

Weber and Castoriadis.

Society as a World of Meaning and the Anti-Speculative Stance
towards History

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Weber and Castoriadis. Society as a World of Meaning and Anti-Speculative Stance towards History

Abstract

The article aims to show that the intellectual relationship between Max Weber and Cornelius Castoriadis is far deeper and more fruitful than it has been considered so far. Starting from the exploration of Castoriadis' own writings on the subject (most of which are only available in Greek), Yannis Ktenas claims that the strong affinity between the works of the thinkers centers around the great importance they both attribute to the concept of "meaning" in their effort to thematize the social-historical universe. An example of this importance can be found in their writings on history: they adopt a critical stance towards Hegel's and (to some extent) Marx's "speculative" theorization of history, counter proposing a conception that highlights the elements of contingency and creativity of social action.



Weber et Castoriadis. La société comme univers de sens et la compréhension anti-spéculative de l'histoire

Résumé

Cet article vise à montrer que la relation intellectuelle entre Max Weber et Cornelius Castoriadis est beaucoup plus profonde et féconde qu'elle n'a été envisagée jusqu'à maintenant. Partant de l'exploration des écrits que Castoriadis a lui-même consacré au sujet (et qui, pour la plupart, ne sont disponibles qu'en grec), Yannis Ktenas soutient que la grande affinité qui existe entre les deux penseurs réside dans l'importance majeure qu'ils attribuent au concept de « sens » pour penser l'univers social et historique. Leurs écrits sur l'histoire offrent un exemple intéressant de ce point de vue : tous deux adoptent une position critique face à la théorisation « spéculative » de l'histoire qu'a Hegel et (jusqu'à un certain point) Marx, et ils en proposent une conception qui met l'accent sur la contingence et la créativité de l'action sociale.



Keywords

Castoriadis; contingency; creation; emanationism; history; imaginary; meaning; values; Weber.



Mots-clés

Castoriadis ; contingence ; création ; émanationisme ; histoire ; imaginaire ; sens ; valeurs ; Weber.

“Modern bureaucracy is, up to a certain point, thinkable within the Marxian frame of reference. But also, beyond this point it blows apart this frame of reference. At a certain level of abstraction (as Max Weber had seen, and as Marx had not seen), it constitutes the immanent culmination of the ‘ideal’ evolution of capitalism”.¹

Given the fact that phrases like this are anything but rare in Cornelius Castoriadis’ writings, one would expect that the intellectual relationship between him and Max Weber would have drawn the attention of the scholars interested in their work. However, this is hardly the case. It is quite telling that Johann Arnason, one of the most prominent commentators of the Castoriadean *œuvre* and probably the person who has written the most on this subject, seldom dedicates more than a few pages to this issue.²

The aim of this contribution is to overturn this situation and to show that there are good reasons to believe that a thorough investigation of the affinities between the Weberian and the Castoriadean perspectives could open new and far-going paths in the field of social philosophy. In my effort to reach this aim, I will first explore two different moments of Castoriadis’ commentary on Weber; then, I will try to establish a strong connection between the ways these two authors think of society, based on the centrality of the concept of meaning in their work. Finally, I will show how this emphasis on meaning – both as a crucial element of the social-historical universe and as a category for the perception of the social-historical field – leads to a very specific way of looking at history. In my view, this way of looking, that I name “anti-speculative stance”, has a relevance not only for those interested in either of these authors (or both), but also for any scholar in the tradition of comparative political and historical sociology.

1988, RETURNING TO WEBER

Part A: The “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” essay

Castoriadis’ most known text on Weber is probably his essay entitled “Individual, Society, Rationality, History”. This text was first published in the French philosophical and political journal *Esprit* in February 1988; in a sense, it is a very rich and analytical book review and critique of Philippe Raynaud’s *Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne*, published some months before. Castoriadis praised the work of his friend and noted that the depth of the book and the fact that he himself was also “an old friend and indeed lover” of Max Weber’s *œuvre* had led him to read Raynaud’s treatise – according to him, the “best introduction in Max Weber’s total work” – very carefully, “with the pencil in hand”.

While Raynaud’s study is indeed very insightful, it is quite obvious that Castoriadis seized the opportunity to return to Weber’s work itself, in order to settle some outstanding issues with the work of a thinker that has influenced him from his very youth. Castoriadis’ paper stops being a book review soon enough and becomes a proper essay, whose author puts the finger on core issues of the Weberian universe, dealing with questions like the nature of the social world, the limits of rationalism and the (im)possibility of a transcendental foundation of ethico-political values.

Generally speaking, in this essay Castoriadis stated his admiration for Weber, while at the same time tried to take some distance from him. In fact, his efforts to differentiate himself from Weber were so intense, that he created a rather misleading image of his relationship with the latter. In other words, someone who would not take into consideration the broader context of Castoriadis’ philosophy or would not have studied the corpus of Weber’s writings in depth would be left with the impression that the Weberian and the Castoriadean thinking do not have much in common.

¹ Castoriadis, 1997, 229-230.

² See for instance Arnason, 2014, 29-32. In fact, these pages are not dedicated to Weber only, but to Weber *and* Durkheim. It has to be noted, though, that in a less known German text of his, Arnason deals with the subject in more depth, directing the reader’s attention to the importance of Weber’s ambiguous elaborations on the concepts of culture and rationality for the development of Castoriadean philosophy. See Arnason, 2012, 42, 43, 45, 49 and Arnason, 1989, 31-32.

I will try to specify these claims through some examples taken from the article published in *Esprit*. First, Castoriadis points out the so-called individualism that can be found in Weber's writings. Of course, he is aware of Max Weber's warning against the *ungeheures Missverständnis* – the terrible misunderstanding – which consists in trying to make an ontology out of his methodological approach in the field of sociology;³ however, he is not convinced by it. According to Castoriadis, when Weber speaks of the social or of the collective formations, his “expressions are [...] so categorical that it can immediately be seen that if the individualist method does not involve taking an ‘evaluative’ and still less a political, position, it is nevertheless tantamount to an ontological decision concerning the Being of the social-historical: ‘For the interpretive understanding of behavior [...] these social collectivities must be treated as solely (*lediglich*) the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons since, for us, these alone can be treated as comprehensible agents of meaning-oriented action’”.⁴

Then, Castoriadis identifies a serious problem in the Weberian conception of meaning (“Sinn”). According to his interpretation, Weber cannot overcome his inscription in a Kantian and Neo-Kantian tradition; as a result, he can only perceive meaning as the creation of an individual subject: “*If there is meaning, it is because there is a subject (an ego) that posits it (intends it, constitutes it, constructs it, etc.). And if there is a subject, it is because it is either the source and unique origin of meaning or meaning’s necessary correlate*”.⁵ Prisoner of such an egological conception of meaning, Weber cannot grasp the essence of the social world. He is intellectually obliged to present the social-historical as a product of the interaction (co-operation and/or conflict) of individuals.

Finally, Castoriadis makes some critical comments on Weber's conception of rationality. At this point, his approach is more nuanced. He asserts that Weber's emphasis on “value polytheism” – i.e. on the impossibility of a strictly rational foundation of ethical and political values and the incommensurability of the ultimate criteria of different societies and cultures – is a proof of his “acute perception of the problem created by the irreducible multiplicity of the forms through which the social-historical deploys itself as well as his profound awareness of the impossibility of giving these forms, when considered in themselves, any hierarchical ordering”.⁶

However, the Greek-French philosopher stands critically towards Weber's concept of *Zweckrationalität*, the so-called “purposive rationality”.⁷ After asserting rather simplistically that a more appropriate term for this dimension of human action would rather be *Mittelnrationalität*, since here we are not dealing with a “goal” or “aim” that is in itself rational, but rather with means that are appropriate, suitable, effective and “economical” with regards to a *given* goal,⁸ Castoriadis goes on to claim that the theorization of purposive rationality in Weber's writings is highly problematic, since it overlooks the historicity and the sociality of different forms of rationalism. “It is therefore impossible for me, in trying to carry out the Weberian ‘methodological’ program, to consider individual behavior as composed of a central ‘rational’ [...]”

³ Weber, 2019, 95.

⁴ Castoriadis, 1990, 60. In this English edition, published in *Thesis Eleven*, some introductory notes on Philippe Raynaud's work have been omitted.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷ I choose here the English term Keith Tribe used in his recently published new translation of *Economy and Society* (2019), adopting the solution Hans Henrik Bruun had suggested some years ago (see Weber, 2012, 501). Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, in their classic translation of *Economy and Society* (1968), use the term “instrumental rationality”, which is, however, not appropriate and can confuse the reader (as we are just about to see, Castoriadis himself sometimes reinforces this confusion). From his side, Talcott Parsons used periphrastic translations of the term, while sometimes keeping the original German word.

⁸ It is not the only time this remark occurs in his writings. Cf. Castoriadis 1996. Of course, it could be argued that Castoriadis here overlooks that, for Weber, *Zweckrationalität* is not just an “instrumental rationality”, but a rationality that is coherent and efficient in regards to a certain finality, upon which the actor can also deliberate – what the French Weber scholars often name “rationalité en finalité”. In other words, the elements of the situation the actor finds himself in are not only used as “tools” or “means”, but also taken into consideration as “conditions” for a coherent action course. Moreover, according to Weber's analytical “definition” of the *zweckrational* action (2019, 102-103), “[w]hoever acts in a purposively rational manner orients their action to the purpose, means, and associated consequences of an act, and so rationally weighs the relation of means to ends, that of the ends to the associated consequences, and that of the various possible ends to each other” (my italics). So, we cannot just assimilate *Zweckrationalität* to an instrumental rationality; of course, that is *not* to say that the use of the appropriate means in order to reach a certain goal is not a crucial moment of the whole *zweckrational* way of action, as already indicated in Weber's description.

component that is supposed to be (if [only] ‘methodologically’) *everywhere and always the same* and of individual deviations from this ‘rationality’”.⁹

All in all, and despite the fact Castoriadis stresses again and again the importance of Weber’s work,¹⁰ “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” comes down to a rather strict verdict as far as the general Weberian conception of society is concerned: Weber’s effort is characterized by “what must really be called, in the last analysis [...] rationalistic (methodological, but also ontological) individualism”.¹¹ It goes without saying that Castoriadis then presents his own philosophy as the solution to overcome Weber’s predicaments – which are, in a sense, the predicaments of the Kantian and Neo-Kantian tradition and even more generally those of the “inherited” way of thinking. The theory of the imaginary institution of society – to which we will return later – facilitates the grasping of the social as something other than many individuals added to each other, the placement of rationality within a cultural context that determines its singular features, and the attribution of the right status to the concept of meaning, seen as social imaginary significations.

