

Imagination and Political Creativity: Castoriadis and Citizens' Democracy

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Introduction

Despite the increasing concern with the study of many traditions of contemporary French democratic theory, the political philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis remains largely unknown in the Anglophone world. In this paper, however, I will attempt to outline the special relevance of Castoriadis' thought, the manner in which it allows us to shed new light on some of the most important recent political phenomena to have occurred in North America. In particular, I will suggest that Castoriadis' thinking on the nature of politics allows for a radical reconsideration of the significance of the two Citizens' Assembly (CA) experiments that took place in Canada in the 2000s. Many commentators have noted that the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (BCCA) and the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (OCA) can be interpreted in terms of a concretely effective actualization of deliberative democratic principles, to the degree that they empowered ordinary citizens to critically engage with a concrete policy issue – in these cases the legitimacy of a first-past-the-post provincial electoral system – and, after processes of learning, consultation, and deliberation, make a recommendation to either maintain the existing system or adopt a new one. Although I agree with such commentators that the CA experiments have the potential to contribute to a meaningful democratic rejuvenation, I argue that their complete democratic significance is obscured when they are considered only in terms of existing deliberative and representative political schema. The political potential of CAs, rather, is more radical than often noted, a fact that can be revealed through reading them in light of the work of Castoriadis. In particular, CAs can be interpreted as potentially germinal political forms suggesting the recuperation of the increasingly forgotten project of collective autonomy. The project of autonomy involves perpetual critical interrogation, the continual calling into question of existing institutions via the creative and critical scrutiny of the social-historical present. An autonomous society for Castoriadis is one “capable of explicitly self-instituting itself, capable therefore of putting into question its already given institutions, its already established representation of the world.”¹ Institutions in such a society, to the extent that they are products of individuals conscious of the fact of historical self-institution, who possess a reflective and deliberative subjectivity, must above all be structured such that they are open to the possibility – which is not necessarily to say eventuality – of their own alteration or transcendence. My suggestion is that the CAs, to the extent that they allow for the refinement of reflective and deliberative subjectivity, are characterized by creative and gratifying human activity, and are oriented toward the interrogation of existing institutional forms, can be read as potential democratic orders affirming the values of autonomy. The potential generalization of such orders is a possible means to overcome the contemporary

democratic malaise which has engulfed much of the liberal democratic world, a malaise which Castoriadis reads in terms of the conflict between modernity's two primary social significations.

Democratic Crisis and the Project of Autonomy

According to Castoriadis, what has historically defined modern societies is the existence and interrelationship of those two primary significations which structure human values within them: that signification which affirms the unlimited expansion of the rational mastery of the natural world, and that signification which affirms the project of individual and collective autonomy. Although these significations historically developed together in a process of mutual interpenetration, it is claimed that to an ever greater degree we are witnessing the decline of those substantive values associated with the project of autonomy, and the triumph of those merely formal values associated with rational mastery, which can ever increasingly be identified with the capitalist maxim valorizing consumption for the sake of consumption. In Castoriadis' words, we are seeing "the total domination of the capitalist imaginary: the centrality of the economic sphere, the unlimited, supposedly rational expansion of production, consumption, and more or less planned and manipulated 'leisure'."² Before discussing the relation of this development to the rise of mass political discontent, however, we should first of all briefly note the content of Castoriadis' category of autonomy, which is very distinct from that liberal concept of autonomy which is most well-known within the history of political thought.

Castoriadis begins with the etymology of the word: *auto-nomos*, to give oneself one's laws, and to do so reflectively and deliberately. The emergence of this concept reflected "a new *eidos* within the overall history of being: a type of being that reflectively gives to itself the laws of its being."³ Crucially, though, this mode of being is not operational purely at the individual level, but presupposes a collective project grounded in an affirmation of human equality: "we want everyone to be autonomous, that is to say, we want all people to learn to govern *themselves*, individually and collectively: and one is able to develop one's capacity to govern oneself only by participating on an equal footing, in an equal manner, in the governance of common business, of common affairs."⁴ A more detailed examination of the nature of equality and its relation to the project of autonomy will be undertaken below. For now it is sufficient to note simply that in the final instance an autonomous society is one which all participate in "the unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations as well as the capacity, in light of this interrogation, *to make, to do and to institute*."⁵ Such a society, according to Castoriadis, born in Greece and reemerging in a different form in modern Europe, is to be sharply distinguished from the majority of known historical societies. The latter societies are heteronomous, that is to say, they institute a social representation explaining the institution of society in terms of some exterior force, be it God, nature, the ancestors, the laws of history, and so forth. History is thus closed to society. To be autonomous is to be able recognize that those social determinations which exist as instituted at any given point are capable of being critically interrogated, and potentially altered. It is to appreciate the instituting power of society: "The project of collective autonomy means that the collectivity, which can only exist as instituted, recognizes and recovers its instituting character explicitly, and questions its own activities."⁶ All societies undergo internal changes in their social institution and self-representation of themselves, but only a certain type of social-historical being is capable of explicitly raising the question of the legitimacy of the institution, and this is the autonomous society.

