uncertain, fuzzy and also unavailable surroundings. They are "shadows", names on "gravestones", echoes of a larger existence that spills over as their very own halo.

Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor for the fragments of a thinker long gone is that of sound. What perceptible truth remains can be thought of as a sound that once carried a precise meaning made up of space, time, landscapes, language – in a word, life.. And yet, what is left as a fragment is not life, but a sound the resounding of which is the form we give to it "now". How could philology, the life of language turned back upon itself, its rewound history, regain the totality of a whole life to us? It may perhaps bring forward other parts, other sounds, other shadows of the whole. The whole as such remains concealed, but in remaining so it "releases us", in the words of Fink, "to the matter that merits being named the matter of thinking."[9] Similarly, the concealed past *releases us to the matter that merits being named the matter of memory* and relates it to the matter of life.

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# *The Pattern of Creation*

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**Creativity and Personality**

We know a surprising amount about the nature of individual creativity. During the twentieth century, the empirical cognitive psychology of creation established a comprehensive list of attributes of creative personalities.[1] As a result, we can say with some confidence that creative individuals are a mirror of the nature of creation. Creation is best described as a union of opposites. This is its most enduring hallmark. Creative personalities are literal embodiments of this universal trait of creative action. They are often walking contradictions. They combine enthusiastic energies with the capacity for quiet concentration. They are predictive and insightful while displaying naïve, even credulous, wonderment at things. They are playful but disciplined, imaginative but grounded, responsible and irresponsible in turns. They mix extroverted and introverted, sociable and anti-social traits. Creative individuals are often lacking in courtesies and social manners, yet have close long-term intellectual friends and peers to whom they relate on the most generous and intimate terms.

About their own work, they are both humble and proud. They treat it with enthusiastic reverence and dispassionate, even brutal, objectivity. They are persons of wide interests and expansive curiosities yet they are persistent, even obsessive, about pursuing defined intellectual goals. Creative personalities are adventurous, even thrill-seeking, but for a point. At the highest level, "the point" is to bridge apparently unbridgeable divides. The ambition, say, to unify Einstein's theory of relativity with quantum mechanics is a classic case in point. Creative personalities are persistent in the face of the "it can't be done" response to the difficult, even recalcitrant, nature of creative problem-solving. Persistence, translated into social situations, can take the shape of stubbornness and uncooperativeness – and the working of long, anti-social hours. Persistence in creation requires mental discipline, concentration, and focus. The flipside of this

[1] This tradition is epitomised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

concentration is forgetfulness. The memory that drives creation is so often forgetful.

It is not uncommon that creative personalities are also careless and disorganised about whatever they are not working on. Yet about matters that command their attention they always have a profound sense of order. For intuitions of order are the way in which the unbridgeable is bridged and unions are created out of opposites. Ordering and creating are analogous actions. Ordering, it must be stressed, is not the same thing as rule-making or rule-following. Creative personalities are interested in order, not in rules. Rules are a by-product of order, but they are not a substitute for order. Often rules create the chaos or the inertness that high-level creative order overcomes. Creative personalities have a great tolerance for complexity and ambiguity. But they don't regard either complexity or ambiguity as a social or cognitive ideal. Their motto is "keep it simple". Order is a kind of simplicity. Order eliminates chaos. It lends the materials of the world an elegant and lucid structure. Creative persons are at home with complex intrigues and baroque labyrinths. But this is because they can see emergent patterns where most individuals only see murk. While they are at home with complexity, they delight in simplicity and parsimonious structure.

Creative individuals, as a type, tell us something about the nature of creation. What they excel at is unifying what is divergent, and harmonising what is dissonant. This displays even in sexual orientation. Creative personalities tend to a kind of androgyny. The impulse to unify opposites also displays in their humour. They are often very witty. This is no accident. Humour works because it combines opposites. The punch line of a joke takes you to the opposite place you expected. Indeed, it often takes you to a place you didn't want to go, and you smile all the while. Where the "logical mind" sees a contradiction between, say, the vertical and the horizontal, the quick-witted mind sees them as a "whole" not bound by discursive logic but by the unifying force of opposition. The connection between the opposites A and X is not simply an analogy (A is like B, X is similar to Y) but rather A in some ways *is* X. If adhesives are equated with strength, the creative mind says "let us try a *weak* adhesive". The notion of a "weak adhesive" sounds at first take to be a contradiction in terms but it is exactly "the power to connect the (seemingly) un-connectable" that constitutes the power of creation.

While we understand much about the nature of individual creativity, we still understand little about the role of creation on a collective level – that is, creativity as an emergent property of large-scale social systems. This is despite the very evident fact that creativity clusters in specific historical times and social spaces. Put simply, certain societies in certain historical





periods are exceptionally creative. The principal examples in history have been ancient Greece, Renaissance Florence and Venice, the Île-de-France, the Low Countries, Southern England since the Renaissance, the Scottish Lowlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nineteenth-century riverine Europe, and the various Seaboards of the United States.[2] These societies, in their golden epochs, are responsible for most of the human species' artistic, literary, political, economic, scientific, and technological inventiveness. They are, quite literally, amazing times and places.

Because inventiveness clusters in this way, it is also quite evident that creation is not just an individual attribute. Indeed, there is good reason to think that individual creativity, no matter how impressive, leans heavily on collective social creativity. There are exceptional individuals with high levels of innovative capacity but these exceptional individuals also cluster in a remarkably small number of times and places. How can we explain this?

## Collective Creation

The most important attempt to date to explain the collective scale of creation is that of Cornelius Castoriadis – the leading Modern Greek philosopher.[3] Castoriadis' contribution to the theory of collective creation can be summarised thus:[4]

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[2] More recently, the Japanese archipelago and the Australasian littoral have shown distinct signs of joining these historic leaders. For a quantitative historiometric analysis of key locations of innovation in the arts and sciences, see Charles Murray, *Human Accomplishment The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). The term "riverine Europe" is an allusion to four key post-1800 centres of creative achievement: a) the triangular region bounded by the Elbe and Salle Rivers that includes the cities of Freiburg, Jena, Halle, Bayreuth, Weimar and Prague; b) another triangular region bounded by the Maas (Meuse) and Rhine Rivers that includes the city of Cologne; c) the triangular area of Baden-Württemberg bounded by the Rhine and Danube Rivers that has Stuttgart at its centre and that converges at its southern tip on Zurich; d) the line of the Danube that stretches between Budapest and Vienna and into Bavaria. As Murray notes (p. 356), cities like Prague, Munich, Vienna, Cologne and Stuttgart produced a huge concentration of highly creative talent after 1800. Their geographical settings have distinct parallels with the older creative node, the Île-de-France, the inland peninsula that is delimited by the Oise, Seine, Ourcq and Marne rivers, which has Paris at its heart

[3] For a overview of Castoriadis' life, politics and philosophy, see Peter Murphy, "Cornelius Castoriadis" in George Ritzer (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Social Theory* Volume 1 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), pp. 82-83.

[4] See in particular, Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge" (1987), "Individual, Society, Rationality, History" (1987-1988), "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1978-1988) in David Ames Curtis (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); "The Institution of Society and Religion" (1978-1980), "*Phusis* and Autonomy" (1986) and "Time and Creation" (1983) in David Ames Curtis (ed. and trans.), *World in Fragments. writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary" (1994) and "Culture in a Democratic Society" (1991-1994) in David Ames Curtis (ed. and trans.), *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997).

Societies create themselves. They emerge in collective acts of creation from chaos. They give themselves form or shape – from which norms and rules are derived. Castoriadis called this self-organisation and self-legislation "autonomy".

— Having created themselves, most societies arrest the process of creation. They replace the autonomy of self-organisation and self-legislation with heteronomous behaviour. They ascribe their creation to extra-social or transcendental sources. In other words, most societies create themselves as un-creative societies – whose forms are more or less fixed.

— Heteronomous societies reproduce themselves through the repetition, recurrence and equivalence of their forms.

— A small handful of societies have an unusual form: a form calibrated to creating forms. Castoriadis called these societies "autonomous".

— All of these autonomous societies belong in the slipstream of Greco-Western history. They include the ancient *polis*, the Renaissance city-states, the burgher cities of Europe, and the American Republic.[5]

On this account then, creation is a collective process that operates on the largest social scale imaginable. All societies are formed through acts of creation – no matter how occulted such acts might be or might become. At the same time, collective creation as a permanent rather than arrested process is very rare, and is typical of only a small handful of societies in history.

