

Teaching Castoriadis.

A modest contribution on the BA (Hons) Politics at University of East London.

I have recently retired from teaching at UEL. My career there started back in the '60s, when colleges in the UK introduced "Liberal Studies" into technical and scientific courses. Liberal studies classes introduced topics from social studies, literature and the arts, communication and media studies etc, as "add-on" elements to courses for e.g. mechanical engineers, civil engineers, biologists and even business studies students. The tutors delivering these classes had a great deal of autonomy, but the classes were compulsory for students – a conflict that was but one of the issues we debated in those days!

The motivation for "Liberal Studies", on the part of government, was undoubtedly that technicians and engineers in the UK had a narrow outlook, with little or no awareness of society or culture. It was believed, in line with the then popular theories of the "human relations" school of management, that workers would be more "fulfilled" – and less trouble! – if they were more broadly educated. Also, presumably, that UK workers were at a disadvantage in relation to their more broadly-educated European counterparts. (Perhaps now we would talk of a "flexible" labour force!).

Of course, many of the tutors – including myself – were involved through a desire to reach FE and HE students and encourage social and political awareness, and to foster more critical attitudes among future workers.

Eventually (fashions change! – and there had always been a fair amount of hostility among some of the recipient departments) Liberal Studies as such disappeared. However, some courses retained a component that had been originally taught as Liberal Studies. My own contribution started as a course in political thought for economics students, later evolving into an interdisciplinary course, which attempted to show (i) that economists, social scientists and political theorists often shared similar assumptions and methodologies (ii) that when this happened, what was shared was a "model" of society, based on questionable political/philosophical assumptions. The economics degree at UEL went through some changes in the early to mid-1980s (becoming more heavily theoretical and narrow), and "my" course was pushed off. However, soon after this a politics degree was established at UEL, and I found a niche there for the course – now thinly disguised as an introduction to economic and social theories for students of politics!

By now the course was called: "Capitalism, Bureaucracy and Democracy", and I had been drawing on a book with a similar title, by Alford, Robert R. and Friedland, Roger (Cambridge 1985): *Powers of Theory: Capitalism, State and Democracy*. This book received little or no comment that I am aware of, in academic circles – I am not sure why. I personally found its central idea thought-provoking: that different models of the state (for me this worked better as theories of society) viz: pluralism, managerialism, and class models, could be drawn together if it was recognised that each focussed on a different "level" of society (for pluralists: the individual – and the defence of capitalism; for managerialists: the organisation, and the state as the supreme organisation; for class theorists: the mode of production – and the demand for democracy).

My view of the book was that it was neo-Marxist, since you could only draw these theories together by subsuming individualist or managerial perspectives under a theory of the “whole” society, and for these writers Marxism provided that theory. Hence also their odd coupling of “democracy” with the class view...

I have to admit that for most of its history this course was pretty orthodox, in the sense that (i) the models that it introduced were the predictable ones for social and political scientists (ii) although I always concluded the course by questioning the whole enterprise of bringing together these theories, Alford and Friedland really did not provide a convincing way of doing this.

Another rather traditional feature of the course was that I dealt with one theorist (or sometimes a “school”) each week. We ranged from Adam Smith, (tracing his influence on such as Hayek), through Schumpeter, Weber and Keynes (as, loosely, “managerial”) and dealt with the arguments between “structural” Marxists (viz. Althusser) and a more humanist approach such as that taken by the late E.P. Thompson.

It was only in the last five or six years that I tentatively brought in Castoriadis. “Tentatively” because of the difficulty and newness of the ideas in a traditional (undergraduate) academic context, and – I have to admit – difficult for me! However, once I gained more confidence I found that students were sometimes quite excited about Castoriadis’ approach. What I found particularly convincing was the way that, through the “radical imaginary”, Castoriadis demonstrated how: (i) the individual is not separable from society; (ii) each society creates its own meanings and structures; (iii) “autonomy” is central to the development of both the balanced individual and the just society. I used an extract from “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (see: ed. David Ames Curtis, 1997: *The Castoriadis Reader*, pages 177 – 189) as a basis for discussion of ideas that I felt were relevant to the course. As suggested above, the one week that was given over to this was probably not enough: the ideas are not only rather difficult, but so rich as well!

In addition, I prepared, for the University of East London, the first part of what I intended to be a two-part paper on Castoriadis: “recommencing Revolution?” Politics and Society in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1992 – 1997). Part I. March 2001. ISSN:1 466-125X. My decision “out of the blue” to take early retirement has created a hiatus, but I have now taken up again the task of writing a more complete Introduction to Castoriadis.

For me, Castoriadis helps to “elucidate” a whole number of questions, in addition to the three points just identified. Particularly helpful to me were:

- (i) the interdisciplinary approach, which underlined the unreal separation of “disciplines” in academic practice (this was my starting-point as a Liberal Studies practitioner – now I see disciplines simply as “institutions” which can and must be challenged when taken as fixed);
- (ii) the explanation of the frightening human tendency to “reify” institutions (how I wish I had been able to use Castoriadis back in the ‘60s when arguing against nuclear weapons, and when confronted by arguments about “not being able to stop scientific progress”!);

(iii) the stress on the importance of creativity to both the individual and society (music and the arts have always been essential to my life – and, like Oscar Wilde, I have always believed that socialism would be *beautiful*)

(iv) above all, the development of a way of thinking which demonstrates the possibility and not just the desirability of revolution.

Ian Pirie 7/10/2003.

# School of Social Sciences

## Unit Outline

### What?

**PO320: Capitalism, Bureaucracy, Democracy**

### Who?

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### Where and When?

**Lecture/Seminar : Room N028, Tuesdays, 2.0 - 5.0 pm**

**What are the Aims? :**

To provide a complementary introduction, for students of politics, to economic and social theories which may help to understand some debates in twentieth century politics.

To explore some links between the disciplines of political theory, economics and sociology, and to see whether it is useful to try to bring the disciplines together.

The course will:

(a) introduce, and test the usefulness of, a number of **models** of modern capitalist society which bring together economics politics and social theory

(b) explore **concepts and issues** concerning the **nature of capitalist society**, and possible alternatives, drawing on political, economic and social theory

(c) introduce a number of significant writers from different backgrounds (viz. economics, social theory and politics).

### **What should be the Learning Outcomes?**

On completion of this Unit, students should be able to:

Describe the differences and similarities between a number of models drawn from political, social and economic theory, which aim to explain (or explore) the problems of (i) the relations between the individual, the organisation and society and/or (ii) the roles of economics, politics and social structures.

Discuss the work of a number of significant individual writers on economic, political and social theory, whose work may be said to examine the above problems.

### **What Teaching Methods?**

Each week will comprise approximately two-thirds lecture (information input - but presented in such a way as to encourage a certain amount of discussion) and one-third seminar (which will usually comprise primarily a discussion of issues raised in the lecture and a seminar reading). A handout will usually be given out each week for the following week's seminar. (Students should be sure to read the handout, and ideally look at some of the recommended texts cited below for each lecture - otherwise the seminar is likely to turn into another lecture-session!!)

## What is the Content ?

### **A. Lecture List (and examples of seminar readings) – see B. below for “thematic list”:**

#### 1. Introduction:

Political theory, economics and the social sciences. Political & Social Models: *Pluralist/individualist and neo-liberal. Managerial. Class.*

Levels of analysis (state/system, organisation/structure, individual/situation).  
Functional vs. political approaches.

*Alford and Friedland (1985) - Introduction and Chapter 1.*

#### 2.

Economic models and approaches. The creation of value.

