

AUTONOMY, IMAGINATION, PRAXIS: FEMINIST THEORY AND DEMOCRATIC
POLITICS

by

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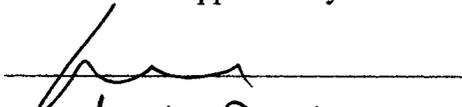
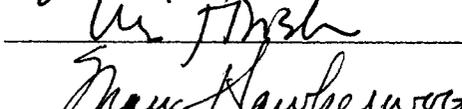
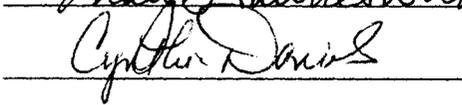
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Autonomy, Imagination, Praxis: Feminist Theory and Democratic Politics

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Drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis's reformulated ontological/political "grounding" of praxis based autonomy, I explore how this account can fruitfully account for critiques of determinacy -- whether by nature, culture, the will of God -- and yet has the political advantage of refusing to relinquish the importance of claiming the project of autonomy for women which occurs in concrete practices. The advantage of such an ontology of indeterminacy is that it makes evident the importance of the tension between the instituted and instituting of society as the very grounds of democratic politics, and allows us to take our theoretical cues from concrete practices. Bringing feminist theory into conversation with Castoriadis's democratic theory, I argue this formulation of autonomy keeps in play the indeterminacy of the subject of feminism i.e.,

women, for whom the claiming of autonomy is always a necessity, because it is only partially realized, and reveals its impossibility, because we can never secure the conditions for our autonomy or the subject of feminism once and for all. I develop the claim that Castoriadis's focus on the radical imagination is important for feminist democratic theory for three reasons : first, centering the radical imagination brings us back again to how we think about society and social transformation (if feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations then it is essential to keep thinking what we are doing as transformative even if in unintended ways); second, we're reminded that critique occurs when a gap or rupture in what is opened up in social life but that it is inadequate, because politically dubious, simply to celebrate that gap or the contingency of gender vis-à-vis bodies and history without positing a another formulation of what would be better even at the risk of closing down the meaning of gender once again; and finally, that autonomy as a praxis relies on our inability to have full knowledge of all we say or do – and that this is the condition for formulating democratic openings and making sense of how we know what we do.

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Introduction

It is commonplace, indeed commonsensical, to assert that autonomy is essential to feminism. What would the theory and practice of feminisms be, after all, without claiming that women ought to be and should be authors of our own lives. Or, in more critical terms, that the patriarchal logic of traditional philosophy and politics cannot have the determining say as to the substance of women's autonomy. Autonomy, derived from the Greek *auto nomos*, is literally translated as giving oneself one's own laws. Individual autonomy is generally taken to mean the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives taken to be one's own and not imposed or given by external forces.¹ As a collective matter autonomy is often thought of as national sovereignty or the right of a people to self-determination. In the context of democratic Enlightenment, autonomy is a fundamental moral and political value.

Like other essentially contested categories of political thought, autonomy has had a tumultuous history. Autonomy has often served as an emancipatory ideal to combat oppression and seek social justice. However, rooted in an Enlightenment language of liberal, self-possessed individualism, critics point out that this version of autonomy depends on an ideal of sovereignty made at the expense of subjugated others for whom the promise of release from immaturity into freedom seems impossible. The Kantian version of autonomy means acting in accordance with a law discovered in immutable Reason.² Turning to Kant, we can recall his famous formulation of the sort of

¹ See John Christman, "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* plato.stanford.edu/entries/autonomy-moral 2003.

² See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. and eds. Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

subjectivity needed by autonomous beings: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.”³ He continues that immaturity is the “inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another”; it is self-incurred if one lacks the will to act autonomously, under the guidance of one’s own understanding. Hence the motto of the enlightenment is, as Kant writes, *Sapere aude!* – have courage to use your own understanding. Of course, for Kant this courage could not be taken up by the “largest part of mankind” and, he continues, this includes the “entire fair sex.” Not only would such a step towards maturity be difficult, but also “highly dangerous.” Despite the radicalness of Kant’s call to a humanist autonomy, the fact that autonomy depends on the heteronomy of oneself to Reason and to non-autonomous others has thrown its philosophical foundations into question and raised doubts about its political purchase.⁴ Lorraine Code notes that the tension between the controlling and excluding aspect of autonomy and its emancipatory potential is “generated, in part, out of a rift between sedimented Kantian-derived conceptions of unified subjectivity and late twentieth century ‘decenterings’ of the human subject which destabilize many of the founding assumptions of Enlightenment-liberal autonomy.”⁵

Indeed, haven't feminists shown that women sit uneasily at best within liberal discourses of autonomous subjectivity; and, of course, that how easily one sits vis-à-vis autonomous subjectivity has a lot to do with race, ethnicity, social class and sexuality? Further, isn't it the case that some bodies trouble autonomy more than others? Yet, isn't it

³ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 54.

⁴ For instance, Michel Foucault remarks on the limited access to enlightenment in Kant’s view in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” trans. Catherine Porter, in the *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

⁵ Lorraine Code, “The Perversion of Autonomy & the Subjection of Women” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona MacKenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 182.

also the case that we can't do without some notion of autonomy? That autonomy has depended on the subjection of women is a central insight in feminist thought and the reason for much anxiety over autonomy as a political ideal. To put it bluntly and reductively, feminist criticism revolves around the following anxieties: that autonomy is codetermined with sovereignty, a masculine, heterosexual liberal subject or a subject fully transparent to itself in terms of its identity and hence no model for women's autonomy.⁶ Or, autonomy is seen as irrelevant as a political or theoretical construct in the wake of anti-essentialist and post-structural critiques of the very subject in the first instance.⁷ Or, finally, autonomy is seen as a white, Western construct which cannot be

⁶ For example, in her strongly argued *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). Carole Pateman suggest that the social contract tradition establishes modern patriarchy by covering over the 'prior' sexual contract of men's/fathers' right to women's bodies and labor and ensuring the sexual contract in the private and public realms. That labor is erased in the constitution of the political realm where freedom is said to ensue. Therefore, Pateman claims women cannot be readily or simply included in the social contract given that the constitutive fiction of the contract requires their dependency -- contract always, she suggests, requires domination and subordination.

Wendy Brown also notes that the fantasmatic masculine subject of liberal theory moves freely in civil society, unencumbered by familial responsibilities because he is constituted vis-à-vis dependent others, namely, women. She writes,

the autonomous liberal subject is a fantastic figure, born into and existing wholly in the realm of civil society, who disavows the relations, activities, and subjects that sustain him in civil society from their sequestered place in the family. This creature is not only fantastic, however, but ultimately dependent: the 'autonomous' subject depends on the subjection of the 'dependent' ones for emotional and physical sustenance (*States of Injury* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 158.)

This constitutive dependency is overlooked in liberal theory and poses problems for those who would utilize this framework for political reforms. Liberal feminist responses to include women in this framework, Brown suggests, lead feminists to argue for women's rights to autonomous personhood, "thereby joining men in the disavowals and repudiating the relations, dependents, and dependency for which women have been made responsible" or arguing for female difference and "reifying the effects of this economy" that is, its essentialism and reductionism (158). Neither approach challenges the gendered division of public and private life and neither approach challenges the "liberal antinomy between autonomy and dependence/dependents by articulating a formulation of autonomy in the context of connection or by replacing permanent hierarchies of dependence with mutual, partial or contingent dependencies" (158). In other words, the problem with dominant thought may be described through what Linda Alcoff calls the "stranglehold of the Cartesian hubris that would make of philosophy a self-enclosed sport without need of empirical input, cultural self-awareness, or practical relevance." Linda Alcoff. "Philosophy Matters: A Review of Recent Work in Feminist Philosophy" *Signs* Spring 2000, vol. 25, no. 31: 841-882.

⁷ Jane Flax makes this point in "Remembering Selves: Is the Repressed Gendered?" *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 26(1) 1996: 92-110. In terms of arguments which engage postmodern critiques more positively see the influential *Feminism/Postmodernism* edited by Linda J. Nicholson New York: Routledge, 1990) and

translated into other cultural contexts except through colonial imposition. Clearly, if autonomy is to be a viable language in feminist theory, the above challenges of masculinism, the metaphysics and atomism of autonomy, and its Western genealogy must be addressed. This is essential because the political work of autonomy is far from realized.

The central question this project addresses is the following: How is it possible to claim and theorize autonomy as a feminist goal after the critiques of sovereignty and the category women? The goal of the project in general is to argue for a praxis based model of autonomy which charts a course between the well-known shoals of foundationalist moves to reduce all activity to Reason, all politics to technical mastery, and all being to “being-determined” (whether by nature, culture or history), and the counter move of “postmodern” thought to render all claims to reason, political norms and being out of bounds. The praxis based model of autonomy as a project I explore relocates autonomy from the sovereign self to the material realm of doing and willing.

Feminism today finds itself in a paradoxical situation. While women have achieved many substantive political gains, the ability to exercise those rights fully remains elusive. The right to reproductive and sexual freedom is steadily being eroded: there are numerous challenges to legalized abortion, state restrictions like parental consent laws for minors seeking abortion, a lack of doctors trained in abortion procedures, campaigns by 'right to life' advocates who often violently target doctors and clinics, and a recent campaign to introduce legislation that pharmacists may act out of

Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme* (New York: Routledge, 1994) for only two examples.

“conscience” in denying the morning after pill⁸ or birth control to women.⁹ Couple this with the history of the United States to “kill the black body,” as Dorothy Roberts puts it, through the use of black women’s bodies as slaves for reproducing the labor force,¹⁰ a legacy which echoes in denying black women the right *to* reproductive freedom by prosecuting drug use by pregnant black women more than other groups, pushing long terms contraceptives on predominantly black schools, and ignoring fertility treatment for black women who want to conceive.¹¹ Violence against so-called sexual others continues as lesbians and gay men are denied the conditions for becoming free. Poverty is an increasingly feminized global phenomena as women and girls represent approximately 60 percent of the billion or so people earning less than a dollar a day.¹² Women still do not receive equal pay for equal work.¹³ What is evident from this paradoxical situation is simply that despite many gains, women remain unimaginable as full citizens, and that the conditions to foster the struggle for autonomy remain at a distance for women as is the case with many “other” bodies.¹⁴ For some, feminism appears to be impotent or

⁸ The morning after pill is a high dose pill of hormones designed to prevent pregnancy right after unprotected sex or in the case of a failure of birth control or rape.

⁹ This legislation is currently being debated in New York among other states.

¹⁰ Roberts reports that arguably the first maternal-fetal conflict in the history of the United States was the horrendous practice when slave owners would punish their pregnant female slaves by digging a hole for her rounded belly so as to beat her without damaging the “goods.” See *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1997), 39-41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Chapters 3, 4 and 6.

¹² For these and other recent global statistics concerning girls and women worldwide, see Zillah Eisenstein, *Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism and the Lure of Cyberfantasy* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) which is a good compilation of facts and contemporary feminist concerns about globalization.

¹³ See the recent statistics compiled by the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor, in “20 Facts on Women Workers” URL www.dol.gov/dol/wb/public/wb_pub/fact98.htm, (1998) especially point 14 which points out that for full-time and salary workers in 1998 women earned on 76 percent of what men earned. Median weekly earnings for women were \$456 compared to \$598 for men. Of course, there are also differences within these categories if broken down by race, ethnic group or education.

¹⁴ Cathy J. Cohen, Kathleen B. Jones, and Joan C. Tronto make this point in their introduction to the collection *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader*, eds. Cathy J. Cohen, Kathleen B. Jones, and Joan C. Tronto (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 1-12.

irrelevant in rectifying these persistent inequalities.¹⁵ For others, feminism is passé or dead or has already "gone too far" in shifting traditional sexual relations.¹⁶

Feminist criticism, however, revolves around critiquing how meaning sustains relations of domination and the necessity of positing new significations of sexual difference. The meaning accorded to sexual difference is central to how women can be seen and act publicly. To ask about the conditions through which women become public beings, citizens, is to ask about the political necessity of unhinging what Woman is, or what women are, from a definitive answer (maternal, reproductive, biological) that excludes her from full public life. Unhinging what Woman is from dominant representations that serve to exclude women from political participation has been a central task of feminist criticism since Mary Wollstonecraft defended women's rights on the grounds of reason. Indeed, feminists have made claims as to women's reasonableness for over 200 years to secure public space for women. Yet, reason alone is not enough to ensure women full access to citizenship. Reason alone is not enough for political cooperation among women, or among women and men. And reason alone is not enough to make a better world.

What social critique requires, instead, is insight into the power of imagination and the importance of the social imaginary. By social imaginary I mean that society is

¹⁵ This is not merely a political or academic debate. The crisis or death or irrelevance of feminism is certainly part of mainstream culture. For example, *Time* magazine recently asked "Is feminism is dead?" by juxtaposing the television character Ally McBeal, a lawyer in a short skirt and an endless quest to find a man -- a character poised as a post-feminist woman (after civil rights, free love, AIDS and Reagan to gross individualism), to images of 'actual' feminist foremothers on its cover, i.e. Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (June 28, 1998). The accompanying article, however, points out the paradoxes of the gains and losses for girls and women in the late 1990s and does not ultimately suggest that feminism or a general struggle for women's rights is anachronistic.

¹⁶ As Mary Hawkesworth argues, such "live burial" of feminisms globally ignores the continual feminist work being done to advance the critical claims of democracy. See her "The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 961-986.

understood as the realm of significations – forms, images, words – through which we come to be. This is imaginary in that our explanation of society and of ourselves as social creatures isn't ultimately reducible to specific origins, causes, or ultimate explanations. Yet, this doesn't mean that we can't make sense of the ways in which social meanings compel us affectively, physically and reflectively; to do so we must engage in social imaginary significations operative within our social-historical context. Moreover, the social imaginary that I investigate has two moments of imagination at work: the reproductive imagination through which we as social individuals and the world come to be meaningful for us, but also as the capacity for creation/destruction of those very social significations that make up society. I propose in this project to look at how the social imaginary brings into being the project of autonomy as doing, willing and reflecting. More generally, I situate my work at the crossroads of feminist theory, political theory, democratic theory, 'post-marxism'¹⁷ and psychoanalysis. In doing so, I introduce an interlocutor into these debates who takes the questions of autonomy, imagination, and praxis head on, and who has only recently been brought into conversations in feminist theory: Cornelius Castoriadis.¹⁸

¹⁷ I use the term 'post-marxism' as articulated by Anna-Marie Smith in *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 1998) to refer to the normative goals of taking material reality seriously, i.e. class divisions, yet to do so in ways which are 'post-marxist' in the sense of being anti-essentialist in terms of dislodging the category of 'class' from a privileged ontological or epistemological position. This is a materialism that is distinctly *post* identity politics and in the cultural context of postmodernism. Although I feel it is a rather unsettling term, the reality is that especially since the collapse of 'really existing socialism' it's been difficult to find a language to discuss materialism let alone socialism or social democracy.

¹⁸ See Ewa Plomowska Ziarek, "Toward a Radical Female Imaginary: Temporality and Embodiment in Irigaray's Ethics" *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 60-75 and Margaret Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991) both of whom discuss the influence of Castoriadis on the work of Luce Irigaray. Renata Salecl makes a brief note about Castoriadis in terms of the way in which he theorizes a post-metaphysical universalism in tension with cultural particularism (in simpler terms, how can we think about universals like human rights without imposing cultural standards/privileges on an other, how can the other be recognized in her/his/their own right) in her article "Hate Speech and Human Rights" in *Feminism and the New Democracy: Resiting the Political* ed. Jodi Dean (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 81-97.

Like others who work in a continental register I draw on a tradition whereby meaning and the value of human life can no longer be answered by reference to traditional metaphysics but must be referred to questions of history. The importance of historicity sparked by Hegel's critique of Kant's formalist approach to human freedom, reveals both the finitude of the human subject, that there is no God-like standpoint or external reference point through which to judge and know our experience.¹⁹ Noticing the contingent character of human experience sparks the possibility that things could be otherwise. Like others of an antifoundationalist bent in political theory I want to critique the model of sovereignty of traditional liberalism with its faith in Cartesian dualisms of mind and body and rational communication as the model of politics.²⁰ Like other feminist theorists I'm interested in avoiding a schizophrenic critiquing of the subject of feminism, i.e. women, leading to the worry that there is no place left to "stand" in making feminist claims, and, the continual need to claim autonomy for women as more than a pragmatic assertion of rights without thinking about our ontological and epistemological commitments in doing so. And these groups are not mutually exclusive.

That Woman is a fantasy, a social construct, or regulative ideal, has been amply demonstrated by feminists who seek to challenge "its" hegemony or violence on women.

See also Christine Di Stefano, "Democracy Without Autonomy?" delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, Aug. 29 - Sept. 1, 1996 for an exploration of autonomy via the work of Judith Butler and Castoriadis. See also Susan James, "Freedom and the Imaginary" in *Visible Women: Essays on Feminist Legal Theory and Political Philosophy*, eds. Susan James and Stephanie Palmer (Oxford-Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2002), 175-195; Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) and Linda Zerilli, "Castoriadis, Arendt, and the Problem of the New." *Constellations*. 9, no. 4 (Dec. 2002). See also my "The Imaginary and a Political Quest for Freedom" *differences*, 13, no. 3 (Fall 2002).

¹⁹ See Simon Critchley's "Introduction" to *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*. Eds. Simon Critchley and William R. Schroeder (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999) 10.

²⁰ There is a long list which I can't do justice to here. In the modern age one could start with Rousseau's critique of the Enlightenment, Hegel's critique of Kant's formalist model of morality and politics, through Nietzsche, the Frankfurt School theorists and into contemporary theorists who are antifoundational in their metaphysical commitments – some of whom would be postmodern (Lyotard, Derrida), but others of whom are better put into a phenomenological or immanent materialist register (Connolly, Grosz).

Yet, it is also the case that to speak for, or to represent, women politically is also to play into fantasies about race, class, sexuality, language and so on. That is, to not be able to represent *all* women. This dilemma is much rehearsed and a consistently troubling one for feminists. Feminist critiques of the past two decades have emphasized the fictional status of Woman, that there is no essence or no a priori category Woman or shared experience of femininity for women. Some have suggested that with the radical deconstruction of Woman/women there is no subject to whom feminism can appeal, and moreover, that if woman is nothing in particular, then she can be anything at all -- a situation leading to cries of relativism or of nihilism. Further, even if feminists have "unhinged" the idea that there is a biological, natural, cultural, or metaphysical truth to Woman/women, isn't it the case that we must act as feminists by claiming femininity, women's voice, women's rights? Although in postmodernity the ontological nature of sex has been well and truly dismantled don't we still act as though it is not? How can feminism authorize its claims without falsely speaking for all women? If it is the case that feminists are caught in a dilemma of addressing actual women and our material lives under the rubric of Woman or women, then the task is to think of working in this situation where, as Irigaray notes, woman has not yet taken (a) place. That is, if we take seriously Irigaray's contention that women do not have a place in our current symbolic order, then the task is not how to rationally claim one or, against Irigaray herself, to forge *a* new feminine symbolic, but rather how to imagine and act on this situation of the impossibility of her having 'a' place.

The question "What is a woman?" Simone de Beauvoir's question, when asked throws open the fact that the question can never be given a definitive answer. Of course,

the question is not new. In her speech in Akron, Ohio in 1851, the former slave, abolitionist and women's rights advocate Sojourner Truth famously raised the query: "Arn't *I* a woman?" as she raised and bared her muscled arm and spoke of the children she had born. Truth simultaneously questions the Victorian ideal of womanhood operative at the time (which revolved around fragility, vulnerability and whiteness) as she displaces its privilege, if only momentarily, in raising the query of who woman is by asking whether or not she is a woman. This process of questioning is what Linda Zerilli has called a feminist practice of defamiliarization and it is central to feminist politics.²¹

Following this line of argument in spirit, Rosi Bradotti claims feminism is not merely a reactive movement of critical opposition, but also an active gesture affirmation of women's ontological desire, of our political determination as well as our subjective wish to posit ourselves as female subjects.²² Further, Bradotti suggests that feminist theory and practice must both critique and posit new images for female subjectivity. It is a double-edged project of breaking and creating meaning. Keeping open new possibilities is not only a key component of feminist politics, this is an important element of radical democratic politics. Radical democracy, Chantal Mouffe suggests, is "the principal guarantee against any attempt to realize a final closure that would result in the elimination of the political and the negation of democracy."²³ To take this task seriously is to address a situation where metaphysics are no longer valid, and yet, the imperative to judge is central. In this gap between the groundlessness of meaning and the necessity for

²¹ Linda Zerilli, "Doing without Knowing: Feminisms Politics of the Ordinary" *Political Theory* 26, no. 4 (August 1998): 435-458.

²² Rosi Bradotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 9.

²³ Chantal Mouffe, "Preface: Democratic Politics Today" in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992), 13.

action is where I see the work of Castoriadis.²⁴ Borrowing a term from Peter Dews, I suggest that his work offers a “non-foundational metaphysics”, but it also retains the necessity of reflection and the importance of struggling for the significance of the project of autonomy. That the significance, not the truth, of sexual difference must be stated in political moments, and is impossible to contain once and for all, is central to how critique and creativity may operate within feminist politics.

To return to the matter of autonomy: feminist scholars have ably demonstrated the importance of autonomy as independence from being governed by another (whether by marriage, economically, etc.). For example, Susan Carroll has documented the importance of women’s autonomy as economic and psychological independence in political decision making.²⁵ Lynne Ford has also revealed that we see the impact of these autonomous activities in national elections where the most likely predictor of electoral success is incumbency not sex.²⁶ Although, it is still the case that women

²⁴ Castoriadis grew up in pre-war Athens where he studied philosophy. He became a member of the Greek Communist Youth at age fifteen and then joined the most left-wing Greek Trotskyist faction which placed him under suspicion from both fascists and communists. In 1945, during the Greek Civil War, Castoriadis left for France on a scholarship and he remained in Paris until his death in December 1997. Situated in the political and academic environment of post-war France, Castoriadis, unlike other members of the French intelligentsia, was an early critic of the Stalinist Soviet Union and, while a member of the French section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, he later rejected the Trotskyist position. More notably, Castoriadis was a founding member with Claude Lefort of the group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (which operated from 1949-1966 and would influence the events of May 1968 in Paris). He also worked as an economist (for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and as a practicing psychoanalyst from 1973 until his death in 1997 (he disbanded from Lacan's "Third Group" in 1968) and he became the director of studies at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales at the University of Paris. Castoriadis' work is now receiving more attention in the English speaking world. However, his ideas were disseminated not just to sixties activists in France. For example, in the United States his influence was felt through the Solidarity group, founded in 1960, and similar to its British counterpart. Also, Castoriadis' works were published in the journals *Telos*, *Thesis Eleven*, and *Salmagundi* and many other radical or left journals before the collections of his work, many compiled by David Ames Curtis, were translated and published in English. An extensive bibliography of his work and commentary on his work is available at <http://www.agorainternational.org/>.

²⁵ Susan J. Carroll, “Women’s Autonomy and the Gender Gap: 1980-1982” in *The Politics of the Gender Gap* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).

²⁶ Lynne E. Ford, *Women and Politics: The Pursuit of Equality* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001).

candidates regardless of party still have trouble getting into the pipeline for national or local office.

Despite these substantive gains, as Christine Di Stefano observes given the critiques of autonomy as sovereignty and of the category of women, we seem to be approaching “the vanishing point of autonomy as a normative political concept” seeing autonomy as “an illusory effect rather than as a substantive achievement or foundational grounding.”²⁷ Di Stefano concludes her essay “Autonomy in Light of Difference” with this paragraph:

Feminists committed to the project of revising autonomy must also be prepared, . . . , to rethink reigning assumptions about the theoretical status of selves. The relation between subjects and their others is significantly at stake in this enterprise. Whether identity is postulated as a formation based on (repressed) connections or as a formation based on (repressed) exclusions, the unified, discrete subject of autonomy no longer serves as a credible model of emancipated self-rule. Revisioning autonomy in light of this discomfiting and exhilarating awareness is the challenge-in-process.²⁸

Rethinking the status of selves is certainly central to rethinking autonomy. This has been a task engaged in by many who want to articulate a more relational or social ideal of the self.²⁹ One of the most visible critics of autonomy in its unified, sovereign form is Judith Butler. On this score Butler notes:

No subject is its own point of departure and the fantasy that it is one can only disavow its constitutive relations by recasting them as the domain of a countervailing externality. . . . Psychoanalytically, that version of the subject [the autogenetic subject as always already masculine] is constituted through a disavowal or through primary repression of its dependency on the maternal. And to become a *subject* on this model is surely not a feminist goal.³⁰

²⁷ Christine Di Stephano’s article “Autonomy in Light of Difference” in *Revisioning the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory* eds. Nancy J. Hirshman and Christine Di Stephano (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996) 98.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹ See the “Introduction” by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar in *Relational Autonomy* for a good overview of contemporary feminist critiques and reconstructions of autonomy.

³⁰ Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations” 9

For Butler, autonomy is “the logical consequence of a disavowed dependency, which is to say that the autonomous subject can maintain the illusion of autonomy insofar as it covers over the break out of which it is constituted”.³¹ Further, she continues, “This dependency and break are already social relations, ones which precede and condition the formation of the subject. . . . The subject is constructed through acts of differentiation that distinguish the subject from its constitutive outside, a domain of abjected alterity conventionally associated with the feminine, but clearly not exclusively”.³² In this work, Butler’s critical project was to illuminate what serves as the abject in the history of political thought, i.e. women, sexual “others”, but as well to engage in an affirmative theory of how it is that the “abject” could also be otherwise. For Di Stefano the challenge Butler wages against the edifice of autonomy is to “reconfigure agency” as citationality of dominant norms to articulate how resistance and resignification can occur albeit not in any voluntary or unencumbered way. To avoid the critique that Butler does not address the issue of how to evaluate the diverse negotiations/productions of agency (after all, neo-Nazis resignify agency as well as “good” liberals), Di Stefano claims that Butler does implicitly have a “democratic imaginary” that allows her to simultaneously refuse autonomy (as conventionally understood) and simultaneously endorse democracy.³³ Di Stefano asks: “Can democracy be posited as a value without allegiance to autonomy as a normative desideratum?” Answering “no” to this question only opens up again how to conceptualize autonomy otherwise.

³¹ Ibid.. 12.

³² Ibid.. 12.

³³ I draw on her “Democracy without Autonomy?” delivered at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, August 29-September 1, 1996.

For example, in her more recent work, Butler has taken up the language of autonomy to rethink autonomy in a language other than the humanist one of the Enlightenment. Taking a cue from intersex and transgender activists who claim autonomy as self-determination, Butler suggest that we consider autonomy as one dimension of normative aspirations. “It is difficult, if not impossible” to make claims to bodily/self-determination “without recourse to autonomy, and specifically, a sense of bodily autonomy”; however, bodily autonomy, Butler notes, is a “lively paradox.”³⁴ This is a lively paradox because we struggle to recreate norms which are given over to us as ourselves, which we must try to make otherwise. This struggle has the Hegelian resonances of struggling to become a person which cannot occur without others because it is given to us by others. These are the conditions through which a “liveable life” is to be imagined. Butler’s ideas will recur in the body of this work, but for now I want to notice how her work is turning explicitly to thinking through the importance of a reformulated, affirmative gesture in claiming autonomy.

The critical purchase of autonomy as a project is open to transformation from a variety of locations. To borrow a phrase from Joan Scott, autonomy reverberates, it takes on diverse forms in concrete actions and thought around the globe. To give one example from feminist literature we could turn to the work of M. Jacqui Alexander. Alexander uses the language of autonomy and the conceptualization of autonomy as the freedom to control one’s body and sexuality in her essay “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practices in the Bahamas Tourist

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 21.

Economy." ³⁵ She argues that in the process of decolonization/nationalization the institution of heterosexualization works through the state apparatus to constitute its status as a nation-state, while paradoxically becoming more fragile and a site of its own instability. Through her reading of the passage of the 1991 Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act, which simultaneously criminalized lesbian sex and made domestic violence an area of state intervention, Alexander explores this "neocolonial" institutionalization of heterosexuality. The creation of a new "heteropatriarchy" signals for Alexander not simply new restrictions, but also exposes the cracks in the patriarchal state façade that cannot be simply shored up with heterosexual imperatives legal or otherwise.

I cite this work to point out that the question of erotic autonomy used by Alexander as a normative and critical device is not simply a Western or colonialist intervention. Alexander notes that women's "sexual agency," our "sexual and erotic autonomy," have always been troublesome for the state. Erotic autonomy, she claims, poses a danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation."³⁶ And because loyalty to the nation as citizen is perennially colonized within reproduction and heterosexuality, erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely posing charges of irresponsible citizenship on the part of Black women who seek such autonomy.³⁷ Alexander convincingly demonstrates how institutions -- the tourist economy, language, the state, and the family -- concretely institute heterosexual norms highlighting their construction and instability as constructs. For Alexander, erotic autonomy is tied to

³⁵ This essay is found in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 63-100.