Now, all human societies require a core set of values shared by their members, orienting and situating the latter's existence in the social world: "The construction of its own world by

each and every society is, in essence, the creation of a world of meanings, its social imaginary significations, which organize the (presocial, 'biologically given') natural world, instaurate a social world proper to each society (with its articulations, rules, purposes, etc.), establish the ways in which socialized and humanized individuals are to be fabricated, and institute the motives, values, and hierarchies of social (human) life."⁷ The human individual is thus the bearer of the social imaginary significations which make collective life possible (although, of course, it is only in autonomous societies that there is not a complete correspondence between the individual and those significations she carries). In contemporary liberal societies, however, it is precisely this complex of values which is being eroded, and most crucially, unreplaced. As the signification of rational mastery becomes unhinged from the project of autonomy values become increasingly focused on "the antagonistic maximization of consumption, of power, of status, and of prestige."⁸ Needless to say, such modes of consumption are incapable of generating those affective bonds which are necessary to hold together human communities. Using one of Castoriadis' favorite examples, how can one expect a judge to honestly evaluate cases, to not succumb to bribery, if all that is motivating her action is the goal of perpetual consumption? This is the crisis facing contemporary societies. Modern representative democracies – what Castoriadis refers to as liberal oligarchies – were compromise formations which mediated between modernity's two primary significations. It should be no surprise that given the waning of autonomy, such democracies are experiencing symptoms of a profound crisis, a fact widely recognized by citizens: "There is a growing consciousness in the population at large that politics today is just a manipulation of people, a manipulation of society to serve specific interests. The phrase 'they are all the same gang' (which you often hear 'apathetic' or 'non-political' people use) expresses first of all an objective truth."⁹ It is precisely within the context of this growing consciousness that we need to analyze the social and political place of the Canadian experiments with Citizens' Assemblies.

Commentators on CAs often point out that their introduction by policy-makers was an explicit response to citizen discontent with the state of electoral democracy in Canada. The specifically Canadian democratic crisis has been noted for years, receiving perhaps its most well-known expression in a 2004 report by the Law Commission of Canada on federal electoral reform, which stated that the country is "in the grip of a democratic malaise, the symptoms of which include declining levels of political trust, declining voter turnout, increasing cynicism and hostility towards politicians and traditional forms of political participation, and growing disengagement of young people from politics."¹⁰ The consequence of such democratic malaise is the emergence of what Castoriadis refers to as privatization. The privatization of individual life refers to the increasing degradation of political socialization which occurs when public matters are no longer seen as being possible objects of human activity. It is manifest in a "society in which outside the labor process, people more and more perceive themselves as private individuals and behave as such; in which the idea that collective action might be able to determine how things turn out on the societal scale has lost its meaning save for an insignificant minority."¹¹ The political value of the Canadian experiments with CAs can be interpreted in terms of their existence as forms of political activity which counter privatization via the opening of political space, thus actualizing and further nurturing civic interest. And indeed, commentators often point to such assemblies as modes potentially capable of contributing to democratic renewal. However, such interpretations almost exclusively consider such renewal in terms of the enrichment of liberal or representative modes and orders. What I would like to do in this paper, on the contrary, is read CAs through the democratic prism articulated by Castoriadis,

as institutions which may point the way towards the affirmation of his concept of autonomy within the sphere of politics, as a possible gesture toward the social institution of a radical democracy.

What, then, is the meaning of politics for Castoriadis? Politics must first of all be sharply distinguished from the political. The political is that sphere referring to the power that “constitutes the instances of authorities capable, explicitly and effectively, of issuing sanctionable injunctions for the sake of the social preservation.”¹² Politics, on the contrary, “can be defined as the explicit collective activity which aims at being lucid (reflective and deliberative) and whose object is the institution of society as such.”¹³ The political is present in all societies, to the degree that all societies need an explicit power which is capable of enforcing those norms and laws necessary for social reproduction, but politics is not. Politics is that mode of collective activity which springs from the recognition that the social institution is not the result of some divine, natural, or sacred intervention, but rather the manifestation of *nomos*. *Nomos* can be changed, and it is politics which attempts to do so. Hence politics “amounts to the explicit putting into question of the established institution of society, the establishment of a new relation between the instituted and instituting dimensions of society.”¹⁴ It is thus the collective manifestation of the project of autonomy. To the degree that it is collective politics necessarily suggests democracy: politics “absorbs” the political with the establishment of conditions of equal participation of citizens in an autonomous society. Thus “the true object of politics: *Create the institutions which, by being internalized by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all forms of explicit power existing in society.*”¹⁵ It will be my suggestion that CAs have the potential to function as precisely such institutions.

