



Short Introduction to  
the Political Legacy of  
**Castoriadis**

Yavor Tarinski

Edited and Prefaced  
by Mark Mason

**αυτο**  
λεξεί



Publisher: aftoleksi

Year: 2020

Author: Yavor Tarinski

Cover and design: George Chelebiev

Edit and Preface: Mark Mason

# **αυτο** **λεξεί**

# Contents

Preface	5
Introduction	10
Why Castoriadis is Still Important Today	13
Castoriadis in the Context of post-Socialist Eastern Europe	18
Self-Limitation and Democracy	23
Political Ecology	39
Political Organizing in the 21st Century	51
Creating A New Democratic Anthropological Type	61
Castoriadis and Bookchin: Political Similarities	70
Bibliography	81



# Preface

## Autonomy and the Fraudulent Self

I am what is mine. Personality is the original personal property.  
— Norman O. Brown

The specter of global plutocratic rule is maintained by a system of social reproduction controlled by wealthy capitalist elites. Social reproduction is that process by which the passive mentality of the working class is maintained across generations by institutions which claim to educate and inform. The state-run schooling systems indoctrinate the young into the cage of the obedient citizen. The state is controlled by the capitalist oligarchy and thus capitalist elites control what is labelled education: a misnomer. A fraud is perpetrated upon the young. A few children among the many resist. Control of adults begins with disciplining the unruly child and all children are unruly. Every child born free; every adult enslaved. As Castoriadis reminds us, elections are forms of slavery masquerading as democracy. Government is a masquerade. Schooling is the fitting of the false mask upon the unwary child. The child becomes the adult wearing a mask of false civility and false autonomy. The notion of the working class is a social construct created and manufactured to specifications established by the power elite. The autonomy project is the twofold work of undoing the damage done to adults and the creation of autonomous zones for childhood development free from state control.

The schooling indoctrination system, in conjunction with corporate

mass media, corporate public relations, and the corporate control of all levels of government creates illusions of democracy. We live under the crushing oppression of a capitalist kleptocracy. The police are hired to use physical violence to maintain the system of capitalist private property and private wealth. School teachers are hired to use psychological violence to indoctrinate vulnerable children. Schooling is child abuse in the schoolhouse for the purpose of preparing children for a lifetime of adult abuse at the workplace. Abuse of power is normalized. Abuse of power is forcefully ubiquitous, unexamined and unthinkable, and perniciously invisible. There is nothing normal about normal. Inversion.

It is no small matter that Castoriadis was a psychoanalyst concerned with the operation of public opinion and the social mind as well as the mind of the individual. The shift from social organization characterized by hierarchy to social organization characterized by direct democracy entails a massive invisible transformation of consciousness not achieved through the accumulation of facts alone. The psychological trajectory from childhood will-to-autonomy that is derailed by coerced infantilization, followed by the work of the adult to rediscover autonomy (reintegration; recovery of Self), is manifested by the re-appearance of active political agency. Dangerous presence.

"The Personal is Political."

"The Politics of Experience."

"Freedom from the Known."

"Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis"

"Journey to Ixtlan"

"The Re-enchantment of the World"

"Koyaanisqatsi"

Imaginary, hegemony, ideology, enculturation/socialization, social reproduction, ego, persona, selfhood, indoctrination, propaganda,

delusions, denial, displacement, somnambulism, woke, false woke, subterfuge, PTSD, trauma, imago, parent-child dyad, regression, agency, self-actualization. The problem of the Self is that it does not belong to us, rather, it is a manifestation we behold. The body politic. The collective unconscious and unconscious of the collective. The struggle between Thanatos and Eros.

Identity is political. Agency is that character of the person attuned to class oppression and engaged in the struggle towards the autonomy of Castoriadis. Imaginary as a noun takes on the broad landscape of the unseen psychology of systems of indoctrination (fundamental values, beliefs, and attitudes, mostly unconscious) and propaganda (products of event-based lies, subterfuge, blame-shifting, and distraction). What is identification and the psychological experience of subjectivity as it pertains to various socioeconomic power systems? The autonomous Self is not achieved by the mere additive function of accumulating information, although this is necessary, but rather it is a qualitative shift of consciousness. From the external other-oriented self to an internal centering of self that must be sharply distinguished from the experience of the narcissist. The internal weightiness is engaged with the Other as another being-in-time-and-place. The notion of the Commons is absent from the modern public vocabulary. Paradise Lost. Lost Horizon. The landscape of perpetual postponement.

The search of the new anthropological type is the work of experimenting with and discovering psychological and bodily tactical mechanisms against the parent-child dyad. The institutions of modern Western society are not democratic because the people do not know what democracy is. Parents do not teach democracy because they do not know what democracy is. Schools do not teach democracy or allow in in any meaningful form. Schools teach obedience to authority. Work organized by capitalism teaches obedience to authority. The mass media does not teach democracy. It teaches



consumerism and jingoism. Government itself does not teach democracy, but rather instead it teaches a parent-child power dynamic. Religion, again, does not teach democracy; instead demanding self-shaming obedience to authority. All domains of modern society demand and reward the infantilized careerist, or cynical opportunist, who actively selects between dollar secularism and theocratic delusions. The anarcho-therapeutic value of a great variety of autonomous zones should not be ignored.

The autonomy project imagined by Cornelius Castoriadis forms the foundation of struggles towards a true, egalitarian democratic cooperative society. In his contributions to our comprehension of the dynamics between the individual and the polis, Castoriadis exhuded insights about the psychosocial landscape modulated by direct democracy. These important ideas are accurately, sensitively, courageously, and with scholarly clarity brought to us in the pages below by Yavor Tarinski. Such work bears witness to the modern human crisis manifested in the urgency to reveal profound truths about the breathtaking, brutal betrayal of the young. It is with great irony that Socrates was condemned to death on the false charge of having corrupted the youth of Athens. Out of the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, we recover the lost truths of the Oracles at Delphi. Life out of balance.

Mark Mason  
April, 2020



# Introduction

The essays that compile this short book have been written in the last couple of years, but only recently I took the decision to gather them together into a pamphlet. I decided to do so in order to present my subjective view on the political legacy of Cornelius Castoriadis in the 21st century, since I believe that his thought is already influencing a significant amount of social movements and struggles across the world. But nonetheless I cannot but notice that Castoriadis has remained relatively neglected, comparing to other political thinkers and philosophers. Because of this I have dedicated several essays on his importance, which now I present in a more systematized manner in this publication.

I have thought on compiling these texts into a pamphlet in the past, but the main reason to finalize it at this particular moment is the Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that half of the planet has been placed under a quarantine. I finally found the time to revisit this old idea of mine. Simultaneously, now is the right moment for free e-books to be published, as most of us have plenty of time because of the quarantine. And we should use the maximum of this time to educate ourselves. It is in such moments that the limitations of capitalism and state management have been exposed and we should indulge into alternative visions and political projects. We should patiently arm ourselves with knowledge and visionary thinking.

I would like to express my gratitude to Ioanna Maravelidi for introducing me to the work of Castoriadis ten years ago. Then a huge thank you to Mark Mason for editing and prefacing this pamphlet and to George Chelebiev for the design of the current publication. Also, I have to thank David Ames Curtis for the help he provided in my first steps into the philosophy of Castoriadis and the books

he suggested I should begin with this journey. I would also like to thank all those that have helped me directly or indirectly to develop my political thought.

I hope that this small book will provoke further interest in Castoriadis' work, as well as to political action since his thinking was always deeply revolutionary.



# Why Castoriadis is Still Important Today

Interview with Yavor Tarinski

Excerpts from an interview conducted by Irina Nedeva for the Bulgarian National Radio and aired on 03.02.2015.

Why is Castoriadis important for you almost 20 years after his death?

According to me the analysis offered by Cornelius Castoriadis remains, 20 years later, as relevant as before. This is so because he manages to detect with high accuracy the problems that still surround us today and as a result of whom people do not live well. From the beginning of his writings he reveals the inherent problems of bureaucracy, the logic of political representation, the consumerist culture and the capitalist idea of unlimited economic growth. This criticism of his remains evidently abreast with our time.

Another important aspect of his thought is the question of significance. According to many, the presence of various myths in ancient societies was a sign of ignorance, whereas for Castoriadis every society, to be able to function as such, needs a set of significations. According to him every society creates its own significations and the ones of consumerism and political representation are not good enough as social binders. Maybe we can even say that they are among the worst humanity has ever known and because of this our societies are degraded. One can suggest that most of the classic ideologies that we know, such as Capitalism, Communism and even Anarchism (at least to a certain degree), participate in the cur-

rent imaginary – in the sense that they tend to limit social struggles to fights over the right to consume “more-than-before”. Castoriadis says that this is not enough; we need to create new significations.

We can give the example of the “Islamic State” that has managed, after centuries, to return to the forefront of the Western world the idea of theological totalitarianism. We saw that even people who can be attributed to the Western middle class, who lead so-called-satisfying consumerist lifestyles, chose instead to go to a foreign place where there is danger for their life, where they will have to kill and live in misery. And all of this because they couldn’t find meaning in their relatively cozy lives and went to search for meaning in God.

To this state of insignificance Castoriadis suggests to deconstruct the current significations and rediscover those of the project of Autonomy. It is based on the concept of the individual as active citizen in the classic sense of the term, as one that is actively interested and involved in the public affairs that affect his existence.

I will quote Castoriadis here, when regarding the Athenian Democracy “What were the Athenians up to? Indeed, something very interesting. It’s the Greeks who invented elections. It’s a historically attested fact. Perhaps they were wrong, but they invented elections! Who was being elected in Athens? The magistrates weren’t being elected. The magistrates were being appointed by drawing lots or by rotation. For Aristotle, remember, a citizen is someone who is capable of governing and being governed. Everyone is capable of governing, so lots are drawn. Why? Because politics is not the business of specialists. There is no science of politics. There is opinion, the doxa of the Greeks; there’s no epistimi.”[1] The politics is not for specialists, but today we see exactly the opposite. Can politics be returned in the hands of the people so they can be free, be able to think and chase their dreams

without all this to be dressed in difficult terminologies that require specialists? Won't society become dumber if the politicians are not experts?

It is important to note that for Castoriadis direct democracy is not a final goal. According to him it is a necessary precondition for autonomy to exist, but it is not the only one. Nowadays the social imaginary is dominated by heteronomy, according to which there is/are extra-social source/s that navigate our lives beyond our reach, like politicians, historic necessity, gods or traditions. For example, one can live in a self-managed society in which contradictorily, people believe that certain things shouldn't be done because of the demands of the gods. So if people are to take on the road towards autonomy they should break with the imaginary of heteronomy.

