I only met Cornelius Castoriadis once, when he visited the Philosophy Department at Essex University in the spring of 1990 to give a series of lectures and seminars over several days. The impression he made was unforgettable. Here was clearly one of the last of a venerable line of philosopher-militants – someone whose political commitment to the deepest kind of thinking made the usual round of academic debate pale into insignificance. I have frequently found the polemical tone of Castoriadis’s writing, even when dealing with abstract theoretical issues, one of the least comfortable aspects of his work, a stylistic residue of the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. But one has to acknowledge also the immense strengths which this passionate engagement implied. Castoriadis’s often caustic dismissal of his opponents – what one of the other distinguished speakers in our final-day conference at Essex described as the “piss and vinegar” – was part of the whole extraordinary package. It was the style of someone for whom philosophy was still connected to the idea of changing the world.

This personal and political commitment helps to explain the immense weight which is put on the concept of the imagination in Castoriadis’s work – a weight which increased over the years. For it is the unforeseeable creativity of the imagination which forms the core of his notion of autonomy as a revolutionary goal. A subsidiary motive for this stress on imagination was undoubtedly Castoriadis’s need to distance himself from the influence of Lacanian thought, which was so pervasive in France in the 1960s, when he turned towards psychoanalysis. But this is not to say that his attitude to Lacan was unremittingly hostile. On the contrary, he pays tribute to him on a number of occasions, in particular for his reformulation of the significance of the Oedipus complex, with its clear detachment of the symbolic paternal function from the actual person of the father. But Castoriadis does take strong exception to the Lacanian notion of the “symbolic order,” because of what he regards as its threat to the ideal of autonomy:

The “Law” and the “symbolic” (just like the idea of structure in ethnology and sociology) erase the instituting society and reduce the instituted society to a collection of dead rules, indeed Rules of Death, in the face of which the subject (in order to be ‘structured’) must be immersed in passivity.¹

As we know, Castoriadis rejected the idea of an immutably given symbolic structure or order, and proposed instead the notion of an “imaginatory institution of
society.” His emphasis was on the creativity of any such institution (the fact that it cannot be subject to any deterministic principle). But we could also say that, for Castoriadis, we need to be able to give a genetic account of the emergence of social order, since unless we understand the forces which bring a social order into being, we will not be in a position to bring about change.

At first sight, there is indeed a major contrast between Lacan and Castoriadis here. Following Lévi-Strauss, whose version of structuralism was equally hostile to genetic questions, Lacan insisted on a radical break between the “symbolic order” and the material – and even biological – levels of reality. “The symbolic order,” Lacan affirmed in his second Seminar, “is rejected by the libidinal order.”2

And in the same text he put forward the hypothesis that:

This symbolic order, since it is always posited as a whole, as forming a self-contained universe – and even as forming the universe as such, as distinct from the world – must also be structured as a whole, in other words it forms a dialectical structure which is complete.”3

Significantly, Lacan does not demur when Jean Hyppolite, who was in the audience for this seminar, back in 1952–3, remarks: “The symbolic function is for you, if I understand correctly, a transcendent function [une fonction de transcendance].” He merely responds that the transcendence he has in mind is that of an implacable ideal machine, rather than some Platonic guiding notion of the Good.

Castoriadis, on the face of it, would have rejected any notion of the institution of society as transcendent. But, at the same time, many of his formulations might lead one to wonder whether, on his own account, the social order is ultimately any less constraining. For example, in his essay “The Imaginary,” Castoriadis states:

The institution produces, in conformity with its norms, individuals that by construction are not only able but bound to reproduce the institution. The ‘law’ produces the ‘elements’ in such a way that this very functioning embodies, reproduces and perpetuates ‘law.’4

Castoriadis frequently stresses that this stamping of social form on the psyche must be regarded as a “violent imposition” (in his own phrase). Thus, his account of the relation between psyche and society seems to involve a permanent clash between the social order of imaginary significations and the spontaneous “flux of representations” which forms the creative core of the individual mind, a flux which must be regimented and controlled. Although the terms of this account are very different from Lacan’s description of a “transcendent” symbolic order, it is hard to see how it could be regarded as more politically optimistic. Our puzzlement is likely to increase when we read Castoriadis’s assertion that “Neither permanent biological ‘needs,’ nor eternal psychical ‘drives,’ ‘mechanisms,’ or ‘desires’ can account for society and history.”5 For is this not transcendence under another name? The short answer to this question is “no” – but only because
Castoriadis traces the process of social institution back to an origin which lies “behind,” prior to biology, drives and desire, an origin which he calls “radical imagination.”

