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## CASTORIADIS ON ALTHUSSER AND THE CRISIS OF MARXISM

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**ABSTRACT:** The issue concerning the crisis of Marxism has had a wide range of interpretations and has promoted debate and controversy. During the Cold War anti-communist hysteria and coming from a radical perspective, Castoriadis re-opened and participated in the above debate. Directing his critique against the theory and practice of Marxism, Castoriadis considered the crisis of Marxism as a crisis of Marx's original thought as well. The degeneration of Marxism and the loss of its radical character were attributed to its transformation into a semi-religious dogma and a closed theoretical system. Castoriadis returned, again, to this issue after Althusser's public announcement of the crisis of Marxism in 1977. This paper discusses Castoriadis's important, but still neglected fierce critique of the Althusser's views and argues that it prompts a re-appreciation of considerable issues for contemporary emancipatory politics. First, Castoriadis's critical alternative approach to the crisis of Marxism is located within the Marxist theoretical discussions on the issue. Following an outline of Althusser's attempt to formulate the fundamental causes for what he meant to be an overt eruption of the crisis of Marxism, the essay goes on to present Castoriadis's critique and investigates the grounds on which it was put forward. The paper concludes with an assessment of the implications of Castoriadis's arguments for the renewal of radical politics today.

**KEYWORDS:** Castoriadis, Althusser, Crisis of Marxism, Marx, Emancipatory Politics

Living and writing in post-war France under the political and ideological dominance of the French Communist Party it was inconceivable for someone to criticize Stalinism, let alone Lenin. 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. Going against the tide, Castoriadis's critical opposition to and rejection of orthodox Marxism could be seen as part of his endeavour to investigate the theoretical and political foundations of Marxism. As Gombin notes, 'in the past, any work which aimed at re-launching revolutionary thought came up against the totalitarian pretensions...

of orthodox Marxism.<sup>1</sup> Castoriadis also addressed as necessary the task of exploring concrete aspects of Marx's writings as responsible for what Marxism became in both theory and practice. The death of Stalin and the revolts in Eastern Europe against the state bureaucracies evoked a debate vis-à-vis the crisis of Marxism opened in 1898 by Masaryk in which both orthodox and critical trends of Marxism participated. Dealing with the crisis of Marxism, Castoriadis moved from a critique of orthodox Marxism to articulate his critical approach to Marx's own thought. He sought the reasons which caused this crisis, the factors which were responsible for the petrification and decay of Marxism. He dealt with the questions regarding the crisis of Marxism long before Althusser's announcement of the crisis (1977). Later on, and more specifically in 1978, Castoriadis contributed once again to the crisis of Marxism debate through his response to Althusser. This paper focuses on Castoriadis's critique of the Althusser positions and argues that it provides valuable insights into this question, which are highly relevant to today. First, it outlines Castoriadis's analysis of the decay and crisis of Marxism, which took the form of both a critique of Marxism and a critical confrontation with Marx's own thought. Afterwards, it presents Althusser's contribution to the discussion regarding the crisis of Marxism, a public announcement that caused heated debates and Castoriadis's rigorous response. The paper concludes by summing up both the defects and the merits of Castoriadis's theoretical endeavour.

#### CASTORIADIS AND THE CRISIS OF MARXISM DEBATE

The question regarding the crisis of Marxism occupied many Marxist scholars after 1898, when Masaryk spoke for the first time about the philosophical and scientific crisis of Marxism, representing the orthodox Marxism of the Second International.<sup>2</sup> Masaryk sought to explore the philosophical and sociological foundations of Marxism in order to show the inadequacy of Marxist theory and policy. Paradoxically, however, he was not able to distinguish Marx from Marxism; on the contrary, in his survey, Marx was identified with Marxism.<sup>3</sup> By thus criticizing what he believed to be the fundamental theoretical principles of Marxism, that is, its political tactics and sociological bases, the labour theory of value and historical materialism, he came to the conclusion that 'Marxism is undergoing an internal crisis, not only theoretically, but also in practical politics'.<sup>4</sup> Masaryk was familiar with the discussions that were taking place within the social-democratic parties of his time, mainly in Germany and Austria. Widely known

1. Richard Gombin, *The Origins of Modern Leftism*, trans. M.K. Perl, London, Penguin, 1975, p. 40.

2. Masaryk expressed his views in his book entitled *Otázka sociální* (The Social Question) with the subtitle 'Philosophical and Sociological Foundations of Marxism' (Prague, 1898). For a synopsis of his views, see T.G. Masaryk, 'The philosophical and scientific crisis of contemporary Marxism' presented by Erazim Kohak in 'T.G. Masaryk's Revision of Marxism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. xxv, no. 4, Oct-Dec 1964, pp. 519-542.

3. In his words: 'We shall limit our examination to marxism, that is, to the scientific and philosophical views of Marx and Engels. Marx is predominantly the economist of Marxism, Engels its philosopher.' Masaryk, 'The philosophical and scientific crisis of contemporary Marxism', pp. 523-4.

