



A New Generation of Greek Intellectuals in Postwar France

Christophe Premat

► To cite this version:

Christophe Premat. A New Generation of Greek Intellectuals in Postwar France. Julian Bourg. After the deluge, New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France, Lexington Books, pp.103-123, 2004. halshs-00156894

HAL Id: halshs-00156894

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00156894>

Submitted on 25 Jun 2007

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

A New Generation of Greek Intellectuals in Postwar France

Christophe Premat

The Sun is lost ... It's all in pieces. All coherence is gone. ... This is the world's condition now.

John Donne, *The Anatomy of the World*
(1611)

In December 1945, a ship left Athens' harbor Piraeus with several intellectuals on board, including Cornelius Castoriadis, Kostas Axelos, and Kostas Papaioannou. The French Institute of Athens, an organization sponsored by the French Foreign Office and promoting the development of French language and culture abroad, helped those intellectuals to escape the chaotic political situation in Greece. A First Civil War in 1944 and 1945 had divided Greece between Communists who wanted to fight against German, Bulgarian, and Italian invaders and others who were afraid of a Communist regime. Then, from 1946 until 1949, a Second Civil War occurred in Greece, opposing the Communists to Monarchists helped by the British government.

We will here focus on three philosophers—Castoriadis, Axelos, and Papaioannou—who were left-oriented. Those three philosophers were engaged in the Greek Communist Party before or during World War Two and took part in the Greek Resistance. In this article we will examine what they brought to the postwar French intellectual sphere. We will first briefly recall some historical events that will help us understand the circumstances of this emigration. Axelos, Papaioannou, and Castoriadis belonged to the Greek resistance during World War Two. Whereas Castoriadis joined the Greek Communist Youth when he was a teenager and quit it in order to be a Trotskyist activist, Axelos and Papaioannou took part in the Greek Communist Party. Axelos was responsible for the Resistance Youth during World War Two and was known as a

communist theorist. He was sentenced to death by the Germans during that period because of his political engagement. As political theorists, these three philosophers played an important role in French postwar debates: they undertook a criticism of the Marxist tradition and its French epigones after World War Two.

In the second part of this essay, we would like to analyze the close relation between these Greek émigrés and the work of Marx. By shaping a dialogue with Marx, they avoided a prevalent enchantment with Stalinism, strong in French society, especially among intellectuals. Having been engaged at a different time in the Greek Communist Party, they had quit it because of its totalitarian tendencies. They returned to Marx in order to analyze the gap between the Socialist regimes and the intentions of Marx. Instead of rescuing Marx against Marxists, they pointed out the contradictions and the unclear points in Marx's work. They dared to criticize the work of Marx when the Communist Party was a seductive figure in France—the French Communist Party had around 30% of votes immediately following World War Two, due in part to the mythic role of Communists in the French Resistance.

Castoriadis was not a typical intellectual figure in French society. His political and philosophical engagements were at the opposite of the mainstream of French leftist intellectuals who chose to join the Communist Party. Distinctively, he tried to promote the central role of politics: by understanding how past and existing institutions of society worked, he influenced the trend called institutional analysis.¹ In every society, there are social norms that are created by humans in order to live together. These norms are the product of a political decision and are internalized by individuals. The trend of institutional analysis (which exists in ethnology and sociology) defines social norms and the way individuals reflect them unconsciously; with time, these norms can be perceived as taboos. According to Castoriadis, individuals should be aware

that if these norms were instituted by humans, then humans should be able to transform them. He considered this particular kind of reflection as a political action and this is why his writings can be classified as political anthropology.

In the third part of this article, we will determine how Castoriadis had an outsider's perspective, which gave him the capacity to criticize French intellectual fashions (Marxism, Heideggerianism, and Lacanianism) without taking part in them. Furthermore, Castoriadis never gave up wondering why democracy appeared and how it is threatened by the totalitarian project. He was thus led to develop a radical theory of democracy: according to him, democracy is socialism, which means that every individual should take part in all the decisions affecting the social sphere. Ancient Greece offered a rare example of a democratic society where almost every individual citizen can discuss laws or public measures on the *agora*.

In fact, the Greek émigrés explored a philosophical crossroads between modernity and the world of ancient Greece. Greece is indeed a part of our Western world: if this thought is obvious nowadays, we cannot forget that this country was still seen as a part of the Orient in the nineteenth century. One of the pivotal events of twentieth-century Greek history occurred in 1936 when John Metaxas led a coup d'état and between 1941 and 1944, when Greece fought Italy before being invaded by the Germans. Then, from 1944 to 1945, a Civil War wrecked the country. Leftist ideas were severely repressed in this political context, and the Greek émigrés turned to France in search of freedom of speech and a place where they could expose their ideas without risking their lives. Having experienced the war caught between the West (the United Kingdom and the United States) and East (the Soviet Union and even the Greek Communist party), these intellectuals expressed very early on the antagonism between totalitarian regimes and the idea of democracy.

Castoriadis was born in Constantinople in 1922, Axelos in Athens in 1924, and Papaioannou in Volos in 1925. We will refer to Castoriadis's biography since he mentioned on several occasions the importance of the political situation of Greece.² Castoriadis spent all his childhood in Greece with a very Francophile education: his father was very keen on French philosophy and literature and passed this infatuation on to him. It was little wonder Castoriadis chose France when he had to flee the country when the Civil War broke out in 1944. When he was a teenager, he joined the Communist Youth in the era of John Metaxas's dictatorship (1936-41). During this period, every political meeting was repressed, and it was very difficult to get involved in politics. The international context made Greece's situation even more tragic, when on 28 October 1940 Benito Mussolini delivered a humiliating ultimatum to Metaxas, which the latter refused. Consequently, the future of Greece rested on the outcome of World War Two. Metaxas died in January 1941, and on 6 April 1941, German troops invaded Greece by way of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. By the beginning of June 1941, the whole of Greece was under the German, Italian, and Bulgarian occupation.

