Book Reviews


One of the essential questions that Bartsch seeks to answer in this book is why ‘the Chinese are reading about Plato in Party editorials’ while ‘universities in the US are closing down their Classics departments’ (4). The key answer laid out in the book is quite straightforward: nowadays, many Chinese intellectuals, scholars and officials tend to utilise classical Greek texts to criticise typical Western concepts such as democracy and rationality. For example, in the book we see some Chinese scholars claim that Plato’s hierarchical, ‘merit-based’ city-state (Kallipolis) is intrinsically good and that the modern West’s ‘reputation’ of it is to its detriment (14–15, 92).

Bartsch is quite modest with regard to the telos of the book, as far as it can help to open ‘the door to different studies of the interpretation of western antiquity in China’ (xiii). Were this the book’s impact, she would be quite satisfied, as she explicitly admits that her main interest ‘is in how ideologies shape readings’ (15–16).

Bartsch’s overall methodology is a sound one: ‘Looking at how Chinese scholars read the west’s classics provides the west with an opportunity to see itself in another culture’s mirror’ (8); this seems to be workable and even productive.

This book has seven chapters and an independent introduction. I would argue that the most engaging chapters are Chapter 1 (‘Jesuits and Visionaries’) and Chapter 7 (‘Thoughts for the Present’). Given Bartsch’s stated research goal, I was confused by the fact that she did not sufficiently mention the Chinese government’s established policy of encouraging ‘exchange and mutual learning’ between different civilisations. This is arguably crucial, given the fact that as early as 2014 Xi Jinping had already formally delivered these lines at UNESCO headquarters: ‘Civilizations come in different colors, and
such diversity has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations relevant and valuable’. . . Civilizations are equal, and such equality has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations possible’. . . Civilizations are inclusive, and such inclusiveness has given exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations the impetus to move forward’ (Jinping 2014). I suppose part of the reason for this lack is that Bartsch tends to posit the current Chinese regime as necessarily opposed to the concept of democracy. But in reality, China is trying to build a ‘whole-process people’s democracy’; therefore, democracy is not really a negative term per se in China nowadays.

There are some convenient and accessible first-hand materials that Bartsch thus misses. For example, in September 2021 China’s ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, explicitly said in a Carter Center conference that:

in ancient Greece, Plato believed that citizens need to receive various kinds of education at early ages. When they grow up, they would be evaluated to see if they are qualified to be politicians in the future, and those selected would be put to the bottom of society to get prepared for ruling the state. After a long time, the middle-aged candidates, who have survived all the trials and tribulations, no longer engage in empty talk, and they become determined and experienced. When they are ready, they would undertake governing positions, but they can only lead simple lives to prevent corruption.

When Bartsch talks about Socrates’ fate in China, she draws a picture of the ‘disappearance of the real Socrates’; the Chinese do not want a ‘querulous Socrates’ (162–163) who is obsessed in playing the role of ‘annoying gadfly’ (166). She also points out that oftentimes Chinese scholars tend to argue that ‘Confucian harmony improves on Socratic antagonism, and the latter’s repudiation of tradition is singled out for criticism’ (14–15, 162). However, not only is the comparison between Socrates and Confucius an old one and one that can be directly traced back to Greek writer Níkos Kazantzákis (1883–1957), who passed away more than six decades ago, but there are at least a certain number of Chinese scholars who tend to treat and interpret these two thinkers equally, paying sufficient attention to their teachings’ self-reflective aspects. For example, in 2019, during Xi Jinping’s state visit to Greece, he published an article named ‘Let Wisdom of Ancient Civilizations Shine Through the Future’ in a local Greek newspaper (Jinping 2019).
In that article, Xi explicitly cited Kazantzákis’s line: ‘Confucius and Socrates were two masks that covered the same face of human logic’ with a high level of approval and praise; he further used a positive tone to describe the fact that ‘the Republic by Plato and Politics by Aristotle are among those Greek classics that have long made names for themselves in China’. He also stated that ‘great civilizations understand each other better’ and that ‘great civilizations always stand by each other’. In 2021, Chinese art scholar Wu Weishan also cited this Kazantzákis line, and he further defined the essential similarity between Confucius and Socrates as having to do with the importance of a self-reflective character: ‘know yourself, and examine your words and actions with humbleness and awe’ (Xi 2021).