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For someone who has never studied Weber in depth, these remarks may seem relevant: of course, society is a lot more than the sum of the people living in it and each society has its proper ways of thinking rationally, reasoning, even counting. How can Weber neglect all these crucial aspects? However, for those who have carefully studied Weber’s writings, Castoriadis’ critique seems rather banal and deficient. In other words, his notes on the problems created by some very clear-cut declarations of Weber regarding the importance of the individualistic method and the dismissal of the *Kollektivbegriffe* could – and should – be used as starting points for a fruitful problematization of Weber’s way of thinking; but they cannot by any means be seen as safe conclusions for a thorough analysis of Weber’s work.

Let us start from the fundamental question about the individual or collective nature of meaning. Is it possible to assert that meaning is always individualistic for Weber? That is to say, that meaning is created by and for an individual subject? Although it is true that the very emphatic expressions Weber uses in the first paragraphs and chapter of *Economy and Society* could leave us with the impression that he is exclusively interested in the “subjektiv gemeinter Sinn”, it is rather a commonplace in contemporary Weber studies that this is not the case at all. Reading Weber’s writings on religions suffice to prove this. These texts, of several hundred pages long, present each religion as a “sinnvoller Kosmos”, a meaningful world, a well-ordered universe of representations, significations, interpretations and values, that are not created by individuals but by different cultures.¹² In fact, two prominent Weber scholars have tried from the middle of the 1970s to show that Weber’s work as a whole is best perceived and understood in his treatment of the religious phenomenon rather than in the opening chapters of *Economy and Society*.¹³ Against this background, let’s recall the following irony: in *Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne* – the very book Castoriadis reviewed for *Esprit* – Philippe Raynaud too dealt with the collective dimension of the Weberian meaning and even correlated this dimension to Castoriadis’ own writings!¹⁴

Moreover, it is not even necessary to turn to Weber’s study of religion (seen as a supposedly totally distinct part of his work) in order to discern that, for him, the category of meaning is always immersed in a social universe. Even the *subjektiv gemeinter Sinn*, the meaning an individual actor attributes to his doings – or, to be more precise, the meaning he considers, the meaning he aims to, the one that makes his actions what they

⁹ Castoriadis, 1990, 77.

¹⁰ This fact has its significance. As any careful reader of Castoriadis knows all too well, when the philosopher decided to attack an intellectual opponent, he seldom avoided the direct polemic, using expressions and arguments that were so aggressive and exaggerative, that weakened other critical remarks, indeed insightful. Deleuze, Foucault and Lacan are perhaps the most famous victims of such a treatment. On the contrary, Castoriadis was often very generous towards the authors he had really studied: even when he critiqued Marx, Weber, Merleau-Ponty or Freud, he always stressed the greatness of their work.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹² See for instance Collins, 1985, 32; Touraine, 1965, 32-34; Wax, 1967, 324; Raynaud, 1996, 143-144; Swedberg and Agevall, 2016, 204-208; Forte, 2008, 435.

¹³ Nelson, 1974; Tenbruck, 1980.

¹⁴ Raynaud, 1996, 150-151.

are¹⁵ – is fully dependent on social preconditions and situations. For example, as Jean-Pierre Grossein reminds us, individual meaning is always mediated by the social institution *par excellence*: language. With Grossein’s own words, “[t]he concept of meaning is also reflected in a symbolic register: ‘The fact that external signs are used as symbols represents one of the constitutive presuppositions of every social relationship’. This reference – which remains unperceived by the commentators of Weber – to the symbolic dimension of action is fundamental, if we do not want to misunderstand the signification of the primacy Weber attributes to the question of meaning”.¹⁶

Furthermore, we must not forget Weber’s forceful remarks on *Wertrationalität*, and especially on our difficulty or sometimes even inability to grasp the value-oriented stances people from other cultures and historical periods adopt. “[W]e are very often not capable of understanding the self-evidence of many of the ultimate ‘purposes’ and ‘values’ to which, in our experience, human action can be oriented. While we might possibly be able to understand them intellectually, the more radical the divergence of such ultimate values from our own, the greater also our difficulty in understanding them by empathetically reliving them in imagination”.¹⁷ This passage in the very first paragraphs of *Economy and Society* (and not in *Sociology of Religion*) makes it perfectly clear that, when Weber speaks of the individual, he does not have in mind an ahistorical and asocial being, a creature the qualities of which would remain unchanged throughout centuries and cultures, but a person who is always immersed in the values, the praxeological and intellectual habits,¹⁸ the ways of doing and thinking provided by his or her community.

If this were not the case, how could one explain the following remarkable passage from the Introduction of “The Economic Ethics of World Religions” – a section that, despite the fact that it starts just after Weber’s famous expression on the ideas that often determine the historic course of the material interests “like switchmen”, remains rather unnoticed? According to Weber, it is the religious “ideas” and “world images” that determine the human efforts and sculpt the situations from which people try to escape and the situations they try to move towards; in his words, they determine whether people want to be saved

from political and social slavery [and to move] in a worldly messianic kingdom of the future. Or from the staining through the ceremony of purifying or from the filthiness of the imprisonment in a body in general towards the purity of a mental-physical beauty or a completely spiritual situation. Or from the eternal and meaningless game of human passions and lusts towards the quiet peace of the clear vision of God. Or from a radical evil and the slavery of sin towards the eternal and free good, in the arms of a fatherly God. Or from the subjugation of the astrological determinacy of the stars towards the dignity of freedom and the methexis in the essence of the secret deity. Or from the constraints of the limitedness, which are expressed through pain, necessity, death and the threatening punishments of hell towards an eternal blissfulness, inside an earthly or heavenly future being. Or from the circle of reincarnation, with the merciless payback of the deeds of the previous lives towards the eternal peace. Or from the lack of meaning of the thinking and the being towards the dreamless sleep. And there were many more possibilities. There is always there a positioning towards something which in the real world would have been perceived as something meaningless, and therefore there is the following claim: that the structure of things is integrated in the totality of a so to speak meaningful “*cosmos*”.¹⁹

To my mind, the way Weber emphasizes the diversity of the possible courses of individual action, depending on the different significations of various religious, cultural and philosophical traditions, is very telling. It makes perfectly clear that even when he speaks of the individual, he sees it as a part of a specific society, of a particular civilization, as the elementary bearer of the sociocultural universe in which every person is raised, educated and formed.²⁰ In other words, *Weber sees the individual as the locus of the social*,²¹ while at the same time his emphasis on subjectivity and individual action helps us keep in mind that a person is never

¹⁵ As Paul Ricoeur notes (1987, 184), “[t]here is not action first and only then representation, because meaning is an integral component of the definition of action. An essential aspect of the constitution of action is that it must be meaningful for the agent”.

¹⁶ Grossein, 2016, 9. The citation from Max Weber comes from *Wissenschaftslehre* (1985, 332). Cf. Grossein, 2016b, 39.

¹⁷ Weber, 2019, 80-81.

¹⁸ See for instance *ibid.*, 80: “We understand the meaning quite unambiguously when someone [...] completes a chain of reasoning ‘correctly’ (and so to our own way of thinking)”. The quotes in the word “correctly” (*richtig*) and the parenthesis make it even more obvious that Weber is perfectly aware of the socially constructed character of reasoning.

¹⁹ Weber, 1988, 252-253.

²⁰ To put it another way, there are *different forms of individualism*, depending on the various cultural backgrounds. See Kalberg, 2016, 116, n. 13, where American individualism is juxtaposed to the romanticist individualism or the one of Nietzsche.

²¹ As Castoriadis himself points out in a discussion with Christopher Lasch (1986, 21), “everything is social. But society as such has no address. I mean, you can’t meet it. *It’s in you, in me*, in the language, in the books, and so on” (my italics).

reduced to a social automaton. In any case, neither meaning nor rationality can be grasped independently from the social world that generates them and provides their directions²² – which, of course, does not mean there are not commonplaces and mutual patterns in different cultures.

To sum up, the idea that Weber's view of the social reality is limited to an individualistic and rationalistic ontology cannot possibly be maintained. Among the most prominent Weber scholars there is a consensus that the "meaning that is subjectively aimed is 'social', as long as it presupposes an intersubjective structure, itself mediated by supra-individual configurations of meanings that have their proper consistency and 'objectivity', and offer to the actors 'resources of meaning'. The social action takes place against the background of objective formations of meaning, which also constitute possible frames of orientation [...] not only in the cognitive level ('ideas'), but also in the normative and affective level".²³

Or, to use Dirk Kaesler's words, Weber's analysis tries to articulate three interdependent dimensions of meaning:

- 1) "Meaning as cultural signification, that is as 'objectified' meaning within a 'world of meaning' [*Sinnwelt*];
- 2) Meaning as subjectively intended meaning, which can be understood subjectively and is communicable;
- 3) Meaning as functional meaning, which is affected through objective contexts [*Zusammenhänge*], transferred intersubjectively and has functional importance for the procedures of social transformation".²⁴

But where do these remarks lead us? At first, it can be tempting to draw the conclusion that Castoriadis – be it voluntarily or not – ignored some crucial elements about Weber, as is probably the case of Arnaud Tomès,²⁵ Thibault Tranchant²⁶ and Vincent Descombes,²⁷ who have light-heartedly fully adopted Castoriadis' critique, in order to attack Weber. However, there are serious reasons to believe that Castoriadis' case is quite different. In order to see why, I shall now turn to a work of his that has for the most part remained unexplored.

