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## The Natural Exigency of Freedom

Towards

Cornelius Castoriadis,

*Postscript on Insignificance: Dialogues with Cornelius Castoriadis*,

translated by Gabriel Rockhill and John V. Garner,

London: Continuum, 2011.

In a wistful panegyric to Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997), published on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1997, *Le Monde* recalled his solemn political resolve: “Whatever happens, I will remain first and above all a revolutionary.” (Anon. 2004) Castoriadis, one of the most important thinkers and prolific writers on the French intellectual scene, must have been well aware of the irony surrounding his adamant self-identification. A philosopher of an astonishing scope and almost encyclopedic breadth of knowledge, he is widely remembered today as the “anti-Marxist revolutionary” who co-founded the journal and political group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (in 1948) and championed his “politics of autonomy” against both Soviet Marxism and critical Trotskyism. Yet, even a cursory glance at Castoriadis’ oeuvre reveals an astounding array of intellectual interests, ranging from classical philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis to contemporary theoretical developments in economics, biology and mathematics. It is with this in mind that we can truly appreciate the “event” of the publication of *Postscript on Insignificance*, an English translation of a collection of Castoriadis’ dialogues with leading figures in these

various disciplines. Originally radio broadcasts, these interchanges include an interview of Castoriadis by Daniel Mermet (broadcasted in 1996), as well as discussions with Octavio Paz (poet), Jean-Luc Donnet (psychoanalyst), Alain Connes (mathematician), Francisco Varela (biologist) and Robert Legros (philosopher). These dialogues were all broadcasted in the period from March 1990 to July 1996 on “Rejoinders” (*France Culture*). A testimony to Castoriadis’ philosophical curiosity, *Postscript to Insignificance* introduces the English reader not only to his remarkable intellectual span, but also to the myriad possible ways in which these sundry ruminations can puzzle together into Castoriadis’ grand philosophical scheme: the project of autonomy.

A paradigm case of a systematic philosopher, Castoriadis placed ontology at the very center of his theoretical edifice. As he vividly put it in his late essay *Done and Be Done* (1989; cf. Castoriadis 1997, 361), his concern in ontology was not a consequence of his passion to “save the revolution,” but of his willingness to save his

coherency. The main pillar of this ontological castle keep was Castoriadis' understanding of Being as "creation."<sup>1</sup> In order to think the emergence of the "radically new," he eschewed both "physicalist" ontologies (reducing society and history to nature) and what he called "logicism" (accounting for social and historical forms as combinations of a finite number of discrete elements).<sup>2</sup> Truly grasping the emergence of the "new," Castoriadis opined, necessitated understanding creation as undetermined, uncaused and unmotivated. Creation, to use his famous *bon mot*, is *ex nihilo*; it is neither deducible nor producible from conditions of the anterior system. (Castoriadis 1997, 321) This wholesome rejection of the age-old philosophical maxim "*ex nihilo nihil*" was, for Castoriadis, tantamount to rejecting the exclusivity of what he idiosyncratically called "ensemblistic-identitary (ensidic) logic," the logic of set-theory. While "ensidic" logic corresponds to an organizable and determinate stratum of Being, this stratum, Castoriadis was obstinate, does not exhaust Being. The ontological remainder, charmingly dubbed "the magmatic" in his mathematical writings, is both that which transcends "ensidic" logic and which renders the creation of the "radically new" possible. "Magmas" are indeterminate and irreducible to the formalization of set-theory, an inchoate stratum of Being that prevents the deterministic closure of the physical world.<sup>3</sup>

