Planning as *magma*. Suggestions from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis

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Abstract
The philosophical work of Cornelius Castoriadis on the imaginary institution of society can inform planning theory today at a juncture of major transitions, unprecedented global urbanisation, multiple crises, and conflict. Planning as magma constitutes a dynamic world of social imaginary significations, which goes beyond plans, legal frameworks, administrative processes, and professional practices. This highlights the political dimensions of planning as thinking and doing interwoven with consensual or conflictual social dynamics, representations, desires, finalities, and affects. Derivative values such as indetermination, infinite potentiality, inexhaustibility, multiplicity, and difference may open paths to self-reflection, self-transformation, and radical imagination. Planning as magma means to elucidate planning goals and orientations, to conceive new social imaginary significations, and to constitute new methodologies, epistemologies, policies, and practices, toward sustainability and justice.

Keywords: planning theory; spatial planning; philosophy; magma; Cornelius Castoriadis

Introduction
In this paper, I find inspiration in the work of the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis to inform theoretical approaches to spatial planning. My emphasis lies on institutions (in the broader sense of the term) and current challenges in times of neoliberal globalisation, multiple crises, and conflict. Planning theory has often identified diversified connections of planning to philosophical and sociological endeavours developed in France around the 1970s, which revolutionised and radicalised social sciences in the context of wider social unrest, and critical dispute (often coined as May '68). Inspiration has been found in neo-Marxist political economy approaches on the right-to-the-city from the work of Henri Lefebvre (Chiodelli, 2013); in poststructuralist approaches on power and governmentality from the work of Michel Foucault (Flyvberg, 1992); or in psychanalysis, desire, and phantasy from the work of Jacques Lacan (Gunder, 2005). I wish to contribute to this thread within planning theory by suggesting ideas and concepts from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis.[1] Drawing from philosophy and psychanalysis, his work, as developed in France in the 1970s and 1980s, revolves around the notion of *institutions* and introduces key concepts such as the *imaginary institution of society*, *autonomy*, and the *magma of social imaginary significations*. I argue that Castoriadis's socio-historical lenses on institutions and radical imagination may provide helpful

[1] Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) was a philosopher, an economist, and a psychoanalyst. Born in Constantinople (1922), lived in Athens (1922 -1945) and Paris (1945-1997). In 1945 he got aboard the ship Mataroa, together with other Greek intellectuals, writers, and artists, in order to escape from anti-communist prosecutions at the outbreak of the Greek Civil War, and migrated to Paris where he spent the rest of his life. He was the founder of the group and journal Socialisme ou Barbarie (1949-1966); worked as an economist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD (1948-1970); joined the psychoanalytic group Quatrième Groupe; and worked at the Faculty of École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). He died in 1997.

insights into institutional approaches to planning with particularly relevant theorisations. We can derive notions that elucidate our understanding of today's critical challenges, transitions, and crises. They also suggest theoretical paths to imagine creatively beyond current trends and limitations.

Neoliberal planning paradigms

In a recent article, Benjamin Davy, Meike Levin-Keitel and Franziska Sielker (2023) suggested to 'cherish the diversity of planning' and spoke of 'plural planning theories' as necessary to deal with huge present transitions and a simultaneity of overlapping crises. In recent decades, in the era of neoliberal globalisation, planning has shifted orientation in its objectives and content. The accelerated flows of capital, people, goods, and information, the radical technological innovations, the unprecedented pace of global urbanisation, and, gradually, a succession and acceleration of crises mean sweeping changes for space and society. The emergence of global governance networks and the gradual expansion and dominance of a neoliberal ethos and policies have decisively influenced planning. *Spatial planning* emerged in the 21st century as a dominant planning paradigm in much of Europe (Gunder, Madanipour and Watson, 2018a, p. 5) through these sweeping changes intertwined with globalisation, albeit with significant variations among regions and contexts. Ideas and planning practices of growth, competitiveness, entrepreneurship, governance, strategic selectivity, and flexibility gradually formed a planning paradigm, which stood in contrast to 20th-century planning paradigms in the West, the East, and the South. Spatial planning, as a neoliberal planning paradigm, diffused globally throughout a post-modernist, post-socialist, and post-colonial world as a reform, good practice, and a factor in shaping planning cultures (Sanyal, 2005).

