

Reconsidering the Necessity of Schooling: Castoriadian Ontology and the Critique of the Instituted Educational Imaginary

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Abstract

This article critically examines the formal representation of the school institution, drawing on Castoriadian ontology to reconsider the meaning of the value attributed to it as universally necessary and useful. In particular, it argues that this conception is neither a natural nor a purely rational construction in the context of functionalism or social constructionism, but rather a product of the instituted educational imaginary. Language plays a dual role in this process. On the one hand, its identitary dimension functions as a code, reinforcing the fixed meaning of the term “school.” On the other hand, as a magma of social imaginary significations, language also reveals that schooling is not an immutable reality but rather an imaginary institution open to radical reconstruction. Referring to common arguments in favor of justifying the inherent value, and therefore compulsivity of schooling, we critically examine them through the lens of Castoriadian ontology to open up new, alternative educational forms to the accepted ones. In conclusion, this article proposes that if we understand human beings not as purely rational entities but as imaginative creators of their institutions, we can begin to dismantle the transcendent or idolatrous status of schooling. By

applying Castoriadian ontology to educational theory, this paper offers a novel ontological critique of schooling's taken-for-granted necessity, revealing how language, imagination, and social creation can reconstitute the very meaning of education beyond institutional closure.

Keywords: *Castoriadis, imaginary, schooling, ontology, necessity*

Introduction

This article does not advance a political program, policy proposal, or institutional blueprint. Its contribution is strictly ontological: to denaturalize schooling as a taken for granted institution by situating it within the Castoriadian imaginary. Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997), was a 20th-century political philosopher best known for his concept of autonomy and his influential book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Castoriadis's philosophy is dominated by terms such as radical imagination, social imaginary, instituted and instituting society, social imaginary significations, magma, and identity logic. Using these terms, our purpose is to see how Castoriadis's thought can contribute to a deeper, ontological reinterpretation of school. To our knowledge, existing research has not utilized Castoriadian thought to question the deeper ontological value of the school institution as necessary and useful. Castoriadis has only spoken periodically about education and *paideia*, not about schooling. “[H]e does not talk about *any* kind of education – such as the more restricted (heteronomous) notion of schooling – but education in an ideal sense, as 'true' or 'non-mutilating' education” (Straume, 2014, p. 151). Most research limits Castoriadian contribution to educational themes of reflectivity, democratic citizenship, and autonomy (see Straume, 2013, 2014, 2015; Wustefeld, 2018). Modern thinkers such as Masschelein and Simons (2010, p. 673) remark that schools exist in every culture and era. They argue that schools are a historical

construct and so could disappear or be reimagined (Masschelein & Simons, 2013, p. 10).

However, most schooling criticisms avoid the real questions. Castoriadis views change ontologically, involving social self-institution. School criticism and change are not just technical or instrumental issues of changing aims and values. They are not either a political or ideological theme, as approached by some researchers (see Giroux, 1981; Leonardo, 2003). Previous critiques do not explain on a deeper ontological level how schools are socially constructed. Castoriadis's main contribution was to overcome reductive, identitary thinking that assigns the variation of institutions to various sources of meaning (e.g., Reason, God, Nature). Castoriadis opposed this ensidic (identitary) ontology that is associated to the theories of functionalism and structuralism, which prior schooling criticisms (e.g., deschooling, critical pedagogy, post-structuralism) did not confront substantially. Saying that school is a social creation does not imply that citizens will try to change it and free themselves from the ontology of determination: the identitary logic. As Castoriadis (2003, pp. 15-16) states, institutions are indeed a social creation, but people don't recognize this ability in themselves.

Castoriadis's thought, through his magmatic ontology, shows how the ontological arbitrariness of social institutions, especially schools, is constructed. Castoriadian thinking is able to free us from inertia to envision new educational paths. In this direction, an ontology of language as magma could play a significant role. This analysis contributes to critical educational theory by unsettling the ontological self-evidence of schooling, without claiming a direct pathway from theory to institutional change. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates within cultural and critical studies of schooling concerning institutional naturalization, neoliberal closure and the limits of reform. Based on the previous discussion, we have the following research questions:

A) How does identitary logic shape the idea that schooling is still natural and necessary through functionalist and structuralist thought?

B) How does viewing language as magma help us overcome the identitary perception of schooling?

C) How does identitary logic manifest in schooling frameworks through common-thought arguments and what would it mean to rethink the possibility of a different educational imaginary once schooling is no longer treated as ontologically necessary?

An integrative literature review will be used as a methodology, as the aim is to identify relationships and gaps in the existing literature and to create new interpretations of a topic. This methodology enables a critical and creative synthesis of research to promote new approaches or aspects of a topic (Torraco, 2005). In fact, it can expand theory and contribute to the policy and practice of the field (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

This paper is divided into four sections: In the first section, we clarify and briefly present some basic key terms of Castoriadis's ontology. In the second section, we answer the first research question. We discuss the ontological construction of schooling with reference to structuralism and functionalism, ensuring its social perpetuation within identitary logic. Although these concepts were dominant in the time of Castoriadis, our position is that they are still constructing schooling as an identitary institution, which means an idealized, naturalized, and inviolable structure. In the third section, we will examine how language as an institution justifies and perpetuates schooling and how we can break free from this perception. Thus, the second research question is addressed. The last section answers the third research question by challenging some common arguments of identitary logic and discussing its manifestations for the articulation of a new educational imaginary. This paper contributes to the philosophy of education by offering an ontological reinterpretation of

schooling through the Castoriadian concepts of identitary logic, magma, and the instituting imaginary.

