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ENGAGING  vulnerability

**CAN A PERSON BE
ILLEGAL?**

Refugees, Migrants
and Citizenship in Europe

Mats Rosengren

On academic responsibility,
chaos and borders

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Introduction

On October 3, 2013 occurred what was then called ‘the Lampedusa disaster’: More than 360 migrants drowned on their way to Europe, just off the coast of the small Italian island. This event triggered a desperate and precise response; a chronicle by the Swedish radio correspondent Cecilia Uddén, aired on October 15 the same year:¹

“Today it is *Eid al Adha*”, she begins, “that is the Muslim feast dedicated to celebrating Abraham (or Ibrahim) and his readiness to sacrifice his son to God.”

Uddén likes this feast, with its monotone chanting and the ritual slaughter of lambs in the streets of Cairo – but she is less convinced when it comes to the qualities of Abraham. He did not rebel against the absurd demand from God that ‘You shall, for my sake, kill your son’. Uddén argues that he could and should have chosen to act and reply like Lucifer: *Non Serviam*, I do not serve. But the blind obedience of Abraham is celebrated in Islam, in Judaism and in Christianity alike.

Now Uddén changes tone. She recounts the story, reported by the BBC, of the boat, crammed with refugees, wrecked outside of Lampedusa on October 3. She tells us about two young parents who, in the cold waters not far from the coast, were faced with a horrible choice: which of our two children can we save? The parents were rescued, but came ashore with only one cold, shivering child.

Almost at the same time, Uddén continues, just outside of Alexandria, another boat sinks and 12 refugees drown.

12 refugees – that is but a number, easily forgotten in the incessant flow of news about larger catastrophes. At least until social media in Egypt made it known that three of the victims were small girls,

three sisters: Haja, Jolie and Sama, aged 3 to 6, dressed in matching clothes – white trousers, white t-shirts, white lace socks and green jackets. Their mother Soheyr tried to save them, but she had to take care of their fourth, paralysed sister – she could not manage to keep them all afloat long enough.

The mother and the paralysed daughter are now in custody in a police station just outside of Alexandria, Uddén bitterly states. They have broken the law in trying to escape.

And she ends her chronicle thus: “Faced with a world order that forces certain parents to submit their children to ordeals and peril of death, we should all answer *Non Serviam* – I refuse to obey.”

The 2013 Lampedusa-disaster then seemed unsurpassable in its horrifying details. Today we have seen, and are still seeing, even worse atrocities in the Mediterranean as well as on mainland Europe. Facing this inhumane and brutal system of ‘management’ of refugees and migrants, Uddén’s plea for non-obedience still haunts me. But I must admit that I am as much at a loss now as I was then as to what it would mean, concretely, for academics like myself to disobey in a scientifically sustainable, politically effective and responsible way. So, in order to explore this problem, I initiated – together with Alexander Stagnell and Louise Schou Therkildsen – a workshop that offered three days of interventions, essays and artwork by international scholars, artists and activists. All contributions related, directly or indirectly, to the alarming vulnerability of immigrants and refugees in Europe today, raising questions about how to re-conceptualize this crisis in order to produce conceptual tools for responsible actions. The text that follows draws to some extent on all these interventions and represents my personal attempt to get a grip on this conundrum.²



The constant adding of disasters to disasters, of terror attacks to terror attacks, seems to be creating a world where a twisted and weird normality, a feeling of ineluctability, has taken hold. Today, August 2017, nothing, absolutely nothing, it seems, has changed that would make the question regarding academic responsibility less urgent or the thematic of Uddén’s chronicle less pressing than it was in 2013. The story of Lampedusa obviously and, I would add, shamefully still actualises many important issues, relating to the global political situation today. Not least does it highlight the many ways in which borders and frontiers, as well as connected distinctions such as citizen/sans papier; citizen/refugee; citizen/migrant and immigrant has come to shape and structure many contemporary lives, both on an individual, subjective, and a political, collective, level. In its vivid details (I have only given you a very bleak account of Uddén’s original pathos and sense for details) it is a truly magmatic story – activating and interrelating many levels and strata, not only of individual suffering and political dreariness, but also of the role and the effective importance of social imaginary significations. So to be a bit more concrete and precise, I will in a moment discuss two specific social imaginary significations, evoked by Uddén’s chronicle, that have a central and ubiquitous place in the political debates of today: chaos and borders.

