

Cornelius Castoriadis

An Interview

The following interview with Cornelius Castoriadis took place at the University of Essex, in late February 1990. Castoriadis is a leading figure in the thought and politics of the postwar period in France. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s he was a member of the now almost legendary political organization, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, along with other currently well-known figures, such as Claude Lefort and Jean-François Lyotard. Unlike some of his contemporaries, however, he has remained firm in the basic political convictions of his activist years. He may be better known to some *Radical Philosophy* readers under the name of Paul Cardan, the pseudonym which appeared on the cover of pamphlets published during the 1960s by 'Solidarity', the British counterpart to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

Castoriadis is notable for his effort to rescue the emancipatory impulse of Marx's thought – encapsulated in his key notion of 'autonomy' – from what he takes to be the rigid and dogmatic structures of Marxism itself. From very early in his career he unfashionably combined a forceful critique of Communist bureaucracy with an unwavering commitment to the radical Left. Castoriadis has also played an important role in a range of debates in the philosophy of science, social theory, political philosophy and the interpretation of Freud. The major statement of his social thought is *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, which appeared in France in 1975 (English translation, Polity Press, 1987). His collected *Political and Social Writings* are available in two volumes from the University of Minnesota Press (1988).

Since the late 1970s Cornelius Castoriadis has been practising as a psychoanalyst in Paris. He is close, theoretically, to the 'Quatrième Groupe', a group of senior Lacanian analysts who broke with Lacan in 1969, over his downgrading of clinical concerns and his bizarre innovations in training procedure. Castoriadis is also a Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, where he teaches a seminar. The *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales* has recently published a multilingual *Festschrift* for Castoriadis (Vol. XXVII, 1989, No. 86), which provides a valuable range of critical perspectives on his work.

RP: What were the fundamental experiences which brought you to philosophy and politics, and to the exploration of the relation between the two?

Castoriadis: To begin with, there was always an intellectual curiosity for which I am indebted to my family. I came into contact with philosophy very early on, at a ridiculously early age in fact, at 13. I came to philosophy through classical manuals; to politics through Communist publications in Greece, around 1935, and then immediately afterwards, through the works of Marx. The two things have been always there – in parallel. What attracted me to Marxism, as I saw it at the time, was a very strong feeling about the absurdity and injustice of the existing state of affairs.

RP: What was the political situation in Greece at that time?

Castoriadis: 1935 was the eve of the Metaxas dictatorship which lasted throughout the war and the occupation. At that time, in the last year of my secondary education, I joined the Communist Youth, which was underground, of course. The cell I was in was dissolved because all my comrades were arrested. I was lucky enough not to be arrested. I started political activity again after the beginning of the occupation. First, with some comrades, in what now looks like an absurd attempt to change something in the policies of the Communist Party. Then I discovered that this was just a sheer illusion. I adhered to the Trotskyists, with whom I worked during the occupation. After I went to France in 1945/46, I went to the Trotskyist party there and founded a tendency against the official Trotskyist line of Russia as a workers' state. We split in '48/49, and started *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which went on until 1965 (the journal) and 1967 (the group).

RP: Is it true to say that you never really accepted Trotsky's interpretation of the Soviet Union? Or did you accept it for a short time?

Castoriadis: For a very short time, yes. As soon as I moved out of Stalinism, the very first thing to grasp was the idea that the revolution had degenerated and that there was a bureaucracy which was just a parasitic stratum. But I soon started to reject this. You must realise that under the Metaxas dictatorship all left-wing books were burnt. And then there was the occupation. So one was not really in touch with the literature. Still, in 1942–43 in Greece, I had the good luck to find copies of Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, Victor Serge, Ciliga's book and Boris Souvarine's *Stalin* – a wonderful book which has been re-issued now in France. And it was already clear in *The Revolution Betrayed* that Trotsky was contradictory.

RP: In what way contradictory?

Castoriadis: Well, he says, for instance, that Russia is on socialist state groundings because all property belongs to the state. But he goes on to say that the state belongs to the bureaucracy. So therefore property belongs to the bureaucracy. If one is logical, one asks, 'What has all of this to do with the workers' state?'. The means of production belong to the bureaucracy. As I discovered afterwards, this idea had been around for some time already. One can see it among the inmates of the Russian concentration camps in 1926/27: the idea that the bureaucracy was becoming a new ruling stratum and exploiting class. What reinforced me in this conviction was the first Stalinist attempt at a coup d'état in Greece in December 1944. There really was something there, with the masses struggling under the leadership of the Communist Party; and for me it was crystal clear. If the Stalinists had gained power at that time, they would have installed a regime similar to that of

Russia. I said so and wrote so at the time. It was the only time I was in disagreement with an elder militant, Spiros Stinas, who I had worked with all this time, and who, in a certain sense, was my political teacher.

How could one account for this on the basis of the Trotskyist theory of the Russian regime that is a proletarian revolution which has degenerated? Bureaucracy was appearing as a quasi-autonomous historical force attempting to establish a regime for its own interest and outlook. The whole development of my political conceptions about bureaucracy – and in contra-distinction to this, what is socialism? – started at this time. If socialism is not nationalised property, not just a bureaucratic method of central planning, then what is it? Immediately, the idea of autonomy arose. Socialism as self-government in production and political life; that is, collective organisation and self-determination at all levels.

RP: How did your move away from Trotskyism affect your understanding of the Russian revolution? As I understand it, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was quite closely identified with the ideas of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union? Did you identify politically with the Left Opposition?