But, Castoriadis' chief philosophical import was his discussion of the mode this universal creation takes in human Being: "the radical imagination." The imaginary, not merely a reproductive or a combinatory faculty, is a wellspring of incessant creation of figures and images, an "undetermined" production of social-historical and psychic forms. (Rockhill 2011, xiii) Man, endowed with

this creative capacity of the psyche, can be understood as a "universal creator," a manufacturer of imaginary conceptual and normative systems, of values, religions and identities. For Castoriadis however, this radical creation was always social in character; the unremitting production of historical forms could not be separated from the primordial socialization of the psyche. (*ibid.*, xiv) The radical imaginary was, at bottom, a social imaginary. Society, Castoriadis wrote in his memorable *The Social Imaginary and the Institution*, "cannot be thought within any of the traditional schemata of coexistence... what is given in and through history is not the determined sequence of the determinate but the emergence of radical alterity, immanent creation, non-trivial novelty." (Castoriadis 1997, 214) This creative overflowing of the social is nothing but society's own "self-creation," the institution of the historical *ex nihilo*. Social-historical forms are not "determined" by natural and historical conditions, they are an expression of the boundless creativity of the "anonymous collective." (Rockhill 2011, xv) *Pace Marx*, there simply are no laws of history. Yet, this groundlessness of the *nomos* introduces a familiar anxiety in the heart of the political. With an absence of external justification of social institutions, societies are tempted to cover over this abyss of freedom. They attribute the creation of social norms to diverse external forces - gods, ancestors, nature etc. The distinct Sartrean flavor of this assertion is paired with a sweeping generalization of Castoriadis': almost every society that has existed has been "heteronomous" in this sense, failing to live up to the truth of society's self-creation.<sup>4</sup> It was only in the Greco-Western tradition that we have witnessed the establishment of the project of political autonomy. Solely within the confines of this tradition does *politics proper* appear, the taking of responsibility for the creation

of social and normative institutions. Political autonomy is not only the cornerstone of the democratic idea; it is a form of ethical self-consciousness.

It is precisely the compromise of this self-consciousness that motivates Castoriadis' exchanges with Daniel Mermet and Octavio Paz in *Postscript on Insignificance*. Broadcasted in the aftermath of Castoriadis' publication of *The Rising Tide of Insignificance* (1996), they are centered around his sweeping claim that modern Western societies are infested with a distinctly new form of heteronomy:

What characterizes the contemporary world is of course crises, contradictions, oppositions, fractures, etc., but what strikes me above all is precisely insignificance. (Castoriadis 2011, 5)

This omnipresent "insignificance" is nothing but the dramatic failure of citizens to challenge the dominant imaginary significations of contemporary liberal capitalism. What was particularly worrying to the discussants was the stifling of the creative capacity of the social sphere, giving rise to an unprecedented form of liberal conformism. The modern "complaisant nihilism," as Octavio Paz labels it, (ibid., 26) is conspicuous in the political passivity and disenchantment following the dissolution of the grand political ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the waning of the liberalist idea of material and spiritual progress. In Castoriadis' system, this political conformity is a consequence of the clash of two modern political projects: the project of autonomy and the project of rational mastery of nature. (ibid., 31) But, it is precisely the incompatibility of the two

that generates the precariousness of contemporary politics. The imposition of a single meta-value ("utility") and a single insurmountable pole of social imagination ("unlimited consumption") reduces all pluralities to an underlying homogenous base and hinders the process of self-determination so essential to politics. What is vital in order to jolt the contemporary citizen out of this heteronomic slumber, Castoriadis and Paz agree, is a novel type of social-historical creation, an emergence of a "radically new" political frontier. (ibid., 37) Particularly interesting in the context of this quest for autonomy is Paz's proposal for restoration of the concept of the human person in light of contemporary developments in evolutionary theory. (ibid., 38)

