



# **Bureaucracy and creativity: preliminary thoughts on Cornelius Castoriadis' theory of imaginary significations**

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# Introduction

- A form of **naive reading** of *The Third Policeman* of O'Brien to see how some theoretical views of Castoriadis could be applied in the understanding of the text.
- Quotes of **De Selby** in the book remind the quotes of **Democritus** in Castoriadis' work (a Presocratic philosopher who was almost forgotten because of the negative influence of Plato). For Castoriadis, Plato established his political theory on the ruins of democracy (professionalization of politics against a form of general *paideia*).
- Sense of inhumanity for Castoriadis: bureaucratization of life where things are disconnected from each other. Metaphor of the body where the mind is absurdly taken away from the body (separation between order-takers and order-givers). Socialist revolution for Castoriadis: breaking the notion of « proletariat » where the majority of people execute the desires of secrete commanders.

# Plan of the presentation

- 1) Background of the theory of bureaucracies
- 2) Clash of imaginaries
- 3) Methodology to investigate imaginary significations

## Castoriadis (1922-1997) and the theory of bureaucracies

- Greek revolutionary activist who emigrated to France in 1945 to flee the political and social situation of Greece. Early consciousness of the absurdity of bureaucracies. Experienced both dictatorship and Stalinism in Greece.
- 1948: creation of a group of radical left, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (split from the Fourth International) which analyzed the USSR as a total bureaucracy. The question for his group: how can we reconnect to the initial revolutionary claim when the language is perverted?
- Early theory of bureaucracies made by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort (1924-2010). Cold war, difference between **fragmented bureaucracies** / **total bureaucracies**. Fragmented bureaucracies: still have some constitutional rights (protection of freedom of speech). **Anthropology of power**



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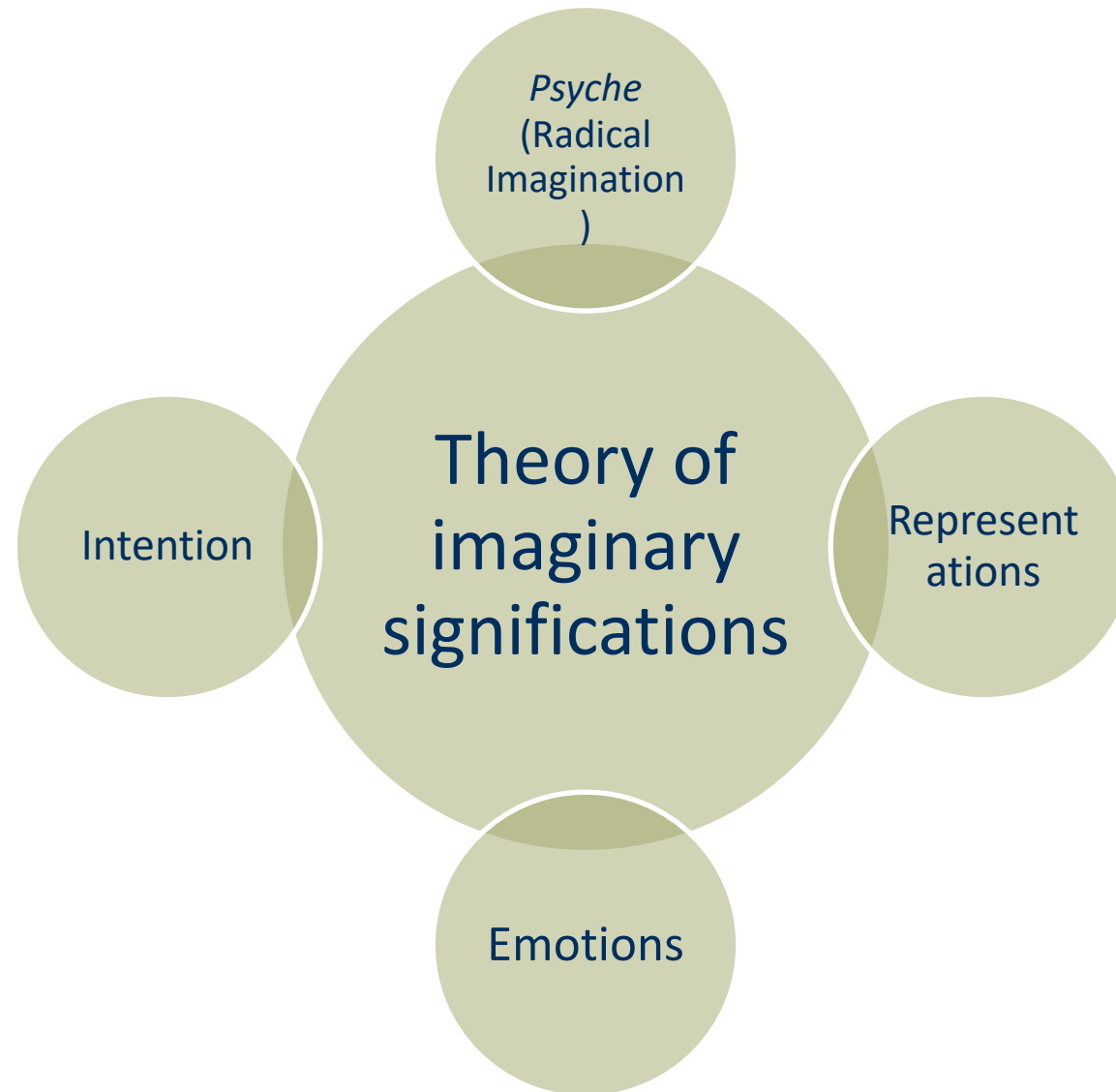






