

## Recension

Johann Michel. *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social. Cornelius Castoriadis et Paul Ricœur*

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Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 8, No 2 (2017), pp. 100-105

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2017.417

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## Recension

Johann Michel. *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social. Cornelius Castoriadis et Paul Ricœur*

Cornelius Castoriadis and Paul Ricœur are undoubtedly two prominent and versatile French thinkers of our challenging times. The subtle reflection of these leading exponents of contemporary continental thought develops from and within the framework of our common social environment, namely through an effective engagement and an active response to social reality. Even though Ricœur is familiar with and occasionally refers to Castoriadis' work, and vice versa, they were not interlocutors and they didn't pursue such reciprocal attention in any sustained or systematic way. They met face to face on March 9<sup>th</sup> 1985 to record the radio program *Le Bon Plaisir* for France Culture. It was Ricœur who had invited Castoriadis to dialogue with him. Published under the posthumous title *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social*, Johann Michel offers for the first time a transcribed version of this fiery encounter<sup>1</sup>. University Professor of Political Science at the University of Poitiers and affiliated with the l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (IMM—CNRS) in Paris, the editor is a distinguished Ricœur scholar. Supported by Catherine Goldenstein, Pascal Vernay, and Olivier Fressard, all experts on Castoriadis and Ricœur, Johann Michel develops the transcription of the Castoriadis-Ricœur conversation by combining Zoé Castoriadis's first fragmented transcript of the radio show with extracts from the audio recording as well as typed excerpts that are stored at France Culture, but also kept in the archives of the *Fonds Ricœur*. The Castoriadis-Ricœur dialogue is introduced by way of a detailed and enlightening foreword in which the editor gives a thoughtful contextualization of the debate. This long introduction does more than provide background details for the reader, it also provides glimpses of a deep and sustained analysis of the main topics of the encounter, highlighting the major convergences and divergences at play in Castoriadis and Ricœur's philosophical projects and political understanding. Johann Michel's work is more than a detailed and accurate transcription since it enables us to develop a critical understanding of the comparison between these thinkers and their respective intellectual perspectives. The transcription of the radio encounter is of great significance both for Castoriadis and Ricœur scholars and for researchers interested in the field of social imaginaries. Touching on the question of social reality makes the dialogue especially valuable in that it provides fertile ground for further social, historical, political, and philosophical inquiries. Thus, the 1985 debate maintains its exceptional intellectual significance both in terms of the uniqueness of the recorded discussion and in the specificity of the themes explored. These topics need to be contextualized in and beyond the works of both thinkers.

The conversation, which is itself short and incisive, revolves entirely around one main question: Is it possible to create the new historically? (9) Can one speak of historical creation or does every new human production proceed from an already existing historical configuration? (10) As Johann Michel rightly stresses, the conversation on history has a marked epistemological dimension, but it is at the same time animated by a practical, praxeological, and political concern.

(15) Specifically, there are two central overlapping themes running through Castoriadis and Ricœur's dialogue. First, the debate is animated by a shifting focus on productive and creative imagination, i.e. by the problematic of creation *ex nihilo* versus the idea of production. This includes an understanding of the significance of the social imaginary in social life as an ineluctable phenomenon. Second, the conversation concerns the question of the possibility and the meaning of human creation in history. More precisely, the speakers grant importance to social and political imaginaries, focusing their attention on the problem of the interplay of continuity and discontinuity in historical creation. The symbolic or imaginary function, viewed as a collective faculty for producing social change, constitutes the connecting thread between the imaginary and history. The dialogue finds its own ground in an agreement to defend historical action in its symbolic and imaginary dimensions. As the editor highlights in his preface, Castoriadis and Ricœur both claim "the positive function of a constitutive imagination of actions and institutions." (23) Indeed, in the opening statement of the debate Ricœur points out: the "issue of the imaginary foyer of social relations and of social production is, I believe, our shared interest." (39) Nevertheless, Castoriadis immediately replies that for his part he does not speak of production, but rather of institution. (40)