Castoriadis' conversation with the French psychoanalyst Jean-Luc Donnet reveals to the reader the systematic influences of Freudianism on the development of the concept of the "radical imaginary." In an iconoclastic interpretation of the psychoanalytic "cure," Castoriadis locates the primary role of the analytic encounter precisely in the liberation of the psychic imagination. (ibid., 47) The cure, always emerging *ex nihilo*, is a catalyst in the production of an autonomous subject, permitting the "ego" to subtract itself from the authority of the rigidified Super-ego. Autonomy, as Donnet hauntingly avers echoing Freud, is the "capacity to entirely de-sexualize the figure of destiny." (ibid., 52) The quest for novel social-historical significations must live up to the ultimate castration: the absence of pre-given meanings and norms. Yet, this absence in itself may be problematic for the universalist model propounded by Castoriadis. In a stimulating interchange with the Belgian philosopher Robert Legros, Castoriadis attempts to respond to what Legros

labels “the Romanticist objection” to the project of autonomy. (ibid., 96-97) Namely, if man is “nothing” by nature - if his social-historical existence is naturally undetermined - then does not the project of breaking the “social closure” (the heteronomic cage of social laws) simply precipitate a dehumanization, a pointless search for an abstract subject extirpated from social particularities? Castoriadis is at his brilliant best when maneuvering among these conceptual poles. Lambasting the Romanticist lack of understanding of the critical attitude (the act of radical questioning of the origins of value), he accepts the social “embeddedness” of the act of questioning, but refuses to render all conceptual traditions equal in value. (ibid., 98) In a distinctly Kantian move, he affirms the “tradition” of autonomy as an exigency to proliferate the questions of self-determination and freedom as (socially instilled) civilizational benefits. Man lives only by creating meaning and it is the understanding of this fact that is the sign of our intellectual maturity.

But, is it only man that has this incredible capacity to create meaning? Or can we envision machines that will eventually be our peers in the production of historical value? And, in that sense, what is this “radical imagination” if not a natural capacity of our psychic constitution? In a fascinating pair of dialogues with French mathematician Alain Connes and Chilean biologist Francisco Varela, Castoriadis castigates attempts by Artificial Intelligence enthusiasts to reduce human imagination to a system of cognitive mechanisms whose formalization we can, in a more or less successful manner, envision. And while in Connes, a vehement defender of a Platonist ontology of mathematics, Castoriadis finds a kindred mind, it is the intellectual encounter with Varela that most seriously

shakes Castoriadis’ system. Varela - a creator of the theory of biological autonomy that Castoriadis fervently endorses - presents what was (at that time) a radically new approach to the problematic of artificial life. Attempting to steer a middle way between classic biological reductionism and pure, undetermined “creation,” Varela lends from non-linear mathematics the notion of “emergence” - conceptualizing the creation of the “new” as a production of global phenomena of physical systems irreducible to their constituent elements. (ibid., 68) However, opposing Castoriadis’ insistence on the strict impossibility of “simulating” intelligence, Varela is quick to point out that the resources of the theory of non-linear dynamics allow an experimenter to formalize the conditions of the possibility of emergence. (ibid.) In essence, “artificial autonomy” can be brought forward in the laboratory, since one has the necessary resources to describe and set up the essential conditions for emergence. And, while Castoriadis’ objections concerning the specific corporeal and social existence of human beings do hold sway, it is precisely the embodied and socially embedded character of cognition that is best captured by Varela’s anti-representationalist turn.

Perhaps the most venerable facet of *Postscript on Insignificance* is the manner in which Castoriadis’ intellectual encounters themselves open up broad vistas for a critical engagement with his system. In that sense, it is one of Octavio Paz’s minute quips that best captures this researcher’s qualms about Castoriadis’ system. If creation is not combination, what is it then? (ibid., 38) The appeal to an undetermined “radical” creation resembles what Dan Dennett calls a “skyhook” - a magical, miraculous intervention that renders imagination possible.