*Cole et al 1983 pp. 6 - 20.*

#### Block (i): Democracy – origins of the pluralist/individualist perspective

#### 3.

**Adam Smith.** Origins of pluralist/individualist model: his ethics. Smith's economics.

*Extracts from: Smith's "Theory of Moral Sentiments" and "The Wealth of Nations"*

#### 4.

Modern liberalism - **Hayek**, Friedman. Neo-liberalism.

*Extracts from Hayek's "Road to Serfdom", Routledge 1976*

#### 5.

Conservatism, Thatcherism, New Right.

*G. Thompson, in: A. Gamble: The Free Economy and the Strong State, Macmillan 1988*

Block (ii): Bureaucracy - the managerial perspective. Contemporary debates on state-managed and corporate capitalism.

#### 6.

Managerialism, industrial society. Economic and **managerial/technocratic** theories (cost-of-production school); also Veblen, Burnham, Galbraith. **Keynes.**

*Cole et al: (1983)*

7.

Elites and bureaucrats/bureaucracy: **Weber** and rationalisation. Defending Bureaucracy?

*Du Gay: (2000)*

8.

Elites and bureaucrats/bureaucracy: **Schumpeter**.

*Extracts from Schumpeter's Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy (1942). Ed. Richard Swedberg, Routledge 1992*

Block (iii): Capitalism - the class perspective.

9.

Socialism and Marxism. The debate between functional/structuralist and humanist/political world-views: Structural Marxism, **Althusser**

*Althusser (1969/70)*

10.

Marxist “cultural and political theories”; critique of bureaucracy (New Left). **E.P. Thompson**.

*Extracts from E.P. Thompson (1978)*

11.

**C. Castoriadis**: socialism, bureaucracy and autonomy. Institutions and instituting society.

The individual psyche and the radical social imaginary.

*C. Castoriadis: Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy, Odeon, 1991.*

12. Conclusion.

**B. Examples of concepts and issues which may be discussed:**

philosophy, ideas, interests and ideology

the economy and politics

individualism, pluralism, socialism and collectivism

the market, morality, and planning

equality and freedom

conservatism and the new right

democracy and elitism  
rationality, managerialism and bureaucracy  
class, social structure and autonomy  
economic determinism and class consciousness  
social institutions/instituting society  
the construction of the individual psyche, and its relation to social organisation

**Assessment** (for a formal breakdown of how assessment matches the intended learning outcomes, see the Politics Subject Area Handbook)

### **What is assessed?**

The Unit will assess, by means of the coursework assignment, your understanding of one of the writers examined; you will be expected to discuss the contribution made by that writer to the central issues of the course (the relation between individual, organisation and society; the roles of economics, politics and social factors).

In the exam, you will be expected to write on three topics based on the theories, the writers, and the models discussed in the unit, particularly in terms of their similarities and differences.

The more you are able to evaluate such issues as: whether it is possible to identify individual writers with particular models, whether these models do in fact consider different levels of society rather than reflecting different ideological positions, and the relative strengths and weaknesses of different theoretical models and approaches – the higher the marks you are likely to obtain.

### **How is it assessed?**

One coursework essay of approx. 2,000 words (30%).  
One three-hour unseen exam (70%).

### **Attendance**

**Please note that the Politics subject area requires 75% attendance at all classes. Failure to achieve that level of attendance may be excused only upon the presentation of medical certification within seven days of the absence concerned. Excessive absence unmitigated by medical certification will result in failure of the unit.**

### **Reading**

**A. Recommended texts for the whole Unit:** (specific readings for each week are given below).

The *main theoretical impetus for this course* came from:



(i) Alford, Robert R. and Friedland, Roger: Powers of Theory (Capitalism, the State and Democracy); Cambridge 1985.

(ii) A useful, if compactly-written text, aimed at students of economics, but which has summaries of similar *economic models* to those used in Alford and Friedland 1985, (and which relates these economic models to wider political perspectives):

Cole, K., Cameron, J., and Edwards, C.: Why Economists Disagree; Longman 4th impression 1989.

More recently, focussing on the “growth” debate, and discussing: *neo-liberal, state-led and negotiated or consensual capitalism*:

D. Coates: Models of Capitalism; Polity 2001.

Focussing on *economic models*, but in an accessible style:

Brown, M.B.: Models in Political Economy; Penguin 1984.

An even more enjoyable read, which introduces the *major economists* in some depth:

Heilbroner, R.: The Worldly Philosophers; Penguin 1991.

Some texts which cover, in a more general way, the *political theories* relevant to this Unit:

Lechte, J.: Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers, Routledge 1994

Goodwin, B.: Using Political Ideas; Wiley 1997

Hagopian, M.N: Ideals and Ideologies..Longman 1985

Ball, T. and Dagger, R.: Ideals and Ideologies: a Reader; Harper Collins 1991.

Gamble, A.: Ideas, Interests and Consequences, IEA 1989.

Held, D.: Political Theory and the Modern State; Polity 1984.

Held, D.: Models of Democracy; Polity 1987 .

Vincent, A.: Modern Political Ideologies, Blackwell 1992

A more recent book on political theory which explores *models of the state*:

Ed. Marsh, D and Stoker, G: Theory and Methods in Political Science, Macmillan 1995.

A text which goes into considerable detail on the use of *economic models* in political science:

Dunleavy, P.: Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice; Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991.

Useful (if basic) introduction to *sociological perspectives*:

Haralambos, M.: Sociology, Bell and Hyman 1985.

Post-Marxist approach to capitalism and democracy:

Bowles, S., and Gintis, H.: Democracy and Capitalism, Taylor and Francis 1987.

Recent critical text on corporate capitalism, which deals with the philosophical theories often underpinning economic models:

Gupta, S. Corporate capitalism and political philosophy, Pluto 2002.

Specifically on approaches to *democracy*:

Ed. Beetham, D: *Defining and Measuring Semocracy*, Sage 1994.

Recent text taking a new look at *bureaucracy*, (referring extensively to Weber):

Du Gay, P.: *In Praise of Bureaucracy*, Sage 2000

## **B. Extra Reading for each Lecture:**

1. A. Brown: *Modern Political Philosophy*; Penguin 1986.
  2. R. Barker: *Political Ideas in Modern Britain*; Methuen 1978.  
Gamble (1989); Goodwin (1990) (ch 2); Hagopian (1985), (Intro);  
Vincent (1992).
  3. D.D. Raphael: *Adam Smith*, OUP (Past Masters) 1985  
R. Heilbroner: *The Worldly Philosophers*, Pelican 1986  
L. Strauss, and J. Cropsey: *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago 1965 (see also  
Sabine and Thorson)  
W.J. Barber: *A History of Economic Thought*, Pelican 1972  
Cole et al (1983) ch 2; Goodwin (1990) ch 3
  4. Hayek: *Constitution of Liberty*, Routledge 1960  
ed. A. de Crespigny, and K. Minogue: *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, Methuen  
1975  
E. Butler: *Hayek, his contribution..* Temple Smith 1983  
Goodwin (1990) ch 3; Barker (1978) ch 7
- Cunningham, F.: *Theories of Democracy*, Routledge 2002 (has useful short discussion on  
democracy and capitalism).
5. R. Barker: *Political Ideas in Modern Britain*, Methuen 1978  
A. Gamble: *Modern Social and Political Thought*, Macmillan 1981  
P. Dunleavy and B. O'Leary: *Theories of the State*, Macmillan 1987  
G. McLennan, D. Held, S. Hall: *State and Society in Contemporary Britain*, Polity 1984  
D. Marsh, and R.A.W. Rhodes: *Implementing Thatcherite Policies*, OUP 1992  
W. Keegan: *Mrs Thatcher's Economic Experiment*, Pelican 1984  
Hagopian (1985) ch 13; Dunleavy 1991
  6. Galbraith: *The New Industrial State*, (first published 1967) also: *The Affluent Society*,  
etc, Pelican  
W. Hutton: *The State We're In*, Cape 1995  
Heilbroner (1991); Hagopian (1995) ch 4
  - 7.& 8...MacRae: *Weber*, Fontana 1974  
M. Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) *or* *Economy and  
Society* (1921)  
*Anti-Minotaur: the myth of a value-free sociology*, in: M.Stein and A.Vidich: *Sociology  
on Trial*, Prentice-Hall 1963  
D. Held: *Political Theory and the Modern State*, Polity 1984  
K. Morrison: *Marx, Durkheim, Weber*, Sage 1995  
Haralambos (1985); Heilbroner (1991) - on Schumpeter....  
Held (1984) p. 39 et seq: central perspectives on the modern state

