

BEING OR CHAOS? HEIDEGGER AND CASTORIADIS AT THE CROSSROADS

Andrew Cooper
University of Sydney

ABSTRACT: Martin Heidegger and Cornelius Castoriadis both understood Greek tragedy in relation to a political rupture in the Athenian world, a rupture containing insights into the ontological grounding of human beings. This paper critically explores the role of 'the Greeks' in Heidegger and Castoriadis' political thought, drawing implications for the availability of the Greeks for any philosophical thinking. After his infamous Rectoral Address in 1933 Heidegger turned explicitly to Greek tragedy in his lectures at Freiburg (*Introduction to Metaphysics and Hölderlin's Hymn*) to search for resources that might prove fundamental to instigating a new political era. However, he constructed a transcultural notion of 'the Greeks' at the expense of seeing tragedy as the development of a public institution that facilitated the criticism of the shared values and ideas of a particular historical epoch. Castoriadis, on the other hand, saw tragedy not simply as an awareness of the groundlessness of human society, but as the ceaseless questioning of what society is for. For Castoriadis, the Greeks are present to us in the same political rupture we experience today. In this paper I will argue that Castoriadis is more successful than Heidegger in developing an account of human creativity that holds open the problematic relation between the created world and human beings, though not without significant problems. I will conclude by suggesting that Euripides, a tragedian overlooked by Castoriadis, can supply some critical resources for addressing them.

KEYWORDS: Ontology; Tragedy; Heidegger; Castoriadis; Creation; Euripides

In a seminar between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger in 1929, Cassirer posed the following question:

How is it possible that we can as much as grasp an object of art which is something objectively there and structured? ... Maybe not all questions in philosophy can be asked this way, but I think, it is only *after* having asked them that one can proceed to Heidegger's questions.¹

1. Carl Hamburg, 'A Cassirer-Heidegger Seminar', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Dec.), 1964, p. 221

Cassirer took issue with Heidegger's basic ontology, arguing that Heidegger problematically views works of art as transcultural entities without firstly considering how art is intelligible from one individual existence to another. He suggests that if we begin by clarifying the condition of the possibility of art, particularly in terms of how a piece of art from a social and historical time radically different from our own confronts us with a different set of ontological presumptions, we discover that there is not a single ontological structure to human life but a variety of them. While Heidegger admits that the essential point we gain from the history of philosophy is that 'the realisation ... of its different standpoints goes to the very root of philosophical work', he responds to Cassirer by arguing that we have no choice but to understand the 'variety of ontological structures' through a question that comes prior to transcendental analysis. That is, from the question of the idea of being:

To repeat Plato's *question* [what is that which is?] cannot mean to withdraw to the *answers* of the Greeks. Being as such is split up and the big problem to comprehend this inner multitude of modes of being from an idea of being. Mere mediating attempts can never help us get on. It is of the essence of philosophy, as a finite concern of man, that it is also confined to this finitude of man.²

While recognising the 'split' nature of being, Heidegger argues that Cassirer's method overlooks the idea of being that is the basic question at issue in the mediation we encounter in the work of art. In his approach, we should not focus our attention of being's fractured modality but the fundamental question that underpins it.

Cassirer and Heidegger's discussion clarifies the divergence between post-Kantian thought and Heidegger's developing position as a dispute over the primary question of philosophy. For Cassirer, philosophy properly begins with elucidating the transcendental configuration of the mind that makes thought and communication possible. Only then can we proceed to asking the ontological questions we encounter. Alternatively, Heidegger believed that Cassirer and the Kantian tradition presume a singular idea of being that is located in the shared finitude of human beings. In his view philosophy properly begins by interrogating what that idea of being is.

The aim of this paper is to place Castoriadis and Heidegger into dialogue, and the Cassirer-Heidegger seminar provides an entry into elucidating the connections and divergences between their work. Castoriadis shared Cassirer's attempt to refigure Kant to face the problems of contemporary philosophy, and while they have different points of interest Castoriadis took Cassirer's 'variety of ontological structures' as a way to explore the social and political implications of Kant's philosophy.

In order to place Heidegger and Castoriadis in conversation this paper will take Cassirer's question of the work of art as its focus. Heidegger and Castoriadis saw art as a mode of clarifying their respective ontological frameworks. In particular, both philosophers understood the original moment of philosophy in regards to Greek tragedy, but came to vastly different conclusions on the ontological implications of tragic art. What Heidegger and Castoriadis have in common is that they both held that

2. *ibid.*

Greek tragedy does not simply reveal the false ontological presumptions of traditional philosophy but uncovers the foundation of political and collective being. In other words, tragedy provides a certain insight into the political nature of ontology and the ontological nature of politics. Though locating the connections and conflict between Heidegger and Castoriadis around the question and challenge of Greek tragedy I argue that Castoriadis is more successful than Heidegger in developing an account of human creativity that navigates the relation between ontology and politics, though not without encountering significant problems.

PHILOSOPHY AND TRAGEDY

By turning to Greek tragedy for critical resources to clarify the aims of both philosophy and politics, Heidegger and Castoriadis enter an ongoing conversation in the tradition of philosophy. For modern philosophers attempting to come to terms with the upheaval of their own times, Greek tragedy represented a creative mode of thinking during a similar era of rapid transition. Georg Lukács conceptualised tragic drama in this paradigm, describing tragedy a form of drama in which ‘God must leave the stage, but must yet remain a spectator.’³ His observation links the ancient dilemma of the flight of the gods to modern disenchantment. On one side, God’s presence in creation deprives his creatures of freedom and removes their autonomous value. However, on the other side, God’s absence equally plunders the world of meaning as all things become arbitrary, leaving human beings to a chaotic existence of endless repetition. Thus in the search for value in a pagan order, God remains a judge yet is denied an active role in human life. His presence is negative, providing the memory of value in a world that is radically on its own.

Terry Eagleton describes tragedy as the presentation of a hero caught up in this historical crossroad.⁴ For the German Idealists, the crossroad was constructed by Kant’s critical philosophy, generating a historical moment they attempted to figure through the experience of the ancient Greeks. Kant’s critical project effectively cut off the ideal values of freedom, totality, and the ethical community of ends from the phenomenal sphere. In other words, he removed ideals from the very sphere in which they are supposed to be active, stripping the world that we encounter of its inherent value.⁵ How we can speak of value in a profane world becomes one of the central problems for modern philosophers, forcing the scope of philosophy to retract from metaphysics and turn to the world of lived experience in order to understand value. However, this move entails a significant problem. From a phenomenological point of view, if there is any value to be found in the empirical world it seems that it can only be in relation to ourselves, engendering a relativity that threatens to undermine the universal conditions of value. Value is not destroyed but stands at an unattainable distance: our access to it is not immediate but mediated by the finitude of human judgment. For philosophers committed to the post-

3. Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. A. Bostock, London, Merlin Press, 1974, p. 154.

4. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, p. 209.

