

Castoriadis and social theory: from marginalization to canonization to re-radicalization

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Castoriadis and Social Theory: From Marginalization to Canonization to Re-radicalization.

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1. Introduction

Koestler`s point that ‘the most productive times for revolutionary philosophy had always been the time of exile’¹ encapsulates well the state of social thought in the years before and immediately after World War II. Over this period, drastic changes took place around the globe and every aspect of social life was influenced: economy, politics, standards of living, culture. Against this background, many types of migration emerged, causing considerable impact on societies and cultures. Amongst these, the migration of intellectuals grew in volume and changed in character, particularly after the Nazi`s seizure of power in Germany. The majority of the intellectual émigrés moved from Hitler`s Europe to the United States and a smaller group fled to the United Kingdom. Although the Germans` influence and relatively large numbers was distinctive, this wave of intellectual refugees included intellectuals from several European countries. A large number of these illustrious intellectuals, who were forced to migrate prior to 1940, were related to the social sciences: amongst so many others, economists such as Joseph Shumpeter, Ludwig von Mises, Wassily Leontief, Paul Baran, Oscar Lange, Karl Polanyi and Franco Modigliani, as well as sociologists, political scientists and philosophers such

¹ A. Koestler (2005) *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Vintage), p. 144.

as Max Horkheimer, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, C. N. Friedrich, Leo Strauss, Rudolf Carnap .

This forced expatriation concerned not only highly developed European countries. In many developing countries scholars emigrated or were forced to move from their countries to France, England or the United States. A typical example of the latter was provided by Greece. During the period of the Second World War some Greek intellectuals left the country, but the Greek migration directed mostly to America was ‘the smallest of all and entirely musical.’² A considerable intellectual exodus from Greece to France took place after the end of the Second World War, when Greece became one of the centres of antagonism between the Soviet Union on the one hand and Great Britain and the United States on the other. Due to Anglo-American intervention and the agreement among the Great Powers, Greece was denied the right to freely decide upon its own political and social system, thus remaining by force under the capitalist rule. The British imperialist armed intervention and the conflict with the Greek popular democratic movement resulted in the armed conflict of December 1944 (known as ‘Dekembriana’), which was the prelude to the outbreak of the Greek civil war (1946-1949). The military defeat of the left and resistance movement led to the ‘Varkiza Agreement’, a peace agreement in name only. Instead of reconciliation, non-violence and socio-political stability, the treaty signalled a new phase of violence known as the ‘White Terror’ period (1945-1946). Brutal right wing violence, purges, rapes and atrocities were committed against the most progressive and radical part of the Greek population.

² L. Fermi (1971) *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe 1930/41* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. 135

Thousands of people were prosecuted, jailed and murdered and basic human rights and civil liberties were banned. Right wing terrorism expanded into every aspect of Greek society and was coupled with cultural decay and intellectual, scientific regression. Under these circumstances, thousands of the poorest citizens fled to the mountains to survive. On the other hand, some young Greeks, many of them of bourgeois origins, were given a privileged way out from this tragic and critical situation.

In December 1945, approximately 220 young Greek intellectuals travelled on a ship called 'Mataroa' from Piraeus to France thanks to a scholarship provided by the French government. This exodus could be viewed as the last part of the intellectual migration that took place in Europe from 1933 to 1945. Among the young immigrants were future leading Greek intellectuals, including the prominent figure of Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997). Living and writing in post-war France, Castoriadis contributed significantly to the flourishing of social and critical theory. This chapter examines Castoriadis's trajectory from obscurity and the margins of post-war French intellectual and political milieu to the misappropriation and canonization of his thought after the 70`s and argues for a re-radicalization of his thought. First, it considers his formative experience in Greece and examines how the post-war French political, economic and ideological conditions and the group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* contributed to Castoriadis's radicalization, thus consigning him, at the same time, to obscurity and marginalisation. The chapter goes on to investigate some reasons for the rising interest in the social and political thought of Cornelius Castoriadis, expressed in both academic and political circles after the 70`s and has led not only to his international recognition but also to a

triple diversion of the political and radical meaning of his theorizing. In the first place, his work was nihilistically defamed, rejected and dismissed by the largest part of the Marxist and radical Left. After the 1970s, Castoriadis's radical and left critique of Totalitarianism, Marx and Marxism was misconstrued and misused by the 'new philosophers'. Over the last twenty years, his ideas have mostly been praised and utilized in ways that deprived them of their original critical and radical meaning or political significance. Castoriadis's project has been subjected to a continuing canonization expressed through the construction of a 'new jargon'. The chapter concludes by arguing for a need to restore to Castoriadis's work its proper political and radical problematic.

2. Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*: Critical Theory in the Shadows

'I was 30, came from America, and was searching in the ashes of 1946 for the Phoenix' egg, you were 20, came from Greece, from the uprising, from jail... You were Kostas Papaioannou, a universal Greek from Paris.'³ Octavio Paz, the Nobel prize-winning Mexican poet, wrote these verses after the death of his friend philosopher Kostas Papaioannou, who was a friend of Castoriadis and fellow-traveller on the 'Mataroa'. Paz's poem also captures succinctly the early years in Greece and the formative experience of Cornelius Castoriadis. He was born on 11 March 1922 in Constantinople (Istanbul), and grew up in Greece during the interwar period, where he received a first-rate multilingual education, appropriate to his bourgeois background. From his early

³ O. Paz (1988) 'Kostas Papaioannou (1925-1981)', in Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems 1957-1987* (Manchester: Carcanet), pp. 537-539.

years as a high school student, Castoriadis expressed a profound interest in ancient Greek and Marxist philosophy. His intellectual inquiries led him to political engagement, which was expressed through his participation in the Greek communist movement. It was a period of intense political and ideological conflicts that deeply influenced Castoriadis's later theoretical and political orbit. The young Castoriadis experienced the Greek fascist regime of Metaxas (1936-41) and the Nazi occupation of Greece. Later on, he decided to abandon the Greek Communist Youth as soon as he realized that his efforts to alter the 'chauvinistic policy', centralism and bureaucratization of the Greek communist party (K.K.E.) were in vain.

He thus joined the Trotskyists and in particular, the anti-chauvinist group led by Agis Stinas (1900-1987). Stinas was a leading member of the Greek Communist Party, but later on he espoused Trotskyism and led several Trotskyist groups that resulted from the fragmentation and numerous splits of the Trotskyist Greek movement. Trotskyism and Stinas's ideas had a strong and enduring impact on Castoriadis's intellectual trajectory and determined his theoretical problematic over the first twenty years of his life in France: the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the bureaucratization of the working class movement, the role played by Lenin and Bolshevism and Trotsky's unsatisfactory analysis of the class character of the USSR. Because of their action, Castoriadis and his Trotskyist comrades were persecuted by the Germans, the Greek Stalinists and later on by the British army and the right-wing Greek government. In this respect, in his formative years in Greece, Castoriadis became familiar with the actual political function of both Stalinism and Trotskyism, and got a very strong taste of the

dogmatism and authoritarianism of the orthodox Marxism of the Greek communist movement. More importantly, as a Trotskyist during the occupation years, he ran the risk of being arrested and murdered by the Greek Stalinists, inducing obsessions or traumas, which were to be mirrored in his later critique of Marx and Marxism. Also and while Castoriadis was still living in Greece, he expressed a strong interest in the phenomenon of bureaucracy by studying and writing on the thought of Max Weber.⁴ Later on in France, the efforts he made to explicate the class nature of the USSR and interpret Soviet society were determinedly influenced by Weber's views. Castoriadis constructed two 'ideal types' that belonged to the same system of 'bureaucratic capitalism', describing the USSR as 'total bureaucratic capitalism' and the western societies as 'fragmented bureaucratic capitalism'.

Castoriadis's exodus to France in 1945 not only saved his life but also provided him with the opportunity to continue his studies, combining his personal experience in Greece with new theoretical concerns and influences. Based on this formative experience, Castoriadis pursued his political commitment and remained active in the Trotskyist movement by joining the French section of the Fourth international (International Communist Party). It was there that he met Claude Lefort and along with some other members of the party formed a small oppositional group. Lefort very characteristically remembered his first encounter with Castoriadis:

I first heard him lecture to the Party on the USSR in preparation for the Third Congress. His analysis overwhelmed me. I was convinced by him before he even reached his conclusion. I would have never been able to articulate the economic

⁴ For Castoriadis's early interest in and work on Max Weber see K. Καστοριάδης (1988) *Πρώτες Δοκιμές* (Αθήνα: Ύψιλον).

foundation that he provided for his conclusion. Castoriadis's arguments seemed to me worthy of the best Marx, but the Trotskyists deemed them heresy.⁵

In 1948, however, they left the French Trotskyist party, basically rejecting the Trotskyist explication of the Stalinist phenomenon. One year later, Castoriadis and Lefort founded a radical independent political and theoretical group and published the first issue of the journal *Socialisme Ou Barbarie* in March 1949. This means that, from his very first years in France, Castoriadis chose to pass through the Scylla of the orthodox Marxists and the Charybdis of the liberal intellectuals and viewed himself as a radical and independent scholar and, concomitantly, as a leftist opposition to the Left. Going against the tide he successfully resisted both the pressure from the ideological dominance of the French Communist Party and the 'marketisation' of intellectuals. It is important to stress here that the French Communist Party reached the peak of its influence and won five million votes in 1945 and by 1947 it consisted of 900,000 members. Needless to say, the French communist intellectuals remained anchored in their traditional Soviet-type Marxist interpretations of the world. Against this background, Castoriadis's political and theoretical stance posited a strong continuity with Max Horkheimer's premise that 'the real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent.'⁶ In pursuing this end, he challenged what was prevalent in the Marxist theoretical tradition in his time: the orthodox Marxism of the second and third international. Based on Marx's thought he attacked 'orthodox Marxism', Leninism, Trotskyism and Stalinism. He also resisted the reduction of Marxian thought to ideology and attempted an uncompromising critique of

⁵ C. Lefort (1976-1977) 'An Interview with Claude Lefort', *Telos*, 30, p. 174.

