The interview with Agnes Heller, ‘Post-Marxism and the Ethics of Modernity’ (RP 94) touches on what should be a key debate among intellectuals on the Left today: does a perspective critical of the authoritarian legacy of modern revolutions spell the end of the project of political revolution, or does it on the contrary entail rethinking revolution along lines largely unexplored – or repressed – in the historical revolutions of modernity? If Heller’s answer to this question is clear in so far as she explicitly rejects ‘political revolution’ in favour of ‘a revolution of everyday life’, her answer is not for all that without historical and theoretical shortcomings that deserve our attention.

Heller’s interpretation of the Hungarian councils of 1956 is at best one-sided. To state that the councils ‘wanted a freely elected parliament and multiparty system’ is to blur precisely what made the practice of the Hungarian councils socially and politically distinct from both historical Bolshevism and modern social democracy. If, for example, we recall the famous resolution of 26 October – ‘the institution of workers’ power and the radical transformation of the system of planning and the economic control exercised by the state’ – we may understand that the movement favoured the spread of councils in all the factories, tending toward what Claude Lefort calls in his essay on the Hungarian insurrection ‘a Republic of councils.’

For Lefort, the determination of the workers to organize labour in its totality by means of the councils ‘indicates that the workers saw in their autonomous organs a power that has a universal significance’. Far from bridging party representation with democracy, democracy qua councilist organization challenged – and this was the outstanding innovation that would also capture Hannah Arendt’s attention – the bureaucracy inherent both in Communist one-party rule (Stalinism) and in a multiparty system of representation (liberal oligarchy). For over two weeks, until the spontaneously formed Hungarian armies were defeated by the Communist army, the coordinated councils of workers, students and soldiers were the only organized power in Hungary. Must we really go from the Communist distortion of the revolution as a ‘Fascist coup’ to the no less distorting viewpoint that circumscribes the revolution of 1956 within the framework of a will for multiparty ‘democracy’? Would it not be more instructive for thinkers critical of instituted domination to examine the extent to which the Hungarian insurrection suggests paths towards a form of political constitution in which the fabric of social life distinguishes and disentangles itself from the hegemony of state power?

According to Heller such a route of inquiry (in this case Arendt’s) is really ‘romanticizing’, since the ‘margin can become the center for ten days, as in Paris in 1968, but then it returns to the margin’. However, rather than seeing Arendt’s attempt to think the ongoing pertinence of council-based self-government as mere romanticization (and, for the moment, leaving aside the question of romanticism), would we not do better to see how Arendt shares Kant’s open-ended ontology, that is, the omnipresent possibility of new beginnings that explode preconceived limits of political freedom – limits that ‘no one can or ought to determine – and for this reason, that it is the destination of freedom to overstep all assigned limits between itself and the Idea’? While what Heller terms ‘absolute autonomy’ is an idea in the Kantian sense, and ‘the center’ thus construed can only be an object of approximation, we may question Heller’s confusion of political autonomy with her straw man of ‘absolute autonomy’ – just as we may criticize the way Heller fails to understand radical democracy and ‘pure democracy’ as distinct notions, and the way she thereby eliminates the possibility...
of thinking an effective political autonomy. Heller ultimately ties a straitjacket around the ‘ought’ of self-determining freedom by adopting ‘the very miserable and pernicious pretext of impracticability’ when thinking political freedom. In other words, by means of her social-democratic bias, Heller limits her appreciation of the Hungarian councils’ struggle for political freedom to the confines of a (then-nonexistent) empirical system (bureaucratic multiparty politics), a system whose ‘philosophical’ justification relies on the alleged impossibility or ostensible ‘danger’ of participatory decision-making (council self-government itself). The Hungarian people are supposed to have deduced the end of political history while Minerva’s owl was still observing, from its lofty perch, Molotov cocktails being thrown against ‘Soviet’ tanks.

Arendt can herself be seen as responding before the fact to Heller when she describes those witnesses of 1956 who

looked upon the councils as though they were a romantic dream, some sort of fantastic utopia come true for a fleeting moment to show, as it were, the hopelessly romantic yearnings of the people, who apparently did not yet know the true facts of life. These realists took their own bearings from the party system, assuming as a matter of course that there existed no other alternative for representative government and forgetting conveniently that the downfall of the old regime had been due, among other things, precisely to this system. 

Far from regarding their councils as a stepping stone to a multiparty system, these ‘romanticizing’ Hungarian insurrectionists threw the party form itself into question. Arendt emphasizes what Heller fails to acknowledge: the councils ‘invariably refused to regard themselves as temporary organs of revolution and, on the contrary, made all attempts at establishing themselves as permanent organs of government’. 