³⁶ Ibid., 64.

³⁷ Ibid., 64.

praxis and to disruption. Erotic autonomy signals a call for decolonization in the realm of sexuality and sex.

For these reasons I use the language of autonomy not simply because it is that offered by Castoriadis, but because I think there is a political richness to using "autonomy as a project" as opposed to the language of possession or pre-social subjectivity because this highlights the political nature of autonomy as the work of creative activity on the part of society. For Castoriadis autonomy is a struggle for the conditions to act autonomously, that is, to be self-reflective under the weight of one's social-historical location. Autonomy is not a possession, a pre-political entity nor a metaphysical notion. To forge the conditions of autonomy is a never-ending task. The project of autonomy is only possible according to Castoriadis if "society recognizes itself as the source of its norms."³⁸ Autonomy is not a foundation for Castoriadis -- it is a social-historical condition and as a condition it belongs to our (that is Western) tradition of autonomy, reflection, deliberation. That is, Castoriadis does not assume that an autonomous subject exists outside of history, society or the institution of language -- there is no pre-political individual to whom rights adhere. This claim highlights the importance of viewing autonomy not as an entity or possession, but as a continual project. My use of the term autonomy is to point out the counter-normative potential of claiming autonomy especially when one is not supposed to have any. As Dominick LaCapra notes the necessity of counter-normative discourses are essential for a vibrant democratic life.³⁹ One way to think through how such counter-normative claims come to be and be recognized as such is to turn to work on the power of the imagination or the imaginary.

³⁸ Cornelius Castoriadis. *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 114-115. Hereafter *PPA* cited in text.

³⁹ Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss" *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Summer 1999): 696-727.

It is not unusual for feminist theorists to turn to the imagination, or the substantive of a more recent vintage, the imaginary, to both offer a critique of masculinist institutions, and to offer a creative alternatives for how women might represent themselves. In the eighteenth century there was also an imagination at work in the Romantic movement of Western Europe which emerged as a revolt against a particular form of rationalism, turning instead to the creative or active imagination for a model of self-making that was primarily artistic in nature. As Joan Scott demonstrates, Olympe de Gouges found resources in that context to present her own active imagination in arguing for women's citizenship in revolutionary France. Scott writes: "De Gouges's insistence on the imaginative basis for her own thought and action was meant to establish her autonomy, her ability to produce an authentic self (not a copy of anything else) – to be what she claimed to be – and so her eligibility for the franchise."⁴⁰ In this endeavor, de Gouges revealed the ambiguities and contradictions in the workings of imagination and reason. Moreover, claiming for herself and women the right of self-representation in a republic in which she was more object than subject was an endeavor shot through with paradoxes. As it was for de Gouges, the imagination again has a prominent and ambiguous place in feminist political theory, but times have changed and so has the imagination.

To understand what Castoriadis offers in terms of his emphasis on the radical imagination and the social imaginary requires a brief sketch of other uses of the imagination/imaginary. Traditionally, imagination has been seen as a quality of the

⁴⁰ Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 34.

mind, of consciousness, which can create something not present to the senses.⁴¹ After a long spate as the adjective of imagination as illusion, misrecognition, and fancy, the imaginary emerges as a substantive not simply opposed to reason, but the ‘ground’ of reason itself; not simply a tool of cognition, but central to how we know and feel ourselves as part of a community or nation; not simply a part of the mind but fundamental to understanding the interconnectedness of mind and sexed bodies. For example, in terms of the lived experience of ideology Louis Althusser formulated an idea of ideology as an imaginary relation to particular interests not our own. He writes that ideology is “the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions in which they live.”⁴² This notion of the imaginary serves to highlight how deeply we are interpellated by ideological apparatuses. However, it keeps in place the idea that we, as subjects, the effects of such ideology, could be less than overdetermined by ideology and see what is really going on. In other words, this notion of ideology as an imaginary relation doesn’t allow us to think rigorously about how something new could come into play or that the “real conditions” in which we live could be grasped as such. Wanting to get away from such structuralist logic other forms of the imaginary have been developed in the following ways: first, as a way to think of consciousness that is not on the model of ideology understood as true or false consciousness or as a totality,⁴³ secondly, the imaginary is formulated as a way to understand an affective sense of belonging i.e., to a

⁴¹ This is seen in the definitions of imagination in the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry.

⁴² Louise Althusser, “Ideology and State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 165.

⁴³ Moria Gatens writes that in her use of the imaginary to theorize imaginary bodies she is not using the imaginary on the model of ideology which for her is more global in nature. See *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1996), viii.

nation as “imagined community”⁴⁴ or, thirdly, the imaginary is a way to de-center reason and rationality at the heart of subjectivity and to think about how cultural images shape our sense of self, our identity and our experience.

Feminist formulations of the imaginary inevitably, and importantly, address the power of images to shape one’s sense of bodily identity and, acting as modifiers, signal that the body or a sense of self is not reducible to ideology. For Moira Gatens “imaginary bodies” are a way to formulate how symbolic representations of women shape our affective feelings of ourselves, others, and social policy in terms of sex. For Drucilla Cornell the “imaginary domain” is a heuristic device for making justice claims and guiding legal reform in a way that acknowledges the importance of images to one’s sense of self (the sexual imago).⁴⁵ Hence, for instance, Cornell utilizes the imaginary domain as a way to argue against the harm images of sexual violence can do to one’s sense of self.⁴⁶ These examples are useful in posing the intimacy between social imaginaries, affect, and self; as well as underlying justice claims to counter harmful representations of women and sexuality.

There are many modifiers of the imaginary circulating in contemporary dialogues: the democratic imaginary, the masculine imaginary, the colonial imaginary, the racist imaginary – and the list could go on. However, one important modifier requires more consideration as it signals a way to think of social theory on the model not of individual consciousness, or of society as the result of what many, many individuals do added

⁴⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1996). This is a revised edition from his original first published in 1983.

⁴⁵ Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography & Sexual Harassment* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴⁶ For a critical engagement with Castoriadis, LeDoeff and Cornell on the imagination see Susan James, “Freedom and the Imaginary” in *Visible Women: Essays on Feminist Legal Theory and Political Philosophy*, eds. Susan James and Stephanie Palmer (Oxford-Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2002), 175-195.

together: that modifier is “social.” Charles Taylor defines the social imaginary this way as: “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”⁴⁷ In this way he wants to extend the idea of social imaginaries (in the plural) beyond immediate background understanding to capture what is both factual and normative in how ideas are wrapped up with practice. This understanding of social imaginaries has a debt explicitly acknowledged by Taylor to Anderson’s idea of the nation as an imagined community traced in his work through print culture. These are important and productive ways to understand the affective, anthropological and normative ways in which we are socially bound. However, to my mind these understandings of social imaginaries underplay what is radical about the idea of the social imaginary – that it is also about what comes to be as social imaginary significations in which we are invested and which invest themselves in us in order for meaning to emerge. In his attention to the radical instituting function of the social imaginary at the level of society, and as psyche on the level of the individual, Castoriadis offers a more vertiginous understanding of the workings of the radical imagination in these two forms. I say vertiginous because to recognize the social imaginary as the work of the institution of society through the creation/destruction of forms, images, and figurations of thought is to recognize contingency at the heart of being. However, this recognition, however partial and incomplete, is the precondition for an autonomous society and individuals who have invested (albeit not necessarily consciously) in the project of autonomy.

⁴⁷ Charles Taylor, *Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

For Castoriadis the social imaginary (*l'imaginaire social*) is central to his formulation of autonomy as a project at the individual and collective levels. Instead of seeing the imaginary as the mere reflection in society of what there is, Castoriadis writes that the social imaginary is what renders possible any relation of object to image. It is, in other words, radical in the work it does to bring society (and many different societies) into being as the work of the anonymous collectivity of society. The central imaginary significations of a society are not the epiphenomena of "real" forces and relations of production or reproduction, but are instead the "laces that tie a society together and the forms that define what, for a given society, is 'real'".⁴⁸

There are two connotations of the word imagination for Castoriadis: the connection with "images in the most general sense," that is forms (*Bilder-Einbildung*); and "the connection with the idea of invention or, better and properly speaking, with *creation*" (*PPA*, 138). The term *radical* he describes in this way: first, as opposed to 'secondary' imagination "which is either reproductive or simply combinatory (and usually both)" -- the secondary imagination we can think of as the repetitions whereby society secures itself through religion, law, etc. The second aspect of defining radical is "to emphasize that this imagination is *before* the distinction between 'real' and 'fictitious'. To put it bluntly," he continues, "it is because radical imagination exists that 'reality' exists *for us* - - exists *tout court* -- and exists *as* it exists" (138). In this way Castoriadis seeks to reframe our ontological assumptions about how the social world in which we come to "be" does come into being through an ontology of flux or Chaos.

⁴⁸ On this point see John B. Thompson, "Ideology and the Social Imaginary: An Appraisal of Castoriadis and Lefort" *Theory and Society*, 11, no. 5 (Sept. 1982): 665.

To clarify what he means by the term "imaginary" in the preface to *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, he explains that the imaginary as he uses it has nothing to do with the "specular" or a reflection of something. Castoriadis claims that human beings are not fundamentally creatures of reason, *zoon logon*, but are at base imaginary beings. Further, he insists, the true opposition we encounter in the world is not that of the individual versus society, but between psyche and society. Rather, society institutes itself through the mechanisms of the *instituting* society and *instituted* society. According to Castoriadis, society is the work of the *instituting* imaginary. The individuals are made by the *instituted* society, at the same time as they make and remake it. What emerges in the tension between the instituting and the instituted society is what we can call the social imaginary.

Let me try to be clear about the stakes here. The radical imaginary as Castoriadis uses it occurs on the individual and collective level -- it is expressed, in rare instances, in democracy or through philosophy. Radical imagination is not irrational for Castoriadis, it is *arational* -- it is the condition by which we can even have reflection, rationality, and public reason in certain social-historical formations. One of the most difficult points of understanding the potential of the radical imaginary is that "every questioning of the laws and of the conditions of the closure of subjectivity still occurs in closure, in the closed sphere of other laws and conditions -- as immensely enlarged as this sphere might be. To be a subject, to be an autonomous subject is still to be someone and not everyone, not just

anyone or anything."⁴⁹ One way in which this closure is broken and realized as such is through the institution of autonomy as a project.

We can partially overcome alienation to the social imaginary through the action of autonomy understood as a praxis. Praxis in this sense is not simply Aristotle's formulation of activity as one way in which beings are, the others being in poesis and theoria, which are distinguished by their end or goal. That is, praxis is not simply about practical knowledge.⁵⁰ Praxis has often been opposed to theory as practical as opposed to speculative knowledge. Or, praxis has been the application of theory to experience. For Marx, praxis takes on a sense of free, creative activity of producing the world as an activity specific to man. Castoriadis has debts to Marx in particular in this regard, but departs from Marx's naturalism in defining man as a laboring (producing) being since he worries, like others, that this downplays the importance of politics and political judgments. Instead, he defines praxis as a democratic activity rooted but not exhausted by its emergence in questioning what we think and know – that is, through his understanding of democracy (coextensive with how he defines politics) as the question “what ought we to do?” and philosophy as the question “what ought I/we to think?” In these questions we find the idea of autonomy as praxis. Praxis is as an activity which “aims as others as (potentially) autonomous subjects and tries to contribute to theory efforts to attain autonomy” (*PPA*, 76). The “potentially” is bracketed because this is a project, never a sure thing. We should also add that the practice must be reciprocal and not simply unidirectional. Autonomy as a praxis takes as its goal the transformation of

⁴⁹ Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*. Ed. and Trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 170. Hereafter *WF* cited in text.

⁵⁰ Although Aristotle is rather vague in how he uses the idea of praxis in opposition to theory and poesis – sometimes as good or bad praxis.

society in substantive ways, for feminist those substantive ways may be transformations in relations with men (with women), to the law, to the past of colonialism, or other formulations of freedom and equality. That we value autonomy means that we have the burden of making judgments and articulating ways in which we value autonomy and judge the emergence of novelty in history.

Some implications for feminist engagements with Castoriadis's work are the following: First, there are implications at the level of subjectivity. While I am sympathetic to deconstructionist critiques of the subject and put myself into a general framework of anti-foundationalist thought, I am also concerned to address, like so many others, charges that this leads to nihilism or relativism. The subject of traditional metaphysics may be by the wayside, but the subject as a thinking, acting being remains to be theorized. In many ways Castoriadis leads us to a subject who is at once anti-foundational, and yet, still a responsible, reflective being. As Castoriadis notes, the subject is not a substance but a project -- a project feminists have been struggling for in relation to those of us designated as women. Further, as Castoriadis notes, the subject is at base an imaginary being, a ground power who with reflection can recognize its own creative powers in a given context (within the constraints, of course, of particular social imaginary significations). Yet, she, as any being, can only exist in a closure in our social-historical context -- she must be someone and not everyone. Castoriadis appears to steer a course between metaphysics and the impotence born of nihilism and points us to the necessity for reflective thought and action and to the responsibility we must take for "authorizing" our actions in the name of women.

Second, Castoriadis's work leads to implications in terms of democratic politics through the idea of autonomy as praxis. Politics, Castoriadis defines as that "lucid

activity" of collective reflection. Through reflection we can recognize that we operate within a system of social imaginary significations which cover over their instituting ground power to become instituted, solidified.

To know, as Castoriadis would have it, that we as society create our own laws would not mean chaos -- it would mean responsibility and a normative struggle to create the conditions for further reflection, representation, and self-preservation. It is because of the weight of heteronomous societies, *which are practically all societies*, that this is so difficult. To push this a bit that heteronomy is the norm, let me offer another quote at length. Castoriadis writes,

Thus everything happens as if the time of social doing, essentially irregular, accidental, altering, must always be imaginarily re-absorbed through a denial of time by means of the eternal return of the same, its representation as pure usury and corruption, its leveling out in the indifference of the merely quantitative difference, its annulment before Eternity. Everything happens as if the terrain where the creativity of society is manifested in the most tangible manner, the terrain where it makes, makes be and makes itself be in making be, must be covered over by an imaginary creation ordered in such a way that the society can conceal from itself what it is. Everything happens as if the society must negate itself as society. Another way of saying the same thing: everything happens as if society could not recognize itself as making itself, as institution of itself, as self-institution.⁵¹

It is through praxis as it embodies democratic activity of doing and reflecting through with we can recognize how society negates itself as a creative/destructive force.

Democracy, as a political project Castoriadis notes, is the "project of breaking the closure at the collective level" (*PPA*, 21). But of course, he continues, "any breaking of the closure, unless it involves a gaping '?' which does not break anything at all, posits something, reaches some results, and, thereby, risks erecting again a closure" (21). We

⁵¹ This is from Castoriadis's *Imaginary Institution of Society* cited in John B. Thompson, "Ideology and the Social Imaginary: An Appraisal of Castoriadis and Lefort" *Theory and Society*, 11, no. 5 (Sept. 1982) 663. I cite his translation here because it captures something more poetic than the current English translation does not.

risk the closure of meaning around women when we act "in our name" -- but it is a risk we take in politics. As Zerilli concludes, "the irony of feminist critiques of the category of women . . . are that they are captured by the very fantasy that they explicitly reject: namely, a political claim that would not exclude, that could indeed account for, respond to, the empirical reality of differences. We can only break the spell of this picture of our view of feminist politics, but only if we acknowledge that to make a claim is to speak for someone and to someone."⁵² There is no way to signify without exclusion or remainders.

The question of creativity here is central. The reason why I think this is useful to explore in feminist criticism is that I take it as important to theorize novelty in history. This I suggest can be usefully explored by theorizing the possibilities and limits of imagination as creativity -- that is, Castoriadis's radical imagination. To focus on creativity, however, is to shift the terrain from one where the possibilities for change lie in endlessly proliferating sites of resistance, to one where we could think seriously about the status of the "new." For instance, in a comment on the status of black female spectatorship, bell hooks argues that "resisting spectatorship" is inadequate to describe the terrain of black female spectatorship. Rather, she suggests, "We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions."⁵³ However, this is not simply novelty for novelty's sake: novelty comes about in history not simply through collective action, but through anonymous collective action, typically undirected by intention -- the horrific forms of which we can see littering the twentieth century.

The formulation of the radical imagination as psyche and society offers a conceptual advantage over what I take to be one predominant legacy of feminist

⁵² "Doing without Knowing" 23.

⁵³ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 128.

engagement with postmodern thought with which feminist theory is still grappling: On the one hand, a well-known worry that the idea of gender as an effect of discourse ignores the positive importance of making political claims in our name (the subject may be an effect of power; yet, if a policeman come to one's door will not let him in saying "I know my rights!"); and on the other hand, the call to refigure postmodern theory for feminism as an explicitly historical and culturally specific practice in terms of use value for alliances. The first worry is that normative politics will be a conceptual impossibility, even as those claims are made everyday based on the experiences of unfairness – this has been well-rehearsed so I will mention it only briefly here. The second worry is a bit more complicated because it is duly appreciative of plurality, contextuality and the need for a comparative approach to feminism. I share these concerns: as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson put it, such a postmodern-feminist theory would dispense with idea of a subject of history replacing this instead with "plural and complexly structured conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation"⁵⁴ In many ways this is an approach to feminist theory that is attendant to diverse feminist practices. However, tracing feminist practices in the plural still leaves underexamined the ways in which such practices come to mean something. That is, we still need attention to social theory to make sense of what is not simply documented in more complex way, but to what is transformative and opens up new ways of being (even as older ones are destroyed).

This is of particular interest for feminists for whom the "grounding" of feminist politics in the subject women has been the center of heated critiques about metaphysics,

⁵⁴ See Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990) 19-38.

exclusion and exclusivity – leading to a nihilistic worry that there is no subject for feminism, or in less dramatic language, that we can never speak in the name of women because to give this content, as any representation must do, would necessarily be exclusionary. Strategic or pragmatic deployments of the category (popularized by Gayatri Spivak) had a realist advantage in saying, but yes, we still must address harms to women in this place, but rely too much on a purposeful subject who can deploy such categories with confidence. Others call for political openings and the self as a regulatory fiction in light of critiques of liberal selves (Brown). However, these critiques tend to downplay that fact that critiques of liberal, modernist conceptions of the self “deny certain metaphysical beliefs about the self *in favor of other such beliefs*.”⁵⁵ More fruitful have been praxis based conceptions of feminisms which argue for a *de facto* feminism based on tracing how women autonomously come to feminism in ordinary ways (Miscagno). Still others work affirmatively through an ontology of becoming (Grosz, Alcoff, Gatens, Llyod) as a way to explore another metaphysics in terms of feminist autonomy and possibility not based on a Cartesian mind-body split. To keep in tension the necessity and impossibility of feminist claims to autonomy for women means attending to theoretical resources that can capture such indeterminacy and the necessity for determinacy in making political claims at particular moments (what is captured by the term *kairos* as a moment of decision). For these reasons a feminist engagement with Castoriadis’s work is valuable. If, following Castoriadis for the moment, we take seriously the idea that politics *is* that lucid activity of continual reflection, we can take responsibility for our representations in the moment of our actions and in our reflections.

⁵⁵ Linda Alcoff. “Becoming an Epistemologist.” In *Becomings: Explorations in Time Memory, and Future*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 68.

Beyond this we can offer no security. We cannot, for example, think that reproductive freedom was secured with any finality with *Roe v. Wade* and with it women's right to bodily integrity. How could we predict that the fetus would come to have an "autonomous" status as the "tiniest citizen" within our cultural landscape?⁵⁶

For those who know Castoriadis's work there may be a worry that I am positioning him in a "postmodern" register to which he would object. He has written rather ferociously on postmodernism as generalized conformism arguing that some of the tenets of postmodernism:⁵⁷ namely, that the rejection of a vision of history as progress or liberation is correct but not new, neither is the rejection of an idea of uniform and universal reason, nor finally the rejection of the strict differentiation of cultural spheres (*WF*, 41). These types of questionings he locates in the practice of democracy as first developed in the context of ancient Greece. And he has a point. However, despite his polemics his is a work fruitfully mining "postmodern" worries about making claims without sure guidance in Reason, progress, or transcendental logic. His Aristotle comes after the Enlightenment, but also so does the type of democratic politics in the wake of Hegel, Marx, Weber, and Merleau-Ponty as those who situate the social nature of the self centrally in their work.

There are, of course, objections to Castoriadis which I will explore as well. Three general concerns emerge as a result of a feminist engagement with his work: first, the question of masculinism in his work, second, the question of Eurocentrism and finally,

⁵⁶ Cynthia Daniels, *At Women's Expense: State Power & The Politics of Fetal Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Lynn Marie Morgan et al, *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁵⁷ Those tenets he takes from Johann Arnason's "The Imaginary Constitution of Modernity" *Revue Europeenne des Sciences Sociales* 86 (Autumn 1989): 323-37.

the status of revolution.⁵⁸ I will not comment here on the rush to defend Castoriadis against the charge of masculinism in his work, suffice it to say that I find it inadequate to merely note that in his political positions Castoriadis supported women's movements and switched to using a feminine pronoun in his later writings⁵⁹. However, I don't read his work as being wrapped up in sexist logic – it is true that doesn't theorize gender as an imaginary signification although he does gesture towards it, but this omission ought not to rule out his work for feminist engagement – indeed, it opens it up – and more importantly, feminist engagement with his work makes evident that for those relying on his democratic theory, attention to gender cannot be overlooked. I tackle this issue in the chapters that follow. The question of Eurocentrism or of the Western legacy of this version of Enlightenment is countered, I argue, by the capaciousness of autonomy as a project in that the substance of autonomy as a democratic project is always up for question. Finally, the status of revolution must be explored simply because for Castoriadis, revolution is not outdated, but essential. Of course, he has a distinct way of understanding revolution as radical creation of something new, a new *eidos*. Still, revolution sounds distinctly anachronistic in a world marked by the tragedies of the revolutions for communism. However, there remains something of value in thinking about social transformation in revolutionary ways – we can track this in social

⁵⁸ The first charge has been raised most recently in a rather oblique way in Vicotor Wolfenstein's review entitled "Psychoanalysis in Political Theory" (1996) where he reviewed four recent texts in the field of psychoanalysis and politics, and his subsequent response to the defense of Castoriadis by David Ames Curtis and Andreas Kalyvas (1998). Wolfenstein was not reviewing a text by Castoriadis here, but in the course of commenting on Joel Whitebrook's *Perversion and Utopia* (1995) in which he draws on Castoriadis, Wolfenstein noted that the psyche in Castoriadis's view is distinctly masculine.

⁵⁹ This is surprisingly the defense Curtis and Kalyvas make and it is inadequate (820-821). The status of the feminine in terms of the psychical monad and subsequent development into an individual in society remains to be evaluated in terms of the so-called masculinism in Castoriadis' theory. A dogmatic defense of Castoriadis' political positions is insufficient against this charge as Wolfenstein rightly points out in his reply. Curtis and Kalyvas are eloquent and knowledgeable in Castoriadis' work, but this, it appears, is a blind spot.

movements particularly of a fundamentalist nature today – but we can see this also by looking not only at social movements looking for change, but also in ordinary activities of praxis (doing and reflecting) that occur in local, specific ways.

In Chapter One I explore the critical purchase Castoriadis's social imaginary offers for feminist theories of gender as a critical component of how we can rethink autonomy on the model of doing, willing and reflecting i.e. as praxis. In doing so I tackle questions of a metaphysical nature by thinking through what it means to think "ontologically otherwise" – otherwise, that is, than traditional ontologies where being means "being-determined." This raises then an investigation of the new as a way to see and take account of the creativity of human action as it's registered in the social imaginary of society typically in ways that deny the contingency of such actions/history. To recognize such contingency as our own being/doing is, however, a condition for thinking about democratic theory as an activity whereby democracy is a form of society.

This leads me into the Chapter Two where I examine the democratic purchase for feminists of this theory of autonomy as a collective matter. Taking on the idea of praxis as both *de facto* (by fact) and *de jure* (by law) I explore how we can see anthropologically and normatively the importance of autonomy as a feminist project. This allows me to explore the necessity of making judgments not on the model of a Kantian rule, but on the model of exemplarity.

In the Chapter Three I take up again the purchase psychoanalysis can have as a way to practice autonomy on an individual level. Arguing that psychoanalysis should not be understood as a political theory, but as a modeling of a political praxis of autonomy, I

suggest that this remains a crucial resource for how feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler envision social change.

I conclude by returning to the importance of theorizing the new as a component of democratic theory and feminist theory. I suggest that feminists have often modeled such democratic practices as an essential paideia or praxis of citizenship as iterations of autonomy.

Chapter One

The Work of the Social Imaginary: This Ontology Which is Not One

To think about how novelty comes into history and is noticed by us as part of our own doing is central to how Castoriadis proposes that we rethink society and its attendant institutions, where language is a central institution, on the model of the dynamic of openness and closure. That is, on what he will call the workings of the radical imagination on the level of the individual (psyche) and society (social instituting imaginary) and closure (the social individual and the instituted society). What this does is allow him to think philosophically about what is in fact an ordinary event: that there is novelty in history and that this is the result of the creative/destructive work of human activity that brings into being new forms of signification, and, more radically, new forms of being, although we rarely recognize it as such. We rarely recognize such creation/destruction as our own because what is novel is continually reabsorbed into what is and always was. This is a phenomena Foucault has ably documented in modernity as disciplinary power and the relentless force of normalization.¹ The political upshot of such determinacy is that society remains within heteronomy – assuming that what is is due to the will of God, nature, the forces of history – or other external law givers. Castoriadis's political wager is that the recognition that society and selves are the results of human activity comes about with the instauration of democratic breaks – the first opening in 5th century Greece, the other in the modern era in Europe around the 12th and 13th centuries when cities began to organize themselves and then through the democratic

¹ See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

revolutions of the 18th century – and that it is in and through the praxis (doing and reflection) of autonomy that we recognize creations as our own.

Let me make three situating moves to suggest why this matters in a broader sense, although this will necessarily be a reductive genealogy of feminist theory. The first situating move: feminist critics have strongly been critical of reductionist work that can only register women as “a body,” the Other, irrational, white, heterosexual, and able-bodied. These are the well-known critiques of the category women debates emerging from experiences of exclusion in the subject “women” and what I will reductively call postmodern critiques of the self-knowing subject, the false universalism of Reason, and a skeptical project about knowledge after the deconstruction of metanarratives of progress. Postmodern and postcolonial thought has therefore worked to emphasize plurality, subjugated knowledges, multiplicity, fragmentation and interdisciplinary which has sparked complex work on gendered, raced and sexed national bodies.

Second, there has also rightly been a normative worry that postmodern deconstruction or debunking practices of categories leaves affirmations, i.e. of women’s experience of violence, without traction politically because every affirmation is simply another confirmation of the effects of power. Or, on the other side of the coin, instead of such stifling determinism (no space for agency), there’s the claim that if politically all is a matter of social construction, then what we do, we do as a kind of voluntarism (ironically reintroducing a self-willing subject). In a related manner, the call to historicize and contextualize,² while opening up new knowledges and connections, has left the impression that we could positively render the complexity of gendered lives with enough

² See Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 19-38.

detail and attention. That is, that what is registered historically is there to be captured with the right set of theoretical tools.