But first I need to be more explicit about the concepts that I will be working with here – that is the Greek-French political philosopher, psychoanalyst and activist Cornelius Castoriadis’s notions of *magma* and *social imaginary significations*.³ In his own words:

There is thus a *unity* of the total institution of society; and, upon further examination we find that this unity is in the last resort the unity and internal cohesion of the immensely complex web of

meanings that permeate, orient, and direct the whole life of the society considered, as well as the concrete individuals that bodily constitute the society. This web of meanings is what I call the “magma” of *social imaginary significations* that are carried by and embodied in the institution of the given society and that, so to speak, animate it. Such social imaginary significations are, for instance: spirits, gods, God; *polis*, citizen, nation, state, party; commodity, money, capital, interest rate; taboo, virtue, sin; and so forth. But such are also man/woman/child, as they are specified in a given society; beyond sheer anatomical or biological definitions, man, woman, and child are what they are by virtue of the social imaginary significations which make them that.⁴

Castoriadis conceives of the social in terms of instituted meanings – that is of different *social*, because they are shared by many; *imaginary*, because they are created by and through the human capacity of imagination; *significations*, because it is in and through these significations that we orient ourselves in and make sense of our world. Together these meanings form a *magma*, that is (as we can see from the examples Castoriadis gives in the quotation) a multi-layered unity in constant motion, each time specific for the society in question, but never constituting an eternal essence or unchanging identity. The magma of significations is what holds a specific group of humans together, for a short while or for centuries and millennia, in that it allows for a common and specific way of ascribing sense to human existence. This function can, as we shall see below, be performed by myths, as well as by shared ideologies, habits, doxa, traditions, etcetera.

It is, I claim, as social imaginary significations in a possibly globally present magma – instituted and borne by habits and technologies

of communication; languages as well as texts; traditional as well as online media outlets – that chaos and borders have a significant presence in our societies today. Chaos is there as an ever-looming sense of impending political and human disaster, of the world as we know it (no matter who this ‘we’ refers to) coming to an end, as a threat of destruction of all that we value, emerging in the wake of the recent acts of terrorism and the apparent abandonment of reason among important political actors. The impression that the social is threatened, that the meaning of the social is at risk – at least in the double sense of an individual’s lived experience and capacity of being social as well as the meaning the social space on a larger and, if you like, more objective scale – is intense and seems ineluctable. And the only response that appears as adequate and realistic to politicians in all parts of the world and of all political colours seems to be to reinforce measures of security, to call for more and more visible policing; to increase and render more effective all so-called ‘measures of control’; to close down borders and to form alliances with the sole purpose of shutting ‘them’ out – whoever ‘them’ may be in the specific case. So, the notions, ideas, myths and fantasies relating to chaos and borders are obviously intertwined and frightfully efficient, today and all over the world.⁵

Nevertheless, ever since September 2001, when president G.W. Bush famously launched *The war on terrorism*, we have seen that these attempts to increase security have dramatically failed – or, worse, that they have resulted in an escalation of conflicts all over the globe. This escalation has in turn provoked calls for even harsher methods of control, exclusion and policing of borders, creating a vicious circling that could be spiralling out of control any moment now.

To seriously assess this situation, we urgently need to acknowledge

that the social – in the sense of a magma of socially shared meaning – is in itself by no means threatened by horrifying acts or political meltdowns. It is no doubt transformed, transfigured and, I would say, disfigured, but not destroyed or eradicated. And the reason why is clear: Social meaning is not only constituted by constructive, well-intended efforts by co-working people trying to make society better and safe for everyone, but just as importantly through acts intent on violently transforming or destroying existing societies, institutions, and entrenched ways of thinking and acting in order to make them conform with some ideal, ideology or worldview. To portray the perpetrators of such actions as anti-social, or as heralds of chaos, is, of course, in a sense true, but only in a limited way (even if obviously very important and terribly severe for those who are murdered, for those who survive, for those whose houses are bombed and burnt, and for those who are forced to run for their lives, becoming refugees risking everything they have in the hope of establishing a new life elsewhere). What I would like to highlight is that, in the wake of forceful condemnations and outrage, there is a palpable risk that such portrayals may obstruct the very possibilities of understanding the meaning of violent destructive events and transformations in and of the social. As a consequence, they may obstruct the view of how to deal with them in a grounded manner. We have seen where such counter-productive reactions lead; the aforementioned proclamation of the war against terrorism is but one example.

