intellectual biographies on both Ricoeur and Castoriadis, takes a broader perspective.

The first essay, by George Taylor, focuses on Ricoeur and Castoriadis's shared interest in the social imaginary, but notes their divergent emphasis on the creative and productive imagination, and the implications that this difference holds for their approaches to historical novelty. Taylor argues, however, that Ricoeur's earlier work on the imagination, such as that found in the imagination lectures and the ideology and utopia lectures, demonstrates a different approach to the question of creativity that brings him closer to Castoriadis's perspective. Johann Arnason's contribution takes a different approach. He not only notes common ground between the two thinkers, but highlights points of possible conflict from which each thinker retreats. Taking up the themes of historical novelty and continuity/discontinuity in history, Arnason argues that their shared concern with questions of meaning, historical reactivation, and creation does not result in discussion of historical processes, which, as historical novelty unfolds over time, would be important to incorporate. Jean-Luc Amalric's essay focuses on the role that the imagination plays in each thinker's approach to human creativity. In Castoriadis's thought, it features as origin, whereas in Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach, it has a mediating function. Amalric

takes the interrelated themes of 'creation', 'production', and 'institution' to build his argument that, although there is indeed common ground, the two thinkers diverge significantly regarding the *method* of accessing the imagination, as well as their approach to its ontological/hermeneutical *status* for the human condition. In her contribution, Suzi Adams emphasises the underdetermined quality of meaning that allows a potential bridge to be built between Castoriadis's 'creation *ex nihilo*' and Ricoeur's articulation of production as 'from something to something'. In her reconstruction of the problematic of historical continuity and discontinuity in the radio discussion, Adams expands the scope of reference to reveal an implicit dialogue on the hermeneutic spiral, which she argues needs to be rethought in relation to creation, interpretation, and critique. The book concludes with an essay by François Dosse. Dosse focuses on the overall intellectual trajectories of Ricoeur and Castoriadis, rather than on the radio encounter. Taking a wider – and more historical – scope, Dosse traces the shifting implications of the imagination and imaginary in Ricoeur's and Castoriadis's respective projects. He argues that, despite their many differences (philosophical, political, and otherwise), there is genuine convergence in the pivotal place that the imaginary holds for the human condition, as the motor of history.

Finally, on a more personal note, I visited the Castoriadis Archives in Paris in 2003, as part of my doctoral research. During my sojourn there, I stumbled across an unedited transcript of the Ricoeur–Castoriadis radio dialogue. Its intellectual significance was immediately apparent, and I was fortunate enough to be able to refer to it in my thesis and subsequent monograph. It is thus an honour to have the opportunity to edit the English edition of the dialogue's publication, and thereby make it available to a broad audience. It is, in fact, a double pleasure, for the publication of this book simultaneously launches the 'Social Imaginaries' book series with Rowman & Littlefield International, which is a sister project to the *Social Imaginaries* journal. These projects are edited by the Social Imaginaries Collective.



Preface

Situating Castoriadis and Ricoeur

Johann P. Arnason

POLITICAL CONNECTIONS

Comparing the philosophical trajectories of Cornelius Castoriadis and Paul Ricoeur, or exploring real and possible points of contact between them, might seem a far-fetched idea. The intellectual coordinates of the two thinkers are very different. Ricoeur pursued a philosophical vocation throughout his active life and developed his ideas through academic debates; not that he ignored political issues or avoided political statements, but his basic philosophical arguments were never constitutively linked to a political project. It is true that his project underwent major shifts, and if there is an underlying unity, it can only be understood as an itinerary, involving multiple refocusing of problems and responses to intellectual challenges. None of the landmarks in this story was primarily related to politics. This is not to deny the significance of his political thought. The essay on the ‘political paradox’ (Ricoeur 1965), written in response to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, deserves particular mention. What Ricoeur identifies as a paradox is the double role of the state, as a monopoliser of violence and an agency of rational regulation; the argument is a sustained critique of Marxist failure to recognise the autonomy of the political, but it can also be read as a critical reflection on the Weberian conception of the state (although there is no direct engagement with Weber, neither here nor elsewhere in Ricoeur’s work). Among later writings, the critique of Rawlsian liberalism and the attempt to place the political philosophy of



recognition in a broader context (Ricoeur 2005, his last major work) are of major importance, but they neither reflected nor foreshadowed any fundamental reorientation.

