

Reconsidering the political – is it possible to be democratic today?

The political philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis confronts us with an urgent and fundamental democratic problem: When he talks about democracy as a conscious self-governance, that is as *autonomy*, he often says that this notion exists like a *seed* within Western political thought.¹ This seed forms a vital part of the *social imaginary significations* that constitutes the magma of meaning in Western societies. Yet, in relation to this ‘autonomous seed’, Castoriadis also perceives that society shapes and produces the citizens through what he calls *infra-power*. It is through this power that the social imaginary significations, specific for just these societies, are incarnated. Here, the citizens institute and deepen these significations and thus become the most important bearers of the social institution.

And it is this idea, fundamental for Castoriadis, about how individuals are created in and through their social belongings that confronts us with a complex and difficult problem: If it is the case that we – for example we who live in Europe – for a long time have been living in societies that are neither autonomous nor democratic, in the strong sense that Castoriadis gives to these terms, then it is obviously the case that none of us have been formed by an *infra* power, or converging and cooperating *infra* powers, that promotes the institution of a democratic, consciously autonomous magma of social imaginary significations. When Castoriadis in the beginning of the 1990:s addressed this question, he said that we in Europe, at best, live in *liberal oligarchies* where the *capitalistic imaginary* is all but totally dominant. The capitalistic magma of meaning makes us believe, according to Castoriadis, that “the goal of human life would be the unlimited expansion of production and consumption, the so-called material well-being, etc.” and, as a consequence, “the population is totally privatized.”² We do not find in the population, as Castoriadis says, “the passion for common affairs.”³ And he draws the following conclusion: “It’s a matter of the close and profound relationship between the structure of individuals and the structure of the system.”⁴

¹ I have presented these thoughts before, first in French as ‘Des sujets autonomes?’ at the conference *Castoriadis: actualité d'une pensée radicale*, held at EHESS in Paris October 26-28/10 2017 (published here: <http://www.littvet.uu.se/forskning/publikationer/urs-sru/urs-sru-7/>), and then, in Swedish, as ‘Kan vi vara demokratiska?’ (in print). This text text prolongs, specifies and tries to answer some of the problems left unattended in the earlier, less complete versions.

² Castoriadis, *Une Société à la dérive*, Paris, Seuil, 2005, p 18 (The texts in this volume are all published posthumously, and stem from the period between 1973 and 1997.) All translations to English are mine, unless stated otherwise.

³ Ibid, p 20

⁴ Loc cit.

Even if more than 25 years have passed since Castoriadis formulated this diagnosis, I see no reason to contradict it today. On the contrary. If anything, things have changed in the direction of an ever more far-reaching, more globalizing and more privatizing dominance of the capitalist imaginary. (I will come back to this point). And these changes have led to, Castoriadis writes, a condition of apathy, of de-politicization, of privatization that is constantly getting worse, more encompassing and that seems to be here to stay:

The withdrawal of the peoples from the public sphere and the disappearance of political and social conflict, allows the economic, political and media oligarchy to escape all control. Already now, this is producing regimes of extreme irrationality as well as of structural corruption.⁵

Castoriadis wrote this in the beginning of the 1990:s, but his words still resonate with us today. There are many signs that it is here, precisely here, where we find ourselves in the end of the 2010:s. Obviously, conflicts abound in the world today, but, as I see it, these conflicts are seldom political in the sense that Castoriadis gives to the term. The fights around identity, as well as the growing nationalisms we see in Europe today (and in many other regions of the world) are not really political struggles in the strong sense of the term. A political conflict, as I understand the term in this text, is a conflict that pertains to what is common, to how the common should be understood, distributed and dealt with. Conflicts stemming from, or based in, identities or nationalism should rather be considered as expressions or symptoms of a generalized privatisation, where the notorious information-bubbles are not without significance. The same goes for regimes of extreme irrationality – it seems unnecessary to point out that there already are, or are developing, many such regimes all over the world today (December 2018): Just to mention a few and in between themselves very different examples, I think of the situation in Hungary, in Italy, in Brexit-UK as well as the activities of the Trump-administration in the USA.