⁶ M. Horkheimer (1972) 'The Social Function of Philosophy', in Max Horkheimer (ed) *Critical theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Herder and Herder), p. 264.

the Soviet Union, when the vast majority of the so-called ‘leftist intellectuals’ did not dare challenge the dominance of the orthodoxy of the Communist Parties. It was, as Papaioannou would characterize this struggle, ‘*les idées contre l’ideologie*’.⁷

For Castoriadis, the crisis and contradictions in orthodox Marxist thought could not be overcome separately from the social reality of orthodox Marxism. He launched his immanent critique of Marxism in an attempt at defending Marx from the orthodoxy. The critical confrontation with Trotsky’s thought revealed his inconsistencies and brought to the surface his claim that it was necessary to re-examine the question of the class nature of the USSR. For Castoriadis, more specifically, Trotsky was responsible for ‘theoretical monstrosities’ and his blindness to Stalinism ‘was a blindness of its own origins: of the bureaucratic tendencies organically incorporated into the Bolshevik party from the start.’⁸ These bureaucratic tendencies were clear both in the analysis of the USSR and the structure of the Trotskyist parties. In Lefort’s words, ‘little by little the Trotskyist party appeared to me to be a microcosm, which at its heart reproduced the models of behavior and social relations typical of bureaucratic organization.’⁹ Thus, instead of analyzing the nature of Stalinism and the bureaucracy and their implications, Trotsky reiterated and reproduced conventional Leninist practices and theoretical schemata. Similar to Leninism, Trotskyism disregarded the idea of the autonomous action of the working class and its self-government and proved to be a serious obstacle to a radical critique of the traditional revolutionary organizations.

⁷ K. Papaioannou (1969) ‘Les Idées contre l’Idéologie : Formes et Degrés de la Débolchevisation’, *Revue Française De Science Politique*, 14 :1, p.46.

⁸ C. Castoriadis (1988) ‘General Introduction’, in D.A Curtis (ed.) *Cornelius Castoriadis: Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 1, 1946-1955 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 8.

⁹ C. Lefort, ‘An Interview with Claude Lefort’, p. 175.

Drawing much of his inspiration from Russia (1917-1918), Spain (1936) and Hungary (1956) Castoriadis argued that ‘the content of the socialist reorganization of society is first of all *workers’ management* of production.’¹⁰ In this sense, Castoriadis determinedly castigated the Leninist notion of the Party, making the claim that ‘the true creator of totalitarianism is Lenin’ since ‘it was Lenin himself who created the institution without which totalitarianism is inconceivable and which is today falling into ruin: the totalitarian party’.¹¹ Castoriadis brought to our attention the fact that one of the focal points for a critical understanding of the decline of the Russian Revolution was the struggle between the *Workers’ Opposition* and the Bolshevik leadership. ‘Contrary to the prevailing mythology’, for Castoriadis, ‘it was not in 1927, or in 1923, or even in 1921 that the game was played and lost, but much earlier, during the period from 1918 to 1920’.¹² This struggle mirrored the two contradictory elements of Marxism: the *Workers’ Opposition* represented the most radical and subversive elements of the Marxist tradition, emphasizing and privileging the self-organization, self-determination and self-emancipation of the working class. Conversely, the Leninist position reflected Marxism’s positivism, as well as its own economic and developmental logic, and played an instrumental role in shaping the character and nature of the former Soviet Union. ‘Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USSR: Four Letters, Four Lies’.¹³ This claim summarizes Castoriadis’s views regarding the actual character of the Soviet regime in a nutshell. Nevertheless, he firmly believed that the ‘Russian question was and remains the

¹⁰ C. Castoriadis (1988) ‘On the Content of Socialism II’, in D. A. Curtis (ed.) *Cornelius Castoriadis, Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 2, 1955-1960 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 95.

¹¹ C. Castoriadis (1997) ‘The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism’, D. A. Curtis (ed.) *World in Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 65.

¹² C. Castoriadis (1993) ‘The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy’ in D. A. Curtis (ed.) *Cornelius Castoriadis, Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 3, 1961-1979 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 98.