Castoriadis was from early on a political activist with revolutionary views, although his version of revolutionary Marxism was always distinguished by broader intellectual horizons than the more orthodox readings. His earliest writings attest to familiarity with Hegel and Weber, and the untranslated 1948 essay on the phenomenology of proletarian consciousness (Castoriadis 1973) is probably the most Hegelian text ever written by a Marxist; but in the 1940s and 1950s, he was, above all else, defending and developing a political project. The radical rethinking that he undertook at the beginning of the 1960s was prompted by an all-round dissatisfaction with Marxism as a guide to political action. This called for a new vision of history, and the resulting critique of historical materialism remains, as the present author has argued elsewhere (Arnason 2012), the most comprehensive and convincing of its kind. But to break new ground in the understanding of history, Castoriadis had to engage in a wide-ranging exploration of philosophical horizons, questioning basic traditional assumptions and identifying points of new beginning; this took him far beyond the political sphere, and the transformation of his thought after 1960 coincided with a reluctant withdrawal from political engagement. He retained the hope that his version of radical philosophy would find a political expression, but after the de facto termination of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in the mid-1960s, he was never involved in an organised group, although it seems clear that he repeatedly considered such possibilities, not least in connection with the events of May 1968.

VIEWS ON RELIGION

Another marked contrast between the two thinkers has to do with their attitude to and understanding of religion. Here the comparison becomes very asymmetric. It is worth noting that neither Castoriadis nor Ricoeur is discussed in Camille Tarot's important book on French theories of religion (Tarot 2008), probably for opposite reasons: Castoriadis seems too dismissive, Ricoeur too committed to a particular religion. But as will be seen, both deserve closer consideration.

Castoriadis's conception of religion, succinctly formulated in one short text (Castoriadis 1993), is essentially a complement to his theory of self-instituting society, and as he notes, it begins with the acknowledgement of a Durkheimian insight: the crucial and foundational role of religion in the formation of human societies. It serves to 'tie together the origin of the world and the origin of society' (Castoriadis 1993, 6). The starting point is, in other words, 'the religious core of the institution of all known societies, with two incomplete exceptions, Greece and the modern Western world' (Castoriadis 1993, 5). Castoriadis also follows Durkheim in identifying the sacred as the central element of religious beliefs and practices. But the next step parts ways with the Durkheimian perspective. Durkheim saw the sacred as a self-projection of society onto environment, making it possible to grasp the world as a totality; for Castoriadis, the sacred is a transfiguration of the unfathomable and indeterminate expanse that surrounds the human domain. A transcending and threatening horizon is covered over by a more meaning-laden image of transcendence, which thus becomes the centre of cosmic and social order. At the same time, the social constitution of the sacred results in a denial of self-instituting capacity and subordination to imagined supra-social instances. Religion is thus understood exclusively as an instituting force, and more precisely as a mainstay of heteronomous institutions. Castoriadis notes that this analysis does not consider the question of sects, nor of religions that emerged – as did early Christianity and early Buddhism – at a distance from dominant institutions but were later adapted to them. An obvious though unstated corollary is that no note is taken of the possible role of such religions in moves towards autonomy. And on another level, this view of religion disregards the traditions of mysticism.

Castoriadis's verdict on religion is, in short, uncompromisingly definitive: It belongs to the world of heteronomy, it can be judged from outside and found wanting, and the critical perspective needed to do so can be derived from a rethought ontology of the social-historical. An ongoing dialogue with religion is not envisaged, and not required for the argument at issue. It might be questioned whether Castoriadis maintained this view throughout his later work. For one thing, his seminars on ancient Greek thought and history suggest a more nuanced view: If rational theology was an enduring concern of Greek philosophy, the latter was by the same token engaged in a dialogue with religion, but that did not prevent it from becoming a paradigm of radical questioning.

In Ricoeur's work, religion has a much more significant role, too complex to be discussed in detail here, but some main points should be mentioned. Ricoeur's approach to historical themes is marked by his allegiance to a particular religious tradition and his distinctive conception of its message. A Christian and more specifically Protestant conviction, coupled with an unusually strong emphasis on the lasting and necessary complementarity of Judaism and Christianity, imposes certain choices and directions on thought in this field. We should therefore start with a brief glance at Ricoeur's way of demarcating faith from reflection (or conviction from critique, to use the title of a particularly revealing work [Ricoeur 1998]). François Dosse (2012, 25–6) quotes Ricoeur's statement, late in life, to the effect that he had maintained a commitment to the 'Christianity of philosophers', but not argued as a Christian philosopher. This may be taken as a key to his self-understanding, and it seems true that he never tried to build philosophical conclusions on theological premises; but we can nevertheless ask whether the distinction retained the same meaning throughout all phases of his work, and whether some major conceptual shifts did not blur or move the boundary between philosophical Christianity and Christian philosophy. If, as seems generally agreed, Christian existentialism was Ricoeur's original frame of reference, the two perspectives were perhaps not as clearly distinguished as he would later have it; nor is it obvious that subsequent changes were all and only in the spirit of stricter separation.