Part B: The First Try-Out

"Individual, Society, Rationality, History" is not the only text on Weber Castoriadis published in 1988. That same year, his first philosophical writings were republished in Athens. The book entitled *Protes Dokimes* (first efforts, attempts or perhaps try-outs) consists of a reprint of young Castoriadis' "Introduction to the Theory of Social Sciences" and his carefully annotated translation of the eleven first "paragraphs" of *Economy and Society*, preceded by a short introductory note concerning Max Weber's life and work. What's more interesting is that the mature Castoriadis (1988), already a well appreciated philosopher who had published his *magnum opus* 13 years earlier, returned to his early writings with a critical look, commenting on some of the remarks of his younger self with the benefit of the time-distance and explaining why this re-edition could be of some interest for those who follow his intellectual efforts. As he noted in the preface of

²² Johan Arnason (2012, 42-43) differentiated himself slightly from Castoriadis at this point, and with good reason.

²³ Grossein, 2016, 8. Here the reference to "intersubjectivity" *does not* have the meaning it has in the work of Alfred Schütz, who can rightfully be accused of a rather egological conception of the social world.

²⁴ Kaesler, 1999, 146.

²⁵ See Tomès, 2007, 42. Of course, this misunderstanding does not reduce Tomès' broader contribution to the study of Castoriadis' work, which is quite noteworthy.

²⁶ In his recently defended PhD, Tranchant included a short chapter on Castoriadis' relationship to Weber's thought (2019, 441-446). Although the Thesis as a whole is one of the most comprehensive works on Cornelius Castoriadis' thought in recent years, the conclusions of Tranchant's short commentary on the affinities between the two authors do not take us very far, since his argumentation is for the most part a repetition of Castoriadis' arguments in "Individual, Society, Rationality, History".

²⁷ See Descombes, 1996, 135, 297-298 and Descombes, 2000, 42-43. However, leaving the critique against Weber aside, Descombes in *Les Institutions du sens* presents a conception of meaning that is really impressive and indeed quite close to the one we are about to sketch out here.

1988, “people who are interested in my later work will find in this writings of my 22 years (*nos vingt-deux carats*, says a French song) the problematic whose pressure formed my later course”.²⁸

But what can explain that a 22 years old man living in the Nazi occupied Athens found himself dealing with the problems of social sciences and the work of Max Weber? A very short look at the broader intellectual atmosphere of Athens in the 1940s can prove useful.²⁹ First of all, the main philosophical feature of the era is the debate opposing Marxists and Neo-Kantians, the former promoting a materialist understanding of social relationships and the final goal of revolution, the latter trying to think society and history through a renewal of Kant’s tradition and rejecting the Marxist materialism. Young Castoriadis found himself somewhere in the middle. On the one hand, he took part in various radical political groups and studied the Marxian and Marxist literature; on the other, one of his favorite professors at law school was Konstantinos Tsatsos,³⁰ a prominent Neo-Kantian philosopher who had studied with Heinrich Rickert and whose book on the philosophy of law was praised by Rickert himself. At the same time, Ioannis Sykoutris, a major philologist and translator who was a friend of Castoriadis’ family, offered the first Greek translation of Weber (*Wissenschaft als Beruf*), preceded by an introduction to which Castoriadis referred glowingly.³¹ Finally, another respected figure of the Greek Neo-Kantianism, Panayotis Kanellopoulos, wrote one of the first studies on Max Weber in Greek³² – a text Castoriadis also cites. It is within this particular intellectual landscape that we have to consider Castoriadis’ first philosophical attempts, written as parts of the second volume of a sociopolitical journal, named *Archive of Sociology and Ethics*, as per academic standards of the time.

There is not enough space here to comment on the “Introduction on the Theory of Social Sciences”, which is less Weberian and more Neo-Kantian, attributing a pivotal role to the concept of validity (*Geltung*).³³ Instead, it should be made really clear that young Castoriadis’ commentary on the body of *Economy and Society* and mature Castoriadis’ revision of the short “Introduction to Max Weber” he had written some 44 years earlier are probably the most important documents for anyone willing to study the relationship between the two authors. Unfortunately, researchers have limited access to them, for they are originally written in Greek. And since they are part of a Greek translation of a German text, it is only natural that they have not been re-translated in a more widely spoken language until recently – and again only partially.³⁴ Thus, although the careful readers of Castoriadis often mention the existence of an early translation of Weber, it is hard for them to know what is in it. These texts are not exactly unknown, but remain for the most part unread.

I have tried to explore the paths opened by the careful examination of these texts in my PhD Thesis. For better or for worse, this is not possible here. I shall only insist on some dimensions that I deem crucial in order to properly understand what connects Castoriadis to Weber. It is no coincidence that these dimensions are almost completely opposed to the critique Castoriadis addressed to Weber that I commented on earlier.

Let us begin by quoting some phrases of the Introduction of 1944:

Weber served the *investigation of the logical foundations of social sciences* with indelible offers: the definite and clear conception of *social meaning* as a constitutive moment of the material of social sciences; the corresponding [to this conception] determination of the main mission of sociology, which is the *understanding* of social phenomena.³⁵

²⁸ Castoriadis, 1988, 9. I have chosen to translate myself the passages from Castoriadis’ early Greek writings for reasons of accuracy. However, given that Vrasidas Karalis and Anthony Stevens have recently offered a (remarkable, yet not always accurate enough) English translation of some of these texts, I will also mention the respective pages of their translation for the convenience of the reader: Castoriadis, 2014, 23.

²⁹ For an interesting description of the intellectual environment of the era and its relation to Castoriadis, see Karalis, 2014, 1-19.

³⁰ For some useful information on their relationship, see Dosse, 2014, 22.

³¹ Castoriadis, 1988, 44 [Castoriadis, 2014, 32].

³² Κανελλόπουλος (1932-1933).

³³ Cf. Karalis (2014, 18), who puts it in another way: “the early texts try to re-invent Max Weber’s theory of social sciences by stressing its Kantian principles.”

³⁴ To be accurate, Karalis and Stevens have translated young Castoriadis’ “Introduction to the Theory of Social Sciences” and his short introduction in Max Weber’s life and work of 1944, along with the comments on it and the preface of 1988, but of course not the Greek translation of Weber’s *Economy and Society* or the analytical commentary young Castoriadis had added to it.

³⁵ Castoriadis, 1988, 44 [Castoriadis, 2014, 33]. We have to be careful and stress the fact that the emphasis on the phrase “social meaning”, which is to be found in the original Greek text, has been omitted in the English translation.

Then again:

The elucidation of the meaningful character of the social (though not its adequate foundation) was performed in the end of the last century by Dilthey [...] and Rickert, but finally by Max Weber himself. While the two former turned to the difference of the *method* between natural and historical science, Max Weber clearly discerned the main features of the historical material from the features of the natural material. The historical phenomenon is always bearer of *meaning*, as opposed to the bare from meaning natural phenomenon.³⁶

And finally:

The hidden nerve of Max Weber's argumentation, against all deviations, is this: *the possibility* of value reference is the constitutive precondition of the social object; [...] after we have accepted this *possibility of value reference*, the social science enters its main work (interpretive understanding and causal explanation of the social phenomenon).³⁷

This last passage is accompanied by the following insightful and telling comment of 1988:

The "constitutive precondition of the social object" is "the possibility of value reference", as the text says – but this value is the each time socially created and instituted value. In a simpler manner, I would nowadays say that the constitutive precondition of the social object is its investment with social imaginary significations. The latter also determine each time what is value (or not) socially. The idea is already announced in advance in my notes 2 a) and 4 d) in Weber's translated passage.³⁸

The notes to which Castoriadis refers are the comments he wrote when he was young. These comments dealt with the first paragraph of *Economy and Society*, in which Weber defines the concept of meaning, and to the third paragraph, where the author distinguishes between the various kinds of *Verstehen*.

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Clearly – and surprisingly – there is a remarkable distance between the two texts Castoriadis wrote on Weber in 1988. While in his extensive book review of Philippe Raynaud's treatise the philosopher explicitly claims that for the German thinker, meaning has an exclusively rational and individualist status, his comments on his own early writings seem to point to a different direction: the social character of the Weberian *Sinn* is not only taken for granted, but it is also presented as a direct precursor of Castoriadean imaginary significations or at least as the ground in which the basic idea of Castoriadis' work sprouted and grew. This fundamental divergence leads in its turn to several more: for instance, the one between the ahistorical and always-the-same rationality which Castoriadis attributes to Weber in the *Esprit* essay, juxtaposed to the socially instituted and culturally diversified version of rationality he seems to trace in the Weberian writings in his "first try-outs".³⁹ Or, to add one more example, the divergence between a strictly methodological conception of society on Weber's behalf and an ontological interpretation of his work, that can be found in the first and in the second text, respectively.

On this basis, we can first point out the ambivalences and ambiguities that have been overlooked by most observers of the relationship between the two authors. To a certain degree, this omission is due to a limited understanding of the extremely profound insights one can find studying Weber's work in depth; in a sense, more often than not people tend to think of Weber as an ideal type (individualist, rationalist, proponent of bureaucracy, etc.), undermining the incredible richness of his total *œuvre*. On the other hand, the only partial linguistic accessibility of Castoriadis' perhaps most relevant work on the subject does not make things easier.

³⁶ Castoriadis, 1988, 48 [Castoriadis, 2014, 36]. Here, for example, Karalis and Steven's translation suffers from a serious defect. While in the first sentence of the passage Castoriadis refers to the "νοηματικός" (meaningful, sinnhaft, significant) character of the social, their translation refers to the "conceptual" character of the social, totally missing the point.

³⁷ Castoriadis, 1988, 48-49 [Castoriadis, 2014, 37].