¹³ Quoted in E. Morin (1998) ‘An Encyclopaedic Spirit’, *Radical Philosophy*, 90, p. 3.

touchstone of the theoretical and practical attitudes that call for revolution, and this question was also the richest vein, the royal road to the comprehension of the most important problems of contemporary society.’¹⁴

Castoriadis endeavored to develop a rich and in-depth analysis of the Soviet regime, not of course without inconsistencies and imitations. In these theoretical elaborations, he underwent a number of conceptual turns that were depicted in the different terms he used in order to conceptualize the peculiarity of the Soviet regime: ‘a new historical formation’, ‘a third historical solution’, ‘bureaucratic society’, ‘total bureaucratic capitalism’, ‘total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism’ and ‘stratocracy’. What could be considered as the lynch-pin that linked all the above-mentioned designations is Castoriadis’s persistence in critically re-evaluating the USSR by stressing its distinctiveness as a new social and historical formation. Working within Marxism, he contrasted Marx’s thought with the several modalities of Marxism claiming to incarnate it. This juxtaposition and his critical confrontation with the historical and political facts (e.g. the Hungarian Uprising of 1956) led him to make an effort to elucidate and explore the stagnation and crisis of Marxism. Yet, in his numerous attempts to make sense of the theory and practice of the ‘Russian enigma’, he came to the point of realizing not only the discontinuity between Marx and orthodox Marxism, but he was also led to argue that the problems and obstacles which existed in the theory and practice of Marxism could be traced back to Marx’s own thought. In other words, dealing with the intractable issue of the nature of the Soviet regime and indicating how Marx’s meaning was misconstrued by Trotsky and Lenin, Castoriadis worked within Marxism and moved from Marx to

¹⁴ C. Castoriadis, ‘General Introduction’, p. 7.

Marxism and vice versa. Hence, he emphatically noted that ‘*Capital* is to be read in the light of Russia, not Russia in the light of *Capital*’.¹⁵

Seeking to identify Marx’s responsibility for the metamorphosis of orthodox Marxism to ‘state ideology’ and ‘reformist practice’, Castoriadis raised penetrating questions with regard to Marx’s writings with a view to tracing the metaphysical presuppositions and positivistic elements of his thought. His critique was premised on two basic pillars: first, he recognized that Marx’s deification of the concept of technique determined Marx’s theory of history and his analysis of capitalism; and second, he argued that Marx was deeply immersed in the values of Western humanism and in capitalist imaginary significations. Castoriadis articulated a radical critique of Marxism and Marx during the 1950s and 1960s and was automatically pushed by the Stalinist intellectuals and the French Communist Party to the margins of intellectual debate. As Khilnani has pointed out,

after the defeat of fascism, in an atmosphere thick with accusations of collaboration and betrayal, anti-Fascism was most easily displayed by support for the Soviet Union. In this context, the anti-Soviet and revolutionary critique made by those such as Castoriadis and Lefort could not gain much force.¹⁶

Castoriadis had great difficulties in taking French citizenship and was only granted full French citizenship in 1970. Over this period, Castoriadis wrote using pseudonyms such as Paul Cardan, Pierre Chaulieu, Jean Delvaux and Jean-Marc Coudray, ‘for fear of

¹⁵ C. Castoriadis (1997) ‘The Social Regime in Russia’ in D. A. Curtis (ed.) *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), p. 228.

¹⁶ S. Khilnani (1993) *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 135.

endangering his émigré status in France'.¹⁷ As a group, *Socialisme Ou Barbarie* had a very restricted influence and Castoriadis very eloquently described this marginalization: 'We were absolutely isolated. There was a period when, after the outbreak of the Korean war, we were less than a dozen in the group. And the audience was extremely limited, residual ultra-leftist groups.'¹⁸ Later on, the situation started to change and the political events and changes that took place after the death of Stalin gave a new vigour to *Socialisme Ou Barbarie*. In Castoriadis's words:

After 1953 with Stalin dead, the Berlin revolt, the Czechoslovakian strikes in '54, then Hungary and Poland in '56, the atmosphere started changing, and the review gained some audience-never very important. At the time we were selling about 1,000 copies of the magazine, which were read around. Then came the Algerian war, and the stand we took against the Algerian war. There was a kind of renaissance amongst the student youth at that time. People started coming and the group grew. Some time in 1958/59, in the whole of France, including the provinces, we were about 100. By '62, '63, '64 we could hold public meetings in Paris with, say, 300 or 400 people. But all of this, as you see, was extremely, limited.¹⁹

Yet, despite the isolation of the group, according to Hirsh, the journal

proved significant as the only vehicle for a systematic gauchiste critique of the communist movement during the height of the Cold War. While many leftist intellectuals (with Sartre in the lead) buried their qualms and sided with the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁸ C. Castoriadis (1990) 'An interview', *Radical Philosophy*, 56: Autumn, p. 36.

¹⁹ C. Castoriadis (1990) 'An interview', pp. 36-7.

