Postmodernism has regularly been understood as a mode of thought that rejected many of the central tenets of modern western rationality. Indeed, even postmodernism’s proponents rarely made a strong case for it as a perspective that sought to reconsider and refine the notion of rationality. The fact that the latter position did not appear a logical outcome of postmodernism’s questioning of reason and rationality certainly reflected its initial oppositional stance. It equally displayed the limited self-understanding of postmodernist discourses and the deficiencies of the exemplifications of the categories they deployed, like transgression, heterogeneity, and discontinuity. Despite its contestation then, postmodernism remained bound to the modernity that it differentiated itself from as the past. For this reason, postmodernism has subsequently been readily displaced in social theory by approaches that highlight the multiple variations of modernity and its ‘ongoing and innovative pluralization.’¹ This program of multiple modernities implies an appreciation of the different cultural inflections of rationality and it is, in this respect, a continuation of Max Weber’s comparative historical sociology.² Nonetheless, the multiple modernities program has yet to fully address the questions postmodernism posed concerning rationality. Postmodernism’s intimations of a different form of rationality have, more in the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt than that of Johann Arnason, been subordinated to the task of disclosing the alignment of rationality with the processes of political institutionalization.³

The vision of a single version of modernity is the key to postmodernism’s conception of rationality and it delineates then this perspective’s significant limitations. Postmodernism’s intuitions about a different sense of rationality

---

can be negatively, at least, defined in terms of their divergence from what, according to Rogers Brubaker, Max Weber considered the ‘common pattern that defines what is “specific and peculiar” about Western rationalism.’ In various spheres, rationalization ‘has involved the depersonalization of social relationships, the refinement of techniques of calculation, the enhancement of the social importance of specialized knowledge, and the extension of technically rational control over both natural and social processes.’ It will be argued that postmodernism originated from a heightened reflexivity concerning the dilemmas of the critique of ideology and that a somewhat different perspective on rationality ensues from the revision of the category of ideology. Although Cornelius Castoriadis perceived postmodernism to be symptomatic of tendencies in contemporary western societies of a declining commitment to the project of autonomy and a crisis of meaning, it is with reference to Castoriadis’s work on social imaginaries that the implications of a postmodernist account of rationality will be explicated.

Castoriadis’s notion of social imaginaries shows that the problems that the category of ideology addressed, like the occlusion of conflict and the legitimation of domination, have a deeper source in the tension between the creation of the institution of society and the institution’s denial of its creation. This explication points to how the critique of ideology has depended on the created form of the institution of society, including its language, norms, horizon of understanding, and hence its sense of rationality. In these terms, postmodernism can be partly understood as an appreciation of the ideological distortion of rationality and the self-questioning ensuing from a recognition of critique’s dependence on the social imaginary significations of instituted society. Castoriadis believed that the ‘self-transformation required by our times is inseparably bound up with the self-transcending of reason.’ Despite the substantial disagreements that postmodernism’s approach to rationality generated, there is a widely shared outlook in contemporary social theory and philosophy concerning the increasing reflexivity in the critique of ideology and the dilemmas that emerge from it. Even postmodernism’s most famous opponent, Jürgen Habermas, considered that a ‘second-order reflectiveness’ in the critique of ideology influenced The

5. Ibid.
Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental reason and its pessimistic equation of rationality and domination.8

In the case of those theorists typically associated with postmodernism, the increasing reflexivity concerning the critique of ideology resulted in a skepticism towards conceptions of the historical realization of rationality and a questioning of the dichotomies that had been drawn between ideology and science. The latter was presumably the guarantor of truth and rationality; yet the identification of the ideological implications of scientific rationality had, at the same time, the consequence of undermining the concept of ideology and its utility for critique. This perspective on the category of ideology is clear, for instance, in Michel Foucault’s desire to write the history of truth, rather than that of deception.9 In other cases, the concept of ideology was radicalized and it accrued new meaning, particularly acquiring a more general epistemological sense. The French Marxist Louis Althusser may have held to a contrast between science and ideology, but he extended the epistemic sense of ideology in the notion of interpellation.10 Althusser claimed that subjects imposed ideology on themselves and that ideology was the imaginary relation of individuals to the real conditions of existence, a formulation that owes a great deal to the psychoanalytic decentering of the subject’s consciousness and rationality, but generally these reassessments of ideology were substantially influenced by structural linguistics and semiotic approaches to meaning. These led to an interest in the relational character of signs in a system of meaning, and how ideology operated like myth through the making of links between things and conceptual significations. It is not difficult to perceive that this framework of analysis could be reflexively applied to critique of ideology, as well as to the method of structural analysis, showing that they too were conditional. Further, if this were acknowledged then their validity would be thrown into question. In a sense, this reflexivity could be described as that of the method of deconstruction.11 Deconstruction’s highlighting of the self-undermining of attempts to provide secure foundations of knowledge could be considered either an innovative version of ideology critique or its denouement.

