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What is This?

Castoriadis as a civilizational analyst: Sense and non-sense in Ancient Greece

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Abstract

This article argues that a civilizational perspective is central to Castoriadis's interpretation of ancient Greece, even if he does not use the language of civilizational analysis. More specifically, his line of argument has clear affinities with Eisenstadt's definition of the 'civilizational dimension' in terms of connections between cultural interpretations of the world and institutional forms of social life. Castoriadis has less to say about geocultural and geopolitical structures of the Greek world, which would also be important topics for a balanced civilizational approach. His distinctive variation on the civilizational theme rests on the idea of social imaginary significations; in the ancient Greek case, this starting point leads to the reconstruction of a 'primary grasp of the world', an imaginary core that conditions further developments and innovations. This core component of Greek culture centres on the human condition as the existence of mortals in a world characterized by imperfect order and underlying chaos. The Homeric poems are Castoriadis's main source for the contents and directions of this original Greek imaginary. He understands the Homeric world as a framework within which the transformation of the *polis* towards autonomy could be initiated. Thus, the result is a strong emphasis on the archaic period as a formative phase of the whole Greek civilizational trajectory.

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Experience and understanding of contemporary Greek history was essential to the new course that Castoriadis tried to chart for the anti-Stalinist left after his arrival in France. A re-interpretation of ancient Greek history and thought became increasingly important for his more radical move beyond Marxism, beginning in the 1960s and continuing on several fronts in later writings. This was evident in the essays published during his life-time, but the publication of his seminars on ancient Greek themes, now complete in three volumes, provides us with a much more detailed and balanced picture.[1] The following dis-cussion will focus on this source and argue that although Castoriadis does not use the lan-guage of civilizational analysis, he applies an unmistakably civilizational perspective. A first justification for that reading can be found at the very beginning of the first seminar, dated 10.11. 1982: Castoriadis proposes to 'go to the roots of the Greek world' and to elu-cidate 'the primary grasp (*saisie*) . . . of the being of the world, of human existence in the world; and thus to gain understanding of all the imaginary significations that were, in due course, developed and instituted in Greece' (I 35).[2] The affinity with civilizational analysts is obvious. Their most distinctive approaches have centred on the intertwining of world understanding and institutional patterns of social life.

Before pursuing this line of argument, a few introductory remarks on Castoriadis's vision of the Greek world are in order. His analyses of ideas, works and developments reflect a coherent view of the overall context, but, by the same token, the specific limita-tions of the framework must be taken into account when judging the results. In this regard, a few basic considerations should be noted. Castoriadis's interpretation of Ancient Greece draws exclusively on textual sources and does not engage with the archaeological evidence that has become crucial to historical research on the archaic and the classical *polis*. To stress this is not to suggest that there is already an agreed way of combining archaeological and historical approaches, nor to deny that text-based analy-ses can still result in significant insights; however, although the present article will not explore the field, archaeological connections would be indispensable for the broader dis-cussion of Castoriadis's work that has yet to take off.

The geocultural context

Other points have to do with the spatial and temporal demarcation of the Greek world. Castoriadis does not enter into the question of cultural borrowings from the Near East during a formative period of Greek history; this issue is important for regional and inter-civilizational perspectives on the early first millennium BCE, but it has also been drawn into ideological controversies. Some of the most misplaced tributes to political correctness have targeted the notion of a 'Greek miracle', seen as a cornerstone of Euro-centrism, and portrayed ancient Greece as nothing more than a receptacle for Egyptian and/or Phoenician models. More balanced interpretations (Raaflaub, 2004) suggest a view that would complement and qualify Castoriadis's account rather than contradict it. There is no doubt about the intensive cultural interaction between Greece and the Ancient Near East during the archaic period; given the respective levels of development and the dynamics of cultural transfer, there are good reasons to situate the emerging Greek culture within the orbit of the established Near Eastern ones. However, against this background, the Greek forms of political life—the orientations, institutions and

practices of the early *polis*—stand out as more inventive and path-breaking than any other aspect of the archaic pattern. More research is needed to settle the question whether—or to what extent—these political innovations can be understood as responses to or reinventions of city-state regimes encountered in the Near East. As things now stand, the existence and influence of older city-state cultures (most importantly the Phoenicians) is well established, but the distinctive features that set *polis* civilization apart from them have not been thrown into serious doubt.

The question of inter-civilizational connections to the Near East is closely linked to another dimension of the archaic Greek efflorescence. Intensified exchanges in the eastern Mediterranean coincided with the proliferation of Greek settlements in other regions; in modern scholarship this process became known as colonization and historians are still clearing away the misconceptions attached to that label. The whole episode is best described as a very specific case of civilizational expansion. As such, it differs from other developments during the Axial Age. Expansion accompanied the cultural transformation of imperial China, but this was mainly a result of interstate competition for territory and power. The eastward thrust of Indian civilization in its early formative phase is beyond doubt, but specific features of the process are more elusive. In any case, the Greek version of civilizational expansion was the only Axial one that took a maritime turn. The Phoenicians were ahead of the Greeks in maritime expansion, but in their case there was no civilizational mutation: contrary to speculations about a Phoenician ancestry of Europe, the Phoenician city-states were survivors of the late Bronze Age crisis and therefore well placed to take advantage of reviving trade connections; however, there is no evidence of cultural or political changes comparable to those of the Axial centres.