Held (1987) ch 5: competitive elitism and the technocratic vision, covers Weber, and Schumpeter

K. Lowith: Max Weber and Karl Marx Routledge 1993

9 & 10:

Dowd, D. Understanding Capitalism, Pluto 2002 (on how economic theory has become capitalist ideology)

9. L. Althusser: For Marx, Penguin 1969 *or* Reading Capital NLB 1970

J. Lechte: Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers, Routledge (1994) (extremely succinct summaries of e.g. Althusser, Foucault -structuralism, post-modernism etc)

10. E.P. Thompson: The Poverty of Theory, Merlin 1979. (contains other essays - is a vehement attack on Althusser)

M. Howard and J. King The Political Economy of Karl Marx Longman 1975 (stresses active role of working class rather than economic 'laws');

P. Anderson: Considerations on Western Marxism, NLB 1976

T. Benton: The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism, Macmillan 1984

G. Stedman Jones: Western Marxism, NLB 1977 continued....

A. Gramsci: Selections from Prison Notebooks

E.W. Fromm: Marx's Concept of Man

R. Miliband: The State in Capitalist Society etc

11. D. Howard: The Legacy of Marxism, Macmillan 1977 ch 10.

D. A. Curtis (ed): The Castoriadis Reader, Blackwell 1997

C. Castoriadis (ed. D.A. Curtis): The World in Fragments, Stanford U.P. 1997

Ditto: Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy; OUP 1991

Mouffe, C.: The Democratic Paradox, Verso 2000 (for an "agonistic" model of democracy),.

D. Coates: Models of Capitalism; Polity 2001.

**Social Politics Paper No.19**

**RECOMMENCING REVOLUTION?**

**Politics and Society in the work of Cornelius  
Castoriadis (1922 - 1997). Part I.**

**By Ian Pirie**

University of East London, 2001

**Price £2.50**

**March 2001**

**ISSN:1466-125X**

## 1. Overview.

A few weeks before his death in 1997, at age 75, Cornelius Castoriadis said: "I am a revolutionary, and I want to see radical change." In 1949 Castoriadis had been one of the founders of an influential revolutionary group called *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, whose prime aim was workers' management; since 1980 he had been Director of Studies at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. However, he had long abandoned the traditional "left" or Marxist notion of revolution as seizure of state power, and developed, instead, the view that the central problem of all societies was the absence of "autonomy". Societies everywhere, whether capitalist or communist, had given power to someone or something "outside themselves" (heteronomy). This heteronomous power could be a "ruling class", a bureaucracy, or a religious elite; or it could be a world-view—such as "determinism", or "God's purpose", or even the "laws of nature". In all such cases, a crucial point was the fact that the way society is set up prevents people even seeing that things could be otherwise, that they could democratically control their own affairs. These ideas were to form the basis of his work on the "imaginary institution of society", and his view that the existence of a "radical social imaginary" was the key to revolutionary social change. It is because this is such an original approach that I have called this piece "recommencing revolution".

Although his background was in Marxism and Trotskyism, Castoriadis was well-known early on for his criticisms of the "traditional left", which were always forceful, based in precise argument, and often colourful. He was especially critical of the separation of theory and practice which he saw in Marxism – despite so many Marxists' claims to the contrary<sup>i</sup>. (See further in section 5 (i) below). In most of his writing Castoriadis also went beyond the narrow confines of what usually passes for "politics". He wrote extensively, and authoritatively, on philosophy – especially that of Plato and Aristotle – and on economics, and psychology, and drew on mathematical and anthropological ideas. Underlying much of his work is an attempt to "put theory in its place", stressing both the importance and the limitations of theory.

Castoriadis's "practice" too (his life and work), was many-sided, as he actively contributed not only to politics, but also to economic argument and to psychoanalysis. For example, having left Greece for Paris at the end of the War (in 1945), he worked for the OECD from 1948 until 1970. When he started working for the OECD he was a Trotskyist, and he remained a revolutionary, so his choice of career his may seem odd, but (as David Ames Curtis wryly comments<sup>iii</sup>) it gave him a chance to observe at first hand the workings of both capitalism and bureaucracy. (It also afforded him a critical take on the problem of "development"<sup>iv</sup>). One of the symptoms of the failure to link theory and practice lay, he believed, in the growth of bureaucracy, which he saw as the separation of the "order-givers" from the "order-takers"<sup>v</sup>. (See further section 3(iii) below, on bureaucracy, and Castoriadis's particular formulation: "bureaucratic society").

Castoriadis became a practising psychoanalyst (though with no ties to the international psychoanalytic establishment) in 1974. (He was associated with a group of psychoanalysts who had broken away from the followers of Lacan in 1968). In my view, one of his most original contributions to modern thought lay in his linking the individual's and society's need for self-definition and autonomy (this argument is elaborated below, in section 5 (v)).

In fact, few thinkers in the twentieth century can have had Castoriadis's breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding of the individual and society. Not many have maintained, in this age of cynicism and post-modernism, a lifelong commitment to the goal of radical political liberation, coupled with a belief in both the need for, and the possibility of, such a liberation.

Moreover, the questions that Castoriadis addressed are surely still with us. Is it possible for us to manage our own lives? How can we have both free individuals and a free society? How far can we go in understanding the society of which we are a part? And above all perhaps, what is the role of "theory" in relation to this project of "recommencing the revolution"? The political and social problems he identified also remain to be solved, among them: bureaucracy, heteronomy, and the fragmentation and meaninglessness of the modern world. Given this, it is a puzzle to me that the work of Castoriadis is not better known, and it is one aim of this paper to summarise some of his contributions to modern political thought in such a way that the reader may be enticed to find out more about him.

The phrase "recommencing the revolution" seemed apt as a title for this paper, for several reasons. First it was the title of an article written for *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (henceforth *S. ou B.*) in 1963/4, in which Castoriadis speaks of the "ruination of classical Marxism". "Recommencing the Revolution" (see also endnote (ii) below) was translated (as "Redefining Revolution") by Maurice Brinton for the British group Solidarity, and it was this Solidarity pamphlet which was my first introduction to the work of Castoriadis, and I found this new view of revolution both convincing and exciting. The phrase also reflects several central aspects of Castoriadis' thinking. All his life he believed in revolution, but he came to see, first, that the term "revolution" needed redefining, since the traditional left notion of capturing the state had proved a total failure – the USSR was not, for him, a workers' paradise. Moreover, revolutionary theory itself had to be rethought, as "what is essential in reality today... can be understood only in the light of different analyses". Eventually Castoriadis came to argue that since society itself, and all things social, are products of our collective imagination, revolutionary change must consist in our fundamentally redefining the very meanings on which existing society is based. This second idea is expressed in Castoriadis's notion of the "radical social imaginary".