All of this is of more than casual interest because, since around 1820 (at the point when the industrial revolution became institutionalised), social success, indeed social viability, has become massively linked to permanent innovation in the arts and the sciences, the humanities and technologies. The cost now of not having permanent creation in economies and polities – and in integrative and technological systems – is to live a kind of collective social death in a way that is historically unprecedented. Castoriadis was at pains to point out that much about the condition of "permanent innovation" is illusory. Most "creative" formation in practice is derivative. It is an elaboration of, or inference from, one or other existing social patterns. In contrast, the most far-reaching kinds of innovation suppose the social ability to generate forms that are not produced or deduced from pre-existing patterns. Thus, in practice, what is "original" or "innovative" is mostly an extrapolation or derivation. Such derivation creates "difference" but, as Castoriadis put it, not the "alterity" or "otherness" typical of

[5] Castoriadis frequently made allusions to the constituents of this list—a list which is remarkably close to that of Charles Murray's empirically-derived inventory of creative places (in *Human Accomplishment*), though Castoriadis' geography of creation understandably is not as minutely detailed as Murray's.





maximal creation – creation that is not derivative.[6] A technological or aesthetic form that is rationally deducible from an existing form may appear "different" from the social form that inspired it but, at the end of the day, it is still determined by that inspirational form. With the passage of time, this becomes very obvious.

To make sense of the distinction between derivation and creation, Castoriadis insisted on the existence of radical, that is, un-determined or a-causal, creation.[7] This is the least compelling aspect of his theory of social creation. It is unconvincing because it is untrue. As we'll see shortly, the human imagination has available to it a common stock of form-generating media that play a crucial role in the determination of social forms. These form-generating intermediaries are not media in the sense of tone or stone – that is, materials that convey meanings. Yet they are not full-fledged social forms either, in the sense that the sonata form or the Greek temple form, the republican form or the feudal form are. Rather, form-generating media lie half-way between the sensuousness of materials and the meaningfulness of explicit forms. Proportion and harmony are examples of such media. They shape tone and stone into recognisable, transmittable and reproducible forms. But they are not actually forms themselves.

Neither are they discourses or arguments, or parts of syllogisms. While his thesis of a-causality gives creativity an undeserved romantic colouration, Castoriadis is on much surer ground when he criticises rationalist illusions that equate the genesis of social forms with communicative reasoning or discursive interaction. Castoriadis was sceptical of claims that reason is capable of positing or revamping the forms of society. The many delirious follies of intellectuals suggest such scepticism is warranted.[8] From the Jacobins to Pol Pot and Sayyid Qutb, their behaviour over multiple centuries has turned numerous societies into

[6] This is the "irreducibly new", the "radical alterity" of creation See "The Institution of Society and Religion" and "Time and Creation" in *World in Fragments*, p. 320 and p. 329.

[7] "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary" and "Culture in a Democratic Society" in *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 322.

[8] Castoriadis was unswervingly critical of the endless procession of intellectuals who identified with despotic and murderous regimes. In one very typical passage, he observed the magnetic appeal that even the creepiest kinds of "revolutionary power" had for intellectuals of his generation. Whenever one of these ugly powers appeared, "[then] begins the golden-age of fellow-travellers, who were able to afford the luxury of an apparently intransigent opposition to a part of reality—reality 'at home'—by paying for it with the glorification of another part of this reality—over there, elsewhere, in Russia, in China, in Cuba, in Algeria, in Vietnam, or, if worst came to worst, in Albania. Rare are those among the great names in the Western intelligentsia who have not, at some moment between 1920 and 1970, made this "sacrifice of conscience", sometimes (the least often) in the most infantile kind of credulity, other times (most often) with the most paltry sort of trickery. Sartre, stating in a menacing tone: 'You cannot discuss what Stalin is doing, since he alone has the information that explains his motives', will remain, no doubt, the most instructive specimen of the intellectual's tendency to look ridiculous." ("Intellectuals and History" (1987) in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 10.)

charnel houses. As Castoriadis points out, reasoning rests on non-linguistic presuppositions. Thus, the first terms of any discourse are intuitive and figurative. They are the products of *nous*, not *logos*. The intellectual's vice is to think that *logos* can do the work of *nous*.[9] But discourse left to itself is pitiless and destructive. Logical language, disconnected from figurative *nous*, is a violent medium. The way discursive logic moves, from premise to conclusion, is ruthless and implacable. For sure, as Castoriadis remarks, this is not physical violence, but it is very destructive all the same. To stand in the way of the logical torrent is to risk being swept aside. To question the premises of torrential discourse is to risk excommunication – and worse. In this manner, rationalist discourse "inevitably destroys discourse itself".[10] Once this happens, it is actually a short step for the violence of discourse to be replaced by the force of arms.

Castoriadis equates "reason" with communicative or discursive reason – the logician's reason.[11] When he talks about reason, he means chains of reasons that rest on discursive principles and that are logically organised. The nature of such reasoning is distinct from the intuitive-figurative nature of social forms. Forms precede words. Of course, once in existence, forms can be represented by language – i.e. they can be put into words and turned into the premise of an argument or discourse. Implications can be derived from such premises. But the problem with this is that, while reasoning is logico-deductive, form creation is not.

New forms emerge through images, not words.[12] This was one of Castoriadis' most important conclusions. New forms emerge from society's collective aural, visual and haptic-tactile imaging. The work of the imagination does not just represent "what is absent". It also posits objects that otherwise would not exist. This occurs in the first place through the making of an image of the object. This is an act of figuration: the "positing of figures and the relations between and to these figures".[13] The creative or radical imagination, capable of bringing into being the image of something that has not existed before, does so by positing figures or models.[14]

[9] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1987 [first published 1975]), p. 350.
[10] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 350.
[11] Castoriadis, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection", *World in Fragments*, p. 256, p. 265.
[12] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 321, p. 329; "Logic, Imagination, Reflection", *World in Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 258. Castoriadis remarks "...abstract thought itself always has to lean on some figure or image, be it, minimally the image of the words through which it is carried on". "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary", in *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 329. Elsewhere he observes that radical imagination involves "the incessant emergence of the other in and through the positing (*Vor-stellung*) of images or figures..." Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 329.
[13] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 204.
[14] Castoriadis, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection", *World in Fragments*, p. 269.





Although these models and figures may be represented by words, they are not created by words.

This principle applies as much to works and objects whose materials are primarily linguistic in nature as it does to any other kind of human creation. As classical rhetoric theorists understood, the good use of language depends on *taxis* (arrangement). *Taxis* allows speakers and writers to communicate through figures. Figures of speech are a resonance of figures of thought. They share structural characteristics and semantic architecture in common. Classical rhetoric stressed that schemas of balance, repetition, word order, presence and omission, and proportion are key aspects of this architecture. Great speakers and writers are masters of such schemas. They build their words using repetitions of alliteration, assonance and anadiplosis. They orchestrate plateaus and climaxes. They balance phrases and clauses, make calculated omissions (ellipsis), and create flexible word orders (parenthesis). Speakers understate and writers exaggerate – they play with the proportions of words and the (dis)proportionate relation of words to things and events. Most interesting of all is the kind of word architecture that creates relations between things that are seemingly unrelated. Metaphor and simile are classic ways of doing this. So is the drawing of comparisons or the arranging words and phrases in opposition. There is also a *taxis* of stacking that allows for the creation of orders of superior and inferior, higher and lower, genus and species. Words, like tones and stones, also can be turned upside down. When we invert words, we create relations of irony and paradox. Whatever the techniques used, and however they are deployed, the overall power of words depends on the underlying *taxis*.

*Taxis* provides incipient structure for visible and audible words. *Taxis* arises in the imagination. Hence Castoriadis' view that linguistic-type axioms, criteria and rules are suspended in acts of imagination.[15] They are suspended by being over-determined by figures, models, and diagrams.[16] Figures, models, and diagrams are the common media of *taxis*. On an individual and collective social level, figuration occurs through the imagination's power of organisation. Correspondingly, this power of

[15] Castoriadis, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection", *World in Fragments*, p. 268.
[16] The great English mathematician Roger Penrose observes in the concluding parts of his *The Emperor's New Mind: Concerning Computers, Minds and the Laws of Physics* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 [first published1989]), pp. 541-550, that the most creative thought is non-verbal. At the highest levels of insight, the sense of beauty plays the crucial role in thought. Penrose cites the self-reflections of Albert Einstein ("The words or the language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical elements which seem to serve as elements of thought... are, in my case, of visual and some muscular type."), the geneticist Francis Galton ("I... waste a vast deal of time in seeking appropriate words and phrases..."), and the mathematician Jacques Hadamard ("I insist that words are totally absent from my mind when I really think..."). Penrose says of himself: "Almost all my mathematical thinking is done visually and in terms of non-verbal concepts "

arrangement operates through figures that take shape via the imagination's mastery of form-generating media like hierarchy, balance, parallelism, repetition, similarity, and proportion. The formation of an image involves the positing of elements and the bringing of those elements into a relation.[17] Whether the material is tone or stone, words or the physical matter of the universe, form-generating media play a crucial role in all kinds of creation.