Castoriadis found himself studying in Athens at a time when the Germans occupied the city as well as Salonica, Crete, and a number of the Aegean islands (the Bulgarians were permitted to occupy western Thrace and parts of Macedonia, and the Italians controlled the rest of the country). Castoriadis had not been tortured, but some of his friends had been victims of torture under the dictatorship of Metaxas. In his writings, Castoriadis wanted to make a tribute to all his Trotskyist comrades, who had never denounced him. "After several months," he recalled, "my comrades (I would like here to say their names: Koskinas, Dodopoulos and Stratis) had been arrested, but though they were savagely tortured, they never denounced me."³

The situation was chaotic in Greece, and the only possible way to resist was to join the Communist Party, which was becoming increasingly Stalinist. At that time, Castoriadis began to become aware that politics might imply a radical rupture with the Marxist party.

It is not interesting to tell here how a teenager, discovering Marxism, *thought* that he respected it by joining the Communist Youth under the dictatorship of Metaxas. Nor is it interesting to tell why he could believe, after the occupation of Greece and the German attack against Russia, that the chauvinistic orientation of the Greek Communist Party and the formation of the National Liberation Front (EAM) resulted from a local deviance that could be corrected by ideological struggle within the Party.⁴

Then, Castoriadis, who was a Trotskyist and collaborated with the cells of Spiros Stinas in 1942 (a Greek Trotskyist leader), suffered on two sides: on the one hand, from the circumstances of the war and the fight against fascism and, on the other hand, from the political repression of the Communist Party which assassinated many Trotskyist activists. Castoriadis was conscious at that time that fighting against fascism within the EAM was not effective. The EAM was the name for the Greek Communist National Liberation Front: its leaders claiming that they were the only ones who could resist against the invaders. Any other tendency inside the EAM was severely repressed. This communist organization had a particular appeal to young people and to women, to whom it held out the prospect of emancipation in a society, which, in rural areas, was still patriarchal.

The war was only possible because of the revival of “nationalistic illusions” of the masses, who remained prisoners of them until the experience of war got rid of them and led the masses to the revolution. This war had only achieved the transformation of the Communist Party into a national-reformist party, completely integrated in the bourgeois order, that Trotsky had previewed for a long time.⁵

Castoriadis began to develop his own theories through having experienced the war and

the brutality of the Communist Party. If there was a necessity to seek a social emancipation, it was nonsense to use the Communist Party to reach it, because the Party despised any kind of free expression. This diagnostic was made very early by Castoriadis thanks to the lucidity that he had on the Greek situation: “The critique of Trotskyism and my own conception were completely shaped during the first Stalinist attempt of coup d'état in Athens in December 1944.” Castoriadis refers to the aborted communist revolution in 1944, which occurred with the help of Soviet Union. After World War Two, the future of Greece was decided by Stalin and Churchill, the latter wanting to establish a kingdom in Greece, in order to give Great Britain access to the Mediterranean Sea. On 9 October 1944, the USSR and the United Kingdom concluded an agreement on Greece stipulating that the British authorities could control the country. Stalin was not specifically interested in the area as he was focusing more on other Eastern countries, Yugoslavia and Albania, for instance. After a war that began in 1944, between the Monarchists, helped by the British army, and the Communists, a February 1945 agreement signed in Varzika put an end to the First Civil War. The Communists promised to give up their weapons and the British authorities to recognize officially the existence of the Communist Party of Greece. In fact, the agreement was never respected as thousands of Communists were arrested. In 1946, elections were organized under the pressure of Great Britain. A lot of people voted in a climate of threat, and a conservative government was elected. Then, the EAM fought against this conservative government. The rupture between Yugoslavia (a country close to Greece that could send troops easily) and USSR did not help the Greek Communists. The Second Civil War ended on 16 September 1949 with the defeat of the Communists. Castoriadis, Axelos, and Papaioannou did not experience the events of the Second Civil War since they came to France during the First Civil War. Axelos and Papaioannou fought within the Greek Resistance during the First Civil

War, whereas Castoriadis was a political activist among Greek Trotskyists who were persecuted both by the Monarchists and the Communists. He was a member of the Greek Communist Youth in 1937 and, after the German occupation of Greece (1941), Castoriadis was the cofounder of a journal attempting to reform the Greek Communist party. He failed on that point and became a Trotskyist by 1942, avoiding Stalinist and Gestapo agents.

In Castoriadis's view, Greece had been an interface: first between Fascism and Stalinism and then between Capitalism (the Western countries) and Stalinism (the Eastern countries). As such, there was no space for a certain kind of autonomy and political thought. The socialist revolution had to be done in another country where the circumstances would be less difficult; the seeds of a social autonomy, which emerged in the ancient Athenian society of the 8th century BCE had to be transplanted somewhere else in order to be saved. The history of the Greek twentieth century is full of coup d'états and dictatorships. The tragedy was that Greece was torn between the possibility of a Fascist dictatorship and a Communist dictatorship. As a matter of fact, Castoriadis, Axelos, and Papaioannou experienced in Greece the roots of the totalitarian system. The political problem could not be simply solved by changing a government; it implied reflecting on the conditions of totalitarianism, a politics that had two sides, a Left one (Stalinism) and a Right one (Fascism).