This paper will explore the evolution of Castoriadis's ideas, from revolutionary Marxism, via philosophy, social theory and psychology, to a rejection of Marxism, and to the formulation of a critique of the modern world, from a new revolutionary perspective. These thoughts will draw on three texts written by Castoriadis between 1959 and 1965: *Modern Capitalism and Revolution* (henceforth MCR), *Recommencing Revolution* (RR) & *Modern Revolutionary Theory* (MRT). The last of these texts was reprinted

as the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. (See the Bibliography for full details of these and other works by Castoriadis).

In a future paper I will examine the key concept of the “social imaginary”, drawing on a text from 1975, which became the second part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (IIS). However, I will first continue with this brief overview of Castoriadis’s ideas and his political and philosophical position. I hope that this overview will support a contention I wish to make, that the idea of the radical social imaginary gradually emerged from his early Marxist thought, and that there is continuity between the early and the later ideas of Castoriadis <sup>vi</sup>.

To some readers, no doubt, the dialogue with Marx may seem arcane or even pointless. However, I want to show, first, that Castoriadis constantly tried to make sense of the social, political and historical context of his own life, and, second, (in doing this) that he was true to one of the most basic tenets of Marxist philosophy which is, that we cannot make sense of the world, and our part in it, if our “practice” does not reflect our “theory”, and if our theory has no purchase on the real world (see note ii). Moreover, in our thinking we have to start with the real world, and when the real world changes we need to *change our thinking* to make sense of it (not continue to pretend that our predictions are right despite the evidence accumulating to the contrary). Castoriadis always strove to restore the link between theory and practice, and he always tried to make philosophy relevant to social and political action. In doing this, while rejecting Marxism, I believe that he took a significant step towards putting theory in its place.

The distinctive feature of Castoriadis’s outlook, then, was his ability to acknowledge the social and political realities of the twentieth century – including the travesty (as he saw it) of “socialism” in the Soviet Union, and the demise of Marxism and other revolutionary movements – while maintaining a belief in and a hope for a radically better future. In Castoriadis’s own “General Introduction” to the first volume of his *Political and Social Writings*, written in 1972<sup>vii</sup>, he usefully outlines the main stages of his life, which will be indicated in this piece. He also summarises (p 3) “a few of the facts” about the three decades that followed the Second World War. This summary is worth quoting, despite its length, as it gives an indication of how he saw the twentieth century. The extract also highlights several key themes (italicised by me), which his work explores:

“the expansion of the Russian *bureaucratic* machine and its empire over half of Europe; the bureaucracy’s accession to power in China; the crisis of Stalinism, its ideological death and its real survival; the *popular revolts* against the bureaucracy in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia; the disappearance of the traditional working-class movement in Western countries; and the *privatisation of individuals* in all countries... the internal collapse of the system of values and rules in modern society; the *challenging, in words as well as deeds, of institutions*, some of which (schools, prisons) date from the beginning of historical societies and others of which (the family) were born somewhere in the mists of time... the eclipse...of our inherited bearings and of all



bearings for reflection and action, with *society dispossessed of its knowledge* and this knowledge itself, swelling like a malignant tumour, in a profound crisis as to its meaning and function; the boundless proliferation of a multitude of empty and irresponsible discourses, their industrialized ideological fabrication and the glutting of the market by a plasticized pop philosophy.....”

It would be easy, as many have done, surveying these profound changes, to conclude that history is indeed dead, that all ideologies are equally worthless and dangerous, that the “progress” which modernism represented or promised was an illusion, etc., etc. Yet Castoriadis rejected what he saw as the emptiness of post-modern thought, and always believed that we can make some sense of the world, though of course we should not fall into the trap of believing that we will ever explain everything.

The key to this realistic but critical approach lies in what Castoriadis called the *radical imaginary*. This is what creates all social institutions - in the broadest sense of the word “institutions”, and so including rational thought itself, as well as the values and norms we adhere to. He had always rejected determinism, in any form, and the positing of the radical (social) imaginary enabled him to develop a sophisticated theoretical alternative to deterministic explanations of society. Since we have created and continue to create society; since doing this makes us what we are, then we must strive to maintain this capacity, or else we will find ourselves allowing the institutions we have created to determine our future. This way of looking at society clearly underlies the political concept of *autonomy*<sup>viii</sup>.

However, it is important to stress right away that this, for Castoriadis, was a *social autonomy* that, of necessity, exercises *self-limitation*. I believe that this idea is consistent with his psychoanalytical approach. For, as a psychoanalyst, he understood that the individual needs to be both autonomous (not directed by others or by forces outside him/herself), and capable of living with others (in the family and in society). Moreover, we could say that the purpose of psychoanalysis is to help the individual restore a lost balance - retaining a sense of individuality (“self”) while at the same time recognising the social dimension of his/her identity. And, just as this requires that the individual first recognise, and then define limits to his/her autonomy, so it is, surely, with society: the fundamental aim of any society is to create, and then to maintain, its own identity. Sadly, most societies have “lost” this knowledge that they are, as it were, their own creation - hence the reference above to the “dispossession of [social] knowledge”.

What is more, there is even an all-pervading myth that, especially with the help of technology, “there are no limits”, that we (modern society) can have absolute freedom - most vividly manifest as a desire for total control over nature. Castoriadis, along with a growing body of opinion, would say this is not only unachievable, but in a very real sense it is *irrational*.

The questions to be posed in these papers ultimately home in on the viability of this view of humanity - on the “social imaginary” and its implications for social and political life. Thus the key questions, in the end, will be: whether Castoriadis succeeded in laying a philosophical basis for a new approach to revolutionary social change; whether he successfully “redefined” revolution;

and whether he did this without betraying his radical intent. If we do not agree with Castoriadis, we might either find that the basic concepts and definitions are flawed, and reject the whole approach; or we might agree with the notions of the radical imaginary, and even autonomy, as he defined them, but find that it is possible to draw from them a liberal, reformist or even pluralist politics, - even though this latter was never the intention of Castoriadis himself, as is clear from the interview cited above.

## 2. Leaving Trotskyism

Cornelius Castoriadis <sup>ix</sup>, 1922 - 1997, was born in Constantinople and studied law, economics and philosophy in Athens. Although a member of the Greek Communist Youth in 1937, he later criticised the Greek Communist Party "from within", and eventually became a Trotskyist. When Greece was occupied by the Germans in 1941 he, in his own words, survived "the double persecution of the Gestapo and the local [Stalinist] GPU (which assassinated dozens of Trotskyist militants during and after the occupation)" (PSW Vol. 1 p 5). At the end of the war Castoriadis moved to France, and was a co-founder with Claude Lefort, in 1949, of *S.ou B.* (*Socialisme ou Barbarie*).<sup>x</sup> This was a revolutionary political group, advocating workers' management, which was the focus of activity and discussion for a small number of ex-Trotskyists (Jean-Francois Lyotard later joined the group for a time, breaking with it in 1963) and which produced a journal under the same name, which was still circulating in the mid-1960s.

It is often acknowledged that *S. ou B.* (almost alone among "left" groups) had an impact on the "events" of May 1968 in France<sup>xi</sup>. This was largely due to its maintaining a revolutionary socialist position, while at the same time, unlike many intellectuals (e.g. Sartre and Althusser in France, Lukacs in Hungary) being prepared to criticise the "bureaucratic distortions" of "socialism" in the Soviet union, and the bureaucracy and opportunism of the pro-Russian western Communist Parties. For it was clear to *S. ou B.* that the new Soviet regime exploited the workers even more ruthlessly than was happening in the "free West" - the promises of a new classless society in which workers directed their own work had proved to be empty words ("all power to the soviets", for example - provided they followed the Bolshevik line of course). Moreover, unlike many revolutionary activists influenced by Trotsky, (notably Mandel), Castoriadis and his colleagues also opposed Trotsky's "blindness about Stalinism"; and he criticised Trotsky's followers in the Fourth International for their, as it were, "frozen" theory of the Soviet Union i.e. their belief that it was a workers' state, and that all that needed changing was the "bureaucratic" leadership<sup>xii</sup>. For Castoriadis, writing in 1947, the Soviet Union was a "new and consummate form of *class* society" (emphasis added), which he called "the bureaucratic society" - we will return below to some of the implications of the idea of a bureaucratic *society*, in particular Castoriadis's definition of alienation (while noting that this is clearly distinct from a mere *ruling bureaucracy*).