This account of the emergence of forms through non-linguistic organising media parallels certain conceptions of the pre-Socratics from Greek antiquity. The pre-Socratics recognised that whatever it is that brings contrary pairings into a meaningful relationship permits the generation of order out of chaos.[18] The impetus toward such pairings is a force, *phusis*, built into the universe and mirrored in the human mind. *Phusis* is the force of organisation that creates lucid, sustainable, contrary pairings of elements. How does it do this? Already observed in Greek antiquity was the key role that abstract media – like rhythm, balance, equilibrium, proportion, harmony, and symmetry – play in the manufacture of order out of chaos. These form-producing media, when mobilised, function as powers that bring otherwise unconnected elements into a relationship that constitutes meaning. In doing so, these powers create objects, and amongst them social objects.

Castoriadis distanced himself from the pre-Socratic account of creation in one very crucial respect, though. Its notion of contrary pairings was a-historical. It set the stage for Plato's assertion that forms are unchanging. Castoriadis instead veered very close to Plotinus' view of a universe of forms involved in a constant activity of morphogenesis. In Castoriadis' eyes, a universe of structural pairs was a universe of spatial "difference" rather than temporal "otherness". It did not distinguish spatial line from temporal line. Repeatedly, he stressed that time was a key dimension of the radical imaginary of creation. His social physics was relativistic in Einstein's sense. Time was the crucial medium in which "other" figures emerged. It was an indispensable medium for the "otherness-alteration" of these figures.[19]

## Nous and Logos

The history of Greek-Western thought can be divided into two strands. One is pre-Socratic. The other is Socratic. The pre-Socratics judged that what was most fundamental in the world was non-discursive. Socrates

[17] Castoriadis, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection", *World in Fragments*, p. 259.
[18] That makes a pair out of what otherwise has no relationship or else simply an accidental relationship.
[19] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 193.





considered that what was most fundamental was speech and argument. One can think of this as the difference between *nous* and *logos*. In the dominant strains of philosophical thought since the seventeenth century, Socratic discursiveness trumped the pre-Socratics. This was so even though the oral spontaneity of Socratic speech gave way to the congealed language of "the book" as the principal mode of discourse.[20]

There have always been dissenters of course – those who challenged the presumptive primacy of discourse (Hobbes was a notable critic). But, especially through the twentieth century, the idea that language was the principal medium for the generation of social relations was dominant in social self-understanding. Many philosophers – ranging from Mead and Dewey to Heidegger and Habermas – endorsed this view. The upshot was the vast over-estimation of the objectivating power of discursive language, and at the same time the underestimation of how important the making of objects, including social objects, is to knowledge.[21] Discursive reason in itself cannot create objects. It cannot do this because by its very nature it cannot posit the non-verbal patterned forms around which social objects coalesce. Reason can explore the implications of objects – or rather the implications of statements we make that represent those objects. But even this has its limits.

Words are not very good at representing objects – let alone at positing them. This is why the early Wittgenstein thought that any hope for logic lay in picture languages – which was a good intuition.[22] Non-figurative languages misrepresent as much as represent social objects. Discourse is often touted as a therapy for this. The propositional statements that we make about objects can be subjected to discursive treatment – ending in falsification or verification. Yet these discourses, while sometimes impressive, are often very inadequate. We can make deductions from, inferences about, and establish analogical relations amongst propositions. But discursive reason rests on the law of non-contradiction. If I accept that law, then I am bound to accept that my statements should not contradict the principles (the major premises, in effect) that I rely on. This, however, tells me nothing about the coming-into-being or invention of these principles – such as the "self-evident truths" of the American Declaration of Independence. Such invention is an act of creation that occurs through aural rhythms, visual pictures, and plastic-haptic shapes – that is, through images not words. The very expression, "self-evident truths", betrays this.

[20] This happened when printing made the production and distribution of the book so cheap and easy.
[21] On this, see Peter Murphy, "Communication and Self-Organization", *Southern Review*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2005).
[22] Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism* (London and New York. Continuum, 2004), pp. 127-136

Self-evidence is the evidence of the eyes. We *see* these principles. We see them before we say them. In such "vision", we grasp the shape – the outline – of a social form. We construct social forms through visual-spatial, bodily-kinetic, plastic-mathematical, and aural-musical cues.[23]

In the most far-reaching cases, such acts of creation suppose the emergence of what Castoriadis called "alterity" or "otherness". His account of this, though, rested on an intellectual tension. On the one hand, he argued that such acts, and their resulting forms, were un-determined. They were generated "out of nothing". On the other hand, he maintained that they were products of the imagination – formed through acts of figuration. This latter implied that the crucible of creation was not "nothing" but a process with explicable – though not discursive – painterly, aesthetic, diagrammatical, graphical, and like qualities.

When Castoriadis spoke of forms arising "out of nothing", his clear intent was to preclude any thought that there was only a limited number of social forms. He contended that in history – that is, in social time – new forms emerge that are incommensurable with any prior existing forms. Put simply, modern bureaucratic capitalism does not emerge out of feudalism, even if feudalism precedes it chronologically. The process of History is not like a logical argument. Contra Hegel, History is not Reason. New forms may mean the appearance of new discursive principles – but discursive principles do not create new forms. Creation is figurative. In historical time, there is a first tribe, a first bureaucracy, and a first sonata. These are things that previously had not been conceived, and thus could not have been logically deduced.

The ABA form of the sonata is figurative, not discursive. At the core of feudalism and bureaucracy is the picture of a hierarchy. In one case it is a personal hierarchy, in the other case a procedural hierarchy. This begs the question, though: where do such figures come from? Castoriadis described creation as a process of figuration figuring itself.[24] While this description has a certain dramatic quality, it is circular, and thus not particularly explanatory. Nonetheless it supposes one very important thing: namely that new forms appear through some kind of a figurative medium. What is this medium like? Well, argued Castoriadis, it is not impressionable material. The emergence of forms is not determined by sense impressions of

[23] For this reason, then, Castoriadis' insistence that the imagination is the capacity to posit an image "starting from nothing at all" is wrong. See Castoriadis, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection", *World in Fragments*, p. 269.

[24] "The social-historical is radical imaginary, namely the incessant originality of otherness that figures, and figures itself, is in figuring and in figuring itself, giving itself as a figure and figuring itself to the second degree." Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 204





something that already exists.[25] Neither does figuration "refer" to an extant world or object. It is not denotative. But neither is it symbolic.[26] Figures don't "stand for" something else that already exists. So, if figuration is not impressionable, referential or symbolic, then what is it? Having dismissed impression, denotation and symbolism, Castoriadis concludes that figuration is the generation of purely circular meanings of social signification,[27] and, as such, figuration figuring itself must start "from nothing".[28]

Castoriadis acknowledged that existing forms *condition* the emergence of new forms.[29] But what he also supposed was the incommensurable nature of forms – their radical "otherness". This meant that their genesis, of logical necessity, is anchored in nothingness. If forms are incommensurable, then they must be un-determined. Forms thus emerge in the passage from nothingness to being.[30] How can something that is determinate apparently not have determinations? How can something that comes into existence not be deducible from something else that already exists?

Castoriadis' theory actually provides an implicit answer to these questions. As already noted, he stressed how important "figures" of the imagination are to creative action. If we take this one step further, we can avoid the difficulties posed by the idea of creation "out of nothing" without relinquishing any of the more compelling aspects of Castoriadis' theory. If we suppose that – both individually and collectively – the imagination is composed of form-generating media, then we do not have to assume that there is any numeric limit on the number of forms ever to be posited. Yet, at the same time, we do not have to assume either that forms appear "out of nothing". Rather, and more simply, they are brought into being by the figurative media of the *nous*. This is not a discursive process. There exist "graphic" words of course – those forged, for instance, by rhyme or accent schemes – that conjure up images, just as shapes exist in music, and reason can be the attribute of an action or a person's character, not just of their

[25] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 301.

[26] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 143.

[27] Circularity—the circle—it should be noted in passing is a commonly recurring social geometry, and one that we find, for example in the Renaissance, that is often invoked against hierarchical figuration. On the circle in Renaissance figurative politics, see Peter Murphy, *Civic Justice From Ancient Greece to the Modern World* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), p 177.

[28] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 300.

[29] "Time and Creation" in *World in Fragments*, p 392, p 397; "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary" in *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 322. Castoriadis observes that "this creation is *ex nihilo*… 'Creation *ex nihilo*'… does not mean creation '*cum nihilo*', that is to say, without 'means', unconditionally, on a *tabula rasa*." "Individual, Society, Rationality, History" in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 64.

[30] "The Institution of Society and Religion" in *World in Fragments*, p. 321.

words. But the imagination is not structured like an argument, a dialogue, a conversation, logical reasoning, or any other discursive utterance.

Reasoning is a linguistic phenomenon, and it is in the realm of discursive reason that we see the manifest limit of words. All language-based models of society fall foul of this limit. There is no way of them escaping such limits. There is no linguistic solvent for them. This means that a "rational society" based on collective discursive competence cannot posit its own foundations. Reasoning, no matter how "unconstrained", cannot create the shape of a society. Debate, argument, logic, and discussion all require a starting-point, the prime unmoved mover of discourse. Words cannot provide this, but the shaping power of form can.