Castoriadis: In a certain sense, yes. But they didn't go far enough. Later on, I wrote a text about Alexandra Kollontai's paper on the Left Opposition of 1921, and its limitations. But this is not our problem now. The defects are obvious there: about the role of the party, the role of the trade unions and so on. Of course, Kronstadt was the last mark of some independent activity of the masses, which was crushed by the Bolshevik party. But once I started the critique of bureaucracy, it evolved quite rapidly into a critique of lots of things: of the Leninist conception of the party, and then of Marxian economics. I had started working as an economist at this time, and was working on *Das Kapital*. I couldn't make much sense of it in relation to actual developments. I couldn't make much sense of it theoretically, either. Here starts all my criticism of the theory of value, which finds its final form in the text about Marx and Aristotle which appears in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Next came the critique of the Marxian conception of what socialism is all about, the bad utopian aspect of all this: the elimination of the idea of politics, the sort of paradisiac state depicted in the early manuscripts, where in the morning you are a fisherman, in the afternoon a poet, etc. – I don't know what you are after dark! There is also the idea, absolutely central to Marx, that labour is slavery and freedom is outside the field of labour. Freedom is leisure. This is written in so many words. Labor is the field of necessity.

RP: That's more characteristic of the older Marx, isn't it?

Castoriadis: It is in *Das Kapital*. The kingdom of freedom can be built only through the reduction of the working day. During the working day, you are under necessity. This is diametrically opposed to any idea of self-management by producers, and of production itself – once it is radically changed, and once technology is also changed – as a field of exercise of human capabilities and human freedom.

RP: There is also the idea of labour becoming 'life's prime want'.

Castoriadis: That's in the early manuscripts. But this is abandoned in the system. Next came the critique of what one can call Marxist economism. The imaginary signification of the centrality of production and economy throughout history. This is obviously a

retrojection of capitalist imaginary significations throughout the whole of human history. Then there was the philosophical work, which is there in 'Marxist Thought and Revolution', the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, which was published in the last five issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1964/65.

SOCIALISME OU BARBARIE?

RP: Could you say something about the experience of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*? What was the political context in which you operated? And how, given your critique of the Leninist conception of the party, was the group organised, internally? How were its interventions made? What do you think are its enduring achievements?

Castoriadis: Well, the famous organisational problem was there all the time. After an initial period during which there were strong residual elements, including in myself, in favour of the Leninist conception of the party (which I gave up about 1950), there was still an internal divide concerning the problem of organisation, between people who were saying that no organisation is needed (the proletariat will do everything, we are just a group trying to work out some ideas) and others, like myself, who insisted, as I still would insist, that a political organisation is necessary. Not a vanguard party, certainly, but some sort of political organisation. Political activity is collective activity, and it ends up with concrete acts, be it a publication or whatever. You have to take decisions. And so you have to have some rules about how you take decisions. Say, majority rules. Obviously, you allow the minority to express themselves, even publicly. But there are some points at which decisions have been taken, and they have to be univocal. Some coordination of the general activities is necessary. But I said very early on that the only way to do this is on the basis of the idea of some sort of collective self-government. Also, the political organisation could play the role, not of a model, but of a sort of exemplary activity, showing people that they *can* organise collectively; that they *can* rule their own affairs.

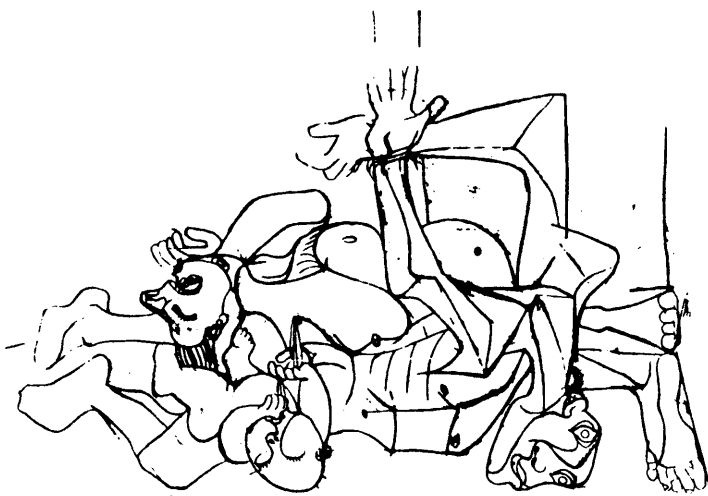
RP: It sounds quite Luxemburgian.

Castoriadis: If you wish. In a certain sense, yes. From this point of view, certainly. This led to splits with Lefort. He was against any formal organisation – 'We are an intellectual group, we publish a magazine, that's all.' You must remember the circumstances at the time. The Cold War started about 1947 and in Europe, especially in France, the Stalinists were almost all-powerful, even if they did leave the government in '47. All the Left was with them. Remember the stories of Sartre and others, the fellow travellers? 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. We cleared the ultra-left ground. Whatever was really of worth there came to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* – not the Trotskyists, of course. But the situation was extremely hard. Later, 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. Of course, after 1968 lots of people said they were in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. To which I have answered that if all these people who say that they were in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* had really been in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, we probably would have grasped power in France some time around 1958.

RP: So you disbanded as an organisation just before that moment, in the later 1960s, when the left began to open up and expand as a result of changes in the political and economic situation more generally?

Castoriadis: Yes. We had some people in the Renault factories who were producing a paper specifically for Renault workers. This was not a subsidiary of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. It was produced by workers and so on. But all this was extremely limited. There was much more underground influence, unknown, anonymous; and it sprung out in 1968 in lots of people, including, for example, Danny Cohen-Bendit.