Jean Baudrillard’s sketches of how consumer capitalism and the mass media transformed the material conditions of existence into a new reality that is characterized by the dominance of the symbolic may be regarded as a more self-consciously postmodernist elaboration of semiology.\footnote{Jean Baudrillard, \textit{Simulations}, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983); Jean Baudrillard, \textit{The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures} (London: Sage, 1998).} Even so, the rudiments of this conception were present in Marx’s account of the inverted consciousness of commodity fetishism and capitalist society’s confusion of the exchange of things with social relations.\footnote{Karl Marx, \textit{Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One} (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1976).} Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard considered that the ‘discovery of the “lack of reality” of reality’ that went together with a ‘shattering of belief’ was a feature of the postmodern immanent in modernity.\footnote{Jean-François Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge}, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 77.} However, Baudrillard described a transfiguration of reality that corroded the subject to such an extent that, in my opinion, it could neither be verified nor effectively critiqued. Baudrillard’s interpretation of the contemporary period is probably as symptomatic as it is compelling. Yet, it similarly pointed to an undermining of the rational basis of the critique of ideology, specifically with respect to its former reliance on the categorical framework of political economy.\footnote{Jean Baudrillard, \textit{The Mirror of Production}, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).}

The implication of many of these structuralist and poststructuralist analyses was that a heightened reflexivity was owed to a distorting perspective, a distortion that received various attributions, including the subject’s misrecognition of itself and its representations, the development of scientific reason in a manner inconsistent with its positivistic self-understanding, and notably that the critique of ideology was itself ideological (particularly in appealing to universality, totality, and historical progress). This combination of distortion and reflexivity partly explains the focus of postmodernism on paradox and the double coding of meaning. Lyotard’s description of the emerging postmodern forms of knowledge highlighted paradox and a series of kindred categories that were appropriate, in his opinion, to the new reality of the times:

Postmodern science—by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, ‘\textit{fracta},’ catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes—is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical.\footnote{Lyotard, \textit{Postmodern Condition}, 60.}
The undermining of the notion of ideology in the process of the increased reflexivity of its critique is itself somewhat paradoxical, as critical reflection is normally regarded as the basis of conceptual clarification and scientific progress. Postmodernism may have drawn significant inspiration from Thomas Kuhn’s idea of revolutions in scientific paradigms and embraced the claim that new paradigms were discontinuous with the normal science of old paradigms. However, the interrogation of ideology is crucial, because it goes to the heart of the postmodernist conception of modernity. It is particularly explicable in light of the vicissitudes in the relationship between ideology and rationality. Significantly, in its initial formulation by Antione Destutt de Tracy after the French Revolution, the notion of ideology was meant to coincide with rationality, being associated with the ‘positivist attempt to establish an empirically-based science of ideas’. Zygmunt Bauman has highlighted the legislator’s role that went together with this version of ideology and the ideologue’s intention of rationally reconstructing society. Ideology was not just ideas, it was meant to have a direct translation into practical action. Consequently, ideology was integral to the program of modernity and the deployment of rationality, particularly against the falsehoods that had been inherited from the past.

The critique of ideology proper commenced with Marx and Engels’s contention that ideology was actually a distorted realization of rationality and that its real purpose was to conceal class oppression and exploitation. The most important characteristic of ideology in this view, as Lefort suggests, consisted in ‘the attempt to represent the universal from the particular point of view of the dominant class.’ For this reason, ideology was distinctively modern, having to present itself in the mantle of rationality. The critique of ideology may have aimed to invalidate those representations of bourgeois society as rational, yet it was itself meant to be indisputably rational and programmatic. It intended the historical transformation that would enable the fulfillment of those bourgeois ideals that could not be actualized in bourgeois society due to the class structure.