# The diagnostic on bureaucratization

- The early diagnostic: the Soviet Union represents the extreme form of **bureaucratization of social life**. There is not a fundamental difference between Western and Easterns regimes, just a variation of degrees (fragmented bureaucracies with some rights granted to people versus total bureaucracies). The USSR is an ideal-type of a bureaucratic society
- Inversion of arguments. The Western regimes tend to have more and more control.
- Bureaucracy = separation between **order-takers** and **order-givers**
- Disconnection between both categories. The order-givers need the labor force of the order-takers but they want to be separate from them (actualization of the dialectics of slave-mastery). Legitimacy of decisions



# Clash of imaginaries

- Logic of absurdity (many perspectives are intertwined in *The Third Policeman*).
- Dialogues that reflect the order of different discourses. Technical discourses that take the part for the whole (the bicycle, the names, the administrative logic...). A bureaucratic society is unable to come back to the sense of life where people have to deliberate and decide (Castoriadis).
- Absurd logic of classification / categorization (inventory). « This year we have eighty-two cases of no lights, thirteen cases of riding on the footpath and four stolen. There was one case of wanton damage to a three-speed gear, there is sure to be a claim at the **next Court** and **the area of charge** will be the **parish** » (O'Brien 1967: 60). Administrative classification (the elaboration of public policies). Bureaucracy is the opposite of autonomy (no possible move – the discourse on bicycle attempts to reify the question of autonomy which is linked to the logic of the bicycle). Image of the parish (small unit of bureaucratic organization).

# Clash of imaginaries

- Several levels of narratives (the investigation of the policemen, the sub-discourses on administrative habits....)
- « a special Act of Parliament » (O'Brien 1967: 77). Castoriadis was talking about the logic of expertise and specialization (Ideas of Plato that the city should be administrated by people who have knowledge). Logic of committees, expertise...O'Brien illustrates this *ad absurdum logic* with a presentation of hyperexpertise (focus on very **small details**).
- Need to explain the theory of imaginary significations to understand how they can really be used to analyze the clash of patterns in the work of O'Brien

# The logic of bureaucratization

- Two levels when an imaginary institution emerges. Holistic vision of society.
- For Castoriadis, there are no individuals, but fragments of society. Examples of imaginary significations: « God », « nation », « clan », « democracy », « bureaucracy ». The language is also instituted within the process of **imaginary institution of society**.
- « The gross and net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles » (O'Brien 1967: 85). Being identified to another kind of identity (ironical presentation of the sociology of roles). **Chemichal** explanation of how somebody who invests into something, is associated with this thing. (Cf the **description of the waiter** in *Being and Nothingness* of Sartre).

# Ensidic logic

- Ensidic logic, short expression of « *ensemble-identitaire* » thinking for Castoriadis.  
Traditional metaphysics where the being is identified with an extra-social principle that you can determine and that explains the meaning of social institutions. Heteronomous way of thinking: separation of imaginary social institutions from a principle that enlightens the logic of things. **No indeterminacy**. The bureaucratization of the world is an attempt of making the radical separation between the principle (perceived as the source of *nomos*) and imaginary institutions. In O'Brien, there is an illustration of this tendency to classify things / administrative logics but the investigation also reflects this idea of absolute causation.
- Ensidic logic close to what Heidegger called the « **Enframing** » (*Ge-stell*) in the essence of technique. The essence of technique has nothing to do with technique, it is a will of control.
- **Enframing: regulating, classifying, identifying, ordering** (Heidegger 2008: 16).



# Ensidic logic

- Thoughts on industrial logic in O'Brien
- Metaphor of the omnium. (Play with all the Latin words in -um, *desideratum...*).
- « Omnium is the essential inherent interior essence which is hidden inside the root of the kernel of everything and it is always the same » (O'Brien 1967: 110). The *archê* is the wave? Different deterministic explanations (static-dynamic perceptions). Recollection of the atoms (play with the different possible realities when policemen re-construct the possible moves, the *dynamis*).
- Metaphor of the road: unidirection? (Roadmap, mechanical repetition, bicycle..)

