Between Creative Democracy and Democratic Creativity

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One of the most significant dimensions of the work of Cornelius Castoriadis is its attempt to interlink the notions of democracy and social creativity. Democracy, in his opinion, is the social-historical creation of the individual and collective project of autonomy. It exemplifies the radical creative power of the social imaginary to give rise to forms that transcend the conditions of their emergence, since democracy is an unprecedented and novel signification. Its instituting of autonomy and equality are related to the preceding historical conditions but they cannot be reduced to them. Indeed, democracy is an exceptional social-historical institution, because of its explicit and reflexive recognition of the social character of the instituting of society.

In his theoretical and political writings, Castoriadis elucidated various dimensions of democracy and challenged numerous misconceptions, but the project of autonomy’s rupture with social imaginaries that attributed the institution of society to some extra-social source, such as the will of God or the laws of nature, constitutes the basic underpinning of democracy. It opened the way for the potentially unrestricted interrogation of the social order and practices that harness social creativity. “Democracy is a regime that explicitly, continually, institutes itself”¹ and “in such a way that the question of freedom, of justice, of equity, and of equality might always be posed anew within the framework of the ‘normal’ functioning of society”²

Castoriadis’s conception of democracy’s radical transformation of social instituting should overcome the demarcation between the two most important strands of thought that have sought to interlink democracy and social creativity: the radical democratic variant of North American pragmatist philosophy and the French theories of democratic creativity, which includes theorists like Claude Lefort, Marcel Gauchet, and Castoriadis. These two stands of thought

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involve contrasting visions of how the social and the political are intertwined and these visions inform their respective conceptions of democratisation. Despite his critical disagreements with other theorists of democratic creativity and his theoretical proposition that social imaginaries institute a horizon of meaning that shapes and legitimates social action, my analysis details how Castoriadis tends to conceive of democratic transformations as ensuing more from the politicising of the social. Rather than as a process of socialising the political, as is the case for John Dewey and George Herbert Mead’s pragmatist interpretations of democracy and democratisation. Of course, the reciprocal implication of the notions of the social and political means that this contrast is in large part one of attribution and emphasis, yet the contrast does signify a genuine dilemma and it probably reflects the residues of underlying differences in political cultures.\(^3\)

In my opinion, the current ideological uncertainty of modern social and political movements for emancipation and justice, especially those of socialism and social democracy, makes these various endeavours to interlink democracy and social creativity especially important. Pragmatism and theories of democratic creativity can contribute to moving beyond this malaise, because they aim to disclose subjects’ capacities to determine the conditions of social life and the self-limitation of human freedom. These two strands of thought share a commitment to the radical renewal of democracy and the critique of hierarchy and its legitimations. The notion of creativity is central to their respective normative conceptions of autonomy and their distinctive, though contrasting, claims that democracy derives from epistemological orientations and ontological interpretations of the world and experience. This means that they are particularly concerned with the broad ‘infrastructural power’ of cultural meanings and not just, in Dewey’s\(^4\) terms, the institution of ‘political democracy’ or what Castoriadis\(^5\) defines as ‘explicit power’: those institutions with the authoritative power to establish social order and to protect against threats to the individual and collective.

There are more specific intersections between the work of Castoriadis and the radical democratic pragmatist perspectives on democracy. Notably, Castoriadis consistently recalls the importance of education and the Ancient

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