

7. Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis

Dr Alexandros Schismenos

University of Ioannina, Greece

E-Mail: abonapartis@gmail.com

ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8490-4223>

Abstract:

We can locate the problematic of time within three philosophical questions, which respectively designate three central areas of philosophical reflection and contemplation.

These are:

- 1) The ontological question, i.e. 'what is being?'*
- 2) The epistemological question, i.e. 'what can we know with certainty?'*
- 3) The existential question, i.e. 'what is the meaning of existence?'*

These three questions, which are philosophical, but also scientific and political, as they underline the political and moral question of truth and justice, arising from the phenomenon of time, the irreversible constant flow of phenomena that undermines every claim to absolute knowledge. The purpose of this essay is to illuminate the importance of time for philosophical thought and, more generally, for human social and psychical life, in the context of the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis, who asserted that "being is time – and not in the horizon of time", correlated history to society and being to temporality within the social-historical stratum, the ontological plane created by human existence, where "existence is signification". Time is interpreted as the creation and destruction of forms in a magmatic, layered with a non-regular stratification, reality, where the social-historical manifests as the creation of collective human activity, in the manner of social imaginary significations. This notion of temporality is accompanied by a profound criticism of traditional rationalistic philosophy, to which Castoriadis assigns the name 'ensemblistic/identitary', that highlights the necessity of a new, magmatic ontology, based on the primacy of time.

Keywords:

Time; Castoriadis; Ontology; Metaphysics; Temporality

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81

DOI: 10.5958/2347-6869.2017.00023.1



Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis

"The time of the philosophers does not exist."

Albert Einstein¹

Does the time of the philosophers exist? Perhaps Einstein was mistaken to reject the philosophical notion of time in his attempt to curb Henri Bergson's objections to the theory of Relativity. Contrary to the genius physicist, we will argue that the time of the philosophers does indeed exist. But, before we can justify our assertion, we must first clarify another latent question. What is the meaning of the phrase "the time of the philosophers", what is the meaning of time for philosophy?

We can locate the problematic of time within three central philosophical questions, which respectively designate three central areas of philosophical reflection and contemplation. These are:

- 1) The ontological question, i.e. 'what is being?'
- 2) The epistemological question, i.e. 'what can we know with certainty?'
- 3) The existential question, i.e. 'what is the meaning of existence?'

These three questions, which are philosophical, but also scientific and political, since they underline the political and moral question of truth and justice, arise from the phenomenon of time, the irreversible constant flow of phenomena that abolishes every claim to absolute knowledge and undermines even the most moderate claim to relative knowledge.

The purpose of this essay is to illuminate the importance of time for philosophical thought and, more generally, for human social and psychological life, in the context of the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis is better known as a political thinker, and during the first period of his philosophical evolution, from 1944 till the middle '50s (Castoriadis, 1997b, pp. 14-15) he aligned himself with the Marxist revolutionary tradition. However, his analyses on the Soviet totalitarianism resulted to a rupture with Marxism, after Castoriadis concluded that Marx's philosophy of history degraded autonomous human action and negated the basic premise of the revolution, human autonomy. Presented with a choice between Marx and the revolutionary project, Castoriadis chose the revolutionary project, a path that led him to ontology and another envision of history and society. Are society and history actually separate? Does society only endures its history, does social activity

¹ In response to Henri Bergson, during their famous dialogue on April 6th 1922, at the French Philosophical Society in Paris.

conform to eternal laws? Is history prefixed by dialectical or other causalities, is human creativity subdued to external norms? Is revolution possible and autonomy attainable? To answer these questions, Castoriadis put into question the foundations of Western philosophy.

According to Cornelius Castoriadis (2008), “being is time – and not in the horizon of time” (p. 258). Following this assertion, Castoriadis correlates history to society and being to temporality, within the social-historical stratum, the ontological plane created by human existence, where society *creates* its own history (Castoriadis, 1998, pp.167-221). In the social-historical stratum, “existence is signification”, (Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 11) and every particular actual society (not an ideal, archetypical society, that does not actually exist) creates the significations of its existence, invests time with meaning and creates a proper time by creating its proper institutions. Time is interpreted as the creation and destruction of forms within a magmatic, layered with a non-regular stratification, reality, where the social-historical manifests in the manner of social imaginary significations. This notion of temporality is accompanied by a profound criticism of traditional rationalistic philosophy, to which Castoriadis (1998) assigns the name “ensemblistic/identitary” (p.170). I will try to explain these terms.

Castoriadis uses the term ‘ensemblistic/identitary’ (or *ensidic*) to describe the traditional ontology and logic which is based on the axiom of the identity of a being to itself ($a=a$), an axiom supported by the logical principles of non-contradiction and of the exclusion of the third. According to these principles, rigid rationalistic or tautological philosophical systems are constructed, under the basic category of definiteness or determinacy (*Bestimmtheit* in German), which define Being solely as determinate and distinctive.