Castoriadis does refer to this inaugural enlargement of the Greek world at the beginning of his seminars (I 62, 70); he even describes 8th century colonization as a 'first matrix of the self-positing political collectivity' (the colonists made their own laws instead of importing those of their home community) and notes the contemporaneity of the early colonizing wave with the composition of the Homeric poems. He revisits the topic in the 1983/1984 seminars, links the colonizing movement to a broader socio-cultural awakening and mobilization, and concludes that overseas settlements embodied the spreading signification of autonomy. But then the issue is put aside and does not enter into the discussion of developments in archaic and classical Greece. Its importance for a civilizational approach to the Greek experience is, nevertheless, worth noting. Some historians have taken the notion of a 'first matrix' further than Castoriadis did; it has even been suggested that Sicily might have the best claim as the birthplace of the *polis*—such views gain further support from growing doubts about traditional accounts of colonists sent out by established poleis (Osborne, 1998). Less controversially, the later historical record shows that at least some of the region settled during the early colonizing phase followed distinctive developmental paths. The extraordinary trajectory of tyranny in Sicily is a prime example. Another case in point, though less familiar, is the northern Black Sea region, with its long-term pattern of monarchy and particular ways of relating to a non-Greek environment. Both these outer zones of the Greek world interacted with the 5th-century greater Athenian state in decisive ways: the latter as a crucial commercial partner, the former as an outlet for expansion that turned out to be a road to disaster. Finally, differentiation within the enlarged Greek world

extended to the intellectual innovations that are most central to Castoriadis's argument. The distinction between Ionian and Italian–Sicilian currents in early Greek philosophy has been invoked by many authors and seems to be based on solid grounds, even if details are still debated. In that context, it is worth noting that Castoriadis refers to Empedocles—a Sicilian—as 'a singular and very important figure' (I 252), but then explicitly excludes him from the main discussion.

In short, the 'colonizing' thrust of Greek civilization was a formative aspect of its history, essential to its archaic beginnings and reflected in geopolitical and geocultural constellations of the classical phase. To see it as a case of civilizational expansion is to invite comparison with a later example: the Hellenistic period, also characterized by a sustained spread of Greek civilizational patterns, but on a new terrain, in a changed historical context and in varying combinations with other sources. This connection calls for a further—and, for our purposes, final—comment on Castoriadis's demarcation of the Greek world. He equates the transition to Hellenism with the destruction of the most notable Greek achievements, more precisely with a world-historical defeat of the vision of autonomy embodied in the *polis*. The dividing line between Greek (archaic as well as classical) and Hellenistic history has been emphasized by a strong historiographical tradition, but Castoriadis's version of it is obviously inspired by his own views on the breakthrough that began in archaic Greece and culminated in classical Athens. For him, the Greek transformation of the political sphere came to an end with the destruction of Athenian democracy; Hellenistic philosophy added nothing of value to the ways and means of reflection that had developed within the horizons of the *polis* (his comments on Stoicism suggest that he saw it as regressive). In this sense, as in others, the devaluation of Hellenism leads to dismissive judgments on the immediately preceding period. The Greek 4th century BCE has frequently been described as a time of decline and crisis affecting the *polis* in general, and Athenian democracy in particular. Castoriadis obviously shared this view, at least to begin with. He repeatedly refers to the Peloponnesian War as a defeat of democracy, and thus of the regime that represented the *polis* at its most creative. From that angle, 4th-century Athenian democracy is 'not at all the same thing' (I 73) as its classical predecessor. But Castoriadis clearly changed his mind on this point. In a seminar dated 16 March 1983, he notes that 4th-century Athens remained a democracy and that changes during this period even strengthened 'some democratic features' (II 47) beyond the classical pattern. Later on, he suggests a qualified comparison with recent tendencies in the USA: Athens also shifted towards a 'democracy of judges' (II 76), with the crucial difference that the judges were non-professionals. The specific remarks are tentative, but the implicit thrust is clear. Athenian democracy now appears as capable of institutional development after the late 5th-century setback and the documented changes do not amount to a break with its distinctive tradition.

Castoriadis's new understanding of Athenian achievements between two defeats —by Sparta and by Macedon—did not translate into a more general reassessment of post-classical history. To contextualize the following comments on Castoriadis's unfinished portrait of ancient Greece, a few words on the broader pattern should, nevertheless, be added. Fourth-century Athenian democracy remains a controversial subject; the seminal work of Mogens Herman Hansen (especially Hansen, 1991) has been central to the debate, but his main claim—that a more 'constitutionalist' regime emerged after the

crisis and restoration of democracy at the end of the 5th century—has been subjected to criticism. The changing perspectives on Athens between 404 and 338 BCE fit in with reappraisals of the whole 4th-century chapter in Greek history. It was a time of acute conflicts, within as well as between *poleis*, and of failed bids for hegemony, but not of general decline or fundamental crisis (see Eder, 1996). There are no good reasons to speak of a crisis or blockage affecting the *polis* as such (noteworthy developments included moves towards federal institution-building, continued with added strength during the Hellenistic period). The description of the *polis* as an evolutionary dead-end (Runciman, 1991) is misleading in that it suggests a generalized incapacity to adapt or innovate and thus obscures the very specific constellation that came to overshadow the *poleis*, their struggles and aspirations to hegemony. The decisive factor was the rise of a monarchic state, with strong traditions of sacral rule, on the margin of the Greek world. During the 5th and 4th centuries, the Macedonian kingdom drew on Greek cultural resources and made good use of diplomatic, as well as military opportunities created by the ups and downs of Greek politics; its growing strength reached a level that proved sufficient to change the configuration of power in the Aegean region and the Near East.