Soviet Union against the capitalist West, *Socialisme Ou Barbarie* continued a critique of both sides.²⁰

Forty issues of the journal were published before 1965, when the cessation of publication was announced, and the group ceased to exist in 1967. The *Socialisme Ou Barbarie* group developed close relationships with the ‘Johnson-Forest Tendency’ (C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya) in the U.S.A and the British group and journal *Solidarity* (Maurice Brinton). The critical endeavour of the group also included a parallel effort to analyse and explicate the crisis and dynamic of modern capitalist societies in order to re-invigorate the revolutionary project. Their work was indisputably uncomfortable and annoying, notably for the leftist and Communist parties. The Soviet regime’s attempt to impose its political and ideological dominance, based on its official dogma of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ and the Stalinist policy of the Communist parties in Western societies, had created a context which marginalized and excluded every independent and ‘unorthodox’ radical thinker from public debate. As Primo Levi very forcefully put it, ‘uncomfortable truths travel with difficulty.’²¹

3. The Diversionists: From ‘Marginalization’ to ‘Totalitarianism’ to the Construction of a ‘New Jargon’

In their *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels envisioned the growth of the rapidly rising working class movement as ‘the self-conscious, independent movement of the

²⁰ A. Hirsh (1981) *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz* (Boston: South End Press), p. 113.

²¹ P. Levi (1989) *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus), p. 129.

immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority'²², whose constant quantitative and qualitative development will rely 'solely and exclusively upon the intellectual development of the working class, as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion'.²³ Autonomous and self-determining action, intellectual growth and united action should constitute the core of the radical and subversive movement in its social struggles to negate capitalist social relations and create a different system of life and an alternative society. And all these fundamental elements should be informed by free and independent critical thinking. Luxemburg captured this point implicitly and categorically: 'Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently'.²⁴ Unfortunately, the tradition of the anti-capitalist movement throughout the last century not only flies in the face of Luxemburg's dictum, but appeared to confirm one of Lukacs's final verdicts: 'we are all still Stalinists'.²⁵ Lukacs's statement could describe the state of intolerance, exclusiveness and hatred that marked a large part of the post-world Left in France. Any open theoretical and political criticism of the Soviet regime, Marxism or Marx was taboo and repressed. A distinctive theoretical contribution was easily accused of being 'reactionary' and often misused and distorted not only by the 'right', but also by 'left' parties and intellectuals. As Albert and Hahnel have noted,

In a world where most who attack the orthodoxy do so from the right, it is easier for leftists to line up in its defence. It is common as well for all critics to be immediately labelled "anticommunist", "bourgeois", "reactionary", or worse as the case may be.

²² K Marx and F. Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in K Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), p. 44.

²³ K Marx and F. Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', from the preface to the fourth 1890 German edition, p. 33.

²⁴ R Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', in M. A. Waters (ed.) *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press), p. 389.

²⁵ G Lukács, (1972) 'A Final Rethinking. György Lukács Talks with Franco Ferrarotti', *Social Policy*, 3: 2, p. 56.

Such sectarian name-calling is very potent. Lumping all critics of the orthodoxy with those whose purposes are indeed reactionary this reverse baiting effectively intimidates most leftist critics. It asserts that there can be no justifiable criticism, only ill-motivated anti-communism, so that those that venture critical analysis run the risk of simultaneously losing all 'revolution credibility'. The orthodoxy is sacrosanct and disbelievers are heretics, beholden, one way or another, to the capitalist devil.²⁶

In post-war France under the political and ideological dominance of the French Communist Party it was inconceivable for someone to criticize Stalin, let alone Lenin. Intellectuals such as Sartre and Aragon did not dare criticize Stalin and usually expressed their admiration for him. The party had managed to capitalize on its own role in the Resistance and the fact that it was seen by the new generations as being the only French political power that symbolized the heroic and glorious victory of the USSR against Nazi Germany. As a result, a critical attitude towards the USSR could be easily rejected, marginalized and designated as reactionary and counterrevolutionary. As described by Khilnani, this situation was particularly the case in France:

Contrary to the situation in Britain, where the much more immediately (and differently) felt effect of writers like Koestler and Orwell made it perfectly reasonable, if by no means mandatory, to reject the Soviet Union as a political model and yet continue to remain on the Left, in France it was not until the 1970s that such a position became intellectually and politically sustainable.²⁷

²⁶ M. Albert and R Hahnel (1978) *UnOrthodox Marxism* (Boston: South End Press), p. 7

²⁷ S. Khilnani, (1993) *Arguing Revolution*, p. 129.

In most cases, the Marxist or radical Left approach to Castoriadis was a nihilistic, ill-equipped and dogmatic denunciation and repudiation of his theorizing. Having settled for decades ‘for the role of revolutionary-by-proxy’, ‘cuckolded and defeated as revolutionaries sans revolution’²⁸, traditional Leftists and Marxists seem to have perceived nothing new as they had seen and known it all before.²⁹ They decisively constituted a catalytic factor in the marginalization of his thought, at least in the period before the collapse of the Soviet regime. Castoriadis’s contribution remained unknown and was unwisely and crudely seen as ‘reactionary’. This development was facilitated by Castoriadis’s theoretical limitations, political contradictions and erroneous judgments. In particular, Castoriadis’s later unfortunate and unsound position that the former USSR was a military and stratocratic society,³⁰ in its own way, opened the door for the distortion of his views and theoretical contributions. Leftists and Marxists not only defamed his whole political and intellectual history, but also his flawed analyses came under severe criticism, which placed ‘Castoriadis’s demonstration among the crudest speculations of an obsolete Kremlinology having more to do with the demonology of centuries past than with the modern study of social and political phenomena’.³¹

On the other hand, and given the historical and political context of the 1970s and 1980s, Castoriadis’s views gained a wider audience and at the same time were distorted by the ‘new philosophers’ (Bernard-Henri Levy, André Glucksmann, etc.) and the ‘Stalinists of

²⁸ R. Vaneigem (1983) *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (London: Left Bank Books and Rebel Press), p. 215.