4. Masaryk, 'The philosophical and scientific crisis of contemporary Marxism', p. 540.

as ‘the revisionist debate’, this theoretical and political conflict is regarded as having generated the first crisis of Marxism.<sup>5</sup> ‘Revisionism’ was expressed publicly by Eduard Bernstein and could be seen as an attempt at a Social-democratic and ‘right’ response to the question concerning the crisis of Marxism. Revisionism questioned Marxism’s teleological aspects about the inevitable collapse of capitalism, the unavoidable character of the proletarian revolution and its historical necessity. Bernstein saw parliamentary democracy and reforms as the appropriate means for achieving the socialist transformation of capitalist society. He also put particular emphasis on the continuity between the ends of socialism and the means to achieve them, rejecting any predetermined final ‘socialist goal’ and renouncing any elements of Utopianism that were present in the working class movement.<sup>6</sup>

The ‘left’ Marxist response to the question of the crisis of Marxism came from Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Korsch. In her article *Stagnation and Progress of Marxism* (1903), Luxemburg vividly expressed her deep concern about the conditions in which Marxism found itself just twenty years after the death of Marx and questioned its potentiality for further development and intellectual creativity.<sup>7</sup> Going a little further, she acknowledged that ‘it is undeniable that Marx has had a somewhat restrictive influence upon the free development of theory in the case of many of his pupils.’<sup>8</sup> But who was to be blamed for this stagnation in the development of Marxist theory? For Luxemburg, Marx has provided us with more than enough theoretical tools for the practical needs of class struggle. The reason we have not made any advance upon Marx’s theoretical principles lies in our inability to properly utilize Marx’s intellectual legacy.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Karl Korsch made the most substantial ‘Left’ Marxist contribution to this discussion. Having been deeply concerned over the atrophy of Marxist theory, he raised some intriguing questions with a view to touching upon the political and philosophical reasons for the crisis of Marxism. He questioned the relationship between Marxism and the working-class movement and the role that Marxism had to play in the light of the rise of both Stalinism and Fascism. He also objected to the reduction of Marx’s theory to some scientific, objective and ‘iron laws’ and attempted to analyse the crisis of Marxism

5. For example see, Jules Townshend, ‘The Communist Manifesto and the Crises of Marxism’, in M. Cowling (ed.), *The Communist Manifesto: New Interpretations*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp. 181-3.

6. On this, see Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A criticism and Affirmation*, trans. E. Harvey, New York, Schocken Books, 1975.

7. Luxemburg made an interesting observation on the stagnation of Marxism. In her words, ‘The actual fact is that — apart from one or two independent contributions which mark a certain theoretical advance — since the publication of the last volume of *Capital* and the last of Engels’s writings there have appeared nothing more than a few excellent popularizations and expositions of Marxist theory. The substance of that theory remains just where the two founders of scientific socialism left it.’ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘Stagnation and Progress of Marxism’, in Mary-Alice Waters (ed.) *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York, Pathfinder Press, 1970, p. 107. She also pointed out that even the ‘theory of historical materialism’, which has left Marx and Engels open to deeper investigation and further developments, ‘remains as unelaborated and sketchy as it was when first formulated by its creators.’ Luxemburg, ‘Stagnation and Progress of Marxism’, p. 108.

8. Luxemburg, ‘Stagnation and Progress of Marxism’, p. 107.

9. Luxemburg, ‘Stagnation and Progress of Marxism’, p. 111.

in detail. He was of the opinion that the crisis had two sides: an *external* one, which emerged ‘in the complete collapse of the dominant position — partially illusory, but also partially real — that Marxism held during the pre-World War I era in the European working-class movement’; and an *internal* one, which consisted in ‘the transformation of Marxist theory and practice, a transformation which is most immediately apparent in Marxists’ altered position vis-à-vis their own national state as well as with respect to the bourgeois system of national states as a whole.’<sup>10</sup> More specifically, Korsch argued that after 1850 the drastic changes both in capitalism and in the labour movement ‘prevented the further development of a living Marxist theory within the unfolding praxis of the workers’ movement.’<sup>11</sup> Hence throughout the second half of the nineteenth century the theory was separated from the practice of the working-class movement and stopped expressing the existing social relations and struggles; rather it reflected the class conflict as it had emerged by the year 1850. According to Korsch, both Marx and Engels based their critique and analysis of capitalism on a proletarian experience that was derived from a past historical era and had been formulated theoretically by the utopian socialists. Later on, however, they espoused and used for their own analyses the content of this experience without modifying or adapting it to the altered conditions of capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

Analogous endeavours to respond to the above question were made by the Frankfurt School. ‘Critical Theory’ could be seen as an attempt to put into question the most controversial elements of orthodox Marxism. Having acknowledged that Marxism had been transformed into a close, sterile and fossilized ideology which played a reactionary and legitimating role for Bolshevik and Social Democratic policies, the Institute attempted to revitalize Marxist theory by making an effort to reconstruct some of its most problematic points. Kellner has argued that ‘the failures of the European revolutions in the early 1920s, accompanied by the emergence of fascism, produced a “crisis of Marxism”’.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Critical Theorists did not deal directly with the crisis of Marxism and did not proceed to examine each of these problematic dimensions in more detail or in a more radical way.<sup>14</sup> As a result, for certain historical reasons as well as from choice, they did not draw the logical conclusions, that is, the radical theoretical and political implications of the questions they had addressed. Hence, one could say that despite their considerable theoretical contribution, they offered no theoretical and political alternative so that the crisis of Marxism could be transcended.<sup>15</sup>

10. Karl Korsch, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, in D. Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, Austin and London, University of Texas Press, 1977, p. 171.

11. Korsch, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 172.

12. Korsch, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, pp. 172-3.

13. Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 12.

14. According to Kellner, ‘in the early days of the Institute Horkheimer planned to write a book on “Die Krise des Marxismus”’ but eventually did not write it. Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*, p. 236.

15. For a more detailed analysis of how ‘Critical Theory’ has dealt with the ‘crisis of Marxism’, see Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984, esp. pp. 5-9 and 125-129.