We may gain further insight from another statement, referring to complementary fields rather than mutually exclusive alternatives. In a book-length conversation with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay, first published in 1995 and covering his entire work to date, Ricoeur describes his intellectual situation, from early on, as 'at the crossroads of two currents of thought that have not been reconciled – philosophical critique and religious hermeneutics' (Ricoeur 1998, 28). The reference to crossing as well as to tension suggests a complex relationship, and further clarification must draw on other sources. The identification of philosophical analysis with critique reflects a particular affiliation with Kant, whose work Ricoeur consistently regarded as the keystone of modern thought (and therefore also as the most important mutually acceptable guide to a dialogue between analytical and continental philosophy). Not that this implied a devaluation of post-Kantian insights; Ricoeur's definition of himself as a 'post-Hegelian Kantian' signals

both an opening to and a distance from German idealism, and Jean Greisch's suggestion that he might just as well have used the term 'post-Husserlian' underlines the role of phenomenology in the reorientation of the critical approach.

Even so, there is no doubt about Kant's exceptional significance or Ricoeur's understanding of the philosophical tradition. It is therefore striking that he should – at a late stage – single out Kant's work on 'religion within the bounds of mere reason' as an example of religious hermeneutics moving beyond the limits of philosophical critique. In fact, his reading of Kant might suggest that 'religion at the borders of mere reason' would have been a better title. The engagement with religion is an exemplary case of philosophy exploring patterns of meaning outside its jurisdiction and without binding claims on acceptance, but relevant to basic philosophical aspirations. It is not enough to enlist religion as a motivating auxiliary to practical reason; its own internal meaning must be clarified. That is not a matter of bringing religion into the orbit of critical philosophy, as Kant's *Critique of Judgment* did with art and living nature. Rather, the philosophical project – as formulated by Kant and rearticulated by Ricoeur – enters into contact with another realm of meaning, through the medium of hermeneutics. Three reasons are given for taking this view (Ricoeur 1995, 75–6). Kant deals with religion as a historical reality, made up of representation, belief, and institution, not – unlike nature and the good will – as a fact 'whose objectivity would be completed by universality'. Second, the focus is on the factual situation of the free will, and thus on an 'existential historicity' outside the realm of transcendental reflection. Finally, the treatise on religion confronts the question of justifying hope, not to be settled in the same terms as the questions of limits of knowledge and imperatives of action.

Ricoeur's interpretation of Kant's treatise on religion was first published in 1992. Three years later, in the conversation with Azouvi and de Launay (Ricoeur 1998), he recapitulates the road taken by his religious hermeneutics in more explicit terms. He acknowledges the strong influence of Mircea Eliade (whom he ranks alongside Gabriel Marcel as an intellectually inspiring friend), and a glance at Ricoeur's writings on hermeneutics in the 1950s will confirm this. The landmark essay on symbols as a guide to thought (Ricoeur 1959) lists Eliade as the first of several authoritative thinkers in that field, and his work on symbols of the sacred figures alongside the interpretation of dreams and of poetic symbolism. But the conversation also reveals the main reasons

for growing reservations about Eliade's approach. For Ricoeur, the most fundamental problem seems to have been the notion of a radical autonomy of the religious dimension, inseparable from the mirage of immanent comprehension (through immersion in the phenomenon to be understood), as well as from the project of a universal and self-sufficient history of religion. All this was summed up in a single-minded focus on the contrast between the sacred and the profane, which Ricoeur describes, somewhat puzzlingly, as an 'almost ideological obsession'.