Castoriadis tries to demonstrate during all of his life that everything that happens in our societies is our own act. He speaks for history as creation, not in a mystic, religious sense, but on the imaginary level. It is a matter of choice. It is not coincidental that he gives as examples for autonomous societies, or at least such that get close enough to experience autonomy, the Athenian Polis and the self-managed city-states of the Middle Ages. Although he was aware of other cases of self-management throughout history, in these two he saw that the people were not guided by some pre-determined final goal. Instead they engaged in what Castoriadis calls constant interrogation. This is the basis of philosophy. What he called social and individual autonomy means just that: the individual simultaneously as an active citizen, constantly interfering with public affairs, and as philosopher, constantly doubting all traditions and norms, not necessarily refusing them, but being able to determine them as right or wrong.

Concluding words?



One big problem today is that when people hear about rearranging society from the bottom-up they immediately ask to know if this has happened somewhere else and how it worked out. This is wrong. Since we can imagine it, we can also implement it in practice. The thing is to take the decision and then the necessary actions to change the political structure of society – a complete paradigm shift.

Notes:

[1] Cornelius Castoriadis: Postscript on Insignificance: Dialogues with Cornelius Castoriadis, London, continuum 2011. p.11



# Castoriadis in the Context of post-Socialist Eastern Europe

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. [...] You can't even pronounce a word which starts with 'S'. – enough of it. Any word. This is the negative side of it.<sup>1</sup>  
— Cornelius Castoriadis

This year marks the ninety-eight year since the birth of the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis as well as twenty-three years from his death. This time represents a long period in which much has changed but somewhat his thought remains as relevant and as fresh as during those rebellious days and nights of May 1968 when the Parisian youth, influenced to a large extent by Castoriadis and his associates, challenged the dominant and bankrupt significations of that period, proposing instead a new and radical narrative rooted in one democratic tradition.

But if drastic changes have taken place in the Western world, where Castoriadis lived and worked, such change has unfolded also, if not

---

1 Peter Osborne (editor): *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp18-19

even to a higher degree, in Eastern Europe. Much can be said about that but I will limit myself to a few notes here.

The post-Soviet era came with promises for blurry notions of “freedom” that irritated the social imaginary after many decades under the iron grip of centralized bureaucratic apparatuses. But the changes that came brought fragmented bureaucratic capitalism that deepened further the already severe crisis of civic culture.

This was no surprise for Castoriadis, who himself was never fooled by the so-called free world of the West, and neither by the labelled people’s republics of the East. Furthermore, his analysis on the effects of social pacification would have on the power relations inside society offers clear explanation for the grotesque forms of social organization in contemporary Eastern Europe. For Castoriadis, the withdrawal of people from the public sphere and the disappearance of political and social conflict allows the economic, political, and media oligarchy to escape all public control.<sup>2</sup> These processes are being unfolded in extreme rapidity in the countries of Eastern Europe where people have first-handedly experienced both Soviet-style socialism (state capitalism) and corporate capitalism. As a result of these social conditions the imaginaries of these societies were submerged into deep cynicism, arguably worse than the alienation of the Western consumerist culture. Thus, regimes are being produced whose irrationality is pushed to the extreme, and which are riddled with unseeingly unhidden structural corruption.

In this signification-less environment traditional ideological projects seem impotent to provide germs for the emergence of new significations which could give once again life to these societies

---

2 Cornelius Castoriadis: *A Society Adrift* (unauthorized translation, 2010), pp5-15

which have descended into deep cynical lethargy. Instead, they are often used as tools by elitist circles to abdicate from broad public affairs. Besides this, for decades the established powers in these countries have exercised their iron grip on power under Marxist ideology. Thus local populations have grown extremely wary, if not even hostile, towards notions such as people power, internationalism and revolution.

Meanwhile the post-socialist governments, in their efforts at enforcing their new Western capitalist ideology, made everything in their powers to erase the past. Thus extreme tribal nationalism rose among the local populations to fill the gap left from this sense of uprootedness. Alternative political activities remained to their bigger part entrapped in the ideological narratives of times long gone, referring to realities of the 19th and 20th centuries, not corresponding to the new temporalities. Thus, dissenting voices were channeled through ideological sects that fit the description given by Castoriadis as groups that set up as an absolute a single side, aspect, or phase of the movement it stems from, making this aspect the truth of the doctrine and the truth as such, subordinating everything else to it and, in order to maintain its 'faithfulness' to this aspect, severs itself radically from the world, living henceforth in 'its' own world.<sup>3</sup>

Somewhere in this harsh environment I was introduced to the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis and the project of autonomy. It's potentials for challenging the present-day oligarchies, in their new liberal clothing, with the non-ideological paradigm of direct democracy, were impressive. Even more so was its radical break with economism that has left such corrosive effects on the imaginary

---

3 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), p10

of the East European people. As Castoriadis noted, the doctrine of the socialist regimes borrowed heavily from capitalism's imaginary that bases all of social life on the idea that economic "betterment" was the only thing that counted or that would yield the rest by addition. This imaginary continued to be vulgarly pushed forward by the pro-Western oligarchies that took power in the post-soviet era. Thus, economism sedimented among large sections of Eastern European societies replacing citizens with taxpayers and dulling creativity with cynical consumerism.

The project of autonomy, advocated by Castoriadis, represented a radical break with it, as well as with traditional ideological sectarianism thereby plaguing the social movements in Eastern Europe. It also offered rootedness in one democratic historical tradition which was to replace the shallow tribal nationalism. Castoriadis called for people to engage in political affairs and to recreate the public space and time that has been severely and continuously degraded by the party commissars of the past and the business oligarchs of the present.

It is not by chance that Castoriadis's thought reached these societies so late – both the socialist censorship and the cannibalistic market have made it difficult for such ideas to make it through. Instead, his thought reached us "from below," and here I write especially for the Bulgarian context in which I have spent most of my life: through activist channels and international exchange of ideas with social movements from neighboring countries. However, during recent years his ideas have begun to reach a growing number of people in Eastern Europe, books of his are being published, and political activities are taking place most influenced by his concepts of autonomy and democracy. A new generation of political thought and action is emerging in this part of the world that only time will show what alternative projects will appear in the future and what effect they will cast on these societies.



# Self-Limitation and Democracy

[F]or the impulse of mere appetite is slavery,  
while obedience to a self-prescribed law is liberty.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis has often been credited with saying that “democracy is the regime of self-limitation.”<sup>4</sup> But since for him the only true democratic form is direct democracy, this claim might seem a bit odd. Direct democracy has come to be conceived by many, including several critics, as a regime that disconnects society from laws and regulations, resulting in its depoliticization and degradation. This concept has understandably raised concerns about what would be the outcomes of the more excessive actions of the masses.

The essence of direct democracy however, as presented by Castoriadis, differs considerably from such chaotic and nihilistic logics. For him, the primary meaning of the term democracy is political, being before all a regime in which all citizens are capable of

---

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998), 20.

5 Marco Deriu: *Democracies with a future: Degrowth and the democratic tradition* (in *Futures* vol.44 issue 6, 2012), 556



governing and being governed — with both terms (democracy and self-limitation) thus being inseparable. Democracy, in other words, is understood as a form of explicit societal self-institution, through reflectiveness and self-limitation.

According to Castoriadis, democracy is not mere process for collective decision-making that can exist in parallel to or within non-democratic oligarchic frameworks, as proposed by thinkers like Jürgen Habermas or Chantal Mouffe.<sup>6</sup> For him, democracy is rather the basis of the project of autonomy — a social condition in which society recognizes no external limits to its instituting power. That is, unlike different forms of what Castoriadis calls “heteronomy,” societies where laws and regulations are derived from extra-social sources like capitalist markets, nation-states, gods, historic necessity, etc., a democratic community’s sole limits result from its self-limitation through collective positing of the law.

Castoriadis observes that institutions and laws that suggest what cannot be done, but also what should happen, are what make society function. Without such regulations, the thought goes, social ties disintegrate. In his own words “society is there precisely at the moment when there is a self-limitation of all the brothers and sisters.”<sup>7</sup> His emphasis on democracy is, in this sense, not a rejection of organization and legislation, but of certain sources of organization and legislation.

---

6 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Problem of Democracy Today* (in *Democracy & Nature*, *The International Journal of Politics and Ecology* vol.3 issue 2, 1997), 18-35

7 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep* (unauthorized translation, 2003), 27

## Forms of Social Limitation

Every society does not only offer, but in some way it enforces certain roles, values, beliefs, ways of life, etc to its individual members. Each societal form provides only a certain set of possibilities to its population, since one cannot be everything nor do whatever he wants. Thus, we can speak here of limitation, but despite the negative connotations of this term, it most certainly also carries a positive trait: by forbidding certain things, society simultaneously draws patterns of what should be done, therefore giving distinguished meaning to its form of life.

Every social order determines different sources for this prohibition. But what cultivating an autonomous, essentially democratic setting means is that the limitations will be self-imposed by society in its entirety. In heteronomy, on the other hand, prohibition is being set extra-socially. This does not mean that such extra-social sources (i.e. sources that are external to the actual and living society, such as gods, nation-states, founding heroes or natural laws when they are presented as immune from human influence<sup>8</sup>), are not in some way connected to or reachable by society, but that they monopolize power, taking it away from the general populace. According to Castoriadis, they are still a product of society's self-creating capacity.<sup>9</sup> It is because of this relatedness that a revolutionary political shift is even conceivable.

Of course, although every society is based on some set of limitations, people do not always abide by these. History is filled with

---

8 Chiara Bottici: *Imaginal Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 147

9 Jeff Klooger: *Psyche, Society, Autonomy* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 7

examples of single individuals, communities, and even whole societies that break away from established social norms and prohibitions. The question is “why”? Contrary to what is argued by many critics of autonomy, people transgressing popular limitations is not a phenomenon limited to the seemingly chaotic direct democracy. In fact, it can be argued that, paradoxically, this trend is more common under heteronomy, due to its non-participatory character, because people in those societies feel alienated from the laws and institutions.

