

# The Magma of Imaginary Politics

## Eight Theses

*Mats Rosengren*

### Exergue

What follows is an attempt at a magmatic representation, reworking and reforming some of Cornelius Castoriadis's ideas relating to the notion of political intervention.

The notion of magma – or rather of magmas – is central in Castoriadis's conception of how, and of what, our world is. In a condensed passage in a seminal essay, –“The logic of magmas”–, he formulates some ontological theses, which I find quite useful as an introduction to his stance. What is, is not totality or systems of totalities. What is, is not completely determined. What is, he says, “is Chaos, or Abyss, or Without-Foundation. What is, is Chaos stratified in a non regular manner.”<sup>1</sup> Briefly put, what is, is magmas – some dense, slow and sluggish, others liquid, fast and brief as water; all in constant motion, interacting, folding into each other just to disengage again; no magma being reducible to another, but all relating and leaning upon each other. One magma may include other magmas – and be included in others, as for example the multitude of sensemaking included in the magma of social imaginary significations.

A magmatic representation of this kind of thought has – in order not to betray its content through the use of a contradictory form – to be magmamorph in itself. Hence, I will let my own voice, text and pictures fold in and out of Castoriadis's words and thoughts, employing a somewhat formal way of presentation, mimicking Castoriadis's own text.

It goes without saying that the theses may be read separately, together, in and out of order.

# Thesis:

**Magma – not system, history or tradition – is the appropriate term to use when talking about the stuff that societies are made of.**

**Elucidation:** Making the claim that if we humans have any historical and social ‘being’, then it is best described through the metaphor ‘being downstream’, I once wrote: “There are, of course, several different senses in which *being downstream* can be understood in connection with history and time. Most evidently, perhaps, the notion of *downstream* evokes a river that flows from a perhaps unknown source or origin towards its goal (the sea) – in this respect, the metaphor tends to guide our thinking about history, about our being in time and in history, towards a conception where time flows, irrevocably, independently, not heeding our human needs and preoccupations, following a pre-established direction, where we, as it were, are more or less reluctantly washed away with the flow. Ever since Heraclitus<sup>2</sup> this image has been an integral part of Western thinking, ceaselessly subjected to different interpretations, but none the less always implying that change, time and therefore history has a direction whether we like it or not. We may succeed in building some barriers and, for a time, be able to divert the current from its main course, but in the end the flow of time will carry us all away towards whatever end or *telos* it itself is approaching.

Moreover, the image *being downstream* in history or time evokes a difference in level: What has happened before is upstream; what is to come, what will come to pass, is even further downstream and we are all familiar with how differences in elevation tend to transform themselves into differences in value: the metaphor might seem to imply that everything was better before the present, and will be worse in the future – the water used to be clearer and fresher; after us, it will be even more polluted. In this sense the notion of being downstream is a nostalgic one – expressing a longing for times past and shores long passed, and urging us to look for the faraway source or origin whence it all sprang forth.

But the value-transformation may work in the opposite direction as well. The trickle, coming from a small source lost in the high, barren wastelands of unfriendly mountains, gains strength, flows more easily, grows mighty and strong as it reaches the valleys and becomes a majestic river in the flatlands, where it unhesitatingly chooses the easiest course towards its goal – the sea, farther away still. If you interpret the metaphor in this way, what



is better, richer and more desirable for us human beings will constantly be found downstream, and the final goal, the sea, even if forever unattainable, will represent an ultimate value, that which gives meaning and purpose to time, history, and to us all.

The three interpretations mentioned this far all convey what I would like to call a heteronomous notion of history and time – that is, a notion of history as something given and immutable, its laws and properties given once and for all by nature, God, or whatever. Of course, this notion does not utterly exclude human influence on the events of history, which would be absurd. To a large extent however, it presents history as pre-determined by laws and conditions beyond human reach, laws and conditions that we have to accept and subordinate ourselves to.

The interpretation I favour is quite different, much less intuitive and not evocative of a river at all, or even streaming water. For me, the notion of being downstream, is consonant with being thrown into water that is already there – in puddles, canals, small lakes and swamps. In this marshland the water flows to and fro, currents are created, grow in strength, diverge, concord, diminish and disappear. Canals go dry, others overflow, puddles stagnate and evaporate, others are re-connected to the bigger lakes and so on. No direction is inscribed in this interpretation, no from where to there. In these marshes of history every position we may take or find ourselves in is always already downstream – in the sense that there is always water there before us, filled with toxic or nourishing particles and debris, the remains of earlier happenings in the marshes. Nor is there a difference in value implied by this interpretation – the different parts of our marshland are just different, *other* in relation to each other, more or less suitable for different purposes, nothing more.”<sup>3</sup>

**Comment:** Today is already downstream – and today I would consequently talk about magmas instead of marshes. What is essential is this: we need to address our history as present, and our future as a realm of possible interventions towards a future deliberately chosen. As in politics, each heteronomic inclination spells doom in the future.