The Marxist critique of ideology claimed then to not just represent a class interest but the universal interest of humanity in emancipation. In other words, it presented itself as an incarnation of rationality in opposition to the ideology of bourgeois society. Marxism shared the basic modernist assumption that subjects have the capacity to construct the social order, although its analysis of capitalism emphasized the constraints upon autonomy and the transformation required for its realization. Now, the strand of the reflexive critique of ideology that shaped postmodernism’s ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ focused on different aspects of this proposition. Marx presented a social diagnosis for which it should be the solution and, in a formal sense, this meant that it shared a mode of legitimation with bourgeois ideology. According to Lefort, the ‘text of ideology is written in capital letters, whether it is a question of Humanity, Progress, Nature, Life, or of the key principles of bourgeois democracy’ and this ‘text bears the constant signs of a truth which establishes the origins of facts, which encloses them in a representation and governs the structure of the argument.’ The Marxist critique of ideology drew legitimacy from its dialectical conceptualization of the modernist narrative of historical progress. In particular, this mode of legitimation decisively configured Marxism’s predominant construction of the relationship of theory to practice. It presented an image of rationality that provided a justification for hierarchical and bureaucratized organization, because Marxism’s claim to a theoretically grounded insight into the conditions of social progress came to serve as an authorization of the leadership of political elites.

The Neo-Marxist group *Socialism or Barbarism* pioneered this version of the reflexive critique of ideology and its traces can be seen in Lyotard’s account of the postmodern condition. Lyotard, however, extended to modern science in general the argument about legitimation through double layers of meaning. In his later *Socialism or Barbarism* writings, Castoriadis came to emphasize the extent to which Marxist thought was itself part of the universe of understanding that it sought to oppose. Castoriadis even claimed that Marx and Engels imported into the workers’ movement some of the core significations of bourgeois society, like the postulates of the centrality of the economy and development. From the standpoint of this genealogy, postmodernism was primarily an outcome of the reflection on how a theory of emancipation can become an ideology and the

attempt to work through the implications of the recognition that this reversal was not inconsistent with the dominant meaning of modern rationality. In fact, at a deeper level, which still had to be fully explicated, it appeared that modern rationality might have even facilitated the transformation of the theory of emancipation into an ideology of domination.

This analysis has certain parallels with The Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental reason, but there are significant differences that distinguish postmodernist perspectives on rationality. Namely, the postmodernist outlook drew inspiration from emerging evidence of the internal limitations of the prevailing form of instrumental reason. That is, the evidence that the objectifying orientation of mathematical calculation and the organization of social relations through hierarchical control were, in the context of increasing complexity and new technologies, less than optimal in terms of instrumental rationality’s own criteria of efficiency and outcomes. Similarly, the immanent evolution of scientific thought had led to a transgressing of what Peter Wagner terms the ‘modernist conception of the epistemic problematic’: the distancing of the knower from that which is to be known.

In its most precisely delineated meaning, postmodernism referred to how the formalism and functionalism of explicitly modernist architecture were being countered by tendencies of historical recuperation, ornamentation and irony. The vernacular character of postmodernist architecture could be read as alluding to the inhumanity or alienation ensuing from specialization, and the new historicism undoubtedly constituted a critical take on the modernist equation of rationality and progress. These rather disparate tendencies were generally clearer about what they differentiated themselves from than what they signified in themselves. Nonetheless, they did suggest some order of a cultural shift and the anticipation of a different collective mentality, one that emphasized plurality and disavowed universalistic standards of justification. Even so, this outlook contains the risk of incoherence and postmodernism exaggerated its novelty. Its more sophisticated exponents appreciated the persistence of modernism—including modernity’s dominant forms of rationality—with the emergence of postmodernism. Less sophisticated understandings relied on a homogenizing

image of modernity and the presumption that postmodernism led simply to the disappearance of those questions or *problematiques* that modernism addressed, including those of universality and rationality. In terms of the present analysis, postmodernism has been an inadequate response to the dilemmas that ensued from the extension of the reflexive critique of ideology, which had delineated important aspects of postmodernism’s initial orientation. Specifically, the various exemplifications of postmodernism, such as those referred to above, are in each case tendentious and open to contrary interpretations. It would not be difficult, for instance, to demonstrate the new techno-sciences’ pronounced continuities with instrumental rationality. Similarly, the dissolution of hierarchy remains a continuing political project, rather than a generic feature of emerging forms of postmodernist sociality.