³⁸ Castoriadis, 1988, 49 [Castoriadis, 2014, 37].

³⁹ "[I]n the field of social science, we define as rational not what is objectively rational, but what is socially considered as such". Castoriadis, 1988, 77. Quite a big step forward compared to the transcendental and ahistorical *Geltung* of the Neo-Kantian philosophy, which at the time also has a grip on Castoriadis.

THE CENTRALITY OF MEANING

My purposes are not just “bibliographical”. Besides showing that Castoriadis knew his way around Weber, I am also interested in exploring the philosophical premises of this elective affinity and in drawing some political and sociological conclusions that have not been drawn until now. Trying to summarize the work of the last five years in a few pages, I will start by claiming that Weber’s and Castoriadis’ common fundamental conception of society as a world of meaning is a fruitful starting point for a renewed understanding of both authors.

In this perspective, meaning is not just an element, however significant, that can be found within society, along with tools, habits, customs, forces of production, etc. Meaning is what constitutes the social-historical being as such. Everything that *is* in society is *a priori* immersed in significations, in meaningful relations and contexts, *Sinnzusammenhänge*. Meaning is not “attributed” to actions and situations, as some English translations of Weber often make us believe. It is always already there, making actions, objects and situations what they are.

On this basis, it becomes crucial for both authors to discern but also intertwine the subjective and the objective dimensions of meaning. This is a point where Weber’s work has often been misinterpreted (sometimes by Castoriadis too, as we saw), since the emphasis he puts on the subjectively intended meaning in the first chapters of *Economy and Society* can confuse the readers and lead them to believe that, for him, meaning is exclusively individualistic. This is not the case at all. On the contrary, the intended meaning of each individual action is always social, since it presupposes the intersubjectivity and the complementarity of the subjective meanings different actors aim to. In their turn, intersubjectivity and complementarity are mediated by “objective” and institutionalized constellations of meaning that have coherence, consistency and (relative) stability and serve as “resources of meaning” for the individuals.⁴⁰ In other words, the subjectively intended meanings do not consist in arbitrary “choices” of individuals, but are situated within the limits of a common, socially formed and mediated “tank”, which determines the possible “range” of values, significations, beliefs and affects that individuals of each society act upon. Even further, this “range” is inscribed in the minds and the bodies of individuals, constituting a crucial part of their socially instituted *habitus* – a term that can be found in Weber’s writings on religion long before Pierre Bourdieu placed it at the heart of his own sociology.⁴¹

On the other hand, these super-subjective configurations of meaning are not just imposed upon the subjects. First, because every social institution is the product of (coordinated but also conflicting, conscious but also unconscious) social action, and action is always in the last analysis performed by (groups of) individuals. Second, because there is always some space for interpretation and even creation of new significations by the individual actors, who are, according to Weber, the elementary bearers of meaningful action; meaning is never absolutely defined and determined,⁴² since it is nowhere to be found than incorporated in the billions of human actions that make society what it is.

In a way, Castoriadis followed the reverse course, but he was also interested in the interweavement of the social with the individual level. His first aim was to form an ontology of the socio-historical field; thus, for him meaning was firstly defined as social meaning, as a magma of social imaginary significations that are “incarnated” in the institutions of each society and determine their modalities and peculiarities. However, the individual dimension is also very important. Drawing on his readings of Freud and his practice as psychoanalyst, Castoriadis defined the human psyche through its search for meaning. While at the early stages of the infant’s growth this search is satisfied by a purely psychical and illusionary activity, there comes a point where the individual psyche is forced to enter the social world. This implies a violent rupture of the previous psychical status, marked by the renunciation of the illusionary satisfaction and the omnipotence of

⁴⁰ See Grossein, 2016a, 8 and Grossein, 2016, 39.

⁴¹ See Weber, 1988, 250, where Weber speaks of the “Gefühlshabitus” and “Habitus” religious significations form.

⁴² As Kalberg (2016, 114, n. 5) beautifully asserts “[o]wing to his orientation to subjective meaning, Weber discovers that a reflective person with pluralistic action options *may* appear *even* in extremely cohesive groups (the sect or the bureaucracy, for example)”.

the infantile soul. However, according to Castoriadis, the society offers some compensation to the individual psyche, for this necessary violence: the access to another modality of meaning, the socially instituted imaginary signification; a form of meaning that is public, communicable and can be used in order to shape an individual identity, the identity of a socialized individual.

Against this background, Castoriadis correlated the social and the individual aspects of meaning through a radical re-interpretation of the Freudian concept of sublimation. For him, *Sublimierung* is not only the desexualization of the drives, but mainly the broader procedure of the socialization of the soul, which consists in the psychical undertaking of the social imaginary significations and the investment of the socially instituted objects: “the social individual is someone who can take pleasure in making an object, in talking with others, in hearing a story or a song, in looking at a painting, in demonstrating a theorem or in acquiring knowledge – and also, in learning that others have a ‘good opinion’ of him and even in thinking that he has ‘acted well’”.⁴³ As indicated by these examples, access to the imaginary significations is, here too, guaranteed through the mediation of the everyday praxis. This is why Castoriadis neverendingly stressed that the emergence and the formation of significations are indissoluble from the social action of the people.⁴⁴

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Of course, meaning can also become a vague notion and it has to be defined more carefully. But defining the concept is a difficult task, even if we limit ourselves to the Weberian and the Castoriadean *œuvre*. Although the references to *Sinn*, *Bedeutung* and *significations imaginaires* respectively are to be found literally everywhere in the writings of the two authors, it is almost impossible to trace a clear expression that defines the “meaning of the meaning”.⁴⁵ It is possible, however, to present a description of the fundamental (and interdependent) features of meaning:

- 1) Meaning offers *orientation*. It gives direction both to the individual action and to the society as a whole. This orientation is not just an intellectual, “mental” or strictly rational situation;⁴⁶ it involves *at the same time* ideas and representations (*Vorstellungen*), passions, affects and intentions.
- 2) Meaning offers *coherence*. It structures, organizes, ties together, legitimizes, again both at a personal and at a societal level. Values and significations create a meaningful order, an *univers de sens*, a *sinvoller Kosmos* within the chaotic reality.
- 3) Meaning is the *source of renewal and creativity*. Although meaning is necessary for the foundation and the legitimization of the established order, it can never become petrified. By its very nature it is open to innovative interpretations, or even to the spring of entirely new dimensions. For Weber, charisma constitutes the revolutionary force in history exactly because the charismatic figure is the bearer of new values that endow social reality with a fresh meaning, imprinted in newborn social forms and relationships. For Castoriadis, the *creatio ex nihilo* is a basic feature of the imaginary element, generating new significations that can lead to a revolutionary change of the social institutions and the subjects.

⁴³ Castoriadis, 2005, p. 315.

⁴⁴ There is a series of expressions Castoriadis used in order to highlight that the imaginary cannot be grasped independently from the social action: *sens incarné*, *imaginaire effectif*, *signification opérante*, *sens actif*, etc. See Castoriadis, 1975, 221, 213, 195.

⁴⁵ For some attempts to theorize meaning in Weber’s work, see for instance Grossein, 2016a, 6-9; Schluchter, 1991, 542; Adair-Toteff, 2013, 92; Albrow, 1990, 211ff. As far as Castoriadis’ work is concerned, I believe that the question regarding “the meaning of the meaning” has not really been dealt with. There are many noteworthy publications on the nature of “imaginary”, but not on the one of “imaginary meaning”.

⁴⁶ However, the direction of rationalism is one of the major features of meaning. The premises of rationalism are always to be found in society’s “ultimate values” or “core imaginary significations”. That is why Weber and Castoriadis support passionately that values or political projects cannot be rationally founded. That is also why Castoriadis is wrong to criticize Weber’s *Zweckrationalität* this harshly, since it is pretty similar to his own “ensemblist-identitary logic” (or ensidic logic): a sort of purposive and procedural rationality, that efficiently and coherently makes things move to a certain direction; a direction, however, which cannot as such be founded in rationality itself, but in values, axioms or significations that are presupposed by it. In fact, Castoriadis himself in a short and rather unnoticed text of his (“The Social-Historical. Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge”), written in 1987, seems to identify the ensidic logic with *Zweckrationalität*, using the latter term as an explanation of the former! See Castoriadis, 1991a, 44. This must be seen as another sign of the ambiguity of Castoriadis’ comments on Weber that we mentioned earlier.

This last comment on the imprint that the concept of meaning leaves to the social life brings us to another important reflection. The conception of *Sinn* Weber and Castoriadis offer is a perfect antidote to the twin dangers of idealism and materialism. In this context, it is interesting to note that Castoriadis and Weber both dismiss these two intellectual hazards in a single move. At first, it is perhaps tempting to see their work as a restoration of the importance of the spiritual elements in human life, which has been overlooked by Marxist materialism. However, they both reject explicitly this interpretation. For them, idealism and materialism are part of the same intellectual tradition that opposes “matter” to “ideas”, trying to find which of the two factors is decisive, in the last analysis.⁴⁷ On the contrary, they insist that, when we refer to a society (always, that is), even “matter” is mediated by significations and values that do not just “invest” it, but make it what it is. On the other hand, “ideas”, significations, world images and values are nowhere to be found unless “incarnated” in the institutions, the forms of life and the actions that are characteristic of each society. For example, Weber reminded that we are not so much interested in the dogmatic correctness of Protestantism, as in the practical imprint protestant ideas and interpretations have on institutions and human beings,⁴⁸ on the everyday ways of action, the praxeological and psychological *habitus* of individuals, the “anthropological types” of Modernity.⁴⁹