Citizens’ Assemblies and Radical Political Creation

In what remains of this article I will briefly analyze the BCCA and the OCA along a set of specific axes in order to demonstrate the degree to which they can be seen to affirm various of the elements of Castoriadis’ understanding of politics. I would like to begin with the issue of political desire. Having summarily recounted Castoriadis’ account of politics, we may now want to ask ourselves what the specific ground for his theorization of the latter in terms of institutional interrogation is? A comprehensive answer to this question would require us to undertake an examination of his appropriation of Freudian metapsychology, a task which is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, a few preliminary comments can be made. For Castoriadis one of the great insights of psychoanalysis is its understanding of the human being as “essentially an imaginary being, one endowed with radical, unmotivated, defunctionalized imagination.”¹⁶ To say that the imagination is radical is to say that it cannot be limited to its functional forms, which look to the generation or recombination of objects for the sake of the merely physical reproduction of the organism. The imagination is radical to the extent that it is perpetual alteration, the spontaneous and *ex nihilo* emergence of new forms and figures of meaning. The radical imagination, though, is just one of two aspects of the radical imaginary, which manifests itself also in the social-historical institution of society. Psychic creation is in a sense the “psychic *sap*” to social-historical creation. The social imagination acts upon the radical imagination of the psyche in order to produce a social individual. It is such creativity which is the source of the institution of society, the institution of that world of significations which define social-historical existence. It is because of the existence of the radical imaginary that it is impossible to construct a society which terminally realizes itself in its institutional form:

“There will always be a distance between society as instituting and what is, at every moment, instituted”.¹⁷ This gap “is one of the expressions of the creative nature of history, what prevents it from fixing itself once and for all into the ‘finally found form’ of social relations and of human activities”.¹⁸ What the individual retains from the originary state in this process of socialization, however, is the capacity to take pleasure from representation, though now a pleasure realized “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.”¹⁹ Socialization thus looks not to the abolition of the creativity of the psyche, but to its sublimation; pleasure is now mediated by a social “state of affairs” and is achieved in the modification of social being. Creation, of which politics is one especially relevant form of, is thus a potentially gratifying activity.

Theorizing politics in terms of gratification can perhaps allow us to make sense of an apparent contradiction in CA analysis, namely that between the desire for citizens to participate and the general civic apathy identified above. As R.S. Ratner notes, “Paradoxically, the sense of apathy and frustration felt by so many citizens runs parallel with their desire for more grassroots participation and involvement in politics.”²⁰ The fact that such desire seems hard to deny, a fact noted in the Ontario case by OCA Academic Director Jonathan Rose. Rose notes that the large number of 7,033 citizens who responded positively to the CA call was very diverse with respect to language, age, and occupation, this diversity demonstrating the degree to which the political desire expressed cut across traditional demographic lines. This seemingly universal political desire was only intensified as the CA process continued. At the selection meetings where individuals were randomly chosen to participate, “many members of the public who attended the meetings and were not chosen were visibly upset.”²¹ Indeed, regarding the selection meetings the OCA Secretariat documented that they “were characterized by high enthusiasm, and the spirit brought to the meetings was an inspiring beginning. The opportunity to participate in this unprecedented exercise in democracy had clearly fired the imagination of the prospective members.”²² The first member chosen to participate even claimed afterward that “I feel as though I’ve won the lottery.”²³ This excitement was only further developed as the actual CA process was initiated, and was consciously stimulated by the institution’s designers. During the first plenary session of the Learning Phase of the OCA, for example, Chair George Thompson made a point of suggesting to participants “that they have fun along the way.”²⁴ And indeed, it would seem that the OCA members did just this, Thompson noting afterward that the former “constantly amazed me with their enthusiasm.”²⁵ During the Learning Phase participants decided for themselves that the maintenance of a “good working environment” necessitated “respect, listening, and having fun.”²⁶ The fact that members did have fun is perhaps testified to by the fact that, over the eight-month process not a single one of the 103 members of the Assembly dropped out, despite having to regularly contribute between 30 and 40 hours per month to their task. In the final instance what these observations regarding the OCA seem to confirm is that citizens show a great desire to participate in formulations regarding the political direction of their communities, provided such participation is direct and substantive, as opposed to merely formal and passive. In the words of Hannah Arendt, what the CA members realized was that “acting is fun,” that there is a specific form of gratification which is achieved through participation in civic life.²⁷