At this point, the question of Hellenism and its place in Greek history must be considered. It is widely agreed that the label is unfortunate, but as difficult to replace as 'colonization'. The spread of Greek socio-cultural patterns was one aspect of a complex reconfiguration. On the one hand, historians now give due weight to the Macedonian factor (at two successive junctures: Alexander's conquest of the Persian empire and the subsequent creation of new monarchies by the Macedonian elite); on the other hand, the expansion of Greek culture gave rise to a broad spectrum of inter-civilizational formations, including attempts to combine the reaffirmation of Iranian political ancestry with selective appropriation of Greek skills and models. The historical phenomenon known as Hellenism was, in short, made up of multiple sources in   changing combinations, and a unilateral emphasis on Oriental influences is as misleading as the traditional term. From the civilizational point of view, the transition to Hellenism is best seen as a transformation of the Greek world, rather than a self-destruction, as Castoriadis prefers to describe it. There is a certain (but limited) analogy with the paradigm shift from 'the decline and fall of the Roman empire' to 'the transformation of the Roman world'. For present purposes, one particular aspect should be underlined. Some recent claims on behalf of Hellenistic democracy (Carlsson, 2010; Grieb, 2008) seem exaggerated, but the underlying question should not be dismissed. The conditions and prospects of city-states in a world dominated by Hellenistic monarchies differed markedly from what they had been before the Macedonian conquests; however, if the proliferation of Greek settlements—seen by themselves and others as poleis—was a defining feature of Hellenism, their efforts to maximize the scope of self-rule are also significant; the latter took more democratic forms in some cities than in others. The cases in point (e.g. Rhodes) did not carry democratic politics to the same lengths as 5th- and 4th-century Athens, but if our focus is—as Castoriadis thought it should be—on democratizing processes rather than on democracy as a distinct and definitive state of affairs, the record to be considered must include developments that took place under less favourable conditions and that had a more limited impact than the classical flowering.

The imaginary core and its transformations

The above reflections are not so much a critique of Castoriadis as indications of a background that should be borne in mind when engaging with his main argument. Civilizational approaches to the social-historical world have, in classical and contemporary versions, followed a twofold track. One of the thematic foci is the internal connection between interpretations of the world and institutional regulations of social life (S.N. Eisenstadt termed this the 'civilizational dimension of human societies'). The other reflects a more external view; it has to do with 'families of societies' as defined by Durkheim and Mauss, i.e. large-scale and long-term groupings of social formations situated in space and time. That context of the Greek experience is not wholly absent from Castoriadis's analyses, but, as has been seen, it plays a minor role, and, in some regards, its significance is obscured by inherited restrictive assumptions. The central topic of the seminars is the internal core structure of Greek civilization; for Castoriadis that means a constellation of social imaginary significations—but, as I will argue, with an important twist to the relationship between the imaginary and the social components.

Compared with more general analyses in Castoriadis's earlier works, the reference quoted at the beginning of this article represents a major change of emphasis: the imaginary articulation of the world seems to gain precedence over the imaginary institution of society. To put it another way, the meta-social dimension of imaginary significations becomes more fundamental than the social one. In Castoriadis's main philosophical texts, the world as a constitutive and inexhaustible horizon of meaning is a markedly under-developed theme. If it comes to the fore through a closer encounter with ancient Greece, the reasons must relate to a specific vision (or, in more strictly hermeneutical terms, pre-comprehension) of the Greek experience; however, the basic conceptual shift is, in turn, reflected in the treatment of particular issues in Greek history, and, as will be seen, the results sometimes prompted further inquiry. To put these questions into a broader context, we may note a certain affinity between Castoriadis's approach and the direction taken by civilizational analysis after the rediscovery of the Axial Age. In both cases, a distinctive and innovative 'grasp of the world' is taken as a starting-pointleading to a certain neglect of institutional contexts.

For Castoriadis, the primary grasp begins with:

> a comprehension of the world as incomprehensible, as chaos, as self-creation against the background of chaos, and moving from there to the partial imposition of a cosmos, that is an order, an ordered universe; but within the latter, the comprehension of the incomprehensible regains its full rights, because this very cosmos has no meaning in the accepted human and anthropological sense. To put it briefly, it is neither made for man, nor against man: it is there, it has its order, and man is born and dies within it (I 55).

The implications are far-reaching: 'this primary imaginary vision of the world as meaningless (*a-sense*) and the absence of a transcendental source of meaning or law or norms . . . liberate the Greeks and allow them to create institutions within which humans, precisely, give themselves their own norms' (I 56). To paraphrase the most laconic statement in the whole text, the argument to be developed will be about a relationship

between chaos and democracy (ibid.). It is tempting to compare this account of a foundational interpretive shift with the prevalent understanding of the Axial Age, all the more so as the latter category is always taken to include Greece (Castoriadis knew Jaspers's work, but not Eisenstadt's radical reinterpretation of the Axial Age, which took shape at the same time as his own work on Ancient Greece). As described above, the Greek grasp of the world runs counter to all claims about an axial turn to transcendent or transcendental levels of being. However, the basic thrust is not so much a negation of transcendence as a divorce of transcendence and meaning. The incomprehensible and—in human terms—alien aspects of the world are in a sense transcendent, but they do not translate into meaningful orientations of social life. Rather, their presence constitutes an obstacle to unified models of order and is in that sense conducive to the opening of space for human initiative. Castoriadis is obviously not claiming that this particular constellation of sense and non-sense can explain the whole trajectory of Greek culture and thought. However it is, as will be seen, the background to everything else and the common ground to which countercurrents must relate, even when they strive beyond it.