5. See Eagleton *ibid.*, pp. 209 ff.

Kantian settlement, the noumenal world threatened to swallow human value in the abyss left by the absence of God, placing the modern subject in a crisis of meaning.

The fractured standpoint of modernity sets the parameters for the philosophical projects of both Heidegger and Castoriadis. The question of how we are to orientate ourselves in relation to the temporal crossroads encountered in modernity is the starting point for their work, a junction where creation confronts tradition, where the memory of absolute value meets the abyssal space of God's absence. Both Heidegger and Castoriadis grapple with the question of whether humans are fated to be ever falling into an alienated relation to their own existence or whether some kind of authentic self-assertion is possible. What concerns us presently is how Heidegger and Castoriadis conceptualized the possibility of an authentic kind of praxis and what they found in Greek tragedy to assist them in the task. Both thinkers are concerned with the conditions of the possibility of creating the world as a work of art, seeing the socio-historical setting that produced Greek tragedy as the original moment of political creativity. We will begin with Heidegger where I will suggest that his inability to articulate the possibility of authentic self-assertion elucidates the depth of the problem both he and Castoriadis confront.

HEIDEGGER AND TRAGEDY

Heidegger's understanding of Greek tragedy represents an ongoing struggle with human action and its relation to history. The problem remaining after his account of Dasein from *Being and Time* is how to understand the emergence of social institutions such as language and politics without giving recourse to the strong account of subjectivity he attempted to overcome. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger understands Dasein, the being for whom Being is an issue, to be in a creative antagonism with its environment. What is important for us to note is the transcendentalism that lingers in Heidegger's early work: his exploration of Dasein as the being who (in some way or other) creates the very world that ensnares it.⁶ While suggesting some level of agency in the process of Dasein creating its own world he does not explore the creative faculties themselves, as this would require the presumption of a 'self' that possesses certain capabilities before the task of questioning has even begun.

The problem for Heidegger is that without a creative self it seems impossible for

6. While Heidegger's language avoids words that imply a strong account of the subject such as 'creation', what I mean here is the way that Dasein brings its own world with it wherever it goes. In other words, the world is not there independently of Dasein. In phrases such as 'Dasein is an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly toward that Being' we see the way that Dasein projects an understanding onto its world, one gained from what 'they' say, from experience and through Dasein's Being through care [Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1962, p. 78]. Heidegger avoids using words like 'creative' because they imply a conscious human action, holding that Dasein's comportment to the world through care are primary to the understanding or reflective thought. By creative I mean a spontaneous mode of bringing into being that which precedes conscious action. Dasein is creative in this sense because it makes a world for itself, a world that is so close that it disappears from conscious thought.

human beings to be anything other than a conglomeration of inherited meanings and interpretations. In other words, how can Dasein be authentically free-for-itself without a locale of creativity, a self-assertive core? This is a problem that Heidegger will attempt to solve during the years he described as his ‘turning’, finding in the tragic poets an authentic kind of *techne*—knowing, art, craft—that he believed could lead a people in a collective assertion against the power of inauthenticity. While his highly dubious political actions and his exploration of the semantic limits of the *polis* during this time reveal a thinker grappling with political creation, my claim is that Heidegger increasingly missed the political nature of Greek tragedy. The self-reflective nature of Greek thought and the development of critical institutions that facilitated the questioning of shared ideas and values is obscured by his method of approaching tragic art as ontological texts. I will identify three significant moments in his understanding of political creation that show a parallel between his attempt to articulate the site of novel political action and his increasing reliance on the role of Being as the *energeia* (setting-into-work) of political creation. These moments are captured in his Rector’s Address (1932), *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) and *Hölderlin’s Hymn* (1942).

1. *The Rector’s Address*

Heidegger’s infamous Rector’s Address entitled ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University’ gives testament that he believed his theory could have a transforming impact of the direction of National Socialism.⁷ It displays his growing conviction that human thinking needs to confront the foundations of the crisis he identified in the present age, causing a dramatic shift in the hierarchies of active life that he articulated in *Being and Time*. Following Goethe and Hölderlin, Heidegger’s address marks an attempt to embark on a project that would link education, history, a people and scientific inquiry in a time of crisis, attempting to find the energy for this project in the power of original moments. In his mind, original moments like the birth of Greek philosophy involve an eruption of radical innovation and rethinking, accepting the determining power of history while at the same time taking a stand within it.⁸

Heidegger argues that the task of science is not simply to outline the conditions of the possibility of a new authenticity as he intended in *Being and Time* but to be instrumental in bringing it about. The alienated relation that the modern world finds to Being is based on a perverted kind of science that uses theoretical knowledge to shape and

7. Dennis Schmidt connotes the Heidegger of the Rector’s Address with Plato of the *Republic*. Both Heidegger and Plato thought they could educate a tyrant and turn power in the direction of refection. However, both thinkers, according to Schmidt, would learn the lesson of power as the great mistake of their lives. Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: tragedy and ethical life*, USA, Indiana University Press, 2001.

8. Importantly, Heidegger experienced an epiphany in the early 1930s, recording his remarkable observation that ‘being free, being a liberator means participating in history’ [Heidegger, *Collected Works*, in Safranski, R. *Martin Heidegger: Between good and evil*, trans. E. Osers, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 222]. This realisation had an immense impact on Heidegger’s course of action, seeing the possibility of being-free as a mode of being that is politically and historically engaged.

domesticate the natural world rather than allowing it to present itself as it is.⁹ The hubris of technological science had placed the German people already outside of the kind of relation to Being that is necessary for political creation. Alternatively, he states that the Greeks were conceived of *theoria* as the ‘implantation of the highest form of *praxis*.’ Both Plato and Aristotle saw *theoria* as a way of existing, as a *praxis*, creating in Heidegger’s understanding a truly historical mode of being. As *praxis*, science for the Greeks is ‘the questioning holding of one’s ground in the midst of the ever self-concealing totality of what is. This active perseverance knows, as it perseveres, of its impotence before fate.’¹⁰

For Heidegger, Greek tragedy captures this original moment of science. He turns to Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* in order to explore Prometheus as the first philosopher.¹¹ What characterizes Prometheus as the original philosopher is his knowledge of the limits of human creativity, embodying the science tempered by art that Nietzsche called for in section 15 of *Birth of Tragedy*.¹² For Heidegger, the first philosopher appears in Greek tragedy when the force of necessity or the claim of destiny is acknowledged—when art takes its role of instructing science. Heidegger quotes Prometheus’ famous line delivered from his bed of torture: ‘*Techne*,’ he stammers, contemplating his impending eternity of pain, ‘is far weaker than necessity.’¹³ Prometheus is the protector of human kind, a figure who brought *techne* to mortals by stealing it from the gods. What identifies him as the first philosopher is that despite his intimate knowledge of the power of *techne* (which Heidegger translates as ‘knowing’)¹⁴ he is also aware of the overwhelming limits of knowing in light of destiny. From Prometheus we see that philosophy, the knowledge of the Being of beings, is both *theoria* (the highest form of *praxis*) and *techne*. As *techne* it involves a mode of disclosing via a particular *poiesis*, the production of a work of art as the setting-into-work of Being itself.