1. Castoriadis's key ontological concepts

Identitary logic

Mathematics expresses the identitary logic, which Castoriadis accuses of deterministically and ineffectively explaining the social historical world and social phenomena (see Castoriadis, 1984, pp. 204-209), as a logic of non-contradiction and axioms. Castoriadis (1984, pp. 208-209) identifies logical contradictions and circularity in mathematics, starting with Cantor's definition of a set (see Castoriadis, 1984, p. 208). Identitary (formal) logic holds that everything can be comprehended by describing all its features and relationships. For example, to fully describe and define a table, we must first list its properties (e.g., four legs, wood, specified dimensions). We should refer to its relationships with other things (e.g. it has chairs surrounding it, it sits on the floor). The identitary logic maintains that we know an item fully if we know all its properties and relations, which are clearly defined, non-contradictory, and distinct. In short, identitary logic constructs being as determined (see Klooger, 2014).

Furthermore, identitary (ensidic logic) is defined by the principle of identity: “If (x) is identical to (y) , then any property (F) that holds for (x) also holds for (y) ”. Formally: $\forall x \forall y (x = y \supset (Fx \equiv Fy))$. In functionalism, the principle of identity is expressed like this: each element x is identified with the function it performs; institution x expresses function y ; and if x maintains the stability of the system, its essence is exhausted in this role. In structuralism, the logic of identity depends on the identification of an element within the system and its position in relation to other elements. If x has a position in the structure, its identity does not arise from itself but is relational

and negative (it is not y). In both of these theories, if one knows y (the structure or functionality), he also knows x. **The belief that reality can be analysed into distinct mathematical elements bound by fixed laws constitutes the essence of identitary logic. Before we go any further, we should have in mind that structuralism and functionalism are historical manifestations of identitary logic, but they are not identical to the logic itself. The latter is not limited to these theories (e.g., Marxist theories may also contain such elements).**

Basic theories based on identitary logic

1. Functionalism: Society is a system that meets basic human needs.
2. Structuralism: Society is a structure built on fixed rules and categories.

In functionalism, society is constituted and reconstructed through its fragmentation into fully defined subsystems that meet unaltered biological needs (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 170-171, 1997b, pp. 199-201). **Functionalism embodies the identitary logic by considering society as a self-regulating system, in which each element has a specific utility or function for the maintenance of the whole.** In structuralism, varied social forms come from a rational starting point of invariant, given conditions and finite elements (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 171-183, 1997b, pp. 200-212; 2003, pp. 183-184). **From the perspective of formal philosophy, structuralism is focused on the logical relationships between things, and the creation of the new is understood as a recombination of pre-existing elements.** Following Castoriadis (1987), we acknowledge that while structuralisms rely on binary oppositions, their content is not necessarily eternally given (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 1966). In short, both theories serve as examples of the application of the logic of determination, but they fail to explain the ontological primary source that creates the logical structures and forms themselves. For Castoriadis, identitary logic fails to examine how individuals, their needs, and social significations are culturally and historically created.

Magma

Castoriadis criticizes structuralism and functionalism and presents his own magmatic ontology. Structure and stability are necessary prerequisites for social creation (see about magmas, Castoriadis, 1997b, pp. 290-310; Klooger, 2009, pp. 179-196; Rosengren, 2014). Thereby, identitary logic remains essential for social institutionalization (Castoriadis, 1984, pp. 209-211, 1987, pp. 227-229, 1997a, p. 11). Even though magmatic logic incorporates identitary traits, it goes beyond them. Castoriadis defines magma in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*:

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. (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 343)

Magma disengages social reality from the logic of ensembles. Reality cannot be reduced to a mathematical set. No matter how much one subtracts or structures distinct elements logically, magmatic logic always preserves something.

Castoriadis referred to dreams to demonstrate this magmatic element.

Enumerating the parts of a dream, the processes followed, and the significations produced is impossible (Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 321-322). Thus, for Castoriadis, magma becomes the primary, unformed, and creative source of the social imaginary, from which societies create their institutions, codes, etc.

Radical imaginary: Radical imagination and social imaginary

According to the French-Greek philosopher, the radical imaginary is a creative source of the emergence of new forms at both individual/psychic and social levels. Castoriadis has shown that the radical imaginary is the vital capacity of society to create its institutions and significations. In Castoriadis, imagination is transformed into the imaginary, and meaning gains a socially constitutive

dimension as signification. The Castoriadian imaginary does not have a simple imitative role but a creative one.

Radical imaginary has two poles: the radical imagination of the psyche and the social imaginary. Both are expressions of the radical imaginary, which, as Castoriadis explains in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (p. 369), “exists as the social-historical and as psyche/soma.” Social imaginary is the collective creation of shared significations that shape and orient the framework of a society. Radical imagination is the personal form of creation of meanings by the psyche that goes beyond functionality and rationality, as an autonomization of imagination is observed (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 314-315, 1997a, pp. 150-151; Klooger, 2009, pp. 113-116). The human psyche is not reduced to a reflection of the social world (see Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 151).