So, I think it is safe to say that we in Europe today – as in other politically and demographically important regions of the world, but in this text I will only talk of Europe – live (and since many years) in social conditions that hardly can be seen as promoting the development of autonomous and democratic ways. Hence, I pose the following question: If this description is correct, how could we reasonably hope to become autonomous subjects, that is, the kind of subjects that are needed in order to become operational, conscious citizens in democratic states? Are we at all in a position where we can claim that at least some of us

⁵ Ibid, p 20-21

are subjects that think and act in autonomous and completely conscious ways? Is political and subjective autonomy even possible for us, as individuals as well as collectively?

This is my problem. And I will, with and perhaps also to some extent against Castoriadis, try to find a solution – in the hope that there is a one – by returning to the idea of democracy as a *seed* within Western thought. First, I want to see how this idea can be comprehended, and then how it perhaps may be activated anew.

I

Castoriadis often returns to the notion that we humans, in our social-historical existence, are situated *downstream*. I have previously developed this idea on a number of occasions ⁶ and here I want to focus on one specific line of thought emerging from this metaphor:

We are all (through socialisation) immersed in imaginary waters, saturated with nutritious as well as poisonous particles, constituting our life-environment. Among these particles, i.e. traces of earlier social-imaginary productions, both material and conceptual, we find what Castoriadis calls seeds – the seeds of democracy and autonomy, but also the seeds of fascism, racism and Nazism. That we humans find our residence *downstream*, or in the “marshes of history”⁷, thus means that we are always influenced and affected by the nutrients as well as the pollutions of these waters, may this be in a conscious manner or not.

But how, more concretely, do these waters affect us? Castoriadis again:

Society, in its being already instituted, is autcreation and ability to self-change.

Society is the work of the instituting radical imaginary, which each time makes itself be as a particular instituted society and as particular social imaginary.⁸

What is important here are the notions of autcreation and the ability to self-change; they offer a possible way to follow and explore. If I have understood Castoriadis correctly, we cannot presuppose a constraining and omnipresent causality, not in society, nor in history

⁶ For example, in “On being downstream”, in *The Past's Presence. Essays on the historicity of philosophical thought*, Södertörn Philosophical studies 3, eds. Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback och Hans Ruin, Södertörns Högskola, 2005, as in “A Philosophical-Anthropological Case for Cassirer in Rhetoric”, written together with Erik Bengtson, in *Rhetorica A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, volume 35, # 3, summer 2017.

⁷ For a development of this specific expression, see Rosengren and Bengtson, *Rhetorica A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, volume 35, # 3, summer 2017.

⁸ *Le Monde Morcelé*, Op cit, p 138.

(and at the same time causality is an inevitable category in many of the different strata of being where the *ensidic* logic⁹ prevails, holding our world together– for example, scientific experiments as well as weather-reports depend on predictable causal relations). There are always gaps and cracks, life and commotion, both in separate individuals and in the social institution, allowing chaos to press through only to be covered over by the creations of the radical imagination.¹⁰ Castoriadis continues:

Concretely, society is only in and thorough the fragmentary and complementary incarnation of its institution and its social imaginary significations in living, speaking and acting individuals. /.../ The individuals are made by, at the same time as they make and remake, the society; in one sense, they *are* it. ¹¹

So, we individuals are not, and cannot be, completely determined by the infra powers of society. Hence there should always be a possibility to want, think, act, say and do otherwise than what is prescribed by the dominant doxa of society. Even in the most totalitarian and constraining circumstances, there remains a possibility to think and act against the current. And it is here that *seeds* can be of decisive importance. Even though we have the ability – always potential, sometimes actualised – to think and act against the general drift, we always have to start right where we are and work with the concrete and conceptual tools available for us, right here and now. And if we, in our *downstream* position, encounter social imaginary significations like *reflexivity*, *autonomy* and *democracy* this points to a possibility “that we should postulate as everywhere present in the human beings” even though “it is only *very rarely realised* through all the different historical societies, or through individuals in our