In this stage of Heidegger’s rapidly developing thought Greek tragedy is the original truth of philosophy. While *techne* was formerly linked to fallen everydayness in *Being and Time*, a mode of understanding where Dasein creates the world that ensnares it, Heidegger distinguishes a higher form of *techne*—a Promethean *techne*—that is adjusted to the unconcealment of the Being of beings.¹⁵ The tragic poets resist both a world

9. In Heidegger’s terms modern science is a ‘morbid semblance of a culture’ dragging ‘all that is strong into confusion and lets it suffocate in madness.’ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University and The Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts,’ *Review of Metaphysics* 38:3, March, 1985, p. 480

10. *ibid.*, p. 473.

11. *ibid.*, p. 472.

12. At the end of section 15, Nietzsche identifies the tendency of science to ‘hasten irresistibly to its limits,’ thus drawing us to face directly into the abyss. This experience, for Nietzsche, shows that logic itself is groundless, engendering a ‘tragic perception’ that requires art as a protection and saving power in order to be endured. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. C. Fadiman, New York, The Modern Library, 1954, p. 55

13. l. 513

14. Heidegger, ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University and The Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts,’ p. 472.

15. Taminiaux, *Poetics, Speculation and Judgment: The Shadow of the Work of Art from Kant to Phenomenology*, p. 158.

determined by the gods and the notion of human autonomy, giving voice to a mode of thinking (as *praxis*) that creates in this in-between space. It is this very resistance that is at the heart of philosophical thinking for Heidegger, and if coupled with political action might bring about a collective historical assertion that he anticipated in the infamous paragraph 74 of *Being and Time*.

2. *Introduction to Metaphysics*

Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) explores the superior kind of *techne* of his Rector's address, again with the aid of Greek tragedy. Turning to the inception of philosophical thought, Heidegger relates Greek tragedy to the pre-Socratic thinkers who explored the antagonism that arises between creators and their environments in order to uncover a form of thinking that does not harness itself to metaphysics. Tragic poetry is an act of thinking that does not ascribe to the inherited world of value but wrests Being from appearance, bringing it into unconcealment.

Heidegger no longer locates the most significant example of ontological thinking Aeschylus but now in Sophocles' celebrated choral ode in *Antigone*. This choral ode has found the attention of many philosophers, exploring the *denion* nature of human beings. *Denion* is a word that is difficult to translate without losing its original power. Heidegger's unique translation, stemming from Hölderlin's rendering, describes the human being as 'the uncanniest of the uncanny' (*to deinotaton*).¹⁶ This sense of 'uncanny' entails that human being necessarily finds itself cast out of its 'home.' What Sophocles articulates in the choral ode is a description of the being that is constantly remaking the world, a being that has always already departed from the familiar (i.e. from its nature). Shifting from his more moderate language in *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes this passage from the familiar as the use of violence/force (*Gewalt*) to create a self-understanding amidst the overwhelming power of beings as a whole. They use power against the overpowering, meaning that the only possible outcome is one of catastrophe. Heidegger believes that this violent quality captures the meaning of Sophocles' use of *techne*, which he no longer translates as 'knowing' but as 'transgressive knowledge.' For Heidegger, authentic human knowing looks out beyond that which is directly present-at-hand in order to set Being into work as something that *is* in such and such a way.¹⁷ *Techne* involves a very specific form of knowing that can mould something that in each case comes to being. In Heidegger's terms, *techne* 'puts Being to work in a being.'¹⁸

As he developed in *Being and Time*, Heidegger identifies that *techne* as transgressive knowledge holds within it a strange ability to both create and ensnare. As artful knowing, *techne* destroys a previous fitting-together of beings for the sake of creating another. The object of this violent knowledge is *dike*, which Heidegger understands as the governing structure of human life. *Dike* is normally translated as 'justice', but Heidegger argues that

16. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. G. Fried & R. Polt, London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 158.

17. *ibid*, p. 170.

18. *ibid*, p. 174

to translate it in a juridical-moral sense gives it a fixed essence outside of its relation to Being.¹⁹ Rather, he argues that *dike* connotes an organisation of being set into motion by the violence of human knowing. *Techne* denotes the historical being-there of humanity, the artful, creative relationship it has to the world. *Dike* connotes the presence of an overwhelming fittingness, a meaningfulness that Dasein has brought to its 'there'. The *deinon* (uncanny) finds its essence in both *techne* and *dike*, being both violent/transgressive and also overwhelmingly fitting. In Heidegger's terms, the 'deinatoton of the *deinon*, the strangest of the strange, lies in the conflict between *techne* and *dike*.²⁰ In other words, humanity is profoundly contradictory, embodying both violence and the establishment of order.

This rearticulation of ontological terms allows Heidegger to articulate the convergence between Parmenides and Sophocles as follows:

Being human determines itself from out of a relationship to beings as a whole. The human essence shows itself here to be the relation which first opens up Being to man. Being human, as the need for apprehending and gathering a being-driven into the freedom of undertaking *techne*, of the setting-into-work of Being, a setting-into-work which is itself knowing. This is History.²¹

What Sophocles and Parmenides reveal for Heidegger is that Being is not there to be thought, but that through the temporality of thinking Being is uncovered and set to work. There is an ontological compulsion to *techne* and to setting-into-work what *techne* knows because Being is an over-power (*Übermacht*) requiring a 'creative self-assertion,' a force that places humans before a 'constant decision' between unconcealment and Non-being.²² History in its fullest sense is the act of violent creation that brings something new into being. This, for Heidegger, is achieved by works: 'the work of the word in poetry, the work of stone in temple and statue, the work of *polis* as the historical place in which all this is grounded and preserved.'²³ By going beyond the familiar, such work leaves humanity without a place or home—the very meaning of historical creation. The making of a collective dwelling though violence within the absence of a home is the political horizon of Heidegger's thought in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the kind of making that could unite the German people with the Greeks in a common attack on unhomeliness.

3. Hölderlin's Hymn

After 1935, Heidegger continued to understand thinking in relation to tragedy in an attempt to reconceive the space of historical creation. His lectures on Hölderlin during 1942 published as *Hölderlin's Hymn* show a final and significant moment in his understanding of tragedy. This work is a searching text, suggesting that the monstrous

19. *ibid.*, p. 171

20. *ibid.*, p. 160

21. *ibid.*, p. 130

22. *ibid.*, p. 81, 84

23. *ibid.*, p. 146

events of the war find their origin in the strange possibilities of human life that is yet to grasp its own nature.²⁴ The war years had a significant impact on his thinking, causing him to question the capacity of human beings to become historical in the self-conscious manner he articulated in his earlier work. He explores Hölderlin's 'Der Ister' hymn, a poem concerned with finding a home or dwelling place within the possibilities of life, and compares it to Sophocles' exploration of unhomeliness in *Antigone*.