Institutional turn and planning

Not without reason, institutions and institutional reforms got inextricably entwined with the era of globalisation. In the political arena, terms such as 'institutional reforms', 'institutional change', 'institutional adjustment', and 'institutional development', became an integral part of discourses and policies initiated by international organisations and national governments (Verma, 2007). Planning literature speaks of a 'changing relationship between the institutions of power and the society and environment' (Gunder, Madanipour and Watson, 2018a, p. 2) while also mentioning an *institutional turn* (Moroni, 2010) in intellectual thought. This turn 'recognizes the centrality of institutional framework when dealing with social and economic phenomena' (ibid., p. 275) and has profoundly influenced planning theory (Salet, 2019). André Sorensen (2018) writes thoroughly about *new institutionalism*, highlighting the importance of theorising institutions to planning theory. He mentions different (and often overlapping) branches of institutional approaches, including (a) rational choice institutionalism, which connects to New Institutional Economics; (b) historical institutionalism, which emphasises path-dependency and embeddedness, development pathways, origins and genealogies, endogenous, and incremental process; and (c) sociological institutionalism, which connects to organisational sociology and brings to the fore social norms and conventions, cultural and normative settings, even legitimating myths. As can be noted, the notion of *institution* can have multiple meanings and contents. Following Douglass North's well-known distinction (North, 2010), an institution may refer to formal rules (written law, property rights, regulations) or informal settings (conventions, codes of conduct, unwritten laws, customs, and habits) that shape social behaviour, as well organisations (political, economic, social, religious, educational bodies) or groups of people bound by a common cause. A series of questions arise here. How does planning theory and practice change, towards where, and why? How is planning reformed, and why? How do planning reforms link to broader institutional transitions?

Reflecting on Cornelius Castoriadis

Initiating from the problematisation of *institutions*, in the most profound sense of the term, I will delve into the work of Cornelius Castoriadis on the *imaginary institution of society*, with a particular focus on the notions of the *social imaginary significations* and the *magma*. The philosophical universe of Castoriadis's ideas and concepts has been the focus of interest for an ever-growing body of philosophical, psychanalytic, and political science literature (Adams, 2014; Kioupkiolis, 2012; Ktenas and Schismenos, 2018; Memos, 2014; Schismenos, 2013; Stavrakakis, 2002; Tovar-Restrepo, 2012). In this text, I revisit some of Castoriadis's original works (translated into English) from a planning perspective while building on relevant theorisations in Greek-language planning literature (Mantouvalou, 2020; Triantis, 2020a). My theoretical endeavour wishes to contribute to the discussion on planning theories in the AESOP congress 'Game Changer? Planning for Just and Sustainable Urban Regions', held in Paris in 2024. At the same time, this pays homage to Cornelius Castoriadis, who developed his philosophical thought while living in Paris.

Reading Castoriadis: the magma of social imaginary significations

Social imaginary significations

In his seminal work, The Imaginary Institution of Society, Castoriadis challenges the functionalist-economic causal explanations of the creation of institutions, arguing that the understanding of institutions cannot be limited to fulfilling a society's functional needs. He argues that society's needs are historically and culturally constructed and that societies invent and define new ways of fulfilling their needs or creating new ones. Besides functionalist-economic explanations, he claims that societies also get instituted in imaginary ways. Institutions contain, all along, an imaginary part together with a functional part:

> The institution is a socially sanctioned, symbolic network in which a functional component and an imaginary component are combined in variable proportions and relations. (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, p. 132)

From this perspective, institutions are not abstract ideas discovered by society at any given time but, instead, are created each time by society, and are constantly under transformation through time. Castoriadis identifies the source of institutions in what he names *social imaginary*. This stands for the capacity each society has for creation. The *social imaginary* is this element

> which gives a specific orientation to every institutional system, which overdetermines the choice and the connections of symbolic networks, which is the creation of each historical period, its singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence, its world, and its relations with this world, this originary structuring component, this central signifying-signified, the source of that which presents itself in every instance as an indisputable and undisputed meaning, the basis for articulating what does matter and what does not, the origin of the surplus of being of the objects of practical, affective and intellectual investment, whether individual or collective. (ibid., p. 145)