This paradox is due to the disharmonious relation between the individual and the social collectivity. No matter what roles society dictates to its singular members, there will always be some among them who will be breaking with the prohibitions. Indeed, one’s individuality is never completely determined by the role that is being attributed to him or her. In fact, these oversteppings of limitations, the breaking of the norm, potentially contain the germs of new possibilities and can become the seeds of social transformation.

Under heteronomy, however, limitations are misleadingly conceived as deriving from a source outside of ourselves, often deriving from narrow managerial elites, who are the only ones able to intervene and alter them. This is so because the heteronomous regimes are based on the scepticism of the ability of large collectivities to consciously determine their destinies. Thus, despite the historic democratic experiences of autonomy, such as the Athenian Polis, or the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, as short as they might have been, there is this false world-view of popular inability for self-instituting being constantly reproduced by genuinely heteronomous entities like the State or the capitalist market to justify their own existence.

Democracy, on the other hand, is based on the rejection of fixed and objective laws, actions, and thought. This seemingly ‘nihilistic’ concept suggests that everything is possible and certain dangers

do give reason for people to be wary. For instance, in regard to the absence of a “norm of norms,” Castoriadis refers to the Greek concept of hubris.<sup>10</sup> According to him, hubris does not simply presuppose freedom, but the non-existence of fixed norms, the essential vagueness of the ultimate social bearings of our actions. However, this does not mean that we are destined to run amok, but that there is the space for us to create our meanings, laws and limitations ourselves, since as Castoriadis suggests, hubris exists where the only ‘norm’ is self-limitation.<sup>11</sup>

Castoriadis suggests that despite the danger of monstrous acts that democracy presents, democracy simultaneously opens the possibility for self-criticism and self-evaluation, which are at the core of self-limitation.<sup>12</sup> Traces of such critical re-evaluation could be found in the Euripedeas’s play “The Troades” (The Trojan Women), produced in 415 BC during the Peloponnesian War. It represents the critical commentary of one Athenian on his fellow citizens and the slaughter they conducted on the people of the Aegean island of Milos. With his play Euripides attempts at visualizing the Greek hubris, staging it one year after the massacre, warning the Athenians with the words “such monsters, we are”. He suggests that although the people of Athens can decide and do certain thing, they shouldn’t always implement it in practice, it is in up to them to determine

---

10 Cornelius Castoriadis: *A Society Adrift* (unauthorized translation, 2010), 193

11 Fisher & Katsourakis: *Performing Antagonism* (London: Macmillan Publishers 2017), 295

12 Nana Biluš Abaffy: *The Radical Tragic Imaginary: Castoriadis on Aeschylus & Sophocles* (in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 8, issue 2, 2012), 48

which act is “monstrous” and which not.

## **Democracy and Self-Limitation**

Self-limitation within democracy decisively shapes the relation between the individual will and collective decision-making. An autonomous society allows all its individual members to directly participate in democratic processes, giving them space to express their views, needs and proposals. Here lies the most positive aspect of the democratic self-limitation: it potentially predisposes society towards lawfulness. By allowing all citizens to participate in the shaping of every law and regulation, direct democracy makes the citizenry the only creator of social limitations, thus making the need of transgression of those limits less likely.

However there will be times and topics on which unanimity will not be reached and some particular opinions will be contradicted by the collective will. In such cases, those that disagree with the given decision will have to comply with it, regardless of the degree of their disagreement. Democratic decisions are rarely unanimous, and however we may organize processes to give everyone the opportunity to express their views, make their needs known and understood, and present their arguments these will still sometimes be contradicted by the collective will. This means not just that what an individual wishes does not occur, it also means that individuals will sometimes be required to comply with laws with which they do not agree.

Some argue that this means that there is an ineradicable element of heteronomy even within the most democratic society, but it is important to make a distinction between decisions that are made without any input by those who are affected by them, and those in which all affected have the effective opportunity to participate. The term ‘heteronomy’ is best reserved for the former. And although

autonomy is characterized by the latter, it inevitably means that sometimes individuals are forced to obey laws they would not have chosen for themselves, otherwise we cannot talk of decision-making.

One example for such a relation is Socrates' attitude towards the laws and institutions of Ancient Athens. He perceived the regulations of the polis as his own, and felt obliged to submit to them, even when he strongly disagreed. This attitude derived, to a large degree, from his recognition of and gratitude for the city's role in his education, not to mention the possibilities it gave him to lead truly free life. He knew that he had joined the Athenian polis voluntarily and had the right to participate in its self-instituting, which made him recognize himself as a part of the social collective, even when disagreeing with some of the collective decisions.

Submission to laws and regulations, however, can never be completely guaranteed. Heteronomous approaches typically prescribe severe punishment to the transgressors through apparatuses of oppression. In such cases, despite the penal threat, there is strong drive among people to transgress laws, since they don't have even the slightest opportunity to take part in their shaping, and thus feel alienated from them. This, however, does not mean that in the democratic conditions of autonomy, obedience to regulations will be entirely voluntary. But because of the participatory nature of self-limitation citizens will feel, to a larger degree, social prohibitions as their own and will be less tempted to overpass them. This does not dismiss the fact that even under democracy, in its most pure direct form, society will have to be able to impose its collective decisions on those individuals that will still proceed in transgressing them.

## On the Contamination of the Revolutionary Project

Although democracy is unthinkable without self-limitation, in certain historic moments multiple contaminations of revolutionary thinking took place that pulled these concepts apart. The workers' movement in general, and specifically Marxism and Marx himself, were from the beginning steeped in an atmosphere in which the growth of the forces of production, worker-managed economic growth, was made the universal criterion for social emancipation. For these thinkers and activists, production was considered the main locus of all public life, and the idea that progress could and would go on indefinitely was taken for granted.<sup>13</sup> This embrace of the capitalist imaginary contaminated the working class' project of autonomy. An autonomous society is completely incompatible with the idea of mastery, advocated by capitalism's paradigm of unlimited economic growth. Rather, an autonomous, de-alienated society would by nature take up the role of steward of the planet.

Castoriadis suggests that, if the projects of autonomy and economic growth have contaminated each other, then one must know how to distinguish them, which is in no way an easy task. This does not mean that we must make choice between material progress or environmentally-minded primitivism. We are not talking of abandoning scientific research on the pretext that some very dangerous things might come out of them, but that there are nonetheless some very dangerous outcomes that can result from the transition from research to its economic application, which raises questions that muse be democratically negotiated by the collective. This is where democratic self-limitation comes in.

---

13 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep* (unauthorized translation, 2003), 226

Today, more than ever, the question of setting controls on the evolution of science and technology is posed in radical and urgent manner. The unrestrained development of technoscience, driven solely by competition, proves to be destructive for the planet as well as for us, creating a crisis of an existential character. Castoriadis calls for breaking the currently prevailing illusion of omnipotence that humanity feels.<sup>14</sup> It is true that we are, as he suggests, privileged inhabitants of a planet that is perhaps unique in the universe. But our very existence is dependent on it and on certain fragile conditions, which our civilization is about to disrupt and even destroy. To avoid the upcoming catastrophe humanity needs to reconsider all the values and habits that rule over us.

This does not mean that we should abandon knowledge and science and return to primitive forms of existence, as some modern lifestylish trends suggest. Giving them up means renouncing our ability to be free. But the tricky part is that, as Castoriadis explains, knowledge is like power – it requires caution. We should, therefore, at least attempt to comprehend what our researchers are in the process of discovering and be attentive to the possible repercussions of what we are about to learn. Here the question of democracy arises again, in multiple forms. Under the present oligarchic order, and within current hierarchical structures, the final say over all these matters is in the hands of competing politicians, corrupted bureaucrats or business oligarchs, with narrow technoscientists as their advisors. Society-at-large is thus being excluded from the political determination of how should acquired knowledge be used, and what goals must be set before future scientific research.

---

14 Ibid, 94



## Self-Limitation and Education

Among the main excuses for the exclusion of the general public from decision-making on matters of supposedly scientific character is the public's lack of appropriate education in these matters. This argument is essentially paradoxical, however, since, most often, contemporary political representatives and businessmen themselves lack such knowledge, and are driven solely by hunger for power.

In a democratic society, the centrality of education is beyond discussion. In a sense, it can be said that direct democracy is an immense institution of continuing education, a permanent process of self-education for its citizens, and it could not function without that. A democratic society has to appeal constantly to the lucid activity and the opinion of all citizens, since by its essence it is of reflective character. This is exactly the opposite of what takes place today, with the reign of professional politicians and all kinds of "experts."

The issue of education cannot be resolved by mere "educational reform," as is often advocated by parliamentary governments of various sorts, since, as Castoriadis suggests, education begins with the birth of the individual and continues until their death.<sup>15</sup> Education takes place everywhere and always. It is embodied by the everyday life and culture taking place within the city. He invites us to compare the education Athenian citizens received when they participated in the self-management of the polis or attended performances of tragedies with the kind of education a television viewer or electoral voter receives today. Therefore determining certain limitations requires first and foremost the educative inclusion of all of society into political affairs so as self-limitation to be possible.

---

<sup>15</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group* (unauthorized translation 2013), 56

## Ecology and Democracy

The above said provides us with the basis to rethink the way we view ecology – a term tightly connected to self-limitation. For years political elites, environmental scientists and experts have been discussing and deciding on the state of the environment behind closed doors. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onwards hundreds, if not even thousands, of environmental treaties have been signed in this manner, with results that can be labelled as questionable at best.<sup>16</sup> The rest of society is supposed to conceive of ecology in romanticized, semi-mythologized “love of nature.”

Castoriadis insists that ecology is, above all, essentially political. He argues that science is, by itself, incapable of (and not supposed to) setting its own limits and goals. If scientific research is set to discover something, it will do so, even if that means finding a way to destroy the planet. This does not mean that science is inherently flawed, but that it does not by itself include democratic deliberation that can determine what is “good” and what “wrong”. In other words, scientific research has an essentially social character.

Ecology is neither scientific, nor technophobic. It is, above all, the necessity of self-limitation of the human societies in relation to the environment, on whose fragile conditions the very existence of humanity depends. Castoriadis traces this logic back to the ancient Greek attitude. He argues that theirs was not based on balance and harmony with nature, but from the recognition of the environmental limits on our actions and the need of self-limitation.