Ricoeur's critical turn against Eliade began, as he describes it, with the last-mentioned aspect. He toned down the excessive emphasis on the sacred and stressed the plurality of symbolisms; following his own account (Ricoeur 1998, 54), he eventually came to think that the very idea of the symbol – or a symbolic dimension – as a direct focus of interpretation was misguided, and that the more accessible phenomenon of metaphor should be in the foreground. This shift indicates a radicalisation of Ricoeur's linguistic turn. But at the same time, the debate with Eliade led to a reorientation within the field of religious studies. Against Eliade's insistence on beginning with a recovery of archaic and oriental sources, long forgotten by European believers and scholars alike, Ricoeur argues for a self-reflection of Judaic and Christian traditions (he underlines the importance of both), in his view necessary to pave the way for more comparative interpretations. This reflexive step explains his suggestion that the opposition of saint and sinner might be more significant than that of sacred and profane. But the most fundamental result of the hermeneutical return to foundations is a new twist to the idea of revelation. Ricoeur's comments in the conversation with Azouvi and de Launay seem to mark the borderline situation where religious hermeneutics moves beyond philosophical critique without taking a confessional stand. A key formulation refers to a 'a ground of questioning that was ultimately more resistant, more profound, and that comes from farther back than critique itself', and goes on to invoke a 'giving of meaning', constituting 'constitute me both as a receptive and a critical subject' (Ricoeur 1998, 146). That is as far as the clarification of religious meaning can go, and it does not obliterate the difference between critique and conviction; nor does it rationalise or domesticate the idea of God. Ricoeur maintains that this notion has no place in philosophical discourse. On the other hand, his differentiated understanding of revelation (especially in Ricoeur 2010) seems potentially very suggestive for comparative religious studies. A comprehensive

overview of biblical genres highlights the ‘play of contrasts between narrative and prophecy, then between history and legislation, then between legislation and wisdom, finally between wisdom and lyricism’ (Ricoeur 2010, 228).

THE RAMIFICATIONS OF HERMENEUTICS

For Ricoeur, the philosophical lesson of these thoughts on revelation is an acceptance of ‘dependence without heteronomy’ (Ricoeur 2010, 268), a notion also applicable in regard to poetic creation, and referring to an opening of the imagination rather than a submission of the will. More generally speaking, dependence without heteronomy becomes a kind of common denominator for philosophy’s dialogue with extra-philosophical sources of meaning. This articulation of receptivity should be seen in connection with other aspects of the hermeneutical pluralism in Ricoeur’s work. On the basic level of location within traditions, he links up with philosophical hermeneutics as a distinctively modern accompaniment to critical philosophy, but characterised by a continuing divergence of paradigms rather than an ongoing elaboration or clarification of shared ideas. Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer represent different ways of re-centring philosophical reflection around meaning, understanding, and interpretive visions of the human condition; their affinities are marked enough to define a current in modern thought, but do not add up to any mainstream version of hermeneutics. For Ricoeur, this pluralism prefigures a fundamental point: ‘[T]he hermeneutical field is an essentially conflictual field’ (Ricoeur 1990, 19). The centrality of conflict manifests itself on multiple levels, from the elementary polysemy of natural language (important for the analysis of metaphor) to the interpretive disputes inherent in the reception of art and the alternative readings of philosophical traditions. Ricoeur’s insistence on the inexhaustible resources of past philosophical systems is one of his main arguments against Heidegger’s attempt to close the book on metaphysics, but the possibility of ever new interpretations also implies a continuing conflict.

The idea of conflict as a general feature of the hermeneutical field is qualified by a more specific notion of polarity, most emphatically formulated in Ricoeur’s book on Freud, and thus particularly salient in the middle phase of his thought. His now well-known distinction between

a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of recovery contrasts two fundamentally opposed formations of meaning. Reductionist modes of interpretation convert manifest meanings into an expression or disguise of underlying forces, with varying emphasis on interest, power, or more elementary infra-social factors. The opposite approach aims at a more adequate understanding and a reappropriation of neglected or forgotten meaning. This stark confrontation reflects the particular thematic focus of the book: Freud's metapsychology, more precisely Freud's own understanding of a new and elusive problematic, represents the hermeneutic of suspicion at its most distant from cultural meaning; conversely, the hermeneutic of recovery is most closely linked to a transcultural symbolism of the sacred, conceived in a way clearly close to Eliade's.