The *social imaginary* contains the *social imaginary significations*. The very existence of any society is interwoven with the creation of *social imaginary significations*. These hold together a society and answer fundamental questions the society poses to itself, its needs, and the world. Individuals (being always part of their society) incarnate or challenge the social imaginary significations of their societies. Castoriadis clarifies that *social imaginary significations* are *not* simply individual representations, ideas, or thoughts, but something much deeper which links

to the society, the individual, and even the *psyche*/soul. These form an integral part of what makes individuals members of society by all different means – from social learning to conflict:

> Significations *are* obviously not *what* individuals represent to themselves, consciously or unconsciously, or *what* they think. They are that by means of which and on the basis of which individuals are formed as social individuals, capable of participating in social doing and representing/saying, capable of representing, acting, thinking in a compatible, coherent, convergent manner, even if this be in the form of conflict. (ibid., p. 366)

Elsewhere, in the collection The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (texts: The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary, and Culture in a Democratic Society), Castoriadis insists on the deep and complex theorisation of the social imaginary significations, and distinguishes a threefold role, which refers to representations, desires (or finalities), and affects:

> The role of these social imaginary significations […] is threefold. They are what structure the *representations* of the world in general, without which there can be no human beings. […] Second, these significations designate the *finalities* or ends of action; they dictate what is to be done and not to be done, what is good to do and not good to do. […] Thirdly, and it is this point that is undoubtedly the most difficult to discern, these significations establish the types of *affects* that are characteristic of a society (Castoriadis, 1996/2022, pp. 167-8).

> Signification […] is not a simple matter of ideas or representations, for it must gather together – bind in a form – representation, desire, and affect. (ibid., p. 272)

Subsequently, understanding a society's *social imaginary significations* is key to understanding society itself and its institutions. In different societies and times, social imaginary significations are different. This means that even similar institutions may have a different meaning as they link to different significations:

> Apparently similar 'institutions' can be radically other, since, immersed in another society, they are caught up in other significations. (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, p. 368)

For instance, when writing about capitalism in Western societies, Castoriadis identifies the centrality of the economic imaginary signification (ibid., p. 363). The institution of a capitalist society provides that *commodity* becomes an imaginary signification of crucial importance. As stated in Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics (The Rising Tide of Insignificancy):

> No one has ever seen a commodity: one can see a car, a kilo of bananas, a meter of fabric. It is the social imaginary signification commodity that makes these objects function in a commercial society. (Castoriadis, 1996/2022, p. 151)

The economic imaginary signification of the commodity links to capitalist *affects* such as the 'perpetual restlessness, constant change, a thirst for the new for the sake of the new and for more for the sake of more (ibid. 169). Nonetheless, although dominant, the economic signification is not the only one. In The Crisis of the Identification Process (The Rising Tide of Insignificancy), Castoriadis identifies two central significations that are in principle *antinomical* to each other: the capitalist, economic signification on the one hand, and, on the other, the signification of individual and social autonomy:

> On the one hand, there is the signification of the unlimited expansion of an allegedly rational alleged mastery over everything, nature as well as human beings. This signification corresponds to the capitalist dimension of modern societies. On the other hand, there is the signification of individual and social autonomy, of freedom, of the search of forms of collective freedom, which correspond to the democratic, emancipatory, revolutionary project. (ibid., p. 171)

At the same time, every society maintains the capacity to creation: *radical imagination* and the *social imaginary*, which is again theorised in ontological and psychanalytic terms:

> There is the radical imagination of the psyche – namely, perpetual upsurge of a flux of representations, of affects, and of desires, all three indissociable each from the others. (ibid., p. 145)

In turn, the notions of *radical imagination* and the *social imaginary*, along with the *antinomical* significations and conflict, the representations, the desires, the affects, and the idea of *autonomy* can further be elucidated through the notion of *magmas*.