But, for ecology to overcome current environmentalism and move

---

<sup>16</sup> Dimitrios Roussopoulos: *Political Ecology: Beyond Environmentalism* (Porsgrunn: New Compass Press, 2015) 44-45

towards a revolutionary direction, according to Castoriadis, it must aim at provoking profound changes in the psychosocial attitude toward life of the modern human, or in other words, in humanity's imaginary.<sup>17</sup> The idea that the sole goal of life is to produce and to consume more—an idea that is both absurd and degrading for human beings—must be challenged and abandoned; the capitalist imaginary of pseudo-rational pseudo-mastery, and of unlimited expansion, must be abandoned. Moreover, It must be recognized that such a profound change can be achieved only by people working on grassroots level. A single individual, or one organization, can, at best, only prepare, criticize, incite, sketch out possible orientations and provoke the social collectivity to change. Thus one ecological, essentially revolutionary, approach can only be social in character.

## **Degrowth and Self-Limitation**

An important trend among ecological circles nowadays has become the “degrowth paradigm.” It is based on a theory of radical reduction of human impact on nature through deliberate negative economic growth. To some extent it is influenced by Castoriadis' critique of the obsession with economic expansion, found among capitalist, as well as socialist, regimes.<sup>18</sup>

One problem with this trend, however, is that it places of economic shrinkage at the centre of social change, as the very name de-growth suggests. This movement often focuses on the technical part of how such process can take place, rather than on how to radically

---

17 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*, 113

18 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 101

restructure the organizational basis of society as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Thus, people from this tendency have often found themselves proposing reforms within the parliamentary regime, as have happened, in similar manner, with advocates of the commons. In this we can detect reproduction of the pseudo-scientific folly of techno-fixes beyond politics.

Castoriadis' notion of self-limitation differs significantly in this respect. While recognizing the immense importance of degrowing our economies to environmentally sound levels, it nonetheless suggests that this process should be preceded by the de-scaling of political power, i.e. from oligarchic to direct-democratic.<sup>20</sup>

In a sense, degrowth can be viewed as self-limitation that is restricted to the economic sphere, which by itself is problematic in several, mutually supplementing, ways if it is not included into one holistic political project that encompasses all spheres of human life. First, it participates in the current imaginary of economism, viewing the economy as the highest human activity. It thus tries to navigate social change along the economic lines, already sketched by capitalism. In other words, it narrows the possibility of radical social alteration to alternative forms of consumption, renewable energy sources, environmentally sound production methods etc. without taking into account their scale or who the beneficiaries from such practices might be.

Second, by determining as its main goal the creation of a “soci-

---

19 <http://www.onthecommons.org/stirrings-degrowth-movement#sthash.rNGHb0t0.dpbs>

20 David AmesCurtis (Editor): *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 417

ety of degrowth”, it pretty much leaves open the political approach through which it will be implemented. If the sole target is to de-scale the economic footprint of humanity over the environment, then all political strategies can be used.<sup>21</sup> This by itself is very problematic. Environmental sustainability could be enforced, for example, by a totalitarian regime (like eco-fascism) to the expense of democratic and human rights.<sup>22</sup> This could mean that the current ecological crisis might be avoided to only slam humanity into another political, social and cultural crisis, provoked by the dystopian character of totalitarianism. Thus degrowing the destructive impact of one human sphere through economic means alone will simply not suffice. There is need of general descaling, with authority as the main target for de-escalation, decentralizing it down to the very grassroots, where people themselves to rethink their relationship with nature and with themselves.

## Conclusion

Democracy, as inseparable part of the project of Autonomy, is the dual self-limitation of intrasocial regulations and laws, necessary to maintain the integrity of our societies on the one hand; and the limits we set before our activities regarding nature, on the other.

But to be effective, democracy has to be detached from the imaginary signification of universal rational mastery, which has been contaminating revolutionary thought for many years. We can see clearly contemporary economic growth being forced with the cost of most basic democratic rights. So, democracy too, in its direct, most authentic form cannot be achieved through technological progress

---

21 Serge Latouche: *Farewell to Growth* (Oxford: Polity, 2009)

22 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*, 116

or abundance of resources, but by the deliberative self-limitation of society itself.

In a world of unlimited economic growth and hunger for power, those that feel the harshest prohibition are the people and communities that strive at limiting the authority of those that exploit humanity and nature for their narrow profit. This should not surprise us since, as Hannah Arendt suggests, the notion of everything is possible is an idea that can be found in totalitarian regimes like Nazism.<sup>23</sup> But unlike the numerous “autonomous” and anarchist trends that seek unlimited individual independence in an institutionless world, the democratic self-institution proposed by the project of Autonomy in Castoriadis can give birth to real political freedom for the creative citizens of a vital society. This requires, however, that social movements and politicized individuals abandon the convenience of heavily ideologized activist groups with sectarian character and immerse instead, into the public affairs of their cities and societies, self-organizing alongside their fellow citizens in an attempt to self-institute the public space of tomorrow. Such might be our only hope to preserve the fragile planetary conditions that allow us to exist, those same conditions the current system is in the process of destroying.

---

23 Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1979)



# Political Ecology

The classical sovereign nation-State is [...] itself becoming irrelevant and impotent as the world rapidly coalesces into supranational, superregional trading blocs whose main purpose and passion is neither to foster direct democracy input nor to address the festering and even worsening problems of environmental degradation.<sup>24</sup>  
— David Ames Curtis

## Introduction

Today ecology is emerging as major concern and as an answer to the contemporary growth-based politico-economic model that is responsible for the creation of tangible environmental crisis and rapidly unfolding climate change. From as early as the beginning of the 19th century a concern for the environment arose within western societies, such as the romanticists, sparked by the pollution caused by the Industrial Revolution. Nowadays it is being expressed in theories like degrowth and social ecology, as well as in the form of popular struggles against consumerist culture and capitalist extractivist projects, harmful to the environment, human health and local autarchy.

Ecology played major role in the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis

---

<sup>24</sup> David Ames Curtis: *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997. ppXi-Xii



as well. He however viewed it in stark contrast from most of the environmentalists of his time (and of today as well). Unlike the widespread understanding of nature as a commodity, as something separated from society, Castoriadis viewed it in direct link with social life, relationships and values, thus incorporating it in his political project.

## **Criticism of Contemporary Environmental Organizations**

While Castoriadis saw in ecology a revolutionary potential, he most certainly did not see such in most major environmental organizations of his time. Instead, he noticed that they tend to deal exclusively with matters that concern strictly the natural environment<sup>25</sup>, highly neglecting political and social issues. Green parties and environmentalist NGOs thus participate to a large degree in the capitalist imaginary that views nature as separated commodity that should be mastered by humanity. Because of this for significant part of the green movement the ongoing ecological crisis does not have political side, and neither is being influenced by specific social structures. As a result the solutions they offer do not overcome the dominant political framework, invoking instead technological or other fixes.

The dominant perception among mainstream environmentalist circles is that the preservation of “the great outdoors” can be entrusted to the market. Carbon emissions and pollution are being viewed as rights that can be sold at market-driven price. In this way, the self-regulating capitalist fallacy is being reproduced among the ranks of the ecological movement. Terms, such as green capitalism

---

25 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep*, unauthorized translation, 2003. pp117-118

and sustainable development, become central political proposals. Because of their non-critical acceptance of the contemporary system, these tendencies tend to approach the various facets of the environmental degradation as disconnected and necessary to be dealt with one piece at a time, often by scientific means, instead of as one holistic ecological crisis with systemic root-causes, that should be dealt with politically. As a result, their activity often leads to the co-optation of popular movements for the protection of nature by the systemic discourse.

Groups and organizations from these tendencies often tend to call on people to symbolically reduce their impact on nature, like calling for international days of closed lights or less water consumption, rather than pointing at multinationals and governments whose activities have environmentally catastrophic effects. In this way they cloak the systemic features that cause most of the pollution and, instead, inflict social feelings of common human fault.

What is often viewed as alternative to the foregoing “green mindset” are different eco-socialist and eco-Marxist trends. They are most often anchored into the metaphysics of the state and invoke the need of strong left parties in power to regulate human relations with nature. As can be imagined, the electoral seizure of political power is at the core of these tendencies. Despite the questionable effectiveness of this approach, these tendencies remain entrapped into highly economic theoretical frameworks, which regard production as the engine of social change.

Finally, there are segments of the broader environmental movement which attempt to break with statism and capitalism. However, there's much to be criticized about the contemporary individualistic imaginary of some of these tendencies and of their devotion to spiritualistic personal change and life-style. Deep ecologists, New Age enthusiasts and primitivists tend to blame environmental de-

struction on human civilization in general and advocate retreat to romanticized notions of the “natural”, rather than trace it to specific political and economic systems.

Despite his criticism of the inability of the leading environmental organizations to overcome the imaginary of capitalism and political representation, Castoriadis recognized in the ecological movement certain evolution in the field on which challenges, contestations, revolts and revolutions are taking place<sup>26</sup>. According to him this evolution takes part in two dimensions: in the instillation of schemes of authority on the one hand; and in the instillation of schemes of needs on the other. The former is exemplified by the workers’ movement while the latter, by the ecological.

Unlike class-centered analyzes, Castoriadis saw in the workers’ movement from the 19th century not simply an attempt at re-shaping the economic sphere, but a direct-democratic challenge to domination and authority on holistic, sociopolitical level. In his own words: What the workers’ movement attacked above all was the dimension of authority - that is to say, domination, which is its ‘objective’ side. Even on this point it left in the shadows - as was almost inevitable at the time - some completely decisive aspects of the problem of authority and domination, therefore also political problems concerning the reconstruction of an autonomous society. Some of these aspects were put into question later on, and especially, more recently, by the women’s movement and the youth movement, both of which attacked the schemata, the figures, and the relations of authority as these existed in other spheres of social life.<sup>27</sup>

---

26 David Ames Curtis: *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997. p246

27 David Ames Curtis: *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers

According to Castoriadis, the ecological movement that followed contributed with another dimension to the struggle against capitalist modernity: it put into question the very structure and nature of human needs, lifestyle etc. Ecology constitutes a capital breakthrough in comparison with what can be seen as the unilateral character of previous movements. It challenged the entire relationship between humanity and the environment, raising again the eternal question of what is the human place in this world.

## **The Political Essence of Ecology**

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Castoriadis disagrees with the idea that ecology is but another scientific branch and suggests instead that it is essentially political. He conceives it as humanity's relationship with nature and the corresponding limitations between the two. From this Castoriadis concludes that ecology cannot be scientific, since science is not about setting regulations or limits before its goals but discovering ways of achieving them. If scientific resources are mobilized to discover ways to destroy the planet, they will ultimately do so, not because they are "evil" or bad hearted, but because this is what they are supposed to do. This does not mean that Castoriadis was scientophobic, on the contrary, he insisted on the importance of mobilizing the resources of scientific research to explore the impact our activities have on the environment, but he knew that science alone is not enough to protect nature - it needs politics. Only through political deliberation one can determine what should and shouldn't be done, what is "wrong" or "right", to what extent we can alter the planetary conditions.