The significant change that occurs between *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Hölderlin's Hymn* is that the struggle between *techne* and *dike* that Heidegger found in the choral ode of *Antigone*, the struggle between transgressive knowledge and nature, is replaced by the ontological struggle between *polis* and *pelein*. In *Introduction to Metaphysics* the artist was seen as the creative agent exemplified by Parmenides and Sophocles who took a transgressive stance toward the metaphysics that held inherited meaning in place. This is the struggle of *techne* and *dike*. In *Hölderlin's Hymn* Heidegger isolates the conflict to the text itself, seeing Antigone as the exemplar of fitting human action as she gives way to the power of Being that draws her along her way.²⁵ *Polis* designates the space of appearance that unfolds from the *denion* nature of human beings. It is the location, the clearing, where Being sets humans on their way. On the other hand, *Pelein* refers to what is, the ontological semblance of beings within a historical setting determined by metaphysics. The replacement of the creative/antagonistic struggle with an ontological turning between being and appearance is the key element to Heidegger's 'turn', one that threatens the possibility any kind of political creation.

The Heidegger of *Hölderlin's Hymn* argues that tragedy is a poetic form that points our attention to the site where the reversal of all things is possible, to the *polis*. In the context of Hölderlin's river hymn, the poet must speak from the arable hearth of Being in order to set the people on their way. Heidegger's renewed emphasis on the ground of humans pushing them along the path of history marks an attempt to overcome any remnants of subjectivity that rely on a self-justifying ground or nature that lingered in his philosophy. Sophocles is no longer a profound example of a heroic resistance against the overwhelming semblance of being. Rather, he is a poet who profoundly gives voice to the opening of Being; he lets Being be by poetically depicting the human being in its uncanny essence.²⁶ Heidegger thus destroys the dialectical element of tragedy that, according to Hegel, is essential to the tragic genre.²⁷ Antigone's transgressive action is no longer a bold resistance against fixed notions of historical meaning but an embodiment of the uncanny essence of humanity by allowing her fateful calling to bury her brother unfold in her own being, rendering death the only way forward. Heidegger no longer uses the word 'Dasein' to describe the self-appearing individual, but describes humans

24. I say 'searching' though ultimately Heidegger defers the responsibility of the monstrous events of history to the uncanny essence of humankind. This deferral of responsibility is attacked in Castoriadis' understanding of tragedy.

25. Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn*, trans. W. McNeill and J. Davis, USA, Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 104.

26. *ibid.*, p. 118

27. G.W. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 1199.

as ‘the open’ or ‘the clearing,’ the space opened by Being where beings come into unconcealment.²⁸

In Heidegger’s account of the *polis* in *Hölderlin’s Hymn*, the consequence of giving increasing emphasis to the activity of Being is a corresponding collapse of the higher kind of *techne* he previously identified back into the *techne* of everydayness. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the *polis* marked the historical sphere of human being where history literally ‘turns’. In the *polis*, creators are able to resist the ontological semblance of the apparent order, bringing a new fitting-together of beings. However, in *Hölderlin’s Hymn* ‘the *polis* marks the pole, the swirl [*Wirbel*] in which and around which everything turns, the place where beings disclose themselves, and where human history unfolds.’²⁹ Heidegger understands Sophocles’ choral ode as poetic work that gives voice to the way that Athenian society began to comport itself towards beings in the opening of the *polis* rather than through pre-established meanings. However, the historical change of the *polis* is not the creative action of the citizenry. Rather, the *polis* is the sphere in which appearances crumble on their own to be replaced by newer ones, heralded by the poet. The ‘polar’ essence of the *polis* is something that concerns beings as a whole, entailing the pole around which beings, as manifest, ‘turn’.³⁰ For Heidegger, the uniqueness of the Greeks lies in their ability to devote their collective attention to the space where beings are manifest.

At the end of this trajectory all creation is violence. There is no mode of creation without alienation, violence, negation or deceit. In this final stage of Heidegger’s use of Greek tragedy, tragic insight affirms being without transgression as it no longer imagines or desires escape but can bear historical necessity joyously, actively allowing it to unfold. There is nothing Promethean about this kind of creation, and it has an implicit messianic structure. Here creation requires death and destruction in order for the new to emerge, generating an ever-expectant position of a creative age-to-come set to work by Being itself. Heidegger’s philosophy generates a circle so closed in on itself that even if a mode of action existed that *could* create peacefully or with novelty it would appear only as a contradiction or an illusion. The only way forward is to resign from breaking out and to let being break in, receiving ‘what is’ without predication or self-reference. The nostalgic structure of this waiting longs for a renewal of Greek spirit and knows the impossibility of bringing it by through creative *techne*.

CASTORIADIS AND TRAGEDY

Like Heidegger, Castoriadis also turned to Greek tragedy for the creative resources to work through a philosophical crisis regarding human freedom. However, from the very beginning of his discussion of tragic art we see not only a radically different approach to the work of art but an explicit attempt to undermine Heideggerian ontology.

In Castoriadis’ understanding, tragedy is not an original example of authentic praxis

28. Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn*, p. 91

29. *ibid.*, p. 81

30. *ibid.*

but a culturally specific institution. In his mind there is no definitive concept or essence of tragedy but only the history of tragedy as a dramatic art.³¹ As an institution, tragedy arose within the particular historical setting of Athens in the fifth century BC and lies on an ontological grounding that became possible only within a city where the democratic process was reaching its climax. Castoriadis found tragedy's uniqueness in its ability to resist presenting the chaos that underlies human society as a fixed and determined form. Writing against Heidegger's account of institutional emergence from the swirl of Being, Castoriadis held that tragedy does not wrest Being from appearance but rather *presents* being as chaos.³² By this he means that tragedy does not presume a univocal account of being but turns on the very realisation of the variety of ontological structures operating even in the same city. The unveiling of being as chaos confronted the spectators with their own creativity, revealing their shared institutions to be products of their own creation. In short, tragedy provided the imaginary conditions for the institution of democracy to be a social possibility.

Castoriadis' fundamental criticism of Heidegger is that after exposing the finite ground of human being that problematizes all historical meaning (Being, abyss, *abgrund* or Chaos), he then presents it *as* Being.³³ In other words, Heidegger's univocal account of Being forms a new kind of ground that obscures the chaos—and hence the representational freedom of the imagination—that lies at the basis of human society. His criticism somewhat misrepresents Heidegger, for in Heidegger's work Being is not some kind of object from which other beings come into the open but rather the sheer manifestation of what is. However, the intention of Castoriadis' criticism is to argue that the ground of human being is not unified and neither can it be represented as a totality. The creative nature of the imagination is always already making the world through our engagement with it, meaning that there is no hierarchy between a lower, inauthentic *techne* and a higher form but merely creation as such (whether Castoriadis sustains this position will be central to our discussion). Such an adjudication would require the idea of being against which to adjudicate the status of our creativity. In Castoriadis mind, creation is devoid of value. Creation is a fact, a spontaneous movement of the imagination that interrupts what is plentiful and is thus always already a mode of destruction. Castoriadis' argument is that human beings *cannot* 'let Being be' for we are at every moment creating and ensembling a unique ontological vista.

