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Questioning the pertinence of the classical *theory-praxis* dichotomy in the light of the Habermas – Castoriadis debate about the concept of “imaginary”

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Abstract :

Refusing both the “contemplative attitude” and the classical distinction between *praxis* and *theory* from his early writings, Castoriadis developed a political philosophy, grounded in a political ontology, which abolishes the pertinence of this distinction. In the beginning of the fifties, Castoriadis was confronted to some problems raised by this classical distinction in three different but interrelated fields. By exploring both the answer Castoriadis gave to those three problems in “the imaginary institution of society”, and Habermas’ critic of this theory of the social-historical imaginary, this paper examines how the *theory-praxis* distinction loses its relevance in Castoriadis’ thought of the society as a permanent process of auto-institution, and how this leads to a renewed conception of *praxis* as a form of acting for the promotion of the other’s autonomy (whether individual or collective). As this renewed concept of *praxis* was strongly attacked by Habermas who criticized the “wait-and-see” attitude it implied in his eyes, we expose this habermasian critic and show that, however this critic isn’t relevant, it accurately points out some problematic dimensions of Castoriadis’ thought, of which we try to deepen our understanding and their implications for the classical *theory-praxis* distinction.

Keywords :

Praxis; political ontology; Castoriadis; Habermas; Autonomy; Imaginary creation.

1 The concept of praxis in Castoriadian thought

a) Objectives and first approach of Castoriadis’ concept of autonomy:

- In this first section, our main objective is to explain the emergence and development of Castoriadis’ renewed conception of *praxis* as “*that doing in which the other or others are intended as autonomous beings considered as the essential agents of the development of their own autonomy*”, as he defined it in 1975 in his main work “the Imaginary Institution of Society” (Castoriadis 1998a, 75).
- This new conception of *praxis* operates a clear break up with the classical *theory-praxis* dichotomy who, since Plato, gave priority to the *theory* over *praxis*. As Castoriadis explicitly recognizes, his thinking on the concept of *praxis* was motivated by the will to go over this classical dichotomy since the *aporias* it raised were in his eyes unresolvable.

b) A new conception of praxis :

- Our hypothesis is that Castoriadis' thinking of the praxis - as that category of doing who intend to develop the autonomy of the other - is the result of his confrontation with the contradictions that this classical *theory-praxis* dichotomy raised in three different fields. In some recently published preparatory works for the doctoral thesis he never wrote (Castoriadis 2009a), we find the first traces of this critical approach to the "contemplative attitude" he will later develop.

- The roots of the problem is the "contemplative attitude" which is as old as Plato's theory of Ideas, and from which the classical *theory-praxis* distinction is derived. For Castoriadis, this "contemplative attitude" postulates that the Being is given to an independent subject who can barely "receive" it, formalize it and try to elaborate some general laws by correctly interpreting some physical regularities. The main features of this attitude are strong ontological postulates: the Being is determined, a rational and total knowledge on it is possible, the subject and the Being are radically separated and the observation of the subject doesn't affect the Being.

c) The contradictions of the classical *theory-praxis* distinction:

But this "contemplative attitude", and the superiority of *theory* over *praxis* derived of it, leads to several important contradictions:

i) In philosophy of history: First, this problem rises in the Marxist philosophy of history. In his main work *The Capital*, the old Marx finally developed a determinist theory of history. The laws of history he reveals lead him to a contradiction due to his adhesion to the "contemplative attitude" and to the superiority it confers to the theoretical attitude over the *praxis*. Indeed, Marx thought that he had scientifically demonstrated that the laws of history are determined and that they will bring the collapse of the capitalist system due to the rising exploitation of proletariat. As a paradoxical consequence, no further revolutionary action of the proletariat would be needed since the laws discovered by historical materialism predict scientifically the future collapse of the capitalist system and the spontaneous raise of the proletariat. This supremacy of *theory* over *praxis* leads consequently to abandon the revolutionary praxis, which was the original main objective of Marx's writings. If the Being is determined as the classical Marxist theory postulates, no action outside of the determined framework of the theory is possible, and still this unique action possible is more of a *technè* than a *praxis*, i.e. that revolution is a technical knowledge to be applied (More details are to be found in (Castoriadis 1998 part I and II; Caumières 2008)).

ii) in justifying militancy : Castoriadis was an active member of the French revolutionary group *Socialism or Barbarism* with Claude Lefort between 1949 and 1967. During the existence of the group, a revolutionary group constituted mainly of intellectuals, two major crises in 1951 and 1958 raised the question of the link between *praxis* and *theory*. Those crises were the expression of a deep dissension existing between two opposite factions in the group, gathered around Castoriadis on one side and Lefort on the other. Simply put, the first wanted to transform the group into an organized party purposed to prepare the insurrection of the proletariat and create an organization able to direct and coordinate the action of the proletariat for the oncoming revolution. The second opposed this transformation by claiming that this would lead the group to adopt an authoritarian and bureaucratic posture, exactly like the Stalinist communist party recurrently condemned by the members of *Socialism or Barbarism*.

