



Crisis, critique and alternatives: Revolutionary politics as the lost substance of the left?

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review of

Memos, C. (2014) *Castoriadis and critical theory: Crisis, critique and radical alternatives*. Palgrave Macmillan. (HB, pp 183, \$105, ISBN: 978-1-137-03445-8).

As the radical left had won the 2015 elections in Greece, the hopes of many Europeans were ignited. Commentators discussed the chances of the left expanding its influence on the political agenda and the potential it could have in counter-weighting the allegedly unavoidable austerity programs. Few months elapsed and Syriza found it difficult to live up to its promise, as new austerity measures were approved in parliament under the protests of people on streets. The turnarounds and dead ends in the Greek case call for a reflection on why it has been so difficult for political alternatives to thrive in contemporary society.

In this respect, Memos' book, *Castoriadis and critical theory: Crisis, critique and radical alternatives*, proves to be important and timely. It provides significant lessons as to why it has been so difficult to break the cycle of ever-recurring capitalist crises and how the left has stagnated intellectually for a long time. The book addresses these issues by critically examining the intellectual oeuvre of Cornelius Castoriadis, a philosopher and social critic who has tackled both Marxism and liberalism with extreme rigor, but whose ideas, Memos argues, scholars have stripped of critical and radical meaning. The book urges then for a 'reradicalization of Castoriadis' thought' [5].

Cornelius Castoriadis was one of the great intellectuals of the post-war period, but his contributions to social and organizational theory have been less explored than those of some of his contemporaries such as Foucault, Derrida and Habermas. His opus magnum, *The imaginary institution of society* (1987), roughly consists of two parts: an elaborate critique of contemporary Marxism; and the development of a social theory based on the idea of the social imaginary. While organizational theory has tentatively engaged with the latter (Wright et al., 2013; Klein Jr., 2013; De Cock, 2013; Shukaitis, 2008; e.g. Hasselbladh and Theodoridis, 1998), the former has been largely absent from recent research, according to Memos. Thus, Memos' book sets out to provide an in-depth discussion of the political thought of Cornelius Castoriadis, its historical context, his relation to contemporary Marxism, Marx's work itself and the implications of Castoriadis' writings for political action. Memos builds his argument based on a rich amount of minutely researched historical context, and an intimate knowledge of Castoriadis' life and writings. Through this detailed engagement, his well-written book provides impulses for both a renewed appreciation of Cornelius Castoriadis' lesser-known writings and the debate about modern Marxism.

The book follows an accessible and rigorous dramaturgy. After a brief introduction, the first chapter provides a detailed account of the early life and biography of Castoriadis. Memos pays special attention to the Greek communist movement, its downfall and its understandings of Marx's theory. By contextualizing Marxism in Greece during Castoriadis' youth, and the limited access to Marx's writings at that time, Castoriadis' arguments are historically grounded. Memos skillfully introduces the reader into those formative experiences of Castoriadis in Greece, the circumstances of his migration to France and the political and intellectual context he faced in post-war France. Such experiences profoundly shaped Castoriadis' intellectual progress and political engagement. One of these influences was Stinas, a leading member of the Greek Communist Party who later formed a Trotskyist group and raised questions that would shape Castoriadis' intellectual interests. Among them, one was pivotal: did Marx's theory include the elements that rendered possible Stalinism and allowed bureaucrats to misuse it? It was therefore by experiencing the 'vulgar-codified and mechanistic Marxism of the Greek Communist movement' [11] that Castoriadis set out to develop his own perspectives on the Russian question and, subsequently, on society.

The second chapter delves deeper into Castoriadis' writings on totalitarianism. It examines Castoriadis' immanent critique of Marxism, his confrontation with Trotsky's interpretations of Marx that led to orthodoxism, his confrontation with Lenin's ideas, his view on the class nature of the USSR and his original analysis of totalitarianism. This is a suitable progression, since Castoriadis' oppressive

experiences in Greece were pivotal for his political thought. It also allows Memos to connect to other literature, especially Hannah Arendt's *The origins of totalitarianism* (1951). For Memos, Castoriadis engages with a concept of totalitarianism which is less elaborate than Arendt's, yet offers a link to Marxism that is absent from Arendt's work. This theme is further developed in the third chapter, which deals with Castoriadis' writings on the Hungarian Uprising of 1956.

In his analysis of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, Castoriadis explored the contradictions of the Soviet regime and the potential for alternatives that emerged from these contradictions. Thus, in chapter three Memos presents us with Castoriadis' accounts of the Hungarian crisis, which, for Castoriadis, 'had been the only total revolution against total bureaucratic capitalism' [48]. At the same time, this episode revealed how deep the crisis of Marxism was, and marked Castoriadis' shift from 'historically specific analysis of economics and political relations' to abstract theory [48]. Memos argues that the distinctiveness of Castoriadis' analysis of the Hungarian Uprising resides in the focus on social contradictions and the self-organizing initiatives of the insurgents. This inspired Castoriadis to advance his conceptualization of revolution. Instead of an apocalyptic event, Castoriadis worked on a concept of revolution as the 'self-organization of the people' [53].