> Every society creates its own world in creating the significations that are specific to it. Indeed, it creates a magma of significations. (ibid., p. 167)

The logic of magmas

Castoriadis introduces the notion of *magma* in The Imaginary Institution of Society. Although the term is mentioned earlier in the book, in the final chapter named Social Imaginary Significations (section i, The Magmas), he expresses his will 'to go beyond merely negative ontology and open up a path (or several paths) in order to think what is without confining ourselves to saying how it is not be thought' (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, p. 340). He then provides a theoretical conception of the magma:

> A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations. (ibid., p. 343)

We can here mark some values of the magma, such as ontological positivity, openness, and indetermination. Another value he insists on is *multiplicity*. In that case, multiplicity is not conceived as a sum of singularities but rather as constituents inextricably assembled, interwoven, or bundled together:

> We have to think of a multiplicity which is not one in the received sense of the term but which we mark out as such, and which is not a multiplicity in the sense that we could actually or virtually enumerate what it 'contains' but in which we mark out in each case terms which are not absolutely jumbled together. Or, we might think of an indefinite number of terms, which may possibly change, assembled together by an optionally transitive pre-relation (referral); or of the holding-together of distinct-indistinct components of a manifold; or, again, of an indefinitely blurred bundle of conjunctive fabrics, made up of different cloths and yet homogeneous, everywhere studded with virtual and evanescent singularities. (ibid., p. 344)

In another point, Castoriadis explains his choice to employ magma as a metaphor, thus bringing to the fore values such as motility, liquidity, contingency, impetus, and alternation:

> [In the magma] there are flows that are denser, nodal points, clearer or darker areas, bits of rock caught in the whole. But the magma never ceases to move, to swell and to subside, to liquify what was solid and to solidify what was almost inexistent. (ibid., p. 244)

In a later piece of his work, The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy, Castoriadis (1983/1997) revisits the notion of magmas. He underlines the different logic that magmas have in relation to ensemble theory and mentions initial experimentations with other terms such as cluster [amas] and conglomerate before concluding with *magma*. He then specifically defines magma by the five following properties (ibid., p. 297):

Properties of magmas

M1	If M is a magma, one can mark, in M, an indefinite number of ensembles
M2	If M is a magma, one can mark, in M, magmas other than M
M3	If M is a magma, M cannot be partitioned into magmas
M4	If M is a magma, every decomposition of M into ensembles leaves a magma as residue
M5	What is not a magma is an ensemble or is nothing

Source: Castoriadis, 1983/1997, p. 297

Derivative values from these properties are, respectively, an 'indefinite potentiality', an 'inexhaustibility of modes of being (and of types of organisation)', an 'impossibility of separation', and an 'inexhaustibility of decomposability' (ibid., pp. 297-8). Among them, Castoriadis marks as most important and decisive property M3, namely that a separation of a magma is impossible and irrelevant. Two more theorisations are of particular interest to this paper. First, the 'absolutely universal' theorisation of magmas, which allows us to think about how the logic of magmas can apply to different epistemological fields and contexts: 'We can call magmatic every non-ensemblistic-identitary mode of being/mode of organization that we encounter or can think of' (ibid., p. 298). Second, the persistent clarification that the magma's indetermination is not a 'state of ignorance' or a 'statistical situation' but a possibility for creation:

> No state of being is such that it renders impossible the emergence of other determinations than those already existing. […] It is creation, namely, emergence of other determinations, new laws, new domains of lawfulness. (ibid., p. 308)

The quest for 'the new' and for 'creation' is crucial for Castoriadis and allows for political connotations. What becomes evident is that the notion of *magma* has a profound *political* content, which links to *radical imagination* and the *imaginary institution of society*. A central argument, which comes back in various wordings throughout Castoriadis's work, links *magma* to the *social imaginary significations* and the institution of society/the world. From this perspective, the *magma of social imaginary significations* is inextricably interwoven with the *doing* (*ποιείν/πράττειν*) and the *representing/saying* (*παριστάνειν/λέγειν*) of any given society, feeding pretty much everything from the soul and personal existence and behaviours to social cohesion and law legitimacy.

> The institution of society is what it is and as it is to the extent that it 'materializes' a magma of social imaginary significations, in reference to which individuals and objects

> alone can be grasped and even simply exist. Nor can this magma be spoken of in isolation from the individuals and the objects that it brings into being'. (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, p. 356)
>
> The institution of society is in each case the institution of a magma of social imaginary significations, which can and must call a world of significations. (ibid., p. 359)

Castoriadis' notion of the society's institution refers to processes of continuous transformation through complex and unequal social dynamics and 'an undetermined number of particular ends' which moves on implicitly and is not overdetermined by any superior structure or power – although sometimes perceived as such:

> The institution operates implicitly, is intended as such by no one, is realized through the pursuit of an undetermined number of particular ends, which are present and can be presented only in the social sphere, […] which subsequently prove to be overdetermined by this central signification, in the process of being instituted. The latter thus allows itself to be grasped, after the fact, as the non-real condition of the real coexistence of social phenomena. (ibid., pp. 363-4)

Within this philosophical universe, Castoriadis develops the idea of *autonomy*,[2] adding a distinct thread to similar theorisations within philosophy and political science. Although an approach of Castoriadis's idea on social and individual autonomy falls out of the scope of this paper,[3] I am interested in marking *autonomy*'s connection to *magma*. It is through the notion of *magma* Castoriadis enters the concluding chapter of the Imaginary Institution of Society to introduce the concepts of a *radical imaginary* and an *instituting society* – namely an *autonomous* society that institutes itself. In the ending sentence of his seminal book, he writes:

> The self-transformation of society concerns social doing – and so also politics, in the profound sense of the term – the doing of men and women in society, and nothing else. Of this, thoughtful doing, and political thinking – society's thinking as making itself – is one essential component. (ibid., p. 373)

This idea of autonomy is necessarily democratic, tragically risky, and essentially political. Autonomy is an 'opening', rather than a closure,

> a 'radical rupture, an ontological creation, the emergence of societies that put into question their own institutions and significations – their 'organization' in the most profound sense of the term. (Castoriadis, 1983/1997, p. 310)

The notion of a free and reflective society that *creates* its own institutions through *radical imagination* is central to Castoriadis's idea of *autonomy* and the notion of *magma*. Castoriadis names this radical, revolutionary notion of autonomy as *self-institution* (*αυτοθέσμιση*), *self-constitution* (*αυτοσυγκρότηση*), or *self-transformation* (*αυτομετασχηματισμός*), in opposition to *heteronomy* and beyond the notion of *self-organisation* (*αυτό-οργάνωση*). What I want to stress is that the conception of a self-instituting, autonomous society is possible precisely because its institution materialises a *magma* with all these values mentioned above: 'indefinite

[2] Coming from the Greek word αυτονομία=autonomy and αυτόνομος=autonomous [αυτό/auto=self and νόμος/nomos=law], meaning one who has/makes their own law.
[3] Castoriadis is frequently mentioned as the 'philosopher of autonomy'. See: Kioupkiolis, 2012.

potentiality', 'inexhaustibility of modes of being (and of types of organisation)', 'impossibility of separation', multiplicity, indetermination, and so on. This point serves as the connecting link to issues of planning.

Selective influences on planning theory

Castoriadis's thought has been distinctively influential in various disciplines and social fields, academia, and activism, even to those interested in space and planning. Ideas about space, place, and the *City* (Polis) can be found in various parts of his work. For instance, in the subchapter The Philosophical Institution of Time/The Social Historical in The Imaginary Institution of Society, he theorised space as inseparable from time and rejected any philosophical distinction between them. For him, an important attribute of space is *difference*: 'If there were no *place*, not *topos*, how could what is different exist?' (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, p. 191). And further on: 'Space is the possibility of the difference of the same from the same without which there is nothing at all' (ibid., p. 194). Moreover, in the part Polis of The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (among others), Castoriadis employed the notions of *political imaginary* as essentially interwoven with a democratic society and the political institution of the City, also bringing to the fore issues of public and private spheres, and citizenship, having as reference the Athenian classical democracy.

Although Castoriadis's concerns were far from planning theory and his work does not directly mention planning, influences from his work can be traced down to various planning contexts and traditions. Jean Hillier (2005, p. 276) recognised Castoriadian thought among theories that 'have been rooted in what are fundamentally transcendent notions' along with those of Habermas, Lacan, Zizek, and Lefebvre). In Latin American contexts, a body of literature has found inspiration in the concepts of *social imaginary* and *autonomy* to explore the prospects of autonomist urban planning and management. Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2000) links these notions to examples of radical urban management, conflictual decision-making, and participatory budgeting in Brazil. Alexandre Bomfin (2019) turns to Castoriadis's idea of radical imagination to discuss the notion of a 'spatial imaginary'.