RP: Why did *Socialisme ou Barbarie* come to an end?

Castoriadis: This was a decision which I pushed very strongly. First of all, there had been a split, a second split, between 1960 and 1963. In 1960 I wrote a text called 'Modern Capitalism and Revolution', which was the most thorough critique of the classical Marxist position at this time: of the idea that the proletariat has a privileged role to play, of the idea that economic problems are the main problems, and so on and so forth. It argued that the problem of the transformation of society is a much more general problem. There is the question of youth, the question of women, of the changing character of labour, of urbanism, and of technology – changing technology. All this created a strong reaction from part of the group, for which the theoretical representative was Lyotard, who at the time was playing the adamant Marxist. This led to a split in 1963 which weakened the group. We were the majority. We kept the magazine, they kept the monthly journal, *Workers' Power*. It was the first paper of this name. Later, the Italians published *Potere Operaio*. This was part of the underground influence. In Italy, lots of these people had been reading *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. But the group was weakened.

Public influence was expanding, as I have said. We were selling more and more. People were coming to the meetings, but they would not actively participate. They were passive consumers of the ideas. And this was reflected on the review, because to

produce a magazine the main problem is the collaborators – the people who write. It's very funny. We never had money, but publishing *Socialisme et Barbarie* was never a financial problem. We always managed. The problem was the contents. Not enough people were coming into the group. Also, my own personal collaboration was beginning to take a different form. I was digging deeper and deeper into the theoretical underpinning, both of Marxist theory and of what we needed for a new conception. This was the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.

RP: You were still working as an economist at this time?

Castoriadis: Yes. I was working at the OECD. The review was taking the bizarre aspect of a theoretical-philosophical magazine which was also pretending to be a revolutionary organ. It was the first in France, and all over Europe, for instance, to produce an extensive account of the Berkeley events. The review anticipated the movements of the '60s. It is there, about the students, the women and so on. It is written down. But this was not enough. And so at some time in 1966, we said, 'For the time being, the thing has become meaningless. We had better stop and begin again later.' And two years later, of course, came '68. I don't know what would have happened if we had still been a group in '68. But '68 very quickly fell under the spell of Maoists and Trotskyists and so on – not at the beginning, I mean the great period, but very quickly. One can't rewrite history.

RP: Did you have any relations with the *Arguments* group, the people who left the Communist Party in 1956?

Castoriadis: Yes. But the relations were bizarre. Edgar Morin published a paper in which he both recognised the role of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and criticised it very strongly, saying that we were obsessed with bureaucracy and making a sort of panacea or shibboleth out of self-management. There were answers in *Arguments* on our part. But there was not very much contact, except on some personal levels. Later on, when *Arguments* had stopped, Morin participated in some of our public meetings. He wrote a paper in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. But there was never a close collaboration. From the beginning, *Arguments* took itself as being a review by intellectuals for intellectuals. We never abandoned the idea that we aim at the general public, and not at intellectuals.

PHILOSOPHY AND IMAGINATION

RP: Perhaps we could switch the topic back to the issue of your intellectual formation. What were the main intellectual sources of your move away from Marxism? What did you draw upon to fuel your development away from an orthodox Communist politics? You have defined your relationship to Marxism negatively, in terms of the things that you gradually gave up until finally more or less the whole thing had been given up and you embarked upon an independent intellectual project. Who inspired you in this second stage?

Castoriadis: It is quite difficult for me to answer your question in a modest way. I would say that the main source was the immanent critique. It does not work, this system which had fascinated me as a 13 year-old boy: the idea that you have a coherent picture of human history and the world – that that's how it works – and it's going to reach a happy final stage.

RP: You mentioned Aristotle ...

Castoriadis: Yes, but that was 1975. In the whole of my writings for *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which have been published in paperback now in France, there is, I think, in all one mention of Plato, and one mention of Thucydides. That's all. Before the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* ('64/65), there is no mention of any philosopher whatsoever. It's not that I didn't want to mention one. It was because this was an immanent critique. The main thing that fuelled it was contemporary experience: the experience of working-class movements. The theme was the critique of capitalism, the critique of the development of capitalist economies – the nonsensical character of the aims proposed by the capitalist economy, which were more or less shared by Marxism: let's increase material wealth and so on. Then, after a point, the questions became for me: 'What is history?' and 'What is society?'. The work about the institution began here, in 1959. There are already seeds in a 1953 article criticising Marxist economics and speaking about creativity in history; and even before, in 1950/51, speaking about creativity and autonomy. The idea was there, but it was not elaborated.

RP: It wasn't drawn from Merleau-Ponty?

Castoriadis: No. Merleau-Ponty had nothing to do with it. There is no idea of creation or creativity in Merleau-Ponty, as far as I can see. I had been interested in philosophy since my adolescence, but I kept the two things separate. This is perhaps a bizarre personal trait. I didn't want to mix political thinking and political activity with philosophy. Not for practical or pedagogical reasons – you don't go to the workers telling them to read the *Third Critique* – but this is a position which I still have. I don't think you can draw directly from philosophy, as such, political conclusions.

RP: Yet in your more recent writings you see philosophical reflection as quite central to the project of autonomy – not the whole of that project, but very central to it ...

Castoriadis: That's true. But my ontology is an ontology of creation. Creation and destruction. Creation can be democracy and the Parthenon and *Macbeth*, but it is also Auschwitz, the Gulag and all that. These are fantastic creations. Politics has to do with political judgements and value choices.

RP: For which you can't find an ontological ground?

