Chapter 8

Contexts of Capitalism: From the ‘Unlimited Extension of “Rational Mastery”’ to Civilizational Varieties of Accumulation and Economic Imagination

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Introduction

When Castoriadis disavowed historical materialism, he began a long process of re-theorising capitalism as the imaginary signification of the endless expansion of ‘rational mastery.’ His critique goes to the heart of the conceptual apparatus of political economy. In his most methodical publication, The Imaginary Institution of Society (1987), he ended his engagement with Marxism and what he came to believe was its metaphysics of value. Capitalism’s historical novelty lay not in the exponential accumulation of surplus value but in the phantasms of pseudo-rational mastery; that is in the capitalist imaginary of endless expansion and conquest of humanity and of the natural sub-stratum.

In this chapter, Castoriadis’ notion of the capitalist imaginary is assessed against Johann P Arnason’s analysis of capitalism. Arnason’s reconstruction of Weber’s metaphor of the ‘spirit’ of capitalism and his less-developed metaphor of ‘mirage’ are the points on which he generates a more nuanced image of capitalism. I conclude from Arnason’s work that Castoriadis’ theorisation

of capitalism requires consideration of regional contexts and reformative programs enacted by states. Those contexts and programs refashion the imaginary signification of endless expansion of rationality. In this chapter the exploration of potential connections between Castoriadis’ work and Arnason’s reconstruction of the unfinished paradigm of civilisational theory centres on Japan as the case informing our argument. Arnason’s work on Japan draws attention to some important limits to the image of infinite capitalist expansion posited by Castoriadis, as well as confirming forces of expansion at work in the Japanese constellation.  

At first sight, Japan appears a good fit for Castoriadis’ theory of imaginary signification of rational mastery. With deeper scrutiny Japan’s historical experience looks more complex. In short, further insights from Japan specialists serve to underscore exceptional (if not entirely unique) state-guided programs of promotion of capitalist development. Successive organisational, ideological and institutional reforms of macroeconomic policy and planning, urban planning and environmental regulation domesticated the imaginary significations of capitalism in ways that promoted capitalist disciplines in some respects, while constraining the objective of inexhaustible growth in other ways. Japan’s social movements are especially important in defining and, in turn, acting to modify capitalism through their agency.

This chapter starts with a summary of Castoriadis’ perspective, moves to Arnason, and then highlights the regime of growth in Japan and contemporary traditions that limit expansion.

Castoriadis and the Imaginary Significations of Capitalism

For Castoriadis, the social imaginary generates core social imaginary significations of the unlimited extension of rational mastery which seem after the fact to be ‘the spirit of the system’.  

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