Further clarification of Castoriadis's views on this core of the Greek imaginary must begin with the idea of chaos. It is—as used in Castoriadis's analyses—a complex notion based on ancient Greek understandings and explicitly tied to their shifting emphases, but also meant to point beyond them and link up with other themes in Greek thought, as well as later developments of the philosophical tradition. The most fundamental layer of meaning is identified through a reading of Hesiod, where the term *khaos* is first documented. Castoriadis distinguishes two interconnected, but distinct, meanings. The first one refers to a primordial emptiness, or a 'hyper-nothing' (I 174) from which both being and nothingness in a more conventional sense emerge. But if we follow Castoriadis's line of argument, this very shadowy notion seems to shrink to little more than a foil to set off the other meaning. The latter refers to 'the idea of a *kukeōn,* a shapeless, terrifying mixture, which contains everything and nourishes everything' (ibid.). It seems clear that Castoriadis reads these mythological visions in light of later philosophical adaptations, especially Anaximander's conception of the *apeiron,* the indeterminate substratum and source of all transient and particular beings. The whole line of interpretation is unmistakably grounded in Castoriadis's own philosophy, but, by the same token, it highlights an issue which he continued to find troublesome: the relationship between indeterminacy and determinability. As he sees it, archaic Greek notions of an uncontainable substratum had proved translatable into a more conceptual language, and could still serve to identify blind spots of the philosophical tradition.

The order that is imposed on this refractory background is partial and permanently threatened. Notwithstanding the shifting meaning of the term *kosmos* in early sources (including a marked, but not omnipresent, trend to associate it with political institutions), the interplay of *khaos* and *kosmos* can be described justifiably as a formative focus of the archaic Greek imaginary. As such, it is—as we have seen—a precondition for later innovations and, most importantly, it enables the reflexive questioning of man-made orders, be they epistemic or institutional. To clarify its interconnections with the unfolding efforts of philosophical and political thought, some main currents of these twin intellectual genres must be brought into the picture. Many authors have stressed the Greek predilection for polarizing categories, but the particular examples cited as evidence reflect

more specific interpretations. Castoriadis's strong emphasis on the distinction between *khaos* and *kosmos* (even if the latter term is not discussed as extensively as one might wish) informs the selection and use of other conceptual pairs, but the link is not always explicit. A noteworthy connection emerges from comments on the earliest philosophers. Castoriadis interprets Anaximander's account of the *apeiron* behind particular things and substances as an attempt to grasp ontological indeterminacy; he then goes on to read the much-debated fragment on things 'paying reparation to each other' in light of the opposition between *dikē* and *hubris*. It is not uncommon for writers on Anaximander to explain this as a cosmological projection of ethico-political categories; however, Castoriadis appears to favour the opposite line of derivation: the notion of *hubris* is grounded in an ontological perspective. Hubristic overstretch seems to accompany the self-affirmation that is inherent in existence. As will be seen, this background adds force to Castoriadis's reflections on *hubris* as a threat from within the *polis*.

However, the key distinctions singled out by Castoriadis, the three great oppositions that define the horizons of Greek thought, are those between being and appearance, knowledge and opinion (*doxa*), and *physis* and *nomos*. He adds that the third opposition, most characteristically Greek, makes the other two more significant than they are in other cultural contexts. The reference to *nomos* (in the broad sense of instituted convention) puts the realm of appearances and the contest of opinions in a new perspective. However, the underlying tension between *khaos* and *kosmos* also sets its stamp on the whole cluster of key distinctions, most decisively through the expanding horizons of man-made and mutable orders. To stress this background is not to suggest that the 'primary grasp of the world' prefigures or predetermines the entire spectrum of later developments. Rather, the distinctions elaborated in philosophical and political thought became the bearers of new cultural orientations, rooted in an older substratum of imaginary significations, but neither confined within the original framework nor explainable in terms of evolutionary progress beyond it. Emergent constellations of meaning added up to a more complex civilizational pattern. Moreover, the developments in question can, to a significant extent, be understood as attempts to overcome earlier visions of the world. As Castoriadis notes, rational theology was a very prominent part of the Greek philosophical tradition; although he does not make the point in so many words, it would be in the spirit of his approach to interpret this trend as an effort to neutralize the opposition between *khaos* and *kosmos* by rethinking the distinction between being and appearance. From this point of view, Parmenides becomes a crucial figure and Castoriadis's observation that 'the true meaning of idealism is Parmenides, not Plato' (II 216) seems highly pertinent. It links up with the work of scholars who have traced Plato's pre-Socratic ancestry but seems more difficult to reconcile with Castoriadis's own frequent references to the Platonic moment as an unprecedented turning-point and an exit from the Greek world.

Another theme of Greek thought is, at first sight, less directly related to these central concerns, but there is, at least, an elective affinity. Castoriadis makes much of the Greek sensitivity to force as the ultimate arbiter of human affairs; as he sees it through ancient Greek eyes, 'the political world constitutes itself as a world where force is sovereign' (I 39) and the 'great superiority of Greek political thought over later stages . . . is that the question of force was always there as a fundamental presupposition' (ibid.).

