

What could be the imaginary institution of the City?

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Introduction: the Castoriadis's hypothesis

In his book « The imaginary institution of Society » the French philosopher Castoriadis explained the diversity of societies and social change by social imaginary.

According to his hypothesis Society can be described using two very different « ontologies » :

- the “ensemblist / identitarian” ontology describes practical, economic and technical reality, codified thought and action allowing efficiency and is submitted to logics.
- the “historical / social” ontology is the social imaginary dimension. All representations and actions are influenced by the imaginary. It is the realm of symbols, beliefs and values. The imaginary significations make up a “magma” which is coherent and ever changing. This change is “arbitrary” that is to say unpredictable. The imaginary social significations are elusive, ever changing and uneasy to interpret and understand. The hope of Castoriadis was a change of social imaginary favorable to autonomy.

Consequences and proofs are:

- *urban ontologies*. It is not sure that urban phenomena can enter into an “urban ontology” in the shape of data in computers which are connected, with some special software. The imaginary dimension could be uneasy to express in coherent datasets.

- *Law*. Society submitted to the ensemblist / identitarian ontology only exists: it is the universe of the detective novel. A consequence is that crime is only an enigma to break. It has been criticized by Messac (the myth of serendipity) and Kracauer (the realm of the Ratio). Indeed, Theory of Law is very much awkward because it has to reconcile the ensemblist / identitarian ontology (to obtain a Code) and the historical / social ontology (because Law has to be in accordance with values).
- *Games*. In a universe submitted to the ensemblist / identitarian ontology only, the only games would be the logical ones. Because of progress in mathematics, all games would become uninteresting. When mathematics discover the winning strategy, it gets the game uninteresting (Caillois). In reality, games imply abilities to logics (analysis, skillfulness) but also imaginary significations. For instance the hopscotch game dates from the 17th century. It is popular and has probably symbolic meanings.
- *Invention and usage*. Technology is part of the codified knowledge (even if this knowledge changes because of innovation). But usage implies the imaginary dimension. For instance, all the theorists of cinema agree that cinema is not the mere deduction of cinematographic technology. It has aesthetic roots and magnifies the imaginary.

The imaginary institution of the City

The main myths are individual happiness and success , chance and equality:

- *Individual happiness and success.* See the literature on the consumers society and the Lipovetsky's works.
- *Chance.* Chance is everywhere in Society, today. According to the theory of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, in the “risk society” Science and Technology create artifacts of which the social effects are unknown. Hence there is a need of debate, measures and regulation. Indeed there is a general deregulation, now (Lipovetsky). Regulation is needed only when the risk is tremendous or contagious. The last example is perhaps drones. All the actors play. Games are popular (videogames). Chance is in the economy because of innovation (venture capital). A proof of the importance of chance is the puzzling popularity of “rogue traders” (individuals coping with chance in their work).
- *Equality.* In the “democratic imaginary”, equality is paramount. Privileges are refused. Only meritocracy is accepted.

The discrepancy between authorities' policies and social needs

Some discrepancy between authorities' policies and social needs is explained by the social imaginary: it influences needs and is very elusive and unpredictable. Sometimes it is clear: for instance, the equalitarian imaginary imposes a free (if not free of charge) access to public spaces. Not to do like Moses (the urban planner of New York) restricting access to Coney Island thanks to a bridge crossing the road and too low for buses.

Examples are:

- *Beauty of cities*. "Artist capitalism" (Lipovetsky) requires beauty anywhere in cities, but they cannot be permanently covered with building sites, if one takes into account the point of view of inhabitants (if not of visitors).
- *Women*. A generous social policy triggers women who do not work and have kids to divorce and fall into poverty (Beck). More generally, there is a trend in cities towards a society of single persons raising kids (Beck). It is a consequence of the equalitarian imaginary, concerning women (Beck).
- *Drugs*. On one side acceptance of individualism triggers tolerance concerning use of drugs, but there is also the prestige of self-control. In some cities, the supervised sites for drug consumers are challenged.

- *Environment.* Artificiality of the city has definitely won (except perhaps in the mid-sized cities). It has bad consequences if we consider the serious environmental problems like global warming, since the Opinion is indifferent to these problems.
- *Spatial segregation.* What matters is not anybody living in prestigious quarters, but youngsters having access to these quarters to have fun there (Lipovetsky). In other words, what matters is jobs for youngsters.

Conclusion

We can consider the city in three ways:

- *A place of harmony*. Obviously, it is utopia. According to Castoriadis, Society could no more be influenced by any transcendental doctrine, like an utopia.
- *A field of forces*. It is more the point of view of the “first modernity”. Of course, there are rival groups in cities, all wanting to shape the city. But a city cannot be the prey or the hostage of one of these groups. We are in a democratic society (Lipovetsky). Opinion is the paramount force.
- *An accumulation of double binds*. It is the point of view of the “second modernity”. One has to take into account the social imaginary. Quality of life is required. Problems are very complex. It is justified to explore the imaginary dimension of cities.

One tool to explore the imaginary dimension of cities is games. We quote the example of the game Blockholm. It consists in the construction of BLOCKs in a virtual StockHOLM.