

Obituary: Castoriadis and the democratic tradition

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The death of Castoriadis gave rise to the expression of very diverse comments on a significant but also controversial intellectual output. Thus, on the one side, the intellectual establishment in France and his native Greece expressed an uncritical admiration for his work, without any deeper understanding of its radical anti-establishment meaning, usually on the basis of the anti-Marxist¹ and anti-Soviet elements in his work. On the opposite side, parts of the Marxist Left, particularly the Trotskyite Left, proceeded to either a wholesale rejection of his work, on account of the conservative ideological and political positions they find in it, or counterpoised the late "humanistic" character of his work to his early revolutionary thought.² Finally, in his native Greece, ex-left wing intellectuals who have now developed a kind of ideological "soup" mixing Christian culture and ethics with nationalism, were not hiding their rage against a thinker who has effectively shown (unlike some contemporary anarchists in the Anglo-Saxon world) the fundamental incompatibility between spiritualism in general, religion and nationalism on the one hand, and autonomy, real democracy and the liberatory project on the other.

As it is usually the case with important thinkers, I think that Castoriadis' early work should be distinguished from his late one. His early work aimed at the deepening of the content of socialism (workers' self-management etc.) and the parallel critique of what he considered the "traditional" or non-revolutionary elements in Marxist thought (historical "laws" in societal development and so on).³ In contrast, in his late work, transcending not just Marxism but in a sense the socialist project itself,⁴ he aimed at an interpretation of

¹ *Le Monde* announced in its first page the death of the "revolutionary anti-marxist" whereas the Italian daily *Repubblica* announced his death under the title "the philosopher who defied Cremlin". Similarly, in Greece, where Castoriadis was considered something of a "national asset", politicians and intellectuals, from the conservative Right up to the social-liberal "Left", joined in a chorus of admiration for his work.

² See, for instance Douglas Johnson's obituary in *The Guardian* under the title, "Trotskyist who embraced the individual", *The Guardian* (31/12/1997).

³ See C. Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vols 1-3, University of Minnesota Press.

⁴ Although Castoriadis himself in a 1979 essay was giving the impression that his abandonment of the term "socialist society" in favour of "autonomous society" was just a change in terminology (see Vol. 3 of

philosophy and democracy on the basis of the central concept of individual and social autonomy. Social autonomy for Castoriadis means that society not only posits its own laws but also recognises itself as the source of its norms. Similarly, individual autonomy means to make one's own laws, again, knowing that one is doing so and in full awareness of one's desires and true wants. In this sense, autonomy signifies the unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations, as well as the capacity to make, to do and to institute. This conception of autonomy is therefore contrasted to the Kantian definition of it as "a fictively autarchic subject's conformity to a 'Law of Reason'," which, as Castoriadis points out, is a definition derived "in complete mis-recognition of the social-historical conditions for, and the social-historical dimension of, the project of autonomy".⁵

The first implication one may derive from the Castoriadian definition of autonomy is that individual autonomy is impossible without social autonomy and vice versa. Furthermore, individual autonomy is only possible when the social individuals take a direct part in the formation and implementation of the social laws which condition their activity: "the autonomy of individuals has as a context the equal participation of all in power, without which there is obviously no freedom, just as there is no equality without freedom".⁶ This presupposes that social organisation is based on direct democracy and not on today's form of representative "democracy" (what Castoriadis calls "liberal oligarchy") which masquerades itself as democracy. The second implication is that the project of autonomy historically emerges in classical Greece because it is there that humans, for the first time in History, created the institutions, principally direct democracy and philosophy, which made the questioning of instituted tradition possible. This is so, because the fundamental condition for autonomy is the possibility of questioning tradition, something which by definition excludes all societies founded on "sacred truths" (e.g. Byzantine and feudal theocracies in Eastern and Western Europe respectively, fundamentalist regimes today etc.) or even any kind of a closed theoretical system (e.g. Stalinist regimes). It was only at the end of the Dark Ages, after an eclipse lasting many centuries, that the project of autonomy re-appears in Western Europe, when the emerging new cities take the form of political communities aspiring to self-government — something quite similar to the Greek polis.

his Political and Social Writings, p. 317), I believe that his late work, in which he integrated classical Greek philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis into the project of autonomy, made it clear that something much more than a change in terminology was involved.