# Thesis:

## In politics, exclusive faith in ensidic rationality spells doom.

**Elucidation:** "Ensidic thinking" or "ensidic logic" is a shorthand expression for the kind of thinking and logic that Cornelius Castoriadis calls 'ensembliste-identitaire', that is thinking based on the idea that all aspects of being are specific differentiations of a determined original element, an element that should therefore be considered to be their unity, identity or essence. Ensidic logic posits the origin of the laws of our world (natural laws as well as social ones) outside of *our* world and society. In this sense the ensidic thinking is heteronomous and tends to 'cover over' the fact that man is autonomous, whether he knows it or not. In short, ensidic logic rejects the possibility of gaps, play and indeterminacy in being – and thus of human creation. Needless to say, the tendency to think both science and politics in ensidic terms has been dominating Western thought ever since it was created.

But, if we do not reckon with our ability to create new forms in and for our world, we would have to admit all kinds of oddities. For example, we would have to accept that everything that now *is*, from hairdryers and hot-dogs to symphonies and quantum-physics, is out of necessity and therefore, in a sense, has been there (where?) ever since the Big Bang (or what ever *arche* you choose). Or, if it is not always already there, we would at least have to assume that everything is fully explainable in casual terms – a position that Castoriadis calls 'the myth of being as determined'. This mode of thinking may be summarised as follows: Since the notion of universal causality and 'the total rationality of what there is' seems to be at odds with the way the world actually presents itself to us, and with the way *we* are in this world, we have to assign to causality and rationality its proper place and range – that is to the strata in the world that actually, inevitably and necessary are 'ruled' by the ensidic-logic. But politics is not one of those strata – rather, it is the only domain where autonomy in the strong sense can realise itself. Consequently, when introduced in the sphere of politics, notions like 'absolute necessity', 'compelling reasons' or 'imperative rationality' spell doom for autonomy.



**Comment:** The pivotal word in this thesis is of course ‘exclusive’. I am not saying that we should do away with all attempts of planning our societies according to foresight, good reason, plans and projects. What I do claim is that we have to do away with the lingering belief in rational domination and control (the engineer way) in order to pave the way for a politics focusing on the ever fluctuating needs and openings of the present situation, as well as on the dependence on history and institutions; a situated politics not losing sight of global connections; a politics focusing on promoting what seems to be reasonable without mistaking firm conviction for evidence or universal validity – in short, a politics of the bricoleur. Or, if you prefer, a politics of autonomous, conscious creation.

# Thesis:

## Creation is inevitable and desirable.

**Elucidation:** “A general science of man, research bearing upon the *genus homo*, is therefore precisely this: research bearing upon the conditions and the forms of *human creation*.”<sup>4</sup> This conclusion, formulated by Cornelius Castoriadis some ten years before his death, states in all its brevity the object and the predicament of our epistemological, and therefore also and inevitably political situation. To some, this may not seem as a radical or even as an important commitment. Creation is an everyday issue: Writing this, I am creating a text; reading these words you are creating a more or less coherent meaning by manipulating the signs which I have put together; mixing ingredients for your meal, you create a dish; contacting colleagues and strangers, you may make friends and enemies, and create networks; putting bricks upon bricks you create a statue or build a house etcetera. Nothing could be more common than activities of this kind, all so human.

But human creativity is infinitely more complex than these ordinary activities may induce us to believe. The examples just mentioned are all instances of an individual intentionally creating something. But these cases are not, nor should they be taken as, paradigm cases of human creation. The most important and most insidious forms of human creation are not attributable or reducible to individual intentions, at least not in simple or obvious ways. Just reflect upon what it means to say that society, or our life-world, is a human construct or creation: Who intended it to become what it is? Who made the plans? Who is responsible? To my mind, the difficulties involved in trying to pin down individual intentions as the origin of the social, reveal these questions as being misdirected.





**Comment:** Creation occurs all the time, but not all creation is radical. For creation to be radical it has to be irreducible to what was there before. Most creations are not irreducible in this way – but some are. For instance, the creation of the social organisation that explicitly recognised itself as the origin of all its laws, traditions, rites and habits was such a creation – the creation of autonomous democracy.