Still in chapter three, Memos explores the debate about the crisis of Marxism. According to Memos, 1898 marked the first crisis of Marxism, when, at the theoretical level, Masaryk contested the philosophical and scientific underpinnings of Marxian theory. Participants in this debate included Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Korsch and, later on, the Frankfurt School of critical theory. All of them raised concerns about the lack of advancements in Marxism, the atrophy of Marxian theory and the close and fossilized ideology that Marxism had become. In this regard, the chapter explores Althusser's attempts to identify the causes of the crisis of Marxism and remedies to it. However, for Castoriadis, Althusser was only 'reproducing the "Stalinist and neo-Stalinist industry of mystification"' [63], since he could not detach himself from the bureaucratic capitalism that cast aside the revolutionary element of Marx's original thought. For Castoriadis, Althusser and European communism have both 'been identified with the dominant methods used in capitalist countries' [63]. The chapter ends by exploring why European communism failed to renew Marxism and became part of the contemporary systemic neoliberal crisis.

The structure of the book loosely follows Castoriadis' intellectual life. Consequently, the fourth chapter deals more closely with Marxian theory in relation to Castoriadis' writings. Here, Memos explains how Castoriadis tried to

overcome the problem of political Marxism by engaging with Marx's original writings. This is probably the central disagreement between Memos and Castoriadis: Memos proposes a different reading of Marx's original work than that of Castoriadis. Essentially, the argument boils down to Castoriadis' shift from a traditional Marxist focus on class struggle and the production process to power relations. While Memos sticks more closely to the tenets of Marxist critique, Castoriadis had parted from this tradition. This departure is important, as it is mirrored in Castoriadis' most-received work *The imaginary institution of society* (1987), developed as a response to the shortcomings he perceived in Marx and Marxism – i.e. technological determinism and doctrinal economics. For Castoriadis class struggle and revolutionary praxis are incompatible with the deterministic core of Marx's theory. Memos argues, however, that while preoccupied with the coherence of Marxian theory, Castoriadis remained oblivious to the material aspects of capitalism and, therefore, made the same mistakes as the orthodox Marxism he so sharply criticized. Memos' criticizes Castoriadis for questioning orthodox Marxism and thereby defends traditional Marxist thought – here, Memos' and Castoriadis' agendas are conflicting. We shall return to this point later.

Chapter five tackles the concepts of crisis and critique in Castoriadis, and presents the revolutionary element of Castoriadis' thought. Memos explores two facets of crisis in Castoriadis writings: 1) crisis as the general trait of modern society, and its respective tendency towards conformism; and 2) crisis as the opportunity for constructing radical alternatives. Concerning the former, Memos offers a reading of Castoriadis' accounts of the movements of 1968. Memos argues that these writings are important since there were many intellectual and political tendencies that dismissed the events of that time as a lifeless historical event without lasting consequences. For Castoriadis, however, the uprisings of 1968 must be valued for their creative and emancipatory potential. According to Castoriadis, the revolt is important as it emerged out of the collective action of ordinary people, who protested against the 'key elements of consumerist functionalities of capitalism, its instrumental rationalization and mechanization of life' [103]. The event represents, accordingly, a 'radical revolutionary affirmation', which reveals the creative potential of society. Yet, by underscoring the creative component of the events of May 1968, Castoriadis hardly painted a rosy picture of revolution. One key lesson he draws from that event is that, when radical alternatives lack a positive element upon which changes can rely, revolutions can be rapidly absorbed by the dominant ideology.

This observation led Castoriadis to conceptualize crisis as general trait of capitalism, a crisis that manifests itself in many aspects of life. As a way of overcoming the crisis of modernity and the ever-deepening decay of society,

Castoriadis suggested that society should not deny its contradictions but explore them instead. Such a project should be pursued, according to Castoriadis, through the continual quest for autonomy in which subjects consciously question and decide which type of society they want to live in. Revolutionary politics are then the main contribution of Castoriadis to renewing socialism. The aim of such revolutionary politics is ‘to trace the “seeds of something new” that comes out of the crisis and assists with its entire emergence and further development’ [125]. Crises are, from this perspective, moments of opportunity and action. However, to bring society back to its self-determining power, says Castoriadis, amounts to a reorganization of values so that economic ones cease to be followed blindly and are therefore dominant. Under the project of autonomy, societies must cope with questions such as:

Why produce and why work? What kind of production and what kind of work? What kinds of relations between people should there be, and what kind of orientation for society as a whole? [126].

Searching for answers to these questions would imply a transformation of labour relations and the creation of new forms of direct democracy. Socialism, a term Castoriadis avoided using, means, in this way, an autonomous society. And autonomy implies continuously questioning everything.