The uprisings in East Germany, Poland, and Hungary during the 1950s (and later in Czechoslovakia) also vindicated and strengthened the *S. ou B.* perspective in two senses: first the claim of these regimes to be socialist was clearly hollow, since workers were demonstrating against their own "workers' governments", and second the workers had an alternative - they were setting

up workers' councils, and exercising real power both over production and in society<sup>xiii</sup>.

As is well known, many members of Communist Parties left in disillusionment during this period, and especially after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. However, many on the left, especially with the "thaw", maintained their belief that the USSR represented a desirable new society. Castoriadis' attacks on the whole basis of the soviet regime ("Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – four words, four lies" he once said) made many fellow-travellers unhappy<sup>xiv</sup>.

In 1966, Castoriadis convinced *S. ou B.* to disband. On the one hand this was because of a sense of frustration at the passivity of readers of the journal (like Marx, he saw "consumption" as a way of dumbing down the masses). But on the other hand, he was able to see the *S. ou B.* political message being taken up by students and others in the '60s, and was somewhat vindicated by the near-revolution in France in May 1968. In particular, the hostility to bureaucratized political parties, and the demand for workers' self-management were key elements in the "May Days", which derived from *S.ou B.*

### 3. Building on Marx: from workers' power to autonomy

Castoriadis then worked in France as "Director of the Branch of Statistics, National Accounts and Growth Studies" at the OECD. His writings at this time are still shaped by the desire to use something of a Marxist method against Marx. For instance, we can take a text which is central to Castoriadis's work - "**Modern Capitalism and Revolution**"<sup>xv</sup>, (henceforth MCR). Written in 1959, this text was circulated to members of *S. ou B.*, (whose members included both workers and intellectuals), reworked in response to their criticisms, and then published in 1960. In it Castoriadis describes the development of modern capitalism, and of past and current workers' struggles. While many writers hostile to Marxism have pointed to the failure of these movements as evidence for the superiority of capitalism, Castoriadis continues in the Marxist tradition of revolutionary criticism. In this text he identifies what he regards as the most radical aspirations of the workers' movement, - especially self-management - and argues that there is still, and always will be, a movement for realising these aspirations. At the same time, the text contains the beginnings of new formulations, and ideas which were to take him well beyond Marx.

#### (i) Contradictions

Castoriadis argues that while there *are* (still, and always) "contradictions" in capitalism, and that (as Marx argued) capitalism *cannot* survive, what we need to do is to re-think the nature of these contradictions. There are several original aspects to this analysis, and some have still a strikingly contemporary flavour. Castoriadis points out that most of what Marxists call contradictions are merely instances of *conflict*.

For Castoriadis, the fundamental contradiction is that modern capitalism both tries to reduce the worker to a mere machine (and the citizen to a mere

consumer), and at the same time requires the worker, (and the citizen), to accept, participate in and contribute to the processes of work (and of politics). In making this point, Castoriadis begins to formulate a critique, which uses and goes beyond both Marx and Weber, of the "rationalisation" which characterises modern capitalism and bureaucracy. In other words, this "rationalisation" is *per se* contradictory, not simply because we cannot regard humans as more than mere machines or passive objects, but because rationalisation demands that we also and at the same time regard them as rational and capable of autonomy.

#### (ii) Autonomy

This argument is coupled with a detailed critique of classical Marxist economics, and of its underlying (objectivist, materialist and determinist) philosophy. This leads Castoriadis to a new<sup>xvi</sup> emphasis on the *self-conscious activity of the working class* in shaping and changing society, as against the working out of impersonal objective economic laws. The word "autonomy" is used in the last two paragraphs of MCR, (p 307) to describe the goal of this self-conscious activity, and this concept is strengthened and developed in Castoriadis' later work.

#### (iii) Bureaucracy

Since modern ("Western") capitalism was also increasingly bureaucratic, both the existing "capitalist" and "communist" forms of society in fact shared a common fundamental characteristic, namely the drive for "rationalisation". This argument has a superficial similarity to the so-called "convergence thesis" popularised by Clark Kerr in the late 1960s, and to James Burnham's notion of a "managerial society".<sup>xvii</sup> Castoriadis's argument, however, is distinct in two respects. First, he argues that this process of rationalisation, or bureaucratisation, "is accomplished through the ever-heightened separation of direction and execution" (p273). This creates a *new social order*, and the effects go far beyond the work-place. This order is still seen in terms of "classes" at the end (p 306) of MCR – though defined in terms of "management or control" rather than "ownership". On the one hand are the workers, reduced to mere "executants", with no control over their work, and on the other are the "order-givers" - the bureaucrats and managers (whether in the workplace, in society, or in politics). Second, as noted above, this social order is based on a fundamental contradiction, and thus there is still the possibility of avoiding barbarism and moving to socialism – the "executants" will rise to the challenge given them by their own managers and demand the right to manage!

We can see here already the importance to Castoriadis of "autonomy" at work and in society, and we will return to this later, in connection with his philosophical and psychological arguments (section 5, especially (iii) (iv) and (v)). We may note also that he writes (ibid) of bureaucratisation entailing "a transformation of the values and significations that form the basis of people's lives in society", even a "destruction of the significations of social activities" – and in his later writings this notion of "significations" is also further explored. At this point, however, Castoriadis is primarily redefining the content of socialism (although much of the language used is still that of Marxism).

#### (iv) Socialism

In the final section of MCR, “For a Modern Revolutionary Movement”, Castoriadis lists a number of “practical conclusions” (while warning that this is not a “programme!”). First, the “revolutionary movement has to be rebuilt from rock bottom”, since “everything which has existed in the working class movement (ideology, parties, unions, etc) is irrevocably and irretrievably finished, rotten, integrated into exploiting society.” Moreover, since capitalism and bureaucratisation extend to the whole of our lives, he also broadens (or “switches the axis” of) the “revolutionary criticism of modern society”, (p 304-5) to include: “the inhuman and absurd character of work... the arbitrariness and monstrosity of hierarchy... the disintegration of communities, the dehumanisation of human relations, the content and methods of capitalist education, the monstrosity of modern cities, the double oppression imposed on women and on youth.” In short, socialism is concerned with “all aspects of life”.

#### 4. Transcending Marx.

I believe it is possible to see in MCR that Castoriadis was already beginning to develop a new approach to existing theory, and a new approach to the relation between theory and practice. To illustrate this I would note the following arguments - which often have a surprisingly contemporary feel, forty years later:

(i) With reference to the “objective/subjective” dichotomy, which has played such a large part in Marxist argument, (especially in relation to the “right conditions for socialism”) Castoriadis says (p 298): “there is only one condition for socialism. It is neither ‘objective’ nor ‘subjective’. It is historical.” Later (p 301) he adds: “The process (of the ripening of the conditions for socialism) is *historical*. The subjective exists only inasmuch as it modifies the objective, and the objective has no other signification than what the actions of the subjective confer upon it in a given context and connection” <sup>xviii</sup>. We will return in our second paper to the further exploration, perhaps the redefinition, of the meaning of “historical” in Castoriadis later work.