⁵ C. Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

It is therefore obvious that the Castoriadian demarcation criterion between autonomous and heteronomous societies is not based on whether they themselves create, or not, their own institutions. Every society is self-instituting, i.e. society's creative ability, what he called the social imaginary, creates the social imaginary significations that determine society's values and, consequently, the institutions which embody them: ideology, religion, tools, power relations and structures, language. Instead, the demarcation criterion is based on whether a society imagines, or not, that its institutions are human creations, which do not originate in God's will or, alternatively, represent the actualisation of unfolding human potentialities, defined according to a particular interpretation of natural or social history (natural or historical "laws"). Historical societies, apart from a few exceptions, have always resorted to such "given" truths to protect their institutions and make them respectable and this is also where the "need" for an "objective" ethics emerges. It is therefore obvious that there is a fundamental incompatibility between, on the one hand, the democratic tradition which is premised on the constant questioning of any given truth and, on the other, religious and spiritualistic traditions which take for granted certain "truths" or closed systems of ideas. For Castoriadis, a society is autonomous when it is fully aware that there is no exogenous or transcendental source for its institutions and laws and, of course, no life after death.

In Castoriadis's problematique, History is an imaginary creation, the domain in which there unfolds the creativity of all people, whereas democracy itself and, of course, philosophy, are not products of some historical evolution but, instead, are creations, which represent a break with instituted tradition. However, his rejection of any "given" truths and "closed" systems of ideas does not emanate from a post-modernist problematique (as sometimes erroneously is assumed), which today dominates Western academia. In contrast to his ex-colleague in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, J-F. Lyotard, Castoriadis, far from joining the post-modernist bandwagon as the latter did, showed its true social significance. Thus, although he recognised that there are certain valid elements in post-modernism (for instance, its rejection of the conception of History as linear or dialectical Progress etc.), he dismissed the complete relativism of post-modernists who gave to every way of thinking, every tradition, not only equal rights but also equal value⁷ (something that not even a supporter of relativism like P. Feyerabend⁸ accepted). Furthermore, Castoriadis put post-modernism in its true historical perspective, namely, he saw it as part and parcel of the regressive post-war historical period which, particularly after May 1968, has been characterised by the total eclipse of the autonomy project in the West. During this period, phenomena like the de-

⁷ C. Castoriadis, *World in Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 41.

⁸ See T Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy*, pp. 347-50.

politicisation and privacy of the individual, as well as the “individualisation” of society have become dominant. In this context, there is a general decline of intellectual creativity, with post-modernism being a typical symptom of this decline — a phenomenon which Castoriadis calls “a general retreat to conformism”.⁹ As he aptly points out, “the misery (of post-modernism) is that it simply rationalises (the prevailing trends) through a high-brow apologetics of conformity and banality”. No wonder that post-modernist “intellectuals” (if the term is applicable to them) “abandon their critical function and enthusiastically adhere to that which is there just because it is there”.¹⁰

Still, although Castoriadis does not question the fact that imaginary significations are not created out of nowhere (“the instituting society, however radical its creation may be, always works by starting from something already instituted and on the basis of what is already there”),¹¹ he criticises Marx on the grounds that he saw the role of the imaginary, during the entire period of scarcity stretching from prehistory to communism, to be a limited one “precisely a functional one, a ‘non-economic’ link in an ‘economic’ chain.”¹² But, by the same token, one could interpret some superficially inexplicable and far from radical Castoridian theoretical or political positions on the basis of his over-emphasis of the imaginary element in History and the corresponding under-valuation of “systemic” elements. For instance, he recently advanced the thesis that capitalism today has turned against its own “logic” when, by liberalising and deregulating markets, it has converted the world economy into a “planetary casino”. Thus, starting from the assumption that nobody controls today’s economy, he derived the conclusion (which I consider wrong) that “nobody can say today that the functioning of the economy corresponds to clearly defined interests, if not of specific capitalists, of the capitalist class in general, since what is happening at this moment, with the chaos that exists in the world economy...is not in the interest of the capitalist class but it simply expresses its impotency in directing its own system”.¹³ However, one may counter-argue here that the present “chaos” of the world economy is in fact the inevitable outcome of the liberalisation of markets and particularly of the capital markets, which, far from being undesired, meets perfectly the needs of the present internationalised market economy.¹⁴ A fact which is anyway abundantly confirmed by the present trends in capitalist profitability which is growing rapidly, in consistence with the spreading of market liberalisation. It is obvious here that Castoriadis emphasises again the imaginary element at the expense of the “systemic”

⁹ C. Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ C. Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p. 150.

¹² C. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Polity Press, 1997), p. 132.

¹³ Castoriadis interviewed by channel 3 of Greek State TV (ERT 3) in 1993.

¹⁴ T. Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy* (Cassell, 1997), ch. 1.

fact that the marketization of the economy (i.e. the lessening of social controls — apart from pure regulatory controls — over markets), far from being incompatible with capitalist “logic”, has always been a precondition of capitalist efficiency and therefore a basic aim of the ruling economic elites.