Third, there is a renewed effort to focus on ontology in terms other than that of inherited Western thought. Stephen White calls these efforts “weak ontologies.” Weak ontologies resist strong ontologies which claim to show us the way the world really is, or God’s relation to his people, or the essence of nature – what we commonly recognize as traditional metaphysics. White explains, “It is by reference to this external ground that ethical and political life gain their sense of what is right; moreover, this foundation’s validity is unchanging and of universal reach.”³ This is a view Castoriadis shares since the political implications of external grounds to politics is literally a situation of heteronomy – the law is given by an other. Weak ontologies, on the other hand, White suggests, share two concerns: first, that there is “the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of the self, other and world are contestable” and second, that such conceptions are nonetheless unavoidable.⁴ Although the term isn’t optimal, Castoriadis’s work would fit into such a weak ontological category. Another way to capture ontologies in other ways is to see ontology on the model of becoming. Linda Alcoff draws on this formulation of ontology (generally linked to the work of Spinoza and Deleuze among others) using the term immanent metaphysics to capture how an ontology of truth can be rethought not through the model of traditional transcendental categories.⁵ She writes that an immanent account of metaphysics can be rethought in

³ Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strength of Weak Ontologies in Political Theory* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2000), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

⁵ Linda Alcoff, “Becoming an Epistemologist” in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* ed. Elizabeth Grosz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 70. See also the interview of Genevieve Llyod and Moira Gatens done by Susan James on their engagement with the work of Spinoza. “The Power of Spinoza” *Hypatia* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 40-58.

terms of becoming, not being as being determined, which has the political advantage of making claims that are necessarily ontological and epistemological – that is, that in politics we must make claims about substantive declarations of truth and value. Alcoff does not argue then that we “need” epistemic foundations to do political work, but rather that epistemic foundations themselves are a socially constructed need and to recognize that is not to abdicate the importance of making truth claims. While I won’t be able to do justice to the innovative work on ontologies of becoming here, my sense is that there is an affinity with both the weak ontological identity White describes and an immanent ontology of becoming articulated by Alcoff. I will briefly draw this out towards the end of this chapter. However, I would prefer to call Castoriadis’s ontological commitments one of an ontology of indeterminacy. I use this phrase because the mode of being of the radical imagination, which is the capacity for the positing, destroying of new forms, images, representations, is one of continual creation/destruction. The term “mode” carries weight here because Castoriadis offers *another* set of ontological speculations, but he doesn’t see this as canceling out the workings of traditional ontology where being equals being-determined. For this reason there is what I would call the insistence on thinking “ontologically otherwise.” Being critical of unitary ontologies and centering the institution of society as conditioning being (although not in any which way) Castoriadis signals with his use of the phrase “Being/being” since he concludes that any thinking of Being (*être*) must occur through being (*étant*). This is important as a way to take account of the ways in which what we claim is locally stable only because globally unstable i.e. women. “History can only be locally stable because it is globally unstable. For without this incalculable multiplicity of recurrent and divergent origins that it contains, without

this accumulation of singular points which flow into each other, without losing their singularity, things would not be or become or be known.”⁶ That is, being is best thought of in the plural through recognizing the work of the radical imagination. We can see this partially because of the being instituted as a result of the project of autonomy as democratic politics.

This chapter investigates the issue of creativity in the sense of social transformation whereby new significations and new beings come “to be.” In less abstract language, I am interested in how women come “to be” in feminist politics if we take critiques of foundations such as the philosophy of consciousness and exclusions seriously, as I do, but still want to make claims for autonomy in the name of women, and all other bodies. I am particularly interested in how centering a creative action theorized around the idea of the tension between the social instituting imaginary and instituted society pushes us beyond a means-ends logic as the way to make sense of our activities. I agree with Elizabeth Grosz, that if dominant modes of knowledge (causal, statistical) are incapable of envisioning the absolutely new, maybe other modes of knowing, other form of thinking, need to be proposed.”⁷ Thinking “ontologically otherwise” on the basis of an ontology of indeterminacy, I suggest is a productive way for feminist theory to make sense of the necessity and impossibility of finding political practices through which to claim the project of autonomy for ourselves. This also opens up an avenue for thinking about the ontology of gender. I suggest we see gender on the model of social imaginary significations building on the work of others who use the imaginary as a way to make

⁶ Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Trans. Kate Soper and Martin H. Ryle (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 137. Hereafter *CL* cited in text.

⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Thinking the New” in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* ed. Elizabeth Grosz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 21.

sense of how we are embodied as social beings. Moira Gatens suggests that she will use the term imaginary bodies to “refer to those images, symbols, metaphors and representations which help construct various forms of subjectivity.”⁸ Like Gatens, I too am interested in investigating how institutions/imaginaries are resilient to change and how we might take account of a “spontaneity without consciousness or will,” that is, without the metaphysical baggage of the Cartesian self so unfriendly to women (and all others bodies).⁹ Unlike Gatens, however, my task is not to develop a feminist philosophy of the body, as immensely important as that is, but to think about how we might think politically about the fact of novelty in history and how we might affirm, reflect, and enact democratic practices in struggling for autonomy. The political move that identifies an ontology of indeterminacy highlights a praxis based model of autonomy which is never simply reducible to a means-ends logic and never fully captured in language as meaningful. Instead, our autonomy as the practice of our freedom emerges in this in-between space where something new emerges but must be captured in terms that close down its significance.¹⁰ For this reason I turn to Castoriadis’s take on the radical imagination in its social form as the instituting imaginary or instituting society.

That we may consciously (and unconsciously) alter socially instituted meanings about, for example, women as the subject of feminisms, illustrates how we can practice our freedom as autonomous action (putting ourselves into question for the task of authorizing our own laws). However, this is not simply a debunking of the category

⁸ Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996), viii.

⁹ Gatens is building this comment off of the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Ibid. xii.

¹⁰ In this sense I agree with Linda Zerilli who notes that what is interesting about Castoriadis’s thought is the “refusal to resolve this tension in either direction and the insistence that democracy and the practices of autonomy or freedom are played out in the space between what is new (instituting society) and what is given (instituted society)” “The Problem of the New,” 545.

“women” in order to reveal its disavowed dependencies (of a metaphysical or social sort). This is an affirmative gesture that illustrates how we can engage in a practice of resignification even as we are inevitably caught up again in closing down meaning in order to say something to someone. As Castoriadis puts it, “every questioning of the laws and of the conditions of the closure of subjectivity still occurs in closure, in the closed sphere of other laws and conditions -- as immensely enlarged as this sphere might be; to be a subject, to be an autonomous subject is still to be someone and not everyone, not just anyone or anything” (*WF*, 170). We are not radically ‘free’ to create and contest in whatever manner we may choose -- there are distinct limitations which structure the boundaries of our actions but not on where politics may occur as political site may be prolific (10). As Linda Alcoff writes: “Antifoundationalism does not require eschewing all epistemic and metaphysical commitments; it requires eschewing transcendentalism and most forms of naturalism that seek to erase the knower from the known or objectify and essentialize all human characteristics.”¹¹ In this goal the workings of the radical imagination can shed some light on how we criticize reductionist claims about being and knowing, and still claim our being and knowing otherwise as the condition of our freedom. In this chapter my wager is that a formulation of creative action based on an ontology of indeterminacy can address the ways in which we must speak “in our name” in a way that keeps the tension that speaking in our name will never fully capture who and what we are or want. That this is possible is both because of the dynamics of the social instituting imaginary and the instituted society and, more importantly, because we are struggling for autonomy as a praxis. The paradox of feminist claims to autonomy, of

¹¹ Linda Alcoff, “Becoming an Epistemologist,” in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* ed. Elizabeth Grosz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 69.

course, is that we make claims in the name of women not simply strategically, but as a fixing of what is inherently “unfixable” -- our freedom.

Society as Social-Historical

For Castoriadis transformative politics is a "praxis which takes as its object the organization and orientation of society as they foster the autonomy of all its members and which recognizes that this presupposes a radical transformation of society, which will be possible, in its turn, only through the autonomous activity of individuals."¹² That is, “praxis is a perpetually transformed relation to the object. Praxis begins with the explicit acknowledgement of the open character of the object and exists only to the extent that it acknowledges this” (*IIS*, 89). Acknowledging the 'openness' of social life is a way to combat alienation, the always present threat to autonomy where we must know that the creation of society is our own doing (and yet will always forget this). So far this may sound like a familiar Enlightenment tale of sovereign subjectivity – a rational mind projecting itself into the world laying down its stamp nature, constructing institutions of governing, and denying its dependency on feminine and other laboring bodies. Except that there’s something else lurking here – the open character of the object. What is that object? For Castoriadis that object is the institution of society itself through which we come “to be.” It is the understanding of society as the “social-historical” (because always in time) and how society as anonymous collectivity creates “beings” through its activity – one of which is always a social individual, another is always this particular society. Castoriadis brings the object of society back to center of analysis in a new way through

¹² Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1987]1998), 77. Hereafter *IIS* cited in text.

the work of a radical imagination that takes the form of a social instituting imaginary. This imaginary is always in a perpetual dialectic (Hegel without a head) in the movement of the instituting imaginary and instituted society positing and forming representations. In linking the instituting imaginary to the question of meaning, Castoriadis presents the social imaginary as a pattern of collectively instituted meanings that become a society's point of reference. To notice that society is a mode of being of an anonymous collectivity – anonymous because we are unknown to each other and because we are never fully conscious of reproducing the “givenness” of our own societies -- means paying attention to how gaps in what is given and what is becoming are registered or not as part of our own work.

To distinguish the idea of the society as social-historical from contemporary ideas of society, Castoriadis claims that society is not a "property of composition" or merely more than the sum of its parts (*PPA*, 145). Rather, society institutes itself through the mechanisms of the *instituting* society and *instituted* society. According to Castoriadis, "Society is the work of the *instituting* imaginary. The individuals are made by the *instituted* society, at the same time as they make and remake it. The two mutually irreducible poles are the radical instituting imaginary -- the field of social-historical creation -- on the one hand, the singular psyche on the other" (145). Because of the radical imagination of the psyche and of society it is possible, Castoriadis insists to question what is given to us as real, true and good.

What the imaginary institution of society institutes is necessarily the social individual. Among other things this means that the social individual and her or his understanding is “first and foremost a total fragment of the institution of society and of *its*

particular society” although it is not only that (*WF*, 343). The social individual must be socialized but never fully since there is, as I’ll explore later, the workings of the psyche which can never be fully socialized, the limits of the “first natural stratum” or “nature” of the body, and the world in which we find ourselves each time with a past, with a particular language, with particular significations. The social-historical is the world we are in, how we come to be, and it is made in time and space through the processes of the instituting and instituted society. This creativity, as the work of the radical imaginary, cannot be accounted for by anything else. Thus, as Hans Joas succinctly states: “the title of Castoriadis’s principle work [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*], which may at first seem strange to the reader, becomes understandable: society is the result of an institutionalization process, and this process, because it arises from the imaginary, from the human capacity to conceive meaning, has an irreducibly creative dimension.”¹³

By articulating this dynamic between the instituting social imaginary and the instituted, Castoriadis attempts to capture in language the idea that like the social individual, the institution of society can’t be reduced to, or simply subject to, any functionalist or determinist principle. By using the term imaginary he means by this not that society is an illusion or fiction, but rather that its meaning cannot ever be fully deduced through causalist measures. Indeed, he notes, the imaginary “outstrips” its function (131). This emphasis on the “defunctionalized” nature of our social significations and our very being may appear shocking to those invested in behaviorist models of social science where what is can be explained by tracing causes and effects on the model of scientific experiments. This is a dominant model of science. For Castoriadis to see human behavior on this model is to assume that the world as given to

¹³ Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 1192.

us is given on the model of “set theory.” Drawing on the mathematician Cantor to articulate what he means by set theory as a mathematical model Castoriadis repeats Cantor’s definition as follows: “a set is a collection into a whole of defined and distinct objects of our institution (*Anshauung* : the term here covers both what is intuited externally or internally in empirical fashion, the perceived, and what is intuited in the ‘pure’ Kantian sense) or of our thought” (*CL*, 208). That is, what is, is an element of a closed set. “It thus encapsulates the essential nucleus of that thought: the idea that everything that exists is *determinable*, in the sense that it possesses an immanent potential for being defined and distinguished” (209). This is the logic he insists that has marked Western thought. We see this at work, for example, in structuralist theories of society. Structuralist theories have been powerful ways to think about individuals as social selves. However, if structuralism takes part in set theoretical logic only, for example in structural linguistics, how meaning emerges is the result only of arbitrary (or not so arbitrary) relations between signifier and signified. This is important for thinking how meaning emerges out of difference, but it limits us in terms of how something new could come about except through what is. Castoriadis claims that:

Structuralism is guilty of a double error in this respect. On the one hand, it thinks that this logic [set theoretical] comprises the whole of logic and even the life itself of any society. On the other hand, it evacuates the question raised by the fact that a particular society distinguishes and opposes certain terms rather than others, and in its own specific manner and not otherwise, and wants instead to treat the ‘oppositions’ which it never tires of setting forth, as if they were givens of a self-evident kind (neglecting thereby such obvious facts that even the opposition between masculine and feminine is socially instituted insofar as it is a social and not a biological difference, and that it exists differently at different times). It is itself guilty, in other words, of a naïve and total commitment to set-theoretical, identitary logic (*CL*, 211).

The problem is a familiar one of not recognizing historical variation and of new forms of

being within a structuralist universe. However, this does not mean that we are radically free to create meaning/forms however we choose. Castoriadis writes that creation "entails only that the determinations over what there is are never closed in a matter forbidding the emergence of other determinations" (*WF*, 393). He continues, "The new is not the unforeseeable, unpredictable, nor the undetermined. . . . Something is new when it is the position of a form Something being new means, therefore: something is in the position of new determinations, of new laws. This is the meaning of forms -- *eidōs*." (392). "It is not, qua form, qua *eidōs*, producible or deducible from what 'was there.' This does not mean that it is created *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*." (392). That is, we cannot say that a subject or society can make whatever she or he, or we, choose. No one is external to language, to the institution, Castoriadis says, of the social-historical. For instance, he says: "The social-historical is, first of all, the phenomenological specificity of the forms it creates and through which it exists: institutions embodying social imaginary significations, and their concrete product, bearer and reproducer, the living individual as a social form" (*PPA*, 36). Therefore it's right to say the society precedes and exceeds all of us as social individuals.

But isn't this going to run into the anxiety that then everything is a matter of social construction and that we can't have a "true" science or reality? Ian Hacking tackles this topic in *The Social Construction of What?* In this work Hacking argues that although the term social construction has become hackneyed and overplayed, it is worth using the term to capture the ways in which culture/society is said to construct reality.¹⁴ For example, Hacking outlines a variety of different arenas in which social constructionist claims are made: in terms of ideas, gender, the self, women refugees,

¹⁴ Ian Hacking, *Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

emotions. In general Hacking assumes that social constructionists are best thought of as offering critiques that what we took to be natural and inevitable need not have been, and some go further to say that what we took to be inevitable is (2) bad and (3) should be radically transformed (6). This then raises the issue yes, but how far does social construction go, in other words, “the social construction of *what?*” -- the anxious “what” being a signal that humanists have lost their minds and now think that if they have a headache an aspirin will not help. That is, that what we take to be “reality” or the truth of science is in fact a social construction all the way down. Hence, the so-called science wars where scientists are pitted against social constructionists. Hacking says that constructionists all claim that the contingent causes of historical source of X phenomena reveals that X need not have existed or need not have been at all. Hacking offers an overview of particular sticking points that make it impossible to decide “is this social construction?” or “is this nature?” In general, his work offers a wide-ranging and non-dogmatic overview of contentious areas of social constructionist debate. However, Hacking still presents the problem of social construction as: we get social construction or we get the truth of what really is. Or, as Sally Haslanger puts it, the “debate presented by Hacking is not very interesting because neither extreme view is plausible and very little is offered to cover the more interesting middle-ground” between the constructionists and the world determinists.¹⁵ Such a situation means, as Catherine Elgin says, that we have to get out of this bi-polar disorder in philosophy whereby what isn’t absolute, is arbitrary or simply a slide into nihilism.¹⁶ Feminist theorists have been addressing this dilemma for

¹⁵ See Sally Haslanger, “Social Construction: The ‘Debunking’ Project” in *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality* ed. Frederick F. Schmitt (Latham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 307.

¹⁶ I take this point from Linda Alcoff, “Becoming an Epistemologist” in *Becomings: Explorations in Time*,

decades now. My suggestion here, however, is that we see Castoriadis as not simply a social constructionist, but as overturning the fantasy that we are either products of social construction or nature; or that there is a split between the work of culture/convention/social imaginary significations as all there is, or that a “real” reality is there to be discovered.

One way that Castoriadis cuts into simplistic charges of social constructionism is that he argues that to speak, to signify, means that we take part in identitary-ensidic logic. This is a condition of our intelligibility. That is, there are limits are external, internal and logical to our intelligibility and to what can be. Set theoretical logic is a logic that Castoriadis calls ensemblistic-identitary logic (or ensidic/*ensidique* for short).¹⁷ This is a domain of determination present in all significations including those that have no relation to the real or rational (*IIS*, 243). That is, there is a logic of quantification and causality without which we cannot do. There is a type of set theory (ensembles) that is accepted, for example, $1+1=2$. That this takes an identitarian form means that it is always seen as the same in its repeated iterations. However, not all that is ensidic is of such a quantifiable nature. To give an example Castoriadis often uses, for a true believer of the Catholic faith $1+1=2$ is an accepted rule, but this does not stop such a believer from seeing in the Holy Trinity that $3=1$. This again is an example of ensidic logic at work. This is a logic that is ordinary in how we speak and know and make political claims.

Memory, and Futures ed. Elizabeth Grosz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 55 -75. There is a related worry with social constructionist theories.

¹⁷ Zerilli notes what Castoriadis recognizes is that the creation of radical otherness (the new) and the workings of ensemblistic-identitary logic (the inscription of the new in terms of the old) are always both at play. “The New,” 541. And, she concludes: “Thus, as important as it is to articulate an alternative ontology that contests the logic of the same, an ontology that celebrates the fundamental indeterminacy of what is, the political question is how to develop democratic practices that attenuate the ensemblistic-identitary logic which denies the contingency of human action and thus freedom.” 541.

However, it does not exhaust logic *tout court* which is the important point for Castoriadis that has not been seen in terms of signification.

Signification Castoriadis defines as “an indefinite skein of interminable *referrals* to *something other* than” what would appear to be directly stated (*IIS* 243). It is in this movement of referrals that new significations are opened up but what results is not an undifferentiated chaos. What appears as social imaginary significations (SIS) for Castoriadis “clump” together magmatically or as magmas. Magma is a substance of volcanic flow that Castoriadis uses metaphorically to capture how signification escapes determinations, but that paradoxically grasping this movement can only be done through ensidic logic itself to hold in place meaning by giving it a definite form or figure. This is one intrinsic constraint to how the social imaginary is instituted each time through its instituting activity. This logical constraint of closure of meaning also Castoriadis suggests reveals that there is also a constraint of coherence. He writes that “coherence has to be assessed immanently, that is, relative to the main characters and ‘drives’ of the given society, taking into account the conformal behaviour of socialize individuals, etc.”; continuing that “Pyramid building with starving peasants is coherent when referred to the whole social organization an social imaginary significations of Pharonic and Mayan societies” (151). To capture such behavior means that we take our bearings at the “crossroads in the labyrinth” – the labyrinth being the metaphor through which Castoriadis characterizes society as the working of the anonymous collectivity.¹⁸ It’s worth more exploration to wonder: what is the critical purchase of coherence taken at such crossroads? Is this a claim of knowledge and of what sort? Castoriadis has not

¹⁸ See the “Preface” to the first volume of *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, trans. Kate Soper and Martin H. Ryle (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984).

explored these epistemological questions with sufficient depth. Ideas of coherence are worth pursuing further if Alcoff is right in suggesting that coherence epistemology is a principle contender with foundationalist views.¹⁹

What Castoriadis does better is suggesting that there are limits to signification. Limits found externally he calls the first natural stratum. The first natural stratum is a minimal account of what we share as living beings such as cells, blood, the way a starch breaks down in the body, indeed, that we are embodied as living beings. And this is not simply a matter of biology but also of physics and mathematics -- that the world itself conditions us as human beings and our world – we can't for example, make an electron, but we can make an atomic bomb because the world lends itself to our creativity/destruction in this way although in no way could we say it determines it. For instance, it is not irrelevant that there is oil as a source of fuel in the Middle East. This is not an insignificant natural fact but in itself it tells us little if anything about why oil and the control of the oil supply and profits is a matter of intense international politics, war, and repressive regimes.

There are also limits that are internal that have to do with the psyche which the social institution must provide with meaning. This reveals that there are many forms of societies that are meaningful – “polygamous, polyandrous, monogamous, fetishistic, pagan, monotheistic, pacific, bellicose, etc.”—the important point being that in order for social imaginary significations to take hold, they must provide meaning for the psyche for its necessary break to a social individual to emerge.

Finally, the creativity of the social imaginary is limited by historical constraints.

¹⁹ *Real Knowing: New Versions of Coherence Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 12.

That is, the past and present, myths, ideals, and language of a particular society. For example, “Classical Greeks are the object of an incessant ‘re-interpretation’ by the Western Europeans since the thirteenth century” (151). However, those interpretations are always done “according to the imaginary significations of the *present*” (151 emphasis in original). Such natural and cultural contextualizations and limitations are important to keep in mind when thinking about how we discuss novelty since this is not simply an unconstrained or limitless activity.

Theory as Specular, Theory as Musical

To get to such a recognition of history and of society as profoundly “of” time requires another conception of the work of theory and of practice through which we might acknowledge and take account of that tension between the intemporal always and the radically new.²⁰ Above Castoriadis is reformulating the work of theory from that which produces a system of explanation to that which is an activity capable of openness and novelty. Theory is an activity making sense of what human beings do, or as he’ll say elsewhere, it’s the “always uncertain attempt to clarify the world” (*IIS*). That attempt at clarification, however, cannot reach the certainty of explanation. Explanation in this regard operates to fully capture a phenomenon particularly through the logic of cause and effect. Explanation is a type of theory of the Gaze examining what is. For Castoriadis,

²⁰ Finding the break from origins (divine) to beginnings (human and secular), Edward Said for example argues that Vico is the philosopher of beginnings, not because he got there first as it were, but because he articulated how beginnings are always asserted at considerable expense. See his *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press [1975]1985), 350. For Said, Vico’s *The New Science* smacks of the newness of aftermath rather than the newness of Edenic immediacy (371). One might say the same thing of Castoriadis’s attempts to think through creation and destruction registered in the social-historical and through the social-historical which is profoundly “after devastation.”

the practice of theory proceeds rather through what he calls “elucidation.” Elucidation assumes that a full explanation of a phenomena could never occur – we can never simply trace the cause leading to effect. He writes: “Theory exists neither as a ‘view’ of that which is, not as a systematic and exhaustive constitution or construction of that which may be thought, whether arrived at in a single definitive moment or through a process of gradual elaboration. No breach opens suddenly in the walls surrounding us, so that we can at last see the light of a sun which has always been there. And no more is there an harmonious edifice whose overall plan we shall progressively discover as we work on its construction” (*CL*, xviii). This is the recognizable Platonic model of philosophy and knowledge famously hostile to the democratic city.

To reiterate: the dangerous illusion of *theoria* is that for a long time its origins in social-historical doing have been concealed. For example:

The evil commences when Heraclitus dared to state: Listening not to me but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that. . . . To be sure, one must struggle against personal authority as well as mere opinion, incoherent arbitrariness, the refusal to give others an account and explanation for what one says. . . . But do not listen to Heraclitus. His humility is but the height of arrogance. It is never the *logos* that you are listening to but always *someone*, such as he is, speaking from the place where he is at his own risk, but at yours too. And that which in the ‘pure theorist’ can be posited as a necessary postulate of responsibility and of the control over his words has become, necessarily, in the political thinkers the philosophical covers behind which they speak – *they* speak. They speak in the name of being and of the *eidōs* of man and of the city – like Plato. They speak in the name of the laws of history or of the proletariat – like Marx. They want to shield what they have to say – which maybe, and certainly has been, of immense importance – behind being, nature, reason, history, or the interests of a class ‘on the name of which’ they are expressing themselves. But no one ever speaks in the name of someone else – unless he has been explicitly delegated to do so. At most, others may recognize themselves in what is said – and even this ‘proves’ nothing, for what is said may and sometimes does induce a ‘recognition’ which nothing permits us to assert that it would have existed without this discourse, or that validates it. Millions of Germans ‘recognized themselves’ in Hitler’s discourse, millions of ‘communists’ in that of Stalin (4).

Here we can see what's at stake politically in not recognizing theory as a doing by someone, in a time and place, through categories that emerge in the social-historical. Do not listen to Heraclitus. How familiar this injunction seems to feminist ears. Do not listen to those who would say you are 'by nature' less rational, that if a woman were president pre-menstrual syndrome might make her set off a nuclear war, or that rape occurs in nature – 'nature' and 'science' has all too often sought to legitimate male/masculine political power. And all too often women have recognized themselves in these ways. However, what is privileged here is not simply the moment of recognition, but the moment of rupture that is privileged as a truth of an autonomous society for Castoriadis. In taking into account this opening/closing, or creation/destruction Castoriadis suggests that we critically engage with social theories that try to take account of and direct social transformation. In this task, he has worked through Marx, Weber and Merleau-Ponty to articulate how the work of the social imaginary or the imaginary institution of society has not been seen even by those most able to glimpse its work. This is not merely an intellectual matter, but a matter of how we think about the politics of social change.

In postulating the importance of thinking about what sorts of activity go unaccounted for in dominant theories of social transformation was not simply a "philosophical" decision (in the stereotypically negative meaning of the term as simple thought about by the mind) but due to a contradiction and gap in experience, observation and what Marxism as a theory could not illuminate in the context of post-war France and the Stalinist regime. In "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory," a text first published in the journal *Socialism ou Barbarie* in 1964/1965 and which he included as the first part of

The Imaginary Institution of Society (L'Institution Imaginaire de la Société, 1975),

Castoriadis makes his break with Marxism. At the time Castoriadis famously writes that he has a decision to remain a Marxist or remain a revolutionary (and true to Marx's spirit of social transformation as necessary for equality) -- and it is the latter to which he adheres. Castoriadis rightly credits Marx with bringing the social question vividly into the realm of politics. However, what became increasingly clear to him was that a "traditional" Marxist explanation of capitalism as an increasing crisis of production and immiseration could not account for the failure of a workers' revolution. Further, it became clear that strict adherence to a Marxist theory of the relations of production couldn't save the revolution; and indeed, the idea of salvation itself became troubling. What it led Castoriadis to was an investigation on how creativity emerges and an expansive definition of democracy as social transformation not tied to a privilege revolutionary subject but activated through the activity of groups i.e. students, women, ecologists, all of whom made claims to self-determination.

Part of the trouble of a "redemptive" understanding of Marxism was the systematization of Marx's ideas into a "set theory", without excesses or irresolvable dilemmas, and without the work, famously, of politics. Indeed, the transformation of Marxism into a finished theory he writes, "contained within it the death of its initial revolutionary inspiration" (*IIS*, 70). For Castoriadis,

The transformation of theoretical *activity* into a theoretical *system* which considers itself to be closed is the return of the most profound sense of the dominant culture. It is the alienation to what is already there, already created; it is the negation of the most profound content of the revolutionary project, the elimination of the real activity of human beings as the final source of all meaning, the forgetting of revolution as a radical upheaval and of autonomy as the supreme principle. It is the theoretician's claim to take on his own shoulders the weight of solving the problems of humanity. A completed theory claims to provide replies to what cannot be resolved except, if

this is possible, by historical praxis. Thus it can close its system only by making people comply in advance to its schemata, by submitting them to its categories, by leaving aside historical creation, all the while glorifying it in words. It can accept what happens in history only if it is a confirmation of theory, otherwise it combats it – which is the clearest way of expressing its intention to bring history to a halt (*IIS* 68-69, emphasis in original).

The worry about the submission to authority that knows where history is going is a heady thing, but it is a heteronomous move. It also, for Castoriadis, ignores the ways in which workers struggles have in fact tempered the crises of capitalism even as capitalism (and the “classless state” of the USSR) take on ever more bureaucratic forms.

But let’s return to Marx for a moment because the situation of a relationship between theory and doing is complicated, as Marx well knew, since we begin in a particular time and place. Indeed, Marx’s brilliance was to see in feudal society the workings of class. In his immanent critique of Marx, Castoriadis reveals the problem of Marx’s retrojection back into history of the categories of capitalism. While Marx rightly revealed that the meaning of a theory can’t be understood in isolation from the historical and social practice to which it corresponds, there can be no return to Marx as revelatory or doctrine – which was the case of many in the post-war era out of which Castoriadis and his collaborators at *Socialism ou Barbarie* were working. The systematization of Marxism for Castoriadis reveals an idealism ironically at its heart – Marx remained Hegelian in terms of the movement of history only substituting base-superstructure relations of production for Reason. Moreover, Castoriadis argues he well accepted the view of capitalist development of the 19th century which assumes a logic of rationality of mean-ends that cannot take account of anything radically new on the part of human activity. And while there is a tension between this “scientific” unfolding and the need for

class struggle, for Castoriadis this tension is not resolved by Marx. Instead, he writes, we find in Marx the “paradox of a thinker who is fully conscious of the historical relativity of capitalist categories and who at the same time projects them (or retro-jects them) onto the whole of human history. It should be well understood that this is not a criticism of Marx but a criticism of historical knowledge in general. *The paradox in question is constitutive of any effort to think history*” (34). The trick is to create practices and forms of being (i.e. reflective subjectivity which is basically a democratic citizenship) that can recognize in those paradoxes an opportunity to think and do otherwise.