At first sight, Castoriadis and Ricœur seem to stand opposed to one another both in their different styles and in their philosophical projects. Castoriadis's style is direct and affirmative. Ricœur's approach is characterized by the art of the detour and by some sort of negotiation between one way of thinking and its opposite, endorsing a type of aporetic argumentation. However, Johann Michel explicitly states that "while this description might be pertinent regarding their respective writings, it is less so, for Ricœur at least, when philosophy is heard in living dialogue." (7) Ricœur's dialogical attitude and his constant desire to create new mediations among opposing positions allow us to call him the philosopher of all the dialogues (Leovino Garcia, "On Paul Ricœur and the Translation-Interpretation of Cultures," in *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 94, n. 1, 2008, 72). The desire to mediate conflicting positions is clearly expressed in the recurring use of the word "between" in his writings. The conversation between Castoriadis and Ricœur makes clear that Ricœur cannot be considered, I believe, a thinker of the margins since he is able to hear the radicalness of Castoriadis's insight, recognizing the sharpness of certain problems in current political and philosophical debates. As Johann Michel has pointed out, it would be both reductive and incorrect to say that Ricœur's style is ecumenical and timid. Neither aggressive nor assertive, Castoriadis and Ricœur's debate is still a penetrating one. Johann Michel describes the particular tone of their exchange using the metaphor of a game of pool in which Castoriadis and Ricœur's claims are like billiards balls that respectively intersect, collide, converge, and diverge with one another. (9) The conversation offers an enthralling controversy in which the central focus on the theory of history is supported by a wide range of pertinent arguments and examples drawn from literary history (Homer's *The Iliad*), religious history (Old Testament), artistic history (Claude Monet, Paul Cezanne), social and political history (the institution of the *polis*, the French Revolution), and the history of philosophy (Michel Foucault, Immanuel Kant, Baruch Spinoza, Reinhart Koselleck, Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jurgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno), but also drawn from anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss) and psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud), opening philosophy up to what is outside itself.

The key question of history and the social imaginary steers the discussion, making it possible to recognize problems, clear up persistent misunderstanding and find the way to

suitable solutions. As Castoriadis notes, he has the impression that they seem to be talking “at cross purposes, a little bit past each other.” (64) In his preface, Johann Michel rightly argues that this can be attributed to the fact that at the time of the interview various seminar series that the two philosophers had given in the years prior to the radio conversation had not yet been published, and so remained unknown to the other. On the one hand, at the time of this conversation, Ricœur was 72 years old. He had already published the first two volumes of *Time and Narrative* and was preparing to publish the third volume a few months later. As Johann Michel continues, in 1975 Ricœur gave “his famous course on ideology and utopia at the University of Chicago, which was later published in English by Columbia University Press in 1986.” (8) In the same year in Chicago Ricœur taught a second series of lectures on the more properly philosophical aspect of the imagination. These *Lectures on Imagination*, which have not yet been published, constitute a lacuna for the understanding of his work. On the other hand, Castoriadis, who was 63 years old at the time of this conversation, had published his work *The Imaginary Institution of Society* in 1975, a work in which the main topics are the social and political imagination and history. Moreover, I would like to add to Johann Michel’s introduction, that another significant source for better understanding the radio encounter between Castoriadis and Ricœur is Castoriadis’ analysis on ancient Greece, which was delivered in his seminars at the EHESS in Paris in 1982-1983.

Given the telling title of the book, the reader is not surprised to see that Castoriadis and Ricœur share some common ground when treating the problem of the imagination. For example, they share an understanding of history as the realm of meaning and social change as well as an approach to the social imaginary that combines the sociological question of social creativity and the philosophical problem of imagination. They also are alike in that they consider the social imaginary in both its ideological and its utopian aspects. More broadly, they agree about the defense of historical action in its symbolic and imaginary dimensions while attacking the fields of historicism, totalitarianism, and technocentrism. However, despite all they have in common, these thinkers propose different solutions around the shared recognition of the primordially of imagination in social life. Focusing on the social imaginary’s creation of institutions and whole societies, with particular reference to ancient Greece’s invention of democracy, Castoriadis defends the thesis of historical creation. More precisely, he elucidates the idea of human creation as *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing, arguing that new forms (institutional, artistic, political, scientific; etc.) considered as absolute novelties are not reducible to or producible from their antecedents. Each new form represents a rupture, a discontinuity in history. Contrary to Castoriadis, Ricœur rejects the possibility of the creation *ex nihilo* from the formless chaos. He says: “we are never in a situation that you would call creation, as if form could be derived from the absolutely formless.” (44) Later in the dialogue he reiterates his position against the idea of absolute novelty stressing that “one is never in a passage from nothing to something, but from something to something, from one to another—which goes from the configured to the configured, but never from the formless to form.” (46) Considering Castoriadis’ thesis unacceptable, Ricœur insists on the Kantian concept of production and productive imagination. For Ricœur, new human productions do not proceed out of nothing, but they are always inscribed in the historical dialectic between innovation and sedimentation. In his introduction, Johann Michel correctly observes that “Ricœur’s allergy toward the thesis of a human historical creation does not point to a theological substitute [...] as if only God could claim the title of creator,” but Ricœur draws his

argumentative resources from the hermeneutic tradition and the hermeneutic theory of the text. Indeed, hermeneutics inscribes all understanding in pre-understanding, each new form proceeds from interpretations and reinterpretations which are grounded on an already existing configuration.