The question concerning the crisis of Marxism remained open to further discussion after the end of the Second World War. In this respect, the historical, political and intellectual context during the 50's and 60's enabled Castoriadis to revive a discussion carried out earlier by both orthodox and critical Marxists.<sup>16</sup> Castoriadis used the phrases 'degeneration', 'decay', 'petrification', 'downfall' or 'corruption' in order to portray the crisis of Marxism. The conclusions that Castoriadis reached in relation to the factors that led to the 'decay of Marxism' were drawn from Marxism's historical praxis and were epitomized in his *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. For Castoriadis, the crisis of Marxism was due to the loss of its initial revolutionary element as could be partially found in Marx's works. It is this revolutionary element which understands our social world as being made by human actions. Human beings themselves are responsible for their own history. They are capable of radically changing the world in and through a process of self-organisation and self-emancipation that gets its own inspiration from the Paris Commune and the soviets in the Russian Revolution. This radical aspect of Marxism grasps communism as a constant movement that negates the class-divided capitalist reality and at the same time resists the use of a completed dialectics that leads to a closed and fixed synthesis.<sup>17</sup>

Linked to this was the fact that Marxism took up the form of a system and was reduced to a mere ideology, a process which involved its further degeneration. According to Castoriadis, this transformation of Marxism took place on three levels: firstly, it served the interests of the ruling class in the Soviet type societies and became its ideological justification and its official dogma; secondly, Marxism has also served as an ideology and as a dogmatic set of guidelines for the large number of sects and minor political groups that claim to represent authentic Marxism; and finally, Castoriadis argued, Marxism had been transformed into an ideology as it had lost its vitality and ability for further development. It is 'no longer, even as a simple theory, a living theory'.<sup>18</sup> By abandoning its radical and revolutionary origins, Marxism was reduced to a 'closed theoretical system' and this 'finished theory' was the final outcome of a 'pseudo-scientific objectivism' combined with a 'rationalist philosophy' that both co-existed in the thought of Karl Marx.<sup>19</sup> Posing as a complete theory, Marxism represented and continued the capitalist culture and the positivism that dominated science at the end of the nineteenth-century. The concept of Marxism as science was

16. It is also worth mentioning here the contributions made, amongst others, by Georges Sorel, Georgi Plekhanov and Leon Trotsky. On this, see Georges Sorel, 'The Decomposition of Marxism' in I. L. Horowitz, *Radicalism and Revolt Against Reason*, London, Routledge, 1961, pp. 207-54; Georgi Plekhanov, *On the Alleged Crisis in Marxism* (1898) available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1898/xx/crisis.htm> and Leon Trotsky, *Once again on the 'Crisis of Marxism'* (1939) available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/Trotsky/1939/03/marxism.htm>

17. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K. Blamey, Cambridge, MA, Polity Press, 1987, pp. 56-7.

18. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, pp. 11-12. On Castoriadis's contention that Marxism 'is dead as theory' see, also, Castoriadis, 'The Imaginary Institution of Society', p. 62.

19. Similarly, Castoriadis ascribed the philosophical foundation of Marxism's decay to its reduction to a closed theoretical system. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, pp. 68-70.

over-emphasized at the expense of its critical and revolutionary elements. Both nature and history were seen as being governed by rational laws independent of autonomous human actions. In Castoriadis's view, under the influence of Hegelianism Marx's philosophy of history is an 'objectivist rationalism' which considered both past history and history to come as rational. Castoriadis noted that for Marx 'there is...a reason to be found immanent in things'.<sup>20</sup> According to this logic, this rationality embodied in history could be studied and discovered only by those who possess the true and objective knowledge of history. This in turn implied a political perception that considered the specialists of the Leninist Party, the 'technicians of this rationality',<sup>21</sup> to be the subject of the knowledge. Critical theoretical activity was transformed into an absolute, and signified the 'return to the contemplative and the speculative as the dominant mode for solving the problems posed to humanity'.<sup>22</sup> This understanding of Marxism amounted to a separation of theory and practice and the reproduction of the dualism between subject and structure. Marxism was thus reduced to a fixed set of principles, a dogmatic doctrine that applies itself to reality from outside as the objectivity that grasps the laws of social development. In doing so, it reconstituted the dualism between thought and social practice and excluded subjectivity and radical praxis 'by making people comply in advance to its schemata' and 'by submitting them to its categories'.<sup>23</sup> Seen through this perspective, the social reality is understood by Marxism as a given and 'static world', a social world that is constructed on the basis of eternal, stable relations and objective laws. As a result, politics was transformed into 'technique and bureaucratic manipulation'.<sup>24</sup>

Within this logic, Marxism ceased to be a negative and destructive critique of capitalism and sought to explain the economic laws that construe the reproduction of capitalism. Historical materialism endeavoured to establish causal interconnections between social and economic phenomena, leading to a dogmatic and teleological conception of history. By extension, historical development, social change and transition from one mode of production to another were interpreted by means of the 'state of technique' and its own evolution.<sup>25</sup> In this line of thought, the development of the productive forces is 'progress' and controls the other spheres of society. For Castoriadis, Marx was enslaved by capitalist culture. For this reason Marxism transformed human praxis into industrial practice and refused to see history as the product of human activity. Marx's stress on the development of the productive forces smoothed the way for orthodox Marxism to underestimate or neglect the class struggle. The self-emancipation of the working class as part of the idea of human emancipation disappeared. The 'laws of the development of societies' became a determinant element in the process of the liberation of man. Marxism prioritised the development of the productive forces, 'industrialization',

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20. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 42.

21. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 59.

22. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 68.

23. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 69.

24. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 70.

25. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 66.

the ‘rationalization of production’, ‘sovereignty of the economic’, ‘quantification’ and a ‘plan that treats men and their activities as measurable variables.’<sup>26</sup> The ultimate and more extreme implication of this metamorphosis of Marxism was the emergence of Stalinism. Stalin could speak of the laws of the development of societies and use the development of the productive forces to explain the passage from one social system to another. What remains to be answered, according to Castoriadis, is ‘how Marxists could have been Stalinists’. Castoriadis preferred to reply by asking another question in order to demonstrate the relationship between Marx and Soviet Marxism: ‘If the bosses are progressive, on the condition that they build factories, how could the commissars who build just as many and even more of them not be so as well?’<sup>27</sup> Castoriadis argued that the closed system of Marxism constituted part of the capitalist culture and went so far as to reject not only orthodox Marxism but all Marxism and Marx. Nonetheless, Castoriadis came back to the question regarding the crisis of Marxism in 1978, when the crisis of Marxism was publicly announced by Louis Althusser and was widely discussed in Marxist academic and political circles.

#### LOUIS ALTHUSSER: ‘AT LAST THE CRISIS OF MARXISM HAS EXPLODED!’

Althusser delivered a speech in a conference in Venice organized by the Italian political group ‘Il Manifesto’ on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1977. His statement sparked off an intense debate. From the outset, Althusser argued that over the previous century the expression ‘crisis of Marxism’ had conveyed negative connotations and was employed by the political and ideological enemies of the international working class movement.<sup>28</sup> Apparently, Althusser neglected the previous Marxist discussions and analyses on the same issue as it appears paradoxical to include Luxemburg, Korsch, Trotsky or Plechanov amongst the opponents of Marxism. Althusser drew a marked line between Marxism and the struggles of the mass movement of the people (e.g. in May ‘68) and argued that it was the radical initiatives of the latter that posed difficult questions to Marxism and made the crisis an ‘open one’ and ‘visible to everyone.’<sup>29</sup> Having acknowledged that Marxism had been through several crises in its history and had managed to survive (e.g., the ‘bankruptcy’ of the Second International), Althusser stated that ‘today Marxism is once again in crisis’<sup>30</sup> and expressed the view that ‘at last the crisis of Marxism has exploded! At last it is in full view! At last something vital and alive can be liberated by this crisis and in this crisis.’<sup>31</sup> It is this opportunity for renewal of Marxist theory that enabled Althusser to undertake the challenge to elucidate the

26. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 58.

27. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 58.

28. Louis Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, in *Power and Opposition in Post-revolutionary Societies*, trans. P. Camiller and J. Rothschild, London, Ink Links, 1979, p. 225.

29. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 226. See also, pp. 231 and 236.

30. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 225.

31. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 229.

‘character, meaning and implications of the crisis.’<sup>32</sup>

Althusser’s definition of the crisis of Marxism conveys a very precise meaning and ‘concerns the difficulties, contradictions and dilemmas in which the revolutionary organizations of struggle based on the Marxist tradition are now involved’.<sup>33</sup> From his definition, it appears that Althusser identified Marxism with the politics of the Communist parties and the crisis, by extension, came out, first, as a political crisis, a crisis of their identity that implied a drop of their membership and voters. Conversely, the fall of their constituency accelerated this crisis of identity. Altwater and Kallscheuer read Althusser’s theoretical effort as an agonized attempt to avert the split between party and masses that could possibly ensue from the participation of the Communist party in the government and state apparatus, its conversion into a governing party.<sup>34</sup> On a deeper level, however, what was at stake was related to the existence and survival of Communist party politics itself. The newly emerged social movements and the autonomous radical initiatives of the people challenged the unity, practice and strategy of the International Communist Movement. More importantly, they criticized or at times rejected the traditional forms of political organizations: trade unions and political parties.

Althusser unfolds his argument by associating the ‘expression’, ‘aggravation’ and ‘emergence’ of the crisis of Marxism with the development and tragic outcome of the Russian Revolution. The crisis was expressed as incomparability between the initial attraction of the Russian Revolution, its revolutionary promises and the later construction of the Stalinist regime. The soviet model ceased to constitute a radical and attractive point of reference for the anti-capitalist movement. To a considerable degree, the crisis deepened due to the fact that Marxism did not provide a reasonable and valid Marxist interpretation concerning the actual class nature of the Soviet system.<sup>35</sup> On the same wavelength, Poulantzas argued that the crisis of Marxism was caused by the ongoing critique of the Western European Communist parties against the Soviet regime owing to the lack of human rights and freedom of the latter. This contradiction aggravated the division of the labour movement and made it clear that we do not have a ‘Marxist explanation’, a ‘satisfactory account’ of the social nature of the societies in Eastern Europe.<sup>36</sup> Sweezy, also, came to the conclusion that ‘the crisis of Marxian theory’ could not be overcome unless we solve the enigma of the so-called ‘actually existing socialism’ based upon the hypothesis that ‘proletarian revolution can give rise to a new form of society, neither capitalist nor socialist’.<sup>37</sup> By seeing the crisis of Marxism through the perspective of the Russian question, Althusser sought to give some historical and theoretical depth to his analysis. As he argued, the crisis that exploded in 1977 ‘emerged

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32. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 229.

33. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 226.

34. Elmar Altwater and Otto Kallscheuer, ‘Socialist Politics and the “Crisis of Marxism”’, *The Socialist Register*, 1979, pp. 106-7.

35. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 227.