Castoriadis (1998) argues that:

“This meaning, determined from start to finish as determinacy -- *peras* in the Greeks, *Bestimmtheit* in Hegel -- already in itself excluded the possibility of recognizing a type of being that essentially escapes determinacy, like the social-historical or the imaginary” (p.168).

Determinative ontology defines true Being as an essential Being that is not subjected to transformation or deterioration, therefore lies beyond time, and is completely determined and distinct from other ontological forms or transmutations of itself. This ontology corresponds with a definitive language and the definitive aspects of any natural language, which dictate that a definition should be always the same and should designate the same object. The perception of truth as the equation of a proposition and its object, when taken as an absolute, leads to a conception of Being as something static, in contrast to the phenomenal flux of perception. This leaves no place for actual creativity and no room for the appearance of any forms that cannot be reduced to a primal unified

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81

essence. From Parmenides to Plato to Christianity, this ontology quickly became the mainstream philosophical attitude, with a strong tradition and a lasting influence. Human history and action were downgraded to a simple mimicry of metaphysical eternal laws. History and society were separated in theory, history reduced to schemata of trivial succession, society to schemata of trivial coexistence with no place for actual human creativity.

In the context of ancient Greek philosophy, the phenomenon of time either reveals an absolute Becoming, according to Heraclitus or conceals an absolute Being, according to Parmenides. In any case, the philosophical and logical axioms of identity and non-contradiction oppose any consideration of time as creation and alteration, allowing only theoretical representations of time in relation to timelessness or eternity. Aristotle (1930) admitted that time challenges the axioms of ensidic logic and ontology when he noted that time “either does not exist at all or barely, and in an obscure way. One part of it has been and is not, while the other is going to be and is not yet” (4.10). He defined time as a measurement of the movement between the prior to the posterior, a measurement is done by the human psyche, a subjective factor that, however, is constrained to counting, and never becomes an actor.

Since everything is subjected to time and change, to Becoming, which implies non-Being, traditional rationalistic philosophy leaves little space for empirical truth. Instead, it disconnects contemplation from the real world, on a search for mathematical abstractions and eternal truths. This metaphysical road leads to the abandonment of the practical and critical aspects of philosophical inquiry, downgrading philosophy to theology.

Before Aristotle, it was Plato (2001) who argued that “time is the moving image of eternity” (37d), and outlined the philosophical vision of Eternity, an image of a spatialized temporality, time objectified in eternal stasis, like a gem that reflects different colors on every cut and surface, but exists simultaneously in the form of a unified space. It is a theological vision that early Christian writers found compatible with the notion of an eternal omnipotent being, namely God, who exists outside and beyond time. He can thus intervene or observe from above, reducing, by ‘His’ Presence, the constant flux of phenomena to a mere epiphenomenon of an eternal, immortal and unchangeable Substance. In the writings of Augustine of Hippo, time becomes subjective and temporality passive (Augustine, 1961, XI. xxviii).

This dominant image of eternity seems to suggest that the enigma of time can only be resolved as a *theological* problem, by the reduction of time to an attribute of a finite, illusionary world, which needs to be ontologically supported by an infinite, transcendental Will. The effort to deduce eternity from temporality requires a reduction of temporality to the illusory randomness of a

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81



semblance. The veil of words hides time behind the image of a metaphysical sanctity. We must take our distance from such a solution that tries not to resolve, but to conceal the existential problem.

But, if the enigma of time is not the question of immortality, then it must be the question of mortality, the problem of death. And as such, it is an issue equally personal and social, the common fundamental existential issue of both the individual and society. Moreover, it is a social issue in the sense that mortality is a fact that we learn by the others, by society, by the family, since, without contact with other people, the individual could not apprehend either his/her birth nor his/her impending death, the two marginal points that define individual time.

Even the value of labour, the most important equation in a capitalist society, is measured by arbitrary time-units (working hours). The phrase 'Time is Money', being a cliché, indicates this unbreakable connection between social temporality and the capitalistic structures of production and distribution. The division and management of social and public time is a primary function of instituted authorities. Therefore, the question of time is also a deeply political issue, a question that underlines every political theory and a question that every critical social theory has to consider.

Castoriadis (1997a) adopts the distinction previously drawn by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative (Temps et Recit)*, between two opposite traditional philosophical approaches to time (p.375). The objective or cosmological approach, outlined in Aristotle's *Physica*, describes time as an attribute of reality, as the passage of natural deterioration and transformation, while the subjective or phenomenological approach, appearing in Augustine's *Confessiones*, considers time as a subjective phenomenon, as the temporality of personal experience and existential anxiety. Both approaches fail to explain the question of *time per se*, time in-itself, which underlines both subjective temporality and natural transformations. Whereas in both cases time itself is considered as a neutral median, Castoriadis (1997a) argues that, actually, time is never instituted as purely neutral (p.386). Also, both approaches implicitly presuppose the other, the psyche as a subjective factor in the Aristotelean approach, the world and God as an objective reality in the Augustinian contemplations.