One way to assume academic responsibility in this situation is to take a step back, to refuse to spin along in this dance of death, to use the conceptual and historical tools for critical thinking that are the hallmark of our trade within the humanities, and to try to think and write clearly about the multi-layered complexity of it all. A first

imperative for academics should thus be to refuse all simplification – and to lay upon ourselves the demand of communicating lucidly and efficiently about complexity. For this, we need first to better understand both the role and the complexities of the notions of chaos and borders in the contemporary mind-set. (For additional, complementary takes and ways to approach this mind-set presented in this volume, see, from a political philosophical point of view, *Crisis and the Ill Logic of Fortress Europe*; from an artistic perspective *On the production of The Chorus of Begging and The Chorus of Giving* as well as *Inflatable Refugee*; and from an activist/artistic outlook, *German for Newcomers*)

On Chaos

Chaos is obviously a complex part of the social fabric, potentially productive as well as destructive, and in order not to be consumed by it we need to deal with it as such. So, let me try, with the help of Cornelius Castoriadis, to complicate a common understanding of chaos a bit. Perhaps our current vulnerability to chaos can be turned into something less fatal, or even be seen as the very condition for an emerging and responsible non-obedience when facing the current world order?⁶

Chaos has regularly been perceived as something to be avoided – a primitive state of things that must, and should, be overcome in order for evolution to get started, or for societies to be formed, or for humans to become sapiens.⁷

Chaos has played the role of the base, even evil, side of human existence. As the less worthy counterpart to the ordered cosmos, it is an ever-present threat against all human achievements; the initial state from whence we all came and to which we all will eventually

return. Chaos is disintegration, destruction, the undoing of everything. Chaos is the opposite of life, the ultimate entropy, death.

Still, paradoxical as it may seem, for about the past sixty years, chaos – or at least the notion of chaos stemming from mathematics and physics – has become a recurrent topic in scientific disciplines such as economics and management studies, in popular science as well as in the public doxa. We have seen the emergence of theories of chaos, stressing its explanatory potential as opposed to rigid and universalistic rationalism and to untenable notions of everlasting order. Chaos in this sense has made it possible to distinguish between predictability and causality; not everything that is causal is predictable, just think of Edward Lorenz' famous butterfly effect.

But even though this quite recent and somewhat positive evaluation of chaos and its consequences, no doubt is welcome (at least in some domains and to a certain extent), it still treats chaos as a simple antithesis to order, rationality and predictability. Chaos in this sense is still conceived of as being a part of an all-compassing ensidic logic, to use Castoriadis's terminology.⁸ Consequently, Castoriadis is also critical of the pretensions and hopes connected to this 'new' notion of chaos. Underlying his critique is the assumption that there is another, more fundamental sense in which chaos plays an important part in our lives – chaos as a continuous, radical creation of our world.

To explain this other meaning and importance of chaos, I think it is wise to take one of Castoriadis's more provocative statements – “The Greek myths are true” – as a point of departure:

What is important here is that the myth goes far beyond a simple figuration of the opposition nature/culture or even of permitted/forbidden. It poses a grip on the world and carries a magma of

significations. And moreover – second point – the Greek myths are true because they reveal a signification of the world that is irreducible to any kind of rationality, a signification that constantly presents meaning against a backdrop of the a-sensed [d'a-sensé], of non sense, or with the non-sense as everywhere penetrating the sense.⁹

So, according to Castoriadis, the Greek myths would be true (and I presume that this is, *mutatis mutandis*, valid also for myths and for magmas of significations in general) because they offered the ancient Greeks, as they still do us today (but of course in a quite different sense), a way of conceptualising and/or organising their world. They embody a rich magma of meaning offering a possibility for orientation in the world – with the important addendum that there is no reference or yardstick 'outside' the mythical sense-making against which this magma of significations could be measured and be declared to be illusory, false or true. What is outside sense has no sense, and hence is not possible even to conceptualise. The very act of saying that something has no sense is to ascribe a certain sense to it – and thereby to incorporate it in what makes sense to us.¹⁰ But luckily Castoriadis does not stop at this *aporia*. Instead he claims that the a-sensed 'everywhere penetrates' the meaning and the meaningful, thus introducing an ever ongoing process of making/unmaking sense, of constant and unavoidable alteration of the grip of the world that the myths offer us.¹¹

Thus, Castoriadis makes a claim that is quite different from just saying that myths are true in any ordinary sense.¹² His claim is that the myths posit significations that are not reducible to some kind of rationality, together with the corollary that mythical sense-making is constantly penetrated by an awareness, continuously repressed,

of this ‘without foundation’, this ‘without sense’ from where our grip on the world springs forth. And in this respect the mythical sense-making does not differ from other kinds of human production of meaning. What Castoriadis says about mythical sense making is in fact a characterisation of a specific aspect of the production of social imaginary significations in general. He writes:

In the depths of being there is an indetermination, the corollary of its power of creation, the successive determinations of which are embodied by the infinite leaves of the cosmos.