Postmodernism initially intimated at a different version of rationality, yet the implications of these insights were misconstrued and their potential denied, particularly through the paradox that rationality was considered an ideology and the contention that the category of ideology had lost its legitimacy. Nonetheless, Castoriadis’s theorizing of social imaginaries developed in a more compelling manner some of postmodernism’s intuitions, and it is explicit about its rethinking of rationality. For Castoriadis, rationality was always a way of making sense of the world and it was most ideological in its depiction as sufficient unto itself. In this respect, Castoriadis seeks to disclose the dependence of rationality on the social imaginary and how the imaginary cannot be determined by reference to either the real, in the sense of established states of affairs, or the rational, in the sense of the logical ordering and logical combining of elements. Of course, this amounts to a far broader perspective on the problem of rationality than that of postmodernism and it is clearly focused on those questions which culminated in the reflexive critique of ideology. This is evident in a concern with disclosing what modernist understandings of rationality conceal through their representation of epistemological foundations as external to their social-historical construction and their equation of valid knowledge with the scientific method. Postmodernism never developed a comparably coherent proposition on rationality, but its intuitions delineate the significance of Castoriadis’s elucidation of the imaginary.

There is nothing unique and novel to postmodernism’s claims that there are richer experiences of the world than that characteristic of modern rationality, especially that of the dominant version of scientific rationality, which has been

---

committed to objectivism and formalism. Postmodernism’s distinctive variation of this claim is its supplementary questioning of the transparency of experience and depiction of different means of its constitution. Postmodernism’s critique of binaries and dichotomies had a variety of motivations and sources, starting from that between science and ideology but sometimes extended to any category that is defined by way of a distinction. On the one hand, it derived from a challenge to the modernist separation between the knower and the known, and, on the other hand, it developed from a view of the instability of epistemological categories and the valency of multiplicity. Still, there was originally another motivation for the questioning of binaries, and for which these postmodernist elaborations are only partially appropriate; that is, the endeavor of developing a non-hierarchical form of rationality, which would be grounded in practices and resist the theoretical framing that the critique of ideology concluded was so politically consequential. Of course, this practical perspective on rationality was already present in the tradition of North American philosophical pragmatism and its critique of the common misrepresentations of scientific inquiry.29

Similarly, postmodernism’s orientation intersected with pragmatism’s critical rejection of philosophical foundations that were transcendental, in the sense of being prior to experience and outside of time and space. However, unlike postmodernism, in no sense did the pragmatist rejection of these foundations lead to a denial of rationality, which the pragmatists located in a practically grounded capacity for innovative learning and the communication processes of a scientific community of inquiry.

Although the fields of origin may not always have been well understood, postmodernism drew on two currents of thought that appeared to contrast with traditional logic. The first was the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy that could be traced back to pragmatism and that subsequently emerged in other traditions, including analytical philosophy and phenomenology.30 Notably, the resultant shifts away from representational and denotative conceptions of language had potentially significant implications for logical analysis, drawing attention to its dependence on a particular construction of meaning.31 The linguistic turn questioned the typically modernist notion that rationality is primarily an attribute of the

subject, and pointed instead to the collective structures that shape consciousness, as well as those dimensions of rationality that subjects can only enact through their participation in language. Structural linguistics, for instance, emphasized the rational ordering of language as code that enabled meanings to be generated through differences within a language system. Of course, Habermas’s contention that the conditions of mutual understanding require speakers to raise validity claims that can be rationally defended and criticized through explicit argumentation demonstrates that a postmodernist standpoint is not inevitably entailed by acknowledging language’s decentering of consciousness.32

The second current of thought that appeared to depart from traditional logic has been remarked upon. It consisted of those scientific developments—like the uncertainty principle in physics, and chaos theory—which broke with the notion that systematic observation generated knowledge of a predictable and orderly environment. What these scientific developments offered was a radically different perspective on temporal and spatial dynamics to that guiding the idea of the instrumental control of nature, and they presaged a movement away from the principle of determination. In effect, a revised notion of rationality would have to incorporate a greater sense of contingency and reflexivity concerning its implication in the constitution of phenomena. These scientific developments were sometimes coupled with those emerging domains of analysis, such as cybernetics, that seemed to generate an alternate and self-referential language. Lyotard’s description of postmodernism’s pluralization of language games is partly an extrapolation from these tendencies of self-reference.33 Postmodernism sometimes interpreted these scientific innovations as implying an erosion of the disciplinary divisions derived from modernist notions of rationality.

These changes in scientific orientations are important to Castoriadis’s theoretical program. He particularly highlights how the questioning of the principle of determination opens the way to an appreciation of the imaginary. Scientific activity itself, he argued, ‘has come to call in question and represent a crisis for the entire categorical framework of science.’34 He disputes, nevertheless, many of postmodernism’s inferences and he considers that the often associated views—like those of science as another narrative genre and only the prevailing interpretation among many—neglect the logical coherence demanded of inquiry.

33. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*.
and science’s commitment to truth. In his opinion, the demarcation between modernism and postmodernism underestimates the longer history of reflection on scientific thought. Scientific developments made explicit questions that had not disappeared, but which had been somewhat concealed by modern science’s epistemological foundations and methodologies, such as those questions relating to the institution of the very categories science presupposes, as well as the value commitments that orient scientific inquiry and the application of scientific knowledge.

In a similar vein, Castoriadis’s reconsideration of rationality involves a general reformulation of another aspect of postmodernism. Postmodernism gave expression to a heightened interest in the aesthetic dimensions of social life, from the discourse itself in the field of art through to analyses of the mass media, consumption, and fashion. It constituted a rupture of sorts with the distinction between appearance and essence, and it contrasted with the subordination of aesthetics to the instrumental and functional in much modernist discourse. It could be argued that a key principle of modernist aesthetics is a distorting of perspectives, especially for those attempts to instantiate forms that are not limited to the historically crystallized modern. Now, this revaluing of aesthetics alludes to Castoriadis’s broader understanding of social creativity, and hence his entire conception of the imaginary institution of society. In other words, the aesthetic dimension implies that a postmodernist perspective on rationality would be one that is oriented towards social creativity and radical innovation. Rationality would not be limited to quantitative improvements through application of existing means, and would be more closely tied to the power of imagination to give rise to new forms and meanings. Castoriadis’s elucidation of the imaginary fits what Lyotard described as the aim of postmodernism’s extension of modernist aesthetics, that is, it seeks ‘the unpresentable in presentation itself.’

It has been argued that postmodernism’s perspective on rationality was shaped by an appreciation of the dilemmas that arose with the critique of ideology’s increasing reflexivity. Castoriadis’s theorizing of social imaginaries accepts that these complications are relevant to the concept of rationality and his elucidation seeks to account for the following dual institution of rationality, as well as their highly ideological entanglement. On the one hand, at a basic level, there can be no institution of society without the exercise of practically grounded forms of rationality, such as in designating a consistent identity to things and applying

---

means to achieve particular ends. For Castoriadis, these aspects of rationality are prerequisites of the institution of society and they are therefore effectively proto-instituting. At the same time, the institution of society, in its diversity of actual social-historical forms, transcends these dimensions of practical rationality through the social imaginary positing of meanings, meanings that are irreducible to rationality and that actually orient and animate its exercise, as in the technical activities of production and linguistic communication. On the other hand, rationality has been one of modernity’s two principal social imaginary significations and modern institutions have been constituted within the interpretative horizon of rationality. In this respect, modernity is unique and distinctive to the extent that its major institutional forms, particularly capitalism and state bureaucracies, have sought to equate themselves with rationality. This has not only meant that because rationality is critical to legitimacy in modernity, what appears to be non-rational is denied as insubstantial, including such manifestations of the radical imagination of individuals as dreams. It means that the instituting of rationality—that is, what it is that makes instituted rationality appear rational and creates the standards of its validation—is largely concealed and obscured.

For this reason, there are parallels between rationality and the ideological form of myths and religions which deny their social-historical instituting. Yet, there is a substantial difference: myths and religions appeal to some extra-social source, whereas rationality enacts a closure of meaning through its depiction as immanent in social institutions and human subjects. In a sense, this generated the complications of the growing reflexivity of the critique of ideology. Modernity is partly the empowerment of the basic proto-instituting capacities of rationality; it has particularly magnified the significance of mathematical calculation, which is always a component of the social activity of exchange. Castoriadis’s most significant, initial innovation is elucidating the creative or generative character of the imaginary. This enables him to propose that there is a ‘world order’ to which ideology and rationality make reference. Social imaginary significations make the connections, he argues, that are the condition for rationality and ideology to appear coherent. Significations make manifest the imaginary through the establishment of relations of co-belonging, such as that between a term and its referent, and by each signification being an ‘indefinite skein of interminable referrals to something other than (than what would appear to be

stated directly)." Castoriadis claims that there is ‘nothing in all of inherited logic and ontology’ that ‘enables us to conceive of what this signitive co-belonging is and how it is.” Instead, these interrelations are established through the institution of the social imaginary and this demonstrates that its creativity is properly ontological. That is, that the institution of society presupposes itself and exists by bringing into being a world of significations. Rationality would be, on this view, the outcome of processes of creation that are not in themselves entirely rational, and the institution of rationality has rarely been the product of lucid and explicit activity. Rather, modernity’s canonical signification of rationality has given it a particular slant and equated rationality with a specific orientation toward the world.