In other words, meaning is to be found in the materiality of the society; and the materiality of the society is always meaningful.⁵⁰ This is not to say that “everything is meaning” or to dissolve society in some sort of “symbolic air”. Weber makes this point quite clear when he states that the sociological emphasis on meaning should not make us forget that a very large part of the social life takes place within the limits of unconscious or semi-unconscious actions and also that the importance of the *sinnfremd* – the meaningless or not bestowed with signification – events and regularities, such as a natural disaster or the biological circle of life, should not be neglected.⁵¹ However, he adds that these events and regularities become sociologically important not as such, but to the extent that the social action is meaningfully oriented towards them, handling them as “‘conditions’, ‘causes’, ‘inhibitions’, and ‘promoters’ of such action”.⁵² In other words, there are different ways to stand towards the meaningless ingredients of life, and these ways have always to do with the various significations persons and societies bestow these ingredients with.⁵³

It seems to me that this way of reasoning and of intertwining meaning and non-meaning is quite close to Castoriadis’ famous concept of “leaning on” or “anaclisis” (*étayage, Anlehnung*). Following his analysis, we could say that the imaginary institution of society has always to “take into consideration” events, forces and phenomena of the natural or the biological world, which *per se* are meaningless. However, the philosopher rightfully notes that, although it is true that these forces do limit the creativity of the social imaginary, these limits are rather trivial – which is *not* to say that they are unimportant. For example, every society must face the fact that people need food to survive or that there is a sort of fundamental sexual drive that affects human life and cannot be totally eradicated or suppressed; nevertheless, these facts do not explain the incredible variety of the ways different societies and cultures have instituted food or sexual relationships in the course of history. On the contrary, one must examine the specific imaginary of each society – the social significations which are incorporated in the actions that have to do with food or sex – in order to render the singularity and the peculiarity of each society understandable, facing the biological givens of nutrition and sexuality as

⁴⁷ See for example Weber, 2005, 125; Castoriadis, 1997b, 325. Regarding Weber, see also Schluchter, 2005, 63ff.

⁴⁸ To put it in Johannes Weiss’ words, what interests Weber “is not the meaning in its ideality, but to the extent that it is a real factor that determines the social action” (Weiss, 1992, 47, quoted by Grossein, 2016b, 39). The same is true for Castoriadis.

⁴⁹ The idea of the “human type” that is formed through socialization is of great importance for both Weber and Castoriadis. Regarding Weber, see *inter alia* the enlightening analysis of Jean-Pierre Grossein, 2016b, 14-17. Regarding Castoriadis, see for instance his essay “Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics” (1997c).

⁵⁰ By the way, this is exactly how Clifford Geertz, former student of Talcott Parsons, used to read Weber. He also believed meaning is social and can be conceived through the practical traces it leaves in the anthropological organization of people. So, Geertz’s work could also be considered as an indirect demonstration for the interpretation of Weber’s work we suggest here. See Geertz, 1973, 5, 104, 108, 131.

⁵¹ See Weber, 2019, 82-83.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵³ For example, Geertz has shown that what he calls, following Weber, “problems of meaning” arise when people face the meaninglessness of death, suffering, etc.

“stops”, “limits”, “supports” or “stimuli” for the imaginary institution – the similarity of Weber’s and Castoriadis’ vocabulary highlighting the one of their reasoning.⁵⁴

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Once we focus on the centrality of meaning for both Weber and Castoriadis, we realize it is possible to re-read their entire work, as well as the relationship between them, under this prism. The concept of meaning is not just a very important element of their approach, but the link that holds the different “components” of their writings together. Given that they both had impressively broad interests, ranging from the analysis of current everyday politics to the study of ancient cultures or the epistemology of social sciences, meaning can be seen as the red thread that unites the various pieces.

This observation may surprise, since commentators have often suggested that, if any, the red thread in Weber’s work is the concept of rationalization, while as far as Castoriadis is concerned, this role is usually attributed to the concept of autonomy. Of course, I do not claim that my interpretation is the only plausible one, let alone *the right one*. However, I believe it is legitimate, and in addition it has the advantage of being able to take into account or even “absorb” other possible interpretations, while also including elements that do not fit so well into them.

For example, the idea of rationalization in Weber’s thought is closely intertwined with the concept of meaning. Fighting against the idea of a global Reason, Weber holds that rationalization is always a process in which a value position, a way of giving meaning to the world and life is to be found at the very basis. That is why he notes, in *Zwischenbetrachtung*, that the study of the different directions of world negation that are formed through the objectified meaning constellations of various religions can prove very helpful for the development of a *sociology of rationalism*.⁵⁵ Moreover, it has to be noted that the Western rationalization is strongly connected with the famous *Weltentzauberung*, the disenchantment of the world. For Weber, the rationalization of society and life in the West had to pass through the extinction of magical and religious meanings that earlier cultures invested their world with.

At the same time, as we are about to see, the concept of meaning enjoys a certain priority in Weber’s epistemological writings, while rationalization is rather an *effect* of science than a constitutive moment of the scientist’s work. The same is true for Castoriadis’ epistemological interests: some sort of meaning is absolutely central in them, even when studying the modalities of a simple living-being (e.g. a cell),⁵⁶ while the concept of autonomy, with the deep sense of the word, becomes possible only in the socio-historical field. This is why Castoriadis rejected Francisco Varela’s use of the term “autonomy” in the field of biology, although he generally admired Varela’s work.

In short, I believe anyone willing to study the works of Weber and/or Castoriadis will eventually come to a point where they will have to give attention to the concept of meaning. For example, studying politics requires examining legitimization, i.e. exploring “the subjectively meaningful bases” that support domination (Weber),⁵⁷ taking into consideration that “the throne of the master of imaginary significations stands higher than the throne of the master of violence” (Castoriadis).⁵⁸ Similarly, the study of Western modernity through Weberian and Castoriadean lenses,⁵⁹ means facing the disenchantment of the world, the gradual remission of the magical and religious significations that once gave meaning to Man’s relation with nature. At the same time, this also means insisting on the directive for rational mastering of the world, one of the most important elements of the unwanted legacy of Protestantism, as Weber has shown. Against this background, it is no

⁵⁴ See Castoriadis, 2005, 229-230. In this respect, the fact that Castoriadis in his *First Tryouts* speaks of the “connection of meaning to its natural ground” and of “conditions”, “obstacles”, “triggering points” and “promptings” while commenting on the afore mentioned views of Weber regarding the *sinngremd* events and phenomena is of great importance. See Castoriadis, 1988, 119, 124.

⁵⁵ Weber, 1988, 537.

⁵⁶ I agree here with Suzi Adam’s analysis, according to which Castoriadis, while examining the living being as such, sketches out a “genealogy of the meaning” (2008, 395).

⁵⁷ Weber, 1981, 177.

⁵⁸ Castoriadis, 1988, 90.

⁵⁹ As Peter Wagner (1993) has done.

coincidence Castoriadis claimed that one of the core imaginary significations of the Western modernity is the “(pseudo)rational (pseudo)mastery” of nature and society.⁶⁰

And we should not be surprised to see the analysis of meanings, significations and values play a central role even in the study of everyday and mundane matters, such as bureaucracy (the treatment of which is of great significance for both authors). This is because meaning is not external to social reality, but is incarnated in the most tangible parts of our lives. “[D]omination by the bureaucracy appears as the adequate form, par excellence, of domination by the ‘spirit’ of capitalism (here again, Max Weber had seen things much more clearly than Marx) – or, by the magma of social imaginary significations the institution of capitalism realizes”,⁶¹ Castoriadis writes, paying a part of his debt towards Weber.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE: THE ANTI-SPECULATIVE STANCE TOWARDS HISTORY

Two ways are open to us: Hegel or – our way of treating things.⁶²

There are many examples of the fields and the topics for the thorough investigation of which meaning is the key, at least according to Weber and Castoriadis. The importance of meaning can also be clearly discerned in the epistemological and methodological writings of Max Weber and Cornelius Castoriadis; a crucial part of their epistemological interests is the study of history, towards which I shall now turn.

At the epistemological level, Weber’s thought is often considered to be connected with a vague demand for “value-freedom”. Interpreted naively, this supposes that Weber claims that values do not (or at least should not) play any role in the praxis of social sciences. As we are about to see, not only is this untrue, but *it cannot* possibly be true, given Weber’s broader philosophical and methodological premises.

For Weber indeed, reality as such is an inexhaustible, never-ending and chaotic river. If I try to summarize a complex issue in a few paragraphs, I can start by saying that Weber endorsed to a significant extent the general conception of empirical reality his friend and colleague, Neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert supported. Rickert spoke of reality as an *unübersehbare Mannigfaltigkeit*, a complexity, diversity and even infinity that is impossible to be entirely grasped or overviewed. Given this fact, every piece of knowledge we acquire about the infinite and abyssal world is always mediated by our own finite means (categories, mental and perceptive organization, etc.), that serve as lenses of selection, focus, and processing.

This idea comes of course from the philosophy of Kant, for whom the *Ding an sich* remains inaccessible, and the phenomena we perceive are always already organized by our own intellect. However, Rickert, and even more so Weber, have extended this idea from the natural towards the social and historical world; the necessity of selection, mediation and material processing does not occur only for the study of nature, but also for that of society and history. Moreover, an extra problem stems from the fact that the historical material “does not speak by itself”, does not bear in it some inherent evaluation criteria about what is worth knowing and what is not. To use Weber’s own example, why study the Battle of Marathon and not a battle from the history of Kafirs, which perhaps was equally or even more bloody? The material does not offer a readymade answer.

Rickert’s solution to the problem is well-known: the access to the material is realized thanks to the mediation of some social values that determine what is worth studying and what is not. However, the Neo-Kantian philosopher, in his effort to avoid the problem of cultural relativism (each society, depending on its values, would consider as worth knowing different things, different parts of the chaotic river), tries to attribute an objective validity to some values. The objectivity of the values defining the points of view through which we are about to select, look and organize our material is for Rickert guaranteed either transcendently (which means these particular values enjoy a supra-historical validity, beyond every subjectivism) either socially (in

⁶⁰ The affinity is evident even at the level of the vocabulary: “rationale Beherrschung von Natur und Menschen” / “expansion illimitée de la maîtrise rationnelle du monde et de la société”.