In South-European contexts, architect-planner Maria Mantouvalou – herself part of Castoriadis's social circle in Paris and Athens – has introduced Castoriadian ideas in her (Greek-language) work. In a text about the problematics of city centres, social inequality, and cultural difference, Mantouvalou (1996) employed Castoriadis's threefold distinction of public and private spheres, namely the Athenian *oikos* (private sphere), the *agora* (private/public sphere), and the *ekklesia* (public sphere) (Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as a Regime from The Rising Tide of Insignificancy), to discuss the changing socio-spatial organisation and public-private relations in European city centres. From a South-European perspective, she subsequently, advocated for urban policies and planning that maintain and foster social diversity/difference and cultural heterogeneity.

In her more recent text, Institutions, 'Overturns', and Stakes of Spatial Planning (2020), Mantouvalou further implies two connections between planning and Castoriadian thought. The first builds on the discussion on *institutions,* emphasising the catalytical influence planning may have on everyday life, ideas, social values, perceptions, cultures, administration, and institutions – in the broader sense. In times of neoliberal globalisation and the dominance of the capitalist social imaginary, she theorises spatial planning and planning reforms as a catalyst to wider institutional overturns and broader social changes (namely the neoliberal institution of the society), as entwined to factors that contribute to a continuous process of educating, changing, and transforming people and their relations. The second one reflects on the notion of

magma of social imaginary significations and reads it in parallel to the notion of *palimpsest* (a concept also used in urban design and planning), which links to values of multiplicity, diversity, co-existence, openness, and interweaves individuals and groups with particular places, social-historical layers, and social imaginary significations. She claims that the notion of planning as a *magma of social imaginary* significations highlights the political dimension of planning and brings to the fore social dynamics that either work together or are in conflict with each other. The magma ought to be understood along with the notion of creation and may elucidate the need for critical and reflective actions and the perspectives of the potentially new.

In dialogue with Mantouvalou's theorisations, I explored how the Castoriadian thought may enrich our understanding of spatial planning and institutions (Triantis, 2020a). I examined planning transitions in a post-socialist East European context, by focusing on fieldwork in Albania as a paradigmatic case study, to explore the interrelations of changing planning cultures and practices with institutions, social dynamics, and the production of space. I then attempted to summarise my research findings and theorise about planning in the era of neoliberal globalisation by reflecting on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. My research particularly discussed the changing *social imaginary significations* of the post-socialist era. As became evident, the 'restitution' of private property, privatisations, the prevalence of exchange values, and the penetration of free market relations tended to render the *commodity* and *private property* as social imaginary significations of supreme value, guiding the transition towards the capitalist, neoliberal institution of society (Triantis, 2018). Various social and cultural norms and settings got destabilised: land and property relations, land use, organisation and management, the public and the private, what is socially accepted and what is not, individual and collective affects, needs, and desires, social problems and objectives, the very meaning of family and kinship, state, economy, and labour – all the above were changing in the whirl of the transition. At the same time, new significations were created (e.g. growth, competitiveness, entrepreneurship, development, consumption), and new social subjects were being formed, also shaped through trans-local networks of communication, information, technology, education, migration, and labour. These have been significant qualitative changes between space and society (Triantis 2020b), supported by institutional reforms but, in fact, referring to broader institutional transitions.

In this troubling, transitional context, spatial planning emerged as a contested field and a stake in institutional reforms and overturns. Understanding spatial planning as *magma*, following the Castoriadian thought, meant going far beyond planning reforms, the making of laws and administrative frameworks. This meant understanding planning as a dynamic, inseparable, indefinite, indeterminate, and inexhaustible entity of global trends and local particularities, discourses, perceptions, experiences, social dynamics, formal and informal practices, governance patterns, power relations, formal institutional settings and unwritten laws, customs, and relations of trust, and imaginary significations – along with their social and historical layers and in time and fragments from past eras. Within this magmatic condition, planning was understood, on the one hand, to virtually normalise – *in terms of normativity and normality* (Triantis, 2020a) – capitalist, neoliberal imaginary significations around land and property development along with broader and deeper social and institutional transformations. On the other hand, this magma contained contradictions across different geographical scales that permeated policies, perceptions, and social practices also including planning alternatives: From informality or conflict to critical reflection and the creative challenging of dominant imaginary significations.

Suggestions on the imaginary institution of planning

I will conclude with two suggestions that attempt to link the selective reading of Castoriadis's work on The Imaginary Institution of Society to planning theory. If we admit that planning is an institution, we may follow the Castoriadian thought to argue that, pretty much like other institutions, planning is instituted in imaginary ways. As should be noted, these are initial thoughts that would require further elaboration.