Castoriadis resists Heidegger's ontology in order to provide a re-examination of the ancient problematic of *nomos* and *phusis* which he translates as 'human law' and 'nature'. He argues that philosophy has privileged nature as the determining ground of human institutions rather holding collective deliberation, that is, human creation, as their origin.

31. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*, unpublished, 2003, p. 318. His notion of tragedy as an institution builds significantly from the historical anthropology of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. See Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*, trans. J. Lloyd, Sussex, Harvester Press, 1972.

32. Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 284

33. Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, trans. D. Curtis, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997b, p. 6.

Thus ‘the Greeks’ do not provide a vision of a people in harmony with both intellect and nature, but clarify the fundamental disjunction between them. Heidegger’s work opens the possibility of seeing the groundlessness of human institutions but fails to provide an alternative mode of action that can identify how human beings are actively involved in the very institutions that form them. In Castoriadis mind, this is because Heidegger could not see the historical particularity of the Greeks. In his mind ‘the Greeks’ are not a transcultural entity available for our reflection but are better understood as an ever-unfolding social and historical project located in Athens. He describes the idea of ‘the Greeks’ as a *germ*, opening an unrepairable wound that infected human history.³⁴ He identifies two elements of the social-historical world of Athens that continue to infect our minds today and prevent us from becoming comfortable with the current state of things; namely the constant questioning of the political institution—philosophy—and the collective, self-explicit creation of the answer—politics.³⁵

Castoriadis’ found the basis for his account of *nomos* and *phusis* in Marx, leading to his understanding of tragedy as a kind of presentation. In *German Ideology*, Marx posited that

it is clear that individuals certainly make one another, physically and mentally, but do not make themselves.³⁶

For Marx, consciousness is conscious being, a representation (*Vorstellung*) of actual life (the process by which humans produce the conditions for their experience) for each individual. However, as representation, consciousness is merely a shadow of actual life that Marx terms ‘ideology’, a type of consciousness where ‘men and their circumstances appear upside-down.’³⁷ In other words, what is derivative from actual life, such as class relations or monetary systems, present themselves as originative in ideology. Thus the

34. Castoriadis’ notion of the germ is an attempt to articulate the political rupture of Athens and its revolutionary potential today without the nostalgia of the neoclassicists. It functions to respond to the attacks on his so-called ‘idealism’ by critics such as Agnes Heller. Heller argues that despite constructing an explicitly anti-metaphysical system of thought, Castoriadis return to Athens as paradigmatic of democracy involves a return to Plato’s metaphysics, seeing Greek democracy as the Ideal, and the closer contemporary projects of democracy come to this Ideal result in their greater reality. However, while Heller’s argument is overstated, she identifies the central difficulty in Castoriadis’ project—his need to link being with some kind of value in order to give normative content to the project of liberation. Heller, A & Fehér, F. *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*, London, Transaction Publishers, 1991, p. 498.

35. This understanding of Athenian democracy mirrors Karl Korsch’s philosophical vision of revolutionary Marxism, characterizing Greek society a little too neatly. In *Marxism and Philosophy*, Korsch attempted to reunite the theory of Marxism with its revolutionary purpose where theoretical discussion and practice must be combined, writing against the dogmatic Marxism of the Second International. Revolution for Korsch involves both action and criticism, uniting politics and philosophy in the same liberating project. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. F. Halliday, London, NLB, 1929, p. 53.

36. Karl Marx & Fredrick Engles, *German Ideology*, trans. Lawrence & Wishart, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1970, p. 56. This insight from Marx has a significant influence on Castoriadis’ understanding of autonomy as a collective project, as the forms of society are collectively made. Further, it highlights an interesting connection with Heidegger’s concept of the equiprimodality of Being and Being-with (*Mitsein*) in *Being and Time*.

37. *ibid.*, p. 47

condition for ideology becoming aware of itself and denouncing itself *as* ideology is to consider actual life—the modes of production that provide the conditions for ideology. Thus to abandon the shadows of ideologies for life itself is to abandon representation (*Vorstellung*) for presentation (*Darstellung*):

Where speculation ends—in real life—there real, positive science begins: the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of man.³⁸

Marx's critique of ideology has a remarkably similar structure to Plato's cave allegory and we can see the same basic structure operative in Castoriadis' analysis.³⁹ However, while Castoriadis took Marx's split between ideology and ontology he believed that Marx reified 'actual life', maintaining a determinate ground to social and historical life. Thus he shifted Marx's basic ontology to argue that tragedy turns on the presentation of being as *chaos*, exposing the foundation that lies beneath the representations of social institutions as the groundlessness of creation. For Castoriadis, tragedy is an awareness of the absence of (complete) order for humankind, entailing that institutions and the world of *nomos* are radically open to question.⁴⁰

Thus for Castoriadis, tragic insight consists of an explicit self-awareness that humanity is not determined but self-created.⁴¹ This implies that in our modern awareness of historical creation—that history is the work of our judging, willing and creating—the Greeks are *present to us* in our imagination of the world. Turning to the Greeks does not look to a lost authenticity, but clarifies the distinction between *nomos* and *phusis* in our own political imagination. What was unique about the Athenian *polis* in Castoriadis' conception was that it promoted a critical self-examination of its own philosophical and political foundations. It is a social creation in which criticism of ideas, opinions and shared values becomes an institution. For Castoriadis, this examination of the foundations of society *is* the work of philosophy, meaning that tragedy is a kind of philosophical praxis. While Heidegger argued that the *polis* allowed the Athenians to see the uncanny essence of human beings, Castoriadis suggested that as the Athenians created the *polis*, the *polis* created a kind of being that is aware of its creative abilities—a new anthropological type of social being. The *polis* revealed that the social world truly belongs to *nomos*, implying that social institutions only come into being because humans create them.

38. *ibid.*, p. 48

39. This does not at all entail that Castoriadis' project is somehow platonic. Rather, the manner in which Plato's metaphysics looks beyond the way things appear for the logical structure behind them is the same move that psychoanalysis or anti-metaphysical philosophy also takes. What this structure allows us to see is that there is nothing more metaphysical than an attempt to overcome metaphysics. The discussion is rather what *kind* of metaphysics we are talking about.

40. By chaos Castoriadis means that the world is not subject to meaningful laws. First there is total disorder, chaos, the formless void. Then order is created in the form of cosmos: 'But at the 'roots' of the world, beyond the familiar landscape, chaos always reigns supreme. The order of the world has no 'meaning' for man: it posits the blind necessity of genesis and birth, on one hand, of corruption and catastrophe—death of the forms—on the other.' Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 273.

41. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*, trans. H. Arndt, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 7.

The tragic insight that law belongs to the realm of *nomos* begins with an accusation of unlawfulness where the citizenry collectively appealed against the law that they imagined to be divinely sanctioned. This is the tragic paradox as such: the gods institute the law *and* that the law is unjust. Such an aporia grounds tragic ontology on the groundless, entailing a search for *de jure* justification of social institutions.⁴² Castoriadis holds that such a claim begins a historical trajectory that draws the very foundations of human society and being into question, engendering a project of liberation. In his understanding, a colossal breach occurs within Athens between Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in 460 BCE and Sophocles' *Antigone* in 442 BCE. *Prometheus Bound* presents Prometheus, a superhuman creature, giving human beings what makes them truly human.⁴³ Less than twenty years later Sophocles' depiction of the human essence responds directly to the question of origins without recourse to the gods. For Sophocles the essence of humankind (the fact of being *denion*) is its self-creation. In Castoriadis' philosophy, history is creation entailing the bringing of forms (*eidos*) into being by human social action. By the time of Hölderlin's *Hymn*, Heidegger allowed no room for history in Castoriadis' meaning, holding that social form 'emerges' within the pole of the emergence of being in history. Thus there is no demand for an interrogation of the legitimacy of social forms in Heidegger's politics, but a continuous search for the locale of a political rupture that is to come.

For Castoriadis, tragic ontology necessitates a sense of political responsibility. We can note the emergence of tragic ontology by comparing Homer's description of Helen's attempt to justify her elopement with Paris in the *Iliad* and Euripides' rendition in *Trojan Women*. In the *Iliad*, Helen attributes her actions to a 'blindness that Aphrodite gave me, when she led me thither away from mine own country, forsaking my child and my bridal chamber and my lord.'⁴⁴ In the *Iliad*, Helen's logic is not questioned. In *Trojan Women*, however, Hecuba refuses to take Helen's appeal to the influence of Aphrodite but holds her responsible for her own lust.⁴⁵ Euripides' account of human creativity demands a radical reassessment of the social and historical institutions. For Castoriadis, Euripides' insight develops in tandem with political concepts such as collective willing (*bouleusis*) and the circulation of speech (*logos*), forms of socio-historical being that emerged within the new domain of public space.⁴⁶ Here Castoriadis builds on Hannah Arendt's understanding of Greek institutional creation, arguing that the *agora* and the *ekklesia* mark the creation of a political domain that 'belongs to all' (*ta koina*) entailing a novel social form of universality amongst citizens.⁴⁷ What were formally the private affairs of the ruling class radically shift to become decisions that can only be made by the community.

42. For a discussion on the legitimacy of institutions in the autonomous society, see Jeff Klooger, *Castoriadis: Psyche, society, autonomy*, Boston, Brill, 2009, p. 310.

43. Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*, p. 5

44. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. R. Fitzgerald, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, Book IV.

45. Hecuba to Helen: 'My son was the handsomest of men, / You saw him and instantly your mind itself turned into Aphrodite, who after all / Is just the name we give to lust gone wild.' Ll. 1146-9.

46. Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 280

47. Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958

In this sense the *polis* of Pericles' Athens was focused on publicity where the opinion of each citizen contained a legitimacy of its own. In Castoriadis view, this is only possible when the presumption of a univocal account of being is replaced with the awareness of the variety of ontological structures that constitute a political community. The city staged and funded the tragedies, forming a public institution of the *theatron*, a place for seeing (*theorein*). *Theoria* during this stage of Athens' history was understood as the beholding of a spectacle where the spectators are the theorists, the seers.⁴⁸ Contrary to Plato's concept of *theoria* in the *Republic* that contemplates the ideas independently of society, Castoriadis affirms tragedy's *theoria* that does not leave the world of appearances but is based on plurality and opinion (*doxa*).⁴⁹ Public reasoning is recast in terms of Aristotle's *phronēsis* (practical judgment, prudence), involving the ability to make up one's mind by searching for a mean between extremes.⁵⁰ It is a mode of *praxis* rather than *poiēsis*, concerned with the world of appearances rather than beyond it to a homogenous notion of being.

Here Castoriadis draws from both Aristotle and Kant, identifying Kant's reflective judgment with Aristotle's *phronēsis*. Both avoid the hubris of thinking alone by providing a way of approaching a particular in a universal way without the help of a predefined universal.⁵¹ For Castoriadis, the experience of the ambiguities of Greek tragedy in the spectators sharpens the type of knowledge that is far removed from the expertise of the technician, developing a specific kind of practical judgment. In Castoriadis' mind, rejecting Plato's technical knowledge for an Aristotelian kind of collective *praxis* frees political deliberation and willing to create in a way that is liberating and novel—not to anticipate a new age of creativity but to embody human freedom itself.

By affirming publicity and their shared world of appearances, Castoriadis argues that in Pericles' Athens we encounter the first instance of a community explicitly deliberating about its laws and changing those laws, a historical event of monumental importance. This historical trajectory is one of philosophy, a mode of thinking with a certain tragic awareness of human limitation. The (tragic) limitation is that there is no final, logical, rational or natural reason behind human institutions. The central question

48. See Taminioux, *Poetics, Speculation and Judgment: The Shadow of the Work of Art from Kant to Phenomenology*, p. 5

49. In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato argues that it is the artisan and not the artist who is in true relation with Ideas. The artisan dedicates his or her life to *theoria*, attempting to behold the ideal pattern or the pure form that they want to fabricate. The artist on the other hand cares only for appearances and attempts to imitate them, settling for the non-ideal world of the apparent. See Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. A. Bloom, USA, Harper Collins Publishers, 1968, 597a ff.

50. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Crisp, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 1142a.

51. Aristotle states in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that 'prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience ... a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it.' Aristotle's account of practical judgment is closely related to Kant's idea of experiencing the particular from the position of the universal: 'to think from the standpoint of everyone else is the maxim of judgment.' Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Pluhar, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, 161.

of political philosophy is thus one of asking what the limits of political action are.⁵² The insight of the tragic poets has political implications, displaying that self-limitation is the only kind of political action available for human beings. For Castoriadis, every other political system commits idolatry by presenting chaos as something determined, positing a homogeneous idea of being over the chaotic flux.⁵³ As a cultural institution that questions the appearance of fixed order in human society, tragedy is a mode of criticism, calling into question both the order of the gods and the unfolding political structures of law and democracy that emerged consubstantially with tragedy in Athenian society. Democracy, the political form that builds on tragic ontology, is for Castoriadis the regime of self-limitation meaning that it is also the regime of historical risk, for there is nothing to guarantee its success.⁵⁴ It is the regime of freedom, and is thus a tragic regime.

CASTORIADIS' LIMIT

Now we have laid out Castoriadis' response to Heidegger's work on Greek tragedy I will claim that Castoriadis' ontology fails to fully escape the dilemmas we encountered in Heidegger's work. In particular I will argue that in his effort to provide a unified account of the philosophical and political institutions Castoriadis oversimplifies the ancient world of the Athenians, meaning that his understanding of tragedy remains incomplete.