If the CAs are to be thought of as a potential mode for the actualization of an immanent desire for creative practice, it is precisely their active dimension which needs to be stressed. Given the BCCA and OCA mandate to critically scrutinize existing electoral systems and make policy recommendations grounded in these systems’ ability to realize a core set of political

values, it might be tempting to reduce CA activity to the merely passive consideration of and mediation between previously determined political options. Such, however, is not the case. As Rose notes: “Citizens’ assemblies are not juries. They are not impassive bodies that hear evidence and choose among options. Rather, they are active and engaged participants in collective deliberation.”²⁸ The degree to which BCCA activity transcended the former type of participation is noted by Ratner in his detailed overview of the Learning Phase, where “members were visibly transformed from mainly passive listeners into mindful observers and commentators on the current BC electoral system and the known alternatives.”²⁹ The creative nature of CA activity has been especially emphasized by Amy Lang, who after observing the process directly and conducting field research came to the conclusion that the BCCA members’ was a “*creative deliberation* that involved reframing the issues, refocusing the terms of debate, and developing new criteria based on their lived experiences as voters.”³⁰ Lang notes that members did not uncritically or blindly adopt expert advice on electoral issues, but critically reframed informational input in light of their own direct political knowledge and goals: “Instead of passively accepting the criteria given to them, the Assembly participants thought long and hard about whether these criteria reflected their own experiences and aspirations as voters.”³¹ During the deliberative process members of the BCCA took the initiative to define and articulate certain problems excluded or marginalized by the official agenda, arguing for their relevance to the electoral issues under discussion and advocating their resolution. Although members had some success in their calls for inclusion, particularly with respect to “the needs of the North,” most of their requests were ultimately rejected. Nevertheless, for Lang this was “their real contribution as citizens: developing their particular perspective on what constituted a problem, and what were the means to solve it. Although they worked within a framework laid out by the official agenda, it was the unofficial agenda of citizen-identified problems that guided their decision-making.”³²

This type of political self management depends on the rejection of what Castoriadis labels the bureaucratic distinction between directors and executants in the political sphere. All political thinking which is premised on the existence of a specialized technical class of experts who possess primary responsibility for the ordering of the community is refused. By Castoriadis’ estimation, to “attempt to impose upon people solutions to the problems of their own lives, solutions they do not themselves approve of, automatically and immediately make these solutions monstrously false ones.”³³ The theoretical justification for the strong normative claim regarding the falsity of alienated political determinations is rooted in the perception of the specific form of political knowledge, in politics’ existence as a sphere governed by doxa. According to Castoriadis, “it is obvious that the problem of society and of history – of politics – cannot be broken down into a list of specialists, that therefore a few, on the basis or not of some specialization, make it the object of their concern and of their labor.”³⁴ There are no scientific criteria allowing those with specialized knowledge to determine what is best for society: “The sole criterion that in these domains has any meaning is what the men and the women who make up society want, and they alone can decide what that is; no one can do so in their stead.”³⁵ Here we can trace out a subtle distinction – one which nevertheless has very large consequences for how we think the nature of democracy – between the interpretation of CAs that I would like to offer and those which have been most prevalent in the literature thus far, one relating to the issue of political competency.

Citizens' Assemblies and the Philosophy of Political Representation

Many commentators on the CA phenomenon have felt compelled to undertake investigations regarding CA members' ability or inability to competently act as critical evaluators of electoral systems. According to Dennis Thompson there are five criteria by which we can evaluate such political competence: 1) actors should have a genuine interest in the project that they are participating in; 2) they should be able to determine the ends that the system should be aiming for; 3) they should be able to comprehend the fundamental elements of electoral systems; 4) they should be able to connect the ends to the systems; and 5) they should be willing to deliberate with other citizens for the sake of the comprehension and incorporation of the viewpoints of others.³⁶ Although it is claimed that most citizens do not immediately meet these criteria, they may very well do so under proper conditions. For those with an investment in demonstrating the political competency of CA decision-makers, the delineation of these conditions thus assumes a central importance. And indeed, many valuable studies have attempted to trace the specific institutional mechanisms and arrangements which allowed citizens to achieve the requisite level of political knowledge for competent intervention in highly complex political problems. Such institutions and arrangements could be seen in, for example, a Learning Phase, combining large plenary sessions with small discussion groups oriented around specific issues, problems, and questions, which greatly increased members' knowledge of existing reform issues and the functioning of political institutions more generally. Or it could be seen in a Public Hearing or Consultation Phase, which once again did not take on the form of experts (now CA members) consulting citizens, but rather citizens consulting citizens for the sake of a cross germination of ideas potentially stimulating the generation of new and creative political insights. In any case, most commentators are in agreement that political competence was achieved to the degree that Assembly designers were able to ensure, among other things, an extended process length, the formation of multiple spaces of discussion, an effective pedagogical organization, and a substantive participatory drive.

