

**Book Review: Alexandros Schismenos, Chris Spannos, and Nikos Ioannou, *Castoriadis and Autonomy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. ISBN-13: 978-1350123373 (hardcover). 240 Pages. \$128.**

Review by Maxwell Ackerman<sup>1</sup>

*[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2022 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

Schismenos, Ioannou, and Spannos collectively provide an intriguing perspective on autonomy and human freedom in the modern era. Through in-depth historical and material analysis, the book critically examines how Western beliefs have solidified themselves in our modern cultural context. From as far back as ancient Athens to the modern era, the authors examine how historical processes have created the context for current social signifiers, such as individualism, profit, and the desire for endless growth and expansion. These values have been produced by the material and social circumstances to prop up the capitalist economies in which we live. As the economy has become more concentrated in the hands of the wealthy and economic crises become more common, society fails to sufficiently reproduce the values necessary for capitalist economies. By exploring this crisis of values, the authors have illuminated areas in which autonomy may be able to break through and create new social signifiers. They examine a wide variety of historical examples to explain the failures of the Western political project.

The critiques examine both modern conservative movements as well as traditional liberalism. These ideologies function to provide a moral justification for authoritarian and anti-democratic actions by assuming a position of moral superiority and technocratic knowledge. Thus, authoritarian practices are implemented “for the best” of the people from a position of moral righteousness. As a result, those with political ideologies that advocate autonomy and self-governance were repressed through social propaganda and violence at the behest of the state. A

---

<sup>1</sup> Maxwell Ackerman, Emory University, e-mail: [maxwell.ackermann@emory.edu](mailto:maxwell.ackermann@emory.edu).

number of these examples were explored in the book, like COINTELPRO, sponsoring the military dictatorship in Greece, and a number of CIA interventions. We see that the state has a genuine fear of grassroots political organizing, especially on the left. As the perceived moral superiority of the state falls apart alternative modes of governance will become increasingly popular. It is the duty of those who seek self-governance and freedom from coercion to position themselves so that they are viewed more favorably than the alternatives. This is especially consequential given that the main opponent to this ideology is that of overt fascism if not explicit Nazism. It is imperative that this perspective be opposed at all costs and to do so we must offer a reasonable alternative to both fascism and modern liberalism. Autonomy as a political project desires a self-regulating society that does not rely on coercive state control. As such it must look outside of the capitalist system that dominates society today. Castoriadis is just one example of this alternative thinking and I think that this book provides excellent commentary on how such a movement could come about and how the state might respond. It is an extremely useful tool for understanding the Western social imaginary and how it may be countered. I would happily recommend the book for those seeking alternatives to the dominant political and economic arrangements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.