(ii) Capitalism is (re-)defined as a form of society based on the increased rational/scientific control both of people and of nature. This also provides a theoretical basis for some of Castoriadis’s later writings against ecological destruction – destruction being wrought by a supposedly “rational” drive (but one that is actually “irrational”, as suggested above) to control and conquer nature. Such awareness of ecological principles is surely in advance of the time when this text was written (1959).

(iii) One “expression of bureaucratic politics” (p 302) is what he calls the “privatisation” of individuals. Thus in a society with a fundamental cleavage between “order-givers” and “order-takers” the individual is bound to feel cut off from all things “public”. He goes on to say that, “[seen as] an inability to confront the problem of society... it [the privatisation of individuals] is anything but positive. But there is something more and different than just this. The rejection of politics as it exists today is, in a certain fashion, the

wholesale rejection of present-day society. What is being rejected is the content of all 'programs' because all these programs – whether conservative, reformist or 'communist' merely represent different variants of the same type of society... Today de-politicisation is a criticism of the separation of politics from life."

(iv) Finally, (p 306) in language which can be found in later accounts of "new social movements"<sup>xix</sup>, Castoriadis says the revolutionary movement itself must get rid of hierarchy and specialists, and be "the place where...individuals learn about collective life, run their own affairs, and fulfil and develop themselves, working for a common objective in reciprocal recognition."

## 5. Towards a new theory.

Whilst MCR is a very forward-looking text, considering it was written in 1959, both the break with Marx and the beginnings of a new approach are most clearly stated in two further texts from the mid-sixties: "Recommencing the Revolution" (1964 - RR) <sup>xx</sup> and "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (1964-5 - MRT) <sup>xxi</sup>.

(i) Theory and Practice have become separated.

In *Recommencing the Revolution* Castoriadis, describes the history of Marxism to date in relation to "theory and practice":

"According to its own programme and its most deep-seated content, Marxism could live only as a constantly renewed theoretical search that sheds light on a world in constant change, and as a practice that constantly transforms the world while also being transformed by it..." (Castoriadis Reader, p 109) and yet, he charges, no theoretical progress has been made since 1923 (the year of Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*), and no Marxist group since the Spanish Civil War has "actually acted on its principles and connected these with mass activity" (loc cit). The self-proclaimed defenders of Marxism "can defend Marxism only by transforming it into its contrary, into an eternal doctrine that could never be upset by any fact... Like a despairing lover whose mistress has died prematurely, they can now express their love only by raping the corpse." (loc cit)

In the opening paragraphs of MRT (CR p 139 - 40) Castoriadis makes it clear that he is not arguing for a return to one "pure" or "correct" version of Marxism over others; but that he regards Marxism as now an ideology, covering the truth and incapable of being developed further. Nor can one defend (as Lukacs tried to do) a "Marxist method" which is separate from its content. A method, Castoriadis argues, is simply an "operating set of categories". And, if we regard the method as somehow separate from the material it is being applied to, either the material being put into categories already has some "distinctive sign" which tells you which category to put it in (and how would this have come about?) or the material really is "shapeless", in which case the choice of category is arbitrary, and "the distinction between true and false collapses". (CR p 142 - 3). This, as Castoriadis puts it, is "the

question posed on the level of logic”, (i.e. at a purely theoretical level). When we turn to history there is a further problem, since “the categories we use to think historically are, for an essential part, real products of historical development”, and “these categories can clearly and effectively become forms of *knowledge* of history only when they are embodied or realized in forms of *effective social life*” (original emphasis)<sup>xxii</sup>.

In other words, (words which point towards the next step in Castoriadis’s thinking): “It is clear that there can be no ‘method’ in history which would remain unaffected by real historical development.” And therefore, “Since the object of historical knowledge is itself a signifying object, or an object constituted by significations, the development of the historical world is *ipso facto* the unfolding of a world of *significations*” (p 144, emphasis added). He adds that “there can be no break between matter and category, between fact and meaning.”

Castoriadis emphasises (pre-empting, perhaps, a suggestion of post-modernism *avant le mot* or some form of relativism) that this does not mean that all categories and methods are immediately put into question at every moment by historical change – but that “each time it is a *concrete question* (emphasis added) whether historical change has reached the point where the old categories and the old method are to be reconsidered.” (ibid)

What is quite clear, however, is that “the history we are living can no longer be grasped with the help of Marxist categories” (ibid), and “we have arrived at the point where we have to choose between remaining Marxist and remaining revolutionaries” (p 145).

(ii) No more “total theories”

Some, of course, stuck to Marxism through thick and thin – fearing that by abandoning it they would lose their “revolutionary impetus”; others gave up on revolution as an ideal, simply because they saw that Marxism was failing. For Castoriadis, both these strategies result from the “phantasy” that there can be a total theory, which emerges at one point in time, yet contains the truth about all time (and about all things!). Of course, our relationship to knowledge, and to the world, is not like that – rather, theory *is* a making/doing, which lies somewhere “between chaos and absolute knowledge”. Theory is “the always uncertain attempt to realize the project of elucidating the world” (CR p 149). We are always “recommencing” the process of trying to understand the world.

(iii) Praxis and project

Theory, then, is making/doing, and cannot be separated from practice; and there cannot be a ready-made total theory. Moreover we now live in a bureaucratic society which is tearing itself apart, since it encourages a belief in peoples’ freedom, while controlling them more and more in every aspect of their lives. There is no future in total control, and people will – must – resist control to assert their own autonomy<sup>xxiii</sup>. This is the new sense of “revolution” for Castoriadis.

We now arrive at a key statement of the principle behind Castoriadis's libertarian socialism, when he re-defines praxis (practice informed by theory):

*"We call praxis that making/doing in which the other or others are intended as autonomous beings and considered as the essential agents of the development of their own autonomy." (150)*

It is worth noting here, that while this statement has Kantian overtones, Castoriadis is not making a moral statement, nor is he simply describing the necessary mental attitude we must adopt towards each other. Rather he is attempting to base this recognition of each others' autonomy in an *ontology* - a view of what it is to act in the world. - a view which embeds the individual in the social-historical (see (vi) below).

#### (iv) The roots of the revolutionary project

It should be clear from the way Castoriadis has argued, that he is far from seeing revolution as a "totality" - a point he counters next (p 154), since it is a "project" that we all "autonomously" seek to realise. But he also needs to deal with objections that "autonomy" is a denial of reality, an illusion, infantile etc., He argues that there are both subjective and objective roots of the revolutionary project - the subjective side lies in wanting to "know what is going on in society... to be able to participate directly in all the decisions that may affect my existence". He goes on: "I do not accept the fact that my lot is decided, day after day, by people whose projects are hostile to me or simply unknown to me..." This is not an infantile desire (shades of Lenin! <sup>xxiv</sup>) since infants desire either total freedom or to be told what to do!

In describing the "objective" aspects, Castoriadis is, in part, still close to his Marxist roots, since he argues that the conflicts at heart of labour relations and the economy have led to the setting-up of workers' groups, whose demands have extended to include the conditions and organisation of labour and even the management of production (Russia 1917, Catalonia 1936, Hungary 1956). He adds that recent society has been contested by mass movements, and that authority is being worn down, economic motivation losing its force, "the instituted imaginary (an expression which is amplified in (vii) below, and which will be more fully examined in our second paper) is losing its hold".

#### (v) Self, other and society.

Later in *Marxism and Revolutionary Theory* there is a crucial passage, in a section headed "the sense of autonomy - the individual" (p 177) which makes use of Freudian ideas, but interprets them in such a way as to bring together explanations of individual behaviour with an understanding of how individual and society are interdependent. Here Castoriadis argues that the opposition "autonomy/heteronomy" operates at the level of the individual psyche as well as socially. He quotes Freud's dictum "Where Id was, Ego shall come to be" (Wo Es war, soll Ich werden) and argues that the Id, or unconscious, does not consist *simply* of ready-made instincts and drives, (libido, death instinct) as some interpretations have it. Rather, it also contains the "unconscious forces of rearing and repression" - that is, the unconscious is "to a great extent" socially constructed (ibid) <sup>xxv</sup>.