Against this background, Ricoeur's later elaboration of hermeneutical perspectives may be seen as a multifaceted but unfinished effort to find the proper balance between the pluralistic and the bipolar vision of the field. The growing emphasis on language, and on linguisticity as a precondition of human thought and action, shifts attention to the common ground of the two alternative hermeneutics, as well as to conflicts arising at this level, without involving an option for either recovery or suspicion. Further differentiations and complications emerge on both sides. Although Ricoeur never engaged with Marx to the same extent as with Freud, his work on ideology and utopia did discuss Marx and the Marxist tradition at some length, and the result appears as a combination of the hermeneutic of suspicion with the hermeneutic of recovery. The analysis of Marxian approaches to social consciousness examines their credentials as an exercise in the hermeneutic of suspicion, but an adequate understanding of their themes depends on the acceptance of meaning as a constitutive element of social being, and this is clearly a case of the hermeneutic of recovery overcoming reductionism. And as we have seen, Ricoeur's idea of religious hermeneutics developed new aspects. The focus on Judaic and Christian religiosity entails a specific hermeneutic of revelation, with the clear implication that other traditions would call for other accentuations of the hermeneutical stance.

This ongoing differentiation raises questions about locating other thinkers in the hermeneutical universe of discourse, and for present purposes, that applies to Castoriadis. There is no doubt that such a reading would run counter to his self-understanding; he rejected hermeneutical approaches on the grounds that they overemphasised the

interpretation of meaning in various forms and contexts, at the expense of the creativity which he attributes to meaning in the social-historical realm. Ricoeur's sustained analysis of imagination and meaning, with particular reference to metaphor as linguistic innovation, shows that a hermeneutical perspective does not preclude interest in creation. Conversely, it can – as I will try to show – be argued that a hermeneutical logic is essential to Castoriadis's line of thought, and that his reflections on specific issues reveal some affinity with Ricoeur's distinction between the hermeneutic of suspicion and the hermeneutic of recovery. A first indication of reasons for a hermeneutical turn can be seen in the thoroughgoing emphasis on meaning, fundamental for Castoriadis's whole critique of historical materialism. But there is more to be said about particular steps of the unfolding argument.

The discussion of the revolutionary project (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 71–114) is a key aspect of the transition from heterodox Marxism to a militantly non-Marxist conception of history and society, documented in the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, and deserves closer examination than it has so far received. It would not seem far-fetched to describe the line taken in this chapter as a critique of revolutionary reason, in a roughly Kantian sense: Against under-reflected and at the same time overambitious visions of revolution, Castoriadis wanted to establish a rational project, in full awareness of legitimate aspirations as well as of basic limits. But the argument proceeds in such a way that we can also speak of a hermeneutical clarification, beginning with the elementary point that the revolutionary project is described on the basis of canonical texts that make up the Marxist–Leninist tradition (including its Trotskyist offshoot, which Castoriadis knew particularly well). More importantly, the critique can be divided into four successive steps, all hermeneutical in character but not in the same sense. Here I will reconstruct them in a slightly different order from Castoriadis's presentation.

The first move is, necessarily, a critique of pretensions to ground the revolutionary project in a comprehensive theory of history and society. This part of the argument combines a hermeneutic of suspicion with a hermeneutic of recovery. The ideas of a total rationality and a correspondingly complete theory are called in question, shown to be untenable in principle and self-destructive in practice (notably in the Marxist–Leninist version); the objections to such constructs apply *a fortiori* to the determinist view that prevailed in dominant currents of

Marxism, and here we encounter the added problem that determinism excludes the autonomous action presupposed by the revolutionary ambitions of the same theory. But the very refutation of these misguided notions discloses aspects of historical experience that have also been, at least tentatively, acknowledged by undercurrents in the Marxist tradition. History is a realm of open horizons, changing perspectives, and innovative action; to quote a formulation that foreshadows much of Castoriadis's later work, it is 'the domain of creation' (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 44–5). Here the hermeneutic of recovery is at work, and its implications become clearer with the second step. The revolutionary project is a strategic starting point for reflection on ways to advance our understanding of human action, but Castoriadis also draws on other examples, from psychoanalytical therapy to the creation of works, and his line of interpretation links up with the classical concepts of *praxis* and *poiesis* (although only the former is explicitly invoked, and Castoriadis's own preferred term is 'doing', *faire*). Creative work, whether aesthetic, intellectual, or institutional, involves a broadening of horizons and an unfolding of meanings beyond the orientations present at the outset. The clarification of the revolutionary project, against authoritarian misconceptions, highlights a point also important for the self-understanding of psychoanalysis as an intervention in the human condition and indicated in the most general terms by the concept of *praxis*: the autonomy of the other as a presupposition and ever-renewed goal of action, neither a mere means nor a definite end. Last but not least, this conception of human doing emphasises the ongoing transformation of its subject.