# Thesis:

## Institutions are needed, but must inevitably and constantly be held open.

**Elucidation:** The imaginary institution of society is the institution of society. Castoriadis explains: " 'That which' creates society and history is the instituting society, as opposed to the instituted society. The instituting society is the social imaginary in the radical sense."<sup>5</sup> Our institutions are essential for keeping chaos and disintegration at bay, but they have a tendency to close themselves, establishing their specific ways of functioning as immutable laws – and thus presenting themselves as necessities and unalterable realities. This may be seen in the many different and multilayered ways in which religions and ideologies, mythologies and sciences have established themselves as True representations of the world. An essential political and conceptual task is to find ways to keep institutions from closing – an always specific and situated task.





**Comment:** “To put it bluntly: It is because there is radical imagination and instituting imaginary that there is any “reality” at all for us, and reality such as it is.”<sup>6</sup> All kinds of institutionalised oblivion of this fact have to be thwarted.

# Thesis:

## The creation of concepts equals the making of worlds – hence a political issue.

**Elucidation:** Our knowledge and our truths are *totally* dependent upon ourselves as human beings and upon our versions of the world. We cannot claim to know anything in the sense of having direct access to the World, or the Forms/Ideas, or the Universe (and this would, of course, still be the case even if you believe in a God having created the world...). But we do know (in the doxic sense of *doxa* as opposed to *episteme*) a lot about the world we are living in. And we make our discriminations as to what is true and false, real and unreal etcetera according to what most of us take to be the dominant (scientific) *doxa*, which is the standard we tend to use when forced to choose between the true and the false. And every *doxa* is a human creation. We are, always in specific and changing ways, forced to create our own facts, our own truths, our own possibilities – in a profoundly cosmogonic way we do create our world in doing politics, science, peace and war. And this is why we badly need to address the problems of creation, not only in relation to literature, poetry or art, but in the very core of the scientific endeavour as well as in everyday politics.



**Comment:** We need to reflect upon what it means to know something in this context. That is, what are the conditions permitting us to know (as opposed to ‘to think’, ‘to guess’, ‘to presume’, ‘to fancy’ etc.) that, for example, a mythical account of the world is false? Well, the standards we use to separate true from false accounts, knowledge from fantasies, are the standards that are accepted in our community as the appropriate ones to use. And here I use the term ‘community’ as shorthand for a more detailed description that would involve references to common sense, to disciplinary knowledge-formation and discourse – but above all to the prevailing *doxa* of a specific society/community/discipline/culture. Moreover, what I call *doxa* is rather similar to what Castoriadis calls the *magma of social imaginary significations* of a society – keeping in mind that magma, for Castoriadis, also has an, as it were, ontological signification. The key issue here is to accept two things: First the obvious – if our standards were different, then the legitimate conclusions would also differ, and the knowledge and the truths of our world as well. Second, we need to admit – and from a traditional epistemological point of view this is probably a less palatable position – that our standards are by no means necessary or immutable; they are creations that could have been different, and that differ and defer all the time.

# Thesis:

## Autonomy is always preferable to heteronomy.

**Elucidation:** A political autonomy involves a conscious dealing with the creation of a human world. Castoriadis writes: “The self-institution of society is the creation of a human world: of ‘things’, ‘reality’, language, norms, values, ways of life and death, objects for which we live and objects for which we die – and of course first and foremost, the creation of the human individual in which the institution of society is massively embedded.”<sup>7</sup>

Heteronomic societies, or politics, refuse autonomy and institute themselves, and their central significations, as unattainable and unchangeable for the society itself. They posit the origin of their laws outside of the society itself.



**Comment:** There are two senses of autonomy – a biological and a social. Read in one way, they are opposites. Biological autonomy is neither chosen, nor conscious – it is just the way the world appears to an organism as a result of its biological makeup; sea-urchins deal with sea-urchin things, bats with bat things, and humans with human things. In this sense, every being is condemned to autonomy.