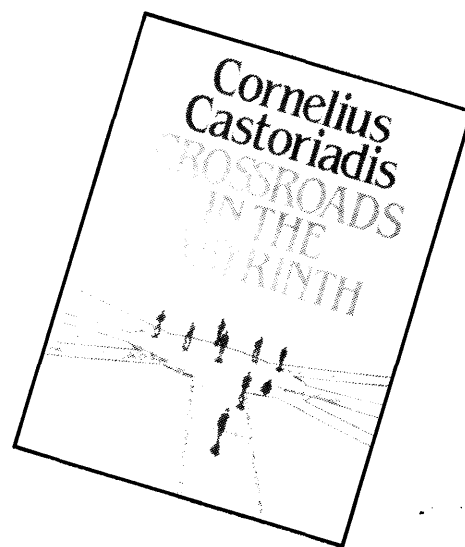
Castoriadis: No. I don't think there is an ontological basis for value judgements. Once you enter the field of philosophy, you have already made a value judgement, Socrates' value judgement: the unexamined life is not worth living (and the unlive life is not worth examining, as you say in Essex – this is true as well). But this is already a stand you have taken. In this sense, the decision to enter the reflexive domain is already a sort of grounding decision, which can't rationally ground itself. If you try to rationally ground it, you use what is the result of the decision. You are in a vicious circle.

RP: So how do you draw people into the reflexive life? Through examples?

Castoriadis: Yes, through examples and through consequences. But you can't force somebody rationally to be rational. There is no demonstration of the kind: if you don't philosophize, you are absurd. Because the other says, 'I don't care about being absurd', or 'I have to be absurd, otherwise I am not a true Christian'. *Credo*

quia absurdum. You can't 'refute' Tertullian.

So, for a long time, I tried to keep politics and philosophy separate. They joined in the first part of my article of 1964/65, 'Marxism and Revolutionary Theory'. Once I had reached the idea of institution, of the imaginary creation of history, I started re-reading philosophy with a different eye. And what I encountered there as forerunners in this field – but only at the level of the subjective individual imagination, of course – was Kant and Fichte. Later, I took up Aristotle, much later. That is the first place you find an examination of the problem of *phantasia*: the genius discovering the thing, and the limitations and impossibilities the discovery of *phantasia* creates for the Aristotelean ontology. Then another development starts. I had never stopped busying myself with philosophy. I came to France to do a Ph.D. thesis in philosophy. (The theme of the thesis was that any attempt at a rationally constructed philosophical system leads to blind alleys, to aporias and to antinomies. Mostly, what I had in mind was



Hegel, but not only.) This remains an unfinished manuscript. So I was reading things and scribbling and jotting all the time, but not systematically. It was only after *Socialisme ou Barbarie* that I took this up again systematically. Even then my main sources of inspiration have never been, properly speaking, in the history of philosophy. They have been much more problems arising out of, say, psychoanalysis; out of the analysis of the social-historical; out of the state of contemporary sciences – the crisis of foundations in mathematics, the aporias of contemporary physics, or problems in biology – the emergence of living things: What is a living thing? What is the biological closure of an organism?

As far as the problem of imagination is concerned, the main difference is that for both Aristotle and Kant, as for all philosophers, imagination is looked at uniquely from the point of view of the subject: the transcendental imagination in Kant, the imagination of the Transcendental Ego in Fichte, etc. There is nothing corresponding to the social-historical. The same is true of Heidegger. There is no substantial relation of *Dasein* to history; to society even less. If I have made a contribution, it is this: what I call the radical imaginary, the instituting imaginary, as a social-historical element.

I accuse all philosophers of ignoring the ontological status of, for instance, language. Language is institution. It is a fantastic paradigm of institution. The philosophers think – they think, therefore they talk, they use language, but they don't care to say what language is and how it came about. And when they do say, they say, like Heidegger: the gift of Being. Everything is a gift of

Being – including death, of course. If one envisages the institution of language, one has to envisage a creative possibility which actualises itself in the anonymous collective, which is the instituting imaginary, which posits language, which posits rules, and thereby enables the singular human being – which is unfit for life qua singular human being, a biological monstrosity – it enables it to survive. I am very much attracted by some philosophers. There is no problem about it. I'm very much attracted by the Great Four – Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel. I always find food for thought there.

RP: You've referred to your classical predecessors, but someone looking at French intellectual history in the 20th century can see a very strong thematics of the imagination. For example, there is one of Sartre's first books, *L'Imaginaire*. When you arrived in Paris, you attended a course given by Bachelard, for whom the notion of the imagination is absolutely central. Then there is Lacan, of course, as well. You do seem to fit into a 20th-century French tradition of reflection on the problem of the imagination. Are there really no influences here?

Castoriadis: I think I come from a completely different direction. Sartre's imaginary or imagination is purely negative. It is the possibility of envisaging that something could not be. It's a negativizing faculty of the ego. For me, it's just the opposite. It's the capacity to posit something which is not there.

RP: Isn't the philosophical structure of that process actually the same, with one side rather than the other being emphasized?

Castoriadis: But there is no given without imagination. In this respect, my view of imagination is much nearer to Kant. It's constitutive, absolutely constitutive. The difference from Kant is that my imagination is creative in a genuine sense. The Kantian imagination, the transcendental imagination, always has to imagine the same thing. If the Kantian imagination started really imagining, the world would collapse. It has to posit the same forms, otherwise it's just what he calls empirical imagination. We remain in the realm of the subject. Lacan's imagination is a very bizarre thing. Vulgarly speaking, it is the illusion. Nothing more than that; the reflection in the mirror; the image in the mirror, and the image the other sends to me of myself. Lacan's imaginary is the optical illusion.