⁶¹ Castoriadis, 1997, 231.

⁶² Phrase from Max Weber’s letter to F. Eulenburg (1909), quoted by Bruun (2007, 76).

this case, “objective” would be the dominant values of the community in which the historian lives and works).⁶³

This is exactly where Weber’s significant deviation from Rickert’s views starts. It is true, Weber claims, that we acquire access to the ever-changing stream of being only through a relation to values, a value-relation (*Wertbeziehung*), which is also – it must be stressed – a meaning-relation.⁶⁴ These values, however, have nothing to do with transcendental objectivity. They are social products: each era and each society have their proper axioms and there cannot be an objective (rational or otherwise) evaluation or hierarchization of the various guiding principles – the notorious cultural *incommensurability of criteria*. And since values are not limited to a praxeological dimension, but cover an epistemological dimension as well – for they determine the prism under which we are about to examine the endless stream of the river, the tributaries that will seem noteworthy to us, the specific brooks on which we will focus – we have to admit that every knowledge on the culture varies according to the culture itself; knowledge on society and history is created by and changes along society and history.

The *significance* of a configuration of cultural phenomena and the basis of this significance cannot however be derived and rendered intelligible by a system of analytical laws (*Gesetzesbegriffen*), however perfect it may be, since the significance of cultural events presupposes a *value-orientation* towards these events. The concept of culture is a *value-concept*. Empirical reality becomes ‘culture’ to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. It includes those segments and only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value-relevance. Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values.⁶⁵

Against this background, it becomes obvious that when Weber speaks of *Wertfreiheit*, he does not and indeed could not support the idea that values should be exiled from the field of social sciences. On the contrary, it is beyond any doubt that for him values play a positive and indeed *constitutive* role as far as knowledge is concerned, since without them the selection of its material and the construction of its object would be impossible. In other words, and in opposition to a very popular misconception, for Weber people do not acquire knowledge about society and history *despite the fact* they always find themselves situated in a very specific (value laden) standpoint; people acquire knowledge *because* they always find themselves in such a standpoint.

In this context, the meaning of the – almost untranslatable – concept of *Wertfreiheit* could be approached in the following way: *once* we have “chosen” the prism through which we are about to examine the material, we can no longer say just anything; not everything goes. The material itself is not a completely amorphous, formless and malleable mass. It entails resistance, normalities and anomalies, nodal points that we cannot violate. And as far as we respect the particularity and the singularity of the material, as far as we let it “talk to us”, we are not *entirely* determined by our personal and cultural values.

At the same time, this process should not be considered as a simple effort of abstaining or self-limitation; because the specificity of our *point of view* – the term is to be taken here literally – can elucidate the material from new, interesting and fruitful aspects, and thus make previously hidden qualities and relations become visible. This way, we manage to “encounter” or “grasp” something that overcomes the closure of our own personal ideas and social-historical horizon. A tangible demonstration of this is the fact that *there is* knowledge and understanding among different cultures, and indeed a kind of knowledge that cannot just be considered as a structured delirium, private and/or social.

It has been and remains true that a systematically correct scientific proof in the social sciences, if it is to achieve its purpose, must be acknowledged as correct even by a Chinese, or – more precisely stated – it must constantly strive to attain this goal, which perhaps may not be completely attainable due to faulty data.⁶⁶

⁶³ Kubalica, 2011, 51ff and Ferrari, 2001, 134 seem to suggest the former solution, while Bruun, 2007, 121, the latter.

⁶⁴ “‘Culture’ is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance”. Weber, 1949, 81.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

In other words, the problem of “value freedom” could be posed in the following terms: since access to the world always occurs via a particular point of view, since every knowledge starts, and will always start, from a standpoint bound in accountable ways to a specific historical situation, to a given society, to a singular person or a collectivity of persons that are themselves and not just anybody, should we abandon the idea of “valid knowledge” or even truth? Through his remarks on *Wertfreiheit*, Weber’s answer is negative. To the extent that we always keep in mind the partiality of our own approach; to the extent that we do not deform what is deploying in front of us in order to make it forcefully fit in our hermeneutical schemes; that we discern (as much as possible) desire from reality; that we remain open to newness and alterity; that we do not try consciously or unconsciously to distort our own observations and insights in order to confirm or “found” our political values; and, of course, to the extent that we have a talent or a way of discerning the essential *Augenmass* (with the measure of the eye), we can bring valid knowledge into existence. That is a kind of knowledge Weber would not hesitate to nominate as “objective” – as long as we remember, of course, that this “objectivity” is not the phantasm of an absolute truth that would hold for some incorporeal creatures, deracinated from their space, time, and self, nor the objectivity of some naïve realism. It is objectivity *from a certain point of view*, “unter diesem Gesichtspunkt”, as Weber tirelessly writes. The person who speaks from this *Gesichtspunkt* certainly plays an active and creative role in the process of knowledge, but cannot, however, present just anything as valid.⁶⁷

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It is within this broader context that we should try to approach Weber’s fundamental critique of what he calls *Emanatismus* in the field of history. By this term he refers to the idea that the historical phenomena emanate or stem from a guiding principle that is situated behind reality and orients it. With good reason or not,⁶⁸ Weber targets Hegel’s conception of history as the most prominent example of the emanatist way of thinking. According to (Weber’s understanding of) the latter, history is the deployment of Spirit; all historical events are products and expressions of this deployment; they are not so much singular and unrepeatable moments as they are parts and manifestations of a broader project, of a “cunning of reason” which stands behind them, directs them and makes them what they are. In Weber’s view, other examples of emanatism can be found in certain forms of Marxism (for which history consists in the unfolding of the movement of the production forces) or in the romanticist ideas regarding the *Volksgeist*, the spirit of the people (according to which every institution, such as language, law, the mores and the traditions are manifestations of this spirit).

Weber reasonably connects this stance towards history with the domination of a speculative way of thinking. Instead of embracing the irreducible openness and complexity of the river of history, the speculative stance explicitly or implicitly tends to *produce* the course of historical events from the general laws inherent in some metaphysical entity, which is to be found in the background of reality, operating as a secret mechanism.⁶⁹ This way, Weber claims, elements that could otherwise be used as heuristic tools for the examination of certain historical events and eras (such as the evolution of production means or the singular traits and the unique ideas of a people) tend to become substantiated, that is to develop into metaphysical, but all too real entities that determine the course of history. On the basis of this substantiation, of the “domination of speculative thought over history”,⁷⁰ we lose sight of the specific historical being and we try to think of it (or, even worse, to make it lay in a procrustean bed, so that it is possible to think of it) as one more sub-case among others, one more demonstration of the action of the decisive factor from which everything emanates.

Weber’s critique of the idea of a determinant principle from which everything stems, an idea which could lead to a deductive conception of history (starting from general principles, we can deduce the parts that

⁶⁷ Of course, here I have not mentioned another important aspect of *Wertfreiheit*, which is easier to grasp and which could be called *Werturteilsfreiheit*, freedom or abstaining from axiological judgments, following Dirk Kaesler. For example, an atheist researcher should study the reality of a religious society without *at the same time* characterizing the believers as dumb, conservative, etc.

⁶⁸ For some objections on behalf of Hegel, see Raynaud (1997, 22) and Colliot-Thélène, 1990, 9-13.

⁶⁹ We can recall Walter Benjamin’s famous analogy of historical materialism with a puppet in Turkish attire who plays chess. It is interesting to note that the puppet turns out to be driven from behind by the hand of an experienced chess player, and systematically wins the game.

⁷⁰ Weber, 1985, 41.

follow), has often been used by Weber scholars as a means to highlight the contingency and the openness that characterize the historical field.⁷¹ Several commentators rightfully assert that, from a Weberian perspective, there is no space for a *philosophy of history*,⁷² in the sense of an exhaustive and complete theory systematizing a certain teleology that is supposed to be directing history *in toto*. In direct opposition to such a perception, Weber insists on the singularity of historical phenomena and on the existence of multiple forces acting within history, sometimes contradicting, sometimes complementing each other (the notorious “tremendous confusion of interdependent influences”⁷³). Weber traced tendencies and *chances* but not strict determinisms in the field of human action.

These remarks are both correct and significant. However, I believe they could be reinforced if we were to focus on another dimension of Weber’s thought that has not been pushed to its ultimate consequences by the thinker himself nor drawn enough attention of his commentators – at least so far. According to my previous comments on the constant change of social and historical values that goes along with the incessant transformation of the prisms through which we see the past, Weber’s anti-speculative stance could be complemented by the following idea: in order to be able to take a speculative position towards history, one must assume being in possession of the *absolute perspective* for its contemplation; that one has somehow made sure of having a privileged access point to history, which is not only “correct”, but also insuperable, insurmountable, unalterable through time. To be able to look at history speculatively means we have discovered the diachronic prism under which every historical secret becomes known, every blind spot is rendered understandable and finds its space within a project, a plan, an “economy” or teleology. This in turn would mean that history is or *could be* over: it can no longer produce new events that would not be interpretable through this point of view, nor can it – most importantly – give birth to *new points of view*. The river has dried up.

As we have seen, Weber fought against this way of reasoning with his though provoking and insightful analysis of the eternal social and historical construction of values via which we relate to history or, to be more accurate, via which we determine what history is and what is just “noise”, unworthy of our attention and of our intellectual efforts. There cannot be a definite and privileged standpoint from which we shall look at the totality of human history; first, because new standpoints emerge incessantly from the constant movement of the social-historical stream; second, because there is no such thing as a “totality” of history.

On this basis, we can better understand why Weber points at Hegel as the central figure of *Emanatismus*.⁷⁴ Who could forget that the Hegelian conception of history is full of “relatively necessary” moments, such as the period of Terror of the French Revolution, during which violence is self-overcome and becomes freedom?⁷⁵ If I dare to raise the question *in what respect* were such moments necessary⁷⁶, I cannot but reach to the conclusion they were necessary to arrive to the present (or the near future); at the privileged point where finally the meaning of the entire history is unlocked and, if there were still things to happen, these are rather secondary.