Regimes of more or less inclusive order, with or without an inbuilt trend towards autonomy, are superimposed on the realm of rival forces and never capable of more than partial control. This outlook—or insight—is reminiscent of the more general vision that opposes *khaos* to *kosmos.* It can, moreover, be linked to a basic conceptual distinction: the contrast between *nomos* and *kratos.* This is (as far as I can judge) an under-explored aspect of intellectual development during the archaic and classical periods. To underline the points at issue, a brief comparison of two well-known classical scholars may be useful; their accounts differ as much from each other as from Castoriadis's analysis. According to Christian Meier, the main focus of 5th-century political thought shifted from notions based on *nomos* (such as *eunomia* or *isonomia*) to those affiliated with *kratos.* The emerging typology of constitutions—monarchy, aristocracy and democracy—was a product of this change. For Meier, the *kratos*-centred rethinking of the *polis* not only directed attention to the holders of power, it also lent new meaning to the very notion of power and, in so doing, it aligned itself with the consciousness of human ability (*Könnensbewusstsein*) which he attributed to 5th-century intellectual movements. His conclusions are strikingly akin to Castoriadis's (and there is certainly no question of one of them having influenced the other): 'For the first time in the history of the world, human beings acquired the possibility to decide for themselves in what kind of order they wanted to live' (Meier, 1984: 30).

Nicole Loraux took a very different view of Greek reflections on force and power. As she saw it, *kratos* in the sense of superior force is a 'word in bad repute' within the city and it is 'as if the cities refused to admit that there could be a place for *kratos* in the exercise of the political, because this would amount to confirming the victory of one part of the city over another, and thus to give up the phantasm of the one and indivisible city' (Loraux, 1997: 66). This is the reason why democrats were reluctant to praise democracy under its proper name; for Loraux, the inability and/or unwillingness to come to grips with the experience of conflict within the city is the basic shortcoming behind a more general failure to reflect on the underside of power (*archē* is the term used to refer to its more legitimate guises). The whole problematic and the contending approaches to it obviously merit more debate.

The Homeric source

As the above analysis suggests, the civilizational trajectory that began in Homeric Greece and ended—according to Castoriadis—with the Peloponnesian War was no linear process: it included reorientations, as well as countercurrents, and the terms of its self-articulation varied from one context to another. But before taking a closer look at these discontinuities, we need a more precise demarcation of the foundational layer and Castoriadis's access to it. The latter part of the question is easy to answer: far more than any other source, the Homeric poems figure as master keys to the workings of the Greek imaginary. For Castoriadis's purposes, it can remain an open question whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed by the same author. He agrees with the 'moderate unitarists', as he calls them (I 87), i.e. those who stress the internal unity of each of the two epics and see it as a sign of single, but not necessarily common, authorship. This position admits that the author(s) must have drawn on earlier oral traditions with a long history of

growth and variation, and, by the same token, drawn diffuse imaginings together in world-encompassing works. So far, Castoriadis shares the assumptions of a strong current in Homeric scholarship. When it comes to issues of substantive interpretation, however, he takes a more specific line. To mention only the most salient approaches involved in recent and contemporary debates, the two poems have been read as expressions of cultural memory focusing on an exemplary but transfigured past, paradigmatic formulations of values that lent themselves to extensive adaptation in the later course of Greek history, or windows on the historical life-world from which they emerged. Castoriadis reads them as authoritative articulations of an integral world-view, the first recorded—and probably the first effective—embodiments of 'core social imaginary significations which later played a central and formative role in the Greek universe' (I 94).

The 'Homeric essentials of the Greek imaginary, i.e. the tragic grasp of the world', constitute 'the germ of everything that appears later' (I 97, 95). The basic characteristics have to do with 'the signification attributed to death and the impact of this attribution on all other significations' (I 94). Human mortality signals the absence of a meaningful order; inexorable destiny (*moira*) prevails, and, although its course is accompanied by hubristic transgressions, they do not appear as steps towards another kind of order.[3] The affinity with the themes introduced at the beginning—chaos, fragile order and ultimate discord between humanity and the world—is obvious. But it is less clear that the Homeric version of these core significations would favour a breakthrough to human autonomy. Even if we add the exemplary cases of heroes willingly embracing mortality (Achilles for the sake of glory, Odysseus for love of his homeland; I 113–114), they lack the order-building capacity needed to mark a new beginning. Nevertheless, Castoriadis wants to argue that the epics point beyond their own basic premises: 'these poems, which depict a heroic world, contain at the same time a critique of this world' (I 100).

To test this claim, we must take another look at the historical setting of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Castoriadis was aware of ongoing scholarly debates in this field and there is no doubt that Moses Finley's *World of Odysseus* (Finley, 1954) had a particularly important influence on his thought. He follows Finley in emphasizing the radical break between the Homeric and the Mycenaean world and in not raising the question whether—or on what level—the epics might, notwithstanding the very different context of creation, have codified cultural memories of the vanished Bronze Age world. That point is obviously not irrelevant to the issue of contrasts and connections between the Homeric world and the *polis*: a link to the lost civilizational horizons of Mycenaean Greece, however tenuous, would complicate the genealogy of the *polis*. But, most importantly, Castoriadis takes on board Finley's equation of the Homeric world—in the sense of the life-world reflected in narratives and descriptions—with the 'dark ages' between the 11th and the 8th century BCE and more particularly with the 10th and 9th centuries. The case for that view requires the assumption of oral sources incorporating a whole experiential context that was then transmitted to the late 8th- and/or early 7th-century compositions. This interpretation of the Homeric legacy would seem to undermine Castoriadis's main claim: references to the dark ages do not easily translate into orientations for later developments of the *polis*. To solve the problem, Castoriadis goes beyond Finley's line of reading and adds another layer of meaning to the Homeric world. As he argues, the two epics relate not only to the poetically preserved life-world of a recent