The institution of society also aims at covering over this chaos, at creating a world *for* society, and it does so, but there is no way to avoid the existence of tremendous holes in that creation, great conduits through which chaos is clearly evidenced. One of those ducts, for human beings, and no doubt the most difficult to block off, is death, which every known institution of society has attempted to make meaningful. One dies for one’s homeland, to become one of the ancestors who will return reincarnated in a newborn babe, or to enter the Heavenly Kingdom, and so the essential senselessness of death is masked.¹³

For Castoriadis, the starting-points when discussing this fundamental kind of sense-making are the Greek myths. Distinguishing between the two senses of chaos present in Greek mythology; the more common conception of chaos as an amorphous mixture on the one hand, versus the philosophically more important and interesting notion of chaos as void, gap, nothingness, as *chora* or *Tartaros* on the other, in the aforementioned seminar, held in January 26, 1983, he says:

When it comes to this original matrix, this substratum, we are confronted with two ideas, two significations. The first is that of verse 116 (in Hesiod): Chaos as Empty space, as Abyss. The world springs forth *ex nihilo*. Even being itself is first an emptiness. If I were to translate this into my own terms, I should say that what we have here is the idea of a radical creation, of a creation out of nothing, and of a creation of nothing itself out of a hyper-nothing. The second signification [...] is the idea of a *kykeon*, a shapeless mixture, terrifying, containing everything and nourishing everything. And it is – quite surprisingly, but I can only mention this thesis here – this second idea that has been called upon to play the most important role in the development of Greek philosophy.¹⁴

Below, I will briefly return to the notion of *kykeon*. But for now, let me just say that the terms *chora*, *Tartaros*, even *apeiron* (CQFLG, 174ff) and *hyle* (*Fig du Pens*, 281), are important here because they reveal a very early awareness of chaos as productive nothingness, as something always already beyond any form of conceptualisation.¹⁵ Castoriadis claims it is here, “with the idea of something completely indeterminate”,¹⁶ and not with some kind of deterministic chaos that we have to start.

But here the *aporia* mentioned above is again threatening Castoriadis. To say that chaos is something ‘completely indeterminate’ is, of course, to project a determination, an ordering on to this of which we cannot even conceptualise. Castoriadis is aware of this difficulty, and deals with it in his specific way. In *Figures du Pensable* he expands his notion of the a-sensed as always penetrating meaning, drawing some process-ontological conclusions. He talks about the need for making

... a new ontology in which chaos will be the fundamental ‘determination’ of being”. We may be more specific, speaking of inexhaustibility, for one thing, and for another, above all of the immanent ability to create, of a *vis formandi* of being; and we can maintain, and I will maintain, that this inexhaustibility of being comes from the immanence of its *vis formandi*.¹⁷

In this way, Castoriadis avoids the aporia of conceptualising that which cannot be conceptualised – he explicitly affirms the actuality of an ongoing immanent creation always already present in being as such.

Castoriadis devotes his attention to the upsurge of meaning for and through different beings, and most importantly for us humans. He insists on keeping the notion of meaning in all its complexity – that is, preserving meaning without reducing it to a question of intentionality (there are, for example, no intentions lurking behind the meaningful way in which our bodies present to each of us human beings a world of colours, forms and shapes). At the same time, foremost through his specific notion of autonomy, he safeguards the possibility of consciously created meanings and ways of being in the world, i.e. of a conscious creation of social imaginary significations. True chaos is always already significantly productive for Castoriadis. He writes:

Chaos, however, is not separate. There is an unfathomable underside [envers] to everything, and this underside is not passive, simply resistant, yielding or not yielding ground, to our efforts at understanding and mastery. It is perpetual source, ever imminent alternation, origin which is not relegated outside time or to a moment in the setting in motion of time, but rather is constantly

present in and through time. It is literally temporality – on the condition that we understand that the kind of time at issue here is not clock time but rather the time that is creation/destruction, time as alterity/alteration. Creation is already destruction – destruction of what was in its apparent ‘plenitude’ henceforth interrupted. The time of creation is at the antipodes of the time of repetition, which alone, by definition, allows itself to be ‘measured’ – namely, to be transformed into its contrary. Time is not only the excess of being [l’être] over every determination that we might conceive of or furnish for it. Time is the excess of being over itself, that by which being is always essential to-be.¹⁸