Any activity may, and is subject to becoming, a system which appears *intemporal*. The only meaning that is registered when theory becomes a system is that which fits within its boundaries – anything else falls out as meaningless. While the young Marx did not see theory as a closed system (58), what emerged was that the Marxist knows where history *must* go (31). Such a teleological endeavor signals the petrification of Marx’s theory and creates a situation where political action becomes a matter of technique or technical action. Hence, and one can only imagine the reaction when Castoriadis threw out this charge, “the Marxist system participates in capitalist culture, in the most general sense of the term and it is therefore absurd to want to make it the instrument of revolution. This is absolutely true for Marxism taken as a system, as a whole“(67). However, Castoriadis continues, “It is true that the system is not completely consistent, and that in the mature Marx or in his heirs, one can often find ideas and formulations that continue the truly revolutionary and innovative inspiration of the beginning” (67). To think about beginnings without reinscribing in them a telos is a task Castoriadis sets for himself in exploring how we can think and judge where freedom would go without

resorting to a teleological vision of action. In other word, he tries to think a “temporality without telos” as a renewed “basis” for calls for democratic social transformation.

What if history is brought to a halt? If history is brought to a halt in the sense that we cannot see the activity of creation and destruction that make meanings emerge, then we are on the terrain that might be familiarly seen as ideological and a familiar view of theory as providing answers, reflections of Forms, or an end point to history. In this case all that emerges must be “more of the same”. Indeed, this for Castoriadis has been the legacy of “inherited thought”. In ontological terms this signals that being equals “being determined”; the political upshot of such ontology is the denial of responsibility for “our” creations, namely the institution of society which may occur in a variety of forms – the one most valued here is the democratic form. Castoriadis writes, “the struggle for democracy is the struggle for true self-government. . . . the aim of self-government is not to accept any *external* limits, true self-government entails explicit self-institution, which presupposes, the of course, the putting into question of the existing institution – and this, in principle, at any time” (*PPA*, 20).

Alienation occurs when the institution does not recognize in the imaginary of its institutions its own products. And, as Castoriadis notes, Marx knew this when he “went beyond a purely economic view and recognized the role of the imaginary”(132). However, Castoriadis insists that Marx saw the imaginary in a limited role and was prepared to recognize man’s imaginary creations – supernatural or social – only as a reflection of the real powerlessness of human beings.

The echoes of Max Weber are probably apparent by now. Castoriadis’s work has a strong debt to Weber’s. Where Weber falls short in his individualist method, however,

is in still remaining tied to a means-ends logic in explaining human behavior; this despite his work that identifies, especially with religion, the ways in which meanings are attached to behavior. Where Weber fell short was in coming up with an acknowledgement that there is a separate social imaginary which cannot be reduced to a collection of individual behaviors (*PPA*, 50). What we do is not always intelligible. The idea that what is intelligible is reducible to the product of individual action is to deny, for Castoriadis, the ontological form of the social imaginary as the institution of society.

Working towards articulating this social imaginary Castoriadis turns to how we think of language broadly as words, images, and figurations of particular societies. This is possible through his engagement with Merleau-Ponty's work. At the end of his essay "The Sayable and the Unsayable" on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Castoriadis ends with these lines: "The subject is not an opening in the sense of a window or a whole in the wall" (*CL*, 144). Then quoting from Merleau-Ponty's *Visible and Invisible* he continues: "The open, in the sense of a hole, that is Sartre, is Bergson, is negativism or ultra-positivism (Bergson) – indiscernible. There is no *nichtiges Nichts*' . . . It is opening, then, in the sense of the work of opening, constantly renewed inauguration, performance of the primitive spirit, the spirit of praxis. Or, in other words: the subject is that which opens" (*CL*, 144). This is a mind blowing contention: "the subject is that which opens." Immediately it's evident that we are not on the terrain of liberal individualism with its bounded selves, nor in the vicinity of traditional philosophy of consciousness. As is well-known, Merleau-Ponty himself had gone a far distance to break down the subject-object dichotomy in his investigations into language. Castoriadis takes these insights from Merleau-Ponty but pushes them to into what he calls a "twofold truth" that there is "the

new,” “as the irreducibility of things to what preceded them” and that the “usual was once the unusual” (137). That is, he argues, each language and each culture establish themselves (their particular institution of society) and themselves are the condition of their own being, becoming, and knowledge. We can dwell at this origin, but, “there are no absolute ruptures, no unbridgeable chasms, since it is only through the support lent by the available significations . . . that new meanings can emerge” (137).

This emphasis on openness means that significations are not located simply liminally, but are both indeterminate and infinitely determinable as an ontological matter. This opens up how something new may come to be and how what “is” is not fully “capturable” by social science methods.

Gender as Social Imaginary Signification

One way to test what an ontology of indeterminacy and the ontology of the institution of society at work is to think about gender. This is something Castoriadis has commented on but not explored in much depth concretely, however, what he has said are suggestive remarks for antimetaphysical politics. Let me before that open a parentheses that is not insignificant and address whether Castoriadis’s lack of concrete explorations of gender reveal a masculinist bias in his work. Feminist work even of sympathetic and affirmative counts cannot do without addressing this issue because it may reveal where gaps, antinomies, and false moves cutting into ostensibly democratic projects may lie. I don’t think in his theory of creative human activity or in terms of who can claim autonomy that Castoriadis displays such a bias. Certainly one can say that in his early writings the revolutionary subject is pretty militantly male – those Renault workers

tended not to be female.²¹ However, I don't see that as the case in his renewed democratic politics, although I will take up this question again in when I turn to his use of ancient Greece in exploring the implications of radical imagination for collective autonomy.

So let me explore the suggestive remarks he does make and test them off feminist concerns. Castoriadis writes that the institution of society is obliged to take into account that there are men and women.

But they are taken into account in and through a transformation of the *natural fact* of being-male and being-female into an *imaginary social signification* of being-man and being-woman which refers to the magma of all the imaginary significations of the society considered. Neither this transformation itself, nor the specific tenor of the signification in question can be deduced, produced or derived on the basis of the natural fact, which is always and everywhere the same. This natural fact puts stops or limits on the institution of society, but the consideration of these limits results in mere trivialities. . . . to say that a minimal heterosexual desire must be tolerated by the institution of society, under pain of rapid extinction of the collectivity in question, still says nothing about the unending alchemy of desire that we observe in history – and this is what is important to us. Likewise a natural fact can provide support or stimulus for a particular institution of signification, but an abyss separates this support or stimulus from a necessary and sufficient condition (229-230).

That is to say, the materiality of the body is never not important. Nor is it unimportant that if I say “I am not pregnant” that the veracity of my statement is assumed to be tested in a way that it would not be if Habermas utters the same sentence.²² There is an ensidic

²¹ That said, even in these years he wasn't inattentive to gender matters although it certainly wasn't a main focus. See, for one example, his “Sexual Education in the USSR” in *Social and Political Writings: volume 3, 1961-1979* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

²² I pick up this example from Linda Alcoff. She writes “Every concept of truth, after all, must allow for some indexical truths: truths indexed to particular speakers and locations (for example, “I am not pregnant”). But generally only one truth per index is allowed for, whereas immanent realism, like Putman's version-dependent realism, must allow for plural truths even in one specific indexed location. Different versions applied to the same indexed location might produce different truth claims: if, for example, pregnancy were defined more broadly, not as that condition which occurs between conception and birth but as a state involving the very capability of reproduction. Some fundamentalist arguments would seem to imply a notion of pregnancy not far from this, when they proscribe contraceptive devices

element (legein and teukhein) through which the materiality of the body matters, but that does not go far at all in terms of thinking about men and women. That is, the natural fact of being male or female, or of being transsexual or sexually doubled, or ambiguous in terms of genotype and phenotype (what is at the chromosomal level and what is expressed) in this framing is what imaginary social significations lean on in order to produce the complex workings of gender. Moira Gates, for instance, has worked philosophically through the idea of the imaginary body as a way to link the “natural fact of being male or female” to the meaningful experiences of our bodies through the working of the imaginary. To say that the matter of the body is immaterial is to overlook a mode of our being (as living beings) and how this interacts inherently through “leaning on” of our particular biology and morphology as well as on the psyche and the institutions of society and the significations attendant upon those. To reduce the meaning of sex to one element goes deeply against the spirit that Castoriadis is trying to cultivate and deeply against a diverse array of feminist analyses. For this reason I find it productive to think about sex/gender/sexuality through the framework of a magma of social imaginary significations; assuming that sex is not the nature on which gender as a cultural construct builds and that gender shapes how we think of sex as two (despite scientific evidence)²³ I’m not sure of the origin of the conjunction sex/gender/sexuality, but I first encountered it in the title of a class that Carole Vance was giving in the Netherlands and it struck me that yes, that is a productive way to think about the intimacy between sex (as chromosomes, hormones, bodies, activity) and gender (as the assumption

that block conception and refer to such devices as methods of abortion.” *Real Knowing: New Versions of Coherence Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 219.

²³ The most famous evidence being offered by Anne Fausto-Sterling’s “The Five Sexes,” *the Sciences* (March/April 1993): 20-25 – but one can also see this in the commonplace anxiety that there is not a certain test for femaleness used for female athletes.

that behaviors and beings come in two types as masculine and feminine; that this is transgressed or challenged is signaled by the term “transgendered”) and sexuality (that there is no natural heterosexual desire as the only model of desire, there is a minimum of attraction yes for reproduction, but this cannot account for the diversity of desire – as Castoriadis often remarked: “How is it that the fetishist can mistake a shoe for a penis?” – we have desire because we have representation). It would be absurd to say that erectile dysfunction is simply a male disease as the result of prostate cancer and leave it as a matter simply of science. As we know, there is a medical treatment for erectile dysfunction but that this alone cannot elucidate the booming business in Viagra and other drugs that boost performance, nor the fact than many men without the physical need of such drugs are taking them in large numbers despite the health risks. To think about gender on the model of a magma of sex/gender/sexuality is to loosen the hold of reductionist theories of gender, but to recognize the there is an interaction of inherence that we can never fully separate of know among the first natural stratum, the psyche, and society. Politically what “leaning on” signals is that gender can never simply be a social construction – it is not simply the effect of power if by this we mean only the effect of power – and that we can reflect and work on changing what gender means to bring things in accordance with autonomy (if that is our goal, the Promise Keepers have another goal).²⁴

²⁴ The Promise Keepers are an evangelical Christian men’s group that works to strengthen the nuclear family by asking men to keep their promises to their wives, children and Jesus. Drucilla Cornell has written on the logics of masculinity underlying the father’s movement of which PK is a part and of the hierarchical gender roles they keep in place. See also David Gutterman “Exodus and the Chosen Men of God: Promise Keepers and the Theology of Masculinity” in *Essays on Masculinity and Christianity*, ed. Dane S. Claussen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) 113-132. There is, however, an existential component to the Promise Keepers that exceeds its overt gendered hierarchy. Anecdotally I can say that one reason my father, who I also consider to be a feminist, has regularly gone to PK meetings is that, on my interpretation, it is one of the few locations in which his decision to make fatherhood a priority is acknowledged as

Thinking the New

The political implications of an ontology of historical creation are significant. The abyss that is opened up with the problem of the novelty in history or, as Castoriadis notes, creation *ex nihilo*, is freedom in the sense that the radical groundlessness of meaning is apparent and this is terrifying. Thus he writes that “Hobbes was right, though for the wrong reasons. Fear of death is indeed the mainstay of institutions. Not the fear of being killed by the next man but the justified fear that everything, even meaning, will dissolve” (*PPA*, 136). Others have remarked on the dread of such contingency. For instance, Hannah Arendt also recognizes the terrifying and disorienting realization of the contingency of meaning. She writes, for instance, that freedom as “arising out of spontaneously beginning” is terrifying in its “ineluctable randomness” where many professional thinkers have been unwilling to “pay the price of contingency for the questionable gift of spontaneity, of being able to do what could be left undone.”²⁵

In an acknowledgement of Hannah Arendt’s work, Castoriadis claims that “there are two dimensions to Arendt’s work which are of relevance for contemporary thought: “the analysis of totalitarianism and the attempt to reconstruct political thinking.”²⁶ He continues,

The deep connection between the two should be obvious. It is the experience of totalitarianism – and the concomitant collapse of both the liberal and Marxist outlook – which led Hannah Arendt to the search for a new framework of political thought.

valuable. Since he didn’t golf every weekend or play poker with the boys or hunt (this is West Virginia I’m talking about) there was such a restricted arena for “thinking” a good father at home with his kids, cooking, etc. in the 1960s and 1970s and arguably through today.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 203;198. Hereafter *LM* cited in text.

²⁶ Castoriadis, “The Destinies of Totalitarianism,” *Salmagundi* (1983): 107.

If I have chosen to discuss here the problems of totalitarianism, it is, first of all, because the topic is central to my present concerns which, I dare say, ought to concern us all. But it is also for a less conjectural reason. This is the field where Hannah Arendt had the audacity to tackle something new and, in fact, incomprehensible without pretending that it was anything but that.²⁷

For neither Arendt nor Castoriadis could totalitarianism in its fascist and communist forms be “explained” through cause and effect or complete understanding of the factors at play – material, ideological, etc. – that led to such phenomenon. That is, both recognize the burden of this new formation and the burden of making it meaningful even if that reveals the utter *meaninglessness* of twentieth century totalitarianism.²⁸ For Arendt, this is unprecedented. Castoriadis notes that: “Implicit in Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism is the assumption that we face here something which not only transcends inherited ‘theories about history,’ but transcends *any* ‘theory.’”

It’s no secret that the work of Castoriadis and Arendt invite comparison. Both shared a nexus of concerns about totalitarianism, the denial of political judgment in scientific Marxism, the necessity of political action, a return to Athenian democracy for inspiration, both admired councilist forms of democracy especially in the brief case of Hungary (although for different reasons), both shared an interest in the imagination, and both wrestled with the relationship between philosophy and politics and making judgments without metaphysical certainty. As Joel Whitebook remarks: “In reaction to Marxism and the illusion of historical inevitability – with its attendant consequences – Castoriadis, like Hannah Arendt, was determined to defend the possibility of novelty in

²⁷ Ibid., 107.

²⁸ See Arendt *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*. New ed. With added prefaces (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1973) especially the last chapter .

history.”²⁹

That said, it’s also no secret that the question of the social divides their work. Castoriadis, after all, first offered a non-Marxist view of socialism to an audience still enthralled with Soviet-style communism and not yet critical of Stalin – this was a driving force behind the founding of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Placing him politically on the left is easy to do; finding the nuances with his thought within the left and in conjunction with republican thinkers is a more complex task. Hannah Arendt, although long shunned by leftists for her neglect of the social and disparagement of labor in relation to action, can’t easily be placed on an ideological spectrum of left, liberal or conservative. Castoriadis himself writes of Arendt’s “ambiguity” in terms of the social that: “She rightly saw that politics is destroyed when it becomes a mask for the defense and assertion of ‘interests’. The political space is then hopelessly fragmented. But *if* society is, in reality, strongly divided along conflicting ‘interests’ – as it is today – insistence on the autonomy of politics becomes gratuitous. The answer, then, is not to ignore the ‘social,’ but to change it so that the conflict of ‘social’ – that is economic – interests cease to be the dominant factor in shaping political attitudes” (*PPA*, 112). Castoriadis’s elucidation of politics (which is always for him democratic politics as he understands it) does fundamentally revolve around a changed understanding of the social which must indeed be democratic. The individual is formed by the city and educates the human being (indeed, ‘makes’ the human being) which is a Greek ideal at the emergence of politics and philosophy and it remains an assumption for Castoriadis as well. Democracy must be a form of society. To recognize this does require turning to an investigation of the emergence of the new to

²⁹ Joel Whitebook, “Requiem for a *Selbstdenker*: Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997),” *Constellations* 5.2 (1998): 145.

track the form (*eidos*) of society.

The emergence of the new reveals that it cannot be accounted for in terms of cause and effect, or in terms of potentiality and realization as Aristotle would have it (208). The new, instead, opens up the subject of revolution, the possibility of the overthrow of, for example, gender norms, assumptions about race or class status—in effect, revealing that there is no solid ground that remains steadfast or secure. The anxiety invoked by the knowledge of this contingency challenges the status of necessity and of determination. Because of the intensity of this anxiety Arendt rhetorically asks: “Isn’t trust in necessity, the conviction that everything is as ‘it was to be,’ infinitely preferable to freedom bought at the price of contingency?” (196). More than that, our freedom is bought at the price of the creation and destruction of forms of being whether they are social or individual.

However, Arendt and Castoriadis use different terms to talk about creation *ex nihilo*. The way Arendt most famously speaks of the fact that there is novelty in history is due to the fact of human plurality and the fact of natality. By natality Arendt means that there are in the world new beginnings in the form of new births.³⁰ The mental endowment that we have for beginning something new is rooted in the fact of natality, that humans are themselves beginners. Following Augustine she notes that “man’s capacity for beginning [is so] because he himself is a beginning.”³¹ She also notes this in *On Revolution* where she writes that “men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence

³⁰ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987): 158. Hereafter *LM*.

beginners, that the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.³² This capacity for beginning, Arendt continues, that "of which we know that it could just as well not be" opens up the abyss of meaninglessness -- provoking the anxiety that things may not be as they *ought* to be" (*LM*, 195; 196). This recognition shouldn't entice one into a ready solace. Rather, the challenge then is to preserve, enact, re-new the public space in which such newness can be expressed as a matter of freedom understood as action. For a bit more detail of how Arendt gets to the problem of the new via Kant, she writes, the problem of the new is that it deals with absolute beginning, with creation *ex nihilo*. That is, there is no necessary series unfolding in time and space, nor is there a potential, in Aristotelian terms, that is realized. Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* is embarrassed (Arendt) and covers over (Heidegger; Castoriadis) the idea that the will deals with a "power of spontaneously beginning" a new series (see Arendt, *LM*, 28). For Kant, the 'spontaneous creation' of a new series, a creation that is not contained in what is, is terrifying. Arendt describes not Kant's terror, but his embarrassment (29) for what in fact, could ground or explain this emergence? If, she continues, Kant could have understood, as did Augustine, that the 'faculty of spontaneously beginning a new series in time' has to do with the relative, that is human (as opposed to the absolute, that is, divine) sense of beginning, then he "might have agreed that the freedom of a *relatively* absolute spontaneity is not more embarrassing to human reason than the fact that men are *born* -- newcomers again and again to the world that preceded them in time" (110). And she concludes this section by saying, "The freedom of spontaneity is part and parcel of the human condition. Its mental organ is the Will" (110). The future, Arendt notes, is the Will's project (158).

³² *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965): 211.

For Castoriadis, creation *is* the radical imagination and for him divine creation is a contradiction in terms. There is no creation that emerges from Forms or the mind of God that is not production—based on an original Form or idea in the mind of God. However, above I use Castoriadis' term of creation/imagination and Arendt's term the new/nativity to be the same problematic. And they do rub up against one another in compelling ways on their own terms and through the work of interpretation.

Although we are most often unaware of thinking as a form of social-historical doing, for Castoriadis elucidation is a way to become aware of this in certain moments with the help of particular democratic practices. It is, to be specific, a social-historical creation coincident with the emergence of democracy and the formulations of politics and philosophy that accompany it.

The abyss that is opened up with the problem of the new is freedom in the sense that the radical groundlessness of meaning is apparent and this is terrifying. Thus, the idea that everything is as it was meant to be is comforting, rather than face the responsibility of 'our' creations. Creative ontology means that there is a level of openness to society and individuals that is constantly solidified, or in Arendt's terms, forgotten, in the world. To break solidified meanings we must take responsibility for 'our' creations at the social-historical and individual level, by constantly, through reflection, breaking the closure of our social world. This is the practice of autonomous action in the practice of democracy. Yet, we only recognize this capacity of being in rare instances when the 'solidity' of being is exposed, when what 'is' is opened to question. To break the closure of what is highlights the provisional and open-ended nature of the future. A future, however, that cannot be made in just any way one chooses.

This is an understanding of novelty that departs from those that draw resources more on “materialist” immanence. For example, I mentioned above the innovative work being done on ontologies of becoming as a way to think about how something new comes into being besides on the model of a sovereign will. Elizabeth Grosz is one of the most innovative feminist philosophers working in this register drawing on Spinoza, Deleuze, biological theory, and Bergson. She also recognizes the anxiety producing nature of the new. She writes, “The concept of the absolutely new raises many anxieties. While it is clear that *newness*, *creativity*, *innovation* and *progress* are all terms deemed social positives, there is a more disconcerting notion of unpredictable, disordered or uncontainable change.”³³ Grosz suggests that we embrace and affirm (along with Minkowski) “the joyous open-endedness of the future, without, however, asserting that such indeterminacy functions only in the realm of consciousness, or even life itself.”³⁴ Grosz wants to take seriously the vitalism of Bergson and Minkowski. While Grosz is not uncritical of vitalist and virtualist ideas, she does find in this “Bergsonian disordering, perhaps the concept of the virtual [that] may prove central in reinvigorating the concept of the future insofar as it refuses to tie it to the realization of possibilities (the following of a plan), linking it instead to the unpredictable, uncertain actualization of virtualities.”³⁵ Here Grosz speculates productively about how we might be open to novelties and I appreciate her interdisciplinary work in the sciences, phenomenology and philosophy. However, this work misses an explicit political dimension that requires making sense of, reflecting on, what the future holds.³⁶ The future, after all, can hold many horrors as

³³ Elizabeth Grosz, “Thinking the New” 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁶ I think William Connolly better addresses the political implications and imbrications of an ontology of

Grosz is well aware. The other worry has directly to do with what happens when we don't take account of a social imaginary as a mode of being with its own flux of creation/destruction. That is, should we see vitality on the model of "naturalist" becomings? This tends to downplay what is also creative about culture understood here as the social imaginary instituted each time in particular ways. Grosz has said that culture is subtractive.³⁷ This is clearly true – we can capture only inadequately in language the pulsing of blood, synapses, life in the oceans, the expansion of the universe – but is culture *only* subtractive? To highlight the political stakes involved in possibilities as novelty and "futures yet unthought" should not ignore that all futures are not ones we would endorse as a democratic matter.

Like ontologies of becoming, in its disruptive qualities, as well as in its ambiguous creative dimension, the radical imagination signals a profoundly different understanding of ontology not addressed by inherited thought. Dick Howard suggests that for Castoriadis ontology becomes political writing: "The idea of the *creative* ability of human praxis, producing radical alterity and thus historical change, is fundamental to the new ontology Castoriadis sees as necessary."³⁸ In a more critical vein, Axel Honneth wonders if Castoriadis "strips the exceptional temporal and social quality away from the idea of revolutionary praxis by giving it the ontological status of a supra-personal process of creation".³⁹ Hence, as Honneth signals in the title of his chapter, "Rescuing the revolution with an ontology: On Cornelius Castoriadis' Theory of Society," he suggests

becoming. See his *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

³⁷ Grosz argues this in her lecture given at the Pembroke Center, Brown University in the fall of 2004.

³⁸ Dick Howard, *The Marxian Legacy*. Second edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 248.

³⁹ Axel Honneth, "Rescuing the revolution with an ontology: On Cornelius Castoriadis' Theory of Society," *Constellations* 14 (1986): 62-78.

that there is a salvation impulse in Castoriadis's turn to ontology. If true, this would indeed be ironic because Castoriadis has been explicitly critical of such moves to salvation, preferring instead the trope of tragedy as the situation of our political activity. Castoriadis responds to this criticism writing specifically that we concern ourselves with ontology in order to save out thought and our coherency.⁴⁰ However, this appears as an inadequate response to Honneth's remarks. A better response, although he was not always good at doing this because sometimes they slide into one another, is to insist on two moments: the creativity of human activity "as a fact", but also the political move to reflect and judge and enact such moments lucidly is part of a democratic struggle. The paradox is that one conditions the other. Citing in greater depth his response to Honneth in "Done and To Be Done" (Fait et à Faire) Castoriadis notes the following:

We do not philosophize – we do not concern ourselves with ontology – in order to save the revolution. . . but in order to save our thought, and our coherency. The idea that an ontology, or a cosmology, might be able to save the revolution belongs to Hegelo-Marxism – that is, to a conception as far removed as possible from my own. An ontological investigation oriented toward the idea of creation leaves room, in the most abstract way, for the possibility of the instauration of an autonomous society as well as for the reality of Stalinism and Nazism. At this level, and almost all others, creation has no value content, and politics does not allow itself to be 'deduced' from ontology" (*CR*, 361-2).

Here there is a level of abstraction that leads to an understandable response such as "ok, but could you give an example of what saving our thought and our coherency looks like?" – because the project of autonomy must have a content value that is claimed and for which we struggle. So, while I think Honneth is wrong about a salvation claim with an ontology of indeterminacy because in and of itself it is inadequate unless given content

⁴⁰ Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 361. Hereafter *CR* cited in text.

by democratic practices traceable in the workings of instituting and instituted significations, I think he is right to wonder more about how what is potential (praxis) can become actual particularly in modernity given that autonomy “founds itself.” I think we can see examples of this but then we will be more optimistic than Castoriadis who saw only a waning of the project of autonomy in modernity (after 1930!) and the rise of the other great signification of the West rational mastery, rather than a smaller proliferation of autonomous struggles and heteronomous closures. This, as I’ll explore in Chapter Three pushes me into an immanent critique of his work to tackle how, for instance, human rights claims and feminist struggles are proliferating globally even as our autonomy is constantly under threat and how we come to think of what bounds a collectivity. For now though, in the realm of the social historical and the praxis of autonomy, his work on the instituting social imaginary and the instituted is a productive line for thinking about gender as a signification and elucidating the ways in which gender is creatively deployed, i.e. women, in democratic practices.

Indeterminacy

By conceptualizing autonomy as a project, Castoriadis writes that autonomy is an ongoing project. We must live in a world where coherence is available in terms of meaning. Attempting to get out from under the ontological assumptions of traditional metaphysics where Being is “being-determined”, Castoriadis “discovers” an ontology that has been “covered over by inherited thought”: that of the workings of the radical imagination. In uncovering this other tradition of imagination as more than imitation or illusion, more than simply a matter of vision of a particular self, Castoriadis writes that

imagination is "in its essence rebellious against determinacy" (*WF*, 214). The determinacy of which he speaks is the dominant conception of Western thought that Being is being-determined, that Being has a wholeness and completeness to it that we may never know in our phenomenal world but that we assume as an ahistorical and transcendent given – this is traditional metaphysics. This rebelliousness against determinacy on the part of another mode of being, however, is not simply a matter of sociological concern but has implications for thinking in terms of traditional ontology and epistemology – and politics.

Is there a critical and affirmative purchase to the radical imagination that Castoriadis develops for feminist theory? I think that there is and I think that it is threefold: first, the work on the radical imagination brings us back again to how we think about society and social transformation (if feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations and keeping in play the indeterminacy of sex/gender/sexuality then it's essential to keep thinking what we are doing as transformative even if in unintended ways); second, we're reminded that critique occurs when a gap or rupture in what is opened up in social life but that it is inadequate, because politically dubious, simply to celebrate that gap or the contingency of gender vis-à-vis bodies and history without positing a another formulation of what would be better even at the risk of closing down the meaning of gender once again; and finally, that autonomy as a praxis relies on our inability to have full knowledge of all we say or do – and that this is the condition for formulating democratic openings (creation/destruction) and making sense of how we know what we do.

Chapter Two

Democracy as the Project of Autonomy: Individual and Collective

Now, at the same time that the rage for "power," the fetishism for "rational mastery," waxes triumphant, the other great imaginary signification of Greco-Western history -- that of autonomy, notably in its political manifestations -- seems to be suffering an eclipse. The present crisis of humanity is a crisis of politics in a grand sense, a crisis of creativity and of our political imagination as well as of political participation by individuals (Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, 274).

A major tenet of early radical feminist theory, as developed in England and the United States, was that the personal is political. In both countries, however, a conservative right has reappropriated this idea, seeking to push through legislation and policies that rely on the politicization of raced and sexed bodies. In addition, with the expansion of consumerism and commodification deeper into personal lives and broader throughout the global network, the language of the market has taken over and infiltrated political discussion, effecting a privatization of the political that obscures collective opportunities for resistance. Feminists, then, are re-siting politics, are turning to theoretical strategies capable of addressing the complexity of postmodern interconnections, because traditional approaches hinder efforts to negotiate this new terrain (Jodi Dean, *Feminism and the New Democracy: Resiting the Political*, 4)

Democracy should be understood as the regime of self-limitation according to Castoriadis. In a democracy we can do anything,¹ but we ought not to. The normative "ought" signals that the laws we give ourselves are value-laden, always at risk, and must be defended reasonably if we are to take seriously that autonomy means that I/we want autonomy for others. This chapter investigates the critical purchase an idea of democracy as self-limitation has for the praxis of autonomy as a collective matter for feminists trying

¹ This should be obvious to a casual observer if we think about the prisoner abuses committed by American soldiers, men and women, against those held at Abu Gharib in Iraq. Unless, we think of this as a "few bad apples," which seems to mean being willful blind to the institutional culture (or social imaginary significations) that allowed international laws and our own military code of justice to be ignored, then we should see this as a "democratic" excess.

to negotiate the complexity of postmodern conditions. Assuming that modernity is neither simply increasing rational mastery, nor the easy confidence in greater equality, but the tension between them, signals that we should define politics not through sovereignty but rather as a continual struggle for securing the conditions for our freedom. This is akin to how Jacques Rancière defines politics against sovereignty and a police order as the continual struggle for the recognition of basic equality.² Democracy is a form of society for Castoriadis (and for Claude Lefort) which recognizes its own indeterminacy as a condition of its autonomy both in its doing – through politics as participatory collective action – and in its knowing – through philosophy as thinking and putting into question our own investments in particular social imaginary significations. If, following Castoriadis, our democracy is contingent on the social imaginary significations of its emergence, in fifth century Greece and in Western modernity, and in tension currently with that other great social imaginary signification, capitalism with its logic of rational mastery (of nature, of bodies) how can we tell the difference? As Claude Lefort puts it, “Democracy thus proves to be the historical society *par excellence*, a society which, in its very form, welcomes and preserves indeterminacy.”³ That is, “the important point is that democracy is instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*.”⁴ And yet, we have the burden of making normative claims because of that very indeterminacy of *nomos*. That is, *nomos*, understood broadly as ways of life, institutions and specific laws, is what is to give shape to *phusis* our nature which we can do through the work of praxis.