Instituted vs. Instituting

To understand these better, we must note that the social imaginary is divided into the instituted and the instituting. The instituted social imaginary is the established ‘natural’ mode of things in a given social framework. It is the institutionalized set of values, norms, purposes, and feelings of a given society. The instituting social imaginary is the constantly emerging set of values, norms, and institutions that are created over time, transforming the given, common world (*kosmos koinos*) (see further Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 369-373; 1988, pp. 29-36; 1991, pp. 145-146, 150-153). Thus, through instituting society, the instituted one becomes perpetual self-alteration (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 371).

Social Imaginary Significations

Social imaginary significations shape society’s main values, feelings, and goals (Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 7). These significations are embodied in institutions and cannot be justified or logically undone. They can be God, taboo, sin, etc. (Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 7). They are social, like language, because they are

universal and widely accessible. They are magma because their meaning is untraceable, having a non-strictly defined element. “A signification is indefinitely determinable (and the 'indefinitely' is obviously essential) without thereby being determined” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 346). Castoriadis summarized these as follows:

“I call these significations imaginary because they do not correspond to, or are not exhausted by, references to “rational” or “real” elements and because it is through a *creation* that they are posited. And I call them social because they are and they exist only if they are instituted and shared by an impersonal, anonymous collective.” (Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 8)

For Castoriadis, society is always self-creation and self-alteration, since society itself determines its dominant imaginary significations (see Castoriadis, 1987, p. 372). “Society is self-creation deployed as history” (Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 13). That is why he uses the term social-historical many times. To show this possibility of change and self-alteration of the social world. Nevertheless, according to the philosopher himself, the majority of societies have been institutionalized on the basis of heteronomy and a closure of signification (see Castoriadis, 1991, p. 146, 2003, p. 193). This means the exclusive identification of the existent with what it is institutionalized as valid and pre-existent, and thus its truth is also ensured (Castoriadis, 2003, p. 193). As we will see in the next section, this also applies to schooling.

Before we proceed to our analysis, we should clarify that any possible rupture into a schooling framework could not happen simply by constructing a different ontology. Although a new magmatic ontology could open paths for educational experimentation, the latter cannot be achieved, of course, without political struggles in the social-historical field. So, we do not attempt to perform here what Honneth (1986) accused Castoriadis of doing, to make a revolutionary project feasible just by providing a new ontology. The answer to the institutional transformation is political, but it cannot be conceived properly as a

realistic way without understanding the underlying magmatic ontology that underpins the social-historical. Nevertheless, research in the history of education and comparative education could argue that Castoriadis's perspective is reductive, since schools are historically contingent, contested, and transient institutions. The transition, for example, from a school of strict physical discipline to a student-centred one is a significant change. Castoriadis, however, struggles to explain how schools can change from within and tends to view any educational reform and the emergence of a new type of school as merely a change in form rather than in essence.

For Castoriadis, this means that if a new school model (e.g., Summerhill) or a new method (the shift to student-centred teaching) continues to produce students for the more effective or smoother integration of the individual into the capitalist system or the dominant reality, then the school remains, in essence, heteronomous. In this regard, it has a tendency to oversimplify educational practice and change, viewing them either as a project of autonomy or as generalized heteronomy, thereby underestimating the small changes that can gradually inspire greater demands (e.g., inclusion). Castoriadis's imaginary constitutes an ungrounded, singular and exclusive source for explaining social creativity, taking a metaphysical turn (Honneth, 1986). Thus, he seems to overlook social complexity, ignoring what Honneth (1995) pointed out about the conflicts of recognition that take place in the intersubjective field.

Therefore, the change in education does not occur merely because we imagined something new through magmatic processes of radical imaginary, but through struggles for recognition in order to re-claim the rights of the educational community. In these terms, Honneth's (1995) contribution on this subject is considered crucial.

2. The ontological construction of schooling within identitary logic: Structuralism and Functionalism

In this section we are trying to show how schooling is still perpetuated in our day as natural and necessary through the theories of functionalism and structuralism. Based on Castoriadis's ontology, we can challenge the belief that schools are inherently beneficial and necessary, a belief so strong that challenging it feels like a scandal. Many researchers have criticized schooling (see, for example, Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2025; Gatto, 1994; Harber, 2004, 2008, 2021; Hargreaves, 2019; Kleinig, 1981; Krimerman, 2010; Lees, 2013, 2014; Osborne, 2008). The construction of schooling's necessity, though, is a product of identitary logic. The ontological presuppositions of this logic made explicit by Cantor's definition of a set are that all existing things are *determinable* (see Castoriadis, 1984, pp. 209-210). When applied to schooling, identitary logic presents it as socially necessary and useful. Thus, this conceptualization precludes other school forms, and reforms occur within a fixed ontological framework. Its functionality lies in the fact that it legitimizes and rationalizes the present social reality. Two central imaginary significations sustain this belief: a) schooling as a pregiven institution, a reasonable subsystem of each society. Here, structures reoccur across time. This is the foundation of schooling based on structuralism. b) Schooling as an institution for fulfilling necessary functions for society's reproduction. Functionalism holds this idea. Next, we will analyze each theory and see why identitary logic dominates even today, despite previous criticisms of schooling (see introduction).

On the one hand, functionalism holds that obligatory schooling implies a deficit: the inherent vulnerability of the child as an imperfect social being.

