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The Otherness of Castoriadis

A Review of

Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1997. *The Castoriadis Reader*, edited and translated by David Ames Curtis. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1997. *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, translated and edited by David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

On 26 December 1997, Cornelius Castoriadis died in Paris at the age of seventy-five. In a review of his last book, Robert Redeker laments that “one of the most important political and philosophical thinkers of the last half century” has remained in the shade while recognized philosophers glorify the reign of “feeble thought” (1997:24). Castoriadis, a prolific writer, started writing under various pseudonyms in 1949 for the influential radical journal *Socialisme ou barbarie*. A recently compiled bibliography of his writings in French amounts to more than thirty pages, including essays on philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics, literature, economics, science, and mathematics. Although increasingly known as a political philosopher and psychoanalyst, it is striking that in his homage Octavio Paz¹ would claim that, other than his “moral and intellectual qualities, his love for art, mathematics, and literature distinguishes him.” Yet what is inescapable is that, in the age of “generalized conformism,” when cynicism parades itself as critique (Derrida) and liberalism cannot be distinguished from socialism (Habermas), Castoriadis’s work found only a limited public. In his obituary, Edgar Morin commented that Castoriadis was “enormously outside norms. Read the fashionable histories of the intellectual world. You will find this great thinker only marginally cited” (1997:1).

In the North American press, his passing went largely unnoticed, unlike, for example, Foucault or Poulantzas. Over the years an increasingly substantial selection of Castoriadis’s oeuvre has become available in English both in books and articles published in a variety of academic journals.² Ironically, 1997 was a momentous year for Cornelius Castoriadis: two new translations appeared—*The Castoriadis Reader*, a collection of

writings spanning fifty years, and *World in Fragments*, a collection of his most recent essays—his seminal *The Imaginary Institution of Society* finally appeared in paperback, a special issue of *Thesis Eleven* was devoted to his work, and two web sites were set up. Yet his intellectual status in contemporary culture remains tenuous, as demonstrated by the responses of many reviewers unable to resist the temptation to parade their arrogance.³ Will this marginalization be the fate of Castoriadis, or will he become, as he once described the *artiste maudit* of modernism, “the misunderstood genius condemned by necessity and not by accident to work for a potentially universal but effectively non-existent and essentially posthumous public” (Castoriadis 1993:307)? Indeed, there is some evidence that the latter fate might come to pass, yet there is something in his work that continues to rub against the grain of contemporary sensibilities.

Castoriadis’s oeuvre is encyclopedic in two senses. A cursory glance at the two books under consideration reveals an astonishing breadth of knowledge. *The Castoriadis Reader* provides an overview of fifty years of writing, from the first article in *Socialisme ou barbarie* (1949) to the lengthy essay, “Done and To Be Done” (1989), in which Castoriadis responds to the criticism of his philosophy, politics, and psychoanalytic theory. Slightly less than half of this book constitutes a sampling of key essays from *Socialisme ou barbarie* (1949–1965), the journal that most influenced the events of May 1968.⁴ During this period, Castoriadis developed an alternative conception of politics to the one that had dominated the left for the greater part of the twentieth century.⁵ On the one hand, he mounts a challenge to Marxism and orthodox communism by showing how the Leninist Party and the Soviet bureaucracy were a new form of oppression, ideologically supported by the theoretical tenets of Marxism. On the other hand, Castoriadis remains faithful to the critical spirit of Marx by deepening the critique of capitalism as the expansion of rational mastery over all aspects of society and by formulating a politics of autonomy. Specifically, he provides a philosophical grounding for modern democratic movements which first found expression in the workers’ movements of the late eighteenth century and were oriented to the formation of new socio-political institutions and forms.⁶

One of Castoriadis’s central claims is that new social movements, whether workers’ movements in the nineteenth century or the women’s movement in the late twentieth century, cannot be reduced to or deduced from their conditions or from the “inner contradictions” of social structures. These movements are, *stricto sensu*, historical creations; they bring about or “instantiate” (*instaurer*) new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting, that have their origins in the individual and collective imaginary, the ontological source for human creativity.⁷ Only human beings are “poietical,” and that is why they must take responsibility for their own creations. Genuine creations are not merely different from what existed before but are radically Other, incommensurable: it is this otherness we experience the moment we fall in love or see a powerful painting for the first time. But, Castoriadis also insists, “creation entails destruction—if only because another form alters the total form of what was there.”