past, but also to cultural horizons—in other words: imaginary significations—emerging and still expanding at the moment of composition (I 94). These new constellations of meaning then become central to the Greek historical universe. The trouble with this idea is that it is difficult to envisage social imaginary significations without a corresponding institutional setting. Castoriadis's general analysis of the imaginary institution of society underlines that point and so does his view—supported by the mainstream of recent scholarship—that the formation of the *polis* can be dated to the 8th century. If the epics took their post-oral shape in conjunction with the emerging *polis*, the life-world built around the latter should be visible within their field of poetic vision. As Kurt Raaflaub has shown in several articles (for a recent summary see Raaflaub, 1998), this is, indeed, the case. The centre of the Homeric world has, thus, in a decisive way, been shifted from the period favoured by Finley to the early archaic *polis*. Not that all controversies have been settled: in particular, the question of cultural memories connecting to the Mycenaean world become even more acute when tied to the 8th-century *polis* and its new horizons.

In a sense, the shift confirms Castoriadis' assumptions about Homeric beginnings of the Greek trajectory, but not without a major qualification. In the context of the early *polis*, the Homeric imaginary must have interacted with other currents, most notably with the political thought that accompanied the new form of political life from the outset and is, to some extent, documented through epigraphic and literary sources. Castoriadis hints at these interconnections when he argues that divine assemblies in the *Odyssey* are more deliberative than in the *Iliad* and associates this with a more developed awareness of political debates among humans, as exemplified *ex negativo* by the case of the Cyclopes (I 137); this difference between the two poems is cited to illustrate the receptivity of the author(s) to significations in the making. We can add that it suggests contact with 'Greek political thought in practice', to quote the title of a recent work (Cartledge, 2009). However, the discussion of the epics does not move further in that direction. Castoriadis's other references to a Homeric critique of the heroic world are more internal to the texts; they include, in particular, an interpretation of Achilles as faced with the antinomy of heroic values (there is nothing of value beyond life in this world, but life without the pursuit of glory is worthless) and of Agamemnon as a study in the failure of heroic leadership.

There is, however, another side to Castoriadis's interpretation of the Homeric source. It has to do with the religious imaginary at work in the epics; it is of key importance to the question of civilizational premises emerging in archaic Greece. Castoriadis follows Finley in arguing that the Homeric vision of divine beings and powers must be the result of a religious revolution (I 121). Both authors have to admit that it is extremely difficult to find any direct evidence of this radical change, but their—broadly speaking—Durkheimian view of religion and society leads them to assume that a major social transformation, such as the emergence of the *polis*, must have been intertwined with a corresponding religious one and that changes of the latter kind tend to occur in a relatively abrupt fashion. The idea is plausible, but not likely to develop into a more conclusive account; archaeological research on continuities and discontinuities across the gap between Mycenaean and archaic Greece can hardly settle this matter. At a minimum, we may assume that religious transformations were an integral part of the civilizational re-patterning that gave rise to the *polis*, and it remains

doubtful whether this was more a matter of reinterpretation or radical innovation. That question is, in any case, less important to Castoriadis's argument than the specific twist he gives to Finley's idea of a religious revolution; it is to some extent—but only up to a point—influenced by Walter F. Otto, who had defended the notion of a Homeric religious revolution long before Finley but on different and much less sociological grounds. For him, Homeric religion is the result of a spiritual awakening, a revelation *sui generis* that seems unrelated to socio-political transformations. Castoriadis draws on Otto as a corrective to the traditional anthropomorphic understanding of Greek gods (shared in substance by Finley); however, it is more than a little misleading when Otto is credited with the view that 'Homer's gods are the sacred par excellence, in the sense of something radically other than the human being' (I 131). In fact, this sounds more reminiscent of Rudolf Otto's work on the sacred than of Walter F. Otto's approach to Greek religion. The latter is better understood in terms of an attempt to overcome the conflict between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic interpretations; this effort is akin in spirit to Castoriadis's claim:

> In my view, the best ways to truly understand what the Greek gods mean is to grasp that they are that which, in man, is more than man, or that which imposes itself on the life of humans, without them being able to control it – i.e. without being able to control themselves (I 132).

But when the point is taken further, specific arguments diverge in fundamental ways. After some inconclusive reflections, Castoriadis relates the 'human but more than human' nature of the gods to the chaos behind and beneath order: 'the gods are, above all, figures of the groundless, the abyss, outside man as well as within him' (I 135). By contrast, Otto had interpreted the Homeric gods as sublime images of the 'forms and validities' (Otto, 2002: 9) that add up to a cosmic order in movement. He did not ignore 'the realm of negation' that casts a shadow over life (ibid: 367, 369); the abyss is part of the picture, but the gods are definitely on the side of order and each of the main Homeric divinities represents a specific articulation of the world as a totality.