This logic of his counters the contemporary techno-science, the belief that technology and science alone can grant humanity mastery over everything<sup>28</sup>. Today this widespread technocratic concept has

---

28 Elliot & Hsu: *The Consequences of Global Disasters*, New York,

become the practical equivalent of religion. Techno-science has managed to reinforce the dominant ideological mystification in a time in which authority has become ostensibly desacralized. If in the past the power of the ruling elites was explained through its divine God-given origin, today it rests on the scientific knowledge that they claim to possess, and allows them to continue their destructive activities. Furthermore, unlike others, Castoriadis argues that technology today cannot be viewed as neutral<sup>29</sup>, since it has been developed and shaped by the dominant capitalist system and thus it has been embedded with its core values of domination and subordination.

Like religious sacralized regimes of the past, contemporary technocracies claim to know what the people actually “need”. They can calculate it through the means of science and deliver it through economic growth and extraction. But what they actually do is to express the needs, embedded in one specific imaginary. In reality we can say that there are no predetermined natural human needs. Every society creates its needs and the means for their satisfaction. For one truly religious person the ultimate need is to make a pilgrimage to a holy (to his faith) place, spending all his savings if required. For the anthropological type of capitalism the need to constantly replace his belongings and gadgets with newer ones that are slightly different and supposedly improved, seems as unquestionable and as natural as their very existence. Thus “need” is a social construct that can be altered.

If this paradigm today manages to function it is so because it suc-

---

Routledge 2016. p11

29 Suzi Adams: *Cornelius Castoriadis: Key Concepts*, London, Bloomsbury 2014. p174

cessfully manages to provide the means for satisfaction of the needs it fabricates. And the debate between the two opposing fractions for the seats of power—the Right and the Left—is centered on this matter. The right-wingers advocate market deregulation as engine of growth, while the leftist forces often tend to blame the current close ties between multinationals and governments for the lessened buying power of local populations and promise, if elected to power, to fix that. And both sides insist on the scientific nature of their claims. In this sense the current paradigm is less threatened by traditional ideological criticism, rather than from the danger of running out of oil, for example.

What Castoriadis sees as problematic in the way modern societies conceive of the ongoing environmental crisis is the absence of prudence. The governing technocratic imaginary, that continues its reign many years after the death of the philosopher, prevents our societies to take certain precautions when engaging with the natural world. If scientific research cannot determine with certainty whether specific act or procedure will irreversibly harm the environment, but there are doubts of such potentials, then precautionary measures (limitations) should be determined through direct-democratic means by all concerned, which by its essence is political process.

Thus ecology as presented above, is incompatible with the current representative oligarchic political system that hinders any effort at genuine democratic deliberation. It requires the radical alteration of society's institutions so as to encourage humanity to act as steward, not master, of the planet and its resources. In this sense ecology must be conceived as part of wider revolutionary project, based on direct democracy, which directly challenges the contemporary institutional order. Castoriadis suggests that:

“profound changes must take place in the psycho-social organization of Western man, in his attitude toward life, in short, in his imaginary. The idea that the sole goal of life is to produce and to consume more—an idea that is both absurd and degrading—must be abandoned; the capitalist imaginary of pseudorational pseudomastery, of unlimited expansion, must be abandoned. That is something only men and women can do. A single individual, or one organization, can, at best, only prepare, criticize, incite, sketch out possible orientations.”<sup>30</sup>

## Ecology is not Ideology

When viewed through such political prism, Castoriadis warns us, ecology is not to be made into an ideology in the traditional sense of the term.<sup>31</sup> Just as contemporary techno-science has become sacralized, so too ecological thinking can be integrated into a new religious cult or neofascist ideological project. Just as human health was turned by Nazi ideology into a dogma that led to the extermination of thousands of people with disabilities, so could a society, faced with environmental catastrophe, give birth to an authoritarian regime that will impose draconian restrictions with the sole target of preserving nature.

What Castoriadis proposes is to integrate ecology into broader po-

---

30 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep*, unauthorized translation, 2003. p113

31 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep*, unauthorized translation, 2003. p116

litical project that goes beyond narrow concerns for nature. Such politics will not be based on romantic, mystic notions of the love for Mother Gaia or the superiority of the “virgin” nature over technology and science. Instead, it will take into account the balance between humanity and the planet, without glorifying the one and diminishing the other, thus avoiding the danger of creating dogmas. Such ecological politics will be based on the recognition that our societies depend on certain fragile planetary conditions, and if we want to continue our existence as specie, we will have to find comfortable place within them, without however abandoning technology and science per se.

Because of our dependence on nature, ecology cannot be separated from direct democracy. If society is to intervene with such delicate matter, on which depends the future of each one of its members, then all of the social collectivity should have a say before one such intervention is undertaken. The specific, technical way in which such a decision will be taken is of little importance here, important is the principle. If it is to saw off the branch we are currently sitting on, without another one in sight, let’s at least ask everybody else that will share the fall.

## **Self-limitation and Ecology**

The concept of self-limitation is of key importance when discussing Castoriadis’s understanding of political ecology. Above all, it recognizes that the current environmental crisis is man-made. As Castoriadis suggests, today the greatest danger for humanity is humanity itself<sup>32</sup>. No natural catastrophe equals the man-made catastrophes, which is more evident than ever with the stubborn way our societ-

---

32 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep*, unauthorized translation, 2003. p122



ies continue to follow the paradigm of unlimited economic growth, insisting on a lifestyle that simply cannot be sustained by the finite world we live in. A lifestyle that is sickening our bodies, our minds, and the fragile planetary conditions that make our existence possible.

Self-limitation in the context of ecology is that there is no one that will protect us from ourselves. Our political leaders are proving unable to solve the ongoing environmental degradation. Despite the numerous treaties signed between ruling elites and representatives of the big business, the ecological crisis seems to be deepening. And neither is the individual, lifestylish tackling of the environmental challenges any more productive. Shorter showers, closed lights in empty rooms, and eco-friendly products seem to only help for our self-esteem, boosting our egos, making us feel that we did our part, without actually changing something of real importance.

Self-limitation comes to remind us of our individual and social responsibility before ourselves, our fellow human beings and the rest of the natural world that surrounds us. It stands for collectively forged laws, which were made by all with the conscious understanding that our society, as well as all of us individually, cannot do just anything; we ought to self-limit ourselves. According to Castoriadis autonomy, or true freedom, is the self-limitation necessary not only in the rules of intrasocial conduct but also in the rules we adopt in our conduct toward the environment<sup>33</sup>.

## Conclusion

The future seems uncertain, especially regarding the ongoing en-

---

33 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep*, unauthorized translation, 2003. p120

vironmental degradation that, if unattended, may develop into existential crisis. It is difficult for one to remain optimistic with all the negative predictions and researches coming from the scientific community. Some claim that what we need is new technological innovations at the cost of greater economic growth. But as Castoriadis has demonstrated, this alone cannot prevent one ecological catastrophe. What one such existential crisis requires above all is the creative human power to draw new direction - a drastic paradigm change - to navigate humanity towards completely new direction, based on collective stewardship and not domination.

What this creative power can bring in the future is, above all, a political matter. As Castoriadis reminds us, [m]an, qua creative power, is man when he builds the Parthenon or the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, as well as when he sets up Auschwitz or the Gulag.<sup>34</sup> It is political participation (or the absence of it) that shapes the values and principles of new emerging social forms. Thus it is up to all of us individually and collectively to create and cultivate one paradigm shift that will navigate us towards sustainable, democratic future.

---

34 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep*, unauthorized translation, 2003. p123



# Political Organizing in the 21st Century

Concern with the problem of organization has meaning only for people convinced that they can and must struggle together (hence, by organizing) and who do not, from the very beginning, assume their own defeat is inevitable.<sup>35</sup>  
— Cornelius Castoriadis

The project of autonomy, as articulated by Cornelius Castoriadis, is a concept whose relevance is nowadays rapidly growing. I'll emphasize the contemporary social movements and the similarities of their activities with the project of autonomy.

Today we are witnessing the rise of multiple crises, encompassing our society, our individual experiences of life, as well as the very nature that is keeping us alive, and thus the question of what is to be done is of ever-growing importance. But it seems that the conventional solutions can't be of help anymore.

If before we were saying that representative democracy was in crisis, now we can say with growing confidence that today it is on its knees. The abstention rates during elections are in their all time highest, even in countries with traditionally high electoral activi-

---

35 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Working Class and Organization* (Solidarity Pamphlets No. 22 and No. 23., 1959)

ty. Political parties across Europe that win elections rarely gather enough seats to rule alone, and are thus forced to engage in unstable coalitions to form governments. Even the so-called radical left parties, that claim to represent the massive social movements, don't seem to be able to increase their membership base or to initiate lasting social mobilizations on a large scale.

The traditional ideological movements (trade unions, anarchist federations etc.), on the other hand, that are out of the institutions of power and act as their opposition, are also in crisis. Traditional ideological organizations fail to increase their membership base, ceding back instead<sup>36</sup>. This is so due to many reasons, the basic one amongst whom is that the proposals they articulate are rarely something more than a reproduction of old patterns of thinking and acting, and thus they are unable to interact adequately with the current reality.

Due to this, new forms of political activism are emerging, that highly resembles the project of autonomy. Castoriadis describes it in The project of Autonomy is not a Utopia as the project of a society in which all citizens have an equal, effectively actual possibility of participating in legislation, in government, in jurisprudence, and, finally, in the institution of society<sup>37</sup>.

And we can see that today's forms of protests are tending to break with traditional forms of expression of popular dissatisfaction such as strikes, marches, etc, and are trying instead to open public spac-

---

<sup>36</sup> <https://roarmag.org/magazine/anti-capitalist-politics-21st-century/>

<sup>37</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *A Society Adrift* (unauthorized translation, 2010), p5

es, where individuals can engage collectively with public affairs. In the constant eruptions of societal creativity during recent years direct democracy is successfully conquering the imaginary of protesters, activists, communities, not leaving a lot of space for political vanguards of any sort. Such were the cases of the Indignados, the Direct Democracy Now movement from Syntagma Square, the Occupy, the Nuit Debout, and nowadays the Yellow Vests, where real attempts at self-instituting are made. We can even say that the modern forms of protest are unthinkable outside the general frame of direct democracy.