Castoriadis viewed the institutions of tragedy and democracy as harmonious counterparts, providing a space for philosophical critique that questions the foundations of the social order and an instituting space of deliberation for society to be creatively made. In other words, he held that tragedy *created* the imaginary foundations for democracy as it was itself *created by* democracy. However, Greek tragedy does not fit so comfortably with democracy. On one level Castoriadis is correct: the tragedies reveal the absolute primacy of human judgment that lies behind divine institutions and presents the semantic ambiguity of social life. They criticise the unity of representation in a way that creates the political space for a perspectival mode of consensus. On the other hand, the tragedies also question the ability of human beings to adjudicate their own concerns at all, often suggesting that the nature of human creation is catastrophic and that our action is ultimately beyond our control.⁵⁵ This aspect of the 'tragic' in privileged by Schopenhauer, Hölderlin and Nietzsche that leads them to locate the end of tragedy in resignation, not responsibility. Heidegger himself is a part of this tradition, privileging the reciprocal violence and the impenetrability of others as the inescapable basis of human society, problematizing the possibility of liberating politics.

52. Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 281

53. Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, p. 12

54. Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 282

55. Perhaps the greatest hermeneutical problem of exploring the tragedies is that they are extremely diverse, and any interpretation of tragedy must privilege some texts or passages over the others. One of the strengths of Castoriadis' exploration of tragedy is that he explores it as an unfolding conversation on the *polis* that changes over its historical development. However, his conclusion that each tragedy provides a representation of Athenian anthropology when it was performed is highly problematic.

Castoriadis' oversimplification is most evident in his essay 'Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation.' As we identified earlier, his method here is to isolate two tragedies, *Prometheus Bound* and *Antigone*, and to show two different notions of human creation assuming that each provides an accurate depiction of Athenian self-understanding. Even if we grant some leeway to his reduction of history to these two texts, a greater problem remains. His argument is that Sophocles' ode demonstrates an explicit awareness that *anthropos* is self-created and that his work is the summit of Greek self-awareness. Here we see that Castoriadis follows Hegel's assessment of the tragedies; that Aeschylus' work shows the development of tragic consciousness leading to the greatest tragedian, Sophocles, while Euripides work shows the demise and death of tragedy. However, if we follow Castoriadis' logic we could argue that Euripides, writing thirty years after Sophocles, demonstrates a *further* development in Athenian self-understanding.

Euripides does not view the fact of human self-creation with any triumphalism, but depicts human self-creation as a terrifying reality, boarding on the absurd. His tragedies question whether human beings can self-institute without catastrophic results, holding that the so-called 'self-creation' of Periclean Athens lead to arrogant myopia, one-sidedness and war. Euripides questions whether democracy merely creates a new domain for human sophistry and hubris to run rampant, and his tragedies bring to centre stage the violence and exclusions on which the project of democracy was (and is) based, a topic of exclusions on which Castoriadis remains silent. An important difference between Sophocles and Euripides is that Sophocles wrote during the height of Periclean Athens—when democracy and Athenian power were at their greatest. The question for Sophocles is whether his anthropology reveals the truth about human creation or whether it reflects a fantasy of self-creation felt at times of intense historical revolution. Euripides, on the other hand, wrote during the unsettling time of the Peloponnesian war amidst the atrocities the Athenians dealt on their enemies, choosing to exile himself from Athens in his old age. His tragedies demonstrate contempt for Athenian arrogance and a critique of the deliberative possibilities of the *agora* from a man who had seen the worst of Athenian democracy.⁵⁶

We can pose this problem to Castoriadis through the challenge raised by Heidegger's work on tragedy. Castoriadis' appraisal of Sophocles' exploration of self-creation raises the question regarding the two modes of *techne* that Heidegger identified in his Rector's address and *Introduction to Metaphysics*—the inauthentic *techne* of *Being and Time* that throws Dasein into the average everyday, and the authentic *techne* of the truly historical people. If human beings are always creating and bringing the absolutely new into being as Castoriadis suggests, can they do so in a balanced, self-conscious manner, or do they always get ahead of themselves when they become aware of their creative potential? Heidegger believed that Sophocles' choral ode suggests that the ontological

56. This is why Castoriadis follows Hegel's denigration of Euripides, seeing Sophoclean tragedy as the height of the genre and Euripides as the fall. Perhaps the crisis of the Peloponnesian war allowed Euripides a critical position from which to view the situation of 'self-created' Athens.

destiny of *anthropos* is to be never-at-home, for our social and historical creation leads to our impending entrapment. His question is whether human beings can become truly historical without leading to the catastrophe that Athens eventually faced, and his answer became increasingly pessimistic. If Euripides' work embodies the birth of the comic subject who knows the split between being and value, that both the gods and the good are merely social fictions, then he questions why we should bother with democracy and the respect of others at all.

The problem for Castoriadis is how he adjudicates between the heteronomous and autonomous modes of instituting in a way that allows him to ascribe some kind of value to autonomy. His distinction between open and closed society is not as far from Heidegger's inauthentic and authentic *techné* as he might have thought, and, I propose, his difficulty of adjudicating between them is no less than Heidegger faced during the years of his turning. The basis of the problem for Castoriadis' distinction between two levels of creation is his adherence to what I describe as Heidegger's narrative of the unrepresentable.⁵⁷ While Castoriadis might argue that Heidegger ultimately holds onto a univocal idea of being, thereby covering over the democratic implications of ontology, he follows Heidegger's idea that being is not something determined but is the manifestation of beings. In other words, like Heidegger Castoriadis' narrative of the unrepresentable—that being is not determined but is chaos—involves a fundamental split between being and value. However, he takes this narrative one step further than Heidegger was willing to go.

For Castoriadis, the narrative of the unrepresentable begins with Empedocles' story of creation where the cosmos is a minute island of order in the midst of the formless chaos of the universe.⁵⁸ It reverses Plato's priority of *eidōs* over simulacrum, seeing the creation of form over chaos as the original act of human creative violence. However, as Heidegger saw, to posit the absolute separation of being from value—to refuse to accept the possibility of a shared being or concept of the good—is an assertion that goes beyond the limits of our vision. The tragic crossroads is *tragic* because the memory of value remains in a political world where the determinacy of value has disappeared. The tragic poets did not reject the idea of the good as Castoriadis does but propose something more humble. They merely unveil the fact that all human actions, whether justified by the good, reason or the law, are grounded only on the finitude of our judgment.

The split between being and value exists not for the tragic agent but for the comic subject who is self-certain, convinced of the fact that value is constituted only in relation to ourselves. For the tragic agent the good is not abolished but veiled, and they are aware of the finitude of their action before the majesty of the good. For the comic subject, value is always the realm of limit, possession and stability, and as such it can be nothing but coercive. In such an ontological framework only the interruption of the new can

57. This phrase is borrowed from David Bentley-Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, USA, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.