Castoriadis uses Lacan's explanation that the Unconscious represents "the depository of intentions, desires, cathexes, demands, expectations – significations to which the individual has been exposed from the moment of conception... as these stem from those who engendered and raised him", or in other words: "the law of another" – another *in me* (p 177) <sup>xxvi</sup>. Heteronomy at the individual level, then, is when the subject "takes himself to be" (that is *imagines* himself to be – an early use of the word imaginary, which Castoriadis was to modify later) other than he/she is, because he/she is ruled by the content of the unconscious – the "discourse of the Other". And the Other is, in a sense, society. Autonomy, then, is when another relation is established with the Other – not a rejection of other influences/discourses, since this is impossible (we are in large part the product of how we react to such influences), nor the elimination or suppression of drives (presumably also impossible!). Instead Castoriadis writes of replacing the unconscious as an "agency of decision", so that *consciousness* is making the decisions. This would create a new relation with the Other, where I am aware of this discourse (the "law of another", the "forces of rearing and repression") and can take it in, consider it, and either affirm it or negate it in deciding on my own truth (p 179). This is not a static condition (a "state") but an unceasing movement, where the individual is one who is "capable of uncovering his phantasies as phantasies and who finally never allows them to dominate – unless he is so willing." It is worth noting here that Castoriadis states right away that this "new relation" could probably never be reached in perfect form – "the notion of the subject's own truth is itself much more a problem than a solution". A constant theme in Castoriadis's work has been that what we are considering, be it the individual, society, a class, capitalism, even socialism, is changing, moving, and never fixed (we are always "recommencing...").

This position, he continues, means the rejection of two myths: (a) the definition of a subject as a "point-like ego" (p 180), and (b) the belief in the "pure freedom" of the individual as imagined by subjectivist philosophy (p 181). For Castoriadis, the subject is always "the produced and productive union of the self and the other (or the world)" (*ibid*). It is crucial to reject these two myths, since they have resulted in the desire to enslave on the one hand the "other", and on the other "corporeality". The other must always be a threat to a free and independently-constituted ego, and if we "forget" (as traditional philosophy has) that the subject has a "concrete structure", then we descend into "the narcissism of the consciousness" and come to regard our very bodies as alien or even hostile. This is a rich passage, and I would love to explore these ideas further, but I will have to leave this until a later paper.

(vi) The social-historical.

In the final pages of MRT, Castoriadis returns to the question of the "social", and notes that this "needs explicating" (or re-defining perhaps, since theories/explanations of the individual as separate, atomistic, cannot provide an adequate theory of society). First, he underlines the "social dimension of autonomy": autonomy can only be a social relation or a social problem, and hence only this conception of the subject and autonomy makes praxis (as defined) possible.

Then Castoriadis introduces a concept which is fundamental to his thinking, and which he will develop through later writings: the *social-historical*. With a brief rejection of the philosophical distancing of the Other, which has led to such dead-ends as “Hell is other people” (Sartre), Castoriadis argues that the fact that “the other or others... [are] constitutive of the subject” recalls the fact that “human existence is multiple (*a plusieurs*)” (p 183)<sup>xxvii</sup>. But “this multiple existence” is not “mere intersubjectivity”... “it is social and historical existence and, to us, this is the essential dimension of the problem. In a way, the intersubjective is the material out of which the social is made but this material exists only as a part and moment of the social, which it composes but which it also presupposes.” It is worth stressing that Castoriadis does not reject “intersubjectivity” – the sharing of meanings or “significations” – but sees that these significations are rooted in a social-historical reality.<sup>xxviii</sup>

(vii) Instituted heteronomy - alienation as a social phenomenon

In a final act of re-definition, Castoriadis begins to explore (p 184) the way in which we have constructed “solidified institutional structures of economy, power, ideology, mystification manipulation and violence”, which either are alienating in themselves, or, because we allow them “autonomy”, and attribute to them their own inertia or logic, then we become alienated in regard to them. In this way, alienation “does not simply appear as the discourse of the other” – though this has an essential role – but the “other... disappears into collective anonymity, in the impersonal nature of the market or Plan, or “the law of few presented as law as such”. This is alienation as a social phenomenon, and this is the basic feature of a “bureaucratic society”.

Note that Castoriadis identifies two “steps” here – the first is that we attribute “significations” to the world around us, and these are “instituted” in society. But then, we lose sight of the fact that we originated these institutions, and give them power over us, a power which easily becomes real because these institutions and their signification are real...

However, it is a mistake to imagine that we can simply abolish all institutions. Communism “in its mythical sense” is often presented this way... This mythical idea takes the form either of the “total man”, dominating history, or of a purely transparent society, both of which are clearly unrealisable from Castoriadis’s point of view. Since on the one hand, individuals and their Unconscious are “instituted” – then to call for the abolition of institutions would be to call for the elimination of the Unconscious, perhaps even of the subject! And on the other hand, as he has argued, we cannot have pure/total knowledge of society, since we are continually “instituting” it. The social exists both as instituted and as instituting (p 187).

Put more simply, Castoriadis’s view is that we can neither demand absolute freedom from society (as anarchists do?), just as we cannot be free from or dominate nature (as Marxists have promised), since we are part of both. Nor should we resign ourselves to the inevitability of complete alienation, since society is not in itself alienating, (although it is the “condition on which freedom/alienation can exist”).

Thus, having re-defined society and indicated the nature of alienation, Castoriadis has placed himself politically in a position which is distinct from fatalistic, deterministic philosophies on the one hand, and stereotypical anarchistic/communistic positions on the other. He has also laid the foundations for further explorations of the “institution” of society.

In the very last paragraph of this fascinating document, Castoriadis gives a tantalising glimpse of another “key” which will help him to unlock the door to a theory of revolutionary change. He clarifies that he is not arguing for a society which “would completely coincide with its institutions... [since this would have] a network of infinitely flat institutions”. For “there will always be a distance between society as instituting and what is, at each moment, instituted – and this distance... is one of the expressions of the creativity of history.... Just as an individual cannot grasp or provide himself with anything at all – neither the world nor himself – outside the symbolic dimension, no society can provide itself with anything outside the second-order symbolism represented by institutions.” (p 189)

In the sequel to this text – the Imaginary Institution of Society – Castoriadis examines and explores the nature of this (second-order) “symbolism” and its basis in our capacity to “imagine” (another concept that needs to be re-defined) our society – as it is, and as it could be.

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<sup>i</sup> In an interview with Daniel Mermet, quoted in: Castoriadis, C.: *Post-Scriptum sur l'Insignifiante*, Editions de l'Aube, 1998

<sup>ii</sup> For example, he wrote in 1972 that: "Marxism had not achieved the transcendence of the antinomy between theory and practice. The theory, having turned speculative again, had become dissociated into a metaphysics that will not say its own name and a so-called positive science founded upon the former's prejudices and mimicking the sociologically dominant model of society. To these two was annexed a practice conceived of as the application of truths derived from the theory, i.e. conceived of ultimately as technique." (p 29 of General Introduction to Cornelius Castoriadis: *Political and Social Writings* (henceforth PSW), translated and edited by David Ames Curtis (Vol. 1, of three volumes) University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1988). Yet the Marxian concept of praxis denotes "the indissoluble unity of theory and practice", as Castoriadis puts it in *Recommencing the Revolution* (*The Castoriadis Reader*, Edited by David Ames Curtis, Blackwell 1997 p 109 – henceforth CR). I am indebted to David Ames Curtis for several essential insights into Castoriadis's approach to theory, and for the formulation that Castoriadis "put theory in its place". *Recommencing the Revolution* also appears in PSW Vol. 3, p 27-53.