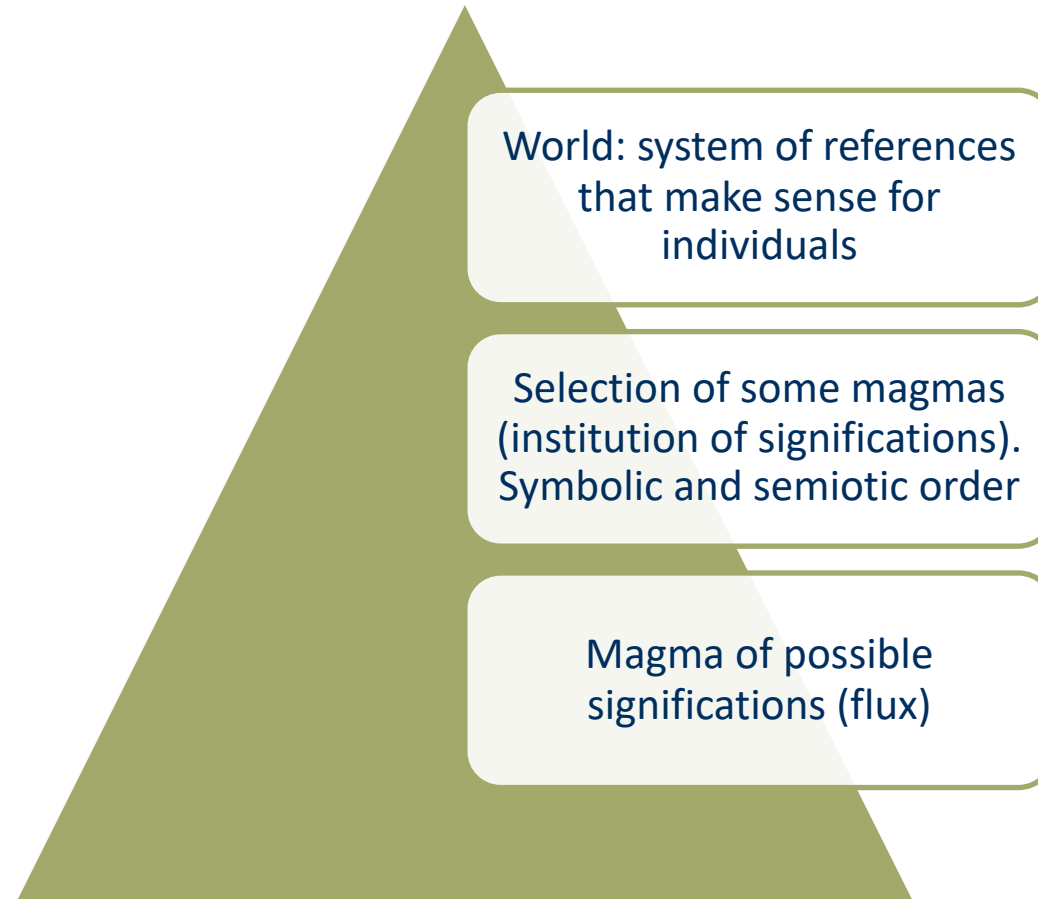
# Absurdity of ensidic logic

- « *This is amusing. You are going to be hung for murdering a man you did not murder and now you will be shot for not finding a tiny thing that probably does not exist at all and which is in any event you did not lose* » (O'Brien 1967: 113)
- Reconstruction of the events given the attention paid to the other perspective on the reality. Interesting part of the fiction: indicating several possible ensidic relations.
- Re-membling process (Premat Sule 2016): collecting different parts of ensidic narratives

# Magmatic logic

- Social creativity. The understanding of human creation is necessary for autonomy. No institution exists *per se*. Radical imaginary with a polarization between *psyché* and society. A society is an institution of imaginary significations that impose an order to the *psyché* which is incapable of surviving. Continuous creation characterizes human being. No vertical ontology but an horizontal ontology where society and history are created. The labyrinth means that human beings will never find an outside norm that explains existence. Circularity of imaginary significations (different from the roads in O'Brien that indicate possible ensidic interpretations).
- Magmatic logic: imaginary significations that are possible, selection of these significations into symbolic orders.

# Magmatic logic



# Conclusions: the labyrinth and the road

- In O'Brien, different possible roadmaps corresponding to different possible ensidic logics. Play with these different ensidic narratives.
- Logic of absurdity (Enframing) by using the thinking of De Selby.
- Different points of view on the complexity of reality.
- For Castoriadis, the imaginary is the principle of reality. Tragedy: there is an imaginary self-institution of society (horizontal world, no vertical principle of causation that you can find).
- The bureaucratization is the attempt of hiding the imaginary self-institution of society by proposing a pseudo-rational thinking. Bureaucrats want to control the world of the others, they pretend to define the meaning of life.

# References

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