Thus, truth is always a becoming true; being is always a becoming, a process. This constant alteration, creation/destruction, is present in each and every stratum of being. From the molecular level to the stratified magmas of social imaginary significations, creation/destruction is everywhere present in a constant process of alteration. And, I think, this is how we should understand the claim that the Greek myths are true, also for us living in other places and in other times – they actually do show us a world, and moreover a world that could have been ours, allowing us to make sense of and in our own world, downstream the mythical Greek world.

Returning now to the notion of *kykeon*, we can see why it – the unordered (shapeless) mass – gives us a false notion of chaos. The unordered is simply the opposite of the ordered, and is therefore something that can be described within, and in terms of, the ensidic logic – just like the ‘chaos’ of the chaos-theories mentioned above. But the ensidic dimension of being is not all there is – to think so would, as Castoriadis repeatedly points out, amount to fall prey to the heteronomistic temptation that has been plaguing western

thought ever since its first moments. There is also creation. And for genuine creation to be possible, there must be, as it were, gaps in being – being cannot be saturated; neither in a Parmenidian sense of completeness, nor in the sense of an encompassing causality. Hence the notions of chaos as Empty space, as Abyss and emptiness are true also today, since they allow for creation in the radical sense. Most importantly – this Empty Space, this Abyss, should not be understood as a place, or a point in space-time, where everything that now is, once was created in some unique, creative act – no, this emptiness is ever present within being, always with us, always penetrating our sense-making, making its result subjected to time, that is to alteration, creation and destruction. Such is the human condition, presented to us in a truthful way already in the early Greek myths. In Castoriadis's own words:

The chaos/abyss/bottomlessness is what is behind or under every concrete existent, and at the same time it is the creative force – what we would call *vis formandi* in Latin – that causes the upsurge of forms, organized beings. The singular human being is a fragment of that chaos and at the same time a fragment or an agency of that *vis formandi* – that force, in other words, the creativity of being as such.¹⁹

So, against the backdrop of Castoriadis' analysis, the meaning of the ubiquitous presence of chaos in our world can, possibly, be seen in another and perhaps less dismal way. A possibility, if only on the abstract, conceptual level, of seeing other possibilities than sheer destruction in seemingly disastrous situations. And the belief in such a possibility is a prerequisite for seeking ways to counteract what may otherwise appear as an ineluctable fate.

On borders and academic responsibility

Apart from chaos, Uddén's chronicle also highlights the central problem of how limits and borders between cultures tend to be conceptualized and materialised – that is, how social imaginary significations tend to materialise in praxis, in action, in the building of walls and the closing of physical borders. (For different and complementary takes, both historically and theoretically, on the question of borders, please see in this publication the texts *Back to Byzantium: Rethinking the Borders of Europe*; *Closure of the meaning: border of the political*; *Political borders entail the closure of meaning* and *Borders of the Self*; *Borders of the State: refugees and the projection of human rights*.)

To summarize a very complex issue: as long as we keep talking about differences in culture, and differences between different 'kinds' of people, as something given and essential, we are doomed to keep repeating – and thus becoming part of and sustaining – a system that we should not want to sustain. The sense of the social imaginary significations of the border and of difference seems as dichotomous and unyielding as ever. One would have hoped that today, in the 21st century, the tendency to essentialise differences should be something of the past, but unfortunately this is not the case - not in academia and even less in contemporary politics. As the Swedish philosopher and writer Aleksander Motturi argued in his book, *Etnotism*:

Difference-thinking is, like a whole mythology, laid down in our language. The designations of other people that were shown to be integrated elements in the violence of the colonial politics of expansion – barbarians; lower races; criminal tribes; undeveloped

nationalities; pre-historic populations – arise again in the form of ambiguous terms connected to immigration, streams of refugees, suburban problems, and the ideologically infected need of integration and cultural diversity.²⁰

The point that Motturi makes is that the racist, colonial discourse, and the distinctions that supported it, has not disappeared but has reformed itself in the guise of multiculturalism. He continues:

It is in relation to this new discourse on difference that we can analyze the return of concepts like culture and ethnicity in the post-colonial, globalized, and ‘multicultural’ society. On a deeper level this return can be seen as a substituting the race-concept, as a replacement for a concept that became unusable in the 20th century after the Holocaust.²¹