When we talk about hyperorganism, we are dealing with interdependent functions for the fulfillment of a purpose, which "(...) is the conservation and the reproduction of the same, the affirmation of the permanence across time and

accidents of the essence, *eidos* (aspect/species)” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 179). Schooling is constructed here as necessary because it fulfills a specific functionality that is perpetuated at varying levels across times (e.g., childcare, socialization, training of the workforce). On the other hand, structuralism views the emergence of schooling dialectically as a presupposed possibility that has always existed and is now realized in a society-superstructure. In structuralist logic, the new is constructed through identitary procedures (even if they are called dialectical) and “(...) the totality of the process is only the exposing of the necessarily realized virtualities inherent in a primordial principle (...)”, present throughout history (Castoriadis, 1987, p.173). In addition, as Castoriadis (1987, p. 173) states, “(...) rational significations can and must be deduced or produced on the basis of other rational significations.” In light of structuralism, then, the rationality of the capitalist system and/or state’s officials justifies accordingly schooling and its role to implement its various rational tasks (e.g. childcare, creation of national self/identity). Furthermore, for social structuralism, oppositional pairs such as

(...) high and low, dry and wet, seem self-evident (...), simply found there by humans, stones of meaning scattered on the Earth since the origins, (...) among which each society selects a few (...) provided that it can choose elements only by pairs of opposites and that the choice of certain pairs leads to or excludes the choice of others. (Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 171-172)

In simple terms, social structuralism reduces all variation to a connection/synthesis of different elements based on the concept of contrast. For example, a structuralist could argue that even Summerhill preserves and transforms elements and structures of Western education, such as an organized space, the child-adult distinction, and is organized around oppositions such as freedom-authority, oppression-autonomy. Functionalism would argue that this alternative model emerged as a result of new social needs or as a more effective means of promoting functions not served by the traditional school, because, for

example, society itself has changed (e.g., industrialization) and thus new institutions are required to ensure its organizational balance. However, in the case of a new educational transformation, structuralism cannot explain a change—such as granting freedom to students as a fundamental new meaning—other than as an exception within an existing system of structures.

Functionalism, in turn, by conceptualizing every rupture as a requirement of social adaptability and coherence, overlooks the fact that new institutions may begin as ideas that seem irrational for their time (e.g., education of the commons, see the next section).

Thus, although there have been historical moments of school transformation and schools may be understood as socially constructed, this does not mean, from a Castoriadian perspective, that the state-education or schooling-education pair does not generally remain indissoluble. This conception constitutes the fundamental model for the organization of educational life, and any attempt to create alternative educational institutions is the exception rather than the rule for both of these theories. If we do not transcend identitary logic, these perceptions will continue to dominate people's minds. Educational reform is about meaningfulness and how to implement meaningful and usable actions (see Fullan, 2016). However, most change is limited to innovation: changing teaching strategies, materials, and beliefs within identitary logic. It is not about changing 'natural' attitudes and feelings by separating schooling from education.

Modern capitalist societies remain heteronomous; thus, they are restrained toward the new (see Castoriadis, 1991, p. 146, 2003, p. 193). Castoriadis (1997b, p. 268) sums up this heteronomous attitude: "our view of the world is the only meaningful one, the 'others' are bizarre, inferior, perverse, evil, or unfaithful." Thus, schools could exist only under neoliberal, capitalistic contexts. Hence, their instrumental dimension, which Castoriadis remarked (1997b, p. 260), is perpetuated. The dominant discourse today is about

enhancing efficiency, competitiveness, and accountability (see Ball, 2016; Baltodano, 2023). Despite attempts to challenge this reality (see Tett & Hamilton, 2019), further ontological support is needed. This implies that creativity and imagination are essential aspects of humans. Criticizing schooling within identitary logic may indeed lead to certain changes, through grey areas, however it is doubtful whether it will fundamentally change it as a primarily heteronomous institution (this position is open to criticism; see above). As Castoriadis remarks:

“With logic and rationality one can go as far as virtual infinity (...); one can draw out, ad infinitum, the consequences of *already posited* axioms; but neither logic nor rationality will ever allow one to imagine a new axiom. “ (Castoriadis, 2003, p. 189)

So, even though alternative educational sites do exist and could play a crucial role for marginalized young students (see McGregor & Mills, 2012), it seems that they will remain few in number and will be treated with distrust from the masses. People often use widely acceptable arguments, based on the above two theories of identitary logic, to justify the current form and role of schooling as interrelated with education. This is why past critiques against schooling have not achieved a substantial change over conventional mainstream schools (schooling), which are still treated as the most archetypal and proper places for learning across many countries. Any other educational institutions/centres that have been introduced throughout history remain underdeveloped, marginalized, or are reserved for a few (e.g. Quaker, Waldorf, Sudbury-democratic schools). Even if hybrid educational institutions were implemented (combining schooling with non-schooling practices), as a manifestation of an interstitial transformation (in Wright’s terms, see 2010), people imbued with identitary logic would tend to treat them as impossible projects that are doomed to failure and capitalism will absorb them in the long term. Thus, change is limited to a defined range of capabilities. As Castoriadis (2003, p. 185) clarified, “The

expression *possible* has meaning only within a system of well-specified determinations. Is the *Fifth Symphony* possible at the moment of the Big Bang? Either the question has no meaning or, if it does, the sole response is: It is impossible.” To go beyond identitary logic that justifies schooling systems across times, we turn to the importance of language in Castoriadian ontology.