36. Nicos Poulantzas, ‘Is There a Crisis in Marxism?’, *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1979, p.

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37. Paul Sweezy, ‘A Crisis in Marxian Theory’, *Monthly Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1979, p. 24.



in the thirties' and it was Stalin who 'provoked' it, but at the same time 'he blocked it and prevented it from exploding.'<sup>38</sup>

Humanist Marxists of Eastern Europe, mainly expressed by the Czech philosopher Karel Kosik, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, the Budapest School and the 'Praxis' group in former Yugoslavia, did also recognize that both Marxist theory and practice are in crisis; they criticized the ruling ideology of Stalinism and attempted to question some fundamental principles of orthodox Marxism.<sup>39</sup> Yet, in most cases, they identified the crisis of Marxism with the crisis of the Soviet type societies.<sup>40</sup> They also sought to analyze the crisis by tending to oscillate endlessly between their attempt to articulate their arguments and to avoid conflict with the regime.<sup>41</sup> However, unlike these writers, Althusser took great pains not to use Stalin and the period of Stalinism as a scapegoat with a view to explaining the atrophy of Marxist theory. Without making a clear distinction between Marx and Marxism, Althusser sought the underlying causes of the crisis in the contradictions that pre-existed in Marxism. At the core of Althusser's approach lay an apparently simple proposition. Marx, Lenin, Gramsci and Mao were 'only men', men whose writings were 'exposed to the mistakes, to the constant need for correction and to the errors bound up with all research.'<sup>42</sup> Assuming this to be the case, Althusser maintained that there is no pure theoretical tradition that has been falsified by Stalin, there is no 'pure heritage'.<sup>43</sup> Marxism is not a completed and perfect system of principles, but it contains 'difficulties, contradictions and gaps'. Marxism has been marked by the dominant ideology and its own formation and development has been affected by capitalist culture.<sup>44</sup>

On this issue, Althusser provided three examples in order to pinpoint the major theoretical gaps within Marxism. The first concerned Marx's theory of exploitation, which according to Althusser's estimation amounted to an 'arithmetical presentation of surplus value' and thus led to a very 'restrictive conception of exploitation'.<sup>45</sup> This focus upon the quantitative aspect of exploitation resulted in disregarding the conditions of labour and exploitation. It thus reproduced the division between economic and political struggles, narrowing and fading the class struggle as a whole. Second and contrary to

38. Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', p. 230.

39. For an interesting presentation of the critical aspects of Marxism in Eastern Europe, see James Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992.

40. See for example, Antun Zwan, 'Ecstasy and Hangover of a Revolution', in M. Markovic and G. Petrovic, (ed.), *PRAXIS: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Boston, Reidel Publishing Company, 1979, pp. 361-369. In this vein, see also, Karel Kosik, *The crisis of Modernity. Essays and Observations from the 1968 Era*, James Satterwhite (ed.), Lanham and Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 1995, especially, 'Reason and conscience' (pp.13-15), 'Our present crisis' (pp.17-51), 'Socialism and the crisis of modern man' (pp. 53-62) and 'The dialectics of morality and the morality of dialectics' (pp. 63-76).

41. For instance, it was no by coincidence that Kosik was persecuted, sentenced to imprisonment and his books were banned.

42. Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', p. 232.

43. Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', p. 231.

44. Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', p. 232.

45. Althusser, 'The Crisis of Marxism', p. 233.

Poulantzas, who categorically asserted that ‘creative Marxism has advanced satisfactorily’ with regard to the issue of state theory,<sup>46</sup> Althusser argued that we lack an adequate Marxist theory of the State. This weakness hinders our understanding of the Eastern European societies and prevents the Communist parties in the West from unfolding a new strategy of conquest or participation in government and state power.<sup>47</sup> And third, according to Althusser, Marxism has no ‘real theory of class struggle organizations, especially of political parties and trade unions.’<sup>48</sup> This difficulty complicates the relationship between the party and the state or the mass movement. Despite the above inadequacies, however, Althusser remained confident that the crisis of Marxism could be used in a positive and fruitful manner so as to open up new horizons and transform creatively both the theory and practice of the working class movement.<sup>49</sup>

#### CASTORIADIS VERSUS ALTHUSSER

The views expressed by Althusser vis-a-vis the crisis of Marxism came under strong attack from Castoriadis, who replied to Althusser in an article first published in *Libre* in 1978.<sup>50</sup> Castoriadis spoke of ‘Althusser’s crises’ and argued that the French philosopher Louis Althusser clearly reproduces the ‘Stalinist and neo-Stalinist industry of mystification’ by producing theoretically a ‘patchwork’ and using a ‘language of caoutchouc’, where the final outcome is distorted because of the fact that his premises are full of elements of truth, half-truths or downright lies.<sup>51</sup> In his article, Castoriadis pointed out that both Althusser and Eurocommunism have been identified with the dominant methods used in capitalist countries: every position could be accepted as long as it has been inverted and transformed into an insignificant one. Althusser’s method, that is, plagiarism and inversion, has had a political goal and he is intentionally aiming at causing confusion and weakening Marx’s and Marxism’s revolutionary critique without changing the substantial core of his traditional Marxism.<sup>52</sup> For Castoriadis, it is obvious that Althusser, having been an ‘ideological functionary’, has never conceived Marx’s revolutionary element: the profundity and the boldness of his thought as well as the radical and ruthless critique of every established authority and thought.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, Althusser’s operation has had existential dimensions. He sought to preserve and renew Marxism as he would be unable to exist without it. Althusser’s main concern is to maintain the

46. Poulantzas, ‘Is There a Crisis in Marxism?’, p. 15. According to Poulantzas, the theoretical inadequacies of Marxism could be traced to the areas of ideology, law, justice, human rights, representative and direct democracy.

47. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, pp. 234-5.

48. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 235.

49. Althusser, ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, p. 237.

50. Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘Les crises d’Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc’, *Libre*, 4, 1978, pp. 239-54.

51. Castoriadis, ‘Les crises d’Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc’, pp. 240-1.

52. Castoriadis, ‘Les crises d’Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc’, p. 220.

53. Castoriadis, ‘Les crises d’Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc’, p. 222.

French Communist Party's leading role and justify his own existence.<sup>54</sup>

On this basis, Castoriadis attempted to evaluate Althusser's views concerning the crisis of Marxism, to unpick his patchwork. First, he made an argument against Althusser's claim that Marxism had survived and was led to a renewal after the crisis and collapse of the Second International. But which Marxism had survived? In which direction had its ideology been modified? To what extent had its organizations and practices been renewed? It is clear that Althusser was referring to the imposition of the 'Leninist model' on an international scale. According to Castoriadis, this simply meant a bureaucratic-totalitarian model of organization along with the admission of the Russian Party's dominance over the international communist movement. This led to the Bolshevization of the communist parties and for the first time in the history of the labour movement, the imposition of a 'theoretical and practical orthodoxy'.<sup>55</sup> Althusser very skillfully presented Marxism and the labour movement as being identical and at the same time tended to neglect the non-Marxist currents and struggles of the radical movement. Castoriadis broaches here a theme of great interest and importance for the evolution of the anti-capitalism movement, which in a manner, echoes Korsch's positions in his dealing with the defects of Lenin's critique of Bernstein's ideas. For Korsch, Lenin's attack against Social Democratic revisionism, despite its merit, was rooted in ideological presuppositions. At the heart of Lenin's critique lay the assumption that the revolutionary spirit of the labour movement could be reassured 'not in its actual economic and social class content, but expressly only in the leadership of this struggle by way of the revolutionary PARTY guided by a correct Marxist theory'.<sup>56</sup> In the same vein, Pannekoek noted that 'the very expression "revolutionary party" is a contradiction in terms'.<sup>57</sup>

Secondly, when Althusser spoke of the crisis of Marxism, he obviously meant 'Althusser's Marxism', the Marxism of the bureaucratic-Stalinist communist parties of Western Europe, which, by the way, were still considered by Althusser as 'revolutionary organizations of class struggle'. In this sense, as Castoriadis argued, it was difficult for Althusser to realize why no Marxist explanation of the class character of the Soviet system had been provided by these parties.<sup>58</sup> Castoriadis maintained that because of his being an 'ideological functionary' of the party (with all its material and existential dimensions), Althusser was unable to give a satisfactory Marxist answer to the following questions: who has benefited from the mystification of the Soviet regime? Which interests, actual social conditions and positions have the lies of the communist parties and their ideologists concealed? Why has Althusser overlooked the fact that Marx's 'limits and contradictions' have not prevented Marxists, having been inspired by the best and most

54. Castoriadis, 'Les crises d'Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc', p. 243-4.

55. Castoriadis, 'Les crises d'Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc', p. 245.

56. Karl Korsch, 'The Passing of Marxian Orthodoxy: Bernstein-Kautsky-Luxemburg-Lenin', in D. Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, Austin and London, University of Texas Press, 1977, p.180

57. Anton Pannekoek, *Party and Working Class*, 1936 available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1936/party-working-class.htm>.

58. Castoriadis, 'Les crises d'Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc', p. 245.

revolutionary elements of Marx, from analyzing the Soviet regime and revealing that it is an exploitative, suppressive society ruled by a dominant class, the Soviet bureaucracy? Above all, however, Althusser, by attributing to Stalin the blockage of the crisis in the thirties, not only utilized in a 'comic' manner the explanation of the 'personality cult', but made no reference to social and historical factors (e.g. class struggle) which could resolve the 'Russian enigma'. Unsurprisingly, in Althusser's text there is no indication of an extensive analysis of the concept of bureaucracy. In this way, for Castoriadis, it is no coincidence that the concept of class struggle or any socio-historical factors are lacking from Althusser's theorising.<sup>59</sup>

From Castoriadis's point of view, Althusser did not want to see that responsibility for what occurred in Russia lies not with the gaps in Marx's theory of the state, but with the role that the Bolshevik party had played as a means of suppression of the autonomous struggle of the Russian labour movement (soviets, workers' councils and factory committees). Behind Althusser's concern regarding the issues about state theory one could see his attempt to veil the reactionary function of the bureaucratic and hierarchically organized party which claims to possess the absolute truth. According to Castoriadis, the real problem for the 'science of historical materialism' derives from the fact that it is not able to perceive that a ruling class could emanate from outside of the 'production relations', that is, from a dominant, ruling party. In this respect, one has to put the blame not on Marx's theoretical gaps or simply its infection by the dominant ideology, but on the 'positive' elements of Marx's theory and their correlation with the 'capitalist imaginary significations': the adoration of capitalist 'rationalism', of technique and organization, the faith in the iron laws of history that imply the inevitability of socialism, just to mention some of them.<sup>60</sup> In Castoriadis's view, all these points amount to a large part of the theory and practice of Marxism and have not only provoked its crisis, but have also rendered Marxism as the 'most formidable obstacle that any endeavour which aims at reconstructing the revolutionary movement has to overcome'.<sup>61</sup> Hence, for Castoriadis, it is not surprising that Althusser wants this Marxism to be preserved as a designation-fetish, while in reality he is treating Marx as a dead dog.<sup>62</sup>

