

# Cornelius Castoriadis, 1922–1997

## Last of the Western Marxists

Perhaps it was most of all the personal presence and vitality of this great intellectual of the European Left which impressed people, indeed could overwhelm them: the mighty bald head, out of which blinked two alert and sensitive eyes; the mouth which was always shaped by an ironic smile; the almost dionysian delight in life and enjoyment of its pleasures, which went hand in hand with mental effort and concentration; finally, the powerful, often almost uncontrollable flow of speech, which testified to an extreme sensitivity to suffering and injustice. To this striking appearance must be added intellectual virtues no less apt to call forth respect and admiration: a natural familiarity with political events in every corner of the world, a broad knowledge of the current state of development of numerous disciplines, and a breathtaking sureness of touch in his ability to bring the classical tradition of philosophy into the present. Probably all these complex qualities would have had to come together to give someone the force and endurance to hold fast to the project of socialist emancipation through fifty years of highs and lows.

Cornelius Castoriadis, the French philosopher and psychoanalyst of Greek origin, was the last great representative of the tradition of Western Marxism which tried to save the practical-political intuitions of Marx's work through a resolute abandonment of its dogmatic kernel. In Castoriadis's theory this effort reached new levels of originality and intensity, comparable only with the major achievements of a Maurice Merleau-Ponty or a Herbert Marcuse.

It was not primarily theoretical considerations which awoke Castoriadis's doubts concerning the traditional assumptions of Marxism, but the experience of political practice. He was born in Athens in 1922, and joined the Trotskyist Fourth International during the Second World War, having directly experienced the dictatorial policy of the Stalinist Greek Communist Party. However, he almost immediately came into conflict with his own organization, with whose stance towards the Soviet Union and analysis of advanced capitalism he was unable to concur, while still a philosophy student in France.

In collaboration with Claude Lefort, a pupil of Merleau-Ponty, Castoriadis founded an oppositional circle which became the intellectual support for the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. From 1949 to 1966 this journal formed both the organizational focus and the intellectual centre of an unusually fruitful engagement with the practical and theoretical problems of Marxism. After the loss of the support of this intellectual circle, Castoriadis continued determinedly with his labour of renewing Marxism. What fascinated him in Marxist theory from the beginning was the idea of a creative praxis which could transform society. History was interpreted as an ongoing process of the production of 'new forms of social life through the action of the masses'. It was not long before Castoriadis gave this thought the shape of a new philosophy of praxis, in which

elements of Aristotle's theory of action were fused with a conception of collective imagination in the most productive way. The most comprehensive form of social action appears in this theory as that praxis in which social groups, thanks to their imaginative creativity, project new social worlds which aim at the expansion of autonomy, and seek to turn them into reality.

But Castoriadis's intellectual curiosity, his enquiring drive, could not be satisfied with this first outline of his thought. In an intensive engagement with contemporary social science, and through his training as a psychoanalyst within the orbit of the Lacanian school, Castoriadis appropriated a range of further disciplines over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, in order to give a more plausible form to the thought of a transcendence which is immanent within history.

The eventual result of these years of effort was the path-breaking theory most clearly embodied in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975), which became renowned in English, German and other languages. Here the role of creative world-transformation has shifted from the revolutionary group, appearing now in the form of a linguistic excess of meaning and the ceaseless phantasizing activity of the drives which permeate social reality, even when it appears to have frozen into an iron cage of bureaucratically controlled processes.

With the death of Cornelius Castoriadis on 26 December 1997 in Paris, the European Left has lost one of the last great representatives and renewers of its tradition.

**Axel Honneth**

## An encyclopaedic spirit

**A**fter the Graeco-Turkish war of 1921, the Greeks, who had been settled in Asia Minor since antiquity, and the Turks, settled in Macedonia for several centuries, had to leave their homelands, undergoing the first ethnic cleansings of this century. Thus the Castoriadis family had to leave Istanbul for Athens shortly after the birth of Cornelius. The Second World War was to decide his destiny.

In 1944, as a young man, Castoriadis rallied to the Trotskyist party, which was suffering from government repression and the decision of the central committee of the Communist Party to effect its physical liquidation. He took refuge in France in 1945 and, with Claude Lefort, inspired a radical heresy within the heresy of Trotskyism. The USSR, no longer regarded as a workers' state which had degenerated, but as the state of a new form of class oppression, lost all its revolutionary privileges. The 'Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USSR: four letters, four lies', Castoriadis wrote. In 1948 he founded the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* with Claude Lefort, which, without ceasing to criticize the capitalist world, tirelessly denounced 'the present reality of an illusion', which earned it the permanent rejection of the 'official' Left.