For Castoriadis, this ontological source of human creativity has largely been “covered over” in human history. Typically, social institutions, or the institution of society in

general, are explained by reference to an external, heteronomous source, such as a god or the laws of history or the necessity of the capitalist market or rationality itself, as the ground and limit of human activity (“Institution of Society and Religion,” *World in Fragments*). Only with the creation of philosophy as self-reflective subjectivity and democracy as “the creation of unlimited interrogation in all domains” in ancient Athens did human beings become explicitly recognized as the source of their own institutions. For a politics of autonomy, the laws, institutions, norms, and so on (*nomos*) of a democratic society are its own (*autos*). On the one hand, autonomy means that human beings must accept responsibility for their own creations:

it entails acceptance of the fact that we create signification on the basis of the baseless, the groundless, that we give form to the Chaos through our thought, our action, our labour, our works, and that therefore this signification has no “guarantee” external to itself. (“The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,” *Castoriadis Reader*, 344).

On the other hand, to be an autonomous individual, to act in accordance with an autonomous collectivity, means to extend the realm of freedom, which cannot be separated from universal equality, throughout social life as a whole.⁸ It is the elaboration or “elucidation” (his term for inquiry or interrogation) of this concept of autonomy in its political, cultural, and psychoanalytic meanings that Castoriadis would make his life work.

Castoriadis insisted throughout his work that the Greek *polis* was not a model but a germ, a beginning. There is no doubt about the *restricted* nature of the historical Athenian democracy. The existence of slaves and the limited political rights of women, for example, are well documented. Equally, Castoriadis is not interested in reviving the idea of direct democracy for a contemporary world. Rather, what interests him about the Greek *polis* is the idea that a democratic politics cannot be separated from the notion of a democratic society. Or, to put it differently, how can “the riddle of politics” be solved? How can one have an autonomous politics without autonomous individuals? How can individuals become autonomous in a true, effective sense without social institutions oriented to the formation of individual and collective autonomy? Certainly this problem cannot be resolved by proceduralism, the establishment of legal and formal norms for protecting democracy. Not only does this concept, as advocated in different ways by Berlin, Rawls, or Habermas, have its roots in an abstract notion of the individual subject (*homo juridicus*, *homo oeconomicus*, *homo rationalis*), but it also fails to articulate a positive goal, a concept of the “good society.” By contrast, Castoriadis argues for a substantive concept of democracy as a regime, locating a politics in the formation of autonomous institutions, in the sphere of culture as such, as the necessary condition for realizing democracy. As he puts it, “There cannot be a democratic society without a democratic *paideia*” (1996:233). *Paideia* is not restricted here to formal schooling but signifies the dimension of institutions that actively and practically forms and educates individuals. And herein may reside Castoriadis’s importance for cultural studies: he regards culture as a sphere of conflict between autonomy, the development of institutions positively oriented to freedom or democracy, and heteronomy, the development of institutions oriented to the expan-

sion of capitalist rationality. In this sense, the study of culture is inseparable from the study of politics and the formation of anthropological types of human beings. A critical cultural studies must, therefore, elucidate cultural forms that are heteronomous and those that seek to bring about a rupture with a heteronomous closure of meaning.

World in Fragments is a collection of essays and lectures from the last fifteen years of Castoriadis's life. It too displays the breadth of his thought, from his indictment of postmodernism as "generalized conformism" to his more detailed accounts of psychoanalysis—he became a practising psychoanalyst in 1974—to his philosophical elucidation of the imagination and science. Yet many of these essays are difficult and can be considered encyclopedic in the original Greek sense of a well-rounded education (*egkuklios paideia*). To distance himself from "inherited thought," Castoriadis created his own terms (e.g., autonomy, imaginary, institute, magma, ensidic, or ensemblist-identitary), the meaning or meanings of which the reader must construct through the labour of critical reading, an activity Castoriadis fears is disappearing. From 1978 he collected his writings under the general title "Crossroads of the Labyrinth." At the time of his death there were five volumes, but, in 1999, a final, posthumous volume appeared under the title *Les figures du pensable (Figures of the Thinkable)*.⁹ Moreover, other than his magnum opus, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, all of his books are collections of essays, and most of the references are to his own writings. What emerges is a densely cross-referenced oeuvre that seeks to elucidate the world and its experience from a multiplicity of perspectives. Against the pervasive cynicism of an epoch characterized by "the rise of insignificance" and the erosion of the public world in favour of the culture of privatization, Castoriadis tries to hold onto the possibility of meaning or meaningfulness.