In other words, Castoriadis can reject the notion, dear to Lacanians, of an inevitably “alienated” relation of the individual subject to the social order – but only because, on his account, both the imaginary of the individual, the creative power manifested in the ceaseless unconscious flux of representations, and the socially instituted imaginary, have their roots in the “radical imagination.” So, in a typical passage from *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis writes of “the question of the psyche which, in truth, is inseparable from the question of the social-historical, two expressions of the radical imagination – here, as radical imagination; there, as social imaginary.”

However, skeptical readers might wonder whether this is any more than a nominal solution. For arguably what Castoriadis has done is to extend the concept of the imagination to describe three discrete processes or realities. Indeed, these three different processes – and their related ontological levels – can be discerned quite clearly in his essay “Merleau-Ponty and the Ontological Tradition.” Firstly, there is the imagination as “primary ontological region.” This Castoriadis explicates as “*Vorstellung* . . . that is not placing-something-in-front-of-someone, but is rather that by which and in which every placing and every place exist,” or as an “originary positing starting from which every position – as ‘act’ of a subject or ‘determination’ of an object – has being and meaning.” From this “originary positing” there emerges a subject of the flux of representations, but this emergence is itself correlated – in a paradoxical structure of reciprocal inclusion – with “the creation and social-historical institution of a language and of a public world.” The affinity of Castoriadis’s thinking with the speculative models of the “identity of identity and non-identity” which are central to German Idealism – and especially the affinity with Fichte – is unmistakable here. One notes the strong resemblance between Castoriadis’s three forms of imagination – let us call them “radical,” “social,” and “subjective” – and the three principles (absolute “I,” “not-I,” and limited “I” confronting “not-I”) of Fichte’s 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*.

My worry about Castoriadis’s thought is not that it takes up again these profound problems of *how* the very distinction between the subjective and the objective worlds comes into being. Despite Lacan’s attempt to declare genetic questions intellectually “off limits,” an attempt which parallels Lévi-Strauss’s dismissal of any inquiry into the origin of language, these questions will always force themselves back onto the philosophical agenda in one form or another. Rather, my concern is that the concept of imagination in Castoriadis’s writing is – on the one hand – over-extended, and – on the other hand – insufficiently flexible and differentiated to capture the emancipatory processes to which, as a political thinker and activist, he was so committed. To put this in another way, I believe we need to hold onto a distinction between imagination and symbol, or perhaps it would be better to say: between the imaginary and symbolic dimen-
visions of meaning. But we need to do so without paying the unacceptable Lacanian price of a symbolic order which has no genesis.

I now want to suggest, albeit briefly, that important features of such a position can be found in Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms. There are times when Cassirer sounds like a Castoriadian *avant la lettre*. For example, he begins his essay “Zur Logik des Symbolbegriffs” with a discussion of the problems which the concept of identity has confronted, ever since Parmenides, in seeking to grasp a world which cannot be neatly divided into subjective and objective, ideal and sensory features. Cassirer makes clear that what Castoriadis would term “ensemble-identitarian” thinking cannot capture “that mental activity [geistige Tätigkeit] through which we build up a ‘world’ in its characteristic formations, in its order, and in its being thus and so.” Many other emphases of Castoriadis’s thought can also be found in Cassirer – for example, the stress on the astonishing power of the mind to generate images (Bildkraft des Geistes), and on the “wealth of this power, the unpredictable multiplicity and plenitude of its modes of expression.” However, where Cassirer differs from Castoriadis is in describing this activity as symbolic activity, rather than as the activity of the radical imagination. The creation of a symbol, for Cassirer, is the creation of a novel, inextricable fusion of image and meaning.