The successive upheavals which can be observed in the ‘rational knowledge’ of societies known to us have always been conditioned by upheavals in the global imaginary representation of the world (and of nature and of the ends of knowledge itself)—the most recent one, occurring in the West a few centuries ago, created the particular imaginary representation whereby all that is ‘rational’ (and, in particular, mathematizable), that which is to be known, is exhaustible de jure, and the end of knowledge is the mastery and the possession of nature.

The modern imaginary of rationality is consistent with other ideological constructions in making what is contingent appear necessary. It has made the orientation to world of control and mastery appear a requirement of rationality and it has proven extremely effective in harnessing subjects’ will and motivation. Of course, the representation of this imaginary covers over its limitations and deficiencies. Castoriadis emphasizes the very narrow parameters of the possible quantification of social life, and how even in this realm it can only construct ideal typical models of economic action. The social imaginary of capitalist modernity is, he argues, actually that of the pseudo-rationality of the unlimited domination and control of nature and society. On the one hand, as Weber already accurately described, it is a project that becomes increasingly formal and therefore appears disconnected from the ‘substantive rationality’ of the realization of values. On the other hand, in Castoriadis’s opinion, the instituted imaginary of rationality becomes reconnected to particular political forms and ideological orientations without being exhausted by them. Rather,

40. Ibid, 250.
41. Ibid, 272.
the ‘self-sustaining expansion of rational mastery’, as Arnason explains, ‘transcends all specific goals.’

Postmodernism recognizes that this dominant form of modern rationality always incorporates additional meanings to that of its self-definition as formal, instrumental and functional. However, this insight is distorted by the truncated conception of history that underpins postmodernism. In Castoriadis’s opinion, the orientation to the world that enabled the imaginary of rational mastery to take effect did not originate with modernity. Rather, a transformation in world orientation occurred when the Judeo-Christian notion of ‘infinity’, of the unlimited and the without end, ‘invades this world’. This notion is quite unlike that of the Ancient Greek image of the teleological rationality of forms, which are limited and bounded by the necessity of conforming to their ‘natural norms’. According to Castoriadis, the change from infinity being a signification referring solely to transcendence, to one that is perceived to be immanent in the world, commenced around the thirteenth century and roughly coincides with the emergence of the bourgeoisie. This meaning of the infinite and the unlimited informs the capitalist imaginary’s sense of accumulation as an unending process. The ‘marriage’ of this conception of development with the signification of the rationality of mathematical calculation decisively shaped the social-historical practices of rationalization and their legitimation. It underpins the vision of the ‘asymptotic’ progress of scientific knowledge and the illusion of ‘omnipotence’ of technique, as well as modernist constructions of the necessity and inevitability of human progress.

The orientation to the world of the social imaginary of rational mastery obscures the extent to which rationality is always in tension with itself. It is a tension that intersects with the distinction Castoriadis draws between instituted society and that of instituting society. Instituted society constitutes, on the one hand, a horizon of meaning and an ensemble of social structures that tend to veil their instituting as social-historical creations. On the other hand, while rationality necessarily incorporates elements of instituted society, a rationality that is not limited to quantification and assemblage can only be actualized through the critical interrogation of instituted society’s significations. Castoriadis proposes that the rationality of critical interrogation is contingent on its actual practice and that it manifests the degree to which a society is open to its instituting proc-

45. Ibid, 187.
esses. Critical interrogation incorporates logical and mathematical reasoning where relevant, but it can neither be reduced to nor simply derived from them. Drawing on what he regards as mathematical set-theory’s formal and circular conception of the differentiation of identities, and the assemblage of their properties into classes, Castoriadis stated that the ‘imaginary institution of society boils down to the constitution of “arbitrary” points of view, starting from which “equivalences” and “relations” are established.’

It is the normative-political dimension of Castoriadis’s interpretation of the relationship of instituted society and instituting society that differentiates his reconsideration of rationality from that of postmodernism. For instance, even though his notion of the indeterminate creation and the radical alterity of worlds of meaning have affinities with anthropological depictions of ‘local rationalities’, he disagrees with the cultural relativism of postmodernism’s endorsement of multiple and local rationalities. In Castoriadis’s opinion, there is ‘the possibility of a historically effective universality’ in the practices of perpetually testing the closure of thought. These practices are, however, conditional on a ‘rupture with the world of traditional or authoritarian instituted representations.’