- The argumentation developed by Lefort once again showed the contradictions inherent to the classical *theory-praxis* distinction. Lefort notes that the group *Socialism or Barbarism* pretends to direct and organize the proletariat, but it is in no way representative of, or formed by, members of that proletariat. In addition, according to Lefort, since it is impossible to define what exactly the proletariat is, it is impossible to represent it. As a consequence, no directive action for the proletariat is legitimate except the spontaneous raise of the proletariat itself. The theorist cannot pretend to know what is good for a class he doesn't belong to, and cannot represent it. Therefore, as Castoriadis accurately notes, this position leads the group to inaction: there is no need for *theory* since the action it can generate is illegitimate, and reversely there is no action possible for a group of militants since the only action acceptable is the spontaneous raise of the proletarian classes (More details on the topic are to be found in (Caumières 2008; Caumières and Tomès 2011)).

iii) in Epistemology : Third, and most importantly, Castoriadis is confronted with the limits of the classical *theory-praxis* distinction in the field of epistemology. After arriving in France in 1946, he plans to start a doctoral research in philosophy: an epistemological approach of the concept of totality in the philosophy of knowledge. In the manuscripts testifying of his thought at that time, we find a strong conscience of the limits of the contemplative attitude he already condemned. For Castoriadis, the Kantian

revolution in the field of epistemology leads to a symmetric dead-end for theories of knowledge : either they accentuate the transcendental dimension of knowledge but cannot explain how this knowledge is always mediated by experience (accent is put on *theory*), or they underline that every knowledge is rooted in perceptions and mediated by the senses – which implies that there are as many different perceptions of the same object as possible observers - , and consequently, the focus set on the necessary mediation of *praxis* brings such theories in the troubles of skepticism and relativism.

d) The introduction of a new category to resolve this three-sided problem : “creation” :

- The solution Castoriadis found to this three-sided problem was to introduce the concept of “creation” as a medium term between the *Being* and the perceiving subject.

- This idea was probably first developed in the context of its epistemological thinking and might have been expanded later to the two other fields concerned.

- Instead of thinking, just like the contemplative attitude does, that the subject can access an objective and determined Being independently of his activity of observation, Castoriadis thinks that the ontological separation between the individual and the *Being* is arbitrary (and inherited from Plato). For him, the mediation between the subject and *what is exterior to the subject* is made *through* and *in* a third term which mediates this relation: the imaginary creation of the perceived world in socially instituted significations and structures of perception.

- The subject’s individual imagination can grasp *the being* and perceive it only through the “imaginarization”, by mean of its previously instituted significations, of what presents itself to the perceiving subject. The process of imaginary institution is therefore central. There is on one hand the sedimented social imaginary significations (inherited during the socialization and the perceptive history of every subject), and on the other, an objective *exteriority* blank of meaning - which is not already some *Being*, but is more precisely “*to-be*”. The link between the “*to-be*” and the subjectivity lies in the imaginary institution of what is *to-be* in a particular *being* - that is: in an individual way determined by the previously instituted imaginary significations. To summarize, the process of institution is a process of creation, and consists in the imaginary institution of what is *to-be* by what was previously instituted. It is the mediation between the sphere of objectivity and the subjectivity. No perception of this objectivity by the subject is possible without the mediation of the imaginary creation of this objectivity in a particular way. The instituting imaginary institutes what is *to-be*, and this institution immediately alters what the instituted was with what was immediately instituted.

- This doesn’t mean that there is nothing objective in the *being*, in what is *to-be*. On the opposite, there is an objective exteriority beyond the perceiving subject, but this exteriority is not determined by particular significations. It cannot be instituted in one “universal” way: it may always have different meanings depending on the instituted imaginary of each individual and each society. However, it cannot be instituted in all possible ways: what is instituted constrains the instituting imaginary. Different subjects can create a same object in different ways, but this creation isn’t totally arbitrary. It has to compose with what the objectivity of the thing in itself imposes to its imaginary creation, to the meaning it can receive from the individual or from the society.

e) Consequences for the classical *theory-praxis* distinction :