Furthermore, for Cassirer it is possible to detect a progressive logic of symbolic forms, moving from myth, through religion and art, with their strong imagistic elements, to the more abstract, less sensorily embedded descriptions of relations, for example causal relations, to be found in modern natural science. This development involves the capacity of subjects gradually to detach themselves from the overwhelming power of sensory images and impressions. For Cassirer myth already contains an explanatory element – the concept of causality is already centrally at work in it – and the move from myth to religion already implies the achievement of a higher level of abstraction (as Freud also clearly recognized in the case of monotheism). At the same time, Cassirer does not wish to suggest that, taken overall, any symbolic form, as a mode of disclosure of the world, is inherently superior to any other. As he argues,

> Instead of measuring the content, meaning, and truth of mental forms [geistige Formen] in terms of something else which is directly reflected in them, we must discover in these forms themselves the measure and the criterion of their truth, their inner significance.

Compared with Cassirer, Castoriadis’s account of “social imaginary significations” is curiously static. Indeed, it is almost as though, in Castoriadis, societies, which he describes as always “in closure,” as collective monads, remain permanently at the level of what Cassirer refers to as “myth.” In myth, according to Cassirer:
Another way of putting this point would be to ask why Castoriadis always refers to “social imaginary significations,” rather than simply to “social significations.” Wherein lies the force of the qualification “imaginary”? It betrays, I suggest, Castoriadis’s implicit assumption that meaning or signification cannot detach itself, even tendentially, from the imaginary – which, strangely enough, has here all its Lacanian implications of inertia and capture.

There are several features of Castoriadis’s work which support this reading. Firstly, Castoriadis appears not to acknowledge any process of reflection and rationalization which could diminish the hold of the image. Thus, he argues that to view a tool as a bare tool – in its naked “toolness,” as he puts it – is no less the expression of an imaginary signification than to experience it as laden with ritualistic meaning. In line with this, Castoriadis criticizes as “rationalistic” Marx’s view that, with increasing technical mastery over nature, mythology (as the expression of an attempt to comprehend and subdue nature) will disappear. However, he equates this Marxian perspective with the view that the “imaginary” as such is merely a “symptom and . . . a compensation,” thereby equating mythology and the imaginary. Secondly, Castoriadis frequently describes autonomy itself as an “imaginary signification,” which he sets alongside the imaginary signification of the “unlimited expansion of ‘rational mastery’.” In one sense this is logical, given Castoriadis’s assumptions, since what else could a nodal point of human thought and striving be, except an “imaginary signification”? But it also contradicts what Castoriadis states clearly elsewhere, that autonomy consists in the capacity to reflect on the socially instituted significations: “An autonomous society means a society in which collective reflectiveness has reached its maximum.” Thirdly, one could also raise the obvious normative question: if both autonomy and unlimited mastery are imaginary significations, why should one be preferred to the other?

In my view, a more coherent approach to these issues would emphasize that, while autonomy and instrumental rationalization are not of course equivalent processes, neither are they entirely separate. They both consist in an advance of reflective distancing, a progressive escape from enthrallment to a world of images. Naturally, it is only possible to theorize this process if one distinguishes between the imaginary and symbolic dimensions or poles of meaning. And it must be admitted that, despite all the philosophical and political reservations one might have about his thought, Lacan always understood symbolization as a kind of emancipatory process, releasing the subject from tutelage and stasis, from dependency on an alienating image. By contrast, Castoriadis’s all-embracing – I would say even, “all-engulfing” – conception of the imagination seems to leave no theoretical space for the reflexivity made possible by
the abstractive power of symbols, no matter how much he may invoke such reflectiveness as an ideal.

As I suggested at the beginning, the centrality of the imagination in Castoriadis’s work is – of course – not simply a matter of a theoretical approach to the functioning of human mind, and its social consequences, but is a deeply political issue. Yet here a final paradox arises. The centrality and pervasiveness of the imagination is crucial to the paradigm of militant, critical thought which Castoriadis so vividly embodied in his life and work. But at the same time, the very ontological profundity of the repressed creative potentialities which this thought invokes has the effect of postponing their realization *sine die*. Or, to put this in another way: it encourages us to overlook the modestly incremental but unmistakable ways in which autonomy and creativity can be realized and enhanced through initiatives in the here and now.

NOTES

This article essentially reproduces the text of a lecture delivered to the conference “Cornelius Castoriadis: Rethinking Autonomy,” held at the Maison Française, Columbia University, December 1–3, 2000. No attempt has been made to suppress the style of the original oral delivery.

3. Ibid., 232.
5. Ibid., 6.
8. Ibid., 284.
10. Ibid., 188.
11. Ibid., 79.