⁹ *Ensidic* thinking or *ensidic* logic is Castoriadis's shorthand expression for the kind of thinking and logic that he calls *ensembliste-identitaire* – thinking based on the idea that all aspects of being are specific differentiations of a determined original element, an element that therefore should be considered to constitute the unity, identity or essence of these aspects of being. *Ensidic* logic, when posited as universally valid, rejects the possibility of creation in general and, consequently, of human creation as well. *Ensidic* logic classically puts the origin of the laws of our world (natural laws as well as social ones) outside of our world and society. In this respect *ensidic* thinking is heteronomous, as it tends to mask ('cover over') the fact that man and society are inexorably autonomous -that man/society posit their own laws, natural as well as social.

¹⁰ For Castoriadis' specific notion of chaos, see Emanuele Profumi, *Sulla Creazione Politica*, Editori Riuniti Internazionali, Roma 2013, pp 40-55; Mats Rosengren, "True and False Chaos – the mythical origins of Creation", in *Les émigrés grecs et leur influence sur le débat intellectuel français*, eds. Lambros Couloubaritsis Servanne Jolivet, Christophe Premat et Mats Rosengren, Éditions Le Manuscrit, Paris, 2012, as well as Mats Rosengren, "On academic responsibility, chaos and borders», i *Can a Person be Illegal? Refugees, Migrants and Citizenship in Europe*, eds Mats Rosengren, Alexander Stagnell, Louise Schou Therkildsen, Uppsala 2017. Downloadable here: <http://www.litvet.uu.se/forskning/publikationer/urs-sru/urs-sru-6/>

¹¹ *Le Monde Morcelé*, *op cit*, p 139.

own society.”¹² It is this prospect of democracy that Castoriadis claims to be possible to discern in the magma of social imaginary significations in western societies that we can understand as a *seed*.¹³

What remains, then, is only to find out how to make this seed take root, how to make it grow in the social historical conditions that are ours.

2

But before I continue, I want to obviate a possible misunderstanding. In Castoriadis’s work, we find three main metaphors contributing to the specific and fecund form of his thinking: *downstream*, *magma* and *seed*. Even so, it seems to me that two of them – *downstream* and *seed* – contradict the sense and general direction of his thought.

When I presented my take on the notion *downstream*, it was perhaps obvious that I avoided the large river of history, following its given course from source to sea. Instead I spoke about *downstream* as a social-historical condition for our existence in the marshes of history, thus trying to circumvent all implications as to a predetermined historical development or an inevitable historical causality. Here I will let this brief comment on *downstream* suffice, and instead turn my attention to the metaphorical *seed*.¹⁴

Is this botanical metaphor really a successful one? Is it not too rigid, too stable or, in other words, too Aristotelian? A seed, surely it contains as a potentiality to actualise a whole plan for growth and development? But democracy, and even less human autonomy, can hardly follow a preordained plan and self-actualise in the same (or even remotely similar) way as for example an oak. That would presume an essence in the centre of the democratic seed, an immutable form for democracy and autonomy – but such an idea would be in complete contradiction with my understanding of Castoriadis’s open and process-oriented thinking. Even so, perhaps the idea of a *seed of democracy* can be saved through focusing on the specific and different social-historical soil where it takes root, claiming that the democracies and autonomies that would grow out of it always are specific and different. But this is hardly a satisfying solution: it would still claim that all democracies and autonomies, historical or to come, are essentially the same – but variations of a predetermined form. I am quite convinced

¹² *Le monde Morcelé*, *op cit*, p 263.

¹³ Castoriadis says clearly that the idea of autonomy and democracy, in an historical sense, is a specific creation within the western cultural sphere, but he is adamant that autonomy and democracy always are humanly possible, everywhere.

¹⁴ Please see the references given in note 6 for more extensive presentation and critique of *downstream*.

Castoriadis, with his emphasis on creation and especially auto-creation, did not want to say anything of the kind.