Mutturi wrote his book in a specific context, the officially proclaimed year of multiculturalism 2006 in Sweden. The thrust of his argument is directed towards what, according to him, was a well-intended but very naïve way of, as it were, embracing difference. Ideas and ideologies that were, in the beginning of the 20th century, formulated and propagated in racist terms and discourse, had now transfigured themselves into cultural and ethnic terms and multicultural discourse. He continues:

‘Culture’ has thus become a marker that not only is acceptable, but also politically active in the production of differences between people. Where the instigator of race-anthropology, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, /.../ spoke of Caucasians, Mongolians, Negroids, Malayans, and Americans, today – after slavery, colonial-

ism, the Holocaust, and apartheid – we would rather speak of cultural or ethnic differences recapitulating real, experienced and constructed differences with regard to religion, customs, style, physical characteristics, etc. Researchers who analyze contemporary forms of racism consequently emphasize that delimitations and practices that formerly were maintained and legitimized through reference to, for example, racial differences, today are legitimized through references to cultural differences. The French sociologist Pierre-André Taguieff has written about a new ‘racism without races’ since – in a time where the concept of race is considered to be obsolete – culture has come to be understood as something static and immutable that determines the individual. The conceptual couple *culture/ethnicity* has therefore, dragging with it assorted semantic leftovers from abandoned scientific and political discourses, become a *functional* equivalent to the concept of race.²²

Mutturi further claims that this ethnotism has become a post-racism where “good intentions become part of the problem rather than of the solution”²³ and that it tends to be “shrouding the reproductive force of difference-thinking; its ability to mutate, to transform or even camouflage itself in the conceptual structures of different periods.”²⁴

In a time of increased emphasis on identity and identity politics, Mutturi’s way of reasoning is still both relevant, sound and urgent. He sums up what is at stake in one sentence:

The question is /.../ not what it takes to bridge cultural differences, but rather how one *dissolves* them.²⁵



As I see it, there is no way around the obvious fact that there *are* different cultures in the sense of *different collective ways* of being in and dealing with the world. At the same time, it is just as obvious that the essentialising difference-thinking that Mutturi diagnoses has no legitimacy – not in theory, nor in the ways in which our cultures and societies effectively *do* exist and interact. (*The Daoud Affair – Politics, Literature, and Migration of Ideas in a Time of Crisis* in this volume discusses a complicated and contested example of how important it is not to get trapped in essentialising forms of thinking).

If you would try to locate the exact demarcation line between, for example, two cultures, where would you situate it? In language? In art? In the way society is institutionalised? In traditions? Languages are constantly transforming, words spread across the globe; others disappear; books are translated; stories travel and find new forms in new contexts. Art constantly escapes its origins, some art travels or is kidnapped and is shown in institutions all over the world; other art is rooted in a place, and lives elsewhere in rumours and representations; institutions are copied or are imposed; traditions spread and transform through migrations and travelling... My point is simply this: Whenever and wherever you try to pinpoint the exact demarcation line between two cultures, the point where an essential difference would erupt, you will find yourself unable to do so in a clear-cut and unambiguous way. Just such clear-cut, stable and unbridgeable demarcation is what is needed for any talk of *essential* differences to hold fast. So, I think it is safe to say that the essentialising difference-thinking diagnosed by Mutturi is without footing, despite its omnipresence. Yet, and obviously, effective *non-essential* cultural differences abound – as seen in different languages, rituals, traditions, architectures, cities, myths, mythologies etcetera – and these differences shape and form populations, all over the world.

They make up the multi-layered, magmatic, differentiated fabric that is human culture.

I believe the obvious goal for a responsible academic cultural analysis should be to furnish the conceptual tools necessary for preventing these differences from being understood as rigid cultural and essential units. At the same time, we need to conceptualise, respect and understand these often chaotic, unsystematic differences for what they are – that is, different and often conflicting ways of making sense of and in our human world.

One (academic) possibility of achieving such a goal lies in sustained conceptual work, departing from other entities than *culture* or *ethnicity*. To put it briefly – if you want to escape the essentialising deadlock, you need to conceive of cultural phenomena and identities not as things, but as processes, ceaselessly altering themselves, each other as well as the general cultural fabric of our world. I would claim that the concept of a *magma of social imaginary significations* allows for such a way of conceptualising and understanding borders as well as cultural differences.