The division between these two conceptions of time is founded on the theoretical distinction between subjectivity and objectivity and on the subsequent oblivion of the social-historical, where *time is history* and where subjects and objects alike are invested with social imaginary significations. Ensemblistic/identitary thought ignores the immanence of ontological creation, the existence of a creative dimension of Being, densely interwoven with the ensemblistic/identitary dimension of Being. Our perception of time is neither purely objective nor subjective since time is always instituted and the social-historical is the "creation of a proper temporality" (Castoriadis, 1997a, p.438). The division between the subject and the object is the fundamental antithesis of

ensemblistic/identitary ontology, which leads to secondary divisions between the individual and society, temporality and eternity, phenomenon and essence.

However, Castoriadis claims that the primal division is false, firstly on a social level, where the real antithesis lies between the psychic and the social, the individual herself being a social institution, secondly, on an epistemological level, where the very perception of the object (as a signified object) by the subject is mediated by the dominant social imaginary significations invested upon the object. On an ultimate level, the subjective and the objective are inseparable and incomprehensible outside the social-historical which transfigures, interconnects and signifies both. Without the acknowledgement of the social-historical, we cannot comprehend the interaction and the difference between the tautological and the imaginary strata that localize and also unify the myriad formations of Time in-Itself.

Castoriadis (1997b) criticizes the ensemblistic/identitary ontology for being a homogenous ontology and sociology (p.198), which corresponds to the conformity of heteronomy. On the contrary, he proposes a different ontology of creation, of heterogeneity, based on the acknowledgement of a differential ontological multiplicity of irreducible forms. For example, the social-historical, where existence is significance, is ontologically heterogeneous to the first natural stratum which has no inherent significance in itself.

Ontological multiplicity manifests both in the mode of difference, as ensemblistic/identitary multiplicity and in the mode of alterity (or otherness), as creative multiplicity.

For Castoriadis, Difference is defined as the differentiation between an object and other similar objects, the arithmetic multiplicity of distinct points and the algebraic multiplicity of determinate relations, the multiplicity of the individual particulars of a generic kind. Difference is the homogenous multiplicity of the identical. This notion of difference and identity includes both differences of degree and differences of nature, because, in order for a point to be considered different from another point, in order for it to receive a different truth value according to its position in a sequence or a level, it should first be considered as identical to itself.

On the other hand, Alterity is defined as the emergence of irregular, new forms that are irreducible to prior definitions and to one another, like the living being is irreducible to inorganic matter or any person is irreducible to another. Alterity is the heterogeneous multiplicity of diverse beings.

We should note that in the *Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis, 1998) Castoriadis draws a sharp distinction between Space and Time based on the distinction between difference and

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81

alterity, whereas later, in his essay “Time and Creation”(Castoriadis, 1997a), he modifies this initial schema with the incorporation of the horizon of Space into the horizon of Time. He also expresses his disagreement with Bergson’s identification of abstract space with “space *tout court*”, pointing out that mathematical Space is an abstraction of real Space, and that real Space always appears within time (Castoriadis, 1997a, pp. 391& 395).

Castoriadis (1997a) points out that we can easily imagine an empty abstract space (p.395), such as the space of Euclidean geometry, or the Minkowski space of non-Euclidean geometries, where a line can be thought of as being actually infinite, or where three or four coordinates can define a topicality. Of course, these spaces are intellectual constructions and deductions that describe only a small portion of actual space and in a schematic manner. In reality, there is not one straight line, nor a perfect circle in the universe. However, a perfect circle is thinkable, as a perfect image of eternity, of a time in stasis and unchangeable, a spatial time that is the radical negation of Time-in-Itself, since the fundamental attributes of the latter is motion and change. Should we accept such an image of eternity as the pure Being, then all Becoming and time itself are reduced to secondary representations or illusions, like the shadows described in the Platonic allegory of the Cave.

The arrow of time, always moving forward towards the future, is the consensus image of natural temporality today. Since time always flows towards the future it always refers to the probable and the indefinite. In that manner, eternity, a temporal mode of infinity, remains always a possibility but never an actuality, as was already pointed out by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Waismann, 1967, p. 229). Nevertheless, besides natural or cosmic time, proper temporalities of the Being-for-Itself, trapped in the rhythm of thermodynamic entropy as regards their ensemblistic/identitary dimension, manifest a negation of entropy as regards their imaginary dimension. The proper time of the living being in the scale of evolution is moving towards more complex structures and adjustable durations.

To describe his notion of heterogeneous ontological multiplicity Castoriadis, adopts from algebra the concept of the *magma*, in a totally new context. Castoriadis (1998) explains:

“A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblistic organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblistic composition of these organizations” (p.343).