Words thus are secondary phenomenon in contradistinction to forms. Indeed words possess their greatest force when they are organised as forms – when they appear as genres of philosophy or science, or as novel or libretto, rhetoric or drama. Societies likewise acquire their efficacy and their lucid sense because they are organised as forms – as tribal, feudal, capitalist, or bureaucratic types. Forms rise and fall, gain impetus and lose force. Each genre, type or form is irreducible to any other. Feudalism does not produce capitalism. The chronicle does not produce the novel.

The creation of these forms is an imaginative act. Imagination relies on individual and social capacities to mobilise abstract – schematic – media. Such media generate patterns. Such patterns shape bodily, kinetic, physical, aural, visual and other materials – including words. Thus it is rhyme schemas, not words, that elicit textual shapes. A word can give a name to a shape, but it can't posit a shape. Names without rhymes or other schemata are like colours without a painter's intuition of the contrastive complementarities of the colour wheel. They can't order the divergent materials, whether of colour or language, and turn them into lucid structures.

## Phusis

Castoriadis was always tempted by the notion that forms were created "out of nothing" – "figuration figuring itself, starting from nothing".[31] No matter how much he denied it, this was a romantic-existential theology of creation. Much more interesting though than the idea of creation out of nothing was the later Castoriadis' recuperation of the Greek idea of *phusis* as the engine of creation.[32] If we think about creation as an act of *phusis*, it gives us a

[31] Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 300.

[32] Castoriadis wavered in his attitude to *phusis*. In "*Phusis* and Autonomy" [1986], he had it moving of its own accord to create social forms. This indicated that, in a strong sense, society had a nature—an encompassing ordering that generated social forms. The problem is that he also held that societies closest





way of thinking about the creation of objects, not least of all social objects, as both "other" (i.e. as not derivative) but also as not created "out of nothing".

Castoriadis described *phusis* perfectly. It is nature pushing-toward-giving-itself-form.[33] *Phusis* is the irresistible push of a being that gives itself a form in order to be. *Phusis*, nature, is self-making or self-constituting. *Phusis* forms itself. In doing so, nature moves itself and changes itself. The end of its self-movement and self-alteration is the positing of form. *Phusis* moves towards new forms and alters old forms in the process. Change, in the strongest sense of that word, is the emergence of new forms.

The nature of anything, including the nature of society, is the irresistible push of that being to give itself a form in order to be. Nature forms itself, and society organises itself, by giving itself form and by destroying and replacing forms that it has previously given itself. Part of this destruction-creation process is to turn existing forms into the material of creation, to be pressed into the service of originating new and distinctly "other" forms. In this process – we can speculate – *phusis* consumes existing forms as matter, and reworks them as fundamentally new forms. Thus epic poetry in the sense of Homer may become the material for the invention of James Joyce's modernist epic novel. The American Founders ransacked history for the material they used in the invention of a radical new political form. They took material from ancient Greeks and Romans, modern Dutch and Anglo-Scottish Whigs, Deists and dissenting Protestants, but reshaped this form-turned-material in a massively distinctive manner – creating a *sui generis* form ("only in America"), yet one whose historical materials, or more particularly the building blocks of creation that give such materials their shape, are quite evident even at a cursory glance.

We are all familiar with these building blocks. We recognise them. They are part of a common stock. These building blocks are the determination of form generation. They are implicit in form creation. They are what *phusis* contributes to creation. The building blocks are *the commons* of all creation. They are common to personality, society and external nature. These building blocks include the shaping powers of rhythm, harmony, equilibrium, and symmetry. There is potentially an infinite array of

to *phusis*—i.e. the autonomous societies—were highly reflexive, meaning that social actors looked on the laws of those societies as conventions (*nomoi*), not as *phusis*. (See, for example, Castoriadis, "The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge" [1987], *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 38.) It is perfectly possible to resolve the apparent contradiction between these views, by simply indicating that norms and laws were secondary manifestations of social form. But in practice Castoriadis couldn't do this because he made a strong equation between law and form.

[33] "*Phusis* and Autonomy" in *World in Fragments*, pp. 333-334.

concrete forms that such media can usher into existence. So even if we recognise the building blocks of a form, that form may still be "radically different" from what our experience has prepared us for.

"Radically different" does not mean radically incommensurable in Castoriadis' sense. We can see why this is if we again look at the case of America. The constitutional balance of power or the workings of market equilibrium in the United States are abstract patterns that have a long history. Yet many visitors to America today, some five hundred years after its first settlement, are still puzzled about how that society works. The degree of puzzlement may be seen in the elementary mistakes foreign observers habitually make about American institutions and mores. Thus the social form of America ends up being both familiar and unfamiliar. Outsiders recognise it yet are confused by it. This is not the same as saying, as Castoriadis' does, that great social forms are incomparably "other". Rather America is both "other" *and* "the same" – radically distinctive but still recognisable. An absolute "other", in contrast, would be unrecognisable.

There are many secondary reasons, but the root reason for the "familiar strangeness" of great forms is that the act of imaging that lies at the root of the making of social objects draws on a common fund of creation – this common wealth is constituted by the tacit organising media of nature (hierarchy, rhythm, symmetry, proportionality, equilibrium, and so on). These organising powers, when deployed, give rise to an infinite variety of explicit forms both social and non-social. These forms are "familiarly strange" when compared with each other. They can appear "shockingly new", and yet because the human mind (as part of nature) readily recognises organising forces like rhythm and symmetry, they remain intelligible, coherent, and meaningful – especially once the subjective psychological "shock of the new" has worn off. To cite just one simple example: both the works of Raphael and Cézanne are constructed around fascinating painterly balances but, in each case, these and other organising powers deployed by the artists gave rise to very distinct aesthetic forms. In Cézanne's case, it took at least fifty years for the forms that he posited to be embraced by mainstream art audiences. But no matter how difficult these forms were to understand at the beginning, they were in the end comprehensible, and so much so that they eventually eclipsed the more popular works of his time.





**Immanence and Legislation**

How deliberate – how calculating – is the creation of forms? Joyce and Cézanne had a deep, not to say obsessive, idea of what they were doing. The same can be said of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. But such precocious invention does not take place in a social vacuum. It may encounter intense social and political hostility, but that's not the same thing as saying that creation is the heroic work of romantic genius. Whether we are talking about modernist Irish letters or the forging of the American Republic, the greatness of its personalities is invariably matched, indeed over-determined, by an upsurge of collective invention. Lonely genius is a romantic myth. Creation is a collective process. But this is not to say that it operates through the scripts of groups, communities or committees. Quite the contrary is the case.

Creative action flourishes where there are porous social ties.[34] Porosity exists where psycho-social-linguistic ties are weak. This does not mean that all ties between social actors are weak. In fact, creative action occurs under conditions of "anti-social sociability" – where weak psycho-social-linguistic ties are matched by strong ties between strangers mediated by art and science.[35] This reflects the fact that – at the level of the human personality – creation is often marked by a-social traits, but that, at the same time, creation operates on the largest social scale imaginable. "Anti-social" creators cluster in the same periods and places. Kant's formula of "unsocial sociability" may be one way of summing up this paradox. Whatever name we give to this state of affairs, it is quite enough to suggest that creation is not a *deliberate* process that works through collective social discussion – regulated by social norms. Castoriadis rightly called creation an anonymous process. The power of social creation is the power of nobody.[36] It is not individuals but *phusis* that deploys itself through forms.[37]

No matter how accomplished he was, Thomas Jefferson didn't "invent" America. He quite happily attributed that invention to nature. Jefferson knew that the "balance of powers" and other devices of the new republic were, at a deep tacit level, copies of *phusis* – brilliant copies, unprecedented copies, paradoxical copies but still copies. What applies to politics also applies to art. Cézanne was exceptionally gifted but his ability to render the cubic-like structures of nature in two-dimensional planes was an imitation of nature's forms in the same way that Raphael's use of

[34] Peter Murphy, "Knowledge Capitalism", *Thesis Eleven* 81 (2005).
[35] Peter Murphy, "Architectonics" in Peter Murphy and Johann Arnason (eds), *Agon, Logos, Polis* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2001), pp 207-232.
[36] "Power, Politics, Autonomy" in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 150.
[37] "Power, Politics, Autonomy" in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 147.

perspective was. Look at great painting and you'll see nature's geometry. Look at a great society, and you'll see the same – a balance of powers, a hierarchy, a harmony, a field of coordinate relationships, or some such pattern/*eidos* around which it is constructed.

Castoriadis perpetrated a curious contradiction. He insisted (rightly) that discursive reason did not create social forms – but he still shared the intellectual prejudice in favour of critical discourse. He thought that the handful of societies in which form generation had become systemic and recurrent were characterised by cultures of critical discourse.[38] Yet it was not critical discourse but constructive ability that made Jefferson, Madison, Adams and the other American "founders" able to act as mediators coaxing the tacit media of creation into explicit form. Linguistic acts – whether they be prophecies, bureaucratic prescriptions, tokens of mutual understanding, unlimited questioning or unconstrained discourse – don't explain this phenomenon. If anything these acts end up being reasons for the enervation of creation, not vice versa. They foster illusions of creation.