This last idea—gods as ways of world-making, with particular emphasis on the self-transcending capacity of human activities and orientations—merits more discussion. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper; we can only add a few concluding remarks on Castoriadis's analysis of Greek religion and its civilizational implications. The reference to figures of the abyss, quoted above, sums up the preceding discussion of Homeric religion, but does not lead to further elucidation of the subject: there is no attempt to explain the characteristics of particular gods (or successive generations of gods) as ways of figuring the abyss or to link this notion more explicitly to the spirit of Greek religion. It is a safe guess that the lost seminar on Hesiod would have enriched the picture. But to judge from comments on Hesiod in the extant texts, Castoriadis saw his genealogy of the gods as a complement to the Homeric vision, not as an alternative. Despite this half-missing link, the discussion of Greek religion in the seminars is not only more extensive, but also more nuanced then comments in earlier publications might have led us to expect. It is less clear whether Castoriadis made full use of the new insights, especially with regard to the civilizational questions that concern us here.

Polis religion and its cultural horizons

In a posthumously published conversation with Octavio Paz and others, Castoriadis describes 5th-century Athens as 'a society that was very pious but had also invented a unique way of keeping the gods and religion at a distance from human affairs' (Castoriadis, 2007: 103). This comment on a paradoxical relationship between religion and society is an interesting twist to the theme of autonomy. It is tempting to pair it with the following observation by Marcel Detienne on Greek culture in general: 'Although they are continuously present in the world, divine powers are put at a distance from a whole set of activities where the human species has the initiative' (Detienne, 2005: 73). The similarity of the formulations is striking, but clearly a result of ongoing contact between Castoriadis and the Paris school of classical studies (never a one-way street) rather than to any direct reference. For closer alignment with our present agenda, we may turn to a point repeatedly underlined in Castoriadis's seminars. He stresses the 'extraordinary polyphony' of Greek civilization, but also the combination with a profound and lasting unity. The 'polyphonic' aspect ranges from the discrepancy between cosmic and geometric space (I 79–81) to contrasts between mainstream and countercurrents in Greek religion. Among the latter, Orphism and Pythagoreanism are briefly mentioned and traced back at least to the 6th century (I 148); they share an aversion to sacrifice and, more broadly speaking, an acosmic thrust that can either lead to a rejection of the *polis* or to visions of moral reform. On another level, the 'plurality of emergences' within one cultural world is exemplified by the innovations of the 5th century. Castoriadis does not claim that the interconnection of unifying and divergent significations is a uniquely Greek phenomenon, but he does suggest that the defining logic of each side was exceptionally pronounced.

This theme is not unfamiliar to civilizational analysts. Contrary to an astonishingly entrenched prejudice, they are not constitutionally biased on favour of unitary models. To mention only two prominent examples, Benjamin Nelson took the internal pluralism of civilizational patterns so seriously that he could even envisage 'civil wars' within basic structures of consciousness. Eisenstadt's more systematic comparative studies were highly sensitive to conflicts rooted in civilizational premises, such as those of the kind associated with orthodoxy and heterodoxy or with the antinomies of modernity. On this view, the balance between unity and diversity differs from one civilizational context to another; the degree of polyphony is a matter for comparative historical analyses. In the Greek case, the distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is obviously inapplicable (to quote Detienne again, this was a civilization that never knew orthodoxy). A more case-sensitive approach might begin with the emergence of cultural trends and spheres defining themselves in relation to a religious background; here it seems possible to take Castoriadis's underlying line of argument beyond his particular formulations and omissions. The idea of religion as a 'meta-institution', a framework within, or from, which further institutions emerge, has a strong record in the sociological tradition; Castoriadis accepted it, albeit with significant qualifications of his own; the apparent paradox of an omnipresent, but variously adapted, circumscribed and contested religion is a good *prima facie* reason for applying it to ancient Greece.

In terms of the above quotations from Castoriadis and Detienne, the paradox is that of a pious society managing to put religion at a distance from key dimensions of human

affairs. In recent scholarship, this configuration has come to be known as *polis* religion (Castoriadis's seminars predate the spread of the term), but misunderstandings of that notion must be avoided. It does not propose to explain Greek religion as a response to functional demands of the *polis*, nor is it based on the claim that the divine world is modeled on the *polis*. In more positive terms, three qualifying points are essential to the concept of *polis* religion. First and foremost (as noted above in another context), there is a fundamental polarity and a potential tension between two defining aspects: religion is, on the one hand, a basic component of institution-building and collective identity, but on the other hand, the central institutions of the *polis* claim authority over religious practices and thus establish the distance required for the autonomization of human activities. The *polis* was, in short, 'also a religious organization' (Gehrke, 2009: 46), but one with a political centre open to further rationalization along its own lines. In this way, the meta-institutional framework shifted towards a more pluralistic and transformative mode. Second, this politicized form of religious life was neither created in a vacuum nor enforced through a complete break with pre-existing traditions. Even if its ascendancy was—as Finley and Castoriadis thought—the result of a religious revolution, the patterns of *polis* religion were superimposed on older strata of local or popular religiosity; the degree of control and integration varied from case to case, but it never amounted to complete absorption. Last, but not least, the absence of orthodoxy—because of the centring of authority in political institutions rather than religious ones—enabled the religious imagination to develop both mythological variations on mainstream themes and counter-currents in search of an alternative to *polis* religion (elusive as the record is, Orphism does seem to merit that description). If religion was put at a distance, that also enhanced its capacity for self-distancing.