One could argue that the concept of the magma bears many similarities to the Bergsonian concept of *mixture*, which describes the irreducible multiplicity and interwoven heterogeneity of duration and matter given to perception. However, for Bergson, the mixture is the ontological mode of immediate perception, whereas for Castoriadis the magma is the ontological mode of temporal social reality and of our imaginary representations of reality. While Bergson considers temporality

and memory as indicators of duration, Castoriadis refers to the radical imagination of the individual psyche and the social imaginary of society as the dual sources of every representation and signification, and of temporality respectively.

As a prime example of the ontological heterogeneity and creation, Castoriadis (1997a) mentions the Being-for-Itself (*être pour soi*), the being that institutes itself and whose finality refers to itself (p.145). A case of the being-for-itself is the living being, from the simplest to the most complex species. The living being creates a plexus of assessments of its environment and informs its proper world according to its proper time. One could describe this function as the cognitive and evaluative function of the being-for-itself, schematically articulated into three instances, cognition, sentiment and intention, all referring to self-reproduction and self-conservation. The living being thus creates and organizes a complete ontological plane, a determinate system of inclusions and exclusions that complements and supports broader ontological ecosystems. The creation of a proper world means the creation of a proper time in the sense of both duration and bio-chronical orientation. Those proper times have to be both specific and complementary among them but also must correspond to cosmic time and above all, time in-itself, without sharing a total common rhythm, duration or entropy. From the perspective of the living being, entropy is negative, from the simple to the complex, in direct contrast to thermodynamic or natural entropy that tends to chaos.

So, finality is the attribute of the being-for-itself. The distinction between living and non-living nature with finality as the distinctive attribute indicates temporal heterogeneity. It should be noted that Castoriadis discusses at length the notion of biological *autopoiesis*, introduced by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Maturana & Varela, 1980, pp.73-123) who consider the emergence and evolution of life as the self-creation of the living being. As they assert, “a living system is specified as an individual, as a unitary element of interactions, by its autopoietic organization, which determines that any change in it should take place subordinated to its maintenance, and thus sets the boundary conditions that specify what pertains to it and what does not pertain to it in the concreteness of its realization” (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 87), and thus a living organism creates its own biological *autonomy*. However, Castoriadis distinguishes his own definition of autonomy as self-determination and self-institution attributed solely to human subjectivity and society, from the notion of biological autonomy, which he prefers to call the “representational-cognitive closure” (Castoriadis, 1997b, p.314) of the proper world of the Being-For-Itself.

The living being, as a being for itself, creates, as Castoriadis (1997b) argues, “its own world—a ‘proper world’, an *Eigenwelt*” (p.356). The human psyche and human society are other cases of the being-for-itself, less individualistic since the psyche is less than an individual and society more than that. Society and the psyche are co-existent and co-dependent within the social-historical which is created as a social proper world and a social proper time, in short, a social self-temporality, a history.

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81



This ontological stratification proposes an ontological heterogeneity and a figure of Time-Being as layered with non-regular stratification, where each stratum or ontological plane differentiates in categorical attributes. It also proposes a chaotic dimension or sublevel, the Abyss, chaotic not in the sense of infinity, but in the sense of indeterminacy.

From these premises Castoriadis (1997b) develops the following ontological theses:

“What is is not ensemble or system of ensembles. What is is not fully determined. What is is Chaos, or Abyss, or Groundlessness. What is is Chaos with non-regular stratification. What is bears with it an ensemblistic-identitary dimension – or an ensemblistic-identitary part everywhere dense.” (pp.307-308).

The sharp distinction between any living being and human beings according to Castoriadis (1997a) is located to the fact that the human being is attributed with a deformity of imagination (p.142) which creates and imposes arbitrary finalities, far from the basic biological norms of self-preservation. The human psyche is described as radical imagination, a constant flux of imaginary representations. But the human psyche, Castoriadis argues, could not survive without society. The psyche itself is incapable of survival unless being transformed into a functional individual, through the process of socialization that transfigures individual unconscious urges according to the dominant social attitudes and ideals. The latter conforms to social imaginary significations that cannot be the product of the individual psyche but point to another imaginary pole, that of an anonymous social imaginary. The human being appears as a distinct being-for-itself whose sufficient and necessary condition is society as another distinct being-for-itself, as the imaginary source of a proper social world and a proper social time that constitute social reality.

Subjective temporality is time as experienced by a human subject, the temporality that is determined by psychical processes and the flux of the radical imagination of the psyche, as this exists in-itself and to the degree that it corresponds with the conscious ego. It is clear that one cannot speculate a completely isolated and closed subjective temporality. A person always communicates one way or another, at least corporeally, with the cosmic or objective temporality, and with social temporality, as regards other people.

