

Call for Papers

Democracy and Radical Imagination: Castoriadis Revisited

International Workshop

University of Vienna, Department of Political Science

May 25-26, 2023

Organized by Sara Gebh & Sergej Seitz | ERC Research Project *Prefiguring Democratic Futures*

That democracy is in crisis is a truism today. In recent years, many commentators have identified the disintegration of truth and facts as the core threat to democratic societies, and accordingly call for restoring our political sense of reality. In turn, this workshop proceeds from the conviction that we face at least as severe a crisis of our political *sense of possibility*: a crisis of political imagination. It has become increasingly difficult to even imagine democratic politics and democratic futurity differently, that is, significantly departing from the status quo of the minimal model of present, liberal western democracy. The infamous TINA dictum emblematically attests to the outright rejection of political creativity under the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. While democratic creativity withers away, progressive change seems to be outsourced to the field of technology, in terms of planned and anticipable ‘innovation’. This is all the more fatal in times of ecological disaster, where democratic political action is increasingly challenged by calls for establishing ‘authoritarian environmentalism’, often accompanied with technocratic ideas of climate engineering.

To explore paths for restoring and enlivening political imagination and our political sense of possibility, it seems apt to (re)turn to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. Nearly half a century after the publication of his magnum opus *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975), it is not only time to take stock and evaluate the relevance and productivity of his political philosophy for present discussions. Rather, with his distinctive account of democracy as autonomous self-institution and his notion of radical imagination at the heart of the political, Castoriadis’s thought may deliver conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks that help foster new, radical democratic imaginaries. Against this background, the workshop proposes to revisit the work of Castoriadis in order to explore how, to what extent, and in which respects it can be utilized or updated for tackling the crisis of imagination. To this end, the workshop convenes interdisciplinary participants from philosophy, political science, and sociology, rallying around the main question of whether Castoriadis’s thinking allows us to establish a notion of democratic imagination and/or democratic imaginaries fit for the challenges of the present.

Central Questions

- A. *Theorizing Democratic Imaginaries*: Recently, there has been a lot of research on different types of imaginaries, as for instance the broad discourse on ‘socio-technical imaginaries’ in science and technology studies. Following Castoriadis, we propose to explore the notion of ‘democratic imaginaries’: What are the components of a democratic imaginary? How can a specifically democratic imaginary be distinguished from other kinds of political imagination? In what ways can a democratic imaginary be revived, and how does it have to be adapted, in times of (political, ecological, military, pandemic) crises?

- B. *Rethinking History as Creation*: Based on Castoriadis's critique of a Marxist theory of history, we invite contributions that investigate his view of history as 'creation and destruction'. What is the role of the past in creating alternative visions of the future? How can we acknowledge history as made and always in-the-making without rendering its meaning fully contingent? What are the hidden potentials of conceiving the history of ideas, specifically, not as an unambiguous recounting of the past, but as a resource for keeping alive the self-instituting impulse of society?
- C. *Widening (Counter-)Institutional Imagination*: Castoriadis decidedly opposes functionalist theories of political institutions. Instead of analyzing institutions merely in terms of their instrumental rationality and stabilizing function, he points us towards the ways in which institutions incorporate, reflect, and reproduce imaginary meanings. In this vein, we want to ask—empirically and theoretically—how both established institutions as well as activist counter-institutions constrain and expand the horizon of political imagination. What kinds of concrete institutions or institutional features widen our sense of possibility today?

Format

We strive towards creating a true workshop-atmosphere that allows for a serious, productive, and collaborative engagement with each other's work. Workshop participants send in working papers (approx. 5000 words) in advance (deadline: April 30, 2023) and each participant prepares a commentary on one of the other papers. Each session begins with a brief opening statement by the author(s) on the background of the text (5 min), followed by a commentary (10 min) that opens the general discussion of the text.

Venue and Accommodation

The workshop will take place in-person at the University of Vienna. Online participation is not possible. There is no participation fee. The organizers are happy to give recommendations regarding travel arrangements. In individual cases, assistance with travel expenses may be provided.

Publication

We plan to publish the workshop's proceedings as a special issue in a peer-reviewed journal and/or in an edited volume.

Timeline

Submission deadline: December 31, 2022

Communication of results: January 31, 2023

Deadline for working papers: April 30, 2023

Submission & Contact

Please send your application with an abstract of max. 500 words and a brief biographical note to sara.gebh@univie.ac.at and sergej.seitz@univie.ac.at. For any questions regarding the CFP, please contact both Sara Gebh and Sergej Seitz.