⁷¹ Among others, Kari Palonen and Sven Eliaeson (2004, 140) have insisted on the significance of the contingency element in Max Weber’s way of thinking. As far as Castoriadis is concerned, see his conversation with René Girard, during the famous symposium on self-organization, which took place in Cerisy (Castoriadis and Girard, 1983, 279-301).

⁷² Touraine, 1965, 32; Bruun, 2007, 219.

⁷³ Weber, 2005, 49.

⁷⁴ It has rightfully been pointed out (e.g. by Bruun, 2007, 76) that Weber prefers to directly attack “epigones” such as Roscher and Knies, Stammer, Croce and Wundt instead of Hegel, Marx or Dilthey respectively, whom he treated with respect. However, it is clear that he had a problem with the Hegelian way of thinking about history, at least as expressed in Hegel’s lectures on history. After all, Hegel (2017, 8) was the one to claim that “[t]he only Thought which Philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of History, is the simple conception of *Reason*; that Reason is the Sovereign of the World; that the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process. This conviction and intuition is a hypothesis in the domain of history as such. In that of Philosophy it is no hypothesis. It is there proved by speculative cognition, that Reason [...] is *Substance*, as well as *Infinite Power*; its own *Infinite Material* underlying all the natural and spiritual life which it originates, as also the *Infinite Form* – that which sets this Material in motion.”

⁷⁵ See Hegel, 2018, 339-347 and 1983, 157: “Robespierre acted in this way—his power left him because necessity had left him, and thus he was overthrown by force. The necessary happens—but every portion of necessity is usually allotted only to individuals. The one is accuser and defender, the other a judge, the third a hangman — but all are necessary”.

⁷⁶ And of course many other moments in which, if I want to be honest, we must also include the history of non-Western civilizations, their conquest, all the battles and the massacres, all the conjunctures.

The differences between the two approaches are quite apparent. And that is exactly why Weber, in his letter to Eulenburg cited in the beginning of this section, makes a clear distinction between two ways of thinking about history: Hegel's and his own.

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Taking into consideration the previous thoughts, I believe that my interpretation is inscribed in the argumentation of a long series of authors (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Pierre Grossein, Johannes Weiss, etc.) who read Weber's *œuvre* at antipodes with some widespread misconceptions of his writings, while my emphasis on the critique of *Emanatismus* reinforces this tradition. Following this line of thought, phrases and ideas that would necessarily remain inexplicable within the limits of the popular Weberian strawman image finally begin to make sense. It is indeed impossible to understand how the "positivist" and "proponent of value neutrality" Weber could have ever written: "In Goethe's words, 'theory' is involved precisely in the 'fact'".⁷⁷ If we place the concept of meaning at the heart of Weber's problematization, we can avoid such misunderstandings and start thinking of his work in terms of a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation of values and significations, which are incorporated in human action, scientific or otherwise. After all, Weber was the one to speak of "interpretative sociology".⁷⁸

In this context, it is no coincidence that Paul Ricoeur dedicated a significant part of his lectures on Ideology and Utopia to Weber's writings, or that Maurice Merleau-Ponty immersed himself into Weber's methodological work in order to find an antidote to Marxist determinism and an inspiration for his effort to "avoid totalizing meanings in history".⁷⁹

The historian cannot look at the past without giving it a meaning, without putting into perspective the important and the subordinate, the essential and the accidental, plans and accomplishments, preparations and declines. [...] One cannot avoid the invasion of the historian into history.⁸⁰

Paraphrasing one of the philosopher's famous quotes, I could argue that history cannot be overviewed from some absolute, suprahistorical or extrahistorical point of view, but rather that it made it possible because we are *flesh from its flesh*.

It is against a similar background that Castoriadis' conception of history can be explored, while also keeping in mind that in this case the bonds that tie the two thinkers are – as we have seen – even stronger. Let's start with an interesting and important passage from *The Imaginary Institution of the Society*. After making absolutely clear that for him the social meaning, in the form of a magma of imaginary significations, is not just "added-up" in social relationships, or even enjoying a certain autonomy in relation to them, but rather is "the element that constitutes history as such",⁸¹ Castoriadis wrote:

This is why the Western project of constituting a total history, the exhaustive understanding and explanation of societies of other times and other places is necessarily rooted in failure, if it is taken as a speculative project. The Western manner of conceiving of history is based on the idea that what was once a meaning for-itself, a meaning of their society for the Assyrians can become without remainder and without deficit, a meaning for us. But this is obviously impossible, and thereby the speculative project of total history becomes impossible. History is always history as it is for us – this does not mean that we can truncate it however we may wish or naively submit it to our projections, since what interests us in history is precisely our authentic otherness, other human possibilities in their absolute singularity.⁸²

The affinity of the two approaches is quite clear. Placing social meaning at the center of his analysis, the philosopher argues that we always see the past through the imaginary lenses of the present. However, the fact

⁷⁷ Weber, 1949, 73 (with minor revision of the translation).

⁷⁸ In this respect, Chowers (1995) was right to assert that Weber sees the human being as a "homo hermeneut".

⁷⁹ See the remarkable paper of Savage, 2008.

⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 1973, 10.

⁸¹ Castoriadis, 2005, 161.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 163.

that alterity is every time mediated by our own prism – how else could it ever be? – does not mean that we are allowed to see in it whatever we please or to claim about it no matter what. Thus, to use Nicolas Poirier’s words, for Castoriadis, if history wants to be something more than a mere listing of dates, “the inclusion of the still raw material the facts offer in a perspective is demanded: the facts do not ever speak by themselves, they disclose their participation in the universal only through a particular discourse that is necessarily situated [in history]. [...] Only on the precondition that it is situated *within* history, can the subject elaborate a knowledge *on* history”.⁸³

So, we should not be surprised if reading some of Castoriadis’ most powerful political texts we were to come along phrases on history that could have been written by Weber himself: for example, speaking of the insurrection of Hungary in 1956, Castoriadis wrote: “these weeks – as well as the few weeks of the Paris Commune – are no less important and significant *for us* than three thousand years of the history of pharaonic Egypt”. Given that Castoriadis had immersed himself in the Weberian methodological writings, the direct connection with Weber’s thought is obvious.⁸⁴

At the same time, Castoriadis’ critique against Hegelianism, and most importantly Marxism, which has set the ground for a broader critique of the inherited philosophical thought and ontology, does not only or primarily concern determinism, but rather what he calls “alienation in the speculative”.⁸⁵ In other words, he turns against the idea that it is possible to achieve a complete theory of the social, a definitive interpretation of history,⁸⁶ a treatment regarding society and revolution that would be configured in advance. But such efforts have to face that the social-historical creates itself and changes constantly, the human action brings into the world new and unforeseeable elements, the movement of the social imaginary is incessant and not determined. This is why in his texts he stresses over and over⁸⁷ that the real problem with the Marxist conception of history is not so much its empirical adequacy (e.g. the question whether a certain progress in the productive forces was actually what “caused” a revolution, something that could perhaps be true in certain cases), as its distinctive spirit, the speculative way of thinking, which makes us think that the magmatic movement of societies can be grasped *a priori* under the form of general laws or abstract principles, which direct history, situated in the backstage of the course of events. As Castoriadis emphatically noted, generating immediate connections with the Weberian critique of *Emanatismus*, we should oppose to this tension that “rules *a tergo* [from behind] the inherited reflection concerning society and history”.⁸⁸

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Finally, we can come to the point where Castoriadis indeed goes beyond Weber, pushing things to a next level. Of course, it can be argued that he does not so much do it through a complete break with the Weberian thought, but rather through a new, radically ontological treatment of a pattern that in a way already exists in

⁸³ Poirier, 2011, 241.

⁸⁴ In the Greek translation of the text, “for us” has emphasis on the original, which gives to the passage an even stronger Weberian tone. Castoriadis himself notes that he is not happy with the English edition of the text, which has been “edited” in a catastrophic way. The French edition, a translation of the English text by Maurice Luciani, is available [here](#).

This is not the only example. Here is another absolutely Weberian moment of Castoriadis’ methodological remarks: “It is hardly necessary to remind ourselves of the schematic character of all periodisations, of the risk of neglecting continuities and connections, or of the ‘subjective’ element involved. The latter is to be found specifically in the basis chosen for the division in which the philosophical and theoretical preconceptions underlying the attempt at periodisation are condensed. Of course, this is unavoidable and it has to be recognised as such. The best way to deal with it is to make these preconceptions as explicit as possible”. Then, the philosopher goes on to announce his proper preconceptions, which allow him to form a “perspective”. Castoriadis, 2001, 20.

⁸⁵ Castoriadis, 1975, p. 103. The English translation “alienation with respect to the speculative” (2005, p. 70) does not really capture Castoriadis’ idea. “Aliénation au spéculatif” does not mean we are alienated as far the speculative level is concerned, but that we are alienated *within* the speculative intellectual attitude and through it.

⁸⁶ Cf. Castoriadis and Girard, 1983, 289:

“Girard: All the great thinkers of history, and particularly the greatest, Hegel, say: everything is history and in a way history is completed [achevée]. There is no doubt.

Castoriadis: We always accuse them of that.

Girard: Yes, we always accuse them of that...

Castoriadis: We can always say, in a very banal way, to Hegel: Sir, you are dead, thank you”.

⁸⁷ See *inter alia* Castoriadis, 2005, 32: “The conclusion to be drawn here is not that the materialist conception of history is ‘false’ as to its content. It is that the type of theory at which this conception is aimed has no meaning, that this sort of theory is impossible to establish, and that, moreover, we have no need of it”.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 168 (with minor revision of the translation).

Weber's horizon. This is a good example for *Castoriadis' radicalization of Weber's way of thinking* I believe we can speak of, which of course does not mean that Castoriadis is a mere radical weberologist.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, as it has been rightfully noted that the philosopher radicalized schemes and ideas of Freud or Kant,⁹⁰ we have every right to claim that he most certainly did the same with Weber.