The political danger from the standpoint of democracy, however, is that excessive focus on the issue of actor competency has the potential to shift the terms of normative evaluation away from the phenomenon's potential actualization of political freedom, and towards the simple achievement of 'right' decisions. It is precisely such a shift, I would suggest, which has led CA commentators to interpret the institutions as either new forms of existing, or as new modes of, political representation. The most important of these commentators is Mark Warren, who claims that "whereas the notion of *participatory* democracy suggests that most citizens participate in self-rule – a worthy ideal – what is most important about these new forms is their *representative* qualities."³⁷ CAs must thus be judged according to the quality of democratic representation embodied in them, not the quantity of participation they allow for. For virtually all interpreters this quality is evaluated in terms of the institution's ability to provide a descriptive reproduction of the expected political will of the represented. Here we may note Philip Pettit's distinction between responsive and indicative modes of representation: "In responsive representation, the fact that I am of a certain mind offers reason for expecting that my deputy will be of the same mind...In indicative representation things are exactly the other way around. The fact that my proxy is of a certain mind offers reason for expecting that I will be of the same mind."³⁸ For Pettit the BCCA was an example of an indicatively representative body: "The citizen assembly can provide a fine indicator of how the people would go on a certain issue, were they well-informed; certainly it may provide a better indicator in many domains than the consensus among elected representatives."³⁹ Representation in the CAs thus undertakes a deliberative shift,

looking towards not the immediate representation of an existent popular will, but rather the critical construction of a potential political will under those institutionalized conditions allowing for adequate knowledge acquisition.

At first glance it may appear that reading CAs in terms of indicative representation may allow us to escape those problems raised by Castoriadis in his critique of representative democracy. According to Castoriadis there exists no philosophy of representation, but only a metaphysics. He asks: “What is this theological mystery, this alchemic operation that makes of your sovereignty, one Sunday every few years, a fluid that spreads over the entire country, enters into the ballot boxes, and comes out again that same evening on the television screen, on the faces of the ‘representatives of the people’ or on the face of *the* representative of the people, the Monarch with the title of President? This operation is clearly of a supernatural character, and no one has ever attempted to provide a foundation for it or even to explain it.”⁴⁰ The unexplainable liquefaction, condensation, and transubstantiation of the political will of the people only results in the practical alienation of a sovereignty no longer capable of asserting itself in any meaningful way; it can only mean “that I am stripped of my sovereignty as a people.”⁴¹ Castoriadis will thus ultimately attempt to provide a reformulation of the Rousseauian critique of representation, arguing that “Once permanent ‘representatives’ are present, political authority, activity, and initiative are expropriated from the body of citizens and transferred to the restricted body of ‘representatives,’ who also use it to consolidate their position and create the conditions whereby the next ‘election’ becomes biased in many ways.”⁴²

I suggested above that perhaps this critique is no longer valid in light of recent theoretical work on the philosophy of political representation. Such work is very capably summed up by Nadia Urbinati and Mark Warren in their text “The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory,” which argues that we need to extend the account of representation well beyond its traditional defining limits. In particular, “We should think of representative democracy not as a pragmatic alternative to something we can no longer have, namely direct democracy, but as an intrinsically modern way of intertwining participation, political judgment, and the constitution of the *demos* capable of self-rule.”⁴³ As political spaces have been expanded and pluralized, representative activity has transcended electoral modes in a variety of directions. Most notably for our purposes, we have seen the emergence of self-authorized representatives, such as the citizen representatives who participated in the CA experiments. Once again, the goal of political bodies composed of citizen representatives is to generate norms that the public would affirm if it had the possibility to deliberate itself. CAs thus do not participate in a metaphysical distillation of an already existent popular will, but are engaged in a process looking towards the practical construction of a popular will. In performing such a construction they “have the potential to capture opinions and voices that are not heard.”⁴⁴ Despite this capture, though, the specifically representative mode of operation must not be lost sight of, for “Although these representative forms are typically categorized as participatory democracy, direct democracy, or citizen engagement, these terms are misleading because only a tiny percentage of citizens are actively involved in any given venue.”⁴⁵