We have to rework also this metaphor in the direction of a truly, that is not predetermined, autonomous process. I suggest we understand the notion of *seed* less as a botanical core and more as a trace, as a residue of earlier social creations, a possible source of inspiration in the magma of imaginary significations of our societies, showing us aspects of what is humanly possible. In any case, that is how I understand Castoriadis when he writes:

Obviously, we are talking about the *possibilities* of the human being: we do not say that these always, most of the time, automatically etcetera are realised. We are well aware that the opposite is the case. But we also know that these possibilities can be actualised, and that they have been actualised in certain societies and by certain human beings /.../.¹⁵

The understanding of the idea of a conscious democratic autonomy as a trace, as a possible inspiration, gives us a conceptual and therefore also concrete possibility to activate the idea in the present social-historical situation – not to replant it and passively wait for it to grow, but to administer and develop the concrete and conceptual possibilities it presents to us.

3

After this metaphorical detour, I would like to return to my main question: Can we, who have been created and shaped as individuals and citizens in and through a dominant capitalistic magma of social meaning, cherish any hope of realising the democracy and the autonomy that we still vaguely discern as traces in our socio-historical existence? And if yes, how?

I think, as already hinted to, that the possibility exists, but minimally so. When Castoriadis in 1997 was asked how the then present society could be transformed in direction of an autonomous collective, he replied that “such a society is possible only if it is animated by individuals who also are autonomous.”¹⁶ Accordingly, there seems to be little hope for us who have become what we are in an epoch of generalized conformism. But, still, Castoriadis believes in the possibility of opening breeches in this massive conformity:

¹⁵ *Le Monde morcelé, op cit*, p 273.

¹⁶ *Une société à la dérive*, p 273

Only in so far as the radical imagination of the psyche can penetrate the different successive strata in the social armour that is the individual, which covers and penetrates it to unmeasurable depths, is it possible to talk about repercussions from the single human being on society. /.../ Such repercussions are extremely rare and, in any case, hardly perceptible in nearly all societies where the *instituted heteronomy* rules and where, beside a range of pre-defined social roles, the only discernible ways of manifestation for a single psyche are transgression and pathology.¹⁷

Do we have to conclude that there is hardly any possibility for social action, apart from desperately throwing yourself into a (revolutionary?) transgression, or to sombre in more or less apathic escapist broodings? Perhaps not, after all. Even if we all are children of our time, of our epoch, Castoriadis offers some consolation when he writes that “even today, there are individuals who are capable of distancing themselves from their own heritage – and that, that is autonomy.”¹⁸

Distancing yourself. It may be easy in theory, but what does it mean in practice, in this here and this now? Two questions obtrude: How can you act in order to create a passion for the common? And – more sinister, perhaps – how can we be sure that an autonomous society being created by an autonomous collective is truly preferable?

And here Castoriadis is no longer able to help us – his answers the first question quite frankly with “I don’t know” and “I am not a prophet”.¹⁹ Moreover, to be able to answer the second question we have to distance ourselves from Castoriadis’s work, and act, if possible, as autonomous thinkers. Even if there is an undercurrent in all of Castoriadis’s work letting us understand that a consciously autonomous society is always preferable to a heteronomous one, I cannot say that I am sure exactly *why* this has to be so.

To avoid a possible and simple misunderstanding here, I should perhaps clarify that what I do not understand relates to the identity and character of the *foundation* on which Castoriadis bases his positive evaluation of societies, groups and individuals that consciously steer themselves, and thus are autonomous in the strong and full sense of the word. I cannot find any clear indication that such societies, groups, and individuals are more efficient, happier,

¹⁷ *Le Monde morcelé*, op cit, p 140.

¹⁸ *Une société à la dérive*, op cit, p 273.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 20 and p 273.

more satisfied, more peaceful, more just or more inclined to solidarity, than their heteronomous counterparts. It seems as if its *only* when you measure ‘other’ societies – or ‘other’ groups within our Western European societies – against the values of the Western democratic tradition (that is, against cherished social imaginary significations), that autonomy always appears as desirable, on both an individual as well as collective level. But our Western colonial history should have vaccinated us against this kind of false evidence. If we want to defend autonomy and the notion of a possible autonomous democracy the first step is *not* to treat them as if they were inherently good and given values: they need to be re-invented, reworked and constantly upheld in specific socio-historic situations, rather than revered or naively used as universal measuring rods.