²⁹ R. Viénet, (1992) *Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May ’68* (New York: Autonomedia), p. 105.

³⁰ On this issue see, C. Castoriadis (1981) *Devant la Guerre* (Paris: Fayand), and C. Castoriadis (1980-1981) ‘Facing the War’, *Telos*, 46, pp. 43-61.

³¹ G. Rittesporn (1982), ‘Facing the War Psychosis’, *Telos*, 51, p. 22.

anti-communism' who emerged in France throughout this period.³² These 'Stalinists of anti-communism' consisted of 'an intelligentsia which was, almost by definition, considered to be on the left' that 'has packed up its bags and gone over to the other side. It now addresses its criticisms, not to French society, but to those who dare to think of transforming it'.³³ More specifically, during the 1970`s an attempt was made by the 'new philosophers' to misuse and misappropriate Castoriadis's critique of the Soviet system, Marxism and Marx. The 'new philosophers' revived interest in the term 'totalitarianism', but they attributed to it a completely different meaning than the Greek intellectual used. In the name of democracy and human rights they attacked and ridiculed any radical anti-capitalist voice, identifying it with totalitarianism and 'red fascism', regardless of the fact that Castoriadis held that the defence of the Soviet Union was actually anti-revolutionary and his critique was 'launched from the Left, in the name of authentic revolution'.³⁴ For them, any attempt to overthrow capitalism and transform capitalist social relations would inevitably lead to 'red terror', blind violence and deification of state power. Having placed the notion of totalitarianism at the centre of their elaborations, and drawing upon thinkers such as Castoriadis, Arendt or Popper, they put particular stress on the dissemination of their anti-statist, anti-radical and anti-Soviet ideas. Likewise, Castoriadis's critique of Marx and Marxism was also read and construed as being akin to the post-modernist view that rejects grand narratives and advocates western forms of liberal and representative democracy.

³² For the ideas of the 'New Philosophers' see P. Dews (1980) 'The 'New Philosophers' and the end of Leftism', *Radical Philosophy*, 24, pp. 2-11, and P. Dews(1979) 'The Nouvelle Philosophie and Foucault', *Economy and Society*, 8: 2, pp. 127-171.

³³ P. Delwit and J.-M. Dewaele (1984) 'The Stalinists of Anti-Communism', *The Social Register*, p. 324.

³⁴ S. Khilnani *Arguing Revolution*, p.129

Castoriadis not only rejected the ‘new wave of diversionists’,³⁵ as he called the ‘new philosophers’ approach to his work, but he also reacted against the misuse and the distortion of his own ideas. For Castoriadis, it is explicit that the function of the ‘new philosophers’ ‘fully plays into the interests of the apparatuses’³⁶ with a view to ‘covering over in advance the true questions by “answers” which have for their effect and their function to stop dead in its tracks the movement of reflection and to take the edge off the political and revolutionary critique of totalitarianism on the one hand, of Marxism on the other’.³⁷ And Castoriadis goes on with his forceful critique:

The new wave of diversionists does not ask: How is totalitarianism *actually* engendered? Shamelessly pillaging through what a few of us have been working out for the past thirty years, it hastily lifts from this work a few elements whose meaning it distorts in order to say: Totalitarianism *is* Marx, *is* Hegel, *is* Fichte, *is* Plato. It understands neither what thinking means nor the *unfathomable* relationship historical thought and historical reality entertain. Diverting the critique of Marx that we had made from a political, praxical, revolutionary perspective — a critique that was bringing out precisely the capitalist, Western, metaphysical heritage of which Marx had remained prisoner, to discover *thereby* what in Marx remained *on the hither side* of a revolutionary aim—it tries to draw from this critique the following absurd conclusion: it is *precisely as* a revolutionary that Marx would have engendered the Gulag.³⁸

Amongst other things, what is at stake here is the manner in which Castoriadis has been received, read and used by both the critical, radical and anti-capitalist tradition and the existing social and theoretical order, the ‘intellectual establishment’. After the ‘*nouveau*