The third step of Castoriadis's hermeneutical operation is a de-mythologising one, directed against the dominant vision of communism. His target is, more precisely, a cluster of loosely defined notions, relating to the social changes to be achieved through revolution. They suggest a stateless society that has not only abolished classes, but also overcome the division of labour and dispensed with markets; the idea of a leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom sums up these exaggerated expectations. On the anthropological level, the image of the future centres on a 'total human being', in full control of history and society. It might be objected that Marx's writings show a distinct shift from highly utopian to more realistic perspectives on communism, but it is also true that this change was never explicitly theorised, the results remained inconclusive, and later experience showed that utopian

extremes could be reactivated. For Castoriadis, the ideas in question (he describes them as mythical, but never uses the concept of political religion) suggest a transparent society that ‘would discover, formulate and realise the collective will without passing through institutions, and whose institutions would never be a problem’ (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 111), and he regards this phantasm as comparable to the illusions of absolute knowledge or a complete elimination of the unconscious.

The de-mythologising detour paves the way for a final round. Castoriadis characterises the human relationship to the social-historical dimension as a matter of ‘inherence’, a mixture of ‘interiority and exteriority, of participation and exclusion’ (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 111); the condition of inherence does not exclude advances of reflection and liberty, but the ideology that cannot accept ‘finitude, limitation and lack’ (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 112) is in denial of social-historical reality. In light of later developments, it is easily recognisable as the common denominator of communist and capitalist utopias. Castoriadis argued for a revolutionary alternative to both, and tried to show that workers’ self-management was the kind of institutional innovation most likely to result in all-round radical change. Given the transformations of capitalism, political culture, and ideological patterns, this perspective now seems a good deal less plausible than in the 1960s. But here it is not the viability of political strategies that concerns us. The point to note is that the all-round rethinking involved in Castoriadis’s break with Marxism gave rise to the central problematic of his whole later work: the question of interrelations between social-historical being and the human subject.

There will be more to say on the ontology of the social-historical. But to conclude the present part of the discussion, the hermeneutical context of Castoriadis’s ontological turn should be considered from one more angle. He introduces his key ontological theme – social-historical creativity – through confrontation with alternative images of society. The first chapter in the second part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 167–220) begins with a critique of established but, on closer view, untenable models that have served as frameworks for the interpretation of human societies. Two exemplary cases are considered, conceptions that reduce social-historical being respectively to organic or logical patterns. The former has a long tradition, and is also the shared foundation of modern functionalist theories, while the focus on the latter reflects the exceptionally strong influence of Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology on French social

thought during the 1960s. Conversely, the somewhat surprising absence of the individualist image, often criticised in passing elsewhere in Castoriadis's work, can be explained by the limited appeal of such ideas in a tradition still marked by rival interpretations of the Durkheimian legacy. If the fallacy of the organic and logical paradigms consisted in assimilating the social-historical domain to models drawn from elsewhere, the individualist perspective mistakes a specific and derivative part of that domain – the instituted individual – for a key to the whole. It is the contrast with these misdirected approaches that brings out the implications of Castoriadis's effort to elucidate the questions of society and history, conceived as aspects of one and the same problematic. The meaning of social-historical creativity is clarified in direct contest with the preconceptions that have blocked its understanding. This constellation exemplifies the hermeneutical field of conflicting interpretations, as defined by Ricoeur.

HUMAN ACTION AND ITS ONTOLOGICAL HORIZONS

A brief recapitulation will help to situate the final step in our comparison of Castoriadis and Ricoeur. The question of religion, incomparably more important for Ricoeur than for Castoriadis, was discussed at some length, and with a view to underlining the distance between the two thinkers. But Ricoeur's continuing reflections on religious texts and traditions – as one of the non-philosophical sources of philosophy – was clearly also crucial for the elaboration of a multifaceted hermeneutical framework, which can in turn be seen as a latent common ground between Ricoeur and Castoriadis. It remains to be examined whether their affinity leads to convergences of a more specific kind, and whether significant contrasts reappear within that more narrowly demarcated field.