RP: Is it not also connected to the lack? Isn't it a more dynamic process – the filling of a lack? You make it sound very empirical, this notion of reflection ...

Castoriadis: The attempt at filling a lack is desire. Lacan doesn't link it to the imaginary as such, which, for him, has to do with what he calls 'demand'. It's another realm. You have the lack, you have desire, you have the Law – which imposes the lack in a certain sense. But the imaginary is not a result of the desire – or of 'demand'. It is exactly the other way round. Cows do not desire, for they have no imagination – not in the human sense. Bachelard is another thing. I followed Bachelard when I arrived in Paris, for half a year, because he was the only one worth following. Then he stopped. That year, he was engaged in discussing some aspects of science from the point of view of his own epistemological conceptions. It was interesting, but it didn't go very far. I read Bachelard much later, but if you know his work you'll see the differences. It's imagination in a very loose sense. It's not constitutive in character. And certainly, it's not a social element.

RP: But there is that sense of creativity there?

Castoriadis: There is, in a certain sense, a sense of creativity in Bachelard. That's true. But I was never really attracted to his work.

RP: What about surrealism?

Castoriadis: I knew a bit about it because there were some Greek surrealists, and I was very fascinated by them. Then, when I came to France, I learnt much more. I was extremely fascinated by Breton and everything he had to say. At that time, the interest of Breton for me was the poetic dimension. Twenty-five years later, I said 'creation is poesis', and I gave another meaning to poesis. It's very difficult to make one's own intellectual biography in a thorough and honest way. You are exposed to influences all the time that you don't even know about; or you don't know the way they are going to work through you, perhaps much later. But among the people who for me were the most important in France at that time was Breton. And then Benjamin Peret, who came later to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and published a text in the journal; and a younger surrealist called Jean-Jacques Lebel who was in the group and very much in touch with us.

RP: We were thinking on a more theoretical plane, about your interpretation of the Freudian unconscious. One can read Freud in a very deterministic way, but the notion of the creativity of the unconscious is obviously there, if you read between the lines. It seems that it was the surrealists who picked up on that.

Castoriadis: They picked it up, yes; but they never theorised it. They used it. They interpreted it this way. It is the fantastic part of Freud, the Freud who is always talking about imagination but never names the thing. But what else are the phantasies? The positivistic streak in him is very strong. After all, this is Vienna at the end of the 19th century, and there are problems of scientific respectability. He was already creating havoc by saying that children are polymorphous-perverse people. If in addition he had said, 'Whatever I tell you, it's just the imagination of the subject ...', he would have been even more laughed out of court than he was at the beginning. Around 1911 he signed a manifesto calling for the establishment of a Society for the Diffusion of Positivistic Thinking, with Petzold, Hilbert, Einstein and some other people. He was a very contradictory character.

AUTONOMY

RP: You have said that your notion of the imagination is not related back to the subject, at least not only to the subject – individuals are formed within the context of a particular institution of society; and you have written about the heteronomous institution of society as that which has obtained historically; and about autonomy as a political value. Yet if the process of institution is not in some sense the outcome of collective activity, but is the matrix within which all activity takes place, how could there be an autonomous institution of society? It seems as though institution always already precedes the empirical activity of human beings.

Castoriadis: This is the problem of the politics of autonomy, of the establishment of an autonomous society. I think that you can have, you can imagine, you can devise – and you do have, up to a certain point, you did have, in the Western world – institutions which are not just institutions of closure. If we have institutions

which not only allow but further the creation of individuals who are capable of discussing, or putting into question; if we create a public space where discussion is genuinely made possible, where information is available, etc.; this is already something completely different, completely other, from the state of classically heteronomous societies, where you have to think what the institution of society tells you to think.

RP: But doesn't the philosophical structure of the concept of institution mean that, at an ontological level, it is tied up with heteronomy in a way that suggests that when one is speaking of autonomy and heteronomy politically one is actually talking about something else?

Castoriadis: We are working under the weight of inherited thought here. Behind what you say, there is a conception of autonomy which I would call metaphysical freedom, in the derogatory sense.

RP: Some Kantian notion?

Castoriadis: Kantian, or perhaps even, to be obscene, Sartrean. That is, one would be autonomous if one were absolutely outside any external influence and fully spontaneous. Now, this is just nonsense. This is a philosophical phantasy. Philosophy has put up this phantasy, and it judges reality against this phantasy. It doesn't exist. Autonomy, as I understand it in the field of the individual, is not a watertight frontier against everything else, a well out of which spring absolutely spontaneously, absolutely original contents. Autonomy is an on-going process, whereby you always have contents which are given, borrowed – you are in the world, you are in society, you have inherited a language, you live in a certain history. You have been *geworfen*, as Heidegger says. You have not chosen to be born in 1952, or whenever, neither have you chosen to be born in England. This just is the case. You will never know the great philosopher of the year 2100, who might have changed your way of thinking. It is in this world that we have to have a workable and effective concept of autonomy. Autonomy does not mean I am totally separated from everything external. And, in relation to my own contents, which are 99% borrowed, have come from outside, I have a reflective, critical, deliberative activity, and I *can* to a significant degree, say yes and no. I can also allow my own radical imagination, my flux of representations and ideas – we are talking about thinking now – to well up, and there to choose again; because my radical imagination may produce nonsense, or absurdities, or things which do not work. It is this ongoing process which I call an autonomous subjectivity.

RP: So the radical imagination is a kind of pure source?