³⁵ C. Castoriadis (1993) ‘The Diversionists’ in D. A. Curtis (ed.) *Cornelius Castoriadis: Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 3, 1961-1979 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 275.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

philosophes', and more particularly, the years following the demise of the former USSR, the work of Castoriadis was subjected to a ruthless and peculiar academisation and canonization. Over the last twenty five years, the vast majority of Castoriadis's interpretations have focused almost exclusively on Castoriadis's later psychoanalytical-philosophical writings, thus unreasonably diverting attention from Castoriadis's political writings and the radical content of his thought, which marked his whole theoretical itinerary. It seems that, as was the case with numerous academics and intellectuals after the movements of the sixties, the demise of the regimes in Eastern Europe provided scholars 'with a minimum of ideological justification' or a 'legitimation' both for the profound disregard of radical ideas and practices that followed the collapse and 'for their own incipient privatization while also retaining some sort of "radical sensibility"'.³⁹ The philosophical writings of the later Castoriadis, as happened with specific aspects of the work of Gramsci or the members of the Frankfurt School, were convenient for 'a retrospective legitimation of withdrawal, renunciation, noncommitment, or of a punctilious and measured commitment'.⁴⁰ Indisputably, Castoriadis left himself open to this treatment both because of the direction and content of a large part of his later theoretical elaborations and due to the fact that he unfortunately did very little to clarify that he aimed at a 'political and revolutionary'⁴¹ critique of totalitarianism, Marxism and Marx, from a 'political, praxical, revolutionary perspective'.⁴² Inherent contradictions and limits of his thought were pushed to the more conservative and apolitical extreme by the academic and intellectual apparatuses. Castoriadis responded by challenging the

³⁹ C. Castoriadis (1997) 'The Movements of the Sixties' in D. A. Curtis (ed.) *World in Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 53, 54.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴¹ Castoriadis, C. (1993) 'The Diversionists', p. 275.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 276.

distortion of his critical project, though belatedly and unsuccessfully, and endeavored to champion the radicalism of his theoretical endeavor. As he vigorously reminds us,

The workers' movement began well *before* Marx, and it had nothing to do with Fichte or with Hegel...The question posed is not how to 'replace Marxism' but how to create a new relationship between thinking and doing, how to elucidate things in terms of a practical project without falling back either into the system or into doing just anything.⁴³

Unfortunately, once again after the 1970s, Castoriadis's political and revolutionary critique of Totalitarianism, Marxism and Marx has been misconstrued by 'the new wave of diversionists' and new Stalinists of anti-Marx, anti-Marxism and anti-communism are produced among Castoriadis's adherents. This new diversion has led to a distorted and misleading reception of Castoriadis's theorising. One of the main vehicles for this new diversion has been the construction of a new jargon. Through this metamorphosis of Castoriadis, his thought ceased to be a moment of critical reason and anti-capitalist struggles. It was reduced to a jargon, a new world of magical words, technical terms and mechanical expressions. Castoriadis's later philosophical language has been transformed into a mystification and has been reified, thus making it being devoid of content, let alone political and radical content. In many academic circles, for example, Castoriadis is known, read and used as a psychoanalyst or his work has been standardised into reified and abstract key concepts such as creative imagination, social imaginary significations, chaos, creation *ex nihilo*, monad, self, body, psyche, magma, tragedy, ensemblistic-identitary logic, legein and teukhein, Anlehnung, the living being, paideia.⁴⁴ This

⁴³ Ibid., p. 276.

⁴⁴ For a recent attempt to canonise and standardise Castoriadis's thought see S Adams (2014) (ed) *Cornelius Castoriadis: Key Concepts* (London and New York: Bloomsbury).

reification is not simply the case of ‘talking trivialities in high-sounding language’.⁴⁵ It actually aims at a forgetting of Castoriadis’s radicalism in order for his thought to be eventually converted into an academic discipline, to be canonized and kept isolated from contemporary social and political struggles. A fashionable invocation of Castoriadis’s standardised catch-words domesticates radical thought in the service of the existing capitalist reality, thus performing the systematic function of stabilization and reproducing all those capitalist relations ‘in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected and contemptible being’.⁴⁶ The construction of fetishistic concepts takes the place of the grasping and penetrating critique and analysis of social, economic and political capitalist relations. As Adorno would say ‘ideology has shifted into language’⁴⁷; this time Castoriadis’s sacred words turned out to be a positive and constructive endorsement of actual capitalist relations of exploitation and domination. By downplaying the oppositional and revolutionary aspects of Castoriadis’s work, the new diversionists postulate Castoriadis’s critical theory as domesticated, bloodless and apolitical, and as such, this domestication aims to become dominant and prevail. As a consequence, the critical and radical content of Castoriadis’s ideas has intentionally fallen into oblivion and it travels with difficulty. Yet, ‘as with wine, the capacity to travel does not necessarily reflect the quality of the passenger.’⁴⁸

⁴⁵ K. Popper (1976) ‘Reason or Revolution?’, in Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, (London: Heinemann), p. 296.

⁴⁶ K. Marx (1992) ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction’, in K. Marx *Early Writings* (London: Penguin), p. 251.

⁴⁷ T. Adorno (2003) *The Jargon of Authenticity* (London: Routledge), p. xix.

