

Teaching Castoriadis: Some Norwegian experiences

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The course was structured as a seminar called "Democracy and Politicization", at the Institute for Educational Research (pedagogics) at the University of Oslo. It was a voluntary, postgraduate course with only four participants, who all took part in the whole series.

The first session (out of seven) was structured as classical lecturing of concepts related to democracy and politicization. The rest of the series was used for discussion of texts which everyone had read in advance. Only the last session was devoted to Castoriadis. The series could however be said to lead up to this last session as sort of an endpoint.

We started out with the opening chapters of Zygmunt Bauman's book "In Search of Politics" (Polity Press 1999). Here a lot of problems were laid out, and Castoriadis was introduced by Bauman through some quotes and comments. The students seemed to take to these passages, especially CC's sharper formulations on market society.

The course progressed through a series of themes and problems concerning rationality, power, knowledge etc. We read Foucault, Paulo Freire, a version of Negri and Hardt's concept of power, neo-Aristotelian reflections on the ethical crisis accompanying neoliberal economical globalization and more. The article by Castoriadis which was supposed to bring all these themes into perspective was "The Greek polis and the Creation of Democracy". Due to practical problems we read it in Swedish - which curiously enough was harder for the Norwegian students to read than English, which they are more accustomed to. In any case, I think this article was a little too demanding for this kind of reading. But the students did like it, and had indeed read it thoroughly. Only they were not able to discuss it very much. I look upon this as a sowing process. It is a good thing to have read this text, I think, even if they are not able to formulate comments right away. Also, the course as a whole was structured so as to give a certain kind of insight or elucidation in the line of Castoriadis' project of autonomy.

The students expressed great satisfaction with both the subject and the democratic form by which the seminar was conducted. I did not lecture, but rather encouraged the students to discuss, analyze and formulate viewpoints. My contribution was to clarify theoretical (political-philosophical) problems at the level of concepts. To this end I used the blackboard in the run of the discussions, as well as overhead sheets and handouts that were worked out from one session to the next, following the problems we had encountered. The spontaneous form is characteristic in that it reveals any blank spots that I as well as the students may have. There was no way I could be in full control. Still I think this is why the course was so inspiring and created a lot of learning for all of us.

I will be conducting a similar course next term. Then I shall choose a new, simpler text by Castoriadis. Depending on the projects and interests of the students, I will follow the same outline, maybe with a little more structure and classical lecturing, especially if I get a less active group than this one.

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