In Castoriadis, we find two and intimately connected sides of this problematic:

First, ontology. Very briefly – Castoriadis states that being is stratified and magmatic and that it would be absurd to pose a *ready-made* universe, or one that would be completely explainable in causal terms. Thus, he concludes that there is no global or universal determinism. On the contrary, being is creation. And creation is the precondition of autonomy, in all senses of the word.²⁰

Secondly, the human world, i. e. the social-historical. This world is also, according to Castoriadis, stratified and magmatic, a world the sense and meaning of which are created by humans for humans, no matter if they are consciously aware of it or not. In this sense, humans are autonomous whether they know it or not. But the most valued and most important sense of autonomy for Castoriadis is, of course, the (self) conscious autonomy that makes us humans aware of our responsibility for our world, since it is our very own creation.

Even though Castoriadis most often remains descriptively neutral when he talks about the different aspects of reality – ontology and the ‘first natural stratum’ on one side; the social-historical on the other – there is a tendency in his thought, perhaps not moral or moralising but clearly normative. One example should suffice: After having discussed the human subjectivity and the typical human ability to discuss and negotiate he writes: “Without such a subjectivity /.../ not only does every attempt at truth and knowledge collapse, but all ethic disappears, since all responsibility evaporates.”²¹ And a few lines further down he talks about the individual as the more or less stable unit, fabricated by society, beyond which “there is a

²⁰ I am aware that this all too short presentation may be bewildering, but here is not the place to expand on the intricacies of Castoriadis’s ontology. Please go to Suzi Adams, *Castoriadis’ Ontology – Being and Creation*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2011, and *Cornelius Castoriadis – Key Concepts*, ed Suzi Adams, Bloomsbury, 2014, for clarification.

²¹ *Le Monde Morcelé*, *op cit*, p 277

unity that we aim for, or *should* aim for: the reflective unity of self-representation and of the deliberate activities we undertake.”²²

For me, this is enough for placing Castoriadis in the current of philosophical anthropology where you also find thinkers like Ernst Cassirer, who also was a convinced democrat and posed that humans have the ability to create their own world. It thus seems as if Castoriadis’s ultimate reason for preferring an autonomous society and an autonomous but perhaps agonizingly responsible life, is to be found in a very classical and (again) very Aristotelian thought: every human should first and foremost strive to realise his or her full potential. And everything that prevents such a realisation – as for example the dominance of the capitalistic individualistic social imaginary today – is bad and should be overcome. Here we finally find the most fundamental reason, for Castoriadis, to always prefer and choose an autonomous society.

4

Perhaps I should clarify that I do agree with Castoriadis on this point. Still I wonder if such a position is enough for us, today – for us who cannot reasonably hope to become entirely autonomous subjects given that we have been shaped by capitalistic imaginaries and social conditions adrift (*à la dérive*). Is gardening, despite everything, our only option? To try to make the seeds from times past grow?

I would prefer to return to the idea of autonomy and the possibility of social-historical creation and try to activate them in our times, in the social historical conditions of Europe today. More precisely, I would like to ask the following question: What can a passion for the common be today? It seems to me as if neither the passions, nor the common are, or can be, the same as they were 20 years ago – or at least that we today cannot approach this question in the same way as was possible in the late 1990:s.