Suggestion 1: Revisiting planning imaginary significations

As academic literature has shown, planning is an institutional apparatus that links to diversified values and imaginaries (Gunder, Madanipour, and Watson, 2018a). In countries of the West during the post-war era of the 20th century, planning was intertwined with the Keynsian welfare state, redistributive policies, liberal democracies, and centralised state authority, and imaginary significations of modernisation, rationality, scientific efficiency, productivity, order, gendered divisions and social stratifications. Planning in the former socialist countries of the East formed an integral part of centralised economic programming and bureaucratic state authority, much more due to the limitations on private property. It was entwined with imaginary significations quite similar to the Western ones, while also associated with state provision and socialist ideas of equality, and social justice. Planning in formerly colonised countries of the South was assembled with colonial oppression, racial discrimination, orientalism, the transfer of Western institutional settings, and the imaginaries of Westernisation, modernisation, rationalisation, and Europeanisation.

In the era of globalisation, spatial planning emerged as a dominant planning paradigm, coined with neoliberal, capitalist imaginary significations of the commodity and the private property as supreme values, privatism, commodification, free market growth, consumption of natural resources, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness (Cahill *et al.*, 2018; Dardot and Laval, 2010/2017). Planning became a 'carrier' of neoliberal agendas (Davoudi, 2018), by introducing a neoliberal ideology and ethos through tools like public land privatisations, laissez-faire policies, city marketing, Urban Development Projects (UDPs), Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), and entrepreneurial spatial management (Baeten, 2018), gradually transplanted across the globe. In this neoliberal context, spatial planning has often normalised certain principles, objectives, typologies, and modes of spatial organisation, development, and governance, along with commodity relations and the economic imaginary significations with which these are interwoven (Triantis, 2020a). This normalisation has been twofold. First, in terms of *normativity*, as spatial planning shapes rules, development, and building regulations and restrictions, it often translates to binding or guiding policies, legal documents, and maps. Second, in terms of *normality*, as spatial planning tends to create norms that serve as socially accepted principles, values, and standards for the organisation, development, and management of space. In this way, spatial planning contributes to the gradual change of deeper relationships between space and society, its representations, desires, and affects. To paraphrase Margaret Thatcher's infamous saying about economics: Planning could be a 'method; the object is to change the heart and soul'.

Yet, in the 21st century, threads of theory and practice question the legacies of this post-modernist, post-colonial, post-socialist, and profoundly neoliberal world. Suggestions to decolonise planning imagination (Miraftab, 2018), feminist and queer approaches, ecological and post-human theorisations, and also post-neoliberal manifestos like *Common* (Dardot and Laval 2019), *Care* (Care Collective, 2020), and a Green Democratic Revolution (Mouffe, 2022) open up new horizons to planning theory and practice. Following Castoriadis's notion of *social imaginary significations*, these 21st-century evolutions can be understood to be in principle *antinomical* to dominant neoliberal planning paradigms. From this standpoint, we could revisit

planning imaginary significations, in terms of representations, desires, and affects. Such an approach would possibly open up several paths to autonomous creation – doing, and thinking – in the Castoriadian magmatic sense of radical imagination and democratic self-transformation.

Suggestion 2: Planning as magma

Since the end of the 20th century, in much of Europe and other parts of the world, ideas about communicative and collaborative planning (Healey, 1997) have had a major impact on planning theory and practice. By drawing on Jürgen Habermas's notion of *deliberative democracy*, they were focusing on consensus building, the reconciliation of diverging agendas, the democratisation of planning processes, and the promotion of citizen participation. More recently, these theories have received criticism, which questioned the meaning and content of consensus insofar as this ignored power relations, exclusions, and structural limitations. Today, in times of multiple crises, armed conflict, rapid digital and material transformations, and a plurality of truths on the internet and social media, planning meets the challenges of goals and orientation, social legitimacy, post-truth validity, and multiple methodological and epistemological biases (Davy, Levin-Keitel, and Sielker, 2023). In post-colonial, global South contexts, and elsewhere, notions of *insurgent planning* and *insurgent citizenship* (Holston, 2008; Miraftab, 2018; Watson, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2018)) have explored alternatives of radical planning practices and new paradigms of citizenship which could be counter-hegemonic, transgressive, inclusive, emancipatory, and imaginative (Miraftab, 2009). Other threads of planning theory have turned to the thought of political theorists and philosophers like Alain Badiou, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière to discuss neoliberal planning and governance as depoliticised, *post-political*, and *post-democratic* (Davoudi, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2018). A distinct thread (Metzger, 2018; Ploger, 2018) has specifically found inspiration in the work of Chantal Mouffe. Beyond the critique on consensus building and the post-political condition, these theorists have drawn attention to Mouffe's suggestions towards a democratically productive *agonism*, *agonistic pluralism*, a *conflictual consensus*, or a conflict-oriented model of radical democracy.