² Jacques Rancière, “Peuple ou Multitudes?” [People or Multitudes?] 9 (mai-juin 2002) <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/article>, accessed August 2, 2005.

³ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

In this chapter I ask: Given the many critiques of sovereignty, is it possible for autonomy based on spontaneity to steer between universality and contingency in a way that refigures the universal claimed in a way that is more capacious?; How is it possible to recognize a universal claim i.e., autonomy, necessary for ethical and political practice if every foundation is contingent? I look to how thinking of the praxis of autonomy as an ongoing project is a valuable way to think through how we claim autonomy necessarily as an individual and collective manner. That is, I suggest that an understanding of democratic theory as an unresolved dialectic of openness and closure allows us to think through the complexities of modern/postmodern power (explicit and disciplinary) but that doesn't shirk on the fact that we must always investigate the content given to, we give, to *nomos*. As a secondary matter, this will push us to think again about reflection central to praxis as judgments. This opens up how we might think about modalities of equality that we defend as part of our freedom. I use the phrase modalities of equality to open up that in a democratic society there may be (and should be) simultaneous legitimate democratic claims for gender equality judged by the location and reasons we give (*logon didonai*). For example, as a critical and normative claim to track the numbers of women and men in political office follows a logic of gender parity.⁵ But such a logic extended liberally has led to the well know equality versus difference debate within feminist theory. Simply put

⁵ See Center for American Women and Politics website for an up-to-date list of the situation of women in United States political office. On this site gender is also broken down by party, race, ethnicity and territory i.e. if this is in the continental United States or a territory such as Puerto Rico. For an international tracking of these statistics see IDEA. See also the French Parity constitutional law that mandates equal numbers of male and female candidates in national elections. As Genevieve Fraisse, a supporter of parity on political grounds, what is unique about the parity law is that it is in Article 3 on sovereignty which she takes to signal the recognition and bringing into being women as full citizens. The law and its justifications have, however, been extremely controversial. See the collection *Le Piège de la Parité: Arguments pour un débat (The Trap of Parity: Arguments for Debate)* ed. Micheline Amar (Hachette Littératures, 1999). Translation my own.

that gender equality is to be judged against men and fairness tested on a model of sameness (leading to problems about how to treat reproduction, mothering, sedimented sexism in institutions) or difference (how to judge just what differences should be taken into account for fairness). However, this doesn't cancel out the political and normative importance of using gender parity as an example of inequality that cuts into the project of autonomy – but it is not the only way to judge this and if extended as *the* rule would lead to unfairness and heteronomous practices. I think that autonomy as a social signification in tension with the social signification of rational mastery help us to think through how challenging it is in modernity/postmodernity to enact our freedom. This remains an insight that Marx and class based political struggles have demonstrated in ideas and action. Although Castoriadis was extremely pessimistic about the continual development of the project of autonomy in the second half of the twentieth century, I suggest we go beyond his assessment to see how autonomy and heteronomy have proliferated rather than waned, something we can see particularly when we track this in terms of gender. Castoriadis's inability to see the persistence of the praxis of autonomy need not lead to the rejection of his theory of autonomy as a democratic practice, but it does point to limits to his vision of democracy.

In particular, I address two sticking points in terms of how he thinks about the dynamism of autonomy as a collective matter: first, there are times when it seems as though Castoriadis overdraws the distinction between autonomous societies and heteronomous ones. To be fair, within modern liberal democracies he is tracking a tension between competing social imaginary significations – those of rational mastery and autonomy – but this still raises the question about the intimacy of explicit power (*le*

politique) and politics (*la politique*) given that it is through politics as autonomous activity that is to check explicit power. Can these be so distinct? More directly, how can Castoriadis account for what is often a founding violence or explicit exercise of power as part of democratic revolutions? This is something which Claude Lefort and Hannah Arendt have tried to work through as a matter of republican politics.

Second, while Castoriadis was concerned that the project of autonomy be substantive, in his later writings⁶ autonomy can seem abstract or almost utopian at times. Can he do more than offer a direct democratic (or councilist) approach to modern democracies? Or, what are we to make of his lack of elucidation of the power of rights claims (civil and human) in modern democracies and around the world? Can the idea of democracy as a regime of self-limitation be hospitable to representative politics?

That said, the general argument of this chapter is that autonomy as a praxis opens up a way of making judgments in the name of autonomy that are contingent and also necessary. This is done not through *a priori* assessments or through the work of the transcendental imagination, but through fostering examples of autonomous activity by recognizing the spontaneity of the radical imagination. As is well-known, feminist theory has been negotiating the shoals of universality and contingency for some time now. In the wake of critiques by women of color, postcolonial and postmodern critiques of identity politics as essentializing women, Judith Butler spoke of the importance of recognizing “contingent foundations” in political theory.⁷ That is, to recognize that foundational concepts such as autonomy, rights, women and dependent upon historical

⁶ By later writings I mean those after “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” which includes the three volumes of political and social writings published in English.

⁷ Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

assumptions laden with nexus of power/knowledge. Such contingency masquerades as true, authentic and transcendental. For feminist politics to authorize its claims, she contends, the foundational weight granted “women” must be recognized as the site of political contestation.⁸ Arguing that the “rifts among women” as to the content of the category women be the “ungrounded ground of feminist theory,” Butler advocated the release of “multiple significations” to emancipate “women” from the “maternal and racist ontologies to which it had been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear.”⁹ The challenge, revisited almost ten years later in the dialogic text *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, is now not simply how to dislodge the phantasmatic mastery of a masculine, white, heterosexual subject, but how to continue to make universal claims.¹⁰ Her entry, “Contesting Universalities,” Butler argues that a central challenge in claiming universals is that of adjudicating among competing claims to universality.¹¹ “Thus, the question for such [social] movements will be how to relate a particular claim to one that is universal, where the universal is figured as anterior to the particular, and where the presumption is that a logical incommensurability governs the relation between two terms” (167) The challenge, she argues, is one of translation of competing notions of universality. Assuming that the project of autonomy is about positing foundations that are contingent need not lead to political impotence, but is instead the very condition for our democratic politics. In this regard we need, as Castoriadis suggest, both an acknowledgement of autonomy as a project as a *de facto* matter and as a *de jure* matter.

⁸ Ibid. 8.

⁹ Ibid. 16

¹⁰ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000).

¹¹ Ibid. 163.

Let me briefly draw out why autonomy as praxis is attentive to both matters. For example, Patricia Misciagno offers an understanding of feminism as praxis that is attentive to social transformation and the novel ways women act autonomously. As she puts it, feminism understood as a praxis demonstrates that feminism arises autonomously from within individuals based on their experiences of inequities, unfairness and contradictions in their lives.¹² In this way she argues that feminism is better understood as a praxis than as a social movement because the model of social movements downplays ordinary feminist activities in favor of large demonstrations and easily identifiable leaders.¹³ That is, when one “measures” feminist activity simply by conscious identification with feminist ideology as equal rights or calls for liberation. However, if we understand feminism as what Misciagno calls *de facto* feminism we can underscore the paradox of feminism – “that women have and do feminism even while bracketing the ideology of feminism.”¹⁴ I agree that such an emphasis on praxis with its attention to the activity of individuals as plural and historically nuanced can help us to explain the innovative and unexpected ways in which women (and men) experience shifts in gender relations and make claims to their self-determination in light of the increasingly rapid changes of late capitalist, globalizing society.¹⁵ I agree as well that this opens up democratic possibilities for thinking about politics and social transformation in ways that

¹² My thanks to Mary Hawkesworth for pointing out this reference to me. She refers to Misciagno in her article “The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 4 (2004): 973.

¹³ See her *Rethinking Feminist Identification: The Case for De Facto Feminism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁵ Mary Hawkesworth develops this point from Misciagno saying: “Conceptualizing feminism as praxis helps to make sense of the multiplicity and poly-vocality of feminist activism. Within a praxis frame, there could be as many modes of feminism as there are lived experiences of raced-gendered inequities” “The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 4 (2004): 973.

take account of the unnerving acknowledgment of novelty in history – whether this occurs in terms of gender relations, weapons of mass destruction, or human rights. Indeed, the idea of a *de facto* feminism traces how such autonomous activities come to be, what they mean, and how they may be defended and elucidated.

However, I think we need to reflect as well on the necessity of a *de jure* moment more so than Misciagno does. I suggest we do this not in the sense of a regulative ideal, but in the sense of autonomy as an individual and collective project about positing substantive values. Misciagno has a sense of *de jure* praxis in her work, namely, challenging patriarchy and asserting autonomy as the *de facto* praxis of feminism. Overlooking the *de jure* moment explicitly, however, downplays how values are expressed unconsciously and consciously. To recognize what we claim as right by law is not necessarily to reinscribe a philosophy of consciousness that would deny its own historicity. In this task Castoriadis's defense of autonomy as a praxis that is both *de facto* (anthropological/psychological) and *de jure* (political/philosophical) is valuable in thinking through the importance of moments of decision (*kairos*) which are also, necessarily moments of political judgment.

The other issue that Misciagno's work raises is that she seems to have an implicit idea of progress which downplays the importance of making nuanced judgments about different forms or modes of *de facto* feminism. For instance, she writes, that the actions of *de facto* feminists “underscores in a quite convincing way the central fact of our analysis – that the dissolution of patriarchy brought on by *de facto* feminist praxis has also brought with it a positive normative contribution at every turn.”¹⁶ Misciagno has contributed in a straight-forward manner the importance of feminist activity as a *de facto*

¹⁶ Ibid., 102.

matter, but without an analysis of the risk involved in autonomy as praxis we may risk too readily downplaying the rifts and need for judgment about diverse feminist leadership practices. Will we know them when we see them? To “know them when we see them” means offering also *de jure* claims about how we track feminist activity.

Castoriadis himself in an acknowledgement similar to Misciagno’s makes a related claim. Praxis, he notes, signifies an ongoing activity; it may be lucid or not, aware or not. For instance, in "Reflections on 'Rationality' and 'Development': Presentation and Response to Critics," Castoriadis he writes:

The most important social and historical transformation of the contemporary era, . . . is neither the Russian Revolution nor the bureaucratic revolution in China but the changing situation of women and of her role in society. This change, . . . has been carried out collectively, anonymously, daily, by women themselves, without their even explicitly representing it to themselves its goals; . . . twenty-four hours a day, in the home, at work, in the kitchen, in bed, in the street, in relation to children, to their husbands, they have gradually transformed the situation. Not only could planners, technicians, economists, sociologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts not have foreseen this, but they were not even able to see it when it began to take shape. (*PPA*, 204-205)

What is noticeable about the above passage in terms of the social-historical transformation about women's "place" in the world is that it has occurred, first, "without" foundations ("without their even explicitly representing to themselves its goals [of the transformation of her role in society]"), and second, without the "authority" or credentials of theory ("It has been carried out collectively, anonymously, daily, by women themselves" and not even those who could theorize this were "able to see it when it began to take shape"). Indeed, this is representative of the revolutionary praxis Castoriadis speaks of. However, it is certainly wrong to characterize these actions as only unreflective; it is right to suggest that this is not an action led simply by conscious will,

but neither is it without the practice of autonomy. There is, despite the fact that he doesn't acknowledge it here, a political awareness, a lucidity, even if much contested, about the struggle for women's autonomy. So what is this idea of praxis if it is more than simply practices?

Habermas claims that Castoriadis uses praxis in an Aristotelian way. Habermas argues that:

Castoriadis (like Aristotle) finds the characteristics of an unabridged praxis in instances of political, artistic, medical, and educational practice. They all bear their purposes within themselves and cannot be reduced to their purposive-rational organization of means. Praxis follows a project, not in the manner in which a theory precedes its application, but as an anticipation that can be corrected and enlarged in the course of practical enactment. Praxis is related to the totality of life achievements in which it is at the same time embedded; as a totality it escapes any objectifying grasp. And, finally, praxis aims at promoting autonomy. . . ¹⁷

The upshot of this criticism is that for Habermas Castoriadis offers an inadequate understanding of intersubjective practice because his Aristotelian inspired notion of praxis, albeit tempered by hermeneutics and a critique of Marxism dogmatism, remains tied to an “ecstatic moment erupting from the continuum of time when something absolutely new is formed”.¹⁸ Thus, continues Habermas, “The self-instituting society replaces the self-positing subject” and there is no way for Castoriadis to take account of how the subject is mediated by and mediates society.¹⁹ But Habermas misunderstands what praxis does for Castoriadis as a way to risk making sense in ways that are more democratic both individually and collectively. There is no kernel of an ultimate development within praxis (à la Aristotle) in a democratic society. For Aristotle praxis knows where it will go, it has a telos. Praxis for Castoriadis is a *modality* of human

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 328.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 330.

making and doing which aims at a transformation of myself to the Other (myself, another being) and because of this transformation – in psychoanalysis and pedagogy it may be “concrete, and nominally designated” – but in politics it can also be indefinite (*WF*, 399). Therefore the political question, “what am I/we to do?” remains a question. Judgment in this matter of what is to be done in terms of such praxis is another step for Castoriadis. Autonomy, he notes can be end and guide but “it does not resolve for us effectively actual situations” (400).

Thus, Castoriadis does not abandon the distinction between meaning and validity (331), but rather pushes us to think about the conditions that make an event meaningful which may be different from those that allow us to see them as valid or true in terms of a project of autonomy. Castoriadis does not assume that an autonomous subject exists outside of history, society, or the institution of language – there is no pre-political individual to whom rights adhere. This claim highlights the importance of viewing autonomy not as an entity or possession, but as a continual project shaped by social life. Castoriadis continues autonomy is freedom understood not in the inherited, metaphysical sense as sovereign will, but as effective, human feasible, lucid and reflective positing of the rules of individual and collective activity. This is why the social-historical struggles animated by this project have left so many important results, among which are whatever intellectual and political freedom we may be enjoying today (*CR*, 337).

Marx recognized the importance of the social in questions of political power and privilege and Castoriadis continues that insight by citing his project of autonomy, which is of necessity a democratic and philosophical (more on this in a minute) project, *as* society. He writes, “Society institutes itself, each time, in the closure of its [social

imaginary significations] S.I.S. The historical creation of philosophy is the rupture of this closure: explicit putting into question of these S.I.S., of the representations and words of the tribe. Whence its consubstantiality with democracy. The two are possible only in and through an onset of rupture in social heteronomy and the creation of a new type of being: reflective and deliberative subjectivity. The creation of reflection – of thought – goes hand in hand with the creation of a new type of discourse, philosophical discourse, which embodies unlimited interrogation and itself modifies itself throughout its history” (*WF*, 370).

Seeing praxis in ordinary activities is certainly central to how Castoriadis sees society, but there is an explicit political concern with praxis whereby it is not just that it allows novelty to emerge, and destruction to occur, but it is an action that must be lucid and reflective about social and historical events. Seeing praxis as an “open-ended unity in the process of making itself” Castoriadis develops an active basis for the dynamism that underlies a social-political and personal project of autonomy (*IIS*, 89). For Castoriadis praxis is “a perpetually transformed relation to the object” which begins with the “explicit acknowledgement of the open character of its object and exists only to the extent that it acknowledges this” (89). In this regard it accords with autonomy as a project found in the concrete actions of everyday people in democratic actions, there is no privileged subject who takes up the project of autonomy. However, autonomy, Castoriadis claims, is not simply self-creation. Autonomy like praxis, he continues, “is not a ‘given’ of human nature. It emerges as social-historical creation—more precisely, as creation of a project, which happens to be in part already realized” (*WF*, 404). He cautions, “even when, in appearance, a society is merely ‘preserving itself’” he writes, “it

never ceases to alter itself' (*IIS*, 201). But how do we know when and if those alterations are good in the sense of autonomy? This raises the issue of political judgments. As Dick Howard notes:

Political judgments are the language of democracy; they are what makes it different from previous political regimes. In a democracy there is no privileged standpoint from which and definitive judgment could be attained. There is no point in time or space, no a priori validity that can be maintained with within the constant flux of democratic opinions. At the same time, and for the same reason, there is a constant quest to find just such a definitive standpoint, to unify partial visions in a perspective on their totality, and to adjust reality and its representations to one another.²⁰

If there is no privileged standpoint, how, indeed do we make judgment calls? For this, a brief foray back into the history of philosophy is in order.

A Philosophical Scandal

For Castoriadis, the scandal of the imagination is that its radical, or creative function, though “discovered” by Aristotle (in his *De Anima as phantasia*), never found its proper place in the history of philosophy. In a reading strategy that has a debt to psychoanalysis, Castoriadis track the slips and gaps and antinomies in inherited thought to trace the workings of a radical imagination. Castoriadis claims the radical potential of imagination is glimpsed, but covered over—covered over due to the threat of the radical groundlessness of meaning. This creative function of the imagination, covered over in the history of Western philosophy nonetheless occasionally reemerges, if only to be subsumed again. Indeed, Castoriadis continues, Kant himself recoiled from the creative imagination he first set out in the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* by excising

²⁰ Dick Howard. *Political Judgments*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996): xii

it's importance from his second edition—as Heidegger noticed and then forgot himself in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929). It is to Heidegger's credit, Castoriadis notes that he restored the question of imagination as a philosophical question, although he too “recoils” from this disruptive imagination and “forgets” how unsettling this is for every ontology, or every “thinking of Being” (*WF* 215-6). Further, Freud, Castoriadis insists, never thematizes the imagination as such, but speaks of it as a fundamental element of the psyche as *Phantasien*. To overlook the working of the radical imagination is to overlook how being unfurls in time as a particular content within social imaginaries. For example, Castoriadis writes:

Can one or can one not conceive of a time separate from any content? Clearly, if we can do so, the conventionality of the direction of time appears infinitely more plausible, if not certain. If, on the other hand, we cannot conceive of a time separate from all content – as I, along with Aristotle, believe to be the case – . . . an internal solidarity between the unfolding of time and with the unfurling of being – which for me is the central idea in this domain – that is dismissed and condemned in a radical fashion in the modern age by the Kantian position, by the idea that subjectivity produces, creates, a pure form of intuition that is time and that, as such, has a meaning independent of every event that enfolds therein.²¹

If instead, we try to locate content in the world, how in fact, might we think about the universal and the particular if every particular is not to be subsumed under a universal law for its legitimacy? And it is in fact this challenge of at positing an autonomy that is at once singular and universal that makes Castoriadis's work particularly relevant for negotiating between the universal and contextual, cultural particulars. For instance, Renate Salecl refers to Castoriadis's work when she poses the antinomy of thinking

²¹ Castoriadis, *On Plato's Statesman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 108.

universal human rights in relation to cultural difference.²² She cites Castoriadis's claim that we cannot just historicize the emergence of universals; we cannot get to an originary point to find when 'the rights of man' first appeared on the historical stage. The source, now matter how hard we try to ground it in God, Reason, the forces of history, or what-not, can never be accessed -- the origins of our social-historical world are occulted.²³ That is, there is no extra social or historical point on which to anchor the remarkable emergence of the project of autonomy or to claim it as right. That is, "The idea of a substantive social and political equality of individuals is not, and cannot be, either a scientific thesis or a philosophical thesis. It is a *social imaginary signification*, and more precisely an idea and a political will, and idea that concerns the institution of society as a political community" (*PPA*, 135). As a social imaginary signification it is something in which we have "invested" albeit without our explicit knowledge. Knowing that we are invested in such a way means that we might engage in the doing and reflection characteristic of autonomy as a praxis. This will not, however, offer us any guarantees as to the rightness of what we do and think.

If we don't have such guarantees what could compel individuals to act for another future? Elizabeth Grosz has recently summarized the political implications of this recognition. She writes,

. . . politics seems to revel in the idea of progress, development, movement, but the very political discourses that seem to advocate it most vehemently (Marxism, feminism, postcolonial and anticolonial discourses, the discourse of antiracism) seem terrified by the idea of a transformation somehow beyond the control of the very

²² See her "Hate Speech and Human Rights," in *Feminism and the New Democracy*, ed. Jodi Dean (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 81-97. Her concerns are to understand different cultural claims to universals by drawing from Castoriadis but insisting on the importance of Lacanian psychoanalysis to delve into the place of fantasy and the unsymbolizable real that operate in diverse cultural imaginaries.

²³ For a philosophical exploration of the self-originary creation of imagination in Castoriadis see Fabio Caramelli's work.

revolutionaries who seek it, of a kind of ‘anarchization’ of the future. If the revolution can carry no guarantee that it will improve the current situation or provide something preferable to what exists now, what makes it a sought-for ideal? What prevents it from blurring into fascism or conservatism?²⁴

And, of course, the answer is that nothing will guarantee the outcome.²⁵ Indeed, Castoriadis himself asks: “Once the guarantee of ‘objective processes’ has been eliminated, what remains? Why do we *want* revolution – and why would others want it? Why would they be capable of it?” (*IIS*, 79). These questions haunt Castoriadis’s work which is to say that there is no definitive answer to the emergence of democratic desire. The best answer he can give is anthropological and historical – the germ of one part of our tradition emerged with the democracy of Greece from the 8th to the 5th centuries and then reemerged in the late Middle Ages – the effects of these democratic elements are responsible for whatever freedoms we experience today as the project of autonomy.

As discussed previously, this is a vision of autonomy that cannot accept external sources of authority. Here Castoriadis reiterates what he takes to be the object of politics:

The object of politics is not happiness, but freedom: autonomy is freedom understood not in the inherited metaphysical sense, but as effective, humanly feasible, lucid and reflective position of the rules of individual and collective activity. This is why the social-historical struggles animated by this project have left so many important

²⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, “Thinking the New.” In *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 17.

²⁵ For example, Bonnie Honig, among many others, makes the point that women's right to bodily integrity or privacy was not secured with any finality with *Roe v. Wade*. She writes that the lesson to be learned from *Roe* is not that legal reforms are ineffective tools of political struggle, but rather that those who thought *Roe* to be the end of the battle for reproductive freedom later found themselves ill equipped to secure their (always) unstable rights when they were repoliticized and contested by opponents on the pro-life side (see Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Who would have thought that the fetus would become the “tiniest citizen” in our cultural landscape? Whereas Grosz turns to biology, physics and vitalism (Bergson, Minkowski, Deleuze, Derrida) to develop the category of the virtual to understand the process of creation in terms of openness, there is another track to take, one that for me highlights more clearly the historical and political nature of time and the emergence of the new and that is the work of Castoriadis, who, one could say, spoke of nothing else.

results, among which are whatever intellectual and political freedom we may be enjoying today. But the philosophically important point is that, even if it finally failed, as in Athens, or is in danger of waning, as in the present Western world, its effect has been the creation of a totally new, unheard of, ontological *eidos*: a type of being which, consciously and explicitly, alters the laws of its own existence as it is, however partly, materialized in a self-legislating society and in a new type of human being: the reflective and deliberating subjectivity. And this is what allows us to take some distance from our own society, to talk about society and history in general, and to accept rational criticism of what we say in this or in any other respect.²⁶

That a reflective subjectivity is necessary for such autonomous praxis is a logical tautology – it must presuppose itself. That this occurred on the historical scene is for Castoriadis a matter *sumbebekos*²⁷ – an accident that became a foundation. To take individuals as authentically autonomous because he or she “obeys values” is for Castoriadis an untenable claim as a normative matter. He wonders in a way that seems prescient, “In what way is a religious fanatic who drives an explosive-filled truck against an embassy’s gates “inauthentic,” and how could it be that s/he does not obey “values”? Either values are arbitrary and mutually equivalent or else not all values are the same, and to say this already means that one has already accepted the reasonable discussability of values as one’s supreme value and criterion. It is impossible to circumvent the necessity of affirming the project of autonomy as the primary position, one which can be elucidated but not “founded,” since the very intention of founding it presupposes it” (*PPA*, 75).

Why we want the revolution is not because we are rule driven (although often we are), but because we can mimic where we would like to go because it is a source of

²⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary,” in *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity* eds. Gilliam Robinson and John Rundell (London: Routledge, 1994): 153.

²⁷ According to the classicist John Lawless, *sumbebekos* or *sumbaino* does mean “to happen” especially in Aristotle. The adverb *sumbebekotos* is glossed as “per accidens” or “accidentally.” The sources for this are the mathematician Nicomachus in his *Arithmetica* and a fifth century AD commentator on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Castoriadis’s use of the term is to elucidate how something comes to be that cannot be reduced to a specific cause or origin. My thanks to the email Lawless sent Oct. 14, 2004 explaining this.

pleasure. In this regard we might think of the work of Castoriadis as not one of offering particular rules or programs to follow (the Kantian resonances of ‘giving oneself one’s own law’ is a rule not for a sovereign being who can do so outside of time and space, but for a social individual in a time and place); but as one of exemplarity in thinking. Kirstie McClure suggests that the use of exemplarity which encourages the development of political judgment is found in looking at the process of judging itself.²⁸ That is, the use of example may be simply for imitation (a rule based example) but they may also illustrate the more radically democratic vertiginous aspects of judging which cannot guarantee its outcomes. For instance, McClure writes of Machiavelli’s use of Roman examples: “Machiavelli’s innovation may find its power less in the citation of historical referents as historical *models* – that is, in framing past actions as embodiments of rules for the present – than in the exemplarity of the historian’s judgment itself, in Machiavelli’s own critical practice of rationing praise and blame across a range of instances.”²⁹ Drawing an analogy between what “the odor of *virtu*” reveals in Machiavelli’s thinking and what “the odor of judgment” looks like in Arendt’s work, McClure suggests that Arendt remains instructive not simply for the specific judgments she makes – as about Little Rock or Eichmann about which we can and should argue – but in the exemplarity she reveals as she makes judgments.³⁰ Likewise, it may be hard to make sense of the normative work autonomy as a project does for Castoriadis without taking into account the ways in which his use of autonomy as a continual project of

²⁸ Kirstie McClure, “Hannah Arendt and the Odor of Judgment” in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, Eds. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56 emphasis in original.

³⁰ There’s much detail in McClure’s argument that I gloss over here which is worth exploring i.e. Arendt’s use of Kant’s *Third Critique*, the importance of a community or being in common with others, and the issue of logical reasoning.

giving ourselves our own laws (individually and collectively) functions along the lines of exemplarity.

Castoriadis's own use of examples is instructive in the practice of political judging that must be at once singular and universal. Recalling that democracy is the regime of self-limitation for Castoriadis – that we can do anything and yet we must not – how indeed will we be able to recognize when we go too far. As he recalls of the fate of Athenian democracy: “The fall of Athens – its defeat in the Peloponnesian War – was the result of the *hubris* of the Athenians: *Hubris* does not simply presuppose freedom, it presupposes the absence of fixed norms, the essential vagueness of the ultimate bearings of our actions. (Christian sin is of course a heteronomous concept.) Transgressing the law is not *hubris*, it is a definite and limited misdemeanor. *Hubris* exists where self-limitation is the only ‘norm,’ where ‘limits’ are transgressed which were nowhere defined” (*PPA*, 115). In light of this situation Castoriadis insists that there is no norm of norms which could be an intrinsic criterion for the law and its guarantee. There is “no way of eliminating the risks of collective *hubris*. Nobody can protect humanity from folly or suicide” (115). To say this, however, clearly does not mean accepting a situation of utter despair. Taking a tragic orientation to judgment in the practice of autonomy means for Castoriadis that the answer to one of Kant's questions of the interests of man, What am I allowed to hope?, must be nothing. “Having nothing to hope from an afterlife or from a caring and benevolent God, man is liberated for action in thoughts in *this* world” (103 emphasis in original). But how to live and judge with the understanding that democracy is a tragic regime because the regime of risk and that this is the condition of our freedom?