## Contextuality

What makes these new forms strikingly different from the traditional ones is their contextual character. The Imaginary of the traditional movements was based on ideologies, thus creating amongst them tendency towards the adoption of their own narratives, incompatible and often even quite hostile towards the rest of society. As I have shown elsewhere<sup>38</sup>, this results in the establishment of a non-contextual way of thinking and acting, which prevents, or at least makes it very difficult, for radical political organizations to interact with people as well as with reality, leading to political sectarianism.

Castoriadis noted in an interview, entitled *Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process*, that:

Autonomy is an ongoing process, whereby you always have contents that are given, borrowed—you are in the world, you are in society, you have inherited a language, you live in a certain history. [...]It is in this world that we have to have a workable and effective

---

38 <http://www.respublica.gr/2015/08/column/beyond-ideology/>

concept of autonomy. Autonomy does not mean I am totally separated from everything external. And, in relation to my own contents, which are 99 percent borrowed, have come from the outside, I have a reflective, critical, deliberative activity, and I can to a significant degree say yes and no.<sup>39</sup>

Once such perception of autonomy, according to Castoriadis, requires the abandonment of bureaucratic means of expressing our ideas:

To break with the conceptions and practice of bureaucratic organizations is also to break with traditional jargon, which has lost all meaning for people, and even has become an object of derision [...] We must transform our way of speaking and writing, pitilessly eliminating from our speech and from our texts insider terms and a didactic expository style.<sup>40</sup>

We can clearly see, that the massive social movements of the last decade are not trying to fit the present into certain ideological frame, developed in different time and context (from the present one), but on the contrary, they are striving at achieving greater synergy between ideals and fluid contemporaneity, culminating in this way into a genuinely democratic tendency. An example for this we can find in activist Baki Youssoufou's described the Nuit Debout movement in an interview:

This movement is more open. We are taking the time to look at one

---

39 Cornelius Castoriadis: *A Society Adrift* (unauthorized translation, 2010), p33

40 Cornelius Castoriadis: *Political and Social Writings Volume 3* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p13

another, to take care of everyone, to be inclusive, to spend more time discussing questions – because not everybody has the same background. We also have to try to revisit our language and our practices and to make our ideas more contemporary. [...] We need to adapt our ideas and actions to the present time. [...] This is a very new thing, and a paradoxical one, but a very powerful one.<sup>41</sup>

We can also detect it in the call, issued by the first Yellow Vest Assembly of Assemblies:

We are strengthened by the diversity of our discussions. At this very moment, hundreds of assemblies are developing and proposing their own demands.<sup>42</sup>

## **Democratic Individuals and the Need for Roots**

Contemporary social movements do not subject the present merely to countless interpretations, but is being experimented with, in search for new ways to implement the principles of direct democracy, embedding them in the experiencing of everyday life. Through the public spaces, opened in this process, is being created the possibility of the emergence of new anthropological types, and more specifically the one Castoriadis calls the democratic individual<sup>43</sup>, which the society today is not capable of reproducing. He detects

---

41 <https://roarmag.org/essays/nuit-debout-interview-baki-yousouf/>

42 <https://thecommunists.org/2019/03/30/news/call-from-frances-first-yellow-vest-assembly/>

43 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance: The Big Sleep* (unauthorized translation, 2003), p217



certain dialectic relationship between democratic institutions and democratic individuals:

[W]e obviously should condemn any fetishism for the 'soviet' or 'council' type of organization. The 'constant eligibility and revocability of representatives' are of themselves quite insufficient to 'guarantee' that a council will remain the expression of working-class interests. The council will remain such an expression for as long as people are prepared to do whatever may be necessary for it to remain so. . . . [T]he council is an adequate form of organization: Its whole structure is set up to enable this will to self-expression [of the workers] to come to the fore, when it exists.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, for Castoriadis this democratic individual cannot be detached from his organic community. Capitalism and the State aims at uprooting people from their social environment, while contemporary social movements, through the participatory institutions they establish, aim at rebuilding their communal relations. Castoriadis writes that:

Direct democracy certainly requires the physical presence of citizens in a given place, when decisions have to be made. But this is not enough. It also requires that these citizens form an organic community, that they live if possible in the same milieu, that they be familiar through their daily experience with the subject to be discussed and with the problems to be tackled. It is only in such units that the political participation of individuals can become total, that people can know and feel that their involvement will have an effect, and that the real life of the community is, in large part, determined by its own members and not by unknown or external

---

44 <http://www.notbored.org/councils.html>

authorities who decide for them.<sup>45</sup>

## Resurging Passion for Political Participation

Since 2011, with the first wave of public anger and creativity, expressed through the social seizure of public squares, many such unabated waves followed, showing the rising urge for popular participation in public affairs. And they have developed today into the formation of confederations of local participatory decision-making bodies. Castoriadis himself recognized the importance of federalism for the creation of a coherent democratic project.<sup>46</sup>

Something similar is happening with the ecological movements, a large part of which was correctly criticized by Castoriadis for viewing nature in a de-politicized manner - as commodity. But today we see how growing number of climate activists are beginning to view problems such as pollution and climate change in a more systemic manner, articulating dynamic politicized proposals instead, like the formation of citizen assemblies<sup>47</sup>.

In all these cases, workerism seems to have been abandoned by social movements and uprisings, as they seem to be increasingly aiming at reclaiming popular democratic control. This is something that Castoriadis has been arguing for long time ago:

---

45 Cornelius Castoriadis: *Political and Social Writings Volume 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp98-99

46 Cornelius Castoriadis: *Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* (Fordsburg: Zabalaza Books, 2007)

47 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/environment/2019/11/are-citizens-assemblies-really-answer-climate-crisis>

People will not make a revolution over their wages -- not today, in any case; they will not even make one for workers' management as such, and rightly so, since workers' management as such is only a tool, not an end in itself. People will make a revolution in order to make a radical change in the way they live, and this concerns the content of the revolution, its ends, and its values.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Many would object to what has been claimed so far, arguing that if we abandon the security of our ideological dogmas or distance with the less politicized segments of society, we run the risk of being absorbed by the institutions of the current oligarchic regime. But such fears can only lead to self-marginalization and elitist/didactic attitudes that lead only to inaction. To these fears Castoriadis has responded with the following:

Someone who is afraid of cooptation has already been coopted. His [sic] attitude has been coopted -- since it has been blocked up. The deepest reaches of his mind have been coopted, for there he seeks guarantees against being coopted, and thus he has already been caught in the trap of reactionary ideology: the search for an anti-cooptation talisman or fetishistic magic charm. There is no guarantee against cooptation; in a sense, everything can be coopted, and everything is one day or another.<sup>49</sup>

In a speech, delivered in Athens at 1989<sup>50</sup>, Castoriadis said that what

---

48 <http://www.notbored.org/castoriadis.html>

49 Cornelius Castoriadis: *Political and Social Writings: Volume 3* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p132

50 <http://www.athene.antenna.nl/ARCHIEF/NR01-Athene/02->

is pre-eminently needed today and seems to be missing for the time being, is passion for public affairs, responsibility, participation, to which, as it seems until now, the contemporary social movements are answering with promising signs. containing the germs of one possible future. The question is not to be too impatient, entrapped in the imaginary of “one-night” revolution, and to continue participating patiently in the creation of the building blocks of tomorrow.



# Creating A New Democratic Anthropological Type

The public, the people, will find a way to create forms we cannot even imagine, forms that could solve problems that seem insuperable to us. So what is needed is this constant creative activity from the public, and that means mainly everybody's passion for public affairs<sup>51</sup>  
— Cornelius Castoriadis

With inequality and environmental degradation on the rise, a growing number of social movements are struggling to achieve the right to directly participate in the decisions that will affect them and potentially alter the course of the world; in other words – direct democracy. One often neglected but essential way of moving core democratic values and principles like cooperation, passion for participation in public affairs, solidarity and equality from the margins of our collective life towards its center, is the attempt to create an anthropological type that deeply embodies them.

The implementation of direct democracy on a larger scale is impossible without the wider self-empowerment of common people (those, situated “below”). Ultimately, who will realize in practice a system based on popular participation, if not the public itself? Who will participate in the direct-democratic institutions we imagine –

---

51 Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Problem of Democracy Today”

popular assemblies, councils etc. – if not the people themselves?

This requires a strategy for inclusive self-empowerment or, in other words, changing the anthropological type of the modern human – who today is predominantly a disengaged consumer – into an active citizen. Surely, any such project will demand a lot of time and effort, simultaneously on practical and theoretical levels, in order to enable people to develop democratic habits and culture. This is something widely neglected by most contemporary ideological movements.

It is important to note here that people will not start suddenly cooperating, sharing and participating directly in the management of their collective lives, like this is embedded in their DNA. We can even assume that in critical situations society does not have time to develop brand new solutions; on the contrary, it turns desperately towards already existing structures, even if they are established in small scale, and towards political proposals, that may have been hidden from the eye, but were never completely vanished. Cornelius Castoriadis warns us about the moments of disappointment and social crisis, when the consciousness of society grows rapidly:

But to be socially effective – this autonomous mass action cannot remain amorphous, fragmented and dispersed. It will find expression in patterns of action and forms of organization, in ways of doing things and ultimately in institutions which embody and reflect its purpose... If libertarian revolutionaries remain blissfully unaware of these problems and have not discussed or even envisaged them they can rest assured that others have.<sup>52</sup>

---

52 Cornelius Castoriadis, "Political and Social Writings" (University of Minnesota Press, 1988); p. 96.

Thus if we want one day to live in a non-hierarchical society, based on solidarity and direct participation, we will have to create the necessary conditions for its existence.

In other words, if we want values like solidarity and self-management to take a central place in our lives, simply destroying the contemporary system won't suffice: it could even unlock "supposedly forgotten" barbaric instincts amongst large sections of society. Instead, we will need people who are embracing these values and principles deeply, in order to be able to co-exist without the paternalism of extra-social hierarchies (like state bureaucracies). And we will need lots of such people. But since our contemporary culture does not have these directly democratic priorities, it will be crucial to find other ways of opening spaces in which to plant the seeds of a different culture. This logic resembles to a certain degree Erik Olin Wright's concept of interstitial transformation<sup>53</sup>. Good examples for such spaces are the autonomous zones, functioning in different parts of the world (like social centers, community gardens, worker cooperatives, democratic educational projects, housing co-ops etc.), as well as ones on a larger scale, like the Zapatistas and the Kurdish democratic communities. Such spaces are already striving to satisfy real human needs by inserting autonomy and solidarity in the everyday life of their participants.