3. Overcoming the identitary dimension of language: understanding language as magma to transcend schooling

In this section, we will explore how the unique Castoriadian understanding of language as magma could help us to conceptually loosen the closure that fixes schooling to a single institutional form. We should clarify at this point that magma is not deducible to language, and any imaginary -including a schooling one- is not simply ontological, but of course a part of social-historical world. Thus, we do not argue that a different ontology of language alone could alter schooling’s necessity. The transformation is a political process that could be intensified although if people understand that a different world is indeed achievable. A political praxis cannot be deduced from ontology in a deterministic way. Political transformations are not the outcome of laws of being and ontological structures. Castoriadis’s ontology does not provide a programme for institutional transformation. Rather, it renders visible the contingency of what appears necessary, thereby reopening the field of the thinkable within the social-historical.

Having clarified these, language is understood as an identitary code based on a bi-univocal relationship between the signifier (the word or phrase) and the signified (what is named) (Castoriadis, 1987). That said, we argue that a univocal relationship is built around the signifier school, because it exclusively refers to a formal state structure with a specified architecture (signified).

Language as an identitary code encloses the meaning of schooling. Therefore,

the meaning of the word ‘school’ is related to a series of strictly defined and timeless functions, which are the most prevalent socially. For example, one typically associates ‘school’ with exams, assignments, timetables, curricula, and rules, as something natural and unchanged. Identitary logic exhausts the meaning of school in these traits, overlooking the underlying schooling’s functionality in constructing this reality. But how does this occur?

“Set-theoretical logic of necessity employs universal categories and treats the universal as a 'strong' determination of anything that is, or can be thought or said” (Castoriadis, 1984, p. 217). The existent is thus perceived as real, meaningful, and valid universally (see Castoriadis, 1984, pp. 217-218).

Language plays a crucial role here, not merely through its identitary dimension, but mainly through the process of sublimation and socialization of the psychic unit (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 311-320). Thus, socialization through language constructs schooling as an inevitable institution (see on socialization, Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 300-320, 2003, p. 24).

Socialization and language’s identitary dimension convey meanings that are not neutral. Language has both a logical and creative role. It helps us understand the world in common ways, but it also allows societies to create new meanings and institutions (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 237-244). For Castoriadis, language as magma is creative, not a result of rational cooperation. It’s called magma because meaning can never be reconstructed reductively/deductively, ideally, and fully (e.g., in the context of the unconscious, dream) (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 321-322). An individual or individuals cannot create a sign because the individual is already a social institution, “underivable from the psyche in itself as such” (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 247). Language defines how a social object like schooling is imagined and conceived for individuals. For Castoriadis, the signitive relation itself is determined by the social imaginary and its instituting activity (Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 245-247). So, the imaginary element mediates language to show that the instituting social imaginary creates every social form.

In socio-historical phenomena, a notion's meaning may include new imaginary significations that did not exist previously. For example, in the Middle Ages, schools were spaces reserved for a few social strata.

Hence, Castoriadis's thought shows that social imaginary significations are arbitrary. This means that judgement of a social object is formed based on the instituted social imaginary. To be structured as a sign, the school figure must be schematized as a representation. Yet, the representation of the word school is signified as a social representation through the social imaginary, which posits school as an institutionalized signitive co-belonging. Meaning is not attached to an object. "[T]he sign *qua* sign can exist only as an instituted figure, a form-norm, a creation of the social imaginary" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 252). Signitive co-belonging, the relationship between an object and a sign, is neither a logical nor a real relation. It can only be instituted as social (Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 250-251). In short, naming as a social institution establishes social reality before rational or theoretical elaboration occurs (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 246-247). But how does Castoriadis differ from other theorists of language?

According to Szkudlarek (2017), educational theories are Laclau-like public and political discourses that form social reality and identities. Language here is discourse, which creates institutions and meanings that can be interpreted differently depending on political hegemony. However, language in Castoriadis produces new signifiers, not just a rearrangement and redistribution of them as Laclau (2005) argues (see about empty signifiers, Laclau, 2005, pp. 69-72, pp. 96-98, pp. 104-105, p. 162). These are radical creations of new significations through language (*ex nihilo* but not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*; see Castoriadis, 1997b, p. 305, pp. 321-322, pp. 333-336); not just original articulation of meaning or a new hegemonic discourse through dislocations (Laclau, 1990, pp. 38-41) and articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. 105-114). This means that dislocations or a structuring discourse cannot explain properly the schooling's emergence and meaning. It is a radical imaginary creation that cannot be

explained, abolishing the cause-effect relationship. It is a self-cause for Castoriadis.

Thus, despite the primacy of critical discourse analysis in education (see Fairclough, 2013, pp. 193-202; Gee, 2008, pp. 130-149), the ontological implications of language as magma remain unexplored. Educational research often uses Foucault's theory to show the importance of discourse in educational contexts (see, for example, Ball, 1990; Walshaw, 2007, pp. 39-78). However, creating new discourses requires more than rearranging power and knowledge. Castoriadis's view of language as magma constructs the form of discourses; the imaginary precedes other frameworks (social, semantic, etc.). Furthermore, important research has examined how language shapes identities, reproducing power relations (see Bernstein, 2003; Bourdieu, 1991), but like critical pedagogy (see Freire, 2000, pp. 110-124, pp. 128-129, p. 137, pp. 167-183; Giroux, 1983, pp. 226-231) through dialogue and critical literacy, it does not perceive language in a radically creative way. Ricoeur too does not accept radical creativity in language (see Ricoeur & Castoriadis, 2017). Saussure (2013, pp. 78-80) was the first to emphasize the arbitrariness of the signitive relationship (signifier-signified). He aimed to structure language as a system of differences with conventional relations within it. Nonetheless, Castoriadis does not see this relationship as logical or as a simple symbolic correspondence. The imaginary precedes language and the symbolic (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 127-128). So, to our knowledge, no one approached Castoriadis's position: through the magmatic element of language, new meanings can emerge. Thus, schools could be defined as an online learning environment, a space for technological, environmental, or civic education, or a creative learning community, with different relationships and roles between students and teachers (education of the commons).