Despite this, most societies in most paces and times have an aversion to weak psycho-social-linguistic ties. Their self-appointed representatives are forever complaining about the "absence of community" incumbent upon such weak ties. Castoriadis tirelessly pointed out that the vast majority of societies in history have attributed creation of all kinds to extra-social or transcendent forces ("This is the work of Allah."). It may very well be that this is a compensation for the weak power of social scripts. One of the curious things about language is that it is constantly in need of support. Often when we use a proposition we feel a need to "justify" or "explain" ourselves. The weaker the script is, the more the author or speaker goes on and on. Transcendent authority for speech thus is very handy. It gives the illusion of being able to bring speech to a conclusion – just as the parent in response to the child's incessant "why?" says "that's just the way it is". Being able to anchor the weak power of social language in an extra-social language – the commandment of God, for example – seemingly negates this weakness. This also has the effect of turning later acts of human creation either into the work of heretics or into "reruns" of some mythical golden age when social actors obeyed "the transcendent word".

[38] Typical of this are statements such as "the rise of unlimited interrogation creates a new socio-historical *eidos*" ("Power, Politics, Autonomy", *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 163), "Greece is the first society where we find the explicit questioning of the instituted collective representation of the world"; "the question of what a just law is, what justice is—what the 'proper' institution of society is—opens up as a genuine, that is, interminable, question" ("The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" [1982-1983], *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, pp. 102, p. 114), "politics, such as it was created by the Greeks, amounts to the explicit putting into question of the established institution of society" ("Power, Politics, Autonomy", *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 159).





But no matter what *fatwas* are issued in the name of God, these cannot guarantee the certainty of language. Doubt plagues the religious mind. This has two consequences. Some people will conclude that all there is, is nothing. Others will conclude that only violence can back up "the word". Often these two positions coincide in the one person. Trading in the transcendent word for the secular word does nothing to get rid of the weakness of language. In fact it often only exacerbates it. We see this in the case of modern intellectuals who try to write the scripts of secular societies.[39] These scripts are often very unconvincing, especially when they rely on the premise "if we, the righteous, say it is so, it must be true". Hence we end up with the ground-less authority of the modern intellectual who loves to tell others what to do, and the massive resistance of those others to such authority-less and frequently ridiculous injunctions. Mostly nobody cares what the intellectuals say, but that doesn't stop them saying it with a dogmatism that they imagine to be "critical and reflexive". This vicious circle somehow seems built into the nature of language – and its impossible quest for a surety it can never attain.

The weakness of language stands in sharp contrast to the strength of images – what we might call the strong iconography of nature. It is its understanding of this that sets Castoriadis' social philosophy apart. Noteworthy in particular is the role he ascribes to the figure or *ikon*. There is a latent and subtle Byzantine quality about this.[40] It has strong echoes of neo-Platonism.[41] Similarly, Castoriadis' understanding of creation as *phusis*

[39] As Agnes Heller observed, in the twentieth century "the task of creating meaningful world-views" increasingly became "the prerogative of professionals". Heller, *The Power of Shame. A Rational Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 181.

[40] Castoriadis is not alone in this. A Byzantine neo-Platonism permeates the extraordinary cinema of Theo Angelopoulos. In Angelopoulos' case, the comparison is often made between his films and the "Orthodox tradition of icon painting". See Andrew Horton, *Theo Angelopoulos A Cinema of Contemplation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p 27. This is perfectly true, though, as also in the case of Castoriadis, the iconography of the icon/figure is the visible rendering of invisible figures of form, alluding always to the way in which figuration figures itself. What happens at the "point" of creation is very difficult to understand, of course. Angelopoulos' ability to induce the contemplative stillness of the moving picture is a remarkable imagining of the time out of mind of creation, in which—through the iconic moment—past, present and future is suspended, just like "the suspended step of the stork" (the title of Angelopoulos' great 1991 film).

[41] Plotinus emphasised the non-discursive nature of the intellect—paramount in its contemplation of beauty and order. See, for example, the Eighth Tractate of Plotinus' *The Enneads* (London: Penguin, 1991). As part of that discussion, Plotinus (pp. 416-417) draws a very revealing analogy between the intellect and archaic Egyptian picture language. "Similarly, as it seems to me, the wise of Egypt—whether in precise knowledge or by the prompting of nature—indicated the truth where, in their effort toward philosophical statement, they left aside the writing-forms that take in the detail of words and sentences—those characters that represent sounds and convey the propositions of meaning—and drew pictures instead, engraving in the temple inscriptions a separate image for every separate item: thus they exhibited the absence of discursiveness in the Intellectual Realm. For each manifestation of knowledge and wisdom is a distinct image, an object in itself, an immediate unity, not an aggregate of discursive reasoning and detailed willing."

takes him very close to the immanent cosmology of the Stoics. A model of imagistic immanence in opposition to scriptive legislation makes good sense. Creation, on any level, is not the fruit of deliberate linguistic acts – be it the acts of a legislator God or a planning committee. To think it is only encourages the delusions of those political intellectuals who produce endless volumes of "writings", usually unreadable, which invariably recommend single-minded action based on pitiless consistency with discursive principles. Whether these principles happen to be divine commandments or foundation-less assertions of moral righteousness makes little difference. Without exception, this uncompromising consistency ends in poisonous deeds or murderous conclusions. Discursive principles by their nature exclude contradictory statements. But the world, the ordered world, is not logically consistent. Thus when decent politics is defined as the art of compromise, the following is meant: any politics that is not mad or empty is like iconic art. It reconciles contradictions by deploying the silent connective powers of *phusis*. Beauty, not logic, is the enemy of tyranny. What erases arbitrary and despotic inconsistency from human actions is grace. Consistency in action models itself on the smooth, lucid, flowing – in a word, graceful – quality of the beautiful image. In contrast, the fanatics' desire for the world to be consistent with discursive principles – a result of propositional language pushed beyond its proper limits – is exceedingly destructive and results in arbitrary, despotic and irrational deeds. The end result of fanatical rationalism in love with discursive principles is the creation of chaos, not the *kosmos* or pattern of creation.

The attempt to "restore" the world or re-make the world "anew" – by bringing it in line with discursive principles – has repeatedly failed. The result often has been horrible conflagration. This has not, however, stopped intellectuals from touting ever newer, more absurd, and crueller scripts. In contrast to this destructive impulse, a handful of societies in history have found ways of turning collective social creation into a permanent and constructive process. The evidence for this is continuing high levels of artistic, scientific, political, economic and technological creativity in these societies over sustained periods, combined with manifestly high levels of social well-being and political happiness.

To have institutionalised creativity in such a manner may once have been considered good fortune but nothing more. Since around 1820, however, social success – measured in terms of social wellbeing – has become massively linked to permanent innovation in the arts and humanities, and in science and technology. A society that exempts itself from the collective processes of creation – and some do quite wilfully in the name of Allah, master or tribe – now live a kind of social death that has





no historical precedent. The only escape from this living social death is to find a way of instituting "a regime of permanent innovation". Such a social order should not be mistaken for a regime of change, fashion or vogue. Rather it is a regime of persistent form creation. Its reason for being is the creation of shapes, figures, types, and genres.

Such persistence should not be confused with Castoriadis' favourite image of a magma flow – the continual spewing forth of creative acts from the collective and individual radical imagination. This image suggests that every moment of existence is creation, which is implausible. Doubtless, low-level background creation is pervasive in human experience. Endless incipient forms appear and as quickly disappear for want of recognition or viability. A kind of creative action is implicated in the replication, adaptation, imitation and translation of existing forms. But even the most creative society doesn't produce the kinds of strong forms that re-define the shape of society without enormous difficulty. One of the greatest of these difficulties is the question of stability – the persistence of forms in existence. Castoriadis was right to say that forms emerge in time, but Plato was also right to say that forms defy time.

Time has a penchant for destruction. It erodes and destroys forms – not least incipient forms. Time mocks weak forms. Heteronomy is one of the great defences against destructive time. It defends social and existential forms by precluding further experimentation in form-making. This regime of protection, we know, has its own destructiveness built into it. To avoid the petrifaction of tradition, autonomous societies thus dispense with external authorities. Yet, in order to stabilise themselves, they have to deal with the dual problem of persistence. This is the problem of how to combine ongoing experimentation in form-making with the durability of forms thereby created. If this problem is not satisfactorily dealt with, creation becomes indistinguishable from chaos. Castoriadis suggested many times that self-limitation was the way that autonomous societies stabilised themselves. Self-limitation suggests a society that can draw its own boundaries. This is a society that, knowingly, gives itself shape. This is plausible. It is certainly more plausible than the arguments of the modern apostles of destructive creation who proselytise change for its own sake. Creation-as-destruction and creation-as-change are indifferent to the form-endowing quality that lies at the heart of any great creation, and to the defiance of time by forms so created.