Castoriadis, in his early Greek papers, defined the objectivity of a phenomenon in terms of its sensibility for every subject and the objectivity of meaning as its independence from any subjective view towards that meaning (Castoriadis, 1988, p.38). To a degree, objective temporality could be defined as the time of the natural environment, the constant flux of transformations of natural reality and its objects. However, it would be wrong to equate objective temporality to the sum or the totality of subjective temporalities, since, first, objective or cosmic time incorporates non-living beings, such

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81



as galaxies and matter/energy and secondly, one can describe whole ecosystems of objective temporalities as networks of living beings where enclosed internal temporalities and proper worlds communicate and interact externally. All this point to Time in-itself as a primal ontological magma into which an infinite number of secondary, although independent, magmatic temporalities emerge, which create *novi loci* and layers of Being-as-to-Be (*être à-être*). Castoriadis (1999) insists that “being means to-be, time and creation require one another” (p.9). Objective, natural temporality can be thought of as a modality of Time-In-Itself, although its representations are always reflected and mediated by the social-historical.

However, *sub specie humanitatis*, what is important is the subjective temporality of the person and the objective temporality of society. This indicates that there is another type of temporality where the subjective and objective temporalities interweave, interact and correspond. Since the social-historical is the ontological environment of human existence, those strata, the natural/objective and the psychic/subjective, which both contain a plexus of ensemblistic/identitary and imaginary/creative dimensions, are articulated and informed in terms of the social-historical through the dominant social significations. Here the distinction between the psyche and society is bridged by the figure of the socialized individual, the conscious ego, formed upon the various unconscious psychological layers, through education and communication from the point of birth forward, which enacts the process of the sublimation of inner drives to accepted social norms and significations. Thus, the external origin of the superego, the internalization of the principle of prohibition via the social contact with the archetypical mother and the extended community is explained through the notion of the emergence of the individual psyche into the social-historical environment. The submergence of the social-historical significations, via language and behaviour, into the proper world of the psyche, is experienced as an invasion, which in turn creates new psychic regions, formulating the magma of the subjectivity that grows into a person. Language is the predominant carrier of social significations and it is through linguistic and semantic patterns that the primal psyche learns to apprehend reality and to channel inner drives and imaginary sentiments towards the socially legitimate normativity. Language in the broader sense of communicative expression that includes oral, corporeal and visual semantics is also the carrier of the dominant social temporality and the social significations of natural time. Those significations that regulate personal feelings, drives and conceptions, precede every and each person since society is the ontological environment and condition of the human being and society is in-itself a plexus of significations, norms, institutions, social structures and behavioural patterns. This implies the presence of an instituting social imaginary, as the matrix that creates and eventually validates those social significations and is analogous to the radical imagination of the psyche, with two crucial differences, among other, that the psyche needs to be transformed into a social being to survive and

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81



that the psyche demonstrates an actual subjectivity, whereas society is a magma of individual subjectivities and their relations, but not their sum nor their totality.

In that notion, personal time and social time are inseparable, although irreducible to each another. Additionally, we should also take into account the unreachable locus of internal, primal psychic temporality, the psychical time formed by the constant flux of figures and images that is radical imagination. So, subjective temporality is also presented as a multiplicity and subjective time is in-itself magmatic and interconnected with the broader magma of social time which emerges on the surface of the even broader magma of cosmic time, all of the above forming, without ever covering or completing, the magma of Time in-itself.

In the same manner, the two strata of time, subjective and objective, interweave and multiply in the social-historical. Society, as a specific being-for-itself creates its own proper world by instituting a social space and a social time (Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 386).

What Castoriadis calls 'social time' is the temporality that is consubstantial with the institution and the plexus of the main and dominant social significations of each society. It is presented in two dimensions, the tautological dimension that is the calendar time, the time that is measured, and the imaginary dimension that is the temporality of signification, the specific meaning attributed to specific temporal durations or instances. Tautological social time is the rhythm by which a given society measures the passage of natural or cosmic time and thus, it is a bridge that connects social temporality with the objective-tautological aspect of Time in-Itself. The main attributes of tautological social time are repetition and equivalence. Imaginary social time is the mode of evaluation, articulation and determination of the *meaning* of the moments of natural or external temporality. Imaginary social time is formulated by the interaction, overlap and successiveness of socially instituted conceptions, world-images and socially accepted relations between the individual, society and the outside, other societies, the past and the cosmos. It is a temporality defined by holy festivals and sacred days, a notion of time that underlines the legitimate paradigms and manifests as the dominant historical narrative. Castoriadis argues that social time contains social space and that is also the case as regards natural time, since the temporal magma is above every spatial superset, even of temporal coordinates, which, being coordinates, are spatial attributes.

However, we should note that social time, necessarily leaning on the natural world, does not have a subjective dimension, besides its imaginary aspect and besides being the collective imaginary articulation of the actual subjective, individual temporalities. If one was to accept an actual collective

subjectivity, or collective consciousness or will, one would have to assume a super-subjectivity that would lead back to the metaphysics of a societal essence.

On the contrary, subjective time belongs to the realm of the individual and since the individual is socially informed one could assume that conscious time, though distinct, cannot be radically separated from social time.