To be more specific, the education of the commons is based on principles such as experimentation, non-hierarchy, openness, peer-to-peer learning, equality,

and the promotion of solidarity, and thus aligns with Castoriadis's thought, since ultimately the education of the commons advocates autonomy as the highest aspiration of the educational community beyond the logic of profit or interventionism, both at the private and state levels.¹ In short, the education of the commons promotes the Castoriadian ideal of self-governance, while simultaneously reinforcing the imaginative element (radical imaginary), as knowledge is not treated as a fixed commodity to be consumed but as a common good that is constantly co-created.

The above examples are not prescriptions but illustrations of the ontological openness of the signification 'school' once it is detached from identity necessity. Of course, these examples are not immune to critique. For example, the imaginary representations of the school as an online learning community or digitally mediated education are likely to entail the closure of the educational imaginary, entrapping it to the capitalist imaginary. From a Castoriadian perspective, one could therefore argue that the transformation of education is not enough; rather, what is needed is the social self-constitution of society beyond the logic of profit and privatization. If this is not challenged, then the digital mediation of education may reinforce heteronomy, in the sense that rather than fostering critical thinking, it entrenches the student in an instrumental view of the educational process. From a Castoriadian point of view, then, there is a risk of an emerging imaginary of productivity, which consists of learning quickly and as much as possible with the least mental effort. This means promoting through technology the most efficient consumption of information to make the student's entry into the labor market as effective as possible. Illich (1971) had already pointed out the danger that technology could become counter-productive, insofar as it could subordinate the student to a technocratic system of bureaucracy and control. This amounts to a perpetual mechanism of supervision and assessment that determines which values become accepted. Nevertheless, the main point is that these examples-

significations cannot be foreseen, justified, or explained by identitary logic but are creations of the social imaginary.

Yet, our present reality has been built on the basis of an enclosed, identitary social understanding that is expressed through language. Clarifying this, the following point is worth noting. Commenting on the position of some critics of Illich, Piveteau (1974, p. 396) highlights that when reforms preserve the name of ‘school’ they are accepted. However, as soon as they seek to eliminate school through institutions that no longer bear this name (school), they are equated with dissolution. Consequently, the instituted educational imaginary, interwoven with the formal rationality of the identitary logic and with historical laws, guarantees the perpetuation of schooling. This means that schooling’s different historical forms are reproduced as an example or variation of a given form, essence or as the creation of a new ontological kind (e.g. in the sense of innovation but not of a radically, irreducibly original form, which Castoriadis calls as *other*, *eteron* in Greek). Given this reality, it is even more necessary to challenge the common-thought arguments that are formulated in defense of identitary logic that permeates schooling. This issue will be analysed in the next section, amongst others.

4. Challenging the perpetuation of schooling: the consequences of identitary logic and a new instituting educational imaginary

The discussion that follows should be read as a conceptual exploration of imaginaries, not as a proposal for institutional reform or political strategy. In this section, we refute some arguments for the defense of schooling that are formulated from an identitary point of view, and we examine how this logic is reflected in educational frameworks. Next, we examine the implications of a new educational imaginary. As we have argued, school is not a self-existent entity but a product of the instituted social imaginary, which constructs its

compatible anthropological types. This process happens for Castoriadis because institutions are embedded in the formation of social individuals who have no other choice than reproducing the institutions (see Castoriadis, 1997a, pp.6-7). Therefore, as Castoriadis argues (1997a, pp. 6-7), do not wonder why people do not consider it appropriate to steal, even though they may be poor. By analogy, we could ask: Is it any surprise why teachers, but especially students, despite their dissatisfaction with educational policies and teaching practices, are not fervently opposed to schooling? Furthermore, why are they not opposed to the narrative of social mobility and equal opportunities that schooling guarantees, justifying its usefulness? (see for a critique Iannelli, 2013).

Despite that, the imaginary investment of schooling as necessary/useful persists. It is said that regardless of the problems it may reproduce (e.g., class stratification, symbolic violence), it provides a necessary level of literacy and thus prevents exclusion, fulfilling the right to public and free education.

However, taking for granted the existence of social exclusion and the imaginary invested role of school to deal with it (but not to eliminate it), schooling is constructed as the most efficient form to alleviate this. Regarding this functionality, it could be said, for example, from a Marxist perspective, that despite the acquisition of the required skills by individuals through education, unemployment is an inherent element of capitalism; Over-supply of labour, wage control, and thus poverty and consequently social exclusion is maintained/recurring or should be reproduced (see for these issues, Colombini, 2020; Roy, 2021). Furthermore, many studies have challenged the compulsivity of school, referring to the inadequacy of arguments about children's right to be educated, children's immaturity, and the instrumental functionality (means to an end) of the school (socialization, autonomy) (see Gaviria, 2022; Haydon, 1998; Krimerman, 2010).