For Castoriadis, the totalitarian system is characterized by a perfect bureaucratic system of domination. Bureaucracy means a political system that aims at creating two separated spheres, the sphere of political-economic power and the sphere of producers. The disconnection between these two spheres contributes to the total domination of the executive sphere. In other words, bureaucracy is the name for a system which establishes a total separation of tasks: the workers are separated from the rulers and depend on them. There are different types of bureaucracies: in

the USSR, the bureaucracy is achieved as workers and rulers are totally separated from each other. The rulers decide all the social questions, the workers are totally dominated, without knowing exactly the will of the rulers (this is the strategy of the planning, where the rulers determine how the production of goods should be and what is good for everybody). Fighting in Greece was all the more difficult as the country was suffering from a chock between West and East.

If Greece was one thousand kilometers northwards—or France one thousand kilometers eastwards—the Communist Party would have taken power after the war, and this power would have been secured by Russia. What would it have done? The Communist Party would have installed a regime similar to the Russian one, eliminating the existing dominant classes after having absorbed what it could of them, establishing its own dictatorship, placing its men in all the commanding and privileged positions. Certainly, at the time, all those were “if’s.” But the subsequent evolution of the satellite countries, confirming this prognosis as no other historical prognosis could be, lead me to return to this way of reasoning.⁶

Castoriadis took the social and historic situation of Greece and France into account. At the end of World War Two, France found itself in an ambiguous political situation. The German occupation and the Vichy government, the myth of the Communist party in the French Resistance—a myth all the more striking since the Communist Party did not appeal early to Resistance against the Germans because of the peace treaty signed in August 1939 between the USSR and Germany, even if many Communists disobeyed official instructions in order to join the Resistance. In Greece, Castoriadis had experienced the contradictions of the Stalinist project and became a Sovietologist, studying all the different steps of mutation of the Russian bureaucratic organization. He analyzed first the conditions of the Bolshevik revolution, secondly the social regime of USSR, and then the Russian bureaucracy after the death of Stalin.⁷

In 1948, Castoriadis founded the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* with Claude Lefort in order to rescue the ideas of the young Marx as well as the revolutionary project that Marx initiated. In fact, they inaugurated this tendency as a critique of Trotskyist theories: for the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the Trotskyist party still considered the USSR as a degenerated worker state. It is why *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was a scission inside the Trotskyist Fourth International.⁸ According to them, the critics of Stalinism had to be more radical within Trotskyism, and this is why they created their own movement. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* criticized strongly the work of Trotsky who had not exactly determined what Stalinism was.⁹ *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was created because of a strong disagreement with the French Trotskyist party. For instance, in 1948, when Trotskyists proposed an alliance with Tito, who was in rupture with Stalin, it was not acceptable for Castoriadis and a few persons who followed him.

Socialisme ou Barbarie began to fight for real proletarian emancipation outside bureaucracy. They promoted the topic of self-organization [*autogestion*], which would become popular after the events of May 1968. The idea of self-organization implies that all the workers should be able to take part in the administration of the factory. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* rejected every form of bureaucratic organization. The group and the review lasted until 1967.

The influence of the group was limited, as the Communist Party was the first political power in France after World War Two. In this context, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was seen as a radical far-left group to be fought. Castoriadis and his colleagues closely studied the internal changes of the French political situation and the characteristics of Stalinism in France, for example, the social basis of the French Communist Party and its tactics linked to the evolution of USSR.¹⁰ *Socialisme ou Barbarie* focused on the necessity of rethinking the revolutionary movement. Its members set out to challenge the assumptions, the practices, and the direction of

the entire French Left. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* presented its main goals through a manifesto, modeled on the *Communist Manifesto* and which declared how the workers should organize themselves with a maximum of autonomy.

One century after the *Communist Manifesto*, thirty years after the Russian Revolution, after huge victories and deep defeats, the revolutionary movement seems to have disappeared, like a river, which, by getting near to the sea, results in swamps and vanishes in the sand. “Marxism,” “Socialism,” the working class, a new historical period, have never been so current, and at the same time, never has real Marxism been so ridiculed, Socialism regarded with such contempt, and the working class sold and betrayed by those who claim to speak for it. . . .

“Socialism” seems to have been accomplished in countries that have four hundred millions of inhabitants, but this “socialism” cannot be separated from concentration camps, from the most intensive social exploitation, from the most frightening dictatorship, and from the most extensive stupidity.¹¹

Castoriadis wanted to distinguish two antagonistic projects in Marx’s work: on one hand, the project of autonomy and, on the other hand, a functionalist and somewhat scientific project. There are two moments in Marx’s thought, a period when he focuses on social struggles and a period when he theorizes revolutionary *praxis*. Castoriadis would like the first moment, the “Machiavellian moment,” to be dealt with.¹² When he focuses on social struggles, Marx thinks human self-determination outside the frame of the State. Revolutionary humanism aims at destroying any kind of State because the category of State was created in order to justify political and economic domination.

Unfortunately, Marx ultimately reduced institutions in every society to basic economic needs. He applied a deterministic approach to every society, ignoring more and more the priority of social struggles. In *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Castoriadis had two main interests: on the one hand, he analyzed the evolution of Russian society, and on the other hand, he initiated a political debate with Marx. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* became increasingly critical not only of the so-called

“Marxist” or “socialist” countries of the Eastern bloc, but also of Marxism itself, with its nineteenth-century scientism. If the renowned Marxists are building a strong political apparatus contrary to the emancipation of proletarians, does it mean that we have to save Marx against the people who invoke him? Perhaps there are some unclear points in Marx’s theories that could lead to different interpretations. To grapple with these questions, Castoriadis focused on the actual situation of the proletariat and compared it to the Marxist theory. The main problem in France in the 1940s and 1950s was that the working movement was under the influence of the French Communist Party, being led to a kind of apathy without the so-called revolutionary elite being able to understand and change this situation.