Memos’ book offers a historical grounded and minutely researched assessment of Cornelius Castoriadis’ work in relation to Marxism and Marxian theory. One of the aspects that can make the book challenging is that it assumes a readership familiar with Castoriadis’ conceptual thought (and Marx’s thought for that matter). This problem is tolerable though, especially, if one takes into account that Castoriadis himself is a difficult read. In this view, Memos’ book serves as a helpful guide to Castoriadis’ work and thinking. More frustrating, however, is the book’s title, which seems somewhat misleading. The reference point of Memos is not critical theory and its developments, but Marxism and the unexplored potential of Marxian theory. Critical theory is, in this regard, only addressed by Memos en passant, since he does not position Castoriadis’ thought within well-established traditions of critical theory or current debates (e.g. Stavrakakis, 2007; Tovar-Restrepo, 2012). Despite Marx’s undeniable contributions to critical theory, modern critical theory and critical thinking should not be reduced to Marxian theory. This was, indeed, the position Castoriadis defended and which Memos explores in detail.

The clear focus on Marxism is the book’s main strength. However, by trying to situate Castoriadis within Marxian thought, Memos’ occasionally harsh assessments of Castoriadis writings and readings needs to be moderated. The main disagreement between Memos and Castoriadis seems to be one of two issues, namely: 1) who is reading Marx correctly; and 2) how far can Marxism

deviate from Marx and still remain relevant? To some extent, these two issues are antithetical. The former is about exegesis, the latter about creation. At the political level, however, both are about relevancy. From our reading, a general question is acute: Can there be a correct exegesis of Marx? The central reason why Marx's writings are still important today is their revolutionary and emancipatory potential, which Castoriadis tried to preserve [131]. Maybe the worker's struggle has taken, at least in industrial countries, different forms than during the time of Marx's writings, as contemporary capitalism has become obsessed with financial markets (e.g. Davis, 2009). Yet, the lack of viable alternatives still leads thinkers to draw on Marx in face of capitalism and its excesses, which we have come to face on a regular basis, usually in the form of financial and ecological crises. As Memos reminds us, Marxism has taken great liberty from Marx's writings and the second half of the 20th century has brought little in terms of theoretical advancement. In the Castoriadian vocabulary, the relevance of Marx lies in his potential to open avenues for accessing our society's instituting imaginary.

Memos avoids entering the debate about the concept of the social imaginary, which, for him, 'led Castoriadis' critical theory to become domesticated, bloodless and apolitical' [130]. Castoriadis, however, worked hard on his theory of society as an imaginary institution; this is evident in the title of his main work. Yet, it must be said, that Castoriadis' concept of the social imaginary is important not only as a way of advancing a more dynamic view of society, but also as a warning against the dangers of theoretical orthodoxism. For Castoriadis, those who transformed Marxism into an ideology of domination, which suffocated its revolutionary potential, as had happened in Communist totalitarianism, fell for the instituted imaginary. Reading Marx would be, however, an instituting experience, if it serves as an inspiration for change. However, this does not fully reflect the complexity of Castoriadis' argument. Castoriadis' contributions extend beyond the political component that Memos elegantly brings to light in his book. Such texts drawing on Castoriadis' non-political works have contributed to critical stances towards, for example, psychoanalysis (Urribarri, 2002), epistemology of organization studies (Hasselbladh and Theodoridis, 1998), neo-institutionalism (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000) and institutional logics (Klein Jr., 2013). The point is, if we assume that critical theory should be restricted to Marxian theory, and that critical examinations of theories are not part of our struggle for autonomy, then we would risk becoming entrapped, again, in orthodoxy.

Another issue Memos raises is that Castoriadis downplayed the importance of class struggle in favour of a more abstract concept of power. This, Memos argues, has tempted scholars to lose sight of the material aspects of capitalism and subsequently of the material aspects of neoliberalism. Defending Castoriadis, we would point out that the play between instituted and instituting imaginary is

central to Castoriadis' reading of Marx. Concepts such as class struggle are open to scrutiny and debate because they are social imaginary significations that depend on the material and technical context in which they are used. Contradictions are, therefore, not only inherent in capitalism but in all forms of social action; and this includes theory building. In Castoriadis' understanding of praxis, we can say that normativity, something any theory of political action must deal with, derives from the new eidos that emerges from society's struggles. To put it more plainly, action is creation, an aspect already described by Marx in his accounts of the ability of humans to produce new objects and social forms; a thought he abandoned when enclosing economy into theoretical determinism (Joas, 1993). Hence, interpretations of Marxian theory – or any other theory for that matter – should be judged by their fecundity, that is, by 'the possibilities of succession it opens up' (Bernstein, 1989: 121), rather than by their correctness of conceptual use.

To our minds, the way forward for both Castoriadis' and Marx's writings is not asking for the correct exegesis but for what offers revolutionary potential and relevancy for contemporary society. This seems to be what Castoriadis suggested with his revolutionary politics; that is, unbounded questioning of society. That implies not only Marx-inspired critique but also questioning both detached and engaged investigations of society and organizations. Memos makes, in many ways, an important case for critical scholars interested in Castoriadis. His point is that without understanding Castoriadis' political thought, his theories might be in danger of becoming depoliticized and devoid of their revolutionary potential. Memos has made sure that the political relevance of Cornelius Castoriadis will not be forgotten quite so easily. For this alone, one should applaud him.

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