Yet, pragmatism and identitary logic coexist: parents are working, so children must be in a safe learning and socializing environment. But these tasks

(socialization, childcare) were implemented in different ways across history, and the answer to why is not the fulfillment of different biological needs. Social institutions transcend the merely biological, as needs are transformed into social ones (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 170-183). Even if we assume that an institution performs a particular biological function, the question arises why in this form and not another, or one of the historically offered range of institutions. There is always an indeterminate element that cannot be interpreted through functionalism (see further Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 170-183). Castoriadis (1987, p. 110) referred to alienation (*xenosis* in Greek) to describe the autonomy of the - imaginative element- of the institution and its dominance over society, as it is not recognized as a result of the legislative instituting activity of a given society.

Also, understanding schools a) ideologically (e.g. liberalism vs socialism) or b) as spaces of resistance and power apparatus/symbolic violence (the core of post-structuralist critique) either maintains the coexistence of education with schooling (a) or cannot effectively disengage the one from another (b). Of course, this does not mean that schools promote the one functionality instead of the other. These understandings of the school are dialectical, meaning that education is both viewed as a public good aiming to foster equality, critical thinking, and social transformation, among other things, whilst still actually serving to reproduce social hierarchies by failing to dismantle class and other distinctions.

In the first case (schooling as an ideological theme), children must attend school in order to learn and escape poverty. This is the socialist perspective. At the same time, the liberal perspective establishes learning/education as a fundamental right of every human being. So, based on these two ideological perspectives, education should be compulsory, for everyone, and free. The mistake, however, is that schooling is equated with education. This equation is based to identitary logic, which perceives everything that is real as necessarily

valid and true. So, any other view of disconnecting education from schooling is just irrational, lacks cohesion, and is essentially antihumanitarian.

Regarding the second case (post-structuralism), Francis and Mills (2012) correctly argue, referring to Foucault and Bentham's *Panopticon*, that schooling is damaging because it reproduces socioeconomic inequality by being inherently embedded in practices and systems of surveillance, hierarchy, and exclusion. The authors leave open the question of mandatory attendance (as an aspect of schooling) and their purpose is to construct new manifestations of schooling/educational communities, less hierarchical and harmful, more open to the community, and more desirable to both students and teachers. However, the alternative representations of schooling that they propose (changing the power apparatus mechanism) through curriculum reforms, minimizing hierarchy, and increasing student participation in what they learn and how they are assessed (Francis & Mills, 2012) cannot be effectively implemented and expanded truly (not as simple student-centered approach) unless the ontological necessity of schooling is itself questioned by educational administrators and societies in general.

Until this time, identitary logic is maintained and is manifested in various forms. One of them is the mandatory attendance and therefore the level of disengagement of education from schooling. As has been noticed so far, where attendance is optional and schooling framework is questioned, it is related to private schools (e.g. Summerhill) and parental preferences of elite minorities. But, for the majority of the population, it is unthinkable to change the form and hours of attendance (e.g., in the afternoon) in order to create new public learning centers with practices unrelated to schooling (e.g. no grades, no specific attendance times). This attitude has nothing to do with the economic factor or practical matters (e.g. working parents); this is secondary. Instead, this dominant attitude is the outcome of a particular social imaginary signification

that guides parents' conceptions of the necessity and usefulness of current school institutions.

Concerning this reality, Castoriadis (2003, p. 334) points out that in heteronomous societies, all questions a society formulates have an answer within its imaginary significations, and those that are not formulated are not forbidden but unthinkable for its citizens. Yet, supporters of schooling disregard this, attributing an instrumental and functional dimension to schools for achieving a broader purpose: either autonomy (Barrow, 2014; Callan, 1988) or critical awareness (see Chamberlin, 2017). It is said, for example, that mandatory schooling should be maintained to protect children from the one-sided views of their parents or any propagandistic speaker in general (Chamberlin, 2017, p. 89). Even if this is one of schooling's functions, it does not mean that schooling's taken for granted status should be maintained and not altered with a different educational institution. For this purpose, supervisory mechanisms and/or educational institutions could be created to oversee situations where parents undermine or fail to promote the well-being of their children (e.g. through nationalistic propaganda, unhealthy environment). As Mills and McGregor (2010) propose, every educational institution (school in the common sense) should be transformed to full service. This means that these institutions should help students (who may be parents) resolve issues relating to homelessness, to provide food, creches, job opportunities, counselling services and social agencies for students who have legal and financial difficulties (see further Mills & McGregor, 2010). But even if attendance is not mandatory, this does not imply that new or current institutions, including educational ones, could not play that supervisory role. So, it is made clear that schooling's compulsory status could be overcome and educational functioning is not limited to a presupposed set of capabilities. Schooling's necessity is an imaginary signification, and as such it could be ruptured and replaced with new institutional forms. In this direction, Van dermijnsbrugge (2024) stated that the

radical imaginary could create new social forms beyond the dipole of hope and despair, a dipole which, in our reading, fails to see education as independent of schooling.