As far as Castoriadis was concerned, everything is determined by politics, and citizens should be able to participate in the legitimization of social norms. The ideas of working management were opposite to what the French Communist Party tried to promote. In this frame, the Marxists did not fight against a capitalistic system but enlarged its goals. Instead of organizing the proletariat as a contesting force, the Communist Party and the trade unions such as the *Confédération générale du travail* divided the working class’ unity and reduced its power of action. The proletariat was less active, and power was transferred to a class of revolution specialists, as in Leninist theories. Castoriadis could have held onto this point of view and developed a classic Trotskyist theory against Stalinist bureaucracy. Contrary to Althusser, who analyzed the deviance of Marxists from Marx’s scientific works, Castoriadis did not hesitate to confront the theories of Marx with reality. He insisted that one should not have to consider Marx as a sacred person in order to be able to discuss his own theories.

Castoriadis did agree with Marx on two main points: Marx had been right to have explained, first, that the capitalist system had to destroy every former form of production (for

example, the medieval mode of production), and second, that capitalism evolved towards a monopolistic phase by assembling capital and getting rid of small producers. Still, Castoriadis pointed out three crucial questions that Marx did not answer:

What determines the level of exploitation of paid work by capital, what Marx called the rate of exploitation (relation of the total surplus value or the mass of profits to the mass of paid workers), and how did this rate evolve? How to realize economic equilibrium (equality of global supply and global demand) in a system in which production and demand depend on millions of independent acts, and where, above all, relations are constantly upset by accumulation and technological evolution? Finally, are the long-term tendencies of capitalism's evolution; in other words, how does the functioning of the system progressively modify the structure?¹³

Castoriadis thus criticized the lack of accuracy of certain concepts that Marx had used, such as the rate of exploitation. By determining the objective economic conditions of the capitalistic process, Marx tended to underemphasize the fight of the proletariat. By relating real salary to real products in order to explain how the rate of exploitation could increase, Marx considered the working force of the proletarian as a merchandise.

Castoriadis maintained that Marx's reductionism showed how he was immersed in the social imagination of his time. For example, he thought in the same way as the capitalists when he wanted to define a constant economic rate of exploitation, ignoring that one hour of work differed from one individual to another. The raise of the rate of exploitation, the elevation of the organic composition of the capital, and the diminution of the profit rate explained for Marx the main crisis of capitalism, especially the crisis of overproduction. He strongly held that there was a law that regulated the rate of exploitation inside capitalism; by pointing out the objective contradictions of the system, he made the mistake of believing that such contradictions do not depend on the actions of individuals. Moreover, to Castoriadis's mind, we read in Marx's work

the seeds of an economist interpretation of society, ignoring the impact of social fights and generalizing an institution of society that fits only some Western societies.¹⁴

Axelos and Papaioannou also shared a very critical point of view on the work of Marx, even if it was not expressed in the same style. We will treat each of them in turn. Axelos did not neglect the economic and political aspects of the Marxist theory but wondered especially if one could talk about a Marxist philosophy. There were three main points to Axelos's critique of Marx: on the economic level, Marxist theory does not solve anything and does not appreciate new emerging technological and economic processes; politically, the theory of Marx does not solve the problem of power; finally, on the philosophical level, Marxism gives up a questioning thought.

Marxism gives up the questioning thought, doesn't practice radical questioning, and forgets global interrogation. It leaves thought to absorb itself in scientism, sociologism, and flat and positivistic historicism. It sacrifices all theory to the sole practice, totally indifferent to *logos*—to meaning [*sens*]—of the dialectic that turns about like a machine.¹⁵

Axelos was close to Castoriadis on two points: first, he refused the systematic and mechanical approach of the society that seduced many French intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, and secondly, he referred to the necessity of questioning. Politically, the conclusions of Axelos are exactly the same as those of Castoriadis: Marxist theory resulted in the promotion of a bureaucratic society. As he wrote, "The Marxist current, full of contradictions and crevices, calls itself socialist and claims socialism. It ends up in what we can call capitalism and/or State socialism, as a bureaucratic collectivism. ... It state-a-fies [étaise] more than it socializes."¹⁶ These are exactly the theses expressed by *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Axelos and Castoriadis thus

followed a similar evolution on the necessity of overrunning Marxism.

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a real shock in France and had an important effect on French intellectuals. Indeed, some of them began to be more critical towards prevailing Marxist discourse and many intellectuals left the Communist Party. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* covered the Hungarian Revolution from the perspective of the working-class challenge to “communist” rule at the very moment that Axelos was helping to found the review *Arguments*. “We tried an adventure at the end of 1956 and the beginning of 1957,” he recalled, “Events in Poland and Hungary seemed to have opened some rifts [brèches].”¹⁷ Axelos mentioned that the group with which he associated was not Marxist anymore, showing how 1956 was a turning point. Furthermore, he insisted on their isolation among intellectuals, in a way parallel to Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, who broke with the existing Left trends. There were significant bounds between *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Arguments*. For instance, in 1968, Edgar Morin, a French sociologist who was a member of *Arguments*, wrote with Castoriadis a book on the May events.¹⁸ Morin was deeply influenced in his theories by his experience in *Arguments* and the work of Axelos. When he points out the fact that the human beings live under a planetary iron age, we perceive the direct influence of Axelos.

Edgar Morin left us a very interesting and complete testimony on the postwar French intellectual context.¹⁹ Through the experience of Morin, we can understand the beliefs and the disillusionment of the postwar French Left. Morin was a member of the Communist Party until 1951. In his book *Autocritique*, he shows exactly how the Communist Party built a legitimacy and seduced intellectuals because of the experience of Resistance. The Communist Party became a cultural religion with a specific mission: it had to enlighten and guide the proletariat to its destiny. The way the Communist Party worked was similar to the Catholic Church—exclusion of

the Party felt like an excommunication. Nevertheless, Morin did not trust the Communist rule after the myth of Stalingrad. Contrary to other intellectuals who still gravitated toward the Party, Morin gave the Communist experience up as lost. He saw the work of *Arguments* as an experience of plurality. The birth of *Arguments* was linked to the events of 1956 in Hungary, a moment at which dialogue and democracy were in demand.