- Thus, the imaginary institution (or imaginary creation of the *being*) is a common feature of both *theory* and *praxis* in the old meaning of those words. When theorizing, the thinker re-creates some already instituted imaginary significations. This process of re-creation is instituted and alters its own imaginary significations. Since the imaginary re-conceptualization implied in the very act of theorizing is an act of intentional creation, it can be assimilated to a form of active creation: every attempt to conceive an object is a way to act on its constitution, and is in a certain way a form of *praxis* in the old meaning of the term. On the opposite, every *praxis* is the result of a previous theorizing. A *praxis* takes meaning only in an instituted context, and the action’s perception itself is also instituted. So that, in the classical meaning of the terms, the activity of *theory* is always a form of *praxis*, and reversely, every *praxis* results and expresses a form of *theory*, and both are some different expressions (or moments) of the individual imaginary creation.

f) Thus a new conception of praxis is required :

- This new conception is developed early but systematized in the “Imaginary institution of society” as “*that doing in which the other or others are intended as autonomous beings considered as the essential agents of the development of their own autonomy*” (Castoriadis 1998a, 75).

- Distinctions: *praxis* and “reflex activity” (un-intentional). *Praxis* and “technical” activity :the latter lies on a totalizing knowledge. Determination of what is to do is the result of the application of a total knowledge to a specific problem. Examples and revolution as a “technique” in Marxist orthodox theory.

- Mains features of this new conception of *praxis* :

- intends to promote the autonomy of the other whether individual or collective. Develop : why autonomy ?contrast with heteronomy. Acting is a matter of creation, but individuals can accept or refuse that auto-creation of meaning, norms, and values. They can recognize themselves as the auto-creators and interact autonomously with their instituted imaginary, or input the legitimacy and the origin of those norms and values to an alterity, an *heteros* who ultimately legitimates them (*heteronomy*)
- Autonomy is an end and a mean to attain this end. We must postulate the individual is able of autonomy to develop it.
- Lies on a particular philosophy of history: the action of individuals is never determined but is on the opposite the result of an imaginary creation. No structures in history, but the creation of structures.
- Hence, anti-teleological conception of history. History is the creation of individuals.
- Hence, no total knowledge on human action is possible. Since every single action is the result of its undetermined imaginary creation, there are no “laws of history”, and consequently no “total knowledge of history”. Similarly, the very idea of a “political science” is deprived of meaning : the political is a matter of auto-creation by the individuals.

g) How does this new conception of *praxis* solve the contradictions mentioned?

- in the philosophy of history : The great error of Marxism was to conceive the History as a teleological process ordained by defined laws. If we draw a line on this aspect of Marxism, we can conserve its original impulsion and promote the autonomous action of the laboring classes. If the laws of history won't generate by themselves a revolution or a popular insurrection, a *praxis* is therefore necessary in order to give to the working classes the tools of their emancipation.

- in justifying militancy : similarly, there is no contradiction in implementing a *praxis* that intends to develop the autonomy of the laboring classes. Encouraging the individual to think by themselves is not an authoritarian attitude, and allows for a real *praxis*. But it implies that there is no “real theory” to teach to the “ignorant” working classes, there is only a necessity to encourage them to be autonomous.

- in epistemology :it is not the place here to explore the complexity of this point, but we can note that the concept of “creation” as an unescapable medium of perception allows Castoriadis to develop a particular ontology of creation, and a correlated epistemology which solves the dead-ends of both transcendentalism and empiricism.

2. Habermas' critic of Castoriadis :

a) Source and context :

in « the philosophical discourse of modernity », a digression is devoted to the discussion of “the Imaginary institution of society”. Context complicated : Habermas needs to show that Castoriadis' concepts of “imaginary” and “reason” cannot hold, otherwise his own “pragmatics of communication” appear superfluous.

b) Core of the critic:

As Habermas read it, in Castoriadis' theory, the individual is a "product" of the society. All his instituted imaginary social significations come from the social-historical imaginary in which the individual evolves. But, on one side, if the individuals are "formed" by this radical imaginary, the move seems to be unilateral. In Habermas lecture of Castoriadis, the individuals cannot "attain" this radical imaginary: the individual is "produced" by this radical imaginary, but cannot alter some of its main significations and purposely change them individually. As a consequence, any attempt to elaborate a *praxis* is vacuous, since no individual action on the collective radical imaginary can be effective.

On the other side, since the individual institutes everything with the help of the imaginary social significations provided to him by the social-historical imaginary of the society he lives in, those individual social imaginary significations motivating the *praxis* are necessarily brought to the individual through the mediation of the social-historical imaginary. Thus, the castoriadian concept of *praxis* ultimately leads to a "wait-and-see" attitude as individuals cannot develop their autonomy by themselves until they're able to draw this imaginary social signification out of the social-historical imaginary created by the society they live in.