Wanting to get away from the rule bound objectivism of Kant's transcendental judgment some have found his *Critique of Judgment* to be a source for a practice of judgment based on the cultivation of taste and the necessity of appeal to a *sensus communis*. Exploring how Kant writes about reflective judgment, i.e. this is beautiful, as a way of claiming universality for my judgment; Castoriadis notes that Kant does see the other as "nontrivially different" from me and that this signals a necessary awareness of others as others. And yet, Castoriadis wonders about Kant's "other" – how is she different and up to what point? He notes that the issue of the education of tastes sufficient for a universally valid judgment of beauty raises two intractable philosophical problems from this perspective about the education of taste (93-94). Education of taste is impossible unless "beauty is already there" and "it is rightly recognized as such" (94). By whom and through what training? These questions, Castoriadis insists can't be understood unless we take into account again that creation presupposes itself (of a historical world, of society, of the individual).

If the other is not a shadow or a mannequin, he belongs to a definite and concrete social-historical commonality. Concrete means particular: a particular community, and its particular 'education' – that is, tradition. But then, the appeal to the other's point of view floats uneasily between vacuousness and tautology. It is vacuous if the addressee is supposedly to be found in each and every particular community. It is tautologous if it is an appeal to our own community: for then it is an appeal to go on judging what has already been so judged.

That this should be so is, of course, the consequence of what I have called the cognitive closure between the different social-historical worlds (94-95).

That is, in the realm of science a "savage" may be convinced that "X causes Y" but the "chances that that you could bring him to love *Tristan und Isolde* are immeasurably less" (95). The realm of art is much more deeply linked to a society's social imaginary

significations than is the knowledge of things. So we are left in a profoundly political dilemma for which there is no solution – there are, perhaps, only examples of how to take account of the new as a new form of being, a new *eidōs*. Indeed, the “‘educative’ function of the new, of the original, is both a fact and a paradox. It is an instance of the fact and the paradox of each and every historical creation” (98). So how, indeed, to illustrate this fact and paradox of the *eidōs* of democracy?

Castoriadis writes that “We have to recognize the decisive importance of the third *Critique*, not for the question of judging but for its insight into creation and human commonality” (99). It is because the *sensus communis* has broken down in the first place that we are left with the political question of judging and choosing among different institutions of society – the world, indeed, is in fragments (101). The recognition of the freedom this entails returns us to Greece. Greece, ancient Athens in particular, is one way Castoriadis practices exemplarity in judging. As he insists that the ancient polis can best be thought of as a germ not a model – we do not, after all, live in such a homogeneous world or accept citizenship and humanity to be reduced to Athenian born male citizens. In the terms of the practice of democracy that he uncovers he notes that if human beings could not create some order for themselves by positing laws, there would be no possibility of political instituting action. Continuing, “If full and certain knowledge (*epistēmē*) of the human domain were possible, politics would immediately come to an end, and democracy would be both impossible and absurd: democracy implies that all citizens have the possibility of attaining a correct *doxa* and that nobody possesses an *epistēmē* of all things political” (104). This assumption, that politics is the realm of opinion (which is not to say untruth) as opposed to full and certain knowledge is seen,

Castoriadis writes in two institutions of self-limitation in Athens: the procedure labeling a proposed law unlawful and the institution of tragedy. The first practice is a procedure whereby if you have made a proposal to the *ecclesia* or legislative body and it has been voted for, another citizen could bring you to court accusing you of inducing the people to vote for an unlawful law. You may be acquitted or convicted – if convicted the law is annulled (what would have happened to the USA Patriot Act in this circumstance?). This is not a procedure Castoriadis thinks we can actually enact or should enact in our modern, complex democracies – it is to be illustrative of what mode of politics we’re missing if we take seriously that democracy is the regime of self-limitation that knows it authorizes itself. Although, with examples like this and some dismissive remarks Castoriadis makes about Constitutions (that they don’t secure political liberty) have added fuel to the fire that his understanding of democracy is outmoded. Is it the case that he’s too enamored of the Greek world despite his condemnations of the lack of political universality in Athens i.e. women, slaves, laborers?

For Alan Keenan this is a problem with how Castoriadis conceptualizes the collectivity. After all, who “is” we who are struggling to act autonomously? Keenan is an astute reader of Castoriadis in terms of how he articulates a theory of democracy as a regime of openness, in the sense of open participation by all, and openness to questioning about fundamental matters of public concern. Keenan is especially concerned with the “we” or “we the people” and wants to take seriously the radical democratic premise that in a democracy the people should rule.³¹ Drawing on the essay “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), Keenan writes that despite his insights about democracy

³¹ Alan Keenan, *Democracy in Question: Democratic Openness in a Time of Political Closure* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1-2.

as a regime of self-limitation by a collectivity, Castoriadis nevertheless undermines them by being inattentive to how a political community comes to be paradoxically through a founding heteronomous moment. Keenan says that although Castoriadis:

. . . correctly speaks of democracy as the regime of risk and of its need for strategies of self-limitation, his attachment to an uncomplicated vision of collective autonomy [i.e. Athens] prevents him from addressing the risk that comes from that same ideal – and the greater risk that comes from maintaining the ideal while forgetting its own paradoxes. Rousseau’s *On the Social Contract*, by contrast, rather than assuming the existence of the political community, is centered on the question of how the community comes into existence in the first place.³²

The problem for Keenan is that he sees Castoriadis’s presentation of Athens as being one where the political community could be transparent to itself in how it comes to be through autonomous activity – a deep irony in his work if true given that Castoriadis’s work has revolved around the indeterminacy of society. I don’t think that Castoriadis takes Athens as his model of a collectivity not simply because he insists on seeing it not as a model but as a “germ” for our democratic tradition; but because he recognizes that there is always an ensidic component to our doing and knowing and always something that escapes our conscious apprehension. We can never fully explain our behavior fully to ourselves let alone others. But in a democracy if this is a public matter we have a burden to do so. I can see why Keenan would react in this way to Castoriadis’s essay on the Greek and modern democratic imaginary given that there is a reverential quality to the tone and content of what he writes, Athens had no experts in political matters, etc. And then there is the figure of Pericles who Castoriadis praises as a democrat, but seems to forget his role in leading Athens to what he acknowledges is a hideous lack of self limitation in its massacre of the Melians. Instead, what I would say is the limit of his

³² Alan Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 40.

view of collective autonomy is not that it is uncomplicated because transparent to itself, but rather that the idea of direct, participatory politics remains undertheorized in modern, democratic nation states in Castoriadis's work. Moreover, while Castoriadis was quite rigorous in thinking about the paradoxes of autonomy on the level of the individual (his work in psychoanalysis focuses on this) he did little to draw attention to democratic foundings and the violence and exclusions of those moments and their consequences – something that would concern Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort much more. His lack of attention to modern collectivities – is this my neighborhood, nation-state, a global citizenship? – is more troublesome than the idea that we could ever be transparent to ourselves as a collectivity like Athens, which was never that way in the first place.

One way in which Castoriadis tries to deal with the dimension of explicit power that comes paradoxically in democratic foundings is to draw a distinction between explicit power and politics. The political (*le politique*) for Castoriadis is explicit power, “the existences of instances capable of formulating explicitly sanctionable injunctions” (*PPA*, 156). This is a dimension of power always present in any society. Politics, on the other hand, is not simply “intrigues, plots, machinations, conspiracies, influence peddling, silent or open struggles over explicit power” (159). Rather, politics is the putting into question of institution of society in a lucid way. That a part of the instituting power of society is made explicit has been formalized in legislation of a public as well as private law, as well as the creation of specific institutions which are open to citizen participation. However, Castoriadis doesn't connect how politics takes part in at least some amount of explicit power. He doesn't theorize how in specific instances explicit power becomes the object of politics, such as in revolutionary founding moments or, as

Dick Howard notes, in elections.³³ To do so would mean thinking more explicitly about representative mechanisms and rights claims. Perhaps Howard is right to suggest that one could see political representation as an enactment of self-limitation rather than as merely having to do with demography or rule by the experts. This, however, is something Castoriadis has not engaged. This is a limitation, but the strength of his work on democracy is to return us again to autonomy as a praxis with cosmopolitan consequences. That is, that this is a praxis not simply contained by the status of nation-states.

What of Others?

Praxis in this sense is the particular mode of activity associated with the project of autonomy because it is reflective about its activity to struggle for freedom. In this way praxis is our attempt collectively to exploit the tension between the instituting and instituted society and between our own psychic and social investments in order to engage in democratic practices. What of the example of the institution of self-limitation and the process of referencing it as a practice of exemplarity is the institution of Athenian tragedy? Can this have an instructive purchase for us today? Castoriadis writes that “tragedy shows not only that we are not masters of the consequences of our actions, but that we are not even masters of their *meaning*” (118). In such a presentation of chaos and meaninglessness, tragedy reveals universality and impartiality – but in what ways if this is the case? Citing Arendt as rightly identifying that impartiality enters this world through the Greeks (i.e. Homer), Castoriadis explores how tragedy – such as Aeschylus’

³³ Dick Howard and Diane Pacom, “Autonomy – The Legacy of the Enlightenment: A Dialogue with Castoriadis” *Thesis Eleven* 52 (Feb. 1998): 83-101.

Persians and the *Trojan Women* – respects the other as other. In the tragedy that is profoundly political, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Castoriadis suggests a new emphasis on the democratic meaning of the play. Because the play has so often been cited through competing feminist interpretations of the title character I take the play up again to illustrate another feminist lesson from the play.

It's often been noted that the play is a conflict between human and divine law (or of between Family and State as in Hegel's reading) embodied by Creon, the new monarch of Thebes now that Oedipus' sons, Polynices and Eteocles, have killed one another, and Antigone, Oedipus and Jocasta's daughter and niece of Creon. The thesis of the play, that Creon is a tyrant and Antigone is the heroine out to enact the burial rituals denied Polynices because he fought against Thebes in the civil war, is quite obvious. But the meaning is multilayered. Castoriadis notes that to focus on the conflict of human versus divine law forgets that for the Greeks to bury their dead is also a human law and to defend one's country is also divine (118-119). The dilemmas of recognition, as Patchen Markell puts it, are central to the play as tragedy.³⁴ The recognition and slippages of meaning in the play are central to the tragic presentation of a democratic dilemma – what if meaning is not steadfast and yet it must be made so. For example, who will be appropriately labeled a traitor is explicitly posed as a problem – clearly Creon can legitimately label Polynices a traitor to Thebes, Antigone can also pick up the language and ask if she should be a traitor to her family and the laws of the dead and not bury her brother – there are also other meanings implicit in the play about the status of the traitor – has Creon become a traitor to his own expressed values to rule Thebes by taking advice?

³⁴ Patchen Markell's *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003) offers an exploration of *Antigone* in terms of the politics of recognition.

To portray Creon as unilaterally “wrong” Castoriadis notes, would go against the deepest spirit of tragedy and Sophoclean tragedy in particular.

For Castoriadis the play is illustrative of a fundamental democratic lesson voiced by Creon’s son, Haemon: do not be wise alone (*monos phronein*) (120). He notes that Creon’s decision is made on solid political grounds but those grounds can always turn out to be shaky. Nothing can guarantee the correctness of political action and in light of this recognition it is folly to insist on being wise alone. Insisting on this lesson is essential for how Castoriadis conceptualizes the project of autonomy as a democratic one. He writes:

Antigone addresses itself to the problem of political action in terms which acquire their acute relevance in the democratic framework than in any other. It exhibits the uncertainty pervading the field, it sketches the impurity of motives, it exposes the inconclusive character of the reasoning upon which we base our decisions. It shows that *hubris* has nothing to do with the transgression of definite norms, that it can take the form of the adamant will to apply the norms, disguise itself behind noble and worthy motivations, be they rational or pious. With its denunciation of the *monos phronein*, it formulates the fundamental maxim of democratic politics” (120).

Here autonomy cannot be an end in itself at an individual or collective level without running into a formalism that again constructs adherence to a rule without testing it in concert with others. What if one point of feminist democratic identification with *Antigone* was not *Antigone* herself?

Certainly there has been much productive and thoughtful work claiming *Antigone* for feminist purposes in different modes of feminist thinking – Elshtain’s value laden familial claiming of *Antigone*, Dietz’s challenge to such private containment of *Antigone*, or more recently Hawkesworth’s metaphorical use of the live burial of *Antigone* to explore the “live burials” of feminisms in the global media. Taking a page

out of feminist and queer film theory (and Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten") the point of feminist identification need not be Antigone or Ismene. That is, we need not simply identify with the female characters in the play although the logic of gendered recognition may push us in that direction along with the fact that she is the play's heroine. Instead, what if it we took up a point of identification with Haemon? Haemon, after all, is the character who also tries to link his words with his deeds in his set up to be heard by his father by positioning himself as his son, in his principled and interested stance to save Antigone and Thebes, and in his insistence on the content of the practice of democratic freedom – do not be wise alone. Haemon is not heroic in the way Antigone is and his posturing to the "state" i.e. Creon may be seen as obsequious but should be seen as highlighting again how imperfect language and how fugitive meaning is in the challenge to be heard – how can one reason with a tyrant? – yet the possibility is still there even though Creon is clearly on his own path. Both Creon, and Antigone insist on their own reasons without listening to the reasons of others – Haemon makes explicit the democratic stakes involved in doing so.³⁵ This is not irrelevant to contemporary feminist debates. For instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that a feminism without borders is invested in a critical pedagogy of dissent which insists that we not be wise alone when we look at and seek to do something about the global politics of

³⁵ It could be interesting to explore briefly the logics of equality as well in terms of exemplarity and not rule making as a process of judging justice in the realm of sex. For instance, what of the uses of equality as parity as in representation of women and men in legislative bodies or any other field? This can be quite critically powerful and necessary. But this mode of formal equality clearly is inadequate in all registers of making judgments about gender fairness – obviously giving rise to the "sameness-difference" debates within feminist theory and other critiques of formal equality models. Perhaps what this means is highlighting what it means to judge – sometimes parity may be politically useful if not philosophically justified (the argument Genevieve Fraisse makes in reference to the adoption of the French Parity Law).

decolonization, capitalist expansion and political solidarity.³⁶ In colleges and universities around the country, to practice such a pedagogy can be seen as an exercise in democratic exemplarity even though the setting of a classroom is not necessarily a democratic environment its (since there is ultimately grades to be given and judgments to make which are not collective).

Knowing that we should not be wise alone is something that we should emphasize not just among feminists but in general as a democratic matter. Knowing that we are not masters of meaning doesn't mean that we forgo trying to do so in concert with others, even if those others have distinctly other ideas about gender equality. What though would it mean to recognize how we do not master meaning? Perhaps it would reveal how profoundly political the making of meaning (always under constraints of logic, order, social-historical context, etc.) in claiming equality and freedom for women is. For example, the conservative women's group, Concerned Women for America (CWA), are quite clear that their founding was in part to challenge how women's interests were presented in mainstream politics particularly by a liberal organization like the National Organization for Women (NOW). As Ronnee Schreiber argues, CWA realized that they had to play "fem-ball" – an odd interlocution that I take to be symptomatic of the tension and anxiety of making political claims for women in the traditional terrain of masculine politics that is in the United States replete with sports metaphors.³⁷ Playing fem-ball meant that CWA had to act as women and make claims for women that were "really true" of the vast majority of women and they set up office space in Washington, D.C. and

³⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

³⁷ Ronnee Schreiber, "Playing 'Femball': Conservative Women's Organizations and Political Representation in the United States" in *Right Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World* eds. Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power (New York: Routledge, 2002) 211-224.

maintain an active public presence and grassroots network. CWA is very interested in being wise alone on the issues that matter to women as mothers and upholders of traditional family values. There is little tragedy in redemptive style politics. This said, that does not mean that others ought not to contest the “truth” of what women want as a matter of politics and to engage with CWA and others about sex equality. Autonomy as a project cannot require full mastery of meanings or of actions, nor can it tolerate being wise alone.

The project of autonomy is only possible according to Castoriadis if “society recognizes itself as the source of its norms” (*PPA*, 114-115). For Castoriadis that the project of autonomy is codeterminous with freedom and must occur on two “levels”: that of the individual psyche and at the level of society (the collective level). This is an immense challenge. To struggle to be autonomous requires a society in which this struggle is meaningful. Thus, Castoriadis continues, society cannot evade the question: “Why this norm rather than that? -- in other words, it cannot evade the question of justice by answering, for example, that justice is the will of God, or the will of the Czar, or the reflection of the relations of production” (114). That is, Castoriadis does not assume that an autonomous subject exists outside of history, society, or the institution of language – there is no pre-political individual to whom rights adhere. This claim highlights the importance of viewing autonomy not as an entity or possession, but as a continual project shaped by social life. Castoriadis continues autonomy is freedom understood not in the inherited, metaphysical sense, but as effective, human feasible, lucid and reflective positing of the rules of individual and collective activity. This is why the social-historical

struggles animated by this project have left so many important results, among which are whatever intellectual and political freedom we may be enjoying today (*WF*, 337).³⁸

In many ways, Castoriadis's articulation of autonomy as a praxis of doing and reflecting returns to Kant. But it's a Kant who offers maxims rather than the Kant who compels dutiful behavior. Not being wise alone functions as a democratic maxim. That is, it offers a guideline for how we might judge our activity.³⁹ As Castoriadis notes, Kant's "least debatable formulations [of autonomy] refer necessarily to some content" (*CR*, 402). That is, "Be a person and respect others as persons" is empty without a "nonformal" idea of the person. Castoriadis insists that the content of autonomy as he defines it is not "Respect others as autonomous beings" which he says is still a static, formal conception of autonomy, but instead "Contribute as much as you can to others' becoming autonomous" (402). This doesn't clear matters up, however, but it does gesture towards the importance of defining the content of what it means to institute an autonomous society as a political matter. Castoriadis is more persuasive in defending the importance of making sense of the content of autonomy for ourselves and others in the practices of what Freud called impossible professions: psychoanalysis, pedagogy and politics. But he leaves open how we can judge the content given to autonomy by insisting on the fostering of reasonableness in the way we reflect on political claims – the necessity for *logon didonai*. Yet, this must be modeled not only through examples but through activity.

³⁸ The quote continues, "But the philosophically important point is that, even if it finally failed, as in Athens, or if it is in danger of waning, as in the present Western world, its effect has been the creation of a totally new, unheard of, ontological *eidōs*: a type of being which, consciously and explicitly alters the laws of its own existence as it is, however, partially, materialized in a self-legislating society and in a new type of human being: reflective and deliberating subjectivity. And this is what allows us to take some distance from our own society, to talk about society and history in general, and to accept the rational criticism of what we say in this or any other respect."

³⁹ Clearly this is something not endorsed by the current Bush administration in the United States.

To see this for others though requires some understanding of what it means to understand other as others. Castoriadis is not unaware of this question although he hasn't been read in the context of multiculturalism within nation states, although his observations shouldn't be ruled out in this arena. For instance, he writes:

It is unclear why a talented Egyptologist or mathematician who wanted to know nothing outside their respective disciplines would particularly interest us here. From this remark one might conclude that, for purposes of the present discussion, we ought to include all those who, irrespective of their profession, try to go beyond their sphere of specialization and actively interest themselves in what is going on in society. But this is, and ought to be, the very definition of the democratic citizen, irrespective of his [or her] occupation. (And let us note that this is the exact opposite of Plato's definition of justice: minding one's own business and not getting mixed up in everyone else's – which is not surprising, since one of Plato's aims is to show that democratic societies are unjust). (*PPA*, 5)

This understanding of the democratic citizen emphasizes that openness must also be openness to understanding others (although we could never do this fully). Moreover, this is something that has to be modeled for us and that we model in doing. This understanding of the reflective part of the project of autonomy clearly makes its departure from individualist theories evident. To articulate this as truth means that we must put to test the closure of our own understandings by looking at others, and vice versa. Praxis is the activity that aims at autonomy taking others as (potentially) autonomous subjects and tries to contribute to their efforts to attain full autonomy (*PPA*, 76). The potential is again important. This is something we can observe and judge that occurs in a *de facto* and a *de jure* way.

Take for instant, two recently reported refusals that enacted autonomy. The Brazilian organization Fio da Alma (Thread of the Soul) has been actively combating AIDS by handing out condoms in the red light district of Rio de Janeiro. Until recently

they had been partly financed through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). That was, until recently when they decided to forgo nearly forty million dollars in American support because they would not comply with the American demand that all foreign recipients of AIDS assistance explicitly condemn prostitution.⁴⁰ In this way the group is refusing the assumption that autonomy in terms of basic health and welfare could come through such heteronomous means. In their refusal to demonize sex workers, Fio da Alma does not endorse the sex trade as is, but insists on the importance of local decision making based on conditions within Brazil. This example resonated as well with Womyn's Agenda for Change (WAC), an advocacy organization for sex workers in Cambodia according to the group's director Rosanna Barbero.⁴¹ To accept USAID money WAC would have had to stop teaching sex workers how to unionize as a way to pragmatically and idealistically control the conditions of their labor. Working in concert with a sex workers union which numbers around 5,000 members, WAC rejects the rescue logic of many evangelical groups in favor of another strategy which arguably in imperfect ways tries to enact autonomy as that praxis which seeks the autonomy of others. To take the US assistance Barbero insists that she would compromise the effective work WAC has done to help sex workers protect themselves from violent clients and predatory policemen and get health treatment for sexually transmitted diseases. Taking a page from the Brazilian example, WAC rejects that they promote prostitution by refusing to sign the USAID antiprostitution pledge. In the refusals of both Fio da Alma and WAC to accept the conditions of US assistance, there is

⁴⁰ See Larry Rother's reporting in "Prostitution Puts U.S. and Brazil at Odds on AIDS Policy" *New York Times*, Sunday, July 24, 2005: A3.

⁴¹ See "The Question of Rescue" written by Matt Steinglass which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* the same day as the above article on July 24, 2005 pages 18-19 of the magazine.

an imperfect example of how the praxis of autonomy is both *de facto* and *de jure* about defending some self-determination and freedom for sex workers in a global economy as a democratic matter, not as a matter of salvation. In this way, Fio da Alma and WAC illustrate one way in which feminist politics partakes in the project of recognizing ourselves as the source of our norms and working to combat the social imaginary significations of both capitalist rational mastery and zealous fundamentalisms.

What this means is that there is a value in thinking about democracy as a regime of self-limitation that we can know as such because of how we act for our autonomy. Feminisms have a stake in not only documenting our activities as praxis *de facto* but of insisting that our claims are also of significance *de jure* for how we assert that not just any closures will do.

Chapter Three

Autonomy: Psychoanalysis and Politics Considered Again

“You know very well that I do not share Lacan’s conceptual model. ‘Structure,’ which he invoked constantly, excludes what is, in my view, the essential: temporality” (“From Monad to Autonomy,” *WF*, 184).

Psychoanalysis does not offer a political theory. Instead, Castoriadis claims that “Psychoanalysis aims at helping the individual become autonomous, that is, capable of self-reflective activity and deliberation” (*WF*, 131). In this respect, he continues, it “fully belongs to the great social-historical stream of and struggle for autonomy, the emancipatory project to which both democracy and philosophy belong” (131). The political importance of psychoanalysis for a project of autonomy is in the modeling it performs at the level of an individual of how we emerge in the tension of the instituting and instituted society and our negotiation of it. As Hortense Spillers notes, self-knowledge has its uses; the self-knowledge that psychoanalysis can model is offers a way of “ethical self-knowing” that unhooks the “psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework” and recovers it “in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility that might decentralize and disperse the knowing one.”¹ The specifics of knowledge that Spillers writes about has to do with recovering the social dimensions of race within a psychoanalytic register which sounds similar to the ways in which Castoriadis proposes we see psychoanalysis as “modeling” a praxis of autonomy. For Castoriadis the activity of psychoanalysis is the activity of “a subject as subject upon a subject as a subject”

¹ Hortense Spillers, “All the Things you Could be By Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race” in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* eds. Elizabeth Abel, et al (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 135-158.

where the coincidence of the two (analyst and analysand) initiated Freud's self-analysis. This self-analysis was *sumbebekos*; an accident which in this case laid a foundation, a foundation for a process of self-transformation (*CL*, 12). However, Castoriadis readily acknowledges that this activity is not that of a scholar or judge or engineer, but instead is an activity of transformation within constraints and under the weight of limits.

However, of Freudian psychoanalysis he writes the following: "What, in Freud's thought, is dated or is very clearly marked by his social-historical environment, is manifest: the patriarchal side of his theory, the sometimes positivistic character of his epistemological and philosophical positions (which is elsewhere contradicted by his conceptual model) . . . All that, however, is revisable, or removable without great damage" ("From Monad to Autonomy", *WF*, 176). We're talking about the Oedipus complex here right? That troubled tale of castrated femininity and renounced attachment to mother for the sake of sexual difference at adolescence which has long been a source of frustration for feminists? And Castoriadis tosses this aside? How did he do it with such seeming ease? How does he instead refigure the project of psychoanalysis as one of a project of autonomy? How does he open up the relation between psyche and society? And, what, if anything, might be of feminist value in his refigured psychoanalysis? These are the questions with which this chapter is concerned. In it I argue that the value of psychoanalysis for feminism is in the praxis of self-transformation as an individual matter, which is not about normalization, but about coming to an other relationship with our past, our selves in a way that demonstrates experientially the possibility of our autonomy. That is, psychoanalysis is a practice of freedom.

To begin with Oedipus: Elizabeth Grosz says that, "I don't know how to get

around Oedipus or, in Lacan's formulation, the Name of the Father. There is no psychoanalysis without Oedipus. Lacan rendered it much more complicated, much less biological, and more linguistic and cultural. But it ended up in the same dead end, the same intractability, which is as unmoving in the biological form as it is in linguistic formulations. The linguistic is as difficult to transform as the biological!"² Toril Moi has recently suggested that psychoanalysis does not need a theory of femininity at all (she adds feminism does not need one either but that's not her project) in "From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan, and Feminism, Again."³ I will make a brief foray through this work as I turn to Castoriadis's psychoanalytic revisions suggesting that his lack of a theory of femininity formation or masculinity formation is not to be lamented, but is an advantage for feminist theory. This is advantageous, I suggest, because it draws our attention to the temporal richness of the practice of psychoanalysis as a project of autonomy which links up with a similar political project. This praxis based account of psychoanalysis has advantages over what has been a dominant Lacanian influence in feminist theory as a richer political account of psychoanalysis and the sort of freedom this entails. I then turn to the account of representation that Castoriadis makes central both to the working of the radical imagination and to pleasure as a way to take account of the emergence of a human individual; in particular, I look to his understanding of the institution of language. In this regard I situate his work as avoiding a mind-body dualism or a simple social constructionist account of individuation due to his formulation of the interaction of a "first natural stratum" (the living being, *le vivant*), the psyche/soma, and

² See "Interview with Elizabeth Grosz" Robert Ausch, Randal Doane and Laura Perez, http://web.gc.cuny.edu/csctw/found_object/text/grosz.htm (Sept. 14, 2004).

³ Toril Moi, "From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan, and Feminism, Again" *Signs: A Journal of Women, Culture and Society* (2004).

the social individual. At the end of the chapter I investigate what his formulation of psychoanalysis reveals about the lived reality of sexed bodies when juxtaposed to two diverse threads of feminist psychoanalytic social theory: that of Luce Irigaray's female imaginary and that of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

Should psychoanalysis offer a femininity theory?

In her introductory remarks, Moi writes the following:

We need more historically specific, more situated, and far more clearly defined accounts of women's lived experience and women's subjectivity than femininity theories can produce. To reject femininity theory, then, is not to reject the *fact* of sexual difference. It is to reject theories that *equate* femininity and sexual difference, as if women were the only bearers of sex. Femininity theories inevitably and relentlessly turn women into the other.⁴

The femininity theories that Moi tackles are those that emerge in the work of Jacques Lacan, and by implication, in Freud as well. Moi, rightly I think, wants to return to Freud and Lacan to move beyond a "construction" or "essence" model of femininity that for many made the choice of Lacan's constructionist model preferable to Freud's essentialism.⁵ She suggests that those who thought Lacan's model less essentialist are, in fact, mistaken.⁶ The key is the relationship between the body and the psyche, which for both, she notes is contingent. However, it's Freud she insists who "remained concerned with the concrete phenomenological body" whereas Lacan "turns the body into an entirely abstract and idealist concept".⁷ Maybe she's exaggerated a bit on both sides, but her general assumption is correct: to think that a theory of femininity by being sprung from Freud and conceived in post-Saussurian

⁴ Ibid., 845.

⁵ Ibid., 843.

⁶ Ibid., 856.

⁷ Ibid., 856.

linguistics, as Lacan has it, is a progressive political development ignores the repetitive compulsion of Lacan's theory of sexual difference. It's a theory where the feminine side of the equation is doing more work with its "lack".