It was at the end of 1956 and at the beginning of 1957. In this review, without realizing it, we made a kind of Copernicus revolution; our foundation was in fact our plurality. We started, of course, from our common obsession, but we had especially developed an interrogation without limits. Our rule was that we could affront and contradict each other.²⁰

If 1956 appeared like an opening onto a new way of thinking and a new way of doing politics, it was in fact a failure, as a large segment of the French intelligentsia of the 1960s was still prisoner of a Marxist dogmatism.

Axelos had founded the collection “*Arguments*” in 1960. The review *Arguments* existed only for five years, whereas *Socialisme ou Barbarie* lasted until 1967, following the conflict between those who wanted to renew the Marxist project and those like Castoriadis who wanted to build a radical Left.

We weren’t at home anywhere. We weren’t Christians or liberals, social democrats or progressives, anarchists, Surrealists, or existentialists. We were no longer either Marxists—should one say, dogmatic?—or Stalinists. And we were no longer writers or scholars, researchers, thinkers, and journalists. ... We were interrogating, questioning, problematizing [*dans l’interrogation, la mise en question, la problématique*]. We were resolved to lay the foundations for a post-Marxism.²¹

In these remarks by Axelos concerning the creation of *Arguments*, we can feel a self-critical position concerning his Marxist engagement, especially when he identifies existing Marxist

discourse with Stalinism. In fact, Axelos's originality can be noticed in the way he developed his philosophy at a crossroads between Heidegger and Marx. Like Heidegger, he focused on the phenomenological approach to the category of "world," the necessity of questioning phenomena and of criticizing the domination of *techne*. The essence of technique is not technical, as Heidegger claimed in a conference given on this topic.²² If, on the one hand, Marx had explained the evolution of the technical world in its relation to the development of capitalism, Heidegger pointed out that the essence of *technique* was rooted in a certain kind of metaphysics.²³ The capitalistic tendencies of the world were the result of a metaphysics that imposed a way of understanding the world through the calculus. According to Heidegger, this particular thought had emerged in G. W. F. Leibniz's theory of sufficient reason: every effect must have a cause.²⁴ As far as Leibniz was concerned, the production of phenomena could be analyzed through a strict scheme of logically deducible causality. Leibniz wanted to build a mathematical science of phenomena that would be purely logical. Heidegger claimed that this metaphysical way of controlling Being through determinism was a tendency of the human spirit and dated back to the invention of Western metaphysics,

Instead of metaphysics, for his part, Castoriadis would have said social imaginary: as far as he was concerned, we can observe in the thirteenth-century appearance of the merchant class the emergence of the idea of a bureaucratic institution of life. This social imagination contradicted the project of autonomy created by the Athenian society between the eighth and the fifth centuries B.C.E. The Athenians created a way of doing politics as well as a way of practicing philosophy. When each citizen can take part in the making of laws or discuss their application, then we have for the first time in our history a society that is able to question its mode of existence.²⁵ This characteristic was very interesting to Castoriadis, though Greek society was

neither utopian nor perfect. A democratic society is very hard, it can never be perfect since its norms can be always discussed.

The category of social imaginary was forged by Castoriadis in order to seize the significant objects that make together an institutional symbolism. This institutional symbolism defines a culture.²⁶ Heidegger had rejected Western metaphysics without considering such a contradiction between autonomy and bureaucracy, because he did not want to think within a political field. According to Castoriadis, this was why Heidegger was not able to see the crisis of the contemporary society. “This is obviously one of the numerous consequences of his ignorance of the social dimension of history,” Castoriadis concluded, “and of this history as including internal struggles.”²⁷

Axelos had joined a Marxist perspective with a Heideggerean conceptual frame, and these keys allowed him to decipher the way the world had evolved. Like Castoriadis and Papaioannou (as we will see), Axelos attempted to think at a global scale and this is why he promoted what he named a “planetary thought”: “Planetary thought should not present itself as a world perspective; on the contrary, it should understand itself as a global and perhaps even a friendly [*amicale*] interrogation, putting everything in question.”²⁸ We will return to this notion of a pure form of philosophy enlightened by a global perspective. For Axelos, humanity had in fact not invented a significant number of metaphysical ideas. Three prominent ones could be found in all existing societies: the idea of God, the idea of nature, and the idea of the human being. A questioning thought has to modify these concepts and open them. This thought opens up on multidimensionality because nothing is really total nor achieved, which is why questioning thought has to be fragmented and fluent. This reference to fluidity was very important in the works of our three philosophers: fluidity is what fights against any form of determinism and in

that concept we can see a reference to Heraclitus. Such a reference is clear for Axelos, who wrote a book on the philosophy of Heraclitus, but it is more discreet in Castoriadis's work, for example, in the way he constantly referred to the idea of a singular human creation.²⁹ As Heraclitus suggested in his famous line—"we cannot enter in the same river two times"—the idea of creation contradicts any kind of reproduction. Creation is linked to the alteration of the world. Furthermore, Castoriadis often used the same metaphor of a "river open to the anonymous collective" [*fleuve ouvert du collectif anonyme*], when he dealt with the democratic experience and the necessity of self-organization.³⁰ There is not a rational totality or a metaphysical system which exists and could make us understand the way the world works. With creation, everything evolves and is subject to changes—in this perspective, determinism is not possible. For Castoriadis, determinism is on the metaphysical level what bureaucracy is on the political level. The imaginary signification of bureaucracy is control, and in order to control, you need to make prevail a theoretical system closed on itself. History is creation and indeterminacy; it is not governed by a scheme. To Axelos's mind, Marxism had become a new tradition. Like earlier religious and cultural traditions, a Marxist tradition had appeared and defined its codes and values in reference to a set of basic texts. This tradition was now over, and from the point of view of planetary thought, Marxism and its dogmas had to be questioned.