In order not to lose myself in a simultaneously arbitrary and superficial argumentation, I want to build this final part of the text on two dates, on two social imaginary significations, that remain of central and acute importance in the social imaginary of Europe today:²³ September

²² *Le Monde Morcelé*, *op cit*, p 277-78

²³ In what follows, I obviously make no claim to present a thorough argumentation based on well-established and documented facts, or to make a critical survey of commonly accepted analyses – this will perhaps be the topic of a coming book length study. What I offer is an attempt to describe and interpret some of my impressions of a number of social changes, on a number of different levels – all the time with the ideas, analyses and thoughts presented in the web-publication *Can a Person be Illegal? Refugees, Migrants and Citizenship in Europe*, *op cit*. as a backdrop. Please follow this link to download: <http://www.litvet.uu.se/forskning/publikationer/urs-sru/urs-sru-6/>

11, 2001 (now famously known as “9/11”) and October 3, 2013 (the day of the so called Lampedusa disaster, when a ship overloaded with migrants sank just off the small island of Lampedusa, Italy, and 360 people perished). Thus, global terrorism, and migration to Europe – two facts that have become social imaginary significations that have become *commonplaces* (i.e. *loci* for thought and contestation), causing all kinds of reactions in Europe.²⁴ The European magmas of meaning have been re-formed and re-stratified around these two significations. They do not organize the same passions or the same oppositions as before.²⁵

In brutal summary: The imaginations relating to what is public and private have been profoundly transformed, to a large extent due to recent developments in communications technologies and social media; the idea of Europe as a place of asylum for those in need and as a defender of human rights has been pushed to the background and left room for the idea that it is completely legitimate to strengthen Fort Europe,²⁶ ²⁷ primarily in order to protect economic and demographic interests;²⁸ globalized capitalism has been pushed aside by reborn nationalisms, whose conservative and rooted kernels paradoxically have been replaced by an odd mixture of globalizing essentialism, characteristic of the so called ‘alt right’-movements;²⁹ the working classes (insofar as they still exist as such) have abandoned the left and vote massively for so called populist alternatives, often with right-wing agendas; the middle classes vote for green neoliberal alternatives; the cultural elites (not very large in numbers..) obstinately vote left; all have taken on the role of the consumer, often disguised as creator or entrepreneur, rather than trying to see themselves as primarily citizens, or even as producers; the growing number of super-rich move freely through economic and social realities without paying tax or taking on political responsibilities. And so on.

²⁴ And of course in the rest of the world as well – but in this text I focus on Europe.

²⁵ I want to emphasise that I talk about changes in the social magmas of meaning here – the material and political ‘reality’, with its distinctions between those who have, and those who have not; the entrenched borders; the inertia of bureaucracy; the geographic situations etcetera is slower and do not respond to changes as quickly or in the same way. Moreover, there has never been more than a very partial correspondence between these material ‘realities’ and the European’s imaginations about themselves – Europe has always had an aspect of fortress, beside and at the same time as its more democratic aspects; Europe has defended and at the same time violated human rights, and so on. For the complex question of borders see, P Caumières, « Closure of meaning – border of the political » in *Can a Person be Illegal?*, op cit.

²⁶ For the lacking logic of Europe as about the misuse of the word crisis, see S Gourgouris « Crises and the ill logic of Fortress Europe » in *Can a Person be Illegal* (op cit), p 70 ff (print edition); p 35 ff (online-edition).

²⁷ For the complex issues that are actualized in and by the debates and practices relating to human rights, see A J Lappin, « Borders of the Self, Borders of the State » in *Can a Person be Illegal?*, op cit, p 161 pp (paper-edition) ; p 80 pp (online-edition).

²⁸ See E Profumi, « Philosophy facing the European crisis of migrants » in *Can a Person be Illegal?*, op cit, p 231 pp (paper-edition) ; p 115 pp (online-edition).

²⁹ See O Heilo och I Nilsson, « Back to Byzantium – Rethinking the Borders of Europe », i *Can a Person be Illegal?*, op cit, p 91 ff (paper-edition) ; p 45 ff (online-edition).

All these changes are connected and form a system that, at least for the moment, revolves around the two significations terrorism and migration. But it is a strange system, in that it seems to defy classical predictions, traditionally based on statistics and on the acceptance of the ‘rational’ political game – i.e. to vote, to partake in debates, to respect the limits and demands of deliberative reason – by the populations. The technologies of communication have transformed the public sphere so profoundly that it can hardly be said to be public anymore; the television is no longer (as in the eponymous book by Pierre Bourdieu from 1996) the prime medium for mass communication; and the masses themselves have, for good or bad, all but disappeared to become a *population* divided in multiple ‘bubbles’; the individuals have finally truly emerged as *dividuals*, as foreseen by Gilles Deleuze already in 1990 (in the first number of the journal *L’autre journal*).