Citizens’ Assemblies: Deliberation beyond Representation

Although new developments in the study of political representation may problematize Castoriadis’ specific critique of it, I would like to suggest that in no way are they capable of being assimilable to Castoriadis’ political philosophy, and if we are to continue to read CAs along Castoriadian lines, we must thus reject reading them in terms of representation. To begin

with, we must reject as a reductive mischaracterization the suggestion that a political phenomenon's institutional non-inclusion of the totality of citizens is in itself a sufficient ground to reject interpreting that phenomenon in direct or participatory terms. Castoriadis writes, for example, that direct democracy today does not mean creating "an *ekklesia* in which the five billion inhabitants of the Earth would gather together in the Sahara."⁴⁶ What it means, rather, is struggling to invent new means of participation, via experiments in decentralization, the self-management of small-scale political units, the utilization of federative principles, the critical redeployment of the technological apparatus, and the establishment of more effective control of centralized institutions. The very opposition between direct and representative democracy is for Castoriadis a potentially false one. Indeed, a self-governing or autonomous society will of course make use of the mechanism of delegation.⁴⁷ The issue, though, is how such delegates are selected, who selects them, and, most importantly, whether or not their selection is ultimately revocable in a non-trivial sense. Democracy requires a division of political tasks, but cannot exist where there is a division of political labor, that is, where there is a "fixed and stable division of political society between directors and executants, the existence of a category of individuals whose role, whose profession, whose *interest* is to direct others."⁴⁸ In short, regardless of how entrenched civic participation is, there will always be some political spheres "where representative democracy would remain necessary".⁴⁹

Obviously neither the BCCA nor the OCA can be read in terms of Castoriadis' ideal of delegation, to the degree that members were not selected by popular vote nor were they subject to popular recall. Although democratic social organization does not preclude delegation, the latter cannot be generalized to the truth of the former. Castoriadis will engage with the much discussed observation, classically noted by Aristotle, that elections embody an aristocratic or oligarchic as opposed to a democratic principle. If aristocracy designates rule of the best, then political representation for Castoriadis is to extend only to those spheres or issues in which a specialized technical knowledge is a necessity. But again, universal participation is not thereby the norm in all those remaining properly political spheres. Castoriadis will appropriate the Aristotelian model of governing and being governed in turn, and, as a selective mechanism for the filling of a finite number of political offices in light of the condition of political autonomy, he will note the democratic features of sortition and rotation.⁵⁰ The utilization of the mode of lottery as a means for selecting participants in both the BCCA and the OCA here assumes a great importance, a fact which is not always noted by commentators. The full democratic significance of the deployment of lot in the CAs is only completely grasped by John Ferejohn, who explicitly distinguishes between two interpretations of the BCCA as a form of public deliberation: a hypothetical one which concludes what the public would conclude if it had the means and opportunity to deliberate, and a direct one operating in the midst of the movement between governing and being governed in turn. It is suggested by Ferejohn that when read in terms of the latter movement, "The CA provides a way to redeem, to some extent, the ancient promise of democracy as a form of popular government...It offers a way for a democracy to conclude and revise its fundamental laws: framework laws that a people need to see as 'their own'."⁵¹

If the mode by which the CA members were selected is highly significant from the standpoint of Castoriadis' democratic theory, so was the object of their deliberation. Here we need to recall Castoriadis' definition of politics as collective activity undertaken between equals and looking towards the reflective interrogation, and if necessary reinstationalization, of the social-historical sphere. I have suggested that the CAs affirmed the former modal conditions through their implicit rejection of their political subject matter in terms of a political episteme or

techne to be reflected on by experts, instead grounding deliberation in the movement of the doxai of the demos as a whole, equality and universality being realized in the utilization of the democratic mode of lottery. What is now crucial to note with respect to the latter substantive issue, is that the political activity of the CAs was oriented towards the critical scrutiny of an existing institutional form, i.e. the particular provincial electoral system. The implicit assumption, in other words, was that *the actualization of democracy is not achieved in the discovery of a universal system of organization or fixed rules of governance, but is rather revealed in the active process of calling into question the efficacy of such systems and rules*. The vast majority of theoretical interpretations of CAs attempt to understand them as manifestations of deliberative democratic practice, often in terms of a Habermasian communicative rationality oriented towards the achievement of mutual understanding via the politically generalized establishment of an ideal speech situation affirming comprehensibility, rightness, and truthfulness. What I would suggest is lost with such interpretations, however, is the positive and creative moment of political generation. Politics becomes reduced to rationality, to the achievement of right results, to competency. Hence the emphasis on descriptive representation, on the identification of that minimum number of citizens which can be said to embody the hypothetical political will of the population. Politics, though, includes much more than the embodiment of a passive rationality. In assuming that individuals can be reduced to beings with identifiable markers and properties which can be theoretically grasped, one loses sight of the very ground of politics: the fact that the individual is creativity or psyche. Emphasis on the joy of action, on the political moment of creation, is forgotten, covered up by the mere concern with neutral procedural mechanisms which aim not to give citizens the ability to politically express themselves, but simply represent their interests.