Castoriadis sources this rupture to the Ancient Greek instantiation of the project of individual and collective autonomy, and that manifested itself in the mutually reinforcing inventions of philosophy and democracy. This project of self-legislation, self-governance, and self-interrogation transformed the nexus of instituted and instituting society. Yet, it did not persist and the project of autonomy undergoes a renaissance with the emergence of republican city-states in Western Europe. In large part, Castoriadis juxtaposes the imaginary of the project of autonomy to the imaginary of rational mastery, emphasizing the extent to which the former has somewhat limited the effects of the latter and their irreducibility to one another. No doubt, there are grounds for refining this strong juxtaposition of the two dominant modern imaginaries. It is clear, though, that Castoriadis recognizes that the institution of modern science has, to varying degrees, participated in the social imaginary of autonomy and that of rational mastery.

There are two features of the Ancient Greek institution of the imaginary of autonomy that are particularly salient to Castoriadis’s conception of the rationality of critical interrogation. First, Castoriadis highlights its democratic conception of public accountability (logon didonai) and the dialectical exchange

47. Castoriadis, Politics, 74.
of points of view on matters of common concern. In the Athenian context, the interrogation of instituted society was always also self-interrogation, because its notion of accountability heightened individuals’ sense of responsibility for the instituted order and it went together with the obligation of public participation. The norm of the political project of autonomy is, Castoriadis suggests, to ‘permit the explicit, reflective and deliberative self-institution.’ Now, these characteristics of critical interrogation convey a need to be alert to the limits of rationality, but they significantly reflect Ancient Greece’s insight into the incompleteness of rationality. This second feature of the Greek imaginary relates to what can be described as the problem of sustaining the opening of the institution of society to its explicit instituting in the face of tendencies toward closure. Castoriadis claims that a cultural signification of the ‘void’, or the chaotic character of being, shaped the Greek democratic imaginary. It disclosed the impossibility of overcoming the limits of rationality through adopting a rational attitude towards rationality. Instead, the signification of the void made explicit the indeterminacy of being, however, its corollary in Ancient Athens was democratic, that is, instituting has no other foundation than the actions of the people and the responsible judgments they take for them.

The Ancient Greek signification of the void was radically different from the somewhat equivalent notions of Judeo-Christian theology, with their sense of some transcendent meaning and purpose. As we saw, Castoriadis considers that this theological understanding afflicted modern science and the suppositions of modern rationality. However, he argues that it was the Platonic rationalization of thought that consolidated the undermining of those two key features of the imaginary of autonomy that enabled critical interrogation. Plato’s philosophy constituted an image of theory as something that derived from a perspective external to that of the public and its discursive space. Theory then represented a superior and more rational standpoint than that of the citizen. Further, while Plato’s notion of ideal forms responded to the Ancient Greek significations of the indeterminacy of being, it resulted in the construction of what Castoriadis terms, a unitary ontology. The operative postulate of a unitary ontology is ‘that there is a total and rational (and therefore meaningful) order in the world.’ A unitary ontology, Castoriadis argues, conceals the ‘fact that human history is creation’, it justifies a denial of responsibility, and ‘in whatever disguise’, a

49. Ibid, 76.
50. Ibid, 3–12; 81–123.
51. Ibid, 104.
unitary ontology ‘is essentially linked to heteronomy.’ This critique of unitary ontology seeks to disclose a deeper, underlying source of the dilemmas that emerged from the increased reflexivity of ideology critique. Despite postmodernism’s misunderstanding the historical dimension of these dilemmas and their normative-political complexion, it could be regarded as gesturing towards a break with the implicit unitary ontology that has inhabited modern rationality.