Castoriadis: It is the permanent welling of representations, desires and affects which, in heteronomous societies, are practically 100% repressed and appear only in Freudian slips, dreams, maladies, psychoses and transgressions. It is always with us, and can be freed; not that we would accept all its products. But it could be free to supply contents, new contents, upon which our reflective and deliberative activity can work. So if we consider the relation to the collectivity: the idea that I'm not free because the others are there, or because the law is out there, only really makes sense against this traditional phantasy. Others, and the existence of the law, are not just constraints. They are also sources of freedom. They are sources of possibilities of action. They are sources of facilitation. They are riches.

RP: So what you understand by the project of autonomy is the maximisation of the possibilities of reflection, self-reflection

and deliberation? Is this an Idea in the Kantian sense?

Castoriadis: No, it's not an Idea in the Kantian sense.

RP: So it's realisable, then, your concept of autonomy? It's philosophically constituted in such a way that it is a possible object of historical realisation. It must be materially possible?

Castoriadis: Yes. It must be materially possible. It's not a utopia. And it's not a Kantian Idea. It's not at an infinite distance. It's not the Polar star.

RP: And yet it's not already implicit within history, in the way that some people understand Marx to have thought.

Castoriadis: No. It's an historical creation, an historical creation which is up to now unfinished.

RP: But if it's not implicit in history, if it is to be created in an open history, how do we know it's actually going to be realisable?

Castoriadis: We don't. We work for it, but we don't know in advance.

MARKET & PLAN, SYSTEM & LEIFORLD

RP: Perhaps we could turn more directly to politics. It has become prevalent on the Left to say, 'If the plan doesn't work, then we've got to go back to the market. In a complex modern society we have to have impersonal forms of mediation, impersonal forms of collective regulation' – in Habermas's terms, the distinction between system and lifeworld. Habermas argues that, although systems should ultimately be under the democratic control of the lifeworld, we can't abolish the systems as such. The market and some forms of administrative–bureaucratic regulation of society must remain. This is the basis of his critique of Marx: that Marx has some notion of collapsing all social relations back into the immediacy of the lifeworld. It seems that a lot of your inspiration comes, albeit indirectly, from the early Marx. Where does your concept of autonomy place you in this debate?

Castoriadis: Marx was certainly wrong in thinking that all impersonal mediations have to be abolished. This appears in his critique of the commodity, and also of money. I repudiated this as early as 1957 in a text called 'The Content of Socialism' which is in my *Political and Social Writings*. For me, it's quite obvious: you can't have a complex society without, for instance, impersonal means of exchange. Money has this function, and is very important from this point of view. It's another thing to deprive money of one of its functions in capitalist and pre-capitalist economies as an instrument for the personal accumulation of wealth and the acquisition of means of production. As a unit of value and as a means of exchange, money is a great invention, a great creation of humanity. We are living in societies; there is an anonymous collectivity; we express our needs and preferences by being willing to spend that much on that item, and not on anything else. This doesn't, to my mind, create any problem. The real problem starts when you say 'market'. Again, in this text from 1957, I said that the socialist society is the first society where there's going to be a genuine market, because a capitalist market is not a market. A capitalist market is not a market, not only if you compare it with the manuals of political economy, where the market is transparent and where capital is a jelly which moves from one field of

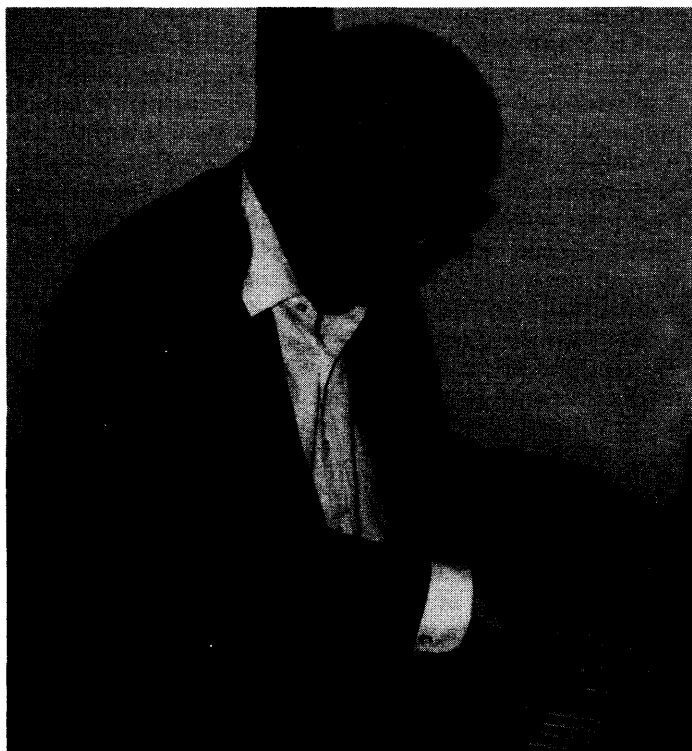
production to another instantaneously because profits are bigger there – all that is nonsense – but because prices have nothing to do with costs. In an autonomous society you will have a genuine market in the sense both of the abolition of all monopolistic and oligopolistic positions, and of a correspondence of the prices of goods to actual social costs.

RP: Will you have a market in labour-power?

Castoriadis: This is a problem. My position is that you can't have a market in labour-power in the sense that you can't have an autonomous society if you persist in the differentiation of salaries, wages and incomes. If you do have this differentiation, then you keep all the motivations of capitalism, of *homo economicus*, and all the old hodge-podge starts again.

RP: Won't this undermine the market?