Social autonomy is quite a different matter, emerging (as far as we know) only in human societies, and only in a few of these. Castoriadis again: “As a germ, autonomy emerges when explicit and unlimited interrogation explodes on the scene – an interrogation that has bearing not on ‘facts’ but on the social imaginary significations and their possible grounding. This is a moment of creation, and it ushers a new type of society and a new type of individuals. I am speaking intentionally of a *germ*, for autonomy, social as well as individual, is a *project*. The rise of unlimited interrogation creates a new social-historical *eidos*: reflectiveness in the full sense, or self-reflectiveness, as well as the individual and the institutions which embody it. The questions raised are, on the social level: Are our laws good? Are they just? Which laws *ought we* to make? And, on the individual level: Is what I think true? Can I know if it is true – and if so, how?”<sup>8</sup>

Put in another way, biological autonomy is a precondition for social autonomy – just as embodiment is the precondition for the very existence of meaning of any kind. That we humans to a large extent embody our world is, however, far from a sufficient condition for social autonomy to emerge – as a germ and project, autonomy is continuously changing and needs to be ever renewed not to close in upon itself.

# Thesis:

## Social imaginary institutions are (of course) real and efficient.

**Elucidation:** Imaginary does not necessarily mean unreal. To be real is to have real effects in the world we live in. Reality is not something ‘out there’ but a complex web of relations, determinations and interconnections between subjects, history, creation, society etcetra. Castoriadis sums up the situation: “The ‘knowing subject’ is not and cannot be ego – and still less *ego-logical*. Language and understanding are social-historical creations, imaginary institutions that have to be imposed upon the singular psyche and permit the latter to make something of the debris of its prehuman ensidic organization. There is no *ego-language* any more than some *mono-understanding*; social-historical existence is an *absolute* condition for subjectivity. And subjectivity is far from being ‘simply logical’, *even* in its ‘logical’ and ‘knowing’ operation. There is a creative potential to the subject – to the singular subject – also *in the domain of knowledge*, which is source of innovation. In altering its knowledge – the social-historical knowledge each time established – the subject does not ‘adapt’ itself; it *posits* new *thinkable figures* of Being/being as knowable and thinkable. And this it can do only because it is also and especially *radical imagination*, a virtually communicable – figurable and sayable – presentational potentiality. It could not do this through ‘reason’ or ‘understanding’. The one and the other can contrive and corroborate, systematize or deduce – neither the one nor the other can *posit* anything that is *new* and has a *content*. But without language, without understanding, without reference to ‘reality’ and even to the tradition of research, this imaginary would produce only phantasms; with them and through them it can create *knowledge*.”<sup>9</sup>





**Comment:** Castoriadis's position is thus not a relativism in the received sense, but nor is it an objectivism. It articulates a position that encompasses the traditional epistemological and theoretical stances, transforms them and turns them into something else – into, if you permit, a magmatic approach to knowing and reality.




# Thesis:

**An intervention has to intervene in the magma of social imaginary significations, or not intervene at all.**

Elucidation:





**Comment:** This thesis states an ambiguous evidence, that may be explored in a multitude of directions. There is no guarantee that an intervention is good, desirable, sensible or leading to a better state of things – in fact, most passionate or coldly calculated interventions do not, as we know far to well.

But we have no alternative – either we try to grasp our autonomy and intervene as best we can, or fall prey to heteronomic actions and thinking of all kinds. There is hope in the fact that no-one can have absolute control. Or, put in another way, if God really existed, all hope would be gone.

## The Magma of Imaginary Politics

### Notes

1. Castoriadis (1977: 509)
2. Cf. Fragm. # 12, 49a, and 91.
3. Mats Rosengren (2005:203-205)
4. Cornelius Castoriadis (1997c: 104) "Anthropology, philosophy, Politics"; translation David Ames Curtis; in *Thesis Eleven*; May 1997; p. 117-135; page 104.
5. Castoriadis (1997b: 269)
6. Castoriadis (1997a: 228) The translation is my own.
7. Cornelius Castoriadis (1997b: 269)
8. Castoriadis (1991: 163)
9. Cornelius Castoriadis (1997b: 372-373)

### References

- Cornelius Castoriadis, *Domaines de l'Homme – Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe 2*, 1977
- Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy – Essays in Political Philosophy*, David Ames Curtis (ed), 1991
- Cornelius Castoriadis, *La montée de l'insignifiance*, 1996
- Cornelius Castoriadis, *Fait et à faire – les carrefours du labyrinthe*, 1997a
- Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, editing and translation David Ames Curtis, 1997b
- Cornelius Castoriadis, "Anthropology, philosophy, Politics"; translation David Ames Curtis; in *Thesis Eleven*; May 1997; p. 117-135. 1997c
- Mats Rosengren, "On Being Downstream" in *The Past's Presence. Essays on the historicity of philosophical thought*, Södertörn Philosophical studies 3, Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback and Hans Ruin (eds.), 2005

(Photos: Mats Rosengren)