Castoriadis' concept of *praxis* is therefore empty : on one hand, the individuals cannot purposely act and alter the radical imaginary in order to promote autonomy of the society, and on the other they're condemned to wait for those significations to raise by themselves. Habermas concludes by claiming that Castoriadis' conception of the radical imaginary leads to the impossibility of an "intramundane *praxis*" (Habermas 1988; Bernstein 1989; Gély 2008; Kalyvas 2000).

c) Is this criticism accurate ?

On this point, I agree with Caumières and Tomès who explain that Habermas' lecture of Castoriadis, and his subsequent criticism, seem to be too simplistic (Caumières and Tomès 2011, 251–262). The main problem with Habermas' criticism is two-folded: a misunderstanding of what the "radical imaginary" exactly means in Castoriadis' thought, and a negation of the social dimensions of individuality. As Tomès and Caumières correctly note, Habermas focuses his criticism on the fact that the individual necessarily institutes a large part of the social imaginary significations of his society, but neglects the fact that the coexistence of multiple individual imaginary institutions in the field of inter-subjectivity alters permanently the social-historical imaginary.

Is this critic totally irrelevant ? No. Even if Habermas doesn't succeed in providing strong reasons to reject Castoriadis' theory of the social-historical imaginary, he rightly points at two problematic dimensions of this theory. To conclude, we will consequently deepen our understanding of the castoriadian concept of "radical imaginary" in order to show how it dismisses Habermas' criticism and how it definitely condemns the classical distinction between *theory* and *praxis*.

d) The concept of "radical imaginary"

Briefly put, this concept refers to the fact that, since the society is a permanent process of auto-institution, the social imaginary always alters itself. The social imaginary is a two-folded concept: it refers to a magma of significations, affects, and representations shared by the members of a society kind of "independently" of them (objective dimension), and it has an existence only through the individual institutions made by those subjects (subjective dimension). Those objective and subjective aspects are strongly inter-linked, as during the socialization, the subjects "incorporate" those social imaginary significations, and then give them their existence by their later use in the permanent individual process of institution. The individual is formed *by* and *in* the social-imaginary of the society he lives in, and, in return, he alters those significations by their permanent institution in the sphere of inter-subjectivity and his living in the society. In order to *exist*, the collectively shared significations need to be created by individuals and to be objectified (and re-created permanently) in the field of inter-subjectivity.

This implies that the instituted significations are always quite sedimented and also always mobilized for the purpose of instituting new significations. The instituted social imaginary significations are therefore also instituting, and the confrontation with novelty, with the "happening" (*événement*), with what in itself has no sense but need to be invested by meaning, alters permanently the instituted significations during the unstoppable process of institution. The instituting social-imaginary leans on the instituted significations to institute the being that presents itself to the individual subjects.

In this conception, the concept of “radical imaginary” refers to this incapacity of the social-imaginary to attain circular closure: by this process of permanent auto-institution, the instituting imaginary never recovers the instituted imaginary, and this continued alteration also provides a strong ontological ground for creation.

By developing the concept of “Radical imaginary”, we can explain that every single act is always instituted, and through this institution becomes instituting for the individual itself, but is also instituted by other individuals and becomes instituting for them as they participate to a common field of inter-subjectivity. So that finally, every *praxis* participates to both parts of the dynamic: on one hand it is inescapably the result of previous institutions and of instituted imaginary significations, but on the other, it always also alters the instituted significations and perpetuates this alteration since it shapes the institutions to come for the individuals affected by this *praxis* (in a non-determinist way).

This brings two additional remarks : first, contrary to the criticism of Habermas, there is therefore the possibility of a real “intramundanep*praxis*”. In a more radical way, except in the “Robinson Crusoé” paradigm, every intentional act (even the most isolated) is intrinsically “social”, since it always affects the individual instituting imaginary, and in a direct or derived degree, the social-historical shared imaginary.

Second, if every act necessarily alters our schemes of perceptions, and if reversely every act of theorizing radically alters our way of instituting our comprehension of the context of future actions, the classical *theory-praxis* distinction seems to be totally irrelevant in this ontology of creation.

Conclusion

To conclude, we therefore have strong reasons to accept Castoriadis’ concept of autonomy as this category of doing who intend the autonomy of the other’s. This new type of *praxis* also provides a strong basis to re-think militancy in a non-authoritarian way, by simply aiming to give all the individuals the means of thinking by themselves and collectively express this thinking in autonomous norms and laws.

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