Castoriadis: I don't see why. There are no economic and rational grounds on which I can say, 'One hour of this man's work is worth three times that of some other man.' This is the whole problem of the critique of value theory, and the critique of what underlies value theory, which is the idea that you can impute the result of production to this and that other factor, in a definite way. But in truth, you cannot do this imputation. The product is always a social product and an historical product. You have to take into account that whatever imputation of costs you do, it's a relative imputation, geared to social needs and geared to the future – which has, of course, to have some relation to historical costs and reality. But you cannot have differential labour costs based on any rational or even reasonable justification. That's a very hard point to swallow.



RP: So you don't think that there is any rationality to the capitalistic distribution of social labour through the wage relation, in terms of productivity? It's purely political?

Castoriadis: It's purely political. The present distribution of income, both between groups and between individuals, is the

sheer outcome of a struggle of forces. Nothing more. This creates problems in relation to work discipline. If the work collective is not capable of establishing enough solidarity and discipline, in order to have everybody working according to some accepted collective rules, we reach the political hard core of the problem. Then there is nothing to do; no more than there is in the field of political democracy, if people are not willing to be responsible for the decisions of the collectivity, to participate actively and so on. This doesn't mean that you have to maintain bureaucratic and hierarchical structures in production – on the contrary. The division of tasks is not the same as the division of power.

I spent a lot of my time trying to analyse the functioning of capitalist factories. I found that the capitalist planning of production in the factory is half of the time absurd. The factory works because the workers transgress the capitalist organisation of production. They work against the rules, or at a distance from the rules, so production can go on. If they were to apply the rules, production would stop immediately. The proof is that 'working to rule' is one of the most efficient ways of breaking everything down. So much for the capitalist organisation of hierarchy. As soon as you have hierarchy, you have this fundamental opacity in the production sphere, because you have the division between executives and directors: people who manage and people who execute. By virtue of their position, the workers have to hide what is going on from the eyes of the directors. This reaches delirious proportions in a fully bureaucratic society, but is the case practically everywhere. The collective has to take the basic decisions. It can delegate, but it elects and it can revoke.

RP: This will entail very high levels of political culture and activism.

Castoriadis: Yes, high levels of responsibility between people. That's certain. You cannot have a truly democratic collectivity, not only self-management and production, but on the sheer political level, unless people are really active. But we shouldn't fetishise this: one can think of institutions which facilitate this participation. Today, to be responsible, to attempt to participate, you would have to be heroic 24 hours a day. We have to create a situation whereby you can participate without being heroic 24 hours a day.

RP: This would mean a reduction of working time.

Castoriadis: Certainly. But there are other considerations. What is working time spent on? During the war in America production doubled between 1939 and 1942. And the workers were actually working for only about four hours in the factory. They were playing the numbers, or they were playing cards, or they were 'working for the government', as the Americans say – 'Leave me alone, I'm working for the government.' That meant he was doing something which he would take home. What is the English expression? – moonlighting. In France they call it 'la perruque'. And in Russia, you know the tremendous extent of it. I would argue that present output under different conditions of participation of the workers could take place in four hours or six hours instead of eight.

RP: Would it be true to say that you are in favour of what is sometimes called indicative planning, via some general democratic framework at a social level?

Castoriadis: More than indicative. I don't think there is contradiction between market and planning in this respect. In an autonomous society one must have a true market, not just with consumer freedom, but with consumer sovereignty: which specific items are

produced for consumption must be decided by consumers in the day-to-day vote of their purchases *where everybody has equal vote*. Today, the vote of Mr Trump is worth one million votes of the average American. That's not what I mean by a true market. But you have to have general decisions about at least two things: the partition of national product, or national income, between consumption in general and investment in general; and the share of the mass of consumption between private consumption and public consumption – how much society decides to devote to education, to roads, to erect monuments, to all public endeavours; and how much it decides that individuals are free to spend as they want. You need a collective decision about this. You have to have proposals and discussions, and bring forward the implications of decisions before the eyes of the people.

In this sense, you have to have a planning, because the implications of the decision about investment and consumption have to be foreseen. If you decide that you will have so much investment, these are more or less the consumption levels you can count upon in the coming years. If you want more investment, then you will have to consume less. But maybe you will be able to consume more in five years time. If you want more education, you can't have it for nothing. You will have to devote resources to education, and you have to decide where you take these resources from. Do you take them from private consumption? Or do you take them from investment, that is, from the future growth of productive facilities? Do you care about any future growth of productive faculties, or do you just want to renew the existing capital? All this has to be brought forward, and it cannot be reasonably decided by market forces.

RP: This sounds like the kind of debate currently taking place in the Soviet Union.

Castoriadis: In a sense, yes. But I don't accept this idea of Habermas's that because you have to have the system you have to accept a degree of alienation or heteronomy. I don't say that you can be master of everything. You can't control everything. That's not the problem. The point is that you can always look back, always change things, and establish mechanisms whereby the function of society is made controllable by people, though certainly not fully transparent.

EASTERN EUROPE/CURRENT EVENTS

RP: You draw a contrast between *fragmented* bureaucratic capitalism and *totalitarian* bureaucratic capitalism which makes it look as though the Eastern European societies were a more closed, more extreme form of the same sort of society which we have in the West. Yet they have revealed a fragility which was quite unexpected. Do you think that your interpretation of bureaucracy and capitalism needs to be revised in the light of recent events? And, given that what perhaps the majority of Eastern Europeans seem to want at the moment is simply to exchange the plan for the market, in what sense was 1989's 'Springtime of Nations' a manifestation of autonomy?