<sup>iii</sup> See the Foreword to PSW Vol. 1.

<sup>iv</sup> E.g. "From Ecology to Autonomy" (1980) CR p 239 ff.

<sup>v</sup> As early as 1949 in "Socialism or Barbarism", PSW vol. 1 p. 76-106.

<sup>vi</sup> This is a different position to that expressed by Brian Singer in two papers published in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* :  
No. 3 (Fall 1979): Pp 35 - 56: Brian Singer: The Early Castoriadis - socialism, barbarism and the bureaucratic thread  
No. 4 (Winter 1980): Pp 75 - 101: Brian Singer: The Later Castoriadis - institutions under interrogation.

<sup>vii</sup> See his General Introduction to PSW (Vol 1, p.3). This Introduction to the three volumes of his political and social writings, covering the years 1946 to 1979, also gives a succinct account of the stages through which Castoriadis's ideas evolved.

<sup>viii</sup> We see here how Castoriadis took the idea of workers' self-management and developed and transformed it. We will elaborate on this below.

<sup>ix</sup> He adopted other names, as did many revolutionaries who had many enemies and who were trying to keep "straight" jobs. Articles in *S. ou B.* (and in the English translations published by Solidarity) appear under: Pierre Cardan, Pierre Chaulieu, Jean-Marc Coudray. For further details of this use of pseudonyms among revolutionaries, see PSW 1 (Foreword p viii and footnote 5, also Appendix H)

<sup>x</sup> The idea that civilisation has a choice, between socialism or some such alternative as barbarism, goes back to Marx and Engels – for example in the reference in the Communist manifesto to the future of class conflict, where there would be either "a revolutionary constitution of society at large, or "the common ruin of the contending classes". Different meanings have been attached to the word barbarism, by Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and others. For Castoriadis, any "exploitative society", whether "capitalist" or "communist", could tend towards barbarism in so far as any chance to criticise or think alternatives is prevented. The crucial point about the alternative "socialism or barbarism" is that it does not represent any kind of inevitability - *we do have a choice*. See the detailed discussion by David Ames Curtis: "Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis" in *Revue Europeenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (1989): 293-322.

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<sup>xi</sup> Cohn-Bendit, D. and G.: *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, translated by Arnold Pomerans, McGraw-Hill (1968) and Hirsh, A.: "Castoriadis and Socialisme ou Barbarie" in *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz*, Boston: South End Press (1981).

<sup>xii</sup> Castoriadis points out (Introduction to PSW vol. 1 p 8) that "Trotsky had written in black and white that if the war ended without the victory of world revolution, the analysis of the Russian regime would have to be revised and it would have to be admitted that Stalinist bureaucracy and fascism already had sketched the outline of a new type of exploitative regime, which he identified, moreover, with barbarism." When the war ended, no such revision of the analysis took place, of course – and Trotsky's "epigones" resorted to claiming that the war "had not really ended. Probably for them it still has not ended." He also wrote, adopting a typical stance of "a plague on both your houses": "by means of the theory of the "socialist bases of the Soviet economy", the Fourth International is indulging in the same kind of mendacious and hypocritical apologetics that bourgeois professors employ when they talk about the sovereignty of the people and civil equality, as guaranteed by the Constitution" – for they are confusing the "real relations of production with the juridical formulas employed by the bureaucracy to camouflage these relations". (*The Problem of the USSR*, 1947, in PSW Vol. 1 p 50-51)

<sup>xiii</sup> See: Harman, C.: "Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe" (1974), Pluto Press.

<sup>xiv</sup> See "The Social Regime in Russia" (1978) in CR p 218 ff.

<sup>xv</sup> MCR: "Le Mouvement Revolutionnaire sous le Capitalisme Moderne": S. ou B. No. 31, first translated into English, as "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (Paul Cardan), by Maurice Brinton, Solidarity, London 1963. References here are to PSW vol. 2 pp 226 – 343.

<sup>xvi</sup> "New" except that it is present in the more radical aspects of Marx's writing. Castoriadis drew a distinction between two sides of Marx, and regarded Capital as far from revolutionary in its reduction of society (and people!) to economic formulae: the central weakness in Marx's economic theory, for castoriadis, is that at times Marx acknowledges that workers, through industrial action, can sometimes affect (drive up) the wages they receive, but his "mature" economic theory is based on the assumption that workers' wages either diminish over time, or at the very best remain constant. But, argues Castoriadis, this could only happen if workers have no consciousness of what is going on. And yet the capitalist "system" itself requires them to improve their working methods, to "participate" in production, and to consume more. (One might even argue that it requires that they demand wage rises!). Hence, for Castoriadis, the "contradictory" nature of capitalist economics.

<sup>xvii</sup> Burnham, J. *The Managerial revolution*, Greenwood Press (1972); Kerr, C.: "Industrialism and Industrial Man" (2<sup>nd</sup> British Edition 1973), Penguin/Heinemann Educational.

<sup>xviii</sup> Maurice Brinton's translation for Solidarity differs slightly: "the subjective is only of importance inasmuch as it modifies what is objective. And what is objective only acquires the meaning which the actions of the subjective confer to it in a given context and connection."

<sup>xix</sup> E.g. Touraine, A.: "Retour de l'Acteur" (1988), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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<sup>xx</sup> “Recommencing the Revolution” can be found in PSW vol. 3 p 27-53, also in CR p 106-137.

<sup>xxi</sup> Part of this text (the first section of ch. 1 and all of ch. 2) appears in CR (pp 106 - 195). It appeared first in the final issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and was reprinted, in three chapters, as the first part of IIS (pp 9 - 164). Castoriadis writes a typical note in the Preface to IIS that he has not re-written this text, as it is valuable to see the “scaffolding” as it is being erected, not just a completed building.

<sup>xxii</sup> Thus, in Antiquity, the dominant categories used to understand the society are political, and “economic” concepts are not helpful – not because such societies were less advanced, or because the economic did not exist, but because the economy was not a separate “autonomous” moment of human activity (this happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of course, with the birth of capitalism).

<sup>xxiii</sup> See previously, in *Recommencing the Revolution*: capitalism is a society where *values have collapsed* (p 122) and therefore there is no culture which can “structure personalities adequate to it (i.e. to make the culture function, if only as the exploited)”. Yet the *system has not collapsed*, and people have continued to produce (and to produce a culture). It is evident, then, that people do constantly strive to give meaning to their lives, and that this effort is now becoming an “aspiration for autonomy”.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Lenin: “Left-wing communism, an infantile disorder” 1920. (Progress Publishers, Moscow).

<sup>xxv</sup> I found this a significant reading, having previously assumed that Freud saw a conflict between the individual and society, which was represented by a conflict between the Id (representing inherent drives) and the Ego and Super-Ego (constructed as the individual grows in society). It is easier to conceive of the Ego and Super-Ego as socially-constructed, than to argue that our very Unconscious must also be in large part a product of our upbringing...

<sup>xxvi</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Remarques sur le rapport de D. Laglache”, in *Psychanalyse* 6 (1961) – see note 33 on p 192 of CR.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Castoriadis makes much of this point in his work, and, drawing on anthropology, he asks: how *do* we account for the existence of so many different patterns of social life?

<sup>xxviii</sup> The nature of the social-historical is further explored in the second part of the *Imaginary Institution of Society*, but here (footnote 42, added in 1975) Castoriadis simply notes that the concept is intended to bring together the synchronic and the diachronic “multiplicity of dimensions” of existence “which are traditionally denoted by the terms ‘society’ and ‘history’”.

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