Kostas Papaioannou had a similar career to Castoriadis. After high school, he studied law and philosophy, especially German philosophy, like Axelos. Papioannou and Axelos became friends from their meeting on the boat taking them to France. Resisting the Nazis, Papaioannou had been arrested, put in jail, and tortured for two months.³¹ During the Civil War, Papaioannou joined the Greek Communist Party. At the end of 1945, thanks to the French Institute of Athens,

he left Greece with a number of left-oriented intellectuals and artists. At that moment, he had already abandoned the Communist Party and denounced the Stalinist methods, when he saw how the Party repressed those who did not agree with its directives. Papaioannou finished his studies of philosophy at the Sorbonne and began to write in Greek and later in French. His work centered on Hegel and Marx, and he translated many of their books.³² His special focus was on the Philosophy of History, which is what led him to study Hegel and Marx. These speculative interests did not prevent him from posing serious political questions, and like Axelos and Castoriadis, he wondered why so many people were living in misery and were the victims of strong dictatorships under the name of Marxist-Leninist theories. How was it that there were so many people fascinated by such theories, especially among the French bourgeois intelligentsia?

Papaioannou suffered from a certain kind of isolation when he had to confront Marx with people who did not know his work very well and who were exalting historical materialism. The French university ignored the work of Marx until World War Two, but after 1945, because of the prestige of the French Communist Party in the Resistance, Marxism was introduced in a very dogmatic way. Papaioannou aimed at understanding why Marxist theory would lead to a totalitarian society. Although he did not like Marx and the Marxists, it was necessary to criticize them in order to see where the Marxist project turned out to be a deterministic project. He translated the works of the young Marx and wrote on Hegel, whom he preferred.³³ The extraordinary conceptual system that Hegel built inspired him to write a general theory of history, in which he showed the radical gap between Greek antiquity and our modern civilization: whereas Greek society was linked to an eternal *cosmos*, our civilization has affirmed the privilege of history and time.

The organization of the terrestrial city always remained at the center of the

reflection of Greek poets and philosophers, who were almost always educators and legislators. However, they never thought to situate the true destiny of humankind in the historical world.³⁴

With Hegel and Marx, History judges what is worth saving and what is not. With the Marxian perspective, history was seen as the open book of the productive forces, a process that determined human activity. However, Papaioannou perceived another important contradiction: even if he wanted to, Marx failed to build a monist theory, since he found two moving forces in history, an objectivist conception through the productive forces and a subjectivist one through the class struggle. According to Papaioannou, this made two forces, unable to be reunified through dialectics:

The “objective” description of evolution as a determinism of productive forces and the “subjective” description of historical process as a class struggle do not work together as well as Marx thought.³⁵

Papaioannou wanted to write a major work on Marx and on the Marxist tradition. Nevertheless, his articles on this topic were gathered in a book published in 1983, two years after he died.³⁶ Raymond Aron wrote the preface to that book and pointed out the courage of a thinker who had resisted philosophical fashions. Papaioannou had taken part in some of Aron’s seminars, and both of them shared a familiarity with Marx’s work and had a strong sympathy for each other. Papaioannou was affiliated with a review named, *Contrat Social*, directed by Boris Souvarine, a former revolutionary who early denounced the deviance of Stalinism and Marxism-Leninism. In fact, the articles from Papaioannou on Marx and Marxism were first published in that review. *Contrat Social* was active between 1957 and 1968, more or less in the same period as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Arguments*. Furthermore, Castoriadis quoted Souvarine as an example of free thought.³⁷ Souvarine was a source of inspiration for Papaioannou and

Castoriadis. After World War Two, Souvarine came back from the United States in 1947 and stayed in France until his death in 1984. He denounced very early the danger of Stalinism and the lie of the USSR. In short, it is striking to see how the evolution of Castoriadis, Axelos, and Papaioannou is parallel, especially with their engagement in critical reviews. If they were active in politics, they tried to rethink the philosophical categories that underlined this practical engagement.

For instance, Castoriadis constantly wondered how a society decided to have democratic institutions. His political engagement in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* made him work on a theory of democracy. What he admired in classical Athenian society was that all the aspects of social existence were decided by all the citizens. In fact, there were no social norms existing outside the society that could determine its evolution. Castoriadis wrote a provocative work proving the relation between democracy and tragedy in the former Athenian society.³⁸ Here, Greek tragedy was clearly associated with democracy, Castoriadis underling the fact that Greek tragedy appeared at the same time as philosophy and the interrogation of the institutions. Tragedy worked in fact as a popular education. In tragedy, even the Gods were subject to *hybris*, and the people understood that those Gods were products of themselves. Greek tragedy was not only a reflected image of society; it also made people aware that there was nothing outside the social sphere that determined it. The Gods had the same passions as individuals; they were neither better nor worse.