Castoriadis: Eastern Europe is different from Russia. It had an imposed and an imported regime, which never had the same roots and the same strength as it had in Russia. I don't think the events in Eastern Europe, or even in Russia, have changed the characterisation of the regime as it was. The regime was a form of bureaucratic totalitarian capitalism. But it was subject to deep

internal antinomies, which I have analysed for a long time. From the time of the Hungarian revolution, and even before, people were resisting passively, but they were resisting fantastically, even in Russia. In Russian factories they were resisting fantastically. But this totalitarian regime, this bureaucratic totalitarian capitalism, is not a timeless essence. It has a history. Already after Stalin's death, it was obvious that it couldn't go on as it had before. You had Khrushchev, and the period under Brezhnev, which I characterised as stratocracy, in the sense that the regime had become totally cynical. Nobody believed in any ideas in this regime. The only objective was sheer force. Brute force for the sake of brute force. The maximum possible social resources were put into the military sector. What we know now about what was



going on proves that, if anything, my analysis fell short of the reality. The degree of the suppression of the civilian economy for the sake of the military was even bigger than I had originally reckoned at the time, in 1981.

The Polish and Afghan events played a very big role in the change, in the sense that the Russian leading groups realised that they were confronted with an impasse. They didn't intervene militarily in Poland, they intervened in an indirect way through Jaruzelski. And in Afghanistan they failed. What nobody had foreseen, me as little as anybody else, was the emergence of Gorbachev and the reforming group. This was totally unforeseeable. A big part of the thing is Gorbachev's role as a civilising autocrat. But it's not just that. He also happened to be a very clever and able politician. And he certainly could not have risen to power without the support of the army and the KGB. That's quite clear. They realised that there was an over-extension of Russia's attempts to be a world power. This unleashed a series of events which culminated in Eastern Europe. There, people hated the regime and were ready to act, as soon as they were sure that the Russian tanks would not enter.

I gave an interview to *Esprit* in 1982 called 'The Hardest and Most Fragile of All Regimes' in which I argued that, as long as the thing holds it appears to be like steel, but in fact it is extremely fragile – like glass – and could be pulverised from one day to the other. This is what happened. This amazed people, because all these organisations, these steely Stalinist people, – 'We are the vanguard of humanity' – became sand from one day to the next. But the same thing is not happening in Russia. Which proves that there the thing has much more important roots. Up to now the process is much slower. You have ethnic strife, and you had this fantastic miners' strike in the summer of 1989, with demands which were not just economic but also political, but demonstrations by the people are only beginning. But Gorbachev is overrun by events, both in the ethnic field and the general field – that's why he retreats constantly in external relations. I wrote in 1977 that of

all the industrialised countries Russia is the first candidate for a social revolution. Up to now, the social revolution hasn't appeared, but ...

RP: Are you hopeful?

Castoriadis: No. If the social revolution happens ... that's another point. We will probably have to pay the legacy of Marxism-Leninism for years from now. It's true that in Eastern Europe at the moment, people can't think of anything else except a liberal capitalist society. Almost everything else has disappeared from the horizon. As an Hungarian friend of mind was telling me some months ago: in Hungary you can't even pronounce a word which starts with 'S' – enough of it. Any word. This is the negative side of it. They are under the understandable delusion that the West is a utopia, a cornucopia. In actual fact, they are not even going to have that. They are going to have a very miserable situation. Even in the political field it's not clear that anything resembling a parliamentary regime in the West will be easy to establish; except perhaps in Czechoslovakia or Hungary. We are confronted with history in the process of creation.


RP: Are there no grounds for hope, then?

Castoriadis: I don't much like to talk about 'grounds of hope'. I think that you have to do what you have to do – and hope for the best. If you take the rich, ripe capitalist countries, we certainly should not renew the discourse about insurmountable internal contradictions. Yet there are at least two facts which make it extremely difficult to believe in an indefinite reproduction of the present state of affairs. The first is the ecological limit, which we are nearer and nearer to. The second concerns the present state of capitalist society, but is somewhat analogous to the ecological

question. Everybody is lauding the extraordinary efficiency of capitalism in the field of economic production. This is true. But up till now this has been achieved through the irreversible destruction of a capital of natural resources which had been accumulating for 3 billion years (or at least 700 million years). This has been thrown away, destroyed, over fifty years or a hundred years. There were sediments of forests, of land, of oxygen, of ozone, of a variety of living species, etc. But the same in true on the anthropological level. Capitalism can function – could function – because there was a capitalist entrepreneur who was fascinated and impassioned by producing things, and setting up new machines. Very often he was, if not an inventor, at least a quite clever design engineer – Edison and Ford, for example. This type is disappearing. More and more, you make money by playing in the casino, not by setting up production facilities. Capitalism also presupposes anthropological types – the bureaucrat, the judge, the educator – which are precapitalist products. If the prevailing philosophy and system of values is that you try to earn as much money as you can, and to hell with the rest – one doesn't see why you should have judges, or university professors, or even schoolteachers. You will have them, but they will do their job in the worst possible way: trying to get away with as much as they can; being corrupt, if corruption is materially feasible, and so on. In this respect, capitalism is living by exhausting sediments of previous norms and values, which become meaningless in the present system. Absolutely meaningless. But this is not a 'ground' for hope. An ecological catastrophe, for instance, could very well lead to a series of quasi-fascist dictatorships – 'The holiday is over. This is your ration for the coming month: ten litres of oxygen, two gallons of petrol, etc. That's all.'

**Interviewed by Peter Dews and Peter Osborne.
February 1990, University of Essex**

SCIENCE *as* CULTURE



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