Every careful reader of Castoriadis knows that the philosopher chose to use the expression “social-historical” to highlight the indissoluble unity of history and society. History is not something that “occurs” *a posteriori* or by accident and deranges the eternal essence of the being “society”. For him, society *is* history, ever-ending self-creation and self-alteration which exists only in its historicity; and history is but the self-deployment of society in time (and each society has its proper tempo, mode and form of self-deployment). In his perspective, this is something most philosophers and intellectuals have overlooked, trying to think society and history as two entities, interrelated of course, yet distinct.⁹¹ So, Castoriadis believes – rightfully or not – that his insistence in the fundamental indistinctiveness of the fields of history and society, and of course the exploration of the consequences of this indistinctiveness, is one of his most important contributions to the renewal of philosophical thinking.

In this context, it seems quite interesting to note that for Castoriadis, at least one author manages to escape the trap of the separation of the social and the historical: Max Weber. “For Weber there is no, and rightly so, distinction between these two objects of inquiry [society and history] in a deep level”.⁹² This remark, that remains rather unexplained at this point of the text, is perhaps better understood when placed into the broader picture I have tried to sketch out here. For Weber there is no ultimate distinction between the social and the historical because each society creates its own concept of history, its proper way of looking at the infinite complexity of the past, through its values and formations of meaning.

However, we have to be careful and note that for Weber (at least according to his own explicit declarations), this is a matter of the *methodology* of social, cultural and historical sciences. So, one could argue that all these elements that enjoy a methodological status⁹³ in the Weberian writings (inexistence of an absolute standpoint, constant mutation of the points of view, anti-determinism and anti-speculativism), come to find their ontological foundation with Castoriadis. It is perfectly clear that, as Weber claims, the *knowledge* of history and society is a product of history and society and changes along with them. Castoriadis raises the stakes: *society itself* is a product of society, in an ontological level. Society is self-creation, self-institution and self-alteration of imaginary significations and values, which determine what is valid and what is not, what is good and bad, great and contemptible, why live and die, what is significant and insignificant, in every possible sense; that is also to say, of course, what is worth knowing and how, with the mediation of which ways of thinking and doing.

Thus, based on Castoriadis' social ontology and its ground idea, according to which society as a mode of being is a self-created world of imaginary significations (incorporated in practices, anthropological types and institutions), we can answer one of the major problems of “weberology” that Hans Henrik Bruun coined “the problem of the norm-sender”.⁹⁴ The question could be summed up in the following terms: if, as Rickert and Weber claim, the society in which the historian and the social scientist live is the “receiver” of some values, through the relation to which the standpoints of knowledge are formed, who is the “sender” of these values? Following Castoriadis, we would say that “sender” and “receiver” are one and the same: each unique society

⁸⁹ Thibault Tranchant (2019, 446) seems to attribute this view to me. To my defense, I should mention that I have never – nor in the short text he cites (Ktenas, 2018) – referred to Castoriadis as a “radical Weberian”.

⁹⁰ Stefanatos, 2007, 131; Klimis, 2007, 25.

⁹¹ Castoriadis, 2005, 168-169. Of course, it should be stressed that Castoriadis probably exaggerated at this point. There are quite a few other authors who refuse to disconnect the fields of history and society, even if they express this idea in their own way. For example, we could cite Merleau-Ponty, for whom every social being is historical. The fact that this remark is often connected by Merleau-Ponty himself with his study of Max Weber is perhaps not coincidental.

⁹² Castoriadis, 1990, 59 (with revision of the translation).

⁹³ A rather clear distinction between methodological and ontological or metaphysical issues can indeed be found in Weber's writings, often fortified by his Neo-Kantian influences. This is a point Castoriadis is right to criticize. However, it has to be added that Weber's genius simply surpasses his own methodological premises again and again, something that is a common secret among his commentators.

⁹⁴ Bruun, 2007, 123.

itself, with its constant creation of norms, values, significations, only a small part of which have to do with the ways we come to look at our own past.⁹⁵

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this text I have tried to show that the intellectual relationship that connects Weber and Castoriadis is a lot richer than what has so far been supposed. We should not always take Castoriadis' critical comments on Weber at face value, especially as expressed in his well-known essay on individual, society, rationality and history, since they stem from a rather exaggerative effort of intellectual differentiation. We should rather try to combine these remarks (some of which can indeed be a fertile starting point for further investigation) with the (far more sincere) comments on the *Economy and Society* translation Castoriadis published in Greek when he was young and, of course, with all the other references to Weber he made in his entire *œuvre*.⁹⁶ This way, I believe that we will eventually come to focus on the dominant role the concept of meaning enjoys in the work of both authors, which in turn will allow us to come up with some interesting directions for research in the field of social thinking.

Against this background, I claimed that it is safe to say Castoriadis' understanding of history can be situated in an anti-speculative tradition that starts from (or at least passes through) Weber. The fundamental characteristic of this way of thinking about history lays in the idea that there is no absolute standpoint from which we can look at history – let alone absolute historical trajectory. History is always history *for us*; “history of the present”, as Michel Foucault would say.

In this sense, Weber marks a very significant break with Marx. Their most important difference regarding history is *not* that Weber multiplies the factors that can have an effect on history (Thibault Tranchant⁹⁷) nor that he keeps the Marxian way of thinking, while freeing it from economic determinism (Catherine Colliot-Thélène⁹⁸) – a paradoxical alliance between Castoriadis scholars and Weber scholars who choose to insist on the continuity of Weber and Marx, although for different reasons. Weber defended the idea that history could not possibly be directed towards an end; not only because there are too many “factors”, nor because we have decided arbitrarily that teleology is wrong, but because *what* history *is* changes from time to time, culture to culture, society to society. Castoriadis took this argument one step further, maybe several, claiming that each singular society has (or *is*) a proper imaginary universe. Subordination to a common historical teleology would be simply wrong – let alone the fact that the radical creativity of the human imaginary, incorporated in the human praxis, generates new and previously unconceivable ways of being.

⁹⁵ It should be stressed that this use of the terms “sender” and “receiver” is highly metaphorical, as indicated by the quotation marks. Literally speaking, society neither “sends” nor “receives” norms and values, first of all because society is not a person nor a subject (even a “collective” one), since it doesn't think, plan, aim, desire, etc. This is perhaps obvious when stated in this way, but in a text on Castoriadis and Weber there are reasons to insist on it: What do we really mean when we write, following Castoriadis, that society *institutes* these or that forms of life and *creates* a universe of significations? What is actually meant when society is used as a subject in the syntax of a sentence? *Who* is society? A first answer would be that this term is a substitute for what Castoriadis calls the “anonymous collective” or what Weber describes as “other than the mere sum of individuals and their interactions” (see Grossein, 2016b, 24-27). Of course, we could always locate the “impact” or the “effect” of society (or of “the social”) in certain individual actions, at least theoretically: Jesus or Muhammad creating Christianity or Islam, Cleisthenes reforming the institutions of Ancient Athens, a football fan (or two or three of them) creating a new chant, a person saying a new joke that becomes “viral”. But at the same time, none of these actions would be possible if something other than the individual existence of these persons had not formed them and generated the suitable “atmosphere”. Phrases that have been used along the text, such as “the individual is the *locus* of the social” or “society has no address”, try to grasp (always incompletely) this bizarre situation, about which Castoriadis rightfully asserts that there is no analogon in other fields of being and that we should think of it starting from it.

⁹⁶ For instance, regarding the topic of the impossibility of rational foundation of values, see Castoriadis, 1996, available [here](#); regarding the topic of legitimization, see Castoriadis 1991b and 2016, 482; regarding the critique of the methodology of ideal types, see Castoriadis, 2005, 367-368.

⁹⁷ According to Tranchant (2019, 441-446), although it is true that both Weber and Castoriadis reject the monocausal explanation of social and historical phenomena that is related to the Marxist tradition, the reasons and the modalities of this rejection are quite different. In contrast to Castoriadis, who sets the ground for a totally new perception of the socio-historical field, based on the idea of the radical self-creation and self-institution of the society, Weber remains prisoner of the same way of reasoning that characterized Marx's thought, and just multiplies the factors that can have an effect on the historical course: next to the production forces, he places the ideas, especially the religious ones. This means that “for Weber, the proliferation of the factors of historicity, the inclusion of ideality on the order of the causes, is not based on a speculation on the ‘reality of the reality’, i.e. in an ontological speculation” (Tranchant, 2019, 442-443). In other words, for Tranchant, Weber's critique of the Marxian conception of history and society is mainly methodological and does not have much to do with the new conceptualization of society Castoriadis came to offer almost half a century later.

⁹⁸ Colliot-Thélène, 1990, 45-49 and 30ff.

Finally, it should be noted that all three dimensions of meaning I have referred to in the course of this contribution (orientation, coherence, creation) can be found in the example of Weber's and Castoriadis' treatment of (the study of) history. Social values and imaginary significations (always interpreted and internalized by each individual subject in its own, unique way) help us orient ourselves within the chaos of the past, directing our gaze, our intellectual efforts, but also our feelings and intellectual passions. At the same time, they help us constitute a coherent outlook, a solid way of looking at things. This is surely true concerning individual "fields of research" and "academic interests", but also the broader "epistemic paradigm" and, even more generally, the social understanding of the past (national consciousness, history of the victors or history of the defeated, as Benjamin put it, etc.). Finally, new values and recently emerged imaginary significations generate hermeneutical novelty, since they create new prisms and standpoints via which we can examine history, highlighting unprecedented qualities and relations.

These three interdependent dimensions of meaning can be found in the writings of the two thinkers, regardless of the specific field one will focus on (epistemology, politics, power and legitimization, individual and social action, etc.). I believe they can be fruitful not only for those who are interested in their work, but for anyone willing to reflect upon the very concept of meaning, both in a sociological and in a philosophical perspective. Hopefully, these issues can be discussed further in future texts.

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