In *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Castoriadis went on building this theory of a democratic society.³⁹ After debating with Marx, he began to contradict some basic ideas of Plato. At the end of his career, when he taught at the *Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales*, Castoriadis got deeper into this debate by affirming that all the philosophy of Plato was a metaphysical and a

political attempt to destroy democracy. According to Castoriadis, the Platonist philosophy is in fact built in order to prove the inanity of democracy. Plato never mentioned Greek authors like Democritus who promoted the idea of a universe which was self-organized. Democritus proved in physics that matter was self-engendered. Those conclusions could have had a strong political impact, but Plato had never referred to such theories. Democritus framed a democratic universe, where human beings realize that the world is the product of their actions and that they can modify the laws in order to live together in the City. For Castoriadis, the idea of self-organization and the idea of autonomy were equivalent; they defined democracy (etymologically, of course, democracy signifies in Greek the power of *demos*, the power of people). Only human beings can draw the limits of their action in order to mobilize a social power—*kratos* in Greek.⁴⁰

Plato wanted a special category of individuals to rule the City, as these individuals have a specific knowledge of how the City should be ruled. Castoriadis denounced this ideology of specific knowledge in order to rule the City in a good way. This management cannot be reserved to a class of individuals, because there is not a knowledge of society, but only opinions. The way you see society cannot exceed an opinion, however well informed this opinion is.⁴¹ In democracy, anybody can have an executive role in public affairs or in politics. Plato associated democracy with demagogic; according to him, all the rhetoricians try to be persuasive in order to come to power. Yet, Castoriadis does not idealize the form of democracy as it is the regime of the political risk. The people can fear this idea of autonomy, without their actions being guaranteed by an extra-social foundation like Gods or principles. In the Platonist theory of specialization of knowledge, there is the imaginary signification of a bureaucratic institution. Bureaucracy means specialization of tasks and control of these tasks. In democracy, the rotation of roles and collective discussion must avoid this bureaucratic tendency. We have mostly been

living under political oligarchies, where politics was more a private sphere instead of being in the center of collective discussions.

Castoriadis promoted his theory of a radical direct democracy against any form of bureaucratic institution. The postwar context is all the more important as he wanted to save democracy against a terrifying bureaucratic institution of life that killed individuals. Democracy is the only regime where the individuals could experience autonomy. In contrast, Plato affirmed a heteronomy through a society led by specialists. Instead of specialists, we would rather employ the word “technocrats” nowadays, and it is striking to notice that the dilemma is still largely the same.

Developing a theory of democracy was Castoriadis’s main goal. It had to be linked to an understanding of how human institutions work. Knowing theoretically that the imaginary rather than reason is what defines the human being would help individuals pursue self-organization and build the conditions of a social autonomy. Social autonomy is inseparable from individual autonomy. Everything should be discussed in the frame of collective decision. This political view needs lucidity from the individuals. If they understand that laws and principles are the product of humans, then they can have an influence in order to make these laws evolve. Social autonomy means that the individuals of a society are able to change the rules that govern them. Individuals are responsible for the social order and the rationality that they create, even if sometimes they prefer to delegate it to a God, Nature, or the power of ancestors. Castoriadis was really close to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of existence when he built this notion of social imaginary.⁴² Moreover, Claude Lefort, who was the co-founder of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, was also the former student of Merleau-Ponty.⁴³ Merleau-Ponty was one of the rare French philosophers for whom Castoriadis had respect, contrary to Sartre whom he denounced

vigorously as the theorist of French Stalinism.⁴⁴ Castoriadis worked on this notion of imagination through confrontations with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

As a matter of fact, Castoriadis evolved on the margins of the French intellectual field. He thus condemned the main trends of the French intellectuals. First, the Marxist tradition that appealed to go beyond capitalism with bureaucratic means (control of the masses through the apparatus of a strong political party),⁴⁵ and secondly, the structuralist mode that Castoriadis criticized deeply. He refused to understand human reality through the idea of structure. His anthropology made him study psychoanalysis before starting to practice it from 1973 onwards. His big debate on psychoanalysis was with Freud whom he read with passion; the theories of Lacan, who reduced the unconscious to a symbolic structure of language, were severely attacked by Castoriadis.⁴⁶ According to him, Lacan defined a symbolic structure that alienated every individual, explaining that the Other speaks through the individual. For Castoriadis, this means that the existing social order is already present inside the individual. This theory is wrong and must be contradicted for its political consequences.

To sum up, Castoriadis, Axelos, and Papaioannou were very original figures in French intellectual circles. As leftist philosophers critical of Marx, they had a certain lucidity on the political events of their time. This temperament helped them to refuse a dogmatic Marxism prevailing in postwar French society. In a way, Axelos and Papaioannou agreed with the theses of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* concerning the evolution of the Russian bureaucratic society. The fact that they experienced the absurdity of the Stalinist methods in Greece during the Civil War gave them this early cautiousness against any kind of determinism or scientism. As a matter of fact, they escaped the sad illusions in which many French intellectuals had fallen because they were

attached to a way of questioning phenomena, without being seduced by closed and systematic approaches. History is creation, and there is not an ideology nor a closed system which could determine the historical process.

We were thus sent back to philosophy and more than that, to its historical character and to the enigma that it posed. Times is not simply the exterior determination of philosophy and even less a reference for the order of succession of philosophers' thoughts.⁴⁷

Notes

¹ His main book is about the imaginary institution of society and links his political engagement to his philosophical views. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). The trend of institutional analysis has been influential in pedagogy and the sphere of education. Georges Lapassade, who wrote many books on institutions, was a member of the same political group as Castoriadis, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. See Lapassade, *Groupes, organisation et institutions* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1970). René Lourau is also one of the main figures of that trend. See Lourau, *L'Analyse institutionnelle* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970).

² Castoriadis touches on his autobiography in *La Société bureaucratique*, Vol. I: *Les Rapports de production en Russie* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1973), 12; *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*, Vol. IV: *La Montée de l'insignifiance* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 82; and *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. V: *Fait et à faire* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 21.

