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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Anders Michelsen and Peter Murphy

This issue of *Thesis Eleven* elaborates connections between the notion of self-organization and creativity. These are inspired in part by proposals, reflections and ideas in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis addressed debates on self-organization on more than one occasion in the 1980s and 1990s – particularly in a French context. While his work has remained (to date) at distance from the rising number of suggestions, especially regarding social and cultural theory, that have come out of these debates on self-organization, Castoriadis made a specific and original contribution to them. His work touches importantly on two aspects of self-organization. First, it takes issue with the problem of how self-organization – and its relations to various aspects of systems theory – may be thought at all within the options and constraints of a ‘human strata of the real’. Second, it probes central aspects of how human social and historical forms may be related to the issues of self-organization by indicating a novel domain of ‘self-creation deployed as history’ (Castoriadis).

For one thing, debates on self-organization have tended to rationalize issues of the human – for example through ‘reality-modeling’ (John Casti) – whether via cognitive frameworks or models of society and culture. Secondly, attempts to adapt debates within the humanities, e.g. in philosophy, social theory and cultural studies, have tended to end in anti-humanism, ranging from Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘abstract machine’ to Friedrich von Hayek’s ‘spontaneous order’ or Niklas Luhmann’s idea of social auto-poiesis.

Put differently, there are interesting interpretations, interventions and appraisals to be found in approaching self-organization with a Castoriadean inspiration, not least in relation to the human domain. And, vice versa, there may be new important perspectives on his work by relating it back to the larger discussion of self-organization. This is so not only in terms of possible qualifications and comments, but in an altogether more ambitious way that contributes to rethinking self-organization via Castoriadis’s models of human self-creation, and that adapt his reflections on meta-instable forms

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of cosmological or trans-regional self-creating to the regional specifics of the human strata.

No discussion of self-organization is possible today without reference to the major contribution by Luhmann, and it is to Luhmann that Michael Schilitz's article in this issue turns – or more specifically to Luhmann's use of Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form*. Schilitz argues that criticisms of the *Laws of Form* from a mathematical standpoint fail to understand the distinctive character of a 'protologic' in Spencer-Brown's work, which is based on a topological conception of mathematics. Moreover, the protological character of the *Laws of Form* indicates a framework for self-organization by an extended questioning of how self-reference may be conceived as self-organization. Schilitz explains how the drawing of a distinction is a form. Form emerges through the distinction (say) of inside and outside, or surface and depth. But what happens when the surface of something is the surface of a torus? In this case, the strict distinction between inside and outside or surface and depth is undermined. This example translates into a theory not just of ontological non-identity (or distinction) but of the paradoxical epistemological autology of self-referential forms where the inside *is* the outside. The paradoxes of self-referential forms in Luhmann's work make it possible to open the rational underpinnings of self-organization, e.g. within cybernetics, to the prospects of imagination, not least because imagination is driven by such paradoxes. The depth of the imagination is all surface, and all of its surfaces are deep structures.

Schilitz's exploration of autology grows out of one of a number (a growing number) of programmes that deal seriously with the idea of autopoiesis in society and nature. The notion of an autonomous society or the radical *pbusis* of nature are two typical examples of revealing attempts to understand autopoietic phenomena. Suzi Adams steps off also in this direction when she confronts and aligns Francisco Varela's notion of autopoiesis with the later Castoriadis's work on trans-regional self-creating. Adams attempts, first of all, to open a connection between the propositions of a self-organized living being and Castoriadis's outline of a cosmology of fragmented self-creation. Second, Adams reflects on the implications of this for Castoriadis's philosophy. She argues that a focus on the self-organization of the living being implies not only a distinct move towards an ontology of radical physis in Castoriadis's later work, but also, along with it, a revised version of his project of autonomy.

Autonomy, like autology and the other theme of this issue, autotranscendence, are all variations of the autopoietic. The theme of the autotranscendent, alongside autonomy, is explored in both the work of Dominique Bouchet and Anders Michelsen.

Bouchet discusses the issue of self-organization in terms of autonomy conceived of as a defining (indeed perhaps *the* defining) problem of modernity. Castoriadis suggests a mutual and complementary relation between

subjective and collective autonomy. Bouchet's interpretation of this is very radical and in certain respects quite startling. He considers how in modernity emerge spontaneous social orders (like markets or publics) that obey their own laws, and that develop independently of social actors' will and consciousness. What is at stake here is not the liberal account of autonomy, nor is the action of the spontaneous at all like the heteronomy of traditional authorities. The autonomous workings of the modern social bond mark out a radically new problematic – that of autotranscendence, which at once represents both the immanence and transcendence of the self-organized human realm.

Michelsen also turns to the theme of autotranscendence along the way to Castoriadis's theory of autonomy. Michelsen prefaces his discussion of this theory with a genealogical exploration of various post-1945 theories of self-organization. Like Bouchet, this genealogy culminates in reflections on Castoriadis's brilliant revision of these theories. Michelsen elaborates this with the help of two contrasting criticisms of Castoriadis – one in Arnason's work and the other in Dupuy's work. The first engages with Castoriadis via a cultural hermeneutics; the second via a complex methodological individualism. Michelsen moves through this interesting debate and then goes on to propose ways in which Castoriadis's philosophy of self-creation contributes to a notion of autonomy that, akin to Dupuy and Bouchet and to Luhmann and Schiltz, has its own paradoxical character. In Castoriadis's theory, creation is organization, society is *phusis*, effectuations are effects, and conditions are conditional. This is a feat of remarkable conceptualization. Beyond the specifics of any particular theory or theorists, beyond the philosophy wars, it resonates deeply with the paradoxical autonomy of modernity and the paradoxical logic of the torus. Like the spontaneous but unwilling social order or the inside surface turned outside, Castoriadis, from his earliest days to his last days, insisted that meaning is circular. Upon that impossible condition rests the possibility of autonomy.

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