## FROM THE CRISIS OF MARXISM TO THE REVIVAL OF EMANCIPATORY POLITICS

The line developed by Castoriadis both in his analysis of the degradation of Marxist theory and the critique of Althusser's positions addresses significant issues and has considerable political implications. Castoriadis's discussion of the crisis and decay of Marxism went parallel with his critical endeavour to reveal contradictions and inadequacies that could be traced to Marx's theorising. Yet, he went back to Marx not to liberate him from these inconsistencies, which are admittedly present in his

59. Castoriadis, 'Les crises d'Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc', pp. 245-51.

60. Castoriadis, 'Les crises d'Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc', p. 254.

61. Castoriadis, 'Les crises d'Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc', p. 254.

62. Castoriadis, 'Les crises d'Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc', p. 254.

writings, but to flee from Marx, to go beyond his theorising. The main props of his critical endeavour derived from his intention to use his analysis of the crisis of Marxism to announce the death of Marxism, to show that Marxism 'is dead as theory'.<sup>63</sup> At times and despite his claims to the contrary, Castoriadis followed the orthodox Marxist interpretations of Marx, reproducing the schemata of traditional Marxism, that is to say, the base-superstructure metaphor, along with its determinism and fatalism. Also, there is a case to be made for Castoriadis's kinship with Althusser's dealing with critical Marxism. First, Castoriadis's reading of the crisis of Marxism remained anchored in the traditional Marxist reading of Marx through the base-superstructure metaphor from Marx's *Preface to A contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).<sup>64</sup> Secondly, his analytical framework strongly resembled the uncritical presuppositions of revisionist debate or Althusser's interpretative method, especially when Castoriadis identified Marx and Marxism. Castoriadis also intentionally neglected other critical traditions and currents of Marxism. Likewise, he overlooked the theoretical development of critical Marxism as he was more interested in announcing that Marxism has come to an end and no longer exists as a living and creative theory. But in response to his claims, one could ask by using Brian Singer's words: 'Is not Castoriadis—at least until 1964—an example of Marxism's potential creativity?'<sup>65</sup> Similarly to traditional Marxism, *Capital* was understood as a text on economics that provided an alternative, problematic and misleading economic theory that bears great responsibility for the petrification and tragic failure of Marxism. Misjudging Marx's critical theoretical activity, Castoriadis failed to grasp Marx's dialectic method as 'a critical explication of economic categories' and a 'critique of economics' in order to destroy 'the categorical basis of academic economics'.<sup>66</sup>

Castoriadis added a further dimension to his analysis of the downfall of Marxism when he maintained that Marxism's degeneration and loss of its revolutionary element reflect the 'fate of the revolutionary movement in capitalist society up to now'.<sup>67</sup> The reduction of Marxism to a simple ideology involved its integration into capitalist society. This in turn led Castoriadis to the point of extending his own fatalism by assuming the domination of capital and emphasizing the duration and stability of capitalist social relations. As he put it, 'capitalism has been able to maintain and even to strengthen itself as a social system... We cannot conceive of a society in which, in the long run, the power of the dominant classes is affirmed and in which, simultaneously, a revolutionary theory lives and develops. The evolution of Marxism is indissociable from the evolution of the

63. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 62.

64. See on this, among others, Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, pp. 58, 70.

65. Brian Singer, 'The Early Castoriadis: Socialism, Barbarism and the Bureaucratic Thread', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol. 3, no 3, 1979, p. 51.

66. Hans-Georg Backhaus, 'Some Aspects of Marx's Concept of Critique in the Context of his Economic-Philosophical Theory' in W. Bonefeld and K. Psychopedis (ed.), *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, pp. 13-4.

67. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 60.

society in which it has existed.<sup>68</sup> In Castoriadis's understanding as indicated in the above passage, capital is powerful and dominant. It is taken as the subject, the determining factor that subordinates and assimilates any oppositional power. The emphasis here is placed on the domination of capitalism rather than the struggle of the oppressed. Marxism, thus, is understood by Castoriadis as a theory that represents the victims of oppression, as a theory of capitalist oppression and not as a theory of the fragility and the contradictions of that oppression.<sup>69</sup> Additionally and despite their different perspectives, both Castoriadis and Althusser perceived Marxism as a theory *of* society and not as a theory of contradiction, a theory *against* society.<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Marxism was understood as a theory aiming at providing an interpretation *of* the objective laws of capitalist society rather than a theory that intends the destruction of capitalist society. Marxism, then, is reduced into a theory of capitalist domination and analysis of the structures and not a theory of struggle against capitalism. As a result, Marxism is confined to the study of the function and reproduction of structures and 'their crisis becomes its crisis.'<sup>71</sup>

At times, however, Castoriadis's theoretical approach to the crisis of Marxism echoes the most radical elements of critical theory, which constitute a sharp break with the dogmatism of the Second and Third International. Ernst Bloch noted that 'crisis is an old term for a burden, for rejecting that burden.'<sup>72</sup> Castoriadis contributed well in rejecting the burdens of traditional Marxism and furnishing counterpoints for the rebirth of radical theory and praxis. From the outset, Castoriadis underscored the fact that as soon as Marxism got institutionalized and became a scientific *Weltanschauung* its revolutionary spirit withered away. Through its reduction to a reformist and established ideology, Marxism was led to its own self-refutation and abolition. It became a closed theoretical system, a never formulated dogma. Nobody knew what actual Marxism really meant. Determinism, teleology and positivism derived from this perception of Marxism as a complete and perfect system, a finished theory. This idea entailed the abandonment of negative and questioning thought and the establishment of new forms of authority. The systematisation of Marxism meant its own rapid deformation and further reification. On a second level, Castoriadis contributed to the questioning of the identification of orthodox Marxism with the revolutionary movement as a mystification. He fiercely challenged the dogmatic presuppositions that take as natural and for granted the prevalent position and hegemony of Marxism within the anti-capitalist movement.

68. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 60.

69. On the idea of Marxism as a theory of the contradictions of oppression, see John Holloway, 'The Freeing of Marx', *Common Sense*, no. 14, 1993, p. 19 and John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, London, Pluto, 2005, p. 160.

70. See on this distinction John Holloway, 'The Relevance of Marxism Today', *Common Sense*, no. 15, 1994, p. 38; Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, pp. 135-6 and Richard Gunn, 'Marxism and Contradiction', *Common Sense*, no. 15, 1994, p. 53.

71. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn and Kosmas Psychopedis (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Open Marxism: Dialectics and History*, vol. 1, London, Pluto Press, 1992, p. x.

72. Ernst Bloch, Interview given to NIN, No 1031, October, 11, 1970. Quoted in Antun Zwan, 'Ecstasy and Hangover of a Revolution', in M. Markovic and G. Petrovic (ed.), *PRAXIS: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Boston, D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1979, p. 361.

This pre-established relationship between the Marxist doctrine and the radical movement should not be perceived as enduring and timeless. Yet, Castoriadis failed or refused to understand that revolutionary theory and praxis need the ‘warm streams’<sup>73</sup> of critical Marxism and Marx to the same extent that they need the ‘warm streams’ of anarchism, radical feminism and ecology, autonomism or any other tendency of the mass movement that could enrich our struggles for the revolutionary transformation of capitalism. As Clarke has nicely put it, ‘whether or not Marx’s name is attached to such a movement is neither here nor there. What matters is that we should take full advantage of the insights that Marx’s work has to offer.’<sup>74</sup>

Castoriadis also underlined the responsibility of Leninism both as an ideology and political practice for the ‘canonization’, crisis and decay of Marxism. In opposition to Marx’s critical principles, the Leninist model of the party as the only exemplary form of organisation of class struggle fetishized, sterilized and preserved Marxism as a codified set of ‘holy canons’. Castoriadis considered that both the Bolshevik party and ideology precipitated the several metamorphoses of Marxism. Although there was a gulf between Lenin and Leninism, between Lenin’s thought and Stalinism, the degeneration of Marxism became worse during Lenin’s period, when Marx’s work was not only used to justify Lenin’s policy and tactics, but also basic Marxian premises were entirely inverted. Beyond this, the fragmentation of the international communist movement and the various splits of the Leninist parties created different versions of traditional Marxism, which were fighting each other for the right to claim the representation of authentic and orthodox Marxism. As Castoriadis characteristically noted in a later article, ‘orthodoxy requires guardians of orthodoxy; that is, a church or a party machine. A church committed to orthodoxy needs an Inquisition, and heretics must be burned — or sent to the Gulag.’<sup>75</sup> Last but not least, Castoriadis ascribed to this Leninist metaphysics of the party one of the major causes of the tragic outcome of the Russian Revolution. Soviet Marxism and Soviet type societies were seen by Castoriadis as determining factors in the crisis of Marxism. The success of the Russian revolution was basically a Pyrrhic victory, since it was not the state but Marxism itself that withered away. Castoriadis repeatedly reminded us of the significance that an understanding and comprehension of the character of the Soviet regime has for contemporary revolutionary struggles. In his words, the ‘Russian question was and remains the touchstone of the theoretical and practical attitudes that call for revolution.’<sup>76</sup>

Evidently, a simply theoretical reflection upon Castoriadis’s critique of Althusser and its contribution to the crisis of Marxism issue cannot fully reveal the new possibilities that stand before critical theory for the re-unity of thought and action. It would not

73. According to Ernst Bloch ‘in Marxism a cold stream and a warm stream run parallel. Michael Landmann, ‘Talking with Ernst Bloch: Korčula, 1968’, *Telos*, no. 25, 1975, p. 167.

74. Simon Clarke, *Marx’s Theory of Crisis*, London, The Macmillan Press, 1994, p. 13.

75. Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘The Crisis of Marxism, The Crisis of Politics’, *Dissent*, 1992, p. 221.

76. Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘General Introduction’, in D. A. Curtis (ed.), *Cornelius Castoriadis: Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1, 1946-1955: From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 7.

be possible to resolve the theoretical mysteries of this controversy in the direction of radical and anti-capitalist theory-practice based exclusively upon the battle of ideas and independently of social reality and the struggles for social emancipation. In this respect, the intensification of contemporary class struggles all over the world could shed light on the crisis of Marxism debate and underline its relevance for emancipatory politics today. The most recent movements of squares or the occupy movement, for instance, or the rebellions in the Arab world and social explosions or uprisings that have erupted across the continents have challenged the culture, theory and practice of the international anti-capitalist movement. The development of non-party forms of struggle and the multiplicity of the emerging global resistance have posed significant political and theoretical questions in respect to the content, form, organization and efficacy of the radical movement in times of severe neo-liberal crisis. They also imply a radical transformation of our mental conceptions of the world, a resignification of words and revolutionary ideas, which could lead to theoretical and practical openings, strengthening the emancipatory movement and its potential to move from revolt to self-organization and self-institution of society.

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