³ Castoriadis, *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. IV: *La montée de l'insignifiance*, 82.

⁴ Castoriadis, *La Société bureaucratique*, Vol. I: *Les Rapports de production en Russie*, 12-13.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Ibid., 15-16.

⁷ Castoriadis, “Le rôle de l’idéologie bolchevique dans la naissance de la bureaucratie,” in *L’Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, Vol. II: *Prolétariat et organisation* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1974). The articles on Russian bureaucratic society are gathered in Castoriadis, *La Société bureaucratique*, Vol. I: *Les Rapports de production en Russie*, and in *La Société bureaucratique*, Vol. II: *La Révolution contre la bureaucratie* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions,

1973). See also, Castoriadis, “La bureaucratie après la mort de Staline,” in *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, Vol. II: *Proletariat et organisation*, 157-88.

⁸ Castoriadis, “Lettre ouverte aux militants du PCI et de la IVe internationale,” in *La Société bureaucratique*, Vol. I: *Les Rapports de production en Russie*, 185-205.

⁹ Claude Lefort theorized this critique of bureaucracy by gathering all the articles that he had written on the topic in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. See Lefort, *Eléments d'une critique de la bureaucratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

¹⁰ Castoriadis, “Sur la question de l’URSS et du stalinisme mondial,” in *La Société bureaucratique*, Vol. I: *Les Rapports de production en Russie*, 63-73.

¹¹ Castoriadis, *La Société bureaucratique*, Vol. I: *Les Rapports de production en Russie*, 139.

¹² The expression is used by Miguel Abensour, *La Démocratie contre l’Etat: Marx et le moment machiavélien* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

¹³ Castoriadis, *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*, Vol. II: *Le Mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne* (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1979), 76.

¹⁴ In the second volume of *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*, Castoriadis confronts Marx’s theses with the reality of the proletarian situation. See Castoriadis, “Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne,” in *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*, Vol. II: *Le Mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne*, 47-184.

¹⁵ Kostas Axelos, *Vers la pensée planétaire* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1964), 186. Axelos developed the characteristics of this planetary thought in other books. See his *Systématique ouverte* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984), 93-100.

¹⁶ Axelos, *Vers la pensée planétaire*, 199.

¹⁷ Ibid., 186.

¹⁸ Morin and Castoriadis, *Mai 68: La Brèche* (Paris: Complexe, 1988). Moreover, Morin and Castoriadis were close friends, and it is striking to find some elements of Castoriadis's anthropology in Morin's theories on the complexity of human nature, culture, and self-organization.

¹⁹ See Morin, *Pour sortir du vingtième siècle* (Paris: Nathan, 1981), and *Autocritique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), esp. chapter IX, entitled, "L'âge de fer planétaire." For Morin, the planetary iron age began in 1492, when America was discovered. Exchanges would be made in all the parts of the world, meaning that the globalization of the world was underway. Castoriadis had more or less the same views when he described the characteristics of planetary capitalism.

²⁰ Morin, *Reliances* (Paris: Éditions de l'Aube, 2002), 53.

²¹ Axelos, *Vers la pensée planétaire*, 186.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Essais et Conférences*, trans. André Préau (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Heidegger, *Le Principe de raison*, trans. André Préau (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

²⁵ Castoriadis, "La *polis* grecque et la création de la démocratie," in *Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. II: *Domaines de l'homme* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 261-306.

²⁶ Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, 493-532. This is the final chapter of the book which deals with significations of the social imaginary.

²⁷ Castoriadis, *La Création humaine*, Vol. I: *Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique: séminaire 1986-1987* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 299.

²⁸ Axelos, *Vers la pensée planétaire*, 186. See Castoriadis, *Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. II: *Domaines de l'homme* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 165.

²⁹ Axelos, *Héraclite et la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1962).

³⁰ Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, 533.

³¹ There is a short biography written by Alain Pons at the end of a book by Papaioannou.

Kostas Papaioannou, *De la Critique du ciel à la critique de la terre* (Paris: Allia, 1998), 53-62.

³² For the translations of Papaioannou in French, see Hegel, *La Raison dans l'histoire* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1965). Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *La Première Critique de l'économie politique* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1972). Marx, *Critique de l'Etat hégélien* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1976). These two last translations have been presented by Papaoiannou in Karl Marx, *Ecrits de jeunesse* (Paris: La République des Lettres, 1994).

³³ Papaioannou, *Hegel* (Paris: Agora, 1962).

³⁴ Papaioannou, *La Consécration de l'histoire* (Paris: Ivrea, 1996), 51.

³⁵ Ibid., 149.

³⁶ Papaioannou, *De Marx et du marxisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

³⁷ Castoriadis, *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. IV: *La Montée de l'insignifiance* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 82.

³⁸ Castoriadis, “Anthropogonie chez Eschyle et autocréation de l’homme chez Sophocle,” in *Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. VI: *Les Figures du pensable* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

³⁹ Castoriadis became a researcher and a teacher at the *Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales* from 1980 until his death in 1997. See Castoriadis, *Platon, Sur le Politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), which were seminars that he gave in this school.

⁴⁰ We refer here to several texts from Castoriadis besides his courses on Plato: “La démocratie athénienne: fausses et vraies questions,” “La culture dans une société démocratique,” “La démocratie comme procédure et comme régime,” in *Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. IV: *La Montée de l'insignifiance*.

⁴¹ Castoriadis, “Une interrogation sans fin,” in *Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. II: *Domaines de l’homme*, 241-60.

⁴² Castoriadis, “Merleau-Ponty et le poids de l’héritage ontologique,” in *Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, Vol. V: *Fait et à faire*, 157-96.

⁴³ Lefort wrote a very penetrating essay on Merleau-Ponty. See his, *Sur une colonne absente