## **The contemporary heteronomous culture**

Everything in the contemporary organization of our society obstructs such principles, inculcating instead submission and obedience towards authority, heteronomous acceptance of pre-determined truths etc. This is the situation in the modern family, state

---

53 Erik Olin Wright, "Envisioning Real Utopias" (Verso, 2010); pp. 321-336.



apparatus, capitalist workplace, compulsory education, etc.

For example, we derive our education in classrooms, in which our attention is focused on the figure of the teacher, which is positioned “above” the student, and where horizontal interaction between students during class triggers penalties and punishments. From an early age our imagination is framed, and our creativity dulled, by established norms, which sustain the existing hierarchical culture. We are being taught to “think” in a “correct” way, so we can “win” the school competition, by giving the “right” answers to the teacher’s questions. Simultaneously a whole set of punishments and sanctions for students and teachers that dare to drift away from the norm are imposed.

Another negative aspect, which grows out of this type of relationships, is that the great majority today remain strongly entrapped in the doctrine of economism, by thinking only of how to get a job, instead of how to live in a meaningful manner. By thinking in this narrow careerist paradigm, people begin to view all their life as a constant interaction between bosses and employees, without seeing any alternative. In such a mindset there is no (or very limited) space for principles like direct participation, cooperation and solidarity. In reality, this paradigm now dominates the imagination of the majority of working people all around the world, with tiny exceptions.

But if this is our present situation, what will happen to our principles and our desire to spread them? One possible approach to overcome this oppressive paradigm and achieve success in the desired direction, is to enable the grassroots movements in which we participate generate cooperative and direct-democratic power. And this can happen mainly through the emergence of people that deeply value these principles. But what will lead to such a change in the anthropological type, so as to move ourselves beyond the pas-

sive consumer and develop a protagonist role in the public sphere?

## **Towards a new transformative strategy**

Surely there is no easy answer to this question. One possible approach is the transformation which takes place in small scale and local level initiatives, simultaneously in coordination with other similar processes taking place elsewhere. Castoriadis suggests that such collectivities will be the fertile soil on which direct democracy can flourish, as the ancient city or the nineteenth-century democratic communities of free farmers in the United States were in their times, and for similar reasons.<sup>54</sup>

This strategy rests on the idea, advocated by the early anthropologist Etienne de La Boetie<sup>55</sup> [4], that what is truly native to people is only their primitive, untrained individuality, the rest they tend to take for granted according to what they are accustomed to. Thus, the creation of different conditions, favorable of a different culture, is of crucial importance.

In order for this transformation to happen, we will have to begin practicing direct democracy from today, and to such a degree, with such success, that common people will be able to recognize it by its basic characteristics. Reaching larger scales depends on collaboration between various initiatives and projects such as urban deliberative grassroots institutions, workers and consumers cooperatives, time banks, social or local currencies, democratic educational projects, housing co-ops etc., that affect different spheres of every-

---

54 The Castoriadis Reader p56

55 James S. Slotkin, "Readings in Early Anthropology" (Routledge, 2011); p. 79.

day life, filling them with autonomy and solidarity. Their success depends on the collaboration between these small scale projects, as well as on their inner organization – the maintenance of democratic procedures through various mechanisms like rotation of positions, distribution of profits amongst members according to effort and sacrifice, etc. In this way people will have the possibility to experience different educating, working, consuming, communicating, banking – in other words, living – making it easier for them to imagine a different way of life and become accustomed to its foundational principles and commitments.

Thus, amongst the main goals of the various movements for direct democracy should be the constant connection of self-managed projects across various social, ecological, economic and other spheres. By saying this we acknowledge that people are not only economic beings, but social, sexual, and above all political ones, as well.

In this way, we could seek the establishment of regional networks for sustainable long term development of social interactions, based on democratic cooperation, solidarity and equality. The culmination of this inclusiveness should be sought in the establishment of global confederated networks for the satisfaction of a greater number of human needs through autonomous and democratic means, challenging the very existence of statist and capitalist managers and intermediaries, and thereby creating conditions for the emergence of new culture.

This project is unfeasible if we consider it only in terms of future generations, neglecting our lives today. I say this because it is an enormous thing to ask people to give up the “here-and-now” in the name of an uncertain future. However, we shouldn't abandon the generational prism completely, since many struggles of the past have sown the seeds of ways of life which are beginning to flourish today. The amalgamation of the two can be accomplished through

a strategy for the development of a new culture, which would transform in practice our current everyday life, while in addition creating exceptions (“cracks”) for alternatives modes of direct participation, projecting into the future.

## **Towards a new anthropological type**

From the above we can suggest that the practice of direct democracy encourages the creation of a different anthropological type – in the shell of the dominant system – striving at independence from the state and the corporate sector. This process encourages self-empowerment of the involved individuals and communities, and simultaneously offers practical examples of how solidarity and collaboration can become the basic significant frame of everyday life.

In other words, direct democracy can serve as a tool for dealing with the present cultural challenges by teaching us how to create spaces which could help us rethink our values, as they are today, and to overcome our widespread and disengaged consumerism. Such steps could open the possibility for the emergence of a new anthropological type that can become protagonists – deeply impassioned for public affairs and with solidarity towards the rest of their fellow humans and nature, and moving principles like solidarity and direct participation out of the margins, and towards the center of our collective and individual lives. Or as Castoriadis puts it : The passion for democracy and for freedom, for public affairs, will take the place of distraction, cynicism, conformism, and the consumer race.<sup>56</sup>

These new principles and values, stemming from the grassroots, can replace today's dominant consumerism and hierarchy. But political manifestos and ready blueprints for the future are not sufficient preconditions for this to happen. These new ideals have to begin penetrating every sphere of our life. What's needed is a range of passionate practice, as described here. These localized and small-scale initiatives, especially when they collaborate, can help make us all more independent from the contemporary dominant structures, and allow us to begin laying the foundations of an alternative, post-capitalist and non-statist future.



# Castoriadis and Bookchin: Political Similarities

The primary threat to nature and people today comes from centralizing and monopolizing power and control.<sup>57</sup>  
— Vandana Shiva

Nowadays constantly we are being told “from above” that we don’t have a choice but to conform to the status quo. The dominant power institutions are doing everything they can to convince us that the solution to our social and environmental problems is going to be found in the very same policies that have created them in the first place. The T.I.N.A. [There is No Alternative] narrative continues to dominate the mainstream discourse; and the widespread consumerist culture, in combination with the long-lasting representative crisis, is infecting people’s imaginary with cynicism, general conformism and apathy.

But germs of other ways of thinking and living are trying to break their way through the passivity of present day logic. New significations that are going beyond the contemporary bureaucratic capitalist discourse, offering new sets of reasons and values, which to navigate societal life away from the destructiveness of constant economic growth and cynical apathy.

---

57 Stephen Spencer: *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity, and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2014), p204

With popular dissatisfaction of the present order of things on the rise we can distinguish two significations that offer a radical break with the present normality:

On the one hand, there is growing interest in political participation and direct democracy. Nowadays it is becoming almost unthinkable to think of popular unrest outside of the general frame of democracy: first, the demands almost always revolve around more citizen involvement in one form or another; second, the way of organizing popular struggle for a long time has [surpassed] the centralism of the traditional political organizations, insisting instead on self-organization and collaboration.

On the other hand, ecology is emerging as major concern and as an answer to the contemporary growth-based politico-economic model that is responsible for the creation of a tangible environmental crisis and rapidly unfolding climate change. It is being expressed in the form of popular struggles against capitalist extractivist projects, harmful to the environment, human health, as well as to local autonomy. It also takes the form of resistance to consumerist culture, both of which boost innovative new theories like de-growth.

Amongst the diverse spectrum of thinkers that nowadays are developing these new significations we can distinguish Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin as two of the most influential. Both emerged from the Left and through their thought, as well as activist practices, managed to overpass ideological dogmas and to develop their own political projects, incorporating and advancing further direct democracy and ecology. It's not surprising that they collaborated in the journal *Society & Nature*, and later in its successor *Democracy & Nature*, until 1996, when a bitter conflict between the two emerged<sup>58</sup>.

---

58 [http://www.democracynature.org/vol3/biehl\\_bookchin.htm](http://www.democracynature.org/vol3/biehl_bookchin.htm)



Nowadays their legacy is being carried on by social movements and struggles that place these two significations at the heart of their political activities. Castoriadis's thought was revitalized with the popular uprisings across Europe of the last years and especially with the so called "Movement of the Squares" (also known as The Indignados), that was driven not by "pure" ideologies but by passion for political action and critical thinking, while Bookchin's project is being partially implemented in practice by the kurdish liberation movement in the heart of the Middle East (most notably in Rojava), influencing it to such a degree that it completely abandoned its marxist-leninist orientation.

It must be noted that the target of the present text is not the development of a deep comparative analysis between the works of both of them, but instead an effort at underlining two elements of their thought that are especially actual for our current context and are charged with huge potential for change.

## **Direct Democracy**

Both Castoriadis and Bookchin saw great liberatory potential in direct democracy and placed it at the heart of their political projects. They devoted a great part of their writings to that matter, developing this notion beyond the frames set by traditional ideologies. In stark difference with authoritarian views, mistrusting society and thus calling for its subjection to hierarchical, extra-social mechanisms, on the one hand, and on the other, with such views that reject every form of laws and institutions, the two thinkers proposed the establishment of structures and institutions that will allow direct public interaction, while maintaining social cohesion through horizontal flows of power.

According to Castoriadis, the majority of human societies were established on the basis of heteronomy, which he describes as a sit-

uation in which the society's rules are being set by some extra-social source (such as the party, god, historic necessity, etc.). The institutions of the heteronomous societies are conceived as given/self-evident and thus, unquestionable, i.e. incompatible with popular interaction. For him the organizational structure of the modern western world, while usually characterized as "democracy", is actually a liberal oligarchy, with some liberties for the people, but the general management of social life is situated in the hands of tiny elites.<sup>59</sup>

For Castoriadis democracy is an essential element of the social and individual autonomy (the people to set their own rules and institutions), which is the opposite of heteronomy. What he called the project of autonomy entailed direct-democratic self-instituting by the society, consisting of conscious citizens, who realize that they draw their own destiny and not some extra-social force, either natural or metaphysical.<sup>60</sup> I.e. in the hands of society lies the highest power that is: to give itself the laws and institutions under which it lives.