We met during support actions for the Hungarian Revolution, in the course of the tumultuous year of 1956. Then, each in his own manner, we worked our way towards an integrating supersession of the best of Marx within a more complex conception. As Castoriadis says, the continuation of Marx requires the destruction of Marxism, which had become, through its triumph, a reactionary ideology. It was within a circle at first peremptorily called 'Saint-Just', and later known by the more modest title 'Circle of Social and Political Research and Reflection' (CRESP), that Lefort and Castoriadis carried out a major reworking of concepts, and it was here that they started to rethink, in different ways, the problem of democracy.

The politico-social idea of self-management was to deepen into the philosophical notion of autonomy, which eventually led Castoriadis to the point of an important philosophical mutation. The idea of autonomy – to give oneself one's own laws – necessarily implies self-creation, and confronts us with the mystery of creation itself, which for Castoriadis was more than a combination of pre-existing elements. It was the upsurge of a radical novelty, constituting an unpredictable discontinuity. And, at the source of all creation there is the imaginary, the inventor of a world of forms and meanings, which in the individual is radical imagination, and in society the instituting social imaginary. Imagination and creation are everywhere linked, including at the very source of thought.

In contrast to the dominant conceptions, for which the imaginary is merely an illusion or superstructure, Castoriadis reintroduces it at the root of our human reality, just as, in contrast with conceptions unable to grasp the notion of the subject, Castoriadis rediscovers the constituents of the subject (the 'for-itself', the fact that everyone creates his or her world and has the power of imagination). He stresses the radical importance of the emergence of the autonomous subject two thousand years ago in Athenian democracy.

His thought, whose expression begins with *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (1975), and extends to *Fait et à faire* (1997), takes an epistemological form: nothing which is living, human and social can be exhaustively and systematically reduced to our classical logic, which he called 'ensemblist-identitarian'. Castoriadis sees in what he calls 'magma', a substance without form which is creative of forms, the genetic substrate of all creation. But this philosophical reconstruction not only effaces the radical critiques which Castoriadis directed at contemporary society but also the ideal to which he was faithful: that of an autonomous society constituted by autonomous beings. He perceives, in an astonishingly profound way, that awareness of our mortality is the condition of this autonomy: 'It is only on the basis of this untranscendable – and almost impossible – conviction of the mortality of each of us and of all that we do that we can live as autonomous beings, regard others as autonomous beings, and make possible an autonomous society.'

'Corneille', as we called him, drew unceasingly on the texts of Plato and Aristotle, but he was not a philosopher *intra muros*: he struggled to understand the elements of the culture and knowledge of his time. Adding to each other the terms philosopher, sociologist, psychoanalyst, economist, political scientist, would be an inadequate way of defining his encyclopaedic spirit. He was encyclopaedic not in the additive sense of the term, but in the original Greek sense, which articulates disjointed forms of knowledge into a cycle. He did not simply demonstrate professional competence as an economist at the OECD, then as a psychoanalyst. He showed in a dazzling way, against the established dogma, that one can form a culture for oneself in the twentieth century, if one returns to the founding creative thoughts,



the key problems, the great works. He was a man of broad and expansive culture: passionate about music, poetry and literature, yet also a reader of scientific periodicals.

A thinker of autonomy, Castoriadis traversed the century on his own independent path, remote from official forms of Marxism, logical positivism and Lacanianism (to which he devoted a corrosive and devastating pamphlet, immediately covered over by an indignant or disapproving silence), just as from structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism. With a polemical violence I sometimes felt to be excessive, he hated vanity fair, with its inflated reputations. He was horrified by futility, ‘Parisian-ness’, and – in a recent book – he denounced ‘the rise of meaninglessness’.

‘Corneille’ did not fit into the framework that seems normal for the majority of intellectuals, academics and politicians. He was entirely outside the norm. If you read the standard histories of the intellectual world you will find him cited only in the margins. From his ancestors, who lived in the Ottoman world, he inherited the manner of a Balkan peasant, but he was an Athenian of the age of Pericles, as testified by the swiftness of his intelligence. He was a passionate Mediterranean, and also a genuinely cultured European, who combined East and West. This immigrant who became a French citizen contributed to the richness and universality of French culture. To the very end he remained ebullient, heated, passionate, young – but, to cite Oscar Wilde, what is terrible about getting older is that one remains young.

After three months in which his whole being was engaged in an incredible struggle against death, he finally lost. His companion Zoé, their daughter Cybele, his daughter Spara, his daughter Dominique, and Rilka their mother, were at his bedside. From the depths of my friendship, from the depths of my faith in human creativity, from the depths of hope and despair, I salute the work, the thought and the person of Cornelius Castoriadis.