Ricoeur often referred to philosophical anthropology as the thematic centre of his work, and critical interpreters have argued that broader horizons and advancing insights in this field are the main reasons for differences between his earlier and later writings. The idea of a 'capable human being' has been singled out as an emerging and overarching theme (Clément 2006); *Fallible Man* (Ricoeur 1987 [1960]) and *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1992 [1990]) can be seen as the opening and

concluding stages of an anthropological project (e.g. Sugimura 1995). But the last-mentioned work ends with a chapter on possible ontological prolongations of the argument. The ontological project, very tentatively formulated, grows out of Ricoeur's analysis of the self and the other. These two poles of a dialectical relationship (Ricoeur strongly emphasises that term) cannot be adequately understood without thematising their mode of being, and that brings into play the more general question of being. Despite this opening of ontological horizons, Ricoeur's suggestions remain on the cautious side; they are fundamentally different from Heidegger's variations on the question of being, and more akin to the elementary ontologies that have emerged in the orbit of analytical philosophy. Identity and otherness, persons, things, and events are the categories to be considered. On the other hand, the ontological frame of reference serves to avoid what Ricoeur calls the 'closed semantism' of mainstream analytical philosophy, its inability to account 'for human action as actually *happening* in the world' (1992, 301; emphasis in original).¹ Here the connection between a philosophy of action and a philosophical perspective is particularly pronounced, and in the same paragraph, Ricoeur speaks of linking philosophical thought to effective doing, using the same word as Castoriadis (*faire*).

It is clear from the preface to *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, as well as from the concluding passages of the second part, that Castoriadis's rethinking of social-historical being was to be accompanied by a similar elucidation of human doing; the posthumously published fragment on 'the imaginary as such' (Castoriadis 2015) stresses the need for interconnected analyses of representing and doing, but the unfinished argument also shows that Castoriadis found the former theme (which in fact became the cornerstone of his social ontology) much easier to tackle than the second. Notwithstanding declarations of intent and various insightful observations, doing remained an underdeveloped theme in his later work. In contrast to Ricoeur, Castoriadis had started out from a more emphatic conception of the possibilities open to human action (on the level of the revolutionary project), but made less progress with conceptualising the elementary patterns of action. One way to develop his reflections in that vein would be to explore points of contact with Ricoeur's thought.

On the other hand, Castoriadis's ventures into general ontology were more ambitious than those of Ricoeur. His proposal to revive the Greek notion of *physis*, understood as a world in creative becoming, did not

develop into anything comparable to the work on society and history, but his reflections on the philosophical implications of the natural sciences, with particular emphasis on discontinuities between their respective domains of enquiry, reveal the outlines of a strongly anti-reductionist programme. Even so, the contrast between the two thinkers should not be exaggerated. There are at least two indications of shared assumptions and cautionary perspectives. Both Castoriadis and Ricoeur refer explicitly to Aristotle's thesis on the multiple modes of being. For Ricoeur, this is primarily a matter of distinguishing between the meanings attributable to the diverse aspects of the self and the others (including the difference between reality and potentiality, inherent in the concept of the capable actor); what Castoriadis had in mind was a more comprehensive spectrum of regional ontologies, ranging from cosmological hypotheses through more solidly anchored analyses of living beings to the elucidation of society, history and the psyche. But in both cases, the reminder of polysemy serves to warn against premature theorising, and another shared theme adds emphasis to that. Ricoeur (1990) stressed the fragmentary character of the ontology that he could envisage. The fundamental reason for this reservation was his understanding of reflexive philosophy, enriched by phenomenology and hermeneutics, as an enduringly problematic clarification of 'the broken cogito', the self-awareness that remains an indispensable and unby-passable starting point but can no longer be mistaken for a certain foundation. This context of reference – not a transcendental ground, an ever-renewed horizon of questioning – is perhaps Ricoeur's most significant link to the tradition that began with Kant and continued with Fichte; it rules out any definitive or comprehensive ontological turn. When Castoriadis referred to a 'world in fragments' (first in a working title for a text on philosophy and science, and then in the book title chosen for a collection of essays), he was drawing on a different framework, but with some comparable implications. The fragmented view of the world is, first and foremost, due to the limited grip of human thought on an understructured and ever-emerging reality, but also due to tensions between identitarian thought, rooted in basic social institutions, and more or less articulated attempts to overcome its limits; last but not least, it has to do with the fragmented state of contemporary culture and society, where dominant modes of thought have disintegrated but not been replaced by adequate alternatives. The resulting constellation is incompatible with any systematic ontology.

