

# On Social Meaning

## Ernst Cassirer, Cornelius Castoriadis and Philosophical-Rhetorical Anthropology

This project investigates if and how the scope of contemporary rhetorical studies could be enlarged and transformed so as to include not only discursive productions of meaning but also the creation, the transformations and the institutionalizations of social meaning at large.

Two articles in Swedish, giving the general outline of the project, are published in 2014. The project will be presented extensively in a book, planned for 2015.

In my book proposal, I present the project thus:

In rhetorical theory, the question of how meaning is produced has traditionally been dealt with in terms of the intentions of the orator to influence her or his audience through speech. Today, in the wake of the late 20th century fundamental critiques within the humanities and the social sciences of concepts like intentionality, meaning, knowledge and power, it seems necessary to complement and to a certain extent rework this traditional notion. All in all, the theories of how meaning is produced in typical rhetorical situations are no longer sufficient for the contemporary discipline of rhetoric, nor for rhetorical studies. In my book I argue for the extending of an understanding of rhetorical meaning to the more comprehensive concept of social meaning, as it may be construed within a certain strand of philosophical anthropology, departing from the works of the German early 20th century philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the French late 20th century philosopher and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis.

The main focus of the book is to deepen our understanding of how social meaning is produced and may be understood. Drawing on the philosophy of symbolic forms (Cassirer) and the idea of a magma of social imaginary significations (Castoriadis), I inquire into specific spaces of human creation – architecture and city-planning. Concrete examples like, for instance, the role of the square and how construed spaces affect its users, are instrumental to my formulation of what a philosophical rhetorical, and in consequence political, anthropology can be today. The impact of communication and landmark buildings in social structure of the cityscape are questions investigated in the book. Relating back to some of my earlier work (for example *Cave Art, Perception and Knowledge* and a chapter in *Ernst Cassirer on Form and Technology: Contemporary Readings*, both Palgrave Macmillan 2012) I will also present the relevant parts of the philosophies of Cassirer and Castoriadis. Both thinkers are essential for widening the scope of contemporary rhetorical research on sense making to include not only speech and propaganda but a wide selection of the sense making activities of mankind - such as architecture and city planning but also art, technology, education etcetera. Hence, the book is partly a philosophical, but more importantly an interdisciplinary work, in line with my earlier work on doxa.

From a pedagogical and academic perspective, Cassirer and Castoriadis do not need general introductions. There are many good ones written already, both in English, French and German. However, what seems to be lacking are contexts, both practical and theoretical, in which the full potential of their work can be explored and shown to be both interesting, valuable and topical. My book will provide such a context, tapping into both the current swelling reception of Cassirer's work, and into the equally important and growing interest in Castoriadis's philosophy. Cassirer's philosophical anthropology, with its emphasis on processes rather than structures, actions rather than things is both updated, prolonged and, especially when it comes to political thinking, completed by Castoriadis's philosophy of autonomy, imagination and creation.

Moreover, both the public and the academic interest in social meaning has been fuelled from many directions over the last decades – from the 'critique of ideology' in the 1970s, the focus on different kinds of relativisms and constructivisms of the 1980s and -90s to the renewed and deepened interest in process philosophy of the first decade of the 21st century. The recent Channel 4 series "The Secret Life of Buildings" is but one popular example of how questions of ideology, social meaning and architecture are connected today. My book will partly sum up the current state of the debate, and

suggest, with the help of notions like doxa, symbolic forms and magma of social imaginary significations, a different take on these questions. I aim to continue my efforts to satisfy the need, often made explicit within the domains of theory of science, philosophy as well as within the humanities in general, of reworking epistemology in order to accommodate the so called post modern critiques of for example intentionality, subjectivity and knowledge without succumbing to an outright relativism