**Edgar Morin**

## Omnipotence and finitude

**W**hat concatenation of factors produces a resolutely independent thinker? This is a question which immediately suggests itself when considering the unparalleled life and work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who died in Paris on 26 December 1997, at the age of seventy-five. It is also a question which naturally arises with regard to Hannah Arendt, who invites comparison with Castoriadis in this as well as other important respects. Indeed Arendt and Castoriadis may represent the two pre-eminent *Selbstdenker* of the postwar era.

Living in the most fashion-afflicted town of all, Castoriadis remained impervious to the intellectual vogues that regularly circulated through Paris over the past fifty years. He was able to steer a course which remained focused on fundamental theoretical and political issues and which – we can now see in retrospect – followed its own internal logic and achieved a remarkable degree of overall coherence. When, after the war, the French intelligentsia were, almost without exception, in the thrall of the Communist Party and defenders of the Soviet Union, Castoriadis was not only a member of the Fourth International, but went on to reject the Trotskyist position itself, regarding the Soviet Union as a new form of class state.

It was during this period that Castoriadis met Claude Lefort, with whom he formed the ultra-leftist grouplet ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie’, and published a journal under the same name. His perseverance paid off in the long run. After years of isolation – indeed

after the group had split up – *Socialisme ou Barbarie*’s ideas exerted a major influence in the May–June events of 1968. Dany Cohn-Bendit himself acknowledged that many of the positions he and his brother Gabriel popularized in *Obsolete Communism: The Left-wing Alternative* – a major text of ’68 – came from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

Understandably, Castoriadis was unsympathetic to Luc Ferry and Alain Renault’s claim, in their controversial book *La Pensée 68* that the post-structuralists – who came into prominence during the 1970s – represented the thought of ’68. He argued that Ferry and Renault got it exactly backwards: ‘Their misinterpretation is total. “Sixty-eight thought” is anti-’68, the type of thinking that has built its mass success on the ruins of the ’68 movement and as a function of its failure.’ On the one hand, the content of post-structuralist theories – the death of the subject, the death of meaning, the death of history and the unsurpassability of power, with its ‘inescapable corollary, the death of politics’ – provided a legitimation for depoliticization. On the other hand, however, post-structuralism, exploiting the anti-authoritarian mood of the 1960s, offered a seductive aura of ‘subversiveness’ – which continues to linger on in the United States – to mask the ‘inescapable corollary’ of its doctrines.

This is perhaps the appropriate point to take up Castoriadis’s relationship to Lacan. His central criticism of Lacan is that his ‘smoky mystifications of the “Law” and the “symbolic”’ ignore the question of the institution and make critique impossible. By hypostatizing the ‘Law’ and the ‘symbolic’ into immutable, transhistorical configurations, and ignoring the question of their historical institutionalization, all empirical institutions become valid as such. In other words, Lacan’s construction involves a systematic suppression of the distinction between ‘*de facto* validity’ and ‘*de jure* validity’, which is the necessary condition for all critique. There is, however, one crucial point on which Castoriadis agrees with Lacan. At the same time as he rejects the hypostatization of the Law, Castoriadis does not reject the transhistorical opposition between lawfulness and desire – that is, the ineliminable conflict between our nature as omnipotent wishing beings and the requirements of civilized social life. Rather than seeking the elimination of the law and the unmediated emancipation of desire – which he rightfully maintains would result in barbarism – he seeks to establish a new, autonomous relation both to the law and to those desires. He insists that all societies, past and present, must provide an institution for decentring infantile omnipotence and transforming the child into a socialized individual.

Agreeing with Freud and Lacan – and against the Freudian Left, represented by Reich and Marcuse, as well as the *desirants* represented by Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari – Castoriadis argued that ‘it is here, beyond all socio-cultural relativity, that the profound signification of the Oedipus complex resides. For in the Oedipal situation the child must confront a state of affairs which can no longer be manipulated at will.’ While it may be possible to devise less violent and post-patriarchal institutions to fulfil this function in the future, the function itself cannot be eliminated: ‘We are justified in imagining everything with respect to the transformation of social institutions; but not the incoherent fiction that the psyche’s entry into society could occur *gratuitously*.’

I will offer three hypotheses concerning Castoriadis’s unsurpassed ability to maintain his independence over the past fifty years. The first concerns the process of identification. Like philosophy itself, Cornelius was born in Asia Minor. As did many families of Greek origin at the time, the Castoriadis family moved from Constantinople to Athens, where Cornelius spent his youth, after the Graeco-Turkish war of 1921. Already at the age of thirteen he was voraciously reading the pocket editions of the great philosophers he carried with him. And when, as an adult, one heard Cornelius speak or read his own writings, there was no denying his identification with the Greek classical tradition. His lectures and writings were punctuated with quotations from the classical Greek. One sometimes had the impression that he believed that by stating

an assertion in the Greek one guaranteed its truth. To his detractors, this appeared to be a pompous affectation. To those of us who loved him, it seemed like a charming boyish identification with his heroes: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The larger point is, however, that those identifications, as well as myriad others – that is, his confidence about the sufficiency and goodness of his internalized objects – contributed enormously to his ability to maintain his independence vis-à-vis the vicissitudes and insults of external fortune.