SHARED PROBLEMATICS

The above reflections have identified some common ground between Castoriadis and Ricoeur; further aspects will be explored below, with direct reference to their conversation. Here I will only add a brief comment on a less obvious but not uninteresting affinity. Johann Michel concludes his very thorough study of Ricoeur's philosophy with the suggestion that it combines a traditionalist, a modernist, and a post-modernist paradigm. The first posits an 'already given meaning' as a founding ground, the second affirms the primacy of the human subject, and the third centres on a rejection of the very idea of foundation (Michel 2006, 470). There is no doubt that the three problematics – the precedence of meaning, the question of the subject and the critique of foundations – are present and interconnected in Ricoeur's work. It is much less clear that we can identify them with the three paradigms mentioned by Michel. Acknowledging the precedence of meaning (in other words: a universe of meaning neither produced, nor mastered, nor exhausted by a subject) does not *eo ipso* entail a traditionalist position; rather, this theme is rediscovered by modern thought (most momentarily by its romantic currents), and put in a new perspective that highlights the self-questioning capacity, the comparative understanding, and the internal interpretive conflicts of traditions. Ricoeur's approach to traditions, including his special relationship to Judeo-Christian sources and his pluralistic attitude to past philosophical systems, clearly belongs in this context. The modern character of subject-centred philosophies is not in dispute; Ricoeur's version is, as we have seen, particularly sensitive to the complexity, openness, and interpretive ambiguity of the subjective dimension. As for the critique of foundationalism, there is nothing postmodern about it. The anti-foundationalist turn is a recurrent trend in modern thought; to mention only some key twentieth-century cases, it is evident in the shift from the early to the late philosophy of Wittgenstein, in the Popperian critique of positivism, and in the post-transcendental turn of phenomenology, most clearly exemplified by Merleau-Ponty's work. If postmodernism gave a new twist to this theme, it was an effort to convert reasoned critique into an 'anything goes' style. Ricoeur's critique of foundationalism, unmistakably present from early on and enriched through phenomenological and hermeneutical insights, certainly owed nothing to postmodernist influences.

The three problematics, not to be identified with separate paradigms, also seem represented in Castoriadis's work. His account of meaning as an irreducible dimension rests on two complementary sources, the representational flux of the unconscious and the collective unconscious web of social imaginary significations. Nobody would think of describing this approach as traditionalist, but it is worth noting that it allows for specific traditional references. As Castoriadis's seminars on ancient Greece show, his Greek affiliation was not only based on philosophical and political breakthroughs to autonomy. He reconstructs a Greek 'grasp of the world', going back to the archaic period that preceded classical developments of rational interrogation and self-government. This distinctive image of and attitude to the world centres on a vision of partial order against a chaotic background, without any ultimate divine authority and therefore compatible with a certain autonomy of mortal human beings existing and acting within it. Castoriadis regards the Homeric epics as the most representative expression of these archaic notions, but the underlying framework is a distinctive pattern of the mythical imaginary. If we confront this analysis with Castoriadis's theory of religion, it seems obvious that he saw archaic Greece as a case of mythical thought breaking through the core structure of religion: the 'simulacrum' of the sacred as a protective screen against a chaotic world. This is a very strong claim, and would deserve clearer formulation, but it remains implicit. While it is not being suggested that his invocation of Greek beginnings is of the same order as Ricoeur's commitment to biblical traditions, a certain affinity should be noted. In his debate with Lévi-Strauss, Ricoeur had argued against overgeneralised theories of myth and maintained that, when myth becomes a vehicle of revelation, new ground is broken and new approaches are needed. Castoriadis appears to be claiming that Greek mythology entered upon a new path, thus becoming a prelude and an enduring stimulus to philosophical reflection (rather than the stark opposite suggested by the traditional contrast between *mythos* and *logos*), as well as a cultural quarry for various genres.

Castoriadis's reframing of the modern question of the subject is directly related to his two perspectives on meaning. He sees the subject as a changing and self-transforming product of interaction between the social-historical and the psyche; the most fundamental link between the two levels is the imagination, but reflection, 'definable as the effort to

break closure' (Castoriadis 1997, 271), is the precondition for autonomising moves in both directions, in relation to the psyche as well as to the institutional architecture of society. Castoriadis's main complaint against philosophies of the subject is that they have tried to screen out the constitutive contexts, and as a result lapsed into egology. That verdict does not do justice to differences between major figures and paradigms in this tradition, but the combined horizons of the social-historical and the psyche do transform the whole problematic. And they are conceived in such a way that philosophical reflection becomes a questioning without end. That is Castoriadis's way of rejecting foundationalism, certainly no closer to postmodernism than Ricoeur's views were. The survey of the three problematics has thus revealed further contrasts and resemblances between the two thinkers, and these issues will be revisited in light of the exchange between them.

NOTE

1. A more literal translation would be: 'for human acting as an effective arrival in the world'.

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