Castoriadis derives his understanding of democracy from the classical meaning of the term, originating from Ancient Athens (demos/people and kratos/power). Thus, on the basis of this he denotes today's liberal regimes as non-democratic, since they are based on the election of representatives and not on direct citizen participation. According to him democracy can be only direct, thus incom-

---

<sup>59</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Problem of Democracy Today* (in *Democracy & Nature*, The International Journal of Politics and Ecology vol.3 issue 2, 1997)

<sup>60</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *A Society Adrift* (unauthorized translation, 2010)

patible with bureaucracy, expertism, economic inequality and other features of our modern political system.<sup>61</sup>

On a more concrete level he suggested the establishment of territorial units with populations of up to 100,000 people, which [were] to self-manage themselves through general assemblies. For coordination between different such units he proposed the establishment of councils and committees to which the local decision-making bodies [would] send revocable short-term delegates.<sup>62</sup> Thus power remains in the hands of the demos, while allowing non-statist coordination on a larger scale.

For Bookchin too, the characterization of the today's system as a democracy was a mistake, an oxymoron. He reminds us that two centuries ago the term democracy was depicted by rulers as "mob rule", a prelude to chaos, while nowadays [it] is being used to mask one representative regime, which in its essence is republican oligarchy since a tiny clique of a chosen few rules over the powerless many.<sup>63</sup>

Bookchin, like Castoriadis, based his understanding of democracy on the experience of the ancient Athenian *politia*. That is one of

---

61 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Problem of Democracy Today* (in *Democracy*)

62 Cornelius Castoriadis: *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group* (unauthorized translation, 2013), pp42-43

63 [https://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/dn/vol3/bookchin\\_communalism.htm](https://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/dn/vol3/bookchin_communalism.htm)

the reasons he placed so much attention on the role of the city.<sup>64</sup> He describes how with the rise of what he called statecraft, the active citizens, deeply and morally committed to their cities, were replaced by passive consumers subjected to parliamentary rule, whose free time is spent shopping in retail stores and mega malls.

After many years of involvement in different political movements, Bookchin developed his own political project, called Communalism. Based on direct democracy, it revolves extensively around the question of power, rejecting escapist and lifestyle practices. Communalism focuses instead on a center of power that could potentially be subjected to the will of the people – the municipal council – through which to create and coordinate local assemblies. He emphasized the antagonistic character towards the state apparatus that these institutions have and the possibility of them becoming the exclusive sources of power in their villages, towns and cities. The democratized municipalities, Bookchin suggested, would confederate with each other by sending revocable delegates to popular assemblies and confederal councils, thus challenging the need of centralized statist power. This concrete model Bookchin called libertarian municipalism<sup>65</sup>, which has influenced to a big degree Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish struggle for social liberation.

A distinguishing feature of Bookchin's vision of direct democracy in his communalism was the element of majority voting, which he considered as the only equitable way for a large number of people to make decisions.<sup>66</sup> According to him consensus, in which a single

---

64 <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/lewis-herber-murray-bookchin-ecology-and-revolutionary-thought>

65 [https://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/dn/vol3/bookchin\\_communalism](https://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/dn/vol3/bookchin_communalism)

66 Murray Bookchin: *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and*

person can veto every decision, presents a danger for society to be dismantled. However, according to him, all members of society possess knowledge and memory, and thus the social collectivity does not have an interest in depriving “minorities” of their rights. For him the views of a minority are a potential source of new insights and nascent truths, which are great sources of creativity and progress for society as a whole.

## **Ecology**

Ecology played major role in the thought of the two big philosophers. Both of them however viewed it in stark contrast from most of the environmentalists of their time (and of today as well). Unlike the widespread understanding of nature as a commodity, as something separated from society, Castoriadis and Bookchin viewed it in direct link with social life, relationships and values, thus incorporating it in their political projects.

Castoriadis argues that ecology is, in its essence, a political matter. It is about political choices for setting certain limits and goals in the relationship between humanity and nature.<sup>67</sup> It has nothing to do with science, since the latter is about exploring possibilities and giving answers to specific questions and not about self-limitation. However, Castoriadis urges mobilizing science’s resources for exploring nature and our impact on it, but he remains firm that the choice that will be made in the end will be in its essence a political one.

---

*the Promise of Direct Democracy* (London: Verso, 2015), pp17-38

67 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance* (unauthorized translation, 2003), pp109-123

Therefore, the solutions that should be given to every ecological crisis should be political. Castoriadis remains critical of the green parties and the parliamentary system in general, since through the electoral processes it strives at “liberating” the people from politics, [leaving] it instead solely in the hands of professional “representatives”. As a result of this the people are left to view nature in a de-politicized manner, only as a commodity, because of which many contemporary ecological movements deal almost exclusively with questions about the environment, unconcerned with social and political matters.

Following this line of thought it comes as no surprise that Castoriadis remains critical towards the rare occasions when big green movements and parties come up with proposals of a political nature for resolving the environmental crisis.<sup>68</sup> This is so, because most of the time, although their political proposals revolve around more popular participation – for example green parties that have come up with proposals for sortition and rotation of their M.P.’s, more referendums, etc. – they are still embedded in the contemporary parliamentary regime. Being an advocate of direct democracy, Castoriadis believes that single elements of it, being embedded in the representative system, will lose their meaning.

Similarly, Bookchin also links the ecological sphere with the social one and politics in general. For him nearly all of the present ecological problems result from problems deeply rooted in the social order – because of which he spoke about social ecology.<sup>69</sup> Ecological crises couldn’t be either understood nor much less resolved if not

---

68 Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Castoradis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp239-252

69 [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bookchin/socecol.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/socecol.html)

linked to society, since economic, cultural, gender and other conflicts in it were the source of serious ecological dislocations.

Bookchin, like Castoriadis, strongly disagreed with environmentalists who looked to disconnect ecology from politics and society, identifying it instead with preservation of wildlife, wilderness or malthusian deep ecology, etc.<sup>70</sup> He insisted on the impact on nature that our capitalist hierarchical society is causing (with its large scale, profit-driven, extractivist projects), thus making it clear that unless we resolve our social problems we cannot save the planet.

For Murray Bookchin the hierarchical mentality and economic inequality that have permeated society today are the main sources of the very idea that man should dominate nature. Thus the ecological struggle cannot hope for any success unless it integrates itself into a holistic political project that challenges the very source of the present environmental and social crisis, that is, to challenge hierarchy and inequality.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the differences and disagreements between them, Castoriadis and Bookchin shared a lot in common – especially the way they viewed direct democracy and ecology. Their contributions in these fields provided very fertile soil for further theoretical and practical advance. It is not by chance that in a period in which the questions of democracy and ecology are attracting growing attention, we listen ever more often about the two of them.

---

<sup>70</sup> <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-crisis-in-the-ecology-movement>

<sup>71</sup> [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bookchin/socecol.htm](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/socecol.htm)

These concepts are proving to be of great interest to an increasing number of people in an age of continuous deprivation of rights, fierce substitution of the citizen by the consumer, growing economic inequalities and devastation of the natural world. Direct democracy and ecology contain the germs of another possible world. They seem as two of the best significations that the grassroots have managed to create and articulate as a potential substitute for the rotting ones of hierarchy and commodification which dominate and destroy our world today.





# Bibliography

A “Socialisme ou Barbarie” Anthology: Autonomy, Critique and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism. unauthorized translation, 2017. (Available online on <http://www.notbored.org/SouBA.pdf>)

Adams, Suzi. Cornelius Castoriadis: Key Concepts. Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Arendt, Hannah. The Origins of Totalitarianism. San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1979.

Cardan, Paul (Castoriadis). History and Revolution: a revolutionary critique of historical materialism. Solidarity Pamphlet No38, 1971.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Window on the Chaos, Including “How I Didn’t Become a Musician” (Beta Version). unauthorized translation, 2015. (Available online on <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf>)

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the “MAUSS” Group. unauthorized translation, 2013. (Available online on <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>)

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Postscript on Insignificance. unauthorized translation, 2017. (Available online on <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>)

Castoriadis, Cornelius. A Society Adrift. unauthorized translation, 2010. (Available online on <http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>)

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Figures of the Thinkable (including “Passion

and Knowledge"). unauthorized translation, 2005. (Available online on <http://www.notbored.org/FTP.K.pdf>)

Castoriadis, Cornelius. The Rising Tide of Insignificancy: The Big Sleep. unauthorized translation, 2003. (Available online on <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf>)

Castoriadis, Cornelius. History as Creation. Solidarity Pamphlet No.54, 1978.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Political and Social Writings Volume 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Political and Social Writings Volume 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Political and Social Writings Volume 3. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. The Imaginary Institution of Society. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society. Fordsburg: Zabalaza Books, 2007.

Curtis, David Ames(Editor). The Castoriadis Reader. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

Eriksen, Erik Oddvar & Weigard, Jarle: Understanding Habermas: Communicative Action and Deliberative Democracy. Oslo: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Karalis, Vrasridis(Editor). Cornelius Castoriadis and Radical Democracy. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Klooger, Jeff. *Psyche, Society, Autonomy*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

Latouche, Serge. *Farewell to Growth*. Oxford: Polity, 2009.

Mouffe, Chantal(Editor). *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. London: Verso, 1992.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998.

Roussopoulos, Dimitrios. *Political Ecology: Beyond Environmentalism*. Porsgrunn: New Compass Press, 2015.



# Biographies

**Yavor Tarinski** is independent researcher and militant in social movements. He is currently a member of the editorial board of the Greek libertarian journal [aftoleksi.gr](http://aftoleksi.gr), part of the administrative board of the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology, as well as bibliographer at Agora International. Author of the book “Direct Democracy: Context, Society, Individuality” (Durdy Books, 2019)

**Dr. Mark Mason** was trained as a biological anthropologist educated at the University of California, Berkeley, and was engaged in the Occupy and bioregional green and peace social movements. He offers analyses of United States’ domestic and foreign policies for the international news media.

Publisher: aftoleksi

Year: 2020

Author: Yavor Tarinski

Cover and design: George Chelebiev

Edit and Preface: Mark Mason

# αυτο λεξεί