Thus, it seems as if Castoriadis was right when he claimed that in a social-historical situation of this kind, the only discernible ways for an individual psyche to manifest its discontent is through transgression or pathology. But we can go even further today, reinforce this conclusion and establish that in 2018 it is valid not only for individual psyches, but also for collectives and groups, as well as for those who have been trusted with the governing and most powerful functions of our political systems.³⁰ It is perhaps enough, among innumerable possible examples from recent years, on a multitude of different social levels, to point at ISIS, Trump and our collective inability to change the way we live, despite what we know about the looming and menacing climate change. These are some aspects of the socio-historical marshland where we currently dwell.

If we do not want to resign when faced with transgressions and pathologies, then it is here, in these current conditions, that we need to start looking for alternatives, and preferably alternatives that could activate sustainable autonomous democratic practices and ideas. I write activate and not cultivate, since there is no natural growth in the idea of political responsible autonomy. It has to be (re)created, and once created, defended with all the conscious, practical and theoretical means we can muster in our current social historical situation.

³⁰ For a nuanced analysis of the so called Daoud-affaire and how it was formed by a collective moralism that will not allow anyone, especially not an author/journalist that is supposed to be on the ‘right’ side in the conflict, to complicate and situate the events that took place in Cologne on New Year’s eve 2016 beyond a simple dichotomous logic, see J Lassègue , « The Daoud affair: Politics, Literature, and migration of ideas in a time of crisis » in *Can a Person be Illegal?* (op cit).

We can draw a few, provisional and incomplete, conclusions from what has been said:

- The possibility to create a community of truly democratic autonomous and self-governing collectives in the world today, acting together and using the possibilities of communication offered by ubiquitous connectivity, has been hampered by movements that have gone adrift: what used to be a *strategic* essentialism, understood as a step towards a more open, more just and equal world, has been thwarted to simple and sometimes rough essentialism; often without the activists (who see themselves as – and often are – anti-racist, defenders of minorities, pro-democracy) noticing the change or, in some case, not even caring.³¹ They still think of themselves as critical, as combatants against a racist and capitalist system, but it seems to me as if many have been tricked into a sectarian logic and thinking: a way of thought that fits perfectly well with a capitalism that incessantly tries to generate more segregation, in order to produce new consumer groups.
- For the same reason, it is hardly likely that the population (or all different populations) can be rallied around one and the same idea of political democracy. The most impoverished and vulnerable on all continents, as in the countries of Europe, may have a number of objective interests in common, but we are living in an era when the identity-bubbles do not facilitate the practice of international solidarity. Nor does it support the notion of political universalism or, least of all, concerted political action – with obvious (and frightening) exceptions for the military, the global companies and explicitly authoritarian movements. Of course, there are examples of other types of movements, democratic and critical movements (different kinds of globalisation-movements – *altermondialistes*; *Occupy*; ‘Los Indignados’ in Spain, the different left-wing movements in Greece, and so on) from later years that seem to prove me wrong on this point. But their lasting results are few, almost imperceptible. I fear that these movements may as well be signs of polarisation and frustration within our societies, rather than expressions of a collective political mobilisation through democratic autonomous practices.
- To avoid the counterproductive effects of identity politics, as of politics of identity,³² on the attempts to install a democratic autonomous society, we probably have to replace the individual as ground for and as essential unit in the political community. Not because the

³¹ For an historical, American and not entirely uncontroversial perspective on all this see Amy Chua, ‘How America’s identity politics went from inclusion to division’, in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/01/how-americas-identity-politics-went-from-inclusion-to-division?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (visited December 20 2018, 15.06).