These notions of agonism, conflict, insurgency, and emancipation in a 'world struggling with a lack of consensus' (Davy, Levin-Keitel, Sielker, 2023, p. 2) can be understood as supportive of a need to *re-politicise* planning and bring us back to Castoriadis's political notion of *magma of social imaginary significations*. Castoriadis's logic of *magma* constitutes an open-ended path of thinking and doing with political connotations. Planning as a *magma* responds to an indeterminate, infinite, inexhaustible multiplicity of interwoven elements: ideas, discourses, perceptions, politics, social dynamics and practices, processes, and politics, from the local to the global level. It is much broader than laws, plans, and administrative frameworks. The elements that constitute the *magma* are not stable or equal; they do not hold the same power or significance and do not necessarily coexist in balance. They are bundled with power relations and unequal social dynamics; they contain contrasts and contradictions, contingencies, tensions, or even conflicts.

Interestingly enough, Mouffe (2022) recalls Castoriadis's notion of the *social imaginary significations* to develop her argument on the power of common *affects* and *passions* and the necessity of *identification politics* for what she names the 'green democratic revolution'. She acknowledges the critical affectual power of the democratic social and political imaginary, and she claims that ideas need to connect to what Castoriadis calls *social imaginary significations* to wake up affects that fuel politicisation and urge people to act. To understand planning as *magma* refers to an open-to-change scheme in which we can identify certain characteristics but

cannot prescribe its future course. Although influenced by dominant actors or power structures, it is not necessarily predetermined by them. It is rather created within social reality through multiple, complex, heterogeneous, and unequal social dynamics, being consensual or conflictual. Understanding planning as magma elucidates its political dimensions, which are inherent in (and constitutive of) democratic conditions. It further creates conditions for self-transformation through critical self-reflection, self-constitution (as *autonomy* rather than *heteronomy*) radical imagination, political thinking, and doing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show that the work of Cornelius Castoriadis can critically enrich our understanding of planning at a juncture of major transitions, unprecedented global urbanisation, multiple crises, and conflict. In a post-modernist, post-socialist, post-colonial, and profoundly neoliberal world we can rethink planning theories and practices as inextricably intertwined with institutions, broader ideas and conceptualisations, social dynamics, as well as different experiences of countries and regions across the globe. Castoriadis's notion of *magma* speaks of a dynamic and indefinite universe of *social imaginary significations*, which shapes on a case-by-case basis the institution of society with unique characteristics relevant to representations, desires, finalities, and affects. *Planning as magma* goes beyond plans, legal frameworks, administrative processes, and professional practices. It constitutes an open-to-change, under constant transformation, incremental, and complex outcome of multiple, heterogeneous, unequal, yet interconnected, interwoven dynamics: imaginaries, ideas, concepts, policies, social dynamics, and practices, which either work together or confront each other. This highlights the political dimensions of planning as thinking and doing. Derivative values such as indetermination, infinite potentiality, inexhaustibility of modes of being and types of organisation, multiplicity, difference, and vigorousness may open up future alternatives of creative questioning of norms and assumptions, self-reflection, self-determination, and radical imagination. In times of poly-crisis and perma-crisis, rapid global urbanisation, climate vulnerability, rising inequalities, and neoliberal governmentalities, to think of institutional change and institutions (in the most profound sense of the term) means challenging dominant planning imaginaries and paradigms. Planning as magma means to elucidate values, goals, and orientations, to conceive inclusive, post-colonial, feminist, post-human imaginary significations, and to constitute methodologies, epistemologies, policies, and practices, opening up a horizon of alternatives toward sustainability and justice.

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