Among the human activities liberated by the distancing of religion, politics played the most central role. However, the political break with religious authority was by no means as complete as Castoriadis argued. His tendency, especially in the seminars, to treat the whole development of the *polis* as a democratizing process was, not least, backed up by the claim that archaic Greek communities had already ceased to invoke divine legitimacy for their laws. He is right to insist on the difference from the ancient Near East, but the contrast is overdrawn. The essentials of the Spartan constitution (not a detailed legal code) were, at least in some quarters, ascribed to a message from the Delphic oracle, but this was only the most salient example; there were many other cases linking legislative measures to divine communication through oracles, and Apollo's prominent role in that context identified him as the deity most directly involved in the founding and ordering of cities (Detienne, 2009: 85-134). In more general terms, it seems clear that 'putting at a distance' did not mean disconnecting politics from religion; it meant establishing a new relationship, markedly different from the patterns of older neighbouring civilizations, but open to variations across the enlarged Greek world and in the course of changes from archaic to classical times.

If the political sphere was the first institutional order to redefine its relationship to religion, it also became a precondition for autonomous developments on other levels. The unending controversy about the 'ancient economy' seems, at present, to have shifted towards more emphasis on the dynamics of economic life in archaic, as well as classical, phases; however, the political framework was so important that it still appears justified to

speak of a *polis* economy. From the civilizational point of view, another *polis*-related innovation is more relevant. In more specific historical and cultural contexts, the institutionalized distance between religion and human affairs gave rise to a dialogue with religion. The concept of *polis religion* was introduced by S.C. Humphreys (1986) in connection with discussions on Greek philosophy as an example of Axial Age thought. Castoriadis did not use the term in his seminars (they preceded the publication of Humphreys's paper), but his argument anticipates it and extends it beyond philosophy, most notably to 5th-century tragedy. Here, his analysis seems particularly interesting when compared with the protracted and often frustrating controversies among classical scholars. They have, in recent years, disagreed sharply on the relationship between democracy and tragedy, with one school of thought interpreting tragedy as a vehicle of democratic, or at least civic, ideology and another objecting to this reductionist reading of very complex works. Castoriadis does not focus on ideological contents; he understands tragedy as an integral part of the self-reflexive turn that accompanied the steps towards political autonomy. The tragic poets engaged in a reinterpretation of mythology (Castoriadis uses that term) and ultimately in a re-imagination of the religious universe, leading to a distinctive elaboration of anthropological themes. This broader perspective is, however, obscured by the inclusion of tragedy among the 'self-limiting institutions' of Athenian democracy. The tragic view of man and world was not confinable within a specific institutional role (and, moreover, there is nothing to show that the regular performance of tragedies did anything to restrain the Athenians from *hubris* when the test came).

A more oblique dialogue with religion was conducted through other genres, such as the works of the great 5th-century historians. However, notwithstanding the merits of a multi-genre overview, it is the dialogue between philosophy and religion that deserves our particular attention. Castoriadis's implicit reference to it is clearest when he discusses rational theology and its persistent role in Greek philosophical thought. Rational theology is the product of rationalizing work on mythology (preceded by very extensive poetic elaboration of the latter) and thus of a dialogue that seems to have begun soon after the rise of the *polis*. This line of interpretation can, however, be taken further than Castoriadis does. For major figures among the Presocratics (including Anaximander and Heraclitus, whose work was a source of inspiration for Castoriadis, but also Parmenides, whom he saw in a different light), cosmological or ontological teachings were also attempts to rethink the divine (*theion*) in ways that transcended traditional religion, as well as its proto-ontological horizons). This is a very prominent and seminal part of intellectual developments during the Greek Axial Age and some authors prefer to describe it as philosophical religion, rather than rational theology (Burkert, 2011: 455–498). Whatever we call it, the trend indisputably took a new turn with Plato, but, as argued above, his indebtedness to earlier thinkers is direct enough to justify his inclusion in a 'polyphonic' model of Greek civilization instead of casting him in the role of its destroyer.

There is another side to the Platonic turn, worth noting in a final comment to indicate the problems that arise when we pursue the critical reading of Castoriadis's reflections on Greece. The argument discussed here assumes the validity of certain premises inherent in the 'primary grasp of the world'—more particularly the vision of partial order imposed on underlying chaos—and Castoriadis's other writings show that this

perspective, interconnected with the acceptance of human mortality and the refusal of any compensation for it, is still an integral part of his idea of autonomy. However, if the Preocratic reinterpretation of religious themes was, at least in part, an endeavour to move beyond the original Greek imaginary, and thus to question presuppositions, albeit not along the same lines as the thinkers favoured by Castoriadis, it belongs fully and squarely to the history of philosophical questioning as an expression of autonomy. The notion of unlimited autonomy, which Castoriadis sometimes invokes, seems misleading; in concrete hermeneutical terms, the history of philosophy (including its Greek opening) is made up of currents with specific lines of questioning, linked to varying contextual presuppositions. That also applies to Castoriadis's own mode of philosophizing. As for his prime adversary, Plato's new beginning did not lead to a closure of spaces previously opened up for questioning. In contemporary scholarship, it is no longer doubted that the 'theory of ideas', over-systematized by influential interpreters, was problematized in multiple ways in his later thought, written and unwritten. His impact on successive phases of the philosophical tradition was a result of varying and sometimes bewildering combinations of both aspects, the foundational and the self-subverting. In Jan Patočka's words, Plato would not have been Plato if he had not been more than Plato; and the Plato who was more than Plato was also a path-breaking pioneer of autonomous thought.

Notes

1. The seminars have been published in three volumes: Castoriadis 2004, 2008 and 2011. In this paper, the first two volumes are cited in the text as I and II.
2. All translations are my own.
3. *Moira* is notoriously difficult to translate. Here, I opt for 'destiny', which is not unproblematic, especially as Castoriadis distinguishes the Greek notion from later versions of fatalism or predestination.

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