Overall, this is an interesting and well-written book, although I do not agree with Bartsch’s essential conclusion. I think there might be some potential cultural misunderstanding going on which further scholarship and engagement could explore and perhaps correct.

Haimo Li
Fudan University

References


The life and thought of Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997) may be seen as an encounter with the major philosophical figures stretching
from ancient Greece through the Kantian Enlightenment to figures like Marx, Freud, Heidegger and even Lacan.

It was in 1982–1983 that he presented a seminar called ‘The Greek Imaginary’. Here Castoriadis revealed what was important for him, namely, the intersection between ancient Greek society in its historical setting and to the birth of both democracy and philosophy. It was Greek society’s cultural expressions that gave him a clue as to the relationship between democracy and philosophical thinking. Although his focus remained on ancient Greece, his findings were accompanied by dialogue with figures like Gadamer, Popper, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Heidegger, to name but a few.

In some histories of ancient (Greek) philosophies, one gets told that philosophy developed from myths and is a more advanced form of cultural evolution. This is not the case with ‘The Greek Imaginary’. Indeed, myth takes a central role and is seen as being multi-dimensional, an ever-present reality that gives meaning and enables life and, at the same time, presents us with deeply inalienable human themes (moira, hubris, dike, adike) that accompany us in a retrieved form even today.

The mythical dimensions of our existence remain ever-present and relevant. For Castoriadis, the myths are not about the ‘gods’ and their stories as such, but about an ‘operative dynamic’ at work within them (the German concept of Wirkungsgeschichte comes to mind). This operative dynamic comprises ‘revealed’ signifiers or significations that give and hold us in meaning. These signifiers are products of the imaginary, humanity’s creative capacity for the signifiable. Faced with the need to survive, human beings institute or create the institution of society. Societies can only work if individuals within themselves, amongst themselves, and within the social body, which they are a part of, are integrated. This integration is achieved by these imaginary significations that give meaning and direction. In this way, they enable us to integrate. As he writes: ‘Beyond simple metaphor, what’s at stake is a certain, affectively colored way of investing in the world and of living it, which we, of course, observe more easily at the level of concrete individuals, but which goes beyond them and saturates, so to speak, collective attitudes’ (100). Myths carry this ‘essential meaning’; the latter is universal (from the perspective of the group) and orientates both individuals and society (140). And these myths go deeper than rationalisation and systemisation.
The title ‘The Greek Imaginary’ sets before us then what Castoriadis intends to demonstrate in these seminars. His understanding of ‘the imaginary’ refers to the fact that for him any given socio-historical context is ‘a field of creation that makes itself exist while making exist the institution and the social imaginary significations that incarnate it’ (xviii, 245–246). There is thus a dynamic at work within a socio-historical reality that creates both itself and the ratifying institutions within it by means of imaginary significations. Our world is constructed by means of socio-imaginative significations. Throughout different epochs of history, different societies created themselves by means of these imaginary significations. Ongoing relevance, or meaning, occurs when these are resignified and are taken up into a society that is ready for them. For this retrieval, the groundwork for the reception of the meaning has already had to have been prepared, or it has to have already been discussed in a way that will lead to reception. And in the development of philosophical thinking, Castoriadis demonstrates how this happens from within the democratic context of the Greek polis and the Homeric poems. This process is what he refers to as the (construction of) the social imaginary.