However, this dipole is reflected, as we have seen, within and through identitary logic, which has disastrous educational consequences. Schools operating within identitary logic are self-referential systems. This means that they give great value to specific practices that are not criticized (e.g., sacred value to traditional goals, emphasis on student obedience, grading). The logic of these schools is enclosed, and the educational process becomes mechanistic. The traditional teaching method is not disputed. It is considered effective and timeless (see behaviorism), regardless of students' needs. Massive learning and the idea of an average student are dominant. Therefore, learning outcomes are predetermined, and there is a lack of participation in decision-making. In short, an identitary closure permeates schools that is closely intertwined with accountability regimes, standardization, and performativity culture. For human beings who have been constituted through this closure, it is extremely absurd (but not impossible) to question both the necessity and utility that the instituted imaginary places on schooling and its wandering functions-significations. Nevertheless, this predicament could be ruptured if we understand humans' inherent irrationality and their unlimited ontological capacity to establish new significations through imagination. Thus, the classical distinction between man and animal based on rationality must be abolished, since, for Castoriadis (1987), human meaning is not rational but an imaginative one. Hence, if a different conception is constructed about human nature, then perhaps the field may be opened for a new educational imaginary.

This new imaginary entails that education becomes a self-reflective process. This means that it should be able to answer students' questions about the meaning of what they learn (see Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 130) and not resort to instrumental, heteronomous, or cyclical answers: 'You learn that in order to

find a decent job,’ ‘You learn that because that is your job, to be a good student.’ The identity of the school is democratized. Students co-shape their schools. Autonomy is given to each school unit, and experimentation is pursued. Thus, despite the limitations imposed by the biological nature of the child, what makes a child is socially determined from social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 230). Therefore, educational reality is subject to criticism by everyone, including students and parents. This has direct political and moral implications. A non-hierarchical and open model of administration is adopted. Hence, we have a different conception of the school’s operations, students’ roles, their abilities, and their obligations. The new imaginary will create responsible, critical, and reflective citizens. In short, it will strengthen the autonomy of individuals to transform their society, an issue that is the extension of the Castoriadian ontology. As Suzi Adams (2014, p. 1) remarked, the *project of autonomy* is central to Cornelius Castoriadis, aiming at the radical transformation of society.

Castoriadis, speaking of the self-institutionalization of societies, was essentially calling on individuals to defend the work of their autonomy (see Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 101-109, 1997b, pp. 150-154, pp. 177-185, pp. 275-282, pp. 309-318). Pedagogy plays an important role in this direction (see Castoriadis 1997a, pp. 129-133). Within this new imaginary, students should be educated to be aware of their own mortality and that of institutions so that they do not assign them a sacred value. Only then do we speak of democracy (see Castoriadis, 1997b, p. 316). For Castoriadis, *true paideia* promotes, above all, the autonomy of individuals for the creation of a self-governing society (see Straume, 2014, pp. 146-149).

Conclusion

In summary, schooling embodies social imaginary significations that are institutionalized as socializable values. In this paper, we attempted to clarify that schooling is not a creation of a higher entity, nor should it be interpreted as the most rationally efficient and appropriate. Instead, it is an arbitrary creation of the social (radical) instituted imaginary, and based on this, we could create a new instituting educational imaginary. Previous analyses of schooling have not succeeded in substantially changing the dominant identitary logic that permeates educational reality. The position that schools are a social invention is obsolete. Therefore, we sought to extend this assumption. How is the institution ontologically created, and why is it unable to change when we know that it is human-created? For Castoriadis, institutions are creations of the social imaginary. Society is not an articulation of individuals; it does not serve timeless needs but transforms them into social ones. Institutions change and are not manifestations of an inviolable rational order or expediency. In contrast, the already socialized individual, via the radical imagination of the psyche, contributes actively to the creation of institutions through the social imaginary. Aware of these observations, we have noticed that through functionalism and structuralism, identitary logic constructs the rational and natural necessity of schooling. This addressed the first research question. Answering the second research question, language reinforces the dominant perception of school within a limited range of functions and possibilities for transformation. However, magmatic logic shows the creative role of language in social institutionalization. The school's range of meanings is constantly changing. This is why language is understood as magma. The most essential thing, though, is that Castoriadis demonstrated the institutional and political dimensions of language.

Regarding the third research question, identitary logic implies an educational practice and policy that adheres to sacred tradition and widely accepted teaching methods and practices. The strict hierarchy, demarcated roles and tasks, and an educational model of mass uniformity in the standards of behaviorism are some of the consequences of identitary logic. A new educational imaginary will be based on a more participatory model (student councils). The broader aim is to make students and citizens responsible and autonomous so they can create a self-instituting society.

Clearly, our analysis has limitations, as this approach must be communicated to the masses and resist the neoliberal schemes and identitary arguments that dominate school². Therefore, more research is needed to examine the consequences and practices of changing the identitary logic in schools. Thus far, the education of the commons is a practical paradigm that has the potential to alter this reality. This is further reinforced by the fact that several case studies have been conducted (see for example Kioupkiolis & Tselepi, 2024; Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020), confirming the emerging potential of education of the commons as a realistic prospect capable of -partially- disrupting the established reality of schooling. To imagine different forms of education, we must first move beyond the fixed way of thinking that treats schooling as natural and necessary. This allows us to explore creative, collective, and more democratic possibilities. Reimagining schooling through Castoriadian ontology means reclaiming education as a collective act of self-institution—a creative praxis of autonomy rather than an apparatus of necessity.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the education of the commons, its principles, and its practical applications (see Cappello et al., 2024).

² For a critique of liberal arguments about public schools as inadequate, regarding the liberal defense of schools as an imaginary one (with the Castoriadian sense) (see Merry and New, 2017).

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