58. Fragment 31 Hermann Diels, *The older Sophists; a complete translation by several hands of the fragments in Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1972.

speak of freedom. Yet as we identified in his criticism of Heidegger, Castoriadis moves beyond positing the new as the only ontological condition of freedom, for he argues that the new can be alienating as much as it can liberate. Every moment of human history is new for Castoriadis, not simply those moments that have an explicitly creative structure. What is required is not simply novelty but *liberation*, the collective creation of the new through self-limitation, deliberation and collective willing.

The problem for Castoriadis' ontology is that if social institutions take their form from the unrepresentable, from the chaos, then the discrimination of liberation from alienation, of heteronomous from autonomous creation, is at best a voluntaristic fiction and at worst a critical impossibility. If we begin from Castoriadis' ontological premise that being is chaos then we must infer that all representation is idolatry. This is exactly what Heidegger discovered, meaning that he began searching for a non-representational mode to approach the Being of being in order to find an authentic ground for creativity. This starting point led him to privilege the work of Being rather than hold onto a Promethean mode of *techne*. Alternatively, Castoriadis asserts that the new is an ever-unfolding flux from the chaos of representation. This is the ontological basis to human freedom that exists even in the most oppressive society. He asserts that liberating action is based on the practice of political institutions that are explicitly aligned with the creativity of the imagination. However, this argument suggests that while humans are basically creative there is a higher kind of creativity that *is aware of* the fundamental creativity of the mind. Castoriadis attempts to build an ontological kind of value in order to promote his project of autonomy, yet value is always already excluded from the ontological domain of chaos.

We find ourselves at the tragic crossroads we identified at the beginning of this paper where the desire for value remains in a world where value has disappeared. Castoriadis' transgression of the limits of ontology demonstrates that his philosophy does not escape the theological kind of thinking he attempts to overcome. All theology is idolatrous for Castoriadis, instituting a connection between chaos and value, between being and the good, becoming guilty of an ontological kind of violence.⁵⁹ To avoid becoming merely a justification according to taste, Castoriadis attempts to argue that a society that self-institutes is favourable because it is true to its own being; is more *what it is* than idolatrous societies. In other words, autonomous societies are *more ontological* because they are not only self-created but they knowingly self-create. Thus he unknowingly recreates Heidegger's ontological distinction that he fundamentally rejects. He describes the philosophical assumption that being is good as a 'monstrosity', denigrates hope as an ontological absurdity, yet maintains an insatiable optimism regarding the future potential of human being and the value of autonomy.⁶⁰

59. Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, p. 5-6

60. Castoriadis' denial of hope is as follows: 'To [Kant's] question: What am I allowed to hope? there is a definite and clear Greek answer, and this is a massive and resounding *nothing*. And evidently it is the true answer. 'Hope' is not to be taken here in the everyday trivial sense ... The hope to which Kant refers is the hope of the Christian or religious tradition, the hope corresponding to the central human wish and delusion that there be some essential correspondence, some consonance, some *adequatio* between our desires and

Castoriadis' ontological vision argues that communities can either continue in the violence of idolatrous politics or take the tragic risk of building upon the groundless, trusting in the creative faculties and possibilities of human beings. If we took the tragedians at their word it would be impossible to maintain such a trust in human potentiality, requiring (for it not to be a *blind* hope) a further affirmation of the possibilities of human creation from evidence outside of these texts. Castoriadis believes to find such evidence in the critical role that the tragedies played in Athenian society coupled with the historical event of democracy, giving him faith in the human condition to make such an achievement again. Castoriadis' positive link between being and value is a kind of faith because it is a tragic risk. For Castoriadis, Athenian democracy was based on a choice to act in such a way that connects being and the good despite the evidence of the tragedies that much of life is *not* good, that suffering appears to be more basic than joy, that human words and minds are mysterious and can never be fully communicated. In other words, the Greeks did not only create *ex nihilo* but they declared that their creation is good.

We can point toward the completion of Castoriadis' unfinished account of tragedy by noting that he does not need to abolish the possibility of the good to maintain his tragic ontology. Rather, tragic ontology entails that the good remain a question, an aspiration that is always open to question and redefinition in a political community. In this view, all action, whether justified in terms of the good or any other sources, is never guaranteed but is always subject to the finite judgment of the agent. In maintaining the absolute priority of the political sphere and refusing to close the basic questions of philosophy, the Greeks remain for us a germ. And Castoriadis anticipates this completion himself, finding the allure of the Greeks in their answer to the basic question of the human condition (what ought we to do?): to live with beauty, with wisdom, and to love the common good.⁶¹ This germ infected Castoriadis' philosophical project, and he believed it could continue to infect western society.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Heidegger's narrative of the unrepresentable has inspired many radical visions of a new kind of community without inner or outer boundaries, that does not coerce its members or constitute its identity at the expense of exclusions. However, his nostalgia maintained a fantasy of 'the people', a community united by a collective attention to being. His philosophy results in a perspective that is always looking beyond what is (the shared world of appearances) to that which is to come (the collective attention to being) in a

decisions, on the one hand, and the world, the nature of being, on the other.' Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, p. 273. Castoriadis, however, does not maintain this polemical position. While he always remained critical of accounts of hope that link human desire with the ontological ground of the world, he maintained hope in the human capacity for liberation. This is nicely captured in an interview he gave in the final year of his life: 'we must wait, we must hope, and we must work in this direction.' Castoriadis, *Postscript on Insignificance*, trans G. Rockhill & J. Garner, Continuum, London, 2011, p. 10.

61. *ibid.*, p. 288

search generated by a past idea of social unity he found in the Greeks. As we identified in Heidegger's shifting interpretation of the Greek tragedies, his ontology involved a collapse in the potential for human liberation leading him to question the possibility of political creation at all and whether ontology can ever provide the basis for a political community. His recourse to destiny renders impossible any path of political creation that is not set to work by Being itself.

Alternatively, Castoriadis believed that by situating the institution that unveils the unrepresentable—that draws the chaotic nature of being into presence for the citizenry—side by side with an institution that collectively asks what society it is trying to achieve, a political community could emerge that is radically open to novelty and difference. He escapes Heidegger's transcultural notion of the Greeks where we are united through our shared attention to being by arguing that the Greeks are present to us in the political rupture that we experience in our own times, one that finds its origins in Athens during the 5th century BC. Turning to the Greeks is thus a process of clarifying the ground of our own political order. While locating his appraisal of liberating politics on an implicit ontological connection between being and value, one that moves beyond the limits of ontological thought to metaphysics, Castoriadis' work attempts to articulate what sense can be made of what Cassirer called the 'variety of ontological structures' presented in the tragedy of the Greeks. He argues that the Greeks provide not a foundation but a germ that lies at the origin of western politics, a germ that inspires political action that engages in the tragic risk of creation.

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