Castoriadis’s reconsideration of rationality emphasized the tendency of its instituted forms to enact a closure of meaning that is contrary to autonomy, and he proposed that rationality proper is sustained through its critical interrogation. Of course, a concern with the explicit instituting of rationality has been part the project of autonomy’s elaboration in modernity. Yet, Castoriadis claims that the dominant imaginary signification of rational mastery has inflected modern interpretations of autonomy. He suggests that Kant’s notion of autonomy bears the traces of a formal and inflexible vision of rationality. Kant’s commitment to the ontological principle of determination similarly eventuated in his occlusion of the critique of pure reason’s original disclosure of the significance of imagination. The differentiation of rationality in modernity does not necessarily modify the effects of the social imaginary and its associated meanings. Castoriadis argues that moral-political commitments can become more lucid and coherent, but they cannot be ‘rationalized’ in the sense that Habermas proposed. In part, this is because moral-political actions are related to problematic situations and always involve substantive values; procedures make a necessary though nonetheless partial contribution to the rationality of deliberation. The primary reason why the notion of rationalization is inappropriate is due to the imaginary institution of moral and political significations. This means, firstly, that autonomy and justice cannot be given a fully determinate meaning, as one would expect of logical categories. Secondly, rationalization implies that some prior limitations of knowledge and action have been overcome. In Castoriadis’s opinion, this is not the case in moral-political matters of substance, and to assume otherwise is to participate in a vision of rationality that denies its contingent creation.

A different, though related, contrast with Habermas’s reconstruction of rationality can serve to further clarify the implications of Castoriadis’s position. According to Castoriadis, an intersubjective notion of rationality is inadequate; it does not grasp the overarching collective character of the institution of society. Of course, it could be argued that this criticism neglects Habermas’s conception

52. Ibid, 105.
53. Ibid, 121; 164.
of the lifeworld and its depiction of a collective horizon of meaning. Habermas argued, for instance, against Weber that rationalization transpires in the background horizon of the lifeworld, rather than explicit action orientations. Even so, it is clear that Habermas’s account of the interplay of the lifeworld and communicative action is rather different to that of Castoriadis’s conception of the relationship of instituting and instituted society. In the latter’s terms, rationality is social, being the instituted creation of an anonymous collective. Still, there is some justification to Habermas’s objection that Castoriadis’s conception of the world-constituting imaginary collapses the distinction between meaning and validity, a distinction that is relevant to the critique of ideology, since ideological beliefs and practices are meaningful, but they are not valid. Despite the criticism of a lack of differentiation between meaning and validity being inconsistent with Castoriadis’s specification of the rationality of critical interrogation, there is a considerable disconnection between his account of the diverse cultural creation of worlds of meaning and his more restricted view of the normative-political institution of the project of autonomy. Indeed, it is not so much rationality that distinguishes the latter from the former, as it is the endeavor to make explicit the instituting of rationality. On this analysis, by recurrently equating rationality with foundations, procedures, and methods, modernist theorizing differs mainly in the manner of its misrepresentation of the contingencies of instituting and its identification with its own institution.

Although Castoriadis regards postmodernism as exemplifying a waning of the cultural creativity that characterized modernism and the possible eclipse of the project of autonomy, my analysis has shown that his theory intersects with postmodernism’s intimations of another form of rationality. The connection drawn is not merely that of an arbitrary affinity, because the increased reflexivity of the critique of ideology shaped postmodernism’s critique of rationality. Castoriadis’s theory was originally motivated by a need to clarify the sources of the inversion of theories of emancipation into ideological legitimations of modern domination. In his opinion, modernity is unique to the extent that its dominant institutions have identified themselves with the signification of rationality. However, he highlights the dependence of rationality on the creativity of the social imaginary and its institution of specific orientations towards the world. In this regard, Castoriadis claims that the dominant modern imaginary of rational mastery was formed through a reinterpretation of an originally premodern theological signification of infinity and its synthesis with the objectifying perspective

---

55. Habermas, *Communicative Action*.
of the mathematical quantification of reality. This social imaginary’s open-ended matrix of meaning permits variations in its modern institutional deployment. Modernity has been shaped, though in a less fully realized manner, by the alternate imaginary of the project of autonomy. Significantly, the imaginary of autonomy endeavors to make explicit the relationship of instituted society to that of its instituting, and Castoriadis argues that from its inception in Ancient Greece the project of autonomy generated another kind of rationality, that is, the rationality of critical interrogation. It is Castoriadis’s conception of the project of autonomy that most differentiates his reconsideration of rationality from that of postmodernism, especially in terms of his understanding of its normative-political implications. Nevertheless, even in the case of critical interrogation, rationality is always in tension with itself and instituting practices have to resist the closure of meaning that ensues from rationalization, with its tendency to present as congruent the rationality of understanding and the way that things are in the world. In Castoriadis’s opinion, this cannot be the case, particularly because rationality is oriented and animated by the indeterminate creativity of the imaginary. In effect, the imaginary is an indefinite composite of forms and figures that are more than simply rational, while being at the same time the condition for rationality.

University of Sydney

Bibliography