I cannot begin to catalogue the number of misrepresentations expressed in Heller’s brief remarks on the late Cornelius Castoriadis in her interview. To label Castoriadis a ‘progressivist’, for example, because he believed in an autonomous society, can only bewilder those familiar with Castoriadis’s criticisms of the very idea of progress. As Castoriadis recently argued:

In history there is no progress, save in the instrumental domain. With an H-Bomb you can kill many more people than with a stone hatchet; and contemporary mathematics is infinitely richer, more powerful and complex, than the arithmetic of primitive peoples. But a painting by Picasso is worth neither more nor less than the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira, Balinese music is sublime, and the mythologies of all peoples are of an extraordinary beauty and depth. And if one speaks of the level of morality, we have only to look at what is going on around us for us to stop talking about ‘progress.’ Progress is an essentially capitalist imaginary signification, one which even Marx let himself be taken in by.

To believe in the possibility – and even the urgency – of an autonomous society does not, from Castoriadis’s standpoint, have anything to do with either progress or the progressivism that posits a teleology intrinsic to modern democracies but raises, rather, the question of a rupture with representative democracy – the project of ‘a genuine democracy that includes the participation of all in the making of decisions, another organization of paideia in order to raise citizens capable of governing and of being governed, as Aristotle so admirably said’.

Heller’s contention that ‘only if you abstract from everything else can you talk about the autonomous society and the autonomous individual’ has much more to do with the transcendental ground of Kantian ethics and practically nothing to do with Castoriadis’s theory of political autonomy. Castoriadis is explicit concerning the contingent relationship of ‘the project of autonomy’ to the historically situated practice of society as a whole:

What is the ‘object’ of autonomous self-institution? This question may be rejected at the outset if one thinks that autonomy – collective and individual freedom – is an end in itself, or that, once significant autonomy has been established in and through the political institution of society, the rest is no more a matter of politics but a field for the free activity of individuals, groups, and ‘civil society.’ I do not share these points of view. The idea of autonomy as an end in itself would lead to a purely formal, ‘Kantian’ conception. We will autonomy both for itself and in order to be able to do. But to do what? Furthermore, political autonomy cannot be separated from ‘the rest,’ from the ‘substance’ of life in society. Finally, a very important part of that life concerns common objectives and works, which have to be decided in common and therefore become objects of political discussion and activity.

A corpse in the mouth

One wonders, moreover, how Heller arrives at the conclusion that May ‘68 and the New Left ‘confirmed’ her idea ‘that we do not need a political revolution’. By contrast to Heller’s mutually exclusive dichotomy between ‘political revolution’ and ‘the revolution of everyday life’ (which opts for a minimalist and depoliticized version of the latter), the worker and student movements that led to generalized contestation
in May '68 radicalized the idea of political revolution by making it inextricable from a revolution in everyday living. Thinking the transformation of the political sphere as coterminous with a revolution of everyday life, the revolutionaries who rejected the corporatism of the French Communist Party and were not caught up in the representation system were actually closer to the ‘romanticizing’ revolutionary politics Heller dismisses than to her own views. The return of everyday party ‘politics’ spelt the end of the May movement and a setback for the revolutionizing of everyday life. In the words of the author of The Revolution of Everyday Life (1967):

In its concrete and tactical form, the concept of class struggle constituted the first marshaling of responses to the shocks and injuries which people live individually; it was born in the whirlpool of suffering which the reduction of human relationships to mechanisms of exploitation created everywhere in industrial societies. It issued from a will to transform the world and change life…. Yet we see the First International turning its back on artists by making workers’ demands the sole basis of a project which Marx had nevertheless shown to concern all who sought, in the refusal to be slaves, a full life and a total humanity. Lacenaire, Borel, Lassailly, Buchner, Baudelaire, Hölderlin – was this not also poverty and its radical refusal? Perhaps this mistake was excusable then: I neither know nor care. What is certain is that it is sheer madness a century later, when the economy of consumption is absorbing the economy of production, and the exploitation of labour power is submerged by the exploitation of everyday creativity. The same energy is torn from the worker in his hours of work and in his hours of leisure, and drives the turbines of power which the custodians of the old theory lubricate sanctimoniously with their purely formal opposition. People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth.¹⁰

From Raoul Vaneigem's perspective the task is therefore not to abandon the project of political revolution but to rethink the imperative to ‘change the world’ in its difference from a purely economic analysis and in the context of a broad critique of ‘everyday life’ – a critique that would affirm individual creativity and artistic experience as the alienated content of authentic everyday living. Whereas scientific Marxism (and its 1960s’ Althusserian variant) operates according to the idea that domination is based on instituted ignorance and that the proletarian class is, as it were, waiting for the theory of its ignorance that would give it true knowledge (class-consciousness), the critique of everyday life reorients the revolutionary struggle around the pole of subjectivity, and more specifically, around the pole of what Marx (after Schiller) envisioned as the authentic or ‘full life.’¹¹ Vaneigem bypasses both the old Left fetish of the ‘objective conditions’ of revolutionary struggle and the vanguardist instrumentalization of theory to address a qualitatively other dimension: alienated subjectivity. The new emphasis on subjectivity accounts for the otherwise paradoxical references to Kierkegaard – ‘subjectivity is the only truth’ – in Vaneigem’s treatise on The Revolution of Everyday Life. From Saint-Just to Nietzsche through Keats, Vaneigem’s eclectic collage of subjective revolt can only be understood from within the romantic Weltanschauung that resitutes emancipation on more existential-sensuous and less epistemological-materialist grounds. In this sense (if only in this sense), Heller’s early ‘either Kierkegaard or Marx’ meets its counter-imperative: Kierkegaardian Marxism – that is, a subjective-existential as well as social-historical thinking and practice of emancipation.¹²