⁴⁸ Craufurd D. W. Goodwin (1973) ‘Marginalism Moves to the New World’, in R.D. Collison Black, A. W. Coats, Craufurd D. W. Goodwin (ed.) *The Marginal Revolution in Economics: Interpretation and Evaluation* (Duke University Press), p. 285.

4. Postscript: Reclaiming Castoriadis's radicalism

In one of his later interviews conducted in 1985 and 1986, Castoriadis made it explicit that what distinguished him from his contemporary scholars was his persistence with 'the political project', namely the fact that he wanted to 'do philosophy and politics at the same time'.⁴⁹ Describing his work as a constant struggle to remain faithful to the project of human emancipation, Castoriadis endeavored also to clarify his relationship with Marx:

Looking back, my fundamental political orientation is without doubt rooted in the work and engagement of Marx... The concern to combine understanding with a project of change I have learned from Marx, or invented, I don't know which. In this sense there is a bond between Marx and me. I privilege Marx over the other great thinkers because he tries again to be a philosophical citizen and citizen-philosopher.⁵⁰

Castoriadis was first and foremost a political and radical thinker and the intended oblivion of the largest part of his work is quite undeserved. It cancels Castoriadis's critical and radical meaning and represents an abdication, abandonment and concealment of the political character of his views. This is not to claim that the later psychoanalytical-philosophical part of Castoriadis's work is not worthy of scholarly and analytical engagement. This is simply to argue that this does not justify the almost exclusive reading of Castoriadis's thought via these texts at the expense of the whole body of his social and political writings. Reading Castoriadis politically means, first of all, detaching his thought from the condition of being used as part of the 'succession of fads', from its

⁴⁹ 'Cornelius Castoriadis' (1995) in F. Rötzer, *Conversations with French philosophers* (New Jersey: Humanities Press), p. 31.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

reduction to another of the ‘successive waves of the ruling system’s *complementary ideology*’, exactly that which Castoriadis was explicitly and fiercely opposed to.⁵¹ Reinstating Castoriadis to his actual political substance implies separating his critical theory from the dominant tendency of becoming ‘fashionable’ and involves critically confronting the ‘compilation, misappropriation and distortion’ of his own ideas.⁵² Giving back to Castoriadis’s work its proper radical problematic would amount to disengaging it from the idolatry of words, the construction of a new jargon. As Castoriadis would say, ‘the magic of words is thus used to make the reality of things disappear’.⁵³ Even after the severe ‘financial crisis’ of 2008, the ‘fashionable’, abstract, philosophical and apolitical readings of Castoriadis appear to remain detached from the social and political reality. The ‘fashionable’ scholars of his work resemble, as Castoriadis brilliantly put it,

those who discourse about the rights of man, the indeterminacy of democracy, communicative action, the self-foundation of reason, and so on—the Panglosses who go on spouting their navel-watching rhetoric without ever allowing themselves to be distracted by the sound and fury of effectively actual history.⁵⁴

They ultimately neglect and bury the riches of Castoriadis’s political and intellectual heritage, deferring treatment of the vital questions he addressed. Contrary to these approaches, Castoriadis championed critical reason’s historic role of ‘provoking

⁵¹ C. Castoriadis (1993) ‘The Diversionists’, p. 272.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵³ C. Castoriadis (1988) ‘Modern Capitalism and Revolution’ in D. A. Curtis (ed.) *Cornelius Castoriadis, Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 2, 1955-1960 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 239.

⁵⁴ C. Castoriadis (2003) ‘The Dilapidation of the West’, in C. Castoriadis *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Available at: http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf, p. 76.

insubordination and destroying horrors'.⁵⁵ Diametrically opposed to the approaches that apprehend the function of scholarly work as being at the service of the established order, Castoriadis was adamant that the role of the scholar 'ought to be critical' and he argued against a 'generalized pseudoconsensus' and those intellectuals who are 'caught up in the system' and who, by abandoning and betraying their critical role, 'became rationalizers for what is, justifiers of the established order'.⁵⁶ In this sense, Castoriadis went against the grain of the academics and intellectuals who seek to catch previously marginal or subversive ideas and words, as ironically is now happening with Castoriadis's work, and make them 'one phenomenon among others, commercialized like the others' with a view to completing the 'harmony of the system'.⁵⁷ In one of his interviews in 1991 and in answer to the question of what the role of the intellectual should be, Castoriadis clarified and specified his positions eloquently: 'Uncompromising criticism of existing realities and elucidation of the possibilities for transforming them'.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ J. Agnoli (2003) 'Destruction as the Determination of the Scholar in Miserable Times', in W. Bonefeld (ed.) *Revolutionary Writing* (New York: Autonomedia), p. 26.

⁵⁶ C. Castoriadis (2003) 'The Rising Tide of Insignificance', C. Castoriadis *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*, pp. 128, 130.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵⁸ C. Castoriadis (2011) 'The Crisis of the Imaginary?' in C. Castoriadis *Postscript on Insignificance*, p. 108.