It is important to note that the orientating meaning was not only invented by poets and artists, it was also already given to them before they created it. Castoriadis intends to uncover this ‘already given’ dimension or presence in these seminars: ‘We will therefore attempt to go to the roots of the Greek world, i.e. to what one may call the primary grasp of the being of the world and of human existence in the world by the Greeks, prior to all philosophical or political thematization’ (3). Later he states that ‘Greek myths are true because they unveil a signification of the world that one cannot reduce to any type of rationality, a signification that constantly presents meaning over a depth of un-meaning, a depth of non-meaning, or a non-meaning as everywhere penetrating meaning’ (142). This depth of un-meaning (or non-meaning as everywhere penetrating meaning, which may be a slight irritant for the more vigorously analytical but probably not for one immersed in the world of mythology) is named elsewhere as the ‘Abyss’. Castoriadis says: ‘Shaped by the obscure and silent experience of the Abyss, they institute themselves not to be able to live, but to hide this Abyss, the Abyss external and internal to society. They do not recognize it, in part, only so as to better cover it over’ (252).
One may indeed ask where philosophy enters. It comes as one giving form but at the same time being in touch with this Abyss, or ‘nightmare of non-being’ (179), that expresses itself as a struggle between emerging oppositions, namely, reality and appearance, opinion and truth, and nature and law. These oppositions are related to each other and are enfolded within each other so that they both are and are not true oppositions. They are at ‘once opposed and indissociable’ (181). Yet they bespeak a logic within themselves that he calls an ‘ensemblist-identitarian logic’. Using Aristotle’s distinction between logos and nous, the ensemblist-identitarian logic will refer to the relation between concepts through demonstrations within a given series, but the very first and last term are not demonstratable, and it is the nous, as thinking, that can grant access to the indemonstrable principles and to ousia, as the essence of the thing (184). When Anaximander asks after the apeiron, the indeterminate, he breaks his (mythical) standing within the series because he ventures outside the direct relation to the myth as the given in order to ask for the indeterminate, the other, that ‘which is outside the terms of the series [and] by definition unrepresentable’ (184). Here is a radical break. Castoriadis, shows, however, that the Greek mythological concept of moira already affects this change in so far as the three sisters of fate act as judges outside of their ‘series’ of the gods and men who are all judged. A further break occurs in that disinterestedness appears when the sole reason for asking after the apeiron is for the sake of understanding itself. Questioning here feeds the above-mentioned oppositions between appearance and reality, opinion and truth, and nature (physis) and law (nomos). The latter gets a thorough treatment later, as he finds it operational in the second founding of philosophy as an act. Here it is an act when citizens ask: ‘What is the law, who lays it down, and by what principles?’

It is ultimately this citizens’ activity relating to nomos that Castoriadis sees humanity clothing itself in. And it is here that we find his practical interests as a thinker whose thought is oriented towards the transformation of contemporary humanity. Identifying and retrieving new significations is the way forward. Certainly, in this book we gain much to reflect on and to take further in our search for philosophy and thinking that might constitute a better humanity.

Apart from the odd terminology at times that one will either ‘love or hate’, the deep way in which the relationship between myth and
philosophy is presented is a bonus. Early on, Castoriadis asks his students what one looks for in a great work of thinking. And finally he answers:

Not for the revelation of a definitive truth. Nor for only some information that we can find there. . . . We want to see what great thinking is, how it works – but not only that. We want to understand how, all while deploying its own forms, it posits forms that are not its own and that refer to something other than itself. And that is its great difference from the work of art. But the work of thinking, when it deploys new forms, does this so that something should be thought which is exterior to itself and which at the same time is not independent of it. This is the mystery of the relationship of thinking with its object. (14)

If this is the case, one would certainly find this book to be a ‘great work of thinking’. He certainly succeeds in providing a clear view of lived reality as a myth on the one hand and thinking as giving a questioning form to this reality that he calls the Abyss on the other.

John Enslin
Arrupe Jesuit University, Zimbabwe