It is important to remember that the veritable ‘critique of everyday life’ and the theoretical opening of Marxism to subjective experience began in France with Henri Lefebvre’s Critique of Everyday Life, the first volume of which was published in 1947 (twenty-three years before Heller’s Everyday Life). Lefebvre’s next major work on the subject, Introduction to Modernity (1961), would prove key in defining the 1968 clarion call for a ‘revolution of everyday life’. The criticism of Marxist orthodoxy that eventually provoked Lefebvre’s expulsion from the French Communist Party here fuses with a positive reassessment of romantic thought and concludes with a fictitious dialogue between ‘Monsieur A’ (thesis) and ‘Monsieur B’ (antithesis) who hash out a preliminary synthesis: ‘the new romanticism’. Twenty years later, in the third volume of his Critique of Everyday Life (1981), Lefebvre would insist that those who advocate a revolution in everyday living ‘must recall that its themes – the understanding of the reality of everyday life as having become trivialized, as having been abandoned to petty concerns and deprived of any meaning or of anything that may orient philosophy toward the true or authentic life – come from romanticism. And more specifically German romanticism: Hölderlin, Novalis, Hoffmann, etc.’¹³ Significantly, Lefebvre’s notion of a revolution in everyday living is, like the Surrealist and Situationist versions, an attempt to extend and elaborate the subjective basis for renewed community and romantic (as opposed to ‘scientific’) revolutionary struggle.
Lefebvre first presented the revolutionary-romantic synthesis in his essay ‘Towards a Revolutionary Romanticism’ (1957). According to Lefebvre, revolutionary romanticism would ‘affirm the primacy of the possible-impossible and understand this virtuality as essential to the present.’ Redirecting the nostalgia of the ‘old romanticism’, revolutionary romanticism would be ‘firmly rooted in the present precisely because its heart belongs to the future’, and it would see its greatness (rather than its deficiency) in being ‘unpredictable, problematic, torn between the past and the future’.

Do we not today see a resurgence of Lefebvre’s ‘revolutions-romanticism’ in contemporary French theory, when for example Miguel Abensour (following Lefort) proposes to ‘forge a libertarian idea of democracy’ and to ‘think it as savage’, as expressive of ‘an attitude that cannot be codified or solidified into doctrine’, and in which the demand for new rights bears within itself the demand for new social relations, the aspiration for another form of community’? Might it be that the poverty of modern political philosophy results from not having sufficiently questioned the doxa that compels us to chose between utopia and democracy? Might we not turn our telescope to an alternative constellation in modernity, one which not only ‘utopianizes democracy’ but also ‘democratizes utopia’?

Heller’s imperative ‘Don’t attach emancipation to a class or agent and pretend that they will produce it for you’ is worth developing as a coherent position within a radical philosophy, as is her rendering of emancipation as ‘self-emancipation’ and her concomitant revaluing of the ‘revolution of everyday life’. But a radical philosophy must dare to think the transformation of everyday life beyond state representation if it is going to grasp at all what could make Rimbaud’s ‘Change life!’ and Marx’s ‘Change the world!’ cohere – and in this adventure the revolutionary romantic challenge to liberal, social-democratic and totalitarian orthodoxy may yet prove to be vital.

Notes

I would like to thank David Ames Curtis for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 199.
6. Ibid., p. 264.
7. ‘The Rising Tide of Insignificance: An Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis’ by Olivier Morel, trans. David Ames Curtis, unpublished manuscript.
8. Ibid.
11. Unfortunately, the relationship between the romantic thought of Schiller and that of Marx has not yet been the object of systematic study in the English language – Hebert Marcuse’s pioneering pathways in Eros and Civilization notwithstanding. I can only call attention here to the parallel between Marx’s theory of alienation and Schiller’s juxtaposition between the ‘totality of character’ of genuine personality and the modern system of fragmentation by which ‘not merely individual persons but whole classes of human beings develop only a part of their capacities’. Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters (1795), trans. Reginald Snell, Ungar, New York, 1977, pp. 34, 36.
12. The existential dimension of Situationist thought is to be differentiated from the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (in both its early phenomenological and later ‘humanist’ versions). I would argue, rather, that it is most instructive to return to Kierkegaard when exploring links between the existential criticism of mass distraction and passivity and the Situationist critique of ‘the society of the spectacle’. See, for example, Kierkegaard’s The Present Age (1846): ‘A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere.’ (trans. Alexander Dru, Harper Torchbook, New York, 1962, p. 35).
15. M. Abensour, ‘Savage Democracy and Principle of Anarchy,’ trans. Max Blechman, forthcoming in Philosophy and Social Criticism. See also his Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment, trans. Max Blechman, Verso, forthcoming. There are nonetheless important differences and changes in perspective in postwar French revolutionary theory (from Lefebvre to Abensour) which will constitute the object of a future study.