The political significance of the CA experiments lay not in the fact that a random group of ordinary citizens, ostensibly representing other ordinary citizens, were able to come to the same conclusion as highly educated political scientists regarding a complex issue, such as the democratic deficiencies of a single member plurality electoral system. The significance lay, rather, irrespective of the particular result, in that citizens were given the opportunity to critically evaluate an existing political norm, to express themselves actively and creatively in an institutional environment affirming political equality. The ‘truth’ of history is not found in a particular knowledge or reason, but “in the effectively actual movement of history itself, and in the living activity of humans.”⁵² Politics is deliberative, critical, and collective activity that emerges when citizens begin to actively call into question the validity of social institutions. The CA members may very well have made a ‘wrong’ decision. If they did, however, this is no ground for rejecting CAs as political organs, but rather a simple manifestation of what Castoriadis calls the tragedy of democracy, the fact that there exists no finally found institutional form capable of generating universally founded norms grounded in reason. Political judgment does not “strive for the ‘true’ but for the ‘good’”. It isn’t of the type ‘I think *a* because *b*’, but rather, ‘I want *x* because *y*’.⁵³

As mentioned above, this is not to say, however, that rationality disappears in such an understanding of politics. To give a reasonable account is an essential element of political determination, and if such an account is to be collectively produced in a social-historical context of equality, then it is essential to have institutional spaces which allow for reflective deliberation. Castoriadis’ emphasis on the creative dimension of politics cannot be reduced to an immediate voluntarism. Castoriadis rejects mere voluntarism at the same time that he does mere procedural democracy, theorizing instead a form of political will which is subject to processes of

meaningful deliberation. In the latter's words, "There must be a framework for discussing problems and for submitting them to popular decision – or even for suggesting that they should be discussed. These are not just 'technical' functions. They are *deeply political*."⁵⁴ And again: "There is no way to do away with the necessity for arrangements and procedures that will permit discussion and choice."⁵⁵ Such discussion and choice, though, must be informed, must be undertaken and made in full light of all the relevant facts. Castoriadis' hypothetical description of how such an institutional arrangement may function is remarkably similar to the form of knowledge-transmission which characterized the CA Learning Phases: "Wide-ranging public debates could be organized in which democratically controlled specialists would lay out the feasible options, for example, with the main arguments for each one, and their respective implications and consequences. That way people could decide knowledgeably, instead of suffering from the effects of decisions taken in their absence and perfectly opaquely, as happens today."⁵⁶ In the final instance, what is crucial is that there exist institutions which allow for the democratic acquisition and exchange of information for the sake of the determination of political trajectories of action, and that these institutions are never hypostatized such that they are interpreted in terms of a fundamental identity with society.

Conclusion

Needless to say, however, the existence of the BCCA and the OCA is not a ground to proclaim the actually effective emergence of a new form of democratic practice at the societal level. Interpreters are right to note the limited nature of these phenomena: "The political experiments based upon sortition usually operate on the margins of politics, and the British Columbia experiment is the exception rather than the norm."⁵⁷ I have argued, however, that their perception of this has led them to reduce the CAs to already existing representative schema, thus minimizing the democratic potential, embodied in an admittedly germinal form, in these political orders. The enrichment of the democratic project in the present depends upon the practical generalization of this germ, on the popular extension of those features of the CAs that I have tried to call attention to. As I noted earlier, Castoriadis was largely skeptical about the possibility of political orders functioning, at the present historical juncture, as media for democratic education, locating the space for the latter, rather, primarily in the workplace. My suggestion, though, is that the existence of the CAs provides a reason for optimism concerning the possibility of political activity serving as a potential antidote to the contemporary crisis of democracy that has manifested itself as a consequence of the social signification of rational mastery's eclipse of the social signification of autonomy. If the latter movement is to be reversed, political experiments similar to the BCCA and OCA should be further encouraged. It could be potentially within such institutions that "a growing number of individuals relearn how to live a truly collective life, manage their own affairs, and realize and develop themselves while working in mutual recognition for a common objective."⁵⁸ I believe, though, that the full appreciation of the democratic potential of such institutions can only be fully revealed by moving beyond the mere description of the latter in terms of existing philosophies of representation.

¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Nature and Value of Equality," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 136.

² Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Project of Autonomy is not a Utopia," in *A Society Adrift: Interviews and Debates*,

1974-1997, ed. Enrique Escobar, and Pascal Vernay, trans. Helen Arnold (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 206.

³Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 164.

⁴Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Nature and Value of Equality," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 132.

⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," 164

⁶Cornelius Castoriadis, "The End of Philosophy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 20.

⁷Cornelius Castoriadis, "The End of Philosophy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 41.

⁸Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Crisis of Culture and the State," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 223.

⁹Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Crisis in Modern Society," in *Political and Social Writings, Volume Three*, ed. David Ames Curtis, trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 111.

¹⁰Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform in Canada* (Ottawa: Ministry of Public Works and Government Services, 2004), 3.

¹¹Cornelius Castoriadis, "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," in *Political and Social Writings, Volume Two*, ed. David Ames Curtis, trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 238.

¹²Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greeks and the Modern Political Imaginary," in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, ed. David Ames Curtis, trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 85.

¹³Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 160.

¹⁴Ibid., 159.

¹⁵Ibid., 169.

¹⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, "Psychoanalysis and Philosophy," in *The Castoriadis Reader*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 351.

¹⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 114.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 315.

²⁰ R.S. Ratner, "A Second Chance for the Single Transferable Vote," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 32, no. 1 (n.d.): 33.

²¹ Jonathan Rose, "The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 30, no. 3 (2007): 10.

²² Ontario Citizens' Assembly Secretariat, *Democracy at Work: The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform: A Record of Ontario's First Citizens' Assembly Process* (Toronto: Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004), 44.

²³ Ibid., 46.

²⁴ Ibid., 62.

²⁵ Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, *One Ballot, Two Votes: A New Way to Vote in Ontario: Recommendation of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform* (Toronto: Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2007), 24.

²⁶ Amy Lang, "But Is It for Real? The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly as a Model of State-Sponsored Citizen Empowerment," *Politics & Society* 35, no. 1 (2007): 43.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, 1972), 203.

²⁸ Rose, "The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform," 13.

²⁹ R.S. Ratner, "British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly: The Learning Phase," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 27, no. 2 (2004): 24.

³⁰ Lang, "But Is It for Real? The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly as a Model of State-Sponsored Citizen

Empowerment,” 38.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 87.

³³ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Proletariat and Organization, I,” in *Political and Social Writings, Volume Two*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 197.

³⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Unending Interrogation,” in *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*, trans. and ed. anonymous, 2003, 265, www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf.

³⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Self-Management and Hierarchy,” in *Political and Social Writings, Volume Three*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 222.

³⁶ Dennis Thompson, “Who Should Govern Who Governs? The Role of Citizens in Reforming the Electoral System,” in *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly*, ed. Mark E. Warren and Hilary Pearce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 26–27.

³⁷ Mark Warren, “Citizen Representatives,” in *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly*, ed. Mark E. Warren and Hilary Pearce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 51.

³⁸ Philip Pettit, “Representation, Responsive and Indicative,” *Constellations* 17, no. 3 (n.d.): 427.

³⁹ Ibid., 432.

⁴⁰ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary,” in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 90; Cornelius Castoriadis, “What Democracy?,” in *Figures of the Thinkable*, trans. Helen Arnold (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 128–129.

⁴¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Neither God, Nor Caesar, Nor Tribune,” in *Postscript on Insignificance*, trans. and ed. anonymous, 2011, 16, www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf.

⁴² Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy,” in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 108.

⁴³ Nadia Urbinati and Mark Warren, “The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 402.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 405.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Politics in Crisis,” in *Postscript on Insignificance*, trans. and ed. anonymous, 2011, 105, www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf.

⁴⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, “If There Is to Be a Democratic Europe,” in *Postscript on Insignificance*, ed. anonymous, trans. anonymous, 2011, 147, www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf.

⁴⁸ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Done and to Be Done,” in *The Castoriadis Reader*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 408.

⁴⁹ Castoriadis, “On the Content of Socialism, II,” 144.

⁵⁰ Castoriadis, “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary,” 90.

⁵¹ Ferejohn, “Conclusion: The Citizens’ Assembly Model,” 213.

⁵² Castoriadis, “Unending Interrogation,” 265.

⁵³ Cornelius Castoriadis, “On Political Judgment,” in *A Society Adrift: Interviews and Debates, 1974-1997*, ed. Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay, trans. Helen Arnold (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 217.

⁵⁴ Castoriadis, “On the Content of Socialism, II,” 140–141.

⁵⁵ Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 113.

⁵⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, “‘Democracy’ Without Citizens’ Participation,” in *A Society Adrift: Interviews and Debates, 1974-1997*, ed. Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay, trans. Helen Arnold (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 168.

⁵⁷ Yves Sintoner, “Random Selection, Republican Self-Government and Deliberative Democracy,” *Constellations* 17, no. 3 (2010): 477.

⁵⁸ Castoriadis, “Recommencing the Revolution,” 52.