(Dennett 1996, 74) But, even if one accepts this radical indeterminacy - the creative burst of the magmatic, if you will - it is not at all clear in what sense this would open up theoretical space for the institution of the creative imagination. As has been known since Hume, a simple rupture in the causal chain does not give us freedom and self-determination, but merely randomness. (cf. Churchland 2002, 232-233) And, while Castoriadis lambasts the positivists' misrecognition of the creative as aleatory, it is he that has to explain what precisely makes this mere indeterminacy a "creation." In an absence of a substantial explanation, Castoriadis' idiosyncratic employment of the notion has no ontological bearing and has to be clearly differentiated from the process of "subjective creation" essential to autonomy. However, Castoriadis' system can best be refurbished with another, ontologically distinct, interpretation of imagination. And, it is precisely this interpretation that fuels Castoriadis' most fertile engagements with the question of autonomy. There are two ways to make the distinction between the causal and the normative. The first would be to render this distinction itself a causal distinction. But, as we just saw, this leads us nowhere. On, the other hand, if - to borrow a trope overly familiar to German Idealism scholars - this distinction is itself made into a normative distinction, then the emergence of social creativity does not require causal indeterminacy. Normativity (and consequently self-determination) is instituted simply in the act of taking something "as" normative. Castoriadis is very close to such an approach with his insistence on the historical "emergence" of autonomy in Greco-Western culture, but the more general - and one must say "less ethnocentric" - method of naturalization would give the notion of autonomy a universal footing that is sometimes sorely missing in his account. What would be naturalized in this

project would not be the particular values and products of the norm-instituting creativity, but simply the formal attitudes of taking something as value-ridden and normative. Normativity will be created *ex nihilo* in a normative sense, but will be firmly grounded in the physical world.<sup>5</sup>

This project of naturalization, however, gives rise to important questions concerning the natural place of Castoriadis' "radical imagination." Namely, to what extent does *only* man live by creating meaning? In their passionate dialogue, Francisco Varela exposed only the crux of his ideas, but a decade and a half later, we have both the further development of those ideas and the benefit of hindsight in our favor. What in the mid-90s was a revolutionary research program in the cognitive sciences and the study of artificial life is today a well-established alternative to traditional (computer-inspired) representationalist views of the mind and cognition. And, based on what we now know<sup>6</sup> it would be, without a doubt, rackingly hasty to propound the exclusivity of human sense-making or to *a priori* reject the possibility of simulating "creative" intelligence. Castoriadis was adamant that only humans have the ability to "break the closure" of *autopoiesis*, (Castoriadis 2011, 60) but one of the main tenets of Varela's "dynamical systems theory" is precisely the idea that autopoietic closure does not necessarily contradict dynamic openness. Cognition is nothing but the structural, dynamical coupling of organism and environment, (cf. Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1992) and it is exactly the necessity of grappling with a particular environmental problem that jolts the imagination into a "creative" solution. All this, however, does not enervate the vitality of Castoriadis' project of autonomy. Fifteen years later, the question why our political coping with

the social problems of contemporary Western societies has not “jolted” our imagination into a creative, radical solution has grown into the defining riddle of our age. And, although on dark days this question does resemble an unsolvable enigma, it is worth keeping in mind the *natural* “exigency of freedom” that fuels this very act of questioning.

*Postscript on Insignificance* is a valuable addition to the steadily-growing library of English translations of one of the most versatile thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; but more importantly, it is a testament to the astonishing intellectual curiosity of the thinker, Cornelius Castoriadis, the revolutionary.

#### Notes:

1. For a detailed overview of Castoriadis’ system see John Garner’s entry in the *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. (Garner 2010).
2. Gabriel Rockhill’s comprehensive “editor’s introduction” to *Postscript on Insignificance* does a wonderful job of elucidating these ideas of Castoriadis’.
3. Cf. “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy,” in Castoriadis 1997, 290-318.
4. Cf. “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy” in Castoriadis 1997.
5. For this kind of an approach, see the *inferentialism* developed by Robert Brandom in *Making it Explicit*. (Brandom 1994)
6. An engaging overview of these developments can be found in Mark Rowlands’ “The New Science of the Mind.” (Rowlands 2010)

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