Castoriadis is a demanding, often irritating, but always engaging writer who never loses sight of the real problems of everyday life and the stakes facing us. As he would frequently insist, "The objective of politics is not happiness but freedom; autonomy is freedom understood not in the inherited, metaphysical sense, but as effective, humanly feasible, lucid and reflective positing of the rules of individual and collective activity" ("Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary," *Castoriadis Reader*, 337). For those unfamiliar with the thought of Castoriadis, reading his work for the first time is to encounter one of the most original and creative figures of the last half of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. See www.multimania.com/ccastor/francais/portrait/hommop.html.
2. Besides the books under discussion here, the following are available in English: *Crossroads of the Labyrinth* (1984), *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), three volumes of *Political and Social Writings* (1988, 1988, 1993), and *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (1991). As well, Castoriadis's essays have appeared in such journals as *Telos*, *Thesis Eleven*, *Dissent*, *Constellations*, and *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. In addition, see "Tribute to Cornelius Castoriadis" (1999), which draws particular reference to his psychoanalytic writing. For a short bibliography of his writings, see the Appendix in *World in Fragments* (1997:405–8). A complete bibliography of his

writings and commentaries on his writings in several languages can be found at the following web site: <http://aleph.lib.ohio-state.edu/~bcase/castoriadis>.

3. A typical example of this arrogance is the review of *The Imaginary Institution of Society, Fait et à faire*, and *The Castoriadis Reader* by Glen Newey (1998). It should be noted that Jürgen Habermas initially dismissed Castoriadis for aestheticizing political and social theory. This judgement has subsequently been modified by many of Habermas's protégés. For example, see Honneth (1998:2–3).
4. Significantly, Castoriadis had to write these essays under various pseudonyms because he was employed as an economist at the OECD and did not have French citizenship. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the unofficial leaders of May 1968, admitted to “plagiarizing” ideas from Castoriadis without ever knowing his name. They would not actually meet until 1980, when Castoriadis gave a talk to the Green Party in Brussels. This talk, “From Ecology to Autonomy,” is included in *The Castoriadis Reader*. See also “Movements of the Sixties” and “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism,” both in *World in Fragments*.
5. With the collapse of the Soviet system, a number of important works on the relation of the Leninist model of communism to the French left have appeared. See, in particular, the books by Furet and Lefort, one of the co-founders of *Socialisme ou barbarie*.
6. It is unfortunate that David Ames Curtis did not include the important essay “The Question of the History of the Workers’ Movement” (1993:157–206), which provides a transition between Castoriadis’s overtly political or polemical writings and his more philosophical-cultural writings.
7. Castoriadis’s concept of the imaginary is quite different from the one developed by Lacan. It signifies the original faculty of positing or presenting oneself with things and relations that do not exist; that is, what Castoriadis calls the “radical imaginary” (the individual) and the “social instituting imaginary” (the collective) relates explicitly to the human capacity to create.
8. “The autonomy of individuals, their freedom (which involves, of course, their capacity to put themselves back into question) also and especially has as a context the equal participation of all in power, without which there is obviously no freedom, just as there is no equality without freedom. How could I be free if other people than myself decide on what concerns me and yet in this decision I cannot take part? It must be affirmed vigorously, against the platitudes of a certain liberal tradition, that there is not an antinomy but rather reciprocal implications between the exigencies of freedom and equality.” (Castoriadis 1991:137)
9. Le Seuil intends to publish all of Castoriadis’s seminars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, which will include Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Freud, and the human psyche. At this time, only *Sur le politique de Platon* has appeared.

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