Similarly, for Castoriadis, the basic obstacle to the spreading of the growth economy in the South (and, by implication, to its non-“development”), which led to the present widening gulf between the North and the South, has been the fact that “this extraordinary spreading of the West had to face societies with completely different imaginary institution which, as a result, have created anthropological types of a very different type than the type of the Western citizen, as described by the Declaration of Human Rights, or the type of the industrial worker and entrepreneur”.¹⁵ It is obvious that such an approach ignores the catastrophic impact of the spreading of the market economy and the subsequent growth economy on the self-reliant communities of the South and, as a result, exonerates the system of the market economy itself, in order to blame the “imaginary significations” that developed in the South! No wonder, that in this problematique the way out of the present global crisis can only emerge in the West.¹⁶ On similar grounds one could criticise Castoriadis’s position on the supposed autonomy of today’s techno-science.¹⁷

Equally controversial are Castoriadis’s political positions in relation to the December 1944 events which marked the beginning of the civil war in Greece (he has characterised them as an attempted coup d’etat by the Greek CP), or in relation to the USSR (he characterised it as the sole aggressive superpower which possessed a massive balance of power versus the USA in a situation which was “practically impossible to be reversed” by the Americans).¹⁸ Clearly, this position had hardly any relevance to reality (but was exploited by western establishments — for obvious reasons — in their Cold War rhetoric), particularly if one takes into account that at the time it was formulated (at the beginning of the eighties) the American ruling elite was financially strangling the corresponding Soviet elite through the arms race, a race that has decisively contributed

¹⁵ C. Castoriadis “The West and the Third World” in the Greek edition of *World in Fragments* (Athens: Upsilon, 1992), p. 91.

¹⁶ “I think that only a new development of the liberation movement in the West could change the parameters of the problem, i.e. could in some way ease the penetration—at least up to the point required— of the traditional institutions and traditional religious imaginary significations that today are dominant in most of the countries of the Third World”, *Ibid.* p. 96.

¹⁷ See, *his Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, ch. 10 and a critique of this position in my article “Towards a democratic conception of science and technology” (in this issue).

¹⁸ C. Castoriadis, *Facing the War* (Athens: Upsilon, 1981), pp. 19 & 37. French original, *Devant la guerre*, 1981.

to the collapse of “existing” socialism. Furthermore, although his critique of the totalitarian bureaucracy in the countries of “existing socialism” is basically correct, one might dissent with the fact that Castoriadis completely ignored that these countries have succeeded in meeting (even at a very low level) the basic needs of all their citizens (employment, health, education, housing, food), as it is tragically illustrated today by the catastrophic regression in the degree of covering these needs, following the integration of Eastern Europe to the internationalised market economy. Not accidentally, to the question whether the western “liberal oligarchies” were preferable than the totalitarian bureaucracies in the East, as bases on the road towards an autonomous society, Castoriadis has always expressed his unreserved preference for the former. His preference was based on the (right) argument that the western regimes contained “germs of autonomy”, which were created through the long social struggles that developed in the period since the end of the Dark Ages. However, the question arises whether this conclusion is still valid today when the neoliberal consensus in the West is effectively dismantling the welfare state, which functioned as the material base for the development of the autonomy project, and at the same time is successfully eroding the historical germs of autonomy (workers’ rights, conditions of work, civil liberties etc.).

Finally, at least controversial is Castoriadis’s position with respect to the Gulf war¹⁹ when, in contrast to other radical thinkers like Noam Chomsky, sided himself with the western socialdemocrats and adopted the American propaganda about the alleged campaign against a totalitarian regime, ignoring the real causes of the US-led destruction of Iraq, for which the Iraqi people are still paying a heavy price.

In conclusion, notwithstanding Castoriadis’s controversial positions, his work may constitute, and it has already done so with respect to this journal, a fundamental element for the development of a new liberatory project. What it cannot do is to provide the basis for the formulation of a new dogma, which is by definition ruled out by the Castoriadian conception of autonomy and the implied notion of democracy. His contribution to the democratic-autonomist tradition has been decisive and his critique against the fashionable Habermasian view of democracy, as a set of procedures instead of a *regime*,²⁰ was devastating. As far as this journal is concerned, Castoriadis’ thought has been an important element of the synthesis it has attempted, in the form of an Inclusive democracy, between the democratic-autonomist tradition and the socialist one, along with the radical green, feminist and libertarian traditions.-

¹⁹ See T. Fotopoulos, *The Gulf War: The First Battle in the North-South Conflict* (Athens: Exantas, 1991), ch. 6.

²⁰ C. Castoriadis, *La montée de l’insignifiance, Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe IV* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), pp 221-41. Reprinted in the Greek edition of *Democracy and Nature*, No. 1, (1996).