While discussing the Freudian position than the unconscious does not known time, Castoriadis (2007) makes an important argument:

“The latter [the unconscious] does not know usual time, diurnal social time. But it is obvious that it unfolds its own time, its proper time. A dream unfurls in a dream time; and it creates, it makes be a dream time. There is a proper temporality of the dream, as, more generally, a proper temporality of the Unconscious. This is not "our" temporality of socialized adults, and noon can be switched to before 9 AM; that matters little, there is a before/after.” (p.376).

So, the psyche has its own proper temporality, distinctive from social time. Personal, individual time emerges as the superimposition of the temporality of the social imaginary on the temporality of the individual radical imagination.

The conflict between the psyche and society within the individual also manifests as a conflict between the conscious personal time, and social temporality. The conflict occurs due to the different attributes of each stratum since personal temporality is finite within the horizon of each lifetime and has a variable rhythm, whereas collective temporality claims infinity and needs to have a constant rhythm in order to establish the institutional authority and reproduction of the dominant social norms.

This means that the conceptual horizon of subjective temporality is fixed by the social signification of the experience of death and the subsequent concept of mortality. This interrelationship between the images of social temporality and personal mortality is reflected on the political constitution of each society, which always proposes an imaginary conception of mortality or immortality that informs the imaginary duration and genealogy of the dominant political body and defines it. For example, in most modern societies the age of adulthood is arbitrarily and specifically set and is, even more arbitrarily, equated to citizenship, or the right of full participation to available political procedures and functions. In that sense, the fact and philosophical mystery of death cannot be reduced to a personal existential issue, but must be dealt with as an equally social issue, whose representations and context have deep consequences to the overall institution of political power, social time and social historicity.

The heterogeneity of temporal strata indicates that, on the one hand, the inner rhythm or duration of each temporality is variable, since the relation between proper temporalities and natural time is of a mode of indeterminate interdependency, while on the other, every proper temporality must be signified/presented/matriculated in terms of social-historical significations in order to obtain meaning and validity. These modalities of Being-as-Time, considered as a constant creation, emergence and annihilation of temporal figures and living forms, obviously refute any theory about time-travel, which is a modern chimaera of scientific imagination.

Secondly, these assumptions obviously refute any theory of immortality or life after death, this religious chimaera, or life before death, the one presupposing the other, both on a mutual claim of an out-of-time space where the soul can reside and correspond with eternity.

Humanity is defined by the emergence of the social-historical surrounding the individual and the creation of a new temporal and ontological stratum, social time and social space. The psychic function of memory and the social ceremonies of tradition are both focused on preserving and reproducing the dominant social significations, creating thus a temporality of repetition. On the level of the subject, the proper time of the psyche must conform to social temporality and moreover, face its own mortality, even if it fails to acknowledge it. Failure to acknowledge mortality is due to both the psyche's own desire for immortality and the closure of social significations, which, in the case of heteronomous societies, tend to veil and deny mortality by projecting the immortality of the dominant social institution and reserving an imaginary place in it for the individual.

However, this metaphysical immortality is not primarily meant to reconcile the individual with her or his fate. It mainly satisfies a social need for coherence and continuity. On the level of society, the existence of social institutions manifests another mode of being, with a different temporality and different duration, an existence that is purely signification, without a material, subjective corporeality. While the individual subject must accept his or her mortality, institutions are presented as potentially eternal, as the foundations of social continuity and social eternity and function as a comforting substitute and indirect negation of personal death.

This notion of the eternity of social institutions is one of the sociological foundations of heteronomy, and it is accompanied either with a notion of dissolution of the individual subjectivity within the social structure, like, for example, in the societies of pre-modern East Asia, or with a concept of guaranteed immortality for the individual soul, as long as the person conforms to the dominant norms. Conformity and immortality are essential attributes of any heteronomous social temporality. This trend of conservation and reproduction of the dominant significations manifests in the closure and sanctification of the basic plexus of significations and their secondary institutional

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81

forms, which contain in their semantic core this promise of duration and aspiration to eternity that is also expressed by the reduction of social creativity and imaginary to external, metaphysical factors.

Social temporality is subsequently articulated into a chronological system of official representation and hierarchical signification of the natural, objective temporalities. This chronological narrative is the primal norm of every social imaginary reconstruction of natural time and is mainly expressed in two manners. The first is the construction of a calendar time which is the categorization of the ensemblistic/identitary phenomena of Time-in-Itself, like the passage of the seasons and the solar and lunar circles, and the imaginary investment of those phenomena with social significations that sanctify certain days as days of memory or worship. Calendar time, which we must distinguish from modern clockwork time, the latter being an unsanctified subset of the former reduced to the rhythm of production, protects, reproduces and imposes social continuity and coherency in everyday affairs, unifying every subjective present into a social timetable under the operating schema of circular repetitiousness. The attempts of the leaders of the French Revolution to change the names of the months and the years, to change the official calendar, can be noted as an attempt to rupture incumbent temporality in order to symbolically establish a new era by the creation of a new calendar. Those attempts were proven futile, but their echo is still present, since Thermidor, the name given to the month July, is still used as a reference to Robespierre's downfall and as a metaphor for the overthrow of any dictatorial authority. Configurations of calendar time can be located in every society, as the foundations of social coherence that only a common temporality can ensure.