It is easy to see how the notion of a *magma of social imaginary significations* differs from, for example, ideology: It has none of the latter's connotations of false consciousness. It may be true that a specific magma of social imaginary significations, and the institutions, rituals, habits and language through which it is embodied, may be permeated by social struggles and conflict and that it may close in upon itself in the same way as a dominant ideology might do. But contrary to one common (typically Marxist) understanding of ideology as false consciousness, there is no way in which the insurgents of a society simply can eradicate the dominant magma of social imaginary significations and replace it with a new one, supposedly more 'just' or more 'true'. The only way to change the

magma of a society is to change it from within, through intellectual and conceptual critique as well as collective action, in order to alter and transform the institutions of the society. The concept of magma allows for the inertia, as well as the transformability of the institutions of society. It gives any project of transformation a more realistic basis in that it does not promise radical or quick changes.

Thus, to talk of a magma of meanings is to talk about a specific evolving phenomenon with no clear-cut borders, but still with an ever-evolving and changing unity. No need to talk of multi-magmas (as in ‘multiculture’) – magma is in itself an elastic concept, ever evolving and harbouring ever new and other magmas within its own strata – hence magma is conceptually very different from culture. Most importantly, it does not support or demand the establishment of strict borders between different magma – nor clear-cut distinctions such as between ‘our’ and ‘their’ magma – in fact, rather the opposite. In the magma of the world, all the different strata are related to one another through what Castoriadis talks about as *An-lehnung*, a leaning on, a co-existence, a frictional involvement with one another. Hence each stratum, though each time specific, may transform into another stratum, or absorb another within itself – all in a constant ever-altering process.

On the conceptual level then, which obviously is the only one that I am working with here, using the notion of a *magma of social imaginary significations* does not allow for the kind of essentialising difference-thinking that Motturi analyses. If we understand our societies and cultures as ever evolving magmas in frictional co-existence, we facilitate an understanding of differences between magmas as contingent, non-essential and always fluctuating. Such an understanding would open for dissolving rather than bridging cultural differences, just as Motturi would have it.

However, I want to stress that there is nothing inherent in the magma of social imaginary significations that would prevent it from becoming racist or fascist; nothing that would guarantee that a magmatic understanding would always promote more equal, more democratic or more just ways of being in the world. No, what is important here is not to be found in the content, but in the form: as a form, magma does not support any idea of founded, unchanging identity, nor of insurmountable borders of differences – not on the physical level, nor on the individual or the political.

So much for the conceptual work and the possibilities it offers. When it comes to implementing its results, however, the outcome often seems very disappointing. Moreover, academics, like myself, are often comfortably installed in our citizenships, as well as within institutions that provide us with shelter from the worst ways of the world. No doubt, this is reason enough for raising relevant critiques regarding institutionally induced blindness and ivory tower mentality among us.

But the academic position is a peculiar one. It provides its occupants with specific and in many ways unique possibilities to engage in work that is not necessarily judged by its immediate results, nor by its immediate accessibility. In the best of cases academics have acquired both the habitus, and the vantage points needed, for making them inclined to and capable of observing, analysing and also creating conceptual tools for concretely engaging in and with the world. This may, and often does, involve meticulous, tedious work that demands stubbornness, perseverance and myopic focus on details. Keeping up this kind of work is, I think, how we, acting as professional academics, can start to assume our autonomy. And communicating its results, for example the conceptual tools that allow for re-conceptualizations, to other actors is part of assuming our responsibility.

Returning one last time to Uddéns chronicle, and its interpellation, I hope that these reflections on chaos, borders and the magmatic way of being of the social imaginary significations may serve as part of such work. This work does not resolve or finally answer the question of how to assume academic responsibility, far from it – it is but an attempt at a conceptual articulation of magmatic thinking. But it could perhaps be a step towards a position from which it would be possible to effectively and responsibly refuse to obey; a sketchy beginning, an indication of possible lines of thought and action – all in the wake of Uddéns call for non-obedience in the face of the oppressive, repetitive and seemingly inescapable systems that are currently unmaking the sense of our world.

Endnotes

1 The account and translation of Uddén’s Swedish chronicle is my own. I have discussed the chronicle in another context, at the meeting of the Social Imaginaries network at IMEC in Caen, May 2014, the thematic of which was *Question de frontière(s)*. For a better understanding of Uddén’s approach to *Eid al Adha* it is perhaps good to know she lived for a long while in Cairo.