In critiquing Lacan in particular in terms of his approach to femininity and castration, Moi does not want a better femininity theory – she wants, instead, a way to take account of finitude (an idea she borrows from Stanley Cavell) as a way to make psychoanalytic and feminist sense of embodiment. I'm not so interested in tackling Moi's use of Cavell (Wittgenstein or Beauvoir), as I am in utilizing her critique of Lacan to situate the purchase of Castoriadis's psychoanalytic theorizations and practices (he was, after all, a practicing analyst). I do this simply because I think he is more radical than her critique. To return to Moi, she suggests that Lacan utilizes a spatial understanding of language. The implications being: "This spatial imagery underpins the Lacanian theory of language and so comes to seem compulsory. But there are alternatives. We could, for example, think of language as a human practice that changes over time".⁸ Thinking of language as that sort of human practice, Moi notes, would uproot the current doxa of language at work for thirty years in many literature departments around the country. But such an uprooting, I agree would do much to dislodge the centering of sexual difference as an ironic metaphysical matter where "woman does not exist". Uprooting as well the function of castration as the way in which the human condition is limited, to one of a general finitude, however, does not mean erasing sexed experiences of men and women. It is simply to push aside the framework of Lacan's theory of sexual difference ("a machine that churns out gender labels" with men as norm, women as other) and work towards a

⁸ Ibid., 861.

psychoanalysis of finitude to take account in a less sexist way the “same aspects of human existence,” namely, that we are not omnipotent.⁹ Moi is right to note that “For over a hundred years now psychoanalysis has patiently shown how difficult it is for human beings to accomplish the ‘task of adolescence,’ to choose finitude”.¹⁰ However, this is an old difficulty arguable first noticed explicitly in the Athenian institution of tragedy and noticed in a new way with Freud.

Castoriadis is ahead of the game in three ways that Moi has identified: first, in dislodging the Oedipus Complex with its attendant emphasis on castration and femininity as an historical phenomena, and focusing instead on thinking the relation between psyche and society in a temporal mode; second, in seeking to understand what Moi refers to as finitude in terms of how the phantasy of omnipotence of the psyche is transformed – initially as a matter of socialization, and then as a continual matter of analysis understood as a project of autonomy; and third, in the way he thinks of embodiment as an experience of a living being, a psyche, and a social individual. Moi may let Freud off the hook here too easily in terms of his phenomenology of the body. For Castoriadis Freud never fully gets out of a mind-body dualism. Indeed, the better phenomenological approach to Freud is that found through revisions Castoriadis makes.

However, one of the critical purchases of the Oedipal scenario of how femininity and masculinity develop objects of desire was to reveal the patriarchal logic at work in contemporary culture. If we are to still account for the effects of the social imaginary on the ways in which we cathect and experience femininity and

⁹ Ibid., 875.

¹⁰ Ibid., 872.

masculinity, then we must still account for the workings of the institution of society even if this is always time bound.

Returning to Freud

In returning to Freud, Castoriadis attempts to address two blind spots he sees in his work: namely, the question of the social-historical institution (how he refers to society itself to signal both the time and space of the social) and the element of the psyche that he calls radical imagination (which is not simply the unconscious). What he sees as radical about the imagination/imaginary is “the emergence of representations or as representative flux not subject to determinacy” (*IIS*, 274). To address this situation, Castoriadis formulates the workings of the radical imagination in two registers: that of the psyche (which he refers to as both radical imagination or radical imaginary) and of society (in its instituting function as social imaginary). Castoriadis is clear that the importance of the social imaginary should not be overlooked since this is how the very institution of society and being comes to be. He writes, what the individual can create are private phantasies, not institutions (*IIS*, 144). Institutions are the work not of individuals, but of society in its anonymous collectivity. When Castoriadis writes that the institution of society is imaginary, composed of social imaginary significations, he does this he says “because they do not correspond to, or are not exhausted by, references to ‘rational’ or ‘real’ elements and because it is through creation that they are posited. And I call them social because they exist only if they are instituted and shared by an impersonal, anonymous collective” (*WF*, 1997, 8). Castoriadis formulates society as a set of institutions, in the broad sense of “norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things” (*WF*, 6), which are instituted through the workings of the social

imaginary. This moment of instituting is tied to the instituted, that which operates as if it always were; a logic that Castoriadis calls identitary time – where everything that is seems to be always there, the work of nature, God, gods, the march of history, rather than the work of society itself. Social imaginary significations, he insists, are “infinitely larger than fantasy” (*IIS*, 143) and, as a mode of signification, are “irreducible to functionality or ‘rationality’, embodied in and through its institutions, and constitutive, each time, of its own or ‘proper’ world (both ‘natural’ and ‘social’” (*CR*, 363). Indeed, this is the register of sexual difference itself and the “always-already” solidity of sex obviously sounds familiar to feminist ears. Drawing on the metaphorical purchase of the substance magma, Castoriadis refers to the ‘clumping’ together of social imaginary significations as operating as magma – that which moves and holds together in a molten state. The disruptions of such social imaginary significations occur through the temporal movement of the social imaginary which is in itself neither positive nor negative; it is the unfolding of history. On the level of the psyche, such temporal surges register from the Unconscious in the realm of representation – as things in the Unconscious – and as language in a social register. We can see this movement once we take account of it as the working of a radical imaginary.

This is a notion of the imaginary as radical, which is not primarily visual, and in this regard it’s a challenge to the Lacanian formulation of the Imaginary. Lacan develops his theory of the mirror stage of human development from Freud’s claim of a bodily ego, postulating that the subject comes to (mis)recognize him or herself in the image in the mirror (or the other/mother). Identification with the image is a central aspect to the Imaginary order and signals the inherent alienation of subjectivity because the subject

will never fully coincide with his/her image in the ‘mirror’. In his formulation of this theory of the spectral foundations of identity and his formulation of language as a realm of signification: which the subject is dependent upon but never fully coincidental with, Lacan helped pave the way for understanding subjectivity as symbolically structured in gendered terms (emerging through the Oedipus complex) notably undermining any naturalistic notion of sexual difference. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan notes that “the importance of the Imaginary for feminism lies in Lacan’s explanation of how sexual difference first comes to be constituted by the effects of division, language and identification imposed on the infant by others” rather than emerging through biology.¹¹ Along with the Imaginary, Lacan outlined two other realms: that of the Symbolic, or the dimension of language and meaning, and the Real which functions to disrupt the supposed seamlessness of Imaginary identification by revealing cracks and loss in the Symbolic order. However, the Imaginary for Lacan is always trouble; it is illusory, it is inadequate to cover over loss in how the subject comes to be. It is the Symbolic where sense is made and which is the privileged site for working out the disabling effects of the Imaginary and the disruptions of the Real.

Castoriadis sees Lacan’s contribution to psychoanalysis as restoring the question of the social. Lacan does this by restoring the significance of the Oedipus Complex in Freud’s work to highlight that what makes a social individual is the recognition that the mother desires someone else, a relationship from which the infant is excluded. The mother’s desire for someone else, the father, thus signals the importance of socialization and at the same time challenges the subjectivism of rationalist theories for indeed the

¹¹ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, “The Imaginary.” In *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, Ed. Elizabeth Wright. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1992: 175.

infant has no control here. Moreover for Castoriadis, Lacan rightly broke up the institutional stagnation of ego-psychology and the functional emphasis on conformity to social norms. The 'paradox,' he says of Lacan's career, is that the enigmatic movement he once brought to Freudian texts was lost in both in a practical sense (in the clinical debates about how to practice psychoanalysis and Lacan's support of the 5-minute session with a mute analyst); and another in that Lacan's Symbolic (and the Law) remains fundamentally ahistorical in character and leaves no space for the critique or understanding of how the institution of society makes particular forms of being possible. Echoing his criticisms of classical structuralism, Castoriadis maintains that Lacan's system cannot account for the emergence of anything radically new, all difference being merely the combination of the same. Moreover, he suggests, Lacan's Imaginary order, emerging as it does in the mirror stage, misses a prior imagination – what Castoriadis calls the radical imagination at the heart of the psyche. This is significant because for Castoriadis it is the radical imagination of the psyche that allows the psyche, which he says is enclosed in its own world until thrown into a social world by its caregiver (usually the mother) and then the triangulated relationship of that caregiver to someone else, so that the constitution of an individual is a violent break with a world of phantasying of the psychical monad.

If the radical imaginary is understood as making possible a new understanding of such activity, this is a valuable contribution to feminist thought as a practice of freedom. In this regard, creative action is a kind of action that puts the instituting and instituted work of meaning into everyday practice and asks us to recognize it and act on it as such. There is in Castoriadis's work an intimacy between a project of autonomy in a

psychoanalytic setting and as a democratic project in a collective one. The modeling of thinking and doing is analogous although not, clearly, identical. Just to reiterate: for Castoriadis the hallmark of an autonomous society is one that “not only knows explicitly that it has created its own laws but has instituted itself so as to free its radical imaginary and enable itself to alter its institutions through collective, self-reflective, and deliberate activity” (*PPA*, 132). A heteronomous society must disguise the fact that it gives itself its own laws. Pedagogy, the inculcation, modeling, encouragement of reflection, is a hinge between this understanding of politics and psychoanalysis. While Castoriadis may not articulate enough what the content of an autonomous society may look like or entail (one could look at early writings on the content of socialism or later interviews for some response), he does address in greater depth the practice of psychoanalysis as part and parcel of practicing autonomy on the level of the individual.

For Castoriadis the project of autonomy at the level of the individual psyche is the challenge to come to an 'other' relationship with the unconscious. To think about autonomy in the context of psychoanalysis may appear quite paradoxical if one assumes that autonomy is synonymous with consciousness or the conscious mastering of that unruly psychoanalytic postulate: the unconscious, or for Castoriadis, the psyche. The practice of psychoanalysis as Castoriadis details it is not a practice of normalization. As Castoriadis remarks: “The practical essence of psychoanalytic treatment lies in this rediscovering by the individual of himself as partial origin of his history, his undergoing gratuitously the experience of making himself, which at the same time was not recognized for what it was, and becoming once again the origin of possibilities, as having had a history which was history and not fatality” (*CL*, 26). The scene of psychoanalysis

then is not exclusively regressive. Nor is it simply scientific. To think it could be was Freud's "fertile illusion"(3). Indeed, Freud's attempt to make of psychoanalysis a science, which it could not be, was a truth he could not acknowledge according to Castoriadis. Science Castoriadis writes "once it passes on to another layer of its object, has in a sense finished with the preceding one" but, psychoanalysis as theory "knows no such development" (7). Why is that the case? For the reason that "psychoanalysis is not simply the theory of its object, but essentially and first of all an activity which makes that object speak in person" (11). The genesis of analytic activity is not in theory but in a doing. It's when Anna O. invents the "talking cure" or Emmy von N. "insists on being allowed to speak at last without interruption" (11). The genius of Freud was to see meaning intended by a subject "who was the patient and who yet was not identical with him/her" (11). To continue a bit further, the "Copernician inversion consisted here in no longer placing all the reason on the side of the doctor and all the unreason on the side of the patient" (11). In suggesting that this is the model that Freud brought into being, Castoriadis brings him, sometimes against his own acknowledgment, into an emancipatory process of struggling for autonomy.

The struggle for autonomy in a psychoanalytic setting for Castoriadis is the task of coming to an other relationship with one's psyche -- to have the psychic conditions for autonomy secured -- conditions which, however, are never secured with any finality but which must be reformed endlessly which is not to say at every possible moment. To understand the philosophical and political challenges of this vision of analysis, it's necessary to reexamine the Freudian maxim *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* (Where Id was, Ego shall come to be).

Lacan himself returns to this phrase in Freud's writings. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan explains that he is not suggesting that Freud introduces the subject into the world separate from the psychical function. He writes: "But I am saying that Freud addresses the subject in order to say to him the following which is new -- *Here, in the field of the dream, you are at home. Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*" (44). It is not, as Lacan insists, that the ego must dislodge the id. Rather, the "subject is there to rediscover *where it was*" (45). The method of knowing where the subject must come into existence is to "map the network" where the subject was (45). The Lacanian interpretation of this maxim is fundamental to the development of a subject that is not that of a masterful ego conquering an unruly id -- it is the invocation of a subject tied into society and to a continual negotiation between ego and id. It is not the triumph then of consciousness over unconsciousness, but rather the constitution of a social subject constituted in particular through the institution of language. Castoriadis explains that with the Lacanian claim that the 'unconscious is the discourse of the Other', "[a]utonomy then appears as: my discourse must take the place of the discourse of the Other, of a foreign discourse that is in me, ruling over me: speaking through myself. The clarification immediately indicates the *social* dimension of the problem (little matter that the Other in question at the start is the 'narrow' parental other; through a series of obvious connections, the parental couple finally refers to a society as a whole and to its history)" (102).

The Lacanian model has been a dominant one in contemporary theory. For instance, Slavoj Žižek is currently editing a series from Verso under the heading "Wo Es War." In the opening pages of his book *The Plague of Fantasies* is this explanation of

the series: “*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* -- *Where it was, I shall come into being* -- is Freud's version of the Enlightenment goal of knowledge that is in itself an act of liberation. Is it still possible to pursue this goal today, in the conditions of late capitalism? If 'it' today is the twin rule of pragmatic-relativist New Sophists and New Age obscurantists, what 'shall come into being' in its place? The premise of the series is that the explosive combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist tradition denotes a dynamic freedom that enables us to question the very presuppositions of the circuit of Capital.” That is, Zizek is most concerned to develop the importance of the subject in the face of what he refers to as deconstructive, namely Foucauldian inspired historicists and those who celebrate the plasticity of subjectivity (Butler in particular has been an important foil and interlocutor) because he suggests these practices fall in line with the logic of capitalism even as they purport to challenge it via transgressions and “gender troubling.” But can this account of the subject take into account change or being otherwise? Zizek has explored with great wit the “time paradox” involved in a repetition of “what will have been” in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.¹² The point of the time paradox is that I don't find myself in an empirical entity i.e. “me”, but rather in a fundamental misrecognition, an “untruth” if you will, of myself “where I had already been”. More specifically, Zizek suggest that in the symptom we find ourselves. He writes, “the final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic process is *identification with the symptom*. . . . That is how we must read Freud's *woe s war, soll ich werden*: you, the subject must identify yourself with the place where your symptom already was; in its ‘pathological’ particularity you must recognize the element which gives consistency to your being” (75). The obscene enjoyment of this process, when

¹² Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

recognized, Žižek suggests reveals how ideology works as the ends justifying the means. Therefore, a fundamental misrecognition of means and ends logic is exactly the point of how ideology proceeds, but it's also he's suggested the end of analysis. And then what? While I am not doing justice to the complexity of his work, there is a rigidity to the Lacanian system offered by Žižek that does not address fully the question of historicity or the context of the social-historical of the symptom itself or of the *Ich*. Dominick LaCapra puts this objection well by describing this as an "all-or-nothing tendency" whereby possibilities are restricted to two extremes: the "justifiably criticized phantasm of total mastery, full ego-identity, definitive closure, "totalitarian" social integration and redemption and radically positive transcendence"; and, on the other hand, the endless mutability, fragmentation, melancholia, aporias and irrecoverable residues and exclusion.¹³ Is one to identify with a symptom, an always-already pathological symptom, and then proceed to reflection? How so? What would make this possible except an injunction to do so. Such a heteronomous moment is antithetical to how Castoriadis conceives of the movement of *Ich* and *Es*, of the Ego and its Unconscious.

Instead, turning to Freud's famous dictum, Castoriadis suggests that this maxim must be completed by its inverse: 'Where Ego is, Id must spring forth' (*Wo Ich bin, soll Es auftauchen*) (IIS, 104). This movement back and forth as it were, is central to the refiguration Castoriadis gives to the emergence of the social individual; it is profoundly in time, and tied to a radical imaginary "core." This means that autonomy cannot be thought as a "clarification without remainder" nor as the "elimination of the discourse of the Other unrecognized as such" (104). It is instead the "establishment of another relation

¹³ LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Summer 1999): 717.

between the discourse of the Other and the subject's discourse" (104). Such a transformation is central to the way in which Castoriadis thinks of the "end" of analysis.

For instance he writes:

The Ego is altered by taking in the contents of the Unconscious, by reflecting on them, and by becoming able to choose lucidly the impulses and ideas it will attempt to enact. . . . The aim of analysis is not saintliness; as Kant said, nobody is ever a saint. The point is important, because analysis is thereby explicitly opposed to all ethics based on condemnation of desire and therefore on guilt. I want to kill you – or rape you – but I will not. Contrast this with *Matthew 5:27-28*: 'Ye have heard it said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say unto you that whosoever has looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her in his heart.' How could analysis ever forget the cardinal fact upon which it is based: that we start out life looking on a woman 'to lust after her' (whichever sex we may be), that this desire can never be eliminated, and , most importantly, that without it we would not become human beings, nay, we would not even survive? ("Psychoanalysis and Politics" *PPA*, 128).

I must not simply identify with my symptom. Rather, my task is to judge, to make sense, to be an agent, with my analyst, of my own self-activity.

Getting to a self: the social individual

Above is a description of an analytic setting as it may be understood as consubstantial with a project of autonomy. But there is a story before this one and it is the question of how the social being actually comes into being. This is important for how he thinks about the status of the relationship between psyche and society, the individual being a social product. The avenue of this break is what he refers to as the process of sublimation. Sublimation is "the process by means of which the psyche is forced to replace its 'own' or 'private objects' of cathexis (including its own 'image' for itself) by objects which exists and which have worth in and through their social institution, and out of these to create for itself 'causes,' 'means,' or 'supports' of pleasure" (312). The psyche

must project its desire for meaning into a social world. The psyche, I should note, is not the Unconscious but is the irreducible "core" of radical imagination -- an energetic field which cannot be eliminated but which cannot be ultimately known except through the institution of language. Through language, a social institution *par excellence*, the psyche is provided with meaning. The institution must provide the psyche with "*meaning for its waking life*" (PPA, 144). Indeed, because "*psyche is its own lost object*" (IIS, 296-297 emphasis in original) it must be seduced, coerced, and thrown into a social world not of its own making. This is a great enigma; namely, how to account for the separation of psychic and social life. As Castoriadis notes:

The great enigma here as everywhere, and which will always remain so, is the emergence of *separation*. A separation will lead, for the individual, to setting up a private world and a public or common world, which are distinct and yet interdependent. What we know and can state is that separation exists in so far as it is created and instituted by society (IIS, 301).

The knowledge that society is an institution, that there is a psyche as radical imagination in the sense of indeterminacy, of continual eruption of newness, should not lead to simple contemplation or easy activities of self-making.

This is separation that does not occur without violence. Indeed, quite the opposite as the psychical monad must renounce its phantasy of omnipotence. And what does it get in exchange? Meaning, signification is what it is offered by society. From the perspective of the psyche "pleasure excludes unpleasure, identity excludes otherness" and as a result "'because the child so often finds it absent', the breast 'has to be . . . shifted to the "outside"' Castoriadis notes in quoting Freud (303). He continues, the "psyche invents-figures an outside in order to place the breast of unpleasure there"; the world and object is literally a projection which is the expulsion of unpleasure (303-304). Because

there is now the 'bad' (source of unpleasure) and the 'good' breast, the relative 'otherness' of the object becomes apparent. This leads to the first sketch of the self and non-self and the process of introjection and incorporation. There's no sense that the psyche is a particularly masculine entity here. Even if the language Castoriadis uses to describe the psyche before it becomes a social being, before separation occurs, as *Ich bin die Brust* (I am the breast, a phrase Freud wrote in 1939 that Castoriadis often cites) this is a metaphorical use to describe the phantasmatic sense of self-sufficiency the psyche has. What Castoriadis takes as evidence of an imaginary at the heart of the psychic monad is the moment Freud decided to base the play of drives on "prior phantasmatic structures" as Laplanche and Pontalis remind us (286). What this means for Castoriadis is that the originary phantasmaticization, or what he calls, the radical imagination "pre-exists and presides over every organization of drives"; the drives "borrow at the start" representational flux (287). Certainly this goes beyond Freud's pretensions to a science of psychoanalysis. While the psyche registers the biological or corporeal "shocks" to its system it is not reducible to such biology. The "original and irreducible" relation of the psyche to the "biological-corporeal reality of the subject" is what Freud called *Anlehnung* or *anaclisis* – a leaning on what Castoriadis calls a first natural stratum – which is not determinate but which cannot simply be done away with (289). He continues:

What the idea of *anaclisis*, of leaning on, states is: in the first place, there can be no oral instinct without mouth and breast, no anal instinct without and anus – *and* the existence of the mouth and the breast, or the anus, still says nothing about the oral instinct in general, the anal instinct in general, about what becomes of them in a given culture, even less, what becomes of them in a given individual. But *more importantly*, in the second place: the existence of the mouth and breast, or of the anus, is not a mere 'external condition', without which there would be no oral or anal instinct, or more generally, no psychical functioning as we know it. . . . Here again the radical powerlessness of traditional thought, of inherited logic-ontology, is evident as soon as we move outside of areas in relation to which this thought has been

developed. Mouth and breast, like anus and faeces, like the penis or vagina are neither causes nor means, and certainly not ‘signifiers’ in some univocal relation to a signified which would always and everywhere be the same, *nor even the same* for the *same* subject. We must learn to think otherwise; we have to understand that the idea of anaclysis, of leaning on, is just as original and irreducible as the idea of cause or the idea of symbolizing (290, emphasis in original).

The ideal of “leaning on” (*Ahnlenung*) is important especially in Castoriadis’s later work to try to distinguish the ways in which we are fragments of a world in different modes: as a living being, as psyche, as social individual, and as specific subjects in particular societies (*WF*, 143). It’s worthwhile to recall that the imaginary is a nodal point for both a “naturalness” of bodies, the fact that human beings do have mouths, etc. and for making “stick” social imaginary significations as they are embodied each time in particular cultures. The psyche is soma, or, in other terms the soul is the form of the body which cannot be ignored in the context of making a social individual.

A social individual does emerge unless psychosis occurs through a triadic schema establishing the subject, the object, and the other. While Castoriadis is rather unclear about this process, he clearly accords importance to this triadic phase unless psychosis occurs. It is, he notes, "a sketch of the psyche's socialization" (306). This is the case because the other must provide the seed of a norm of the social institution. The fact that a repudiation of the maternal occurs is due not to psychic structures per se, but rather to social imaginary significations in operative at specific historical moment. For instance, it's remarkable that the triadic schema necessary for socialization does not necessarily follow the form of child, mother, father. It remains empty in terms of who or what elements are substantive in this triadic relation. Indeed, Castoriadis himself remarks that the significance of the Oedipus complex is in its triadic structure, and in the fact that it

sets before the child the "unavoidable fact of the institution" (310). He writes that the patriarchal family is "presented abusively as a meta-cultural and trans-historical necessity" (310). But the important point is elsewhere. Namely, "that the social individual does not grow like a plant, but is created-fabricated by society, and that this occurs *always* by means of a violent break-up of what is the first state of the psyche. . . and this will *always* be the task of the social institution in one form or another" (311). The new-born will always be torn out of "*his* world without asking for his opinion" and "under the pain of psychosis" will have to renounce imaginary omnipotence (311). The "true signification of the Oedipal situation" Castoriadis writes, is that the patriarchal family it is at once exemplary and accidental. In this violent process the psyche must replace its own objects for others and it's able to do so because representational pleasure, as opposed to organ pleasure, is offered as a means of satisfaction. It is this source of pleasure which comes into play in the process of sublimation and which marks us as human beings.

Castoriadis spends most of his theoretical energy on the *infans* and the setting of analysis. There is remarkably little attention to the process of sexual identification or sexual desire except in passing or the occasional aside. For instance, he remarks in a footnote in the section "The Social-Historical Institution: Individuals and Things" of the "profoundly imaginary character of human sexuality (beyond any 'phantasizing' in the ordinary sense of the term)" and continues that "human sexuality as an imaginary creation (at once psychical and social-historical) would require an entire book all by itself" (IIS n. 38). This has in fact spawned many books and arguments, two of which seek to tie sex/gender/sexuality to refigured practices of autonomy: namely the work of Luce

Irigaray and Judith Butler.

A Female Imaginary: Luce Irigaray's Political Practice

For Irigaray, "Psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality is the discourse of truth. A discourse that tells the truth about the logic of truth: namely, that *the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one".¹⁴ Thus begins Irigaray's essay "Cosi Fan Tutti," in which she proceeds to call to task psychoanalysis and Lacan in particular, for his ahistoricism and conservatism with regard to women, who on his model can only be the support of (male) subjectivity and never a subject for herself. Challenging this conception of being, Irigaray claims that Woman can not become a subject for herself, as she is instead object for an other, the substance of (masculine) being. Seeing Woman as the matter whereby man's form is assured, Irigaray asks about the possibility of her own self-birth. Yet, this is an impossibility. Given this, Irigaray asks of female existence:

But doesn't her whole existence amount to an 'accident'? An accident of reproduction? A genetic monstrosity? For a human life takes its form only from its father, or more specifically from the male sperm, since the product of intercourse is not made up of the combination of sperm and ovum. *If this is so, how can a girl be conceived?* Except by chromosomal anomaly? In any case, she couldn't lay claim to any substance. Merely added to -- or taken away from -- essence, fortuitous, troublesome, 'accidental,' she can be modified or eliminated without changing anything in 'nature.'¹⁵

If novelty, in fact, were introduced into this narrative of being, or found covered over within it, the security of being itself would explode. Indeed, it is just such a question of

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 86.

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 167.

the possibility of a disruptive temporality, of the possibility of creativity in history, that Irigaray calls a "female imaginary."

In a mode similar to Castoriadis, Irigaray notes that Lacan's logic is predominantly visual and that its logic of sameness positions women as "the horror of nothing to see". Also like Castoriadis, Irigaray sees that an imaginary has been repressed or covered over in Western thought in order for men 'to be'. For Irigaray the political dilemma for women is that Lacan excludes in advance the possibility of any real social change "because he does not ask the question about the relationship between real women and women in the symbolic."¹⁶ Therefore, Irigaray writes, "perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary". As Margaret Whitford suggest, juxtaposing Irigaray's work to that of Castoriadis allows us to discuss the female imaginary not simply in the framework of existing social institution, but also in the context of the disjunctive temporality of history. Likewise, Eva Ziarek makes this point in greater detail in her argument that Irigaray offers the "radical female imaginary" as an "attempt to link both embodiment and language to the discontinuous temporality of becoming, on the one hand, and to the ethical structure of alterity, on the other."¹⁷ Positioning Irigaray's ethics as a negotiation of liberation, agency, and becoming through Castoriadis's social imaginary, Ziarek wants to highlight the ethical resources offered by this "endlessly open" temporality of the body.¹⁸ She argues that what is original in Irigaray's work is "her insistence that this inaugural temporality [of the

¹⁶ Margaret Whitford *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), 68

¹⁷ Eva Ziarek, Plonowska. "Toward a Radical Female Imaginary: Temporality and Embodiment in Irigaray's Ethics." *Diacritics* 28.1 (1998): 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

radical imaginary] has to be linked with the becoming of the body.”¹⁹ This, she suggests, sets up how the asymmetry of the erotic relation between women and men “calls the subject to responsibility to the other.”²⁰ In doing so she seeks to hold off the charges that Irigaray is essentialist in her view of femaleness, and that in her more recent work on the right to civil and political identities for women, that she limits political potentiality to a heterosexual matrix.

Ziarek provides a nuanced reading of the dynamism of Irigaray’s thought in terms of temporality as the “incessant emergence of otherness” and of the importance of an ethics of sexual love as a metaphor/model for responsibility to the other. In reading Irigaray’s work as a “radical female imaginary,” she wonders what the institutional ramifications are of the feminine imaginary which might allow the “utopianism” of her work to be seen in less essentialist and more temporal/political terms. In fact, Ziarek touches on the importance of social praxis when she notes: “The tension between the instituted and instituting character of the imaginary – that is, the tension between the specific institutional arrangements and disruptive temporality – allows us to clarify the relation between the female imaginary and social practice.”²¹ Ziarek claims Irigaray does this by submitting the disruptive temporality of the radical imaginary to “the detour of mediation” in *I Love to You*.

But is this really the work of a radical *female* imaginary? The idea of the repressed female imaginary, as that energy circulating “beneath” patriarchal culture, is not much in evidence in Irigaray’s later work. For instance, Irigaray writes: “Difference must become an everyday concern in every encounter between two individuals. From

¹⁹ Ibid., 66.

²⁰ Ibid., 72.