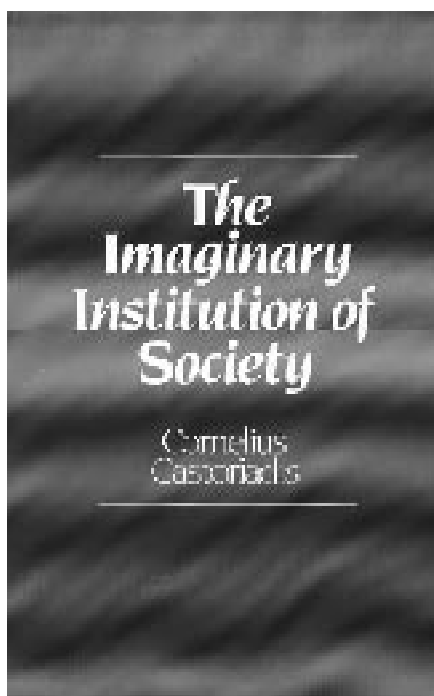
It is often said – in an attempt to pathologize the analysts and discredit psychoanalysis – that analysts typically focus on the problems which cause them the most trouble personally. In the first place, this only counts as a criticism if one assumes that psychoanalysts ought to be free from psychological difficulties. But we can go further and ask: aren't people apt to be the most creative in working on problems about which they have inside familiarity – for example, Freud on Oedipal configurations and Winnicott on separation? The topic that was at the centre of Cornelius's psychoanalytic theories was, of course, omnipotence. And anyone who heard him play the piano

– his dynamic range extended from *fortissimo* to *fortissimo* – recognized that it was an active force in his personality. My second hypothesis, then, is the following: Cornelius's sense of omnipotence no doubt contributed, especially in his youth, to his difficulty in working in political groups and his ideological combativeness. But it also served him well. For it undoubtedly helped him to stand alone, with the conviction that he was right and others were wrong, in a number of extremely difficult situations in which weaker individuals would have caved in to the pressures of the group.

My third hypothesis concerns Castoriadis's sheer sense of animal vitality – *joie de vivre* is too weak a term. It was apparent to anyone who knew Cornelius how much gratification he extracted from the pleasures of life – food, wine, conviviality, humour and music. And I am convinced that the compensations of these pleasures must have helped him substantially in getting through the many dark periods and disappointments that his career necessarily entailed. This vitality was nowhere more manifest than in the three months of incredible struggle he waged in the hospital prior to his death. An anecdote will help illustrate the point.

One night, Cornelius, his wife Zoé and I were eating dinner in an Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village. When Zoé and I failed to order pasta for our *primo piatto*, Cornelius turned to us with a look of utter incredulity and contempt and said: 'To go to an Italian Restaurant and not order pasta is like meeting Johann Sebastian Bach [whom he considered the quintessential creative genius] and not having him play a fugue.' In short, he esteemed the 'lower' things every bit as much as he did the 'higher'. In fact, he knew the opposition was artificial.

In the spirit of Castoriadis, I will end these reflections on an interrogative note. As he was one of the few thinkers who continued to believe in revolution, it must be asked: what does his death mean for those of us who accept his insistence that modernity does not represent the completion of history, but who nevertheless can no longer accept the idea of revolution? Indeed, what does it mean for those of us who suspect that the belief in revolution might represent a last vestige of magical thinking in his theory, a *deus ex machina* that would extricate us from our finitude? Hans Joas has put the question well: 'How can we continue to believe in, and strive to carry out, the project of autonomy when the myth of revolution is dead?' This is a key question to





grapple with for those of us who will continue to elaborate the legacy of this 'titan of the spirit' while we complete what Freud called the 'extraordinarily painful work' of mourning.

**Joel Whitebook**

*Axel Honneth's obituary first appeared in the Frankfurter Rundschau, 30/12/97 and Edgar Morin's in Le Monde, 30/12/97. Joel Whitebook's piece is extracted from an article forthcoming in a special tribute issue of Constellations. Translations from the German and French are by Peter Dews.*

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**For further information write to: Stella Sandford,  
Middlesex University, White Hart Lane, London N17 8HR  
S.Sandford@mdx.ac.uk**