2 Please see <http://www.engagingvulnerability.se/urs> and the ‘On the contributions’ above for a full description of this event, that took place at Uppsala University in May 19–21 2016.

3 For the notions of *magma* and *social imaginary significations* and its role in Cornelius Castoriadis’s thinking, see also *Cornelius Castoriadis: Key Concepts*, ed S. Adams, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.

4 “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” in *World in Fragments*, Stanford University Press, 1997, p 7.

5 In Sweden, we have seen this in the recent, strange debate about, and usage of the interlocution ‘systemkollaps’ [collapse of the system].

6 As far as I know there are four major loci where Castoriadis treats

the question of chaos, and the difference between productive, creative chaos and the ‘false’, deterministic notion of chaos as disordered matter – though the notion and reality of chaos is present all through his work: The first place (in chronological order) is in the beginning of the last chapter in *The Imaginary Institution of Society, IIS* (1975), concerning the question of social imaginary significations, and more specifically the question of magmas; next, in the essay ‘Institution de la société et religion’ (written about 1980, according to a note in the English translation in *World in Fragments* 1997), published in *Domaines de l’Homme* (1986); third, in a seminar held January 26, 1983, published in *Ce qui fait la Grèce*(CQFLG) I, 2004 (translated into Swedish in 2003, in *Res Publica* #58), where Castoriadis, among other things, explains why “the Greek myths are true”, and finally, the short intervention, published as ‘Faux et vrai chaos’ from 1993, in *Figures du Pensable* (1999),

7 An earlier version of my reflections on chaos is included in the hard to find edition of *Destins d’exilés; trois philosophes grecs à Paris: Kostas Axelos, Cornelius Castoriadis, Kostas Papaïoannou*, Servanne Jolivet, Christophe Premat, Mats Rosengren (eds.), Éditions Le Manuscrit, Paris, 2012.

8 Ensadic thinking or ensadic logic is Castoriadis’s shorthand expression for the kind of thinking and logic that he calls *ensembliste-identitaire* – thinking based on the idea that all aspects of being are specific differentiations of a determined original element, an element that therefore should be considered to constitute the unity, identity or essence of these aspects of being. The ensadic logic, when posited as universally valid, rejects the possibility of creation in general, and consequently of human creation as well. Ensadic logic classically puts the origin of the laws of our world (natural laws as well as social ones) outside of *our* world and society. In this respect the ensadic thinking is heteronomous as it tends to mask (‘cover over’) the fact that man and society are inexorably autonomous – that is that man/society posit their own laws, natural as well as social. It is hardly surprising, then, that Castoriadis condemns the universalistic claims of ensadic thinking that, according to him, has been dominating Western thought at least since Plato.

9 CQFLG, p 167–168, my translation

10 For all this, see *IIS*, p 341–343

11 Suzi Adams, in her thesis *Castoriadis and the circle of physis and nomos – a critical interpretation of his philosophical trajectory*, La Trobe University, Australia, 2006, p. 52, talks about Castoriadis’s notion of being as ”temporal” – but immediately qualifies ”although he is not explicit in this regard.”

12 What could ’ordinary’ mean in this context, one may ask. I will not engage in an attempt at an overview of different notions of ’truth’ here – suffice it to say that Castoriadis’s notion truth – in this specific context – includes but is not reducible to both correspondence and coherence conceptualizations of truth.

13 ‘Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads’ in *Figures of the thinkable*, op cit, p 80.

14 *Ce Qui Fait La Grèce*, p 174, my own transl. See also p 172, on the idea of *kykeon*.

15 For Castoriadis’s reading of the *Timaios*, and of chora as ’formless form’, see Adams, op cit, p 56.

16 ‘False and true chaos’ in *Figures of the Thinkable*, op cit, p 240.

17 ‘False and true chaos’ in *Figures of the Thinkable*, op cit, p 240

18 “Institution of Society and Religion” in *World in Fragments*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, transl. David Ames Curtis, p 322.

19 ‘Psyche and Education’ in *Figures of the thinkable*, op cit, p 171.

20 *Etnotism*, Glänta production, 2007, s 19; the translation of all quotes from this book is my own, based on a previous unpublished translation made by the author himself.

21 *Etnotism*, Glänta production, 2007, p 19

22 *Etnotism*, Glänta production, 2007, p 19-20

23 *Etnotism*, Glänta production, 2007, p 25

24 *Etnotism*, Glänta production, 2007, p 26

25 *Etnotism*, Glänta production, 2007, p 74