²¹ Ibid., 65.

this point of view, the difference between ma(e)n and woma(e)n appears a possible model for a new era in History.”²² Irigaray is on target in her political judgments of the failures of law, European Union law in particular is her focus, for denying value to women as citizens and to prosecute crimes such as rape with adequate force and recognition. She insists that “we” need to define laws “for other women but also for ourselves, on pain of behaving like wealthy matriarchs who are by now secure in their own rights. . . . A duty which falls to us in our era is to discover and establish a new universality”.²³ But it’s unclear that there is a continuity between these claims of praxis and the working of a female imaginary. Moreover, while Ziarek clearly acknowledges her use of the social imaginary in interpreting Irigaray’s work, it’s impossible in Castoriadis’s terms for the radical imaginary to have a “positive” modifier such as “female.” The radical imaginary does not have any form in and of itself. And so we could ask: What would it mean to see Irigaray’s work as creative action and through the lens of praxis? In many ways, this would mean acknowledging that the notion of a “repressed female imaginary” should not be assimilated to Castoriadis’s social imaginary, as the social imaginary itself is not dependent upon a particular cultural representation or social imaginary signification. And this should also open the question of how we read “temporality” into Irigaray’s “political” writings. If we want to play out the political implications of Irigaray’s later work, it may make sense to look more at the question of the social imaginary as feminist praxis, and how Irigaray works to institute a place for a civil identity for women through law. This, of course, may open up more questions than it answers.

²² Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, trans. Kirsteen Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2000) 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

While Irigaray doesn't offer a definition of a "feminine imaginary" and the imaginary is a complex category in her work, Margaret Whitford writes that one key dimension of her formulation of a feminine imaginary was the work of Castoriadis on the radical imaginary. An imaginary tied to disruption and creation is essential in woman is to become more than, she writes more than an obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies in our sexual imaginary. For Irigaray, woman's pleasure becomes then a "masochistic proposition" caught in the economy of male desire. Her desire shouldn't be "expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks".²⁴ This logic, Irigaray continues, is predominantly visual. She proposes instead that women's desire emerges from touching rather than looking since "her entry into dominant scopopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation."²⁵ Since Lacan's mirror can only see women's bodies as lacking, and she is doubtful about the radical nature of his Symbolic, it's to a radical imaginary that she turns.

Utilizing Castoriadis's radical imaginary, Eva Ziarek, claims that for both Castoriadis and Irigaray "it is imperative to enlarge the concept of the imaginary beyond the paradigm of visual representation and to link it with a disruptive temporality characteristic of history."²⁶ Arguing that using this framework of a disruptive temporality, Ziarek seeks to displace discussion of Irigaray's work from the language of essence to the language of historicity. Indeed, the language of historicity or of radical imagination is usefully juxtaposed to linguistic models of being to expose the

²⁴ Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, 25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁶ Ziarek, 64.

determinism and conservatism often unexpectedly lurking. However, in turning to a radical *feminine* imaginary, Irigaray has ended up in her later work fixing the feminine in a heterosexual couple (see *Democracy Begins Between Two*, [1994]2000). I agree with Cornell that Irigaray's temporality can be conservative in that she has "reinscribed conservatism on the deepest level of her understanding of sexual difference" by making it about two, a man and a woman.²⁷ However, I don't think this is necessarily the case given that Irigaray is interested in a democratic experiment to reform the universal as two. Given her Hegelianism and her attention to sexual difference, it makes sense for Irigaray to imagine specific rights for women and a cooperative coupling by calling our attention to the temporality of how something new comes to be. Irigaray is invested in a transformed praxis of freedom forged through a new way of giving "substance" to the universal. This, of course, is particularly vivid in the French context where a republican tradition of community exists with roots in Rousseau. However, I worry that Irigaray neglects too much the social imaginary as a distinct but intimate sphere in formulating a radical feminine imaginary. Is this feminine imaginary part of or one expression of the social imaginary? To see the feminine imaginary as one democratic expression of the social imaginary in which we find ourselves would open it up for contestation in a way Irigaray seems to foreclose against her best intentions. That is, isn't it the case that democracy begins with the third? In the sense that we are always in the situation where we may not be in the majority and that our appeal is an open and changing dialectic between openness and closure to others. The psychoanalytic situation is necessarily between two (at least in the version practiced by Castoriadis and Irigaray) but that is

²⁷ Drucilla Cornell. *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, & Equality*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 11

exemplary for how we practice our freedom. Irigaray is original in seeking to reconstruct the universal between two, as in man and woman, as a political matter, but doing so means paying attention to how this must open up to more than two.

Identification and Loss: Judith Butler's Melancholia

One way to see what Castoriadis offers in terms of identification with social imaginary significations (and what he lacks) is to juxtapose his work to the approach of Judith Butler's formulation of subjection and to think distinguish the formulation of autonomy as praxis and gender identification as performativity. Butler has increasingly engaged psychoanalysis to formulate a view of subjectivity that respects agency and yet can take account of the practices of normalization and the imposition/internalization of heteronormativity and other normalizing discourses. It is to this work, specifically *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) that I turn to briefly to explore that stakes involved in her critique of traditional autonomy and her reformulation of subjectivity appropriate to a materially inspired, psychoanalytic politics.

Butler writes that she is "in part moving toward a psychoanalytic criticism of Foucault" because, she continues, "one cannot account for subjectivation and, in particular, becoming the principle of one's own subjection without recourse to a psychoanalytic account of the formative or generative effects of restriction or prohibition."²⁸ Indeed, the task she sets for herself in *The Psychic Life of Power* is to account for agency as derived from, not opposed to power (contra a standard liberal-humanist formulation); and further, to understand the interiorization of a norm i.e.,

²⁸ Judith Butler *Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 87. Hereafter *PLP* cited in text..

heteronormativity as the dominant one marking those 'outside' the norm as wounded. Of the first point she writes: "If the subject is *neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of noncontradiction" which is not to say that the subject lives in a free zone of its own making (*PLP*, 17 emphasis in original).

In seeking to join the discourse of power with the discourse of psychoanalysis, Butler seeks to find out how power has a psychic life, but yet is not all encompassing. Which brings me to the second task she lays out, namely, how to account for this psychic subjection. In her words she argues: "that this process of internalization *fabricates the distinction between interior and exterior life*, offering us a distinction between psychic life and the social that differs significantly from the internalization of norms" (19). In this regard, Butler is concerned to talk complexly about the negotiation of the boundary between psyche and the social, to explore a desire for a norm that is dangerous or harmful. By turning to an exploration of the functions of the Freudian explanations of mourning (working through trauma) and melancholia (a refusal to mourn for a lost object), Butler begins to formulate her spin on what literally is the "psychic life of power."

Butler writes,

Indeed, one may rage against one's attachment to some others (which is simply to alter the terms of the attachment) but no rage can sever the attachment to alterity, except perhaps a suicidal rage that usually leaves behind a note, a final address, thus confirming that allocutory bond. Survival does not take place because an autonomous ego exercises autonomy in confrontation with a countervailing world; on the contrary, no ego can emerge except through animating reference to such a world. Survival is a matter of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one's own emergence (195).

Loss in this instance is the unmournable loss of the same sex object. This is the psychic life of power -- there is no acceptable place for same sex desire except as loss. Certainly this is worthy of further elaboration -- but is this loss where Butler locates it? That is, is it at the level of subjective emergence or is it rather at the level of what Castoriadis would call the social-historical -- the culture, time, and location in which one is offered meaning? While this is certainly true in many aspects of daily life, what does it mean to inscribe this loss as constitutive to subject formation? That is, what are the implications of making the loss of the same sex object a fundamental loss in order to be? Certainly it is provocative claim and one that has a certain resonance. However, this formulation tends to ignore the historical specificity of how heterosexual desire and same sex attachments are foreclosed or made unspeakable in certain times, in certain places, with specific institutional arrangements.

Certainly the psyche must recognize that it is not the breast, it is not omnipotent or can remain the source of its own pleasure. There is at the heart of the psyche a representational flux which are "continually overdetermined and interwoven with the cultural fabric of society." Alterity is not necessarily attached to an abjected feminine or homosexual object. It is instead at the heart of the psyche and the institution of society. Castoriadis concludes that:

We are justified in imagining everything with respect to the transformation of social institutions [like the family]; but not the incoherent fiction holding that the psyche's entry into society could ever occur *gratuitously*. The individual is not the fruit of nature, not even a tropical one, but a social creation and institution (*IIS*, 311 emphasis in original).

As should be evident, there is no biological need or functional reason for socialization -- this is a defunctionalized sexuality which Castoriadis explores. Because of his emphasis

on the social-historical emergence of the psyche into a social individual, Castoriadis skirts the issue of a meta-cultural or trans-historical tale of entry into society and language. In this regard, it may be useful for feminists who seek to explore the historical nature of society and social individuals by way of psychoanalysis, and avoid the pitfalls of a constitutive feminine or maternal outside necessary for the emergence of the subject. However, one still must address how and why the feminine, the gay or lesbian other, the racial other, is perpetuated as such by the institutions of society as a matter of history.

Let me try to provide a starker contrast to explore the stakes involved in how one approaches the conjunction of psychoanalysis, philosophy and politics by drawing a distinction between sublimation and subjection. Sublimation concerns the quest for meaning which must be provided to the psyche in order for the social individual to be. Otherwise, psychosis would ensue and it is remarkable, Castoriadis has noted, that for the most part, we do become social individuals. Sublimation must rely on a monadic core, the ground power of the imaginary. It is because of this core that alterity is possible, that otherness, and not merely difference is possible. Alterity as creation is so important for Castoriadis' work because without it there would be no way to think novelty in history. "Creation entails only that the determinations over what there is are never closed in a manner forbidding the emergence of other determinations" (*WF*, 393). Putting creation at the center of his social project for autonomy means putting front and center the issues of the possibility for other forms to emerge, even though this only occurs with rare frequency.

Subjection, on the other hand, emerging as it does for Butler has to do with the internalization of norms and codes lived as real. One can never be without

subjectivation. This is compelling in so far as one can see the contingency of norms and yet their visceral power for individuals, especially if one is 'damaged' more by the internalization of norm like that of an 'aberrant' homosexuality. However, it remains hard to account for counter-norms to challenge this dominance if it is structurally endemic to how one becomes an individual subject. That is, the question of history and political creativity must remain. To claim that it is the structure of melancholia that makes identity as subjection possible is to restrict the possibility of identifying otherwise at the level of the subject. Certainly I have no objection to this evaluation on the level of the cultural-historical. Indeed, it is telling that in her more recent work, Butler addresses more explicitly the issue of questioning -- what she refers to as a "commitment to radical interrogation".²⁹ She writes that "to question a form of activity or a conceptual terrain is not to banish or censor it; it is, for the duration, to suspend its ordinary play in order to ask after its constitution."³⁰ And further, that there is a dilemma with the logic of lack. Namely, the dilemma as she phrases it here is that:

the theorist must engage in a certain reflective inquiry about the positioning from which the description emerges. For if we are to claim that all new social movements are structured by a lack which is the condition of identification itself, we have to give some grounds for making this claim.³¹

Because she suggests that "there is no givenness to the object which is not given within an interpretive field", to begin with either an empirical description or transcendental one (of hegemony) is unnecessarily polarizing and restrictive.³² Indeed, there is an affinity between this suggestion and Castoriadis's proposition that we find

²⁹ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 2000. Hereafter *Contingency*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

³² *Ibid.*, 274.

ourselves by way of social imaginary significations and there is no 'other' way to think of reality or the world or to analyze social relations except in this way. While society may lean upon the natural stratum, it is only to erect a fantastically complex and amazingly coherent edifice of significations which invest everything with meaning (*PPA*, 41). Of the social imaginary Castoriadis writes, "This element -- which gives a specific orientation to every institutional system, which overdetermines the choice and connections of the symbolic networks, . . . the basis for articulating what does matter and what does not. . . is nothing other than the *imaginary* of the society and of the period considered" (*IIS*, 145). Indeed, imaginary significations of society prove exceptionally powerful. In terms of the nation, Castoriadis writes that the "imaginary characteristic of the nation nonetheless proves more solid than any other reality as two world wars and the survival of nationalism have shown" (148). What today's 'Marxists' miss he notes are that one can't do away with nationalism by calling it a mystification. That a "mystification has effects so massively and terribly real . . . proves itself to be much stronger than and 'real' forces" (148). In terms of sexual difference, the significance of masculinity and femininity, this is an imaginary signification of similar power.

How Impossible

Freud famously referred to psychoanalysis, pedagogy and politics as impossible professions. Castoriadis picks up on the term impossibility to ask why Freud chose such a term when he himself created psychoanalysis and practiced it. Freud did not say that these professions were "extremely difficult" as are those of a "brain surgeon, a concert pianist, or a Himalayan Sherpa" – but impossible. Why? The answer Castoriadis says

must be because these professions deal with “that most intractable of all materials, the human being” (*WF*, 126). Noting that general, salesmen and prostitutes all deal with the same material does not in itself lead to a charge of their professions as impossible. The impossibility stems from the way in which psychoanalysis, pedagogy and politics seeks to change human beings – by way not of reaching a determinate end but of being otherwise. In this regard Freud offered what for Castoriadis is a comprehensive, pregnant and risky answer to the ends of analysis – the famous *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, the formulation I discussed above where impossibility is the elimination of that which makes us human: “the uncontrolled and uncontrollable continuous surge of creative radical imagination in and through the flux of representations, affects, and desires” (127-8). Psychoanalysis, like politics and pedagogy, is then a project of a democratic sort. Castoriadis calls this a project and not a plan or program since we do not know where this project must go. This is a political project which he insists means that “I want the other to be free, for my freedom *begins* where the other’s freedom begins, . . . I do not count on people turning into angels, nor on their souls becoming as pure as mountain lakes. . . But I know how much present culture aggravates and exasperates their difficulty to be and to be with others, and I see that it multiplies to infinity the obstacles placed in the way of their freedom” (*IIS*, 92). In one of the few anecdotes he offered from his own practice, he reveals what the experience of psychoanalysis can transform on the part of the analyst. He reports that a schizophrenic confined for many years who saw him twice a week and made real progress on day recounted to him a terrifying memory. She said that several years earlier she had been with her boyfriend at the time in a hotel room so that they could make love. This proved impossible and even frightening “because the

sheets were so sweet they were on fire” (*WF*, 210). Castoriadis writes to my question – “a stupid one I admit – [as to] how sheets could be sweet and why that made them burn, she responded quite rightly, and with the tone of a great philosopher reprimanding a dull pupil: Mr. Castoriadis, if you had never dreamed, would I be able to explain to you what a dream is and what it is like to dream?” (210). Here, Castoriadis admits, we see the schizophrenic’s genius “which can, indeed, sometimes rival that of an Immanuel Kant” (210). What this reveals is that psychoanalysis enacts a model of freedom whereby transformation is not simply one-sided, but can, very often lead to self-knowledge and a new form of being in relation to oneself on the part of the analyst and analysand. That this is a model of philosophy should give pause to those who think that knowledge without pain, subjection and transformation is possible or ever fully determinable.

Conclusion

This attention to recognizing contingency should sound familiar to feminist and cultural theorists. After all, contemporary feminist theory has known for some time that there is no stable foundation for feminist politics—not the ‘nature’ of sex, nor gender, nor experience. In the realm of popular culture, the fantasy of self-making is a commonplace marketing tool—just watch television, as an ad for L’Oreal Féria hair color crones “I don’t just change the way I look, I change myself” spoken in our supposedly ‘post-difference’ world, by a model of African origin with blond hair, an Anglo with dark hair and spokeswomen Jennifer Lopez in a dashing shade of red. Slavoj Žižek offers some provocative and I think right comments on the dangers of uncritically celebrating fluid and multiple identities in progressive politics. He writes that the predominant form of ideology today is “precisely that of multiple identities, non-identity and cynical distance. If we play this game—not male, not female, but assume all possibilities—this is a late capitalist game.”¹ Assuming that this is correct, Hannah Arendt’s articulation of the problem of freedom of the problem of the new should come into relief as not simply about multiplicity and multiplication of political identities and political claims, but that the substance of politics is about what is was once unthought. With the help of the work of Cornelius Castoriadis I’ve tried to explore how this recognition of freedom as the problem of the new conditions how we might understand autonomy as a project; a project reiterated and claimed anew in feminist political activities. This also, I hope, has shown that the sharp separation between theory and practice is a political and practical dead end

¹ Žižek, “Lacan in Slovenia” and “Postscript” in *A Critical Sense of Place: Interviews with Intellectuals*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1996), 40.

for feminist theory. Indeed, when reframed as a praxis, the looping of theory (clarifying the world; what ought I/we to think?) and practice (what ought we to do?) reveals that the subject of feminism need not be resolved empirically for us to act politically. As a practice of the radical imagination, autonomy as a project in the name of women is a radically contested and claimed practice.

In this project I have been most concerned to address the question: How is it possible to claim and theorize autonomy as a feminist goal after the critiques of sovereignty and the category women? As I intended in the project, the goal is to argue for a praxis based model of autonomy which charts a course between the well-known shoals of foundationalist moves to reduce all activity to Reason, all politics to technical mastery, and all being to “being-determined” (whether by nature, culture or history), and the counter move of “postmodern” thought to render all claims to reason, political norms and being out of bounds. Relocating autonomy from the sovereign self to the material realm of doing and willing involves a defense of creativity (and destruction) that late capitalist “novelty” cannot capture because it exceeds its very boundaries or bureaucratic accounting. When it comes to seeing such creativity in terms of the political claiming of women in feminist politics, there has been a reluctance to see this claiming as a political act of freedom.

Take for instance the case of Simone de Beauvoir. Upon her death the French newspaper *Le Monde* ran an article about Simone de Beauvoir entitled “Her works: Popularization rather than Creation.” Indeed, women who act and speak in public have often been characterized as getting their ideas from a man, acting like men, or, being masculine. That a woman may be creative, may produce something novel, falters on the

ground of the status quo—“she” could never say anything new. Yet, of course, feminism has emerged as a creative, political movement to challenge just such policing and to posit and foster the conditions whereby women may become ‘speaking subjects’; that is, a situation where women, theoretically all women, may speak in their own voice. This double-edged process, as Rosi Bradotti notes, involves “both the critique of existing definitions, representations and theorizations of women and also the creation of new images for female subjectivity and suitable representations of it.”² The practice of critique and creativity is, of course, banal at some level; certainly all political movements do such a thing. It is however the side of creation, of creation as it is tied to the new that I investigate here because it seems to me that the significance of the ‘new’ has been elided by feminist discussions revolving around liberal mechanisms of inclusion, or in the recurring assumptions of identity-based politics, or, conversely, in the seeming voluntarism of identity as a choice among competing images in a field of shifting discourses. These starkly drawn options gloss over what Arendt calls ‘the problem of the new.’

As discussed in Chapter One, the problem of the new, Arendt contends, is that it opens up the abyss of freedom—freedom not as a choice among a variety of options, but freedom to spontaneously begin a new series, a radically other future. Freedom as “arising out of spontaneously beginning” is terrifying in its “ineluctable randomness” where, Arendt notes, many “professional thinkers” and “men of action” have been unwilling to “pay the price of contingency for the questionable gift of spontaneity, of being able to do what could be left undone” (*LM*, 203;198). As Arendt puts it, the

² Rosi Bradotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 90.

emergence of the new reveals that it cannot be accounted for in terms of cause and effect, or in terms of potentiality and realization (208). The new, instead, opens up the subject of revolution, the possibility of the overthrow of accepted reality in effect, revealing that there is no solid ground that remains steadfast or secure. The anxiety invoked by the knowledge of this contingency challenges the status of necessity and of determination. Because of the intensity of this anxiety Arendt rhetorically asks: “Isn’t trust in necessity, the conviction that everything is as ‘it was to be,’ infinitely preferable to freedom bought at the price of contingency?” (196). For Arendt, freedom bought at the price of contingency is a freedom understood as doing, a practice of I-can which needs others (public space) to exist. This she opposes to freedom understood as sovereignty which, as a quality of the will, exists outside worldly space and time.

For another example, take the vision of freedom and what we could see as a praxis based autonomy in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa’s work can be situated within the logic of feminist challenges of critique and creativity of the category of women so much in evidence in the last part of the 20th century. Anzaldúa’s new mestiza captured feminist imagination for the complex ways she theorizes differences simultaneously and dynamically. Since first appearing in her writing in the mid-to-late 1980s, the new mestiza as the site of a new consciousness—a “product” of the borderlands of the southwestern United States (actual, linguistic, cultural and sexual borderlands) -- spoke to racism within feminist politics and sexism in Chicano politics.³ This work also was

³ See the works: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) hereafter *B/LF*; Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. *Making Face, Making Soul - Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990.); and Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherrie Moraga. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983).

critical of identity politics based on essential cultural or natural differences, and emphasized the need to reclaim a revolutionary spirit that revealed in the ambiguity and fluidity of multiple identities. Since this time, the figure of the new mestiza has been taken up and engaged in numerous ways, in a variety of disciplinary fields, and political programs.

Although Anzaldúa's call for creative resistance has been often commented upon, there has been little work done to engage this "positive" moment of her work that is not simply a celebration of self-invention, downplaying the difficulty of self and social transformation. However, María Lugones in a brief, but rich interpretive essay on *Borderlands/La Frontera*, draws out the importance of creativity in Anzaldúa's work by seeing her text as "a work creating a theoretical space for resistance."⁴ Lugones notes that "Anzaldúa recognizes that the possibility of resistance depends on [the] creation of a new identity, a new world of sense, in the borders."⁵ I'd like to push this insight more, to see what sort of practice emerges from the borderlands and how, or if, there is a recognition of the sort of novelty that Arendt and Castoriadis see as central to democratic practices.

The "newness" of identity relies on the creation of new meanings. A "new world of sense" is what is necessary to resist and survive the imposition and internalization of oppressive forces. Indeed, the identity of the mestizo is itself the result of colonialist and oppressive forces. The mestizo is a historical creation and a controversial one. For instance, when Jose Vasconcelos celebrated *mestizaje* in his 1925 text *The Cosmic Race*

⁴ Lugones, María. 1992. "On *Borderlands/La Frontera*: An Interpretive Essay." *Hypatia* 7(4): 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

(*La raza cósmica*) as a positive emergence of racial and cultural mixing for a new age in which freedom would flourish, he was charged with an elitism and blindness to Indian identities, and was also called to task for his religious transcendentalism. Yet the positive figurations of mestizaje remains vibrant, popping up in 1960s/70s Chicano movements and in many contemporary works of fiction, philosophical, and social science investigations. For Anzaldúa mestizo culture is a result of the historical convergence of the people of Aztlan, the native Indians in Mexico, Spanish colonists, and then people in the United States from Native Americans to Europeans. Anzaldúa recognizes that identity is historical, not ontological in the inherited sense. She also notes that Chicano identity came into being during the 1960s with books like *I am Joaquin* and Cesar Chavez's organization of farm workers (*B/LF*, 63). These are historical creations, materialized in flesh and blood, lived as struggle and oppression. Both mestizaje culture and Chicano identity are creations in a radical sense—they are novel on the world stage not having existed before these historical acts. In light of this, Anzaldúa's task is to negotiate and develop a new meaning for mestizaje culture, opening up a space for a feminine, queer, Chicana identity and consciousness.

For Anzaldúa the work of *mestiza* consciousness is to “break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (80). This rupturing of dualistic thinking emerges for Anzaldúa through *mestiza* consciousness as an embodied and feminine process. This gives rise to a new *mestiza*. For one thing, *mestizo* is transformed into the feminine *mestiza*. Secondly, the new *mestiza* defies simple categorization as she is always multiple and always emerging in time and space. She is never really at home. As

Anzaldúa writes, the new *mestiza* has no homeland; she is a writer, queer, Chicana (72-73). In a provocative passage Anzaldúa offers these thoughts:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland casts me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*. (80-81).

In this passage Anzaldúa demonstrates the tensions of recognizing the power of the institution (culture, language, religion) to define her, and the necessity to resist and posit an 'other' story (not explanation since there is no way to come to an original 'cause' for this situation) that is more just. She is *un amasamiento*, a mixture of these conflicting significations, what Castoriadis would call a fragment. We are all living fragments in a world made of fragments. Mestizas explicitly make known the fragmentary nature of our lives and our world. In this sense the mestiza and the queer are synonymous in function, in not belonging anywhere, but being everywhere. The political identification of queer and mestiza break down the geographic associations of the mestiza and the false security that we 'know' who they/we are and thus reveal the temporal quality of self and society.

In her work Anzaldúa demonstrates the necessity to develop space for new versions of female subjectivity at the same time that she recognizes that to be a woman is to be defective or wounded from the point of view of traditional (Chicano) masculinity. (82-83). Anzaldúa's new definition of woman is to take a step toward a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions—to "communicate that rupture" and "document the struggle" (82). In this way she reinterprets history, uses new symbols, shapes new myths

to adopt new perspectives toward the “darkskinned, women and queers.” She deconstructs and constructs in her words. “Woman” in this sense is created by “burning up the old.”⁶ This burning up of “Woman” Bradotti suggests is a “farewell to the second sex, that eternal feminine that was stuck to our skins like toxic material Unless feminists negotiate with the historicity of this temporal change, the great advances made by feminism towards the empowerment of alternative forms of female subjectivity will not be brought to social fruition.”⁷ At her best, this is what the new mestiza makes possible. That is, Anzaldúa is concerned with a radically other relationship between Woman the sign and the diverse reality of Chicana/queer/women in feminism and society. She offers us insight into the dynamics of critique and creativity so essential for not forgetting sexed, raced, queer bodies. Through her own exploration of what it means to try to give birth to a new meanings, to new beings, Anzaldúa offers not a model, but an illustration, useful in a cultural register of the possibilities and pitfalls of the borderlands as a figuration of freedom as novelty.

That society (and its attendant social individuals) is a result of the instituting and instituted work of the social imaginary reveals that autonomy is generated as the result of the social-historical dynamic of the breaking and positing of new forms of signification and being. Autonomy then is not conceived on the model of containment, but rather on the model of praxis. Praxis in this sense is understood as conscious and lucid activity which is not the application of prior knowledge for where our activity “must go.” Instead, praxis as autonomy is based on fragmentary and provisional knowledge because there is no exhaustive theory of humanity and history; as cited earlier, autonomy “is provisional

⁶ Rosi Bradotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

because praxis itself constantly gives rise to a new knowledge for *it makes the world speak a language at once singular and universal*" (IIS, 76 emphasis in original). What makes this so vertiginous and risky is the recognition that autonomy is "grounded" on an ontology of indeterminacy as opposed to what has been more typical, and ontology of determinacy in terms of how we think of being, reality, and historical change.

Critiquing the assertion of an enlightened sovereign self and a sense of proper order "out there" has been a task at least since Rousseau, passing through Hegel's critique of Kant's formalism to think of freedom within history, and then taken up vividly by Nietzsche who unveiled the contingency of democracy as dependent upon a slave mentality to take a continental line of critique. Moreover the experiences of war, genocide, exploitative labor practices, racist and sexist violence reveals that the very freedom supposed to be secured with enlightened modernity cannot keep its promise as promised through a vision of politics as the institution of sovereignty. Indeed, the claim that democratic politics simply opposed violence has long been questioned. Marx's critique of capitalism, for example, gives lie to the rights of man as the rights of those with property or who control the means of production. Or the argument that modernity is contingent upon the situation of slavery. Or, as Simone de Beauvoir famously reveals, the unmarked category of the human as masculine and woman as man's other. As feminist criticisms continue to reveal, the norm of who counts as a person is contingent upon a masculine imaginary i.e. a vision of the self who is male and independent because not a slave, a laborer, woman or child. That is the model of the self enshrined in much of democratic theory (indeed in most of Western thought) is a self that denies such contingencies of time and place in order to be: a self who is sovereign. But noticing this

does not mean that we could get “her” right once and for all. Getting out from such sovereign-centered ideas of the self with the attendant rationality of his actions and political ordering is a renewed effort to think about political analysis in other terms. As the work of Max Weber on bureaucracy and of Michel Foucault on the disciplinary working of modern power demonstrate there is an intimacy between freedom and “unfreedom” in modernity. Modernity is clearly not a neat process of rationalization improving on our autonomy, but neither is it simply a legacy of rational mastery.

The assumption that the ontological precepts of Enlightenment rationalism are what is needed to ground democratic politics has been of concern to feminists and others for some time since this has not been the guarantee of freedom but often the grounds of its denial. And yet, if we don’t want to lapse into nihilism and or thin pragmatism of “so be it” let’s just do what we can, we should think again about the intimacy of ontology (and epistemology) and politics. On this point Jean-Phillipe Deranty writes: “An ontology of contingency provides the model with which to think together both the possibility, and the possibility of the repetition of, catastrophe, as one heritage of modernity, and the contingency of catastrophe as logically entailing the possibility of its opposite. Modernity is ambiguous because it provides the normative resources to combat the apparent necessity of possible systemic catastrophes. Politics is the name of the struggle drawing on those resources.”⁸ Some of the most interesting theoretical and social science work in this vein crosses the boundaries of philosophy, gender theory, literature, phenomenology, critical theory, economics and science (physical and biological). Castoriadis’s work on the radical imagination as an ontology of

⁸ Jean-Phillippe Deranty, “Agambens’s Challenge to Normative Theories of Modern Rights” *Borderlands e-journal* vol. 3, no. 1, 2004.

creation/destruction is important in understanding how a praxis based understanding of autonomy may open up nonsovereign account of freedom; a practice of freedom central to feminist democratic politics.

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