³² On the distinction between ‘identity politics’ and ‘politics of identity’ and related problems, see Louise Schou Therkildsen, *Rhetorical Formations of European Identity - Close Readings of Constitutive Rhetoric within the EU 1973-2014*, especially chapter 2, forthcoming thesis (licentiate), Uppsala University, Sweden, 2019.

individual has played out its role, but because we need to conceptualise ourselves differently today. Since decades we live in an epoch of *dividuals*,³³ and we need to start to work out the conceptual and practical consequences of this situation. Perhaps, in the wake of Castoriadis, we must do so by putting our trust in, and starting strengthening, our collective institutions (schools, universities, the juridical instances primarily – but also the so-called ‘traditional’ media) as the true political agents. One could, perhaps, offer the citizens the possibility to identify with certain social imaginary significations, connected to the common, without risking that such an identification with, or perhaps even passion for, the common would result in the promotion of narrow, exclusive identities, sectarian movements or closed institutions – things that, taken together, would create an even more closed society, impregnated with fear and xenophobia. And precisely on this point, we can turn directly to Castoriadis again. Already in 1982 he showed us a possible way to think identification without essentialism, in a text called ‘The crisis of the Western Societies’:

There can be no society that is not something for itself, that does not represent itself as being something /.../.

‘For itself’, society is never a collection of perishable and substitutable individuals living on some territory or other, speaking this or that language, practicing ‘outwardly’ some customs or other. On the contrary, these individuals ‘belong’ to this society because they participate in its social imaginary significations, its ‘norms’, ‘values’, ‘myths’, ‘representations’ ‘projects’, ‘traditions’, etc., and because they share (whether they know it or not) the will to be of this society and to make it be on a continuing basis.³⁴

Here, if not before, it becomes clear that it is the society, the always already instituted institutions that primarily affect and shape the individual. It is true, as I said in the beginning, that there is a close and deep conformity between individual and society – but it is also clear

³³ For the classic presentation – already mentioned in the text above – of the notion of *dividuals*, see Gilles Deleuze, ‘Post-scriptum to the societies of control’, *L’autre Journal*, #1, 1990.

³⁴ *La montée de l’insignifiance*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, p 20-21. English translation by Davis Ames Curtis in *The Castoriadis Reader*, Blackwell, 1997, p 261. The quote continues with a discussion of how important the individuals are as incarnations of the self-presentation of society, as with a discussion about how important the significations are for the individual herself: “The effort of the individual to be X or to remain X is, ipso facto, an effort to make be and to give life to the institution of its society. It is through individuals that society realizes itself and reflects itself through complementary parts that can be realized and be reflected (can reflect) only by realizing society and reflecting it (by reflecting).” (loc cit.)

that it is primarily the general institution of society that forms and produces the individuals, who thereafter partake in the social imaginary significations of the society, partake in “its 'norms', 'values', 'myths', 'representations ' projects', 'traditions', etc.”.

Social imaginary significations are not essences, and to partake, to want to partake, yes even identify with a society's social imaginary, is something quite different from postulating that oneself and the group or the culture in to which one happens to be born, are bearers of specific, unique and – inherently distinct – immensely valuable essences. So even if we all unavoidably are children of our age and belong to a specific epoch and society, Castoriadis points out that we all have the possibility to consciously realise this difference and act accordingly. In this possibility resides, as we have seen, the prospect of true, conscious autonomy.

But what does this mean for the question we departed from – that is, what does this possibility concretely mean for us who have been formed and shaped in societies subjected to the capitalistic imaginary?

It is undeniable that it is hard to be precise here. But we have at least identified some points of orientation: We need to remember that no institution, no social formation is complete or completely coercive – there is, will always be, cracks, breaches and craqueleures that undermine all social determinism. The possibility to reactivate, or create, significations that run counter to the dominant ways and doxas, is always there.

But as to the question of *how* we should go about to realise this possibility – a question that I would have loved to be able to answer, or at least give an idea of what such an answer should contain – I have to leave it open. Not because there is no answer but, more encouragingly, because the possibility of an answer rests on the undetermined openness of autonomous institutions, it is dependent on thinking and acting that refuse to close in upon themselves, and dependent on the traces in our magmas of meaning that continue to inspire us.

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