For this reason, I have intentionally used the phrase "a regime of permanent innovation" to make a point. *Prima facie*, the phrase sounds like a rationalist nightmare. It evokes a society run by a committee of busybodies who want to change things "for the better" – meaning, for the

sake of change itself. Here we see the classic confusion of time's onward march with creation – the equation of the new with the formative. Nothing is more ridiculous than this. Correspondingly, there is good reason to think that creation at the deepest level is not "deliberate". It cannot be prescribed in a policy document or a master plan. Yet it can be understood. It does have patterns. Still, all the buzz-words in the world contribute nothing to its genesis. A large part of the reason for this is that the genesis of forms is *not discursive*. Communicative reason *follows* form. It does not precede it. *Form emerges in non-discursive figures, shapes and patterns.*

**Time Out Of Mind**

If Castoriadis is right, society (in the singular) creates societies (in the plural). Society in the singular is self-altering. It acts through history, positing social forms. Each form is exceptional; each is radically "other". This idea compares in interesting ways with the model developed by the great Swiss historian Jacob Burkhardt. Burkhardt proposed that the birth of social forms is closely connected with the renaissance or re-birth of forms. At first glance it would seem that Castoriadis' idea of the radical emergence of social forms and Burkhardt's notion of the re-emergence of forms are totally at odds. However, as we know, things are often not what they first appear to be. In fact there is a lot of common ground between Burkhardt's and Castoriadis' ideas. If there weren't, there would be no way to explain Castoriadis' persistent reference to what he called "Greco-Western" societies. That hyphenated concept clearly suggests that emergence involves some kind of re-emergence. But what kind? – that's the question.

Castoriadis used the phrase "Greco-Western societies" as a synonym for creative societies.[42] In a loose empirical sense, he was right. The vast majority of high-achieving human creation is the product of this band of societies. But the term "Greco-Western" is also misleading. Without question, creation clusters in certain times and places. "Greek antiquity" is foremost among these. Athens produced a staggering intellectual legacy with what was by modern standards a modest population of some 150,000 Athenians (about a third of them citizens), 100,000 slaves, and 50,000 alien residents. In contrast, it is not so clear that "the modern West" is as useful a designator of peak creation as "Greek antiquity". Take the case Burkhardt's home city of Basel. Like Athens, nineteenth-century Basel had a modest, if

[42] On the centrality of Greco-Western societies in creative action, see "*Phusis* and Autonomy" in *World in Fragments*, p. 339; "Culture in a Democratic Society" in *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 345; and "The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge" (p. 37) and "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (p. 144) in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*.





rapidly growing, population and its citizen rulers made up about a third of the population. Despite the fact it was no London or Berlin, the Basel city-state domiciled not just Burkhardt, who was probably the greatest historian of the nineteenth century, but also Nietzsche, the greatest philosopher of that century.[43] That's quite an achievement. Yet this kind of extraordinary creative attainment is by no means evenly distributed across the West. Indeed it is much less evenly distributed across the West than serious accomplishment was evenly distributed amongst the hundreds of ancient Greek city-states.

In simple terms, the West is a bit of misnomer. Basel in the nineteenth century may have been a shining place, but it was so arguably because it was a major portal city on the Rhine and sat at the apex of one of a handful of "creative inland islands" in Europe – in this case, the triangular area of Baden-Württemberg bounded by the Rhine and Danube Rivers that has Stuttgart at its centre. If we compare such "creative inland islands" with the rest of Western Europe, we find that many of the other regions of Europe (past and present) are lacklustre, backward, or downright lethargic by comparison.

It is notable today that those non-Western societies that show distinct if still inconclusive signs of joining the company of the systemic form-generating societies are principally the island, archipelago, peninsula, and coastal societies of East Asia – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the South Coast of China, and Singapore.[44] There is an interesting parallel between this littoral cluster and the first, second, third, fourth and fifth-hand institutionalisations of intensive creation. The first institutionalisation occurred in the ancient Mediterranean, the second in the late-medieval and Renaissance Mediterranean, the third around the North Sea and Baltic rim of Europe, the fourth in the riverine arteries of Western Europe, and the fifth in the littoral powerhouses of the Australasian and North American settler societies.

In the annals of human creation, without question, the first institutionalisation of intensive creation – the Greek breakthrough – was astonishing. Castoriadis' instinct always was to link the concept of "Western modernity" to the peculiar space-time of "Greek antiquity". Even if we replace "Western modernity" with the notion of "littoral modernity", which I think is an empirically stronger concept, there remains no question that there are, and there remain, extraordinary parallels between the antique and modern cases. Yet what exactly such parallels are, and what they mean,

[43] And also Bachofen and Overbeck.

[44] These states have done so under the impetus of various kinds of Anglo-American cooperation, hegemony, or incitement—sometimes welcomed and sometimes not.

is more difficult to specify. Castoriadis proceeded to draw these parallels with great care. This is because any talk of the twinning of "antiquity and modernity", and of the collusion of "Greeks and Moderns", has obvious risks. One is that it plays out as nothing more than a kind of nostalgia – in short: a backward-looking Hellenism. Whatever criticisms might be directed at Castoriadis' work, there is nothing "backward-looking" in it. Yet his work does not belong to the "forward-looking" progressive genre either. Castoriadis was aware that backward- and forward-looking senses of time were personal or psychological in nature – and that creative "works and objects" redolent with marks of this psychological time never outlive their authors' death. For anyone, like Castoriadis, interested in explaining the most adventurous acts of creation, this was important to note. Time is the ultimate judge of these acts, and few things survive time's withering judgment.

In his theory of creation, we see Castoriadis carefully demarcate the temporal schemata of "acts of creation" from the subjective-psychological time of memory, attention, and expectation. This, incidentally, is not an easy thing to do. Memory, attention, and expectation are normally the way that we apprehend time.[45] Time, in the three dimensions of retention, attention and protention, is categorical for the human mind. These three dimensions are fundamental to what Castoriadis, after Augustine, called the stretching of the mind – the *distento animi*.[46] This animus of the mind is capable of three activities or postures. It remembers, it pays attention, and it expects. All of these are subjective approaches to time. It is individual human subjects who remember, attend, and anticipate. Human beings of course try to project subjective time schemas onto institutions. They talk, analogously, of "institutional memory" or "collective expectations". Sometimes there is a rough correspondence between subjective time and group expectation or archival memory. But it is only a very rough approximation.

What Castoriadis does that is interesting is to suggest that the most significant social acts of creation are not played out in subjective time. They are not enacted through memory, attention, or anticipation. What he raises, correspondingly, is the idea that there is a common or public time – an ontological time dependent neither on recollection, interest, nor promise. What kind of time is this? It is the time of anonymous creation. This is the kind of creation that escapes being over-determined by human subjectivity. The footprint of subjectivity makes most speeches, novels, paintings and melodies read, sound or look excruciating once they are placed out of their

[45] "Time and Creation" in *World in Fragments*, pp. 379-383.
[46] "Time and Creation" in *World in Fragments*, pp. 380-381.





time. In contrast, non-subjective time is a time outside of mind – it is not the kind of time through which the human mind is "stretched" forwards, downwards or backwards. Mostly we inhabit this personal-psychological time of "stretching" – but not always. Sometimes we experience time out of mind. We do so when we encounter a "classic". This happens, for example, when we come across an artwork or a social object that may have been produced in time but that is not easily classifiable as an object of memory, attention or expectation. We are unsure in fact whether it belongs to the past, the present, or the future.[47]

Anyone who builds a social philosophy on conceptual pairs, like "ancients and moderns" or "Greece and the West", risks producing a memory-saturated theory of society. This is work that is elegiac, sorrowful, funereal, or grief-stricken. Nostalgia is a paradigm instance of such memorial time. It is time filled with memories of loss. Such loss can be projected onto a world-historical stage. The attempt to find redemption through the past is invariably destructive. Far from being enamoured with the past – with "what was" – Castoriadis, if anything, was "guilty" of the opposite. He persistently argued that the social creation of forms was undetermined. His view was that maximal form creation occurred "out of nothing". Neither the past, nor the present, could logically be the causal determinant of any future form that was "unprecedented" in the strong sense of that word.