Castoriadis and Ricœur's respective theories of the social imaginary differ also on the conception of the status of ideology and utopia considered as components of the social imagination. Ricœur criticizes other more familiar theories of ideology: ideology as the representation of dominant interests and ideology as the product of certain socio-psychological strains. Ricœur will specify in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* that the distorting and legitimating functions of ideology presuppose a prior integrating function. First, ideology can distort only because it is originally constitutive. Then, when a difference between a ruling group and the rest of the community arises, ideology comes in to legitimize the authority of the ruling group. Ideology as integration puts a limit on social war and prevents it from becoming a civil conflict. In short, the three functions of ideology are intricately linked. Ricœur puts ideology into dialogue with utopia. As Johann Michel summarizes, for Ricœur "ideology can be recognized only through the utopian possibilities which unmask it, the idea of an unlimited and unconstrained communication in the Habermasian sense can fulfill this utopian function." (28) In short, utopian ability presents new horizons of expectation to societies, namely it offers alternative ways of organizing the social space. For Ricœur utopia's ability to challenge ideology is restorative and it is clearly one of its positive aspects. Specifically, according to Ricœur utopia allow us to create and preserve a distance from reality in order to develop a better understanding of the social contexts in which we live out our daily lives

In particular, in the debate this polarity in the social imagination arises when reflecting on the interplay of continuity and discontinuity in history. Ricœur states that: "we are always in a dialectical relationship between what Reinhart Koselleck [...] calls a horizon of expectation and a space of experience. One should not go outside this polarity." (57-58) It is in this context that Ricœur evokes the concept of *retroaction*. As he says, "this concept is quite important for us: when there is a breakthrough of truth, we are at the same time able to re-connect it, precisely because we are not at an absolute beginning." (63) Castoriadis does not accept Ricœur's conclusions. He strongly criticizes the notion of utopia conceiving it in a Marxist sense as a flight from reality, as something that is forever inaccessible. Johann Michel explains this refusal stressing that "Castoriadis ultimately rejects utopia, because he adheres to the revolutionary project (of a radical transformation of society in the sense of autonomy). Conversely, we could say that Ricœur adheres to utopias because he is not (or is no longer) revolutionary." (29) Therefore, while Castoriadis emphasizes revolutionary change, Ricœur emphasizes overarching lines of continuity internal to history.

Johann Michel's excellent introduction invites the reader to focus on the shared anthropological root of Castoriadis' and Ricœur's theories of the social imaginary. Understanding this implicit point makes the dialogue even more fecund. Against Marx's conception of human being as *Homo Faber* or *Homo Laborans*, for Castoriadis and Ricœur the human is first a *Homo Loquax*. As Johann Michel claims, for these thinkers the human is conceived "not only as a speaking human being, but as a human who exchanges, imagines, invents, and transmits signs, meanings, symbols, texts, and stories." (21) While Ricœur learned about this anthropological root

from the hermeneutic tradition and from the passage through Freudian psychoanalysis, Castoriadis inherits this root principally from the influence of Lacan, i.e. from the psychoanalysis that he theorized and practiced.

Finally, I want to mention that in their dialogue Castoriadis and Ricœur we can clearly experience, using Ricœur's definition, a depiction of resemblance across difference. Castoriadis and Ricœur are on the two different connecting sides of a bridge, namely the bridge of social imagination. The entire bridge does not fall, even though it is divided into independent-connected sections and a redundant structure. The dialogue between Castoriadis and Ricœur offers rich resources for further reflection on social reality, enabling us to put into practice what Ricœur calls the "gesture of innovation-tradition." (68)

<sup>1</sup> The English translation of this book, edited by Suzi Adams, has just been published under the title *Ricœur and Castoriadis in Discussion. On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary*, (Roman and Littlefield, 2017). This book, which constitutes a part of the series *Social Imaginaries*, is enriched by interesting critical essays on Ricœur and Castoriadis's dialogue (George H. Taylor, Johann P. Arnason, Jean-Luc Amalric, François Dosse, and Suzi Adams). The English quotations in my review are from Scott Davidson's translation of the dialogue and Johann Michel's preface.