The second way in which social temporality is formally expressed may be called historiographical, in the broader sense of the dominant historical narrative that each society creates as its self-image. Every society presents itself within Time as the present state of a temporal succession in respect to an imaginary past and an equally imaginary future. This historiographical narrative intersects calendar time, whose annotations are mostly symbolic reproductions of the significant historical events that are the joints of historical articulation. The imaginary patterns that each society projects to the past contain and carry dominant aspirations and interests, under the gravity of which that past is transformed, regulated and narrated accordingly. At least in heteronomous societies, where the social division between the people and the authorities is justified with feigned origin stories that refer to past heroic actions and subsequent present and future obligations towards those. During modernity, this necessity of past justification has produced, among other, national legends like that of the U.S. Founding Fathers, and philosophical allegories, like that of the Social Contract, all considered as starting points in history, after which all is amended. The actual social-historical environment of each society is thus clothed with an imaginary social-historical tapestry, formally woven.

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81



In every case, the imaginary institution of society is also an imaginary institution of social temporality and the institution of a dominant formal history of this temporality. The restrictions imposed on the dominant chronology is that it has to adjust to natural temporality, whose instances of daily or monthly circulation serve the standardization of that narrative. Even linear narratives must curve in order to adjust to the circularity of local natural temporality, as the example of Christian holidays indicates. However, as regards linear narratives the arrow of time is ultimately pointed forward and the discourse on time is a discourse on death. The interaction between social and individual time is noted explicitly in this imaginary framework since the time-units used to measure the temporal rhythm are indivisible points on a linear succession under the concept of causality. In circular social narratives the arrow of time seems broken, as the discourse on time becomes a discourse on resurrection, where individual time, essentially linear, is usually absorbed by the community and personal death is presented as the temporary price for the cosmic or social recurrence, in a repetitive circular motion under the concept of necessity.

These imaginary patterns are modes of refuting the mortality of society itself as a Being-for-Itself. They are also foundations of heteronomy since they attribute societal creativity to external factors and impose the subjugation of social temporality to enclosed temporal schemata. However, exceptions to the canon of heteronomy have emerged in history, creating different temporal modalities, the temporality of autonomy.

Castoriadis (1997a) places the emergence of the project of autonomy in ancient Greece (pp.267-298), where and when the dual rise of democracy and philosophy broke down previous dogmatic representations of social time, thus breaking the cognitive closure of society. The rise of direct democracy, during the classical Athenian period, created a new public space, a space of social deliberation and political decision, where the functions of government and power could be appointed to every citizen and, through every citizen, to all. Social space was subsequently articulated into three major divisions, private space, the *oikos* (meaning 'house'), a semi-private and semi-public space, the *agora* (meaning 'market' but in a broader sense, beyond the financial functions, incorporating public social relations and discourses of every kind), where open deliberation took place and a completely public, thus political, space, the *ecclesia* (meaning 'assembly of the citizens'), the place for political decisions.

This creation of a public space also means the creation of a public time (Castoriadis, 1997b, p.281). This public time, on the one hand, designates the democratic political functions within the new divisions of public space aforementioned. Public time is devoted to democratic self-government and, in that sense, private time is the time of labour, with free time becoming public, in direct contrast to the modern situation, where private time is considered free and public time consists of

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)**Issue-September and December****ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)****Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81**

working hours. Free time, time of freedom, cannot be devoid of a strictly private dimension, but neither can it be contained to the private sphere without losing freedom, since social and individual freedom are interconnected both in space and in time.

On the other hand, Castoriadis (Castoriadis, 1997b) points out that by public time he does not mean only “just ‘social’, ‘calendar’, time, a system of sociotemporal benchmarks” (p.281), but also the creation of a different relation of the collectivity with its past history and future aspirations, a new relation with tradition characterized by reflection and re-creation, and “the emergence of a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as domain for its activities” (Castoriadis, 1997b, p. 281). This free public time and free public space are the places of democratic practice and democratic education, which is the education of the democratic citizen, whom Castoriadis defines as the reflective and deliberative human subjectivity.

What is more important in the case of ancient direct democracy is the new notion of temporality that it created, a temporality grounded on the present, pointed towards the creation of the future, without metaphysical reassurances of a religious eternity. A democratic society must recognize mortality as a factum, not as an illusion so that the gravity of every decision can be fully comprehended and dealt with accordingly. A mortal, limited life can be meaningful in the experience of freedom when that freedom is socially instituted, in order for it to be actually experienced and not just dreamt of. And this shows the ontological predominance or primary significance of the present moment of time over the past or the future since the present is the only moment of public time, the moment of social co-existence and democratic *praxis*. The present is the ontological field of creation and transformation according to Castoriadis (1998):

“The present, the *vuv* is here explosion, split, rupture -- the rupture of what is as such. This present exists as originating, as immanent transcendence, as source, as the surging forth of ontological genesis. What is contained in this present is not contained there, for it is burst asunder as a determined 'place' in which something determined could simply stand, as the copresence of compatible determinations. Social-historical time -- time that is the social-historical itself -- allows us to apprehend the most pregnant, the most striking form of this time.” (p. 201).

The democratic transformation of the Athenian society brought traditional temporalities, circular mythological genealogies and dynastic chronicles down to the level of didactic allegories, draining them from their effective power. These archaic annotations of the time were reduced to points of reference that articulate but do not dictate the social temporality of the *polis*. The Athenian free and equal citizen who was praised by Pericles in his *Funeral Oration* (Thucydides, 1990, pp.34-46) is a person of a society that fragmented traditional rigid temporalities into a network of individual temporalities, unified in the common public space, that collectively create a public time, a

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81

common future and a common history under a sense of common good. It is no wonder that the birth of history occurs in that context, namely by Herodotus, but actually by Thucydides, in whose *Archaeology* we can detect for the first time an explicit notion of historicity, that differentiates a historical account from a mythical narrative.

Today we live in a fragmented world, where the social institution is based on heteronomy foundations, but these foundations are eroded by the social movements and the significations of autonomy. The global struggle between societies and the elites is also a struggle for the creation of an actual free public time and an actually free public space.

We can now respond to the initial question, posed by Einstein, by arguing that the mathematical, natural dimension of objective temporality does not actually include all of the significant aspects of time. The ensemblistic-identitary perception of temporality cannot account for the consubstantial poetic-imaginary and creative dimensions of being and time, manifested by the psyche and the social imaginary, which envelop the time of the philosophers within the broader magma of the social-historical. If we perceive time as the creative modality of Being, we can conclude that both the time of the physicists and the time of the philosophers exist, in the manner that social-historical time exists, as strata of a magmatic, dynamic and temporal reality.

References:

- Aristotle. (1930). *Physics* (W.D. Ross, Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Augustine. (1961). *Confessions*. London: Penguin Books.
- Castoriadis, C. (1999). *Domaines de l'homme*. Paris: Seuil.
- Castoriadis, C. (1988). *Protes Dokimes*. Athens: Ypsilon.
- Castoriadis, C. (1997a). *World in Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Castoriadis, C. (1997b). *The Castoriadis Reader* (D.A.Curtis, Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castoriadis, C. (1998). *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Castoriadis, C. (2007). *Figures of the Thinkable*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Castoriadis, C. (2008). *Fait e à faire*. Les Carrefours du labyrinthe. Paris: Points.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: the realization of the living*. Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co.
- Plato. (2001). *Timaeus*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Thucydides. (1990). *Histories Books I-II*. London: Loeb Classical Library.
- Waismann, F. (1967). *Ludwig Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*. Oxford: Blackwell Publisher.

Vol 5 No 3 and 4 (2017)

Issue-September and December

ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis, by Alexandros Schismenos, Page No. 64-81





Cite this article:

Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis

Citation Format: APA:

Schismenos, A. (2018). Time in the ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis. *S O C R A T E S*, 5(3 and 4), 64-81. Retrieved from <https://socratesjournal.com/index.php/SOCRATES/article/view/316>

For more citation formats visit:

<https://socratesjournal.com/index.php/SOCRATES/article/view/316>



Author Self Archiving Policy

<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/search.php?issn=2347-2146>

Summary:

Socrates journal does not allow authors to post items submitted to the journal on personal Not for Profit websites or institutional repositories or on any other website prior to publication and after publication. They can only share web links to their published article after publication. The journal, however, permits "author self-archiving" 24 months after the publication of the article.

Published Authors can download and print their article in PD Format but cannot share it online on any website.

Preprint (Archiving and sharing online not allowed)

A preprint is a version of the article before it has been peer-reviewed for publication. The term may refer either to articles at an early stage of preparation or to articles at the last stage before submission for peer review. In the latter case the article is, of course, well-developed and ready for critical review and, if only minor revisions are needed as a result of peer review, a late-stage preprint may be very little different from the final article.

Post print/Final post-print (Archiving and sharing online not allowed)

A post-print is the final version of the article that the author sees before it is published. A post-print has been peer reviewed and the changes and revisions required by the reviewers have been incorporated. However, the author's final post print and the published version are effectively the same.

There would be no responsibility of the Journal Socrates or any member of the Journal on the items submitted/posted by the authors and readers on any personal Not for Profit websites or institutional repositories or website or anywhere on Internet. In the case of Breach from the side of the author, the Journal will remove the shared article from its published issue.

**DO NOT SHARE THIS RESEARCH PAPER ONLINE
DO NOT UPLOAD IT ONLINE ON ANY WEBSITE OR PLATFORM**