This thesis profoundly affected Castoriadis' understanding of the relationship of "Greeks and Moderns". He saw them as a pair but reiterated on many occasions that the link between the ancient polis and the modern West was non-casual. Greek antiquity did not "produce" the West. Rather it was the case that Greek and Western societies coincidentally shared a massive capacity for reflexivity. They were not causally or genetically related, but they had an uncanny family resemblance. Both were defined by their readiness for self-interrogation, self-critique, and internal dissent. These societies regularly questioned their own laws. They were not in thrall to extra-social validation. They critiqued their own presuppositions, axioms

[47] Exactly the same applies to any kind of maximal creation. Works of maximal creation are not revivals They are not contemporary chic. They are not millenarian—"about to be born". It is this bracketing of subjective time incidentally that makes Castoriadis' own work a "classic". It transcends his personal identification with the hypertensive "now" moment of 1968 and the social movements of the 1960s. It escapes the millenarian expectation of "coming into being" that periodically surfaces in his work. He quells his own fascinated expectation with "what is to come" with a deep respect for great social forms. Finally—and not least because of his abiding and deep admiration for great forms—his is a body of work that never looks back, with nostalgia, at past social achievements. Castoriadis is a Greek thinker par excellence but not ever a sentimentalist.

and foundations. They were able to suspend their most basic criteria and rules on their own recognisance.[48]

While there is some truth in this, reflexivity – on whatever scale – is not sufficient to explain the emergence of forms. Critique is a function of words, and words, even if they are critical words, play a remarkably low-level role in acts of creation. Words come after the fact of creation. They are ciphers for what we already know, not for new knowledge. Words at most offer the possibility of being syllogistically deducted from discursive principles. As Castoriadis often noted, such communicative reason cannot explain Europe's transition from agrarian feudalism to civic capitalism, the Roman and American replacement of kingship with republicanism, or the Greek and Western replacement of aristocracy with democracy. Nobody deduced the American Revolution or England's Glorious Revolution. Indeed large-scale attempts at social deduction have invariably led to terrorism and the triumph of chaos over cosmos. The French Revolution established the modern template for this. It confused the violent negation of form with the radical emergence of form. The intellectuals who devised Japan's Shinto fascism or Syrian-Iraq-Lebanese Baathist fascism or the strains of homicidal suicidal totalitarian feudal Islamism all appealed to discursive principles whose logic led directly into the thanatocratic abyss. Principles without form, words without figuration, quickly become an incitement to social destruction because of their inherent chaotic drive. They portend destruction without creation.

As Castoriadis constantly reiterated, creation is a function of form – and, as the very idea of "form" suggests, creation is figurative not linguistic. The medium of the act of creation is figure, shape, and pattern. There may be something built into the nature of the cosmos – into the nature of nature, or the nature of being – that conditions this. There are figures, shapes, and patterns (e.g. symmetries, scales, and rhythms) built into the building blocks of nature (e.g. super strings). The human mind and human society draw freely and recursively on these in form creation. In this sense, form follows nature. Reflexivity can amplify form – it can focus attention on it. It can link subjective and ontological time. But reflexivity cannot in itself create form.

Nature, *phusis*, is the key to understanding what Burkhardt meant when he talked about the renaissance of social forms. We all know that the cities of the Italian Renaissance "re-discovered antiquity". Curiously, in doing so, they also forged an ebullient type of modernity. Their re-search or re-discovery of the past produced a social form that was not in any sense a shallow imitation. This was because what the very inventive inhabitants of

[48] Castoriadis, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection" [1988-1992], *World in Fragments*, pp. 267-268.





the great Renaissance cities did was not "re-discover the past" in the sense of "where we have come from" but rather discover (and discover they liked) societies (Greco-Roman societies) that had a powerful sense of form. What made the Romans secondary to the Greeks, and the Italian Renaissance secondary to the Romans and the Greeks, was not a feeble desire of one to copy the other as a child traces the outline of a picture it likes, but rather a deep desire to replicate what happens in only a very few social times and places – namely, an incredible upsurge of form. Mimesis is the force that drives such upsurges. But it is the mimesis of *phusis*, and of society's engagement with the time of mind, rather than any lame repetition of what has come before. When Einstein taught himself mathematics using Euclid's handbook, he did not think that geometry ended with Euclid. What he was developing was a strong sense of mathematical form. Euclid was a "classic" for Einstein in the same sense that Europe's last great period of form-giving – the era of Braque, Stravinsky, Cavafy, Mondrian, and Minkowski – will one day be a "classic" period for a future epoch.

From this standpoint, Castoriadis' assertion that socio-historical worlds are self-contained, and irreducible to each other, is both right and wrong. It is perfectly true that French Revolutionary attempts to duplicate Greek and Roman rhetoric, festivals, funeral ceremonies, and names were a silly pantomime. They – notably – had no impact on the revolutionary laws of the period.[49] While the effects of the French Revolution were massive, its Greco-Roman self-understanding was superficial – at least measured by its outcomes, which were remarkably unstable. From the time of the Revolution to the Republic of de Gaulle, France suffered persistent regime crises and collapses. Contrast this with the Italian Renaissance and the American Revolution. The Italian city-states certainly had their share of atrocious government, but, like a lot of the most creative states, a powerful underlying sense of self-organisation neutralised the corrupting effects of much of this. Italian anarchy was not lethal. While in the American case, the Greco-Roman tradition produced a much more visible sense of order in government – synonymous with long-term stability and development.

Either way, and in both cases, Greek and Roman models served as instructive examples of the way in which some societies are able to draw on the common wealth of form-generating media, allowing them to enact socio-historical world-making in ontological time. What explains the massive constructive surge of the great Renaissance cities and the American Revolution was their collective capacity to engage time out of

[49] Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "The Place of Greece in the Imaginary Representations of the Men of the Revolution" in *Politics Ancient and Modern* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995).

mind. This was time out of mind in the sense that it was not the time of past, present or future. It was an ontological time in which the ancient appeared to be contemporary, and the contemporary looked and felt ancient. Human beings are born, and they live, in the subjective time of regret, awareness and expectation. This is an inescapable part of the human condition. However, human beings are also drawn to another kind of time. This time is timeless. Everyone has intuitions of it. Déjà vu is an uncanny psychological version of it. Plato's notion of forms that exist outside the flux of ordinary social or personal time is a great philosophical treatment of this timeless time – just as Cézanne's definition of nature as composed of cones and cylinders is a great aesthetic invocation of it. What Cézanne was getting at was that an artwork that is radically un-determined by previous artworks is nonetheless determined by the artist's encounter with forms whose time is ontological, not personal. The forms of a Cézanne painting are unmistakable. They can be imitated but they are not an imitation of another artist's work. Nonetheless, they are mimetic. The paradox is that they are a radiant imitation, and yet they are not pedestrian copies. They are a mimesis of *phusis*, not a copy of existing artworks.

What applies to the great artist also applies to great societies. Some societies, usually for short historical periods, encourage excursions into ontological time. The importance of the artistic masterpieces of these societies resounds across all times and periods. The forms that constitute the skeletons of these masterpieces are not "new", are not "old", and are not "now". They evade entirely the categories of subjective time. Ontological time instead compounds subjective time into the time of a "new order of the ages". This time and its forms are not exhausted – nor are they even particularly well represented – in discursive thought and speech. The normal "train" of argument and discussion finds it difficult to extricate itself from the force of memory, or from the pregnant now, or from hope and expectation. Those extensions of the human mind, after all, are keys to the ordinary apprehension of time. We find it difficult, though not impossible, to bracket memory, attention, and hope. Such bracketing requires an exceptional toughness of mind.

Form creation – represented by a "new order of the ages" – is not discursive. Discursive thought or communicative reasoning relies on the law of non-contradiction. If what I say is consistent, then it is true. Chains of reasoning are valid if the major and minor premises, and the conclusion, of the reasoning are consistent. If witches are bad, and supporters of policy Y are political witches, then witch-hunting these supporters is legitimate. Or, as Hegel once put it, there are many good reasons for doing bad things. Forms, in contrast, are composed out of contradictions. They are ruled by





the law of contradiction. Forms are unions of opposites. They meld master and servant, sovereign and subject, hot and cold, hard and soft, steel and glass. Forms unite such divergent parts through pattern media. Patterns are the ordered – and ordering – coalescence of contrasts. Commonplace forms that organise patterns include hierarchies, harmonies, scales, rhythms, and proportions. This is not to suggest that the social appropriation of forms is always benign. Dark, violent, dissonant, crushing forms that turn towards formlessness are as common as elegant, beautiful forms. Human beings are hugely fascinated by the dissolution, ruin, and meltdown of forms as by their creation through renaissance.[50]

The renaissance of forms occurs principally through images – not discussions. The renaissance of forms is the intense but rarely lasting encounter of a society with ontological time. The most common images associated with the invention of social forms are conceived out of visual-diagrammatical, rhythmic-aural and kinetic-plastic patterns. Words can be material for harmonies, scales, and for rhythmic explorations, but social invention as opposed to social dissemination rarely relies on the discursive train of thought but rather on the figurative images of the imagination, which, in their turn, rely on universal form-hatching media like symmetries, scales, and rhythms.

Linguistic genres such as stories and dramas are relatively late-arriving evolutionary additions to this human repertoire of order-making – and notably what the masterpieces of these genres do is to transform subjective time into the time of epic, tragedy, and comedy. They turn human expectation into destiny, necessity, or comic reversal.[51] Memory, attention and expectation are social crutches – unavoidable but at times unhelpful. Castoriadis was thus right to stress the importance of tragedy in the first great reflexive upsurge of human creativity – the Greek polis. The polis was fuelled by the most unsparing inquiry into the *phusis* of personality, society, and cosmos. This emerged in various ways, but no more enduringly than in its epic song, its tragic drama, and its comedy. All pointed beyond the human vanity that subjects create social worlds out of their hopes and memories into the deep ontological layers where society and *phusis* meet and where creation unfolds.

[50] Castoriadis, in "The Institution of Society and Religion" in *World in Fragments*, observed that social forms are stretched rather thinly over the abyss of chaos and groundlessness. There is a nihilistic streak in the human psyche that is fascinated by the abyss, and its thanatocratic nature. Social dissolution and death—the death of forms—is often interpreted as a kind of dark beauty that attracts as much as the lucid beauty of ascendant forms On this, see Peter Murphy, *Civic Justice· From Ancient Greece to the Modern World*, chapter eight.

[51] Wit is arguably the highest form of creation in the sense that it rests entirely on undoing of expectation—a mode of subjective time—through turning what we expect into its opposite

**The Crucible of the City**

We can be confident that collective creation does exist because we know that a handful of societies in a number of specific times and places have engaged in massive acts of creation and re-creation for extended periods of time. In other social times and places, this simply hasn't happened. So, if collective creation exists, how can we explain it? It is no good saying that such societies are an aggregate of individual creative personalities. As Castoriadis rightly insisted, personalities lean on their society. What seems to be the case is that some societies are very hospitable to creative personalities – the cities of the Italian Renaissance are a classic example. In talking about Greco-Western societies, Castoriadis most often refers to the "ancient *polis*" or the "burgher city" as their spring.[52] This is an important observation. *The city is the most important condition of human creation. It is not the only condition of human creation but it is the most crucial one.* All of the great moments of Greco-Western creation are centred on specific cities: Athens, Rome, Venice, Florence, Amsterdam, London, New York, Chicago, San Francisco among them.

Why is the city, the *polis*, so important? In a circular sense, we can say that in certain times and places the city is unusually hospitable to creative personalities. It accommodates their traits. But why is this so? One of the most powerful reasons is that the city, like the imagination, is a figurative-aural-plastic medium. All human society begins with the making of marks on the earth. Eventually this evolves into the kind of spiritual geometry that was achieved during the Greek breakthrough – and that is the most potent recurring sign of concentrated creative human achievement. The city is the most intensive expression of the work of humankind in creating an artificial environment for itself – be it a track, a field, or a street. The city is primarily defined not by words or language or textual signs but by architectonic forms, distributed networks, social geometries, and relational schemas. It is through such media that societies forge a union of opposites. What are logical contradictions from the standpoint of discursive language are harmonies and symmetries in sound and figure and touch.

We can give the name of *the commons* to these collective patterns. The commons is the primary medium for the imaging activity of the individual mind. Minds imag(in)e forms. Mainly these are familiar forms. They are replicated and adapted from what we see and hear and feel around us. But some, a much smaller number, are unfamiliar – or rather more exactly they are uncannily familiar. They are replicated from *phusis*. They are modelled

[52] See, e.g., "The Movements of the Sixties" [1986] in *World in Fragments*, p. 56; "The Crisis of Culture and the State" [1986] in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 230.





on the forms of nature that the *nous* tacitly, already, always recognises. These forms are both unfamiliar and yet somehow very familiar. Some of these "unfamiliar familiar" forms are eventually embodied in the city. They inspire further mental imaging. The figures of the city correct for the idiosyncrasies of the individual mind. The forms of the city are (necessarily) collective. The images that they inspire are pre-disposed to collective recognition.

If that is so, then why are most cities creative dead-waters? In the last two centuries, much of the human population has moved into urban areas. But in the main, with very few exceptions, a small number of Western cities have remained overwhelmingly – and measurably – the dominant creative centres. At the first level, the answer is that only some cities develop strong architectonic forms. This is not just a matter of wealth, but of ambition and instinct as well. On a deeper level, this is because only a very few cities develop as open systems. This is a crucial condition of permanent form creation – even if it is not the only condition.

In most cases, the principal sites of collective creation have been stranger cities – cities filled with aliens, visitors, travellers, exiles, migrants, settlers, and people from elsewhere. The enigmatic case of twentieth-century Japan – a very ethnocentric society – provides a partial exception to this proposition. But it is an exception that proves the rule – for the Japanese attempt to innovate in the sense of "form-create" under conditions of social closure reaped a terrible price. The Japanese resort to the use of scripts, notably the script of anti-Western nationalist ideology, to steer a society struggling to reconcile "change and tradition", proved catastrophic. The anti-Western Shinto fascism of Japan's inter-war period ended in complete disaster. Yet, as with other littoral and seaboard societies, Japan is a society where form-innovation has reached significant levels. Notably, the key driver of this achievement has been non-discursive aesthetics – for example miniaturising arts – and mathematics. But there always remains the question of how much aesthetic power alone, without the collusion of strangers, can sustain high-level creation?

A classic example of the importance of the stranger is Burkhardt's Basel. They may have been perpetually excluded from Basel citizenship, but Protestant refugees from France, Flanders and Italy, who poured in during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were crucial to the development of the industrial base of the city and its long-term success. The enduring model of the exo-city is the ancient *polis* – not least of all Athens in the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries.[53] In classical Athens, huge numbers of resident aliens had a very powerful influence on the character

[53] Peter Murphy, "Architectonics" in *Agon, Logos, Polis*, pp 207-232.

of the city. Why is the stranger city important? It is important because it tends to unleash the aural-pictorial-plastic imagination. Such creative imagining emerges under conditions of *porous social ties*. The stranger city is an ecology of such porous ties. It is the *via media* of unsocial sociability. Paradoxically, strong social forms emerge where society is "weak" in the sense that its linguistic norms, rules and authority are feeble. Under conditions of weak linguistic interaction, figurative schemata, visual thinking, musical and plastic-haptic forms come to the fore. This occurs because the noise of language is reduced. Opinion, rhetoric, propositional judgments, verdicts, and convictions are all treated sceptically. The reasoning of debate, which can never escape conventional premises, is set aside. *Logos* and *doxa* are downplayed along with dogmatic, moralising, and righteous assertions. Through the graphical, schematic and pictorial media of the imagination, new forms (shapes and figures) emerge.

Shape implies order – *kosmos* in contrast to *kaos*. Everybody has experienced the impulse to replace *kaos* with *kosmos* when we say: "Let us meet where there is a whiteboard. I think more clearly when I can sketch things out." Sense can be made out of the fog of a messy situation when we can sketch a solution. Just as there is individual and group sketching, there is also a social whiteboard. It is not language. Language is not the house of being. The house of being – being that pushes towards giving itself form – is the city. In cities, more than any other social medium, human beings outwardly in their external environment) represent aural, visual and haptic forms to themselves. Cities allow considerable scope for experimenting with new shapes and patterns. Some experiments are idiosyncratic and quickly die. Most experiments repeat (with minor differences) what already exists. Successful forms by definition are repeated. It is notable just how quickly compelling forms are picked up and replicated in cities. While repetition is a key aspect of any form creation, it is not repetition per se that defines the creative city. It is emergence. Emergence stands on contrariness: the capability to unify what is divergent: "out of many, one." This is not the negative capability of social critique. It is the "musical" capacity to harmonise the discordant. What contrary minds do on an individual level, great cities do on a collective level. The city in this sense is the site for experiments that turn existing forms into the materials out of which new forms emerge. This *poietic* activity turns the past into the future, memory into expectation, and history into that which is new and unexpected. Out of this compounding of time, it creates a "new order of the ages".



# Object-Oriented Aesthetics: The Legacy of Plato in the Philosophy of Art

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> *For the products of the arts have their excellence in themselves; it is enough, then, that they have these [fine qualities] in some way when they have been made.*
> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.4.1105a27-29

Aristotle thought that artistic excellence lay entirely in the objects of art. In this he was merely stating plainly the view already maintained by his predecessor, Plato. Plato himself was not so conservative, however. The conception of artistic excellence that preceded him was dynamic, but through persistent effort and argument Plato brought about a change of focus in aesthetics that has persisted down to the present day. I shall call the focus that Plato brought to art "object-oriented aesthetics" and describe it as follows: an aesthetics is object-oriented just in case it locates artistic excellence entirely in art objects, their objective properties or their objective relations. Plato's object-oriented aesthetics is a special case: it locates artistic excellence entirely in beauty, which is seen as an objective property instantiated in art objects.

In this paper I will begin by exploring the context in which object-oriented aesthetics arose. I will set object-oriented aesthetics against another focus which I shall call "activity-oriented aesthetics", in which the excellence of an artistic production lies in the artist's activity. This activity is merely expressed in the finished work, even when the work is overwhelmingly admirable. Excellent artistic activity originates and persists in the artist's manner, execution and style.[1] Just as there is a special

[1] A product of chance or accident can be beautiful only in an equivocal sense It has the appearance of something that might have been fashioned, but it is not *artistically* beautiful. Similarly, a chance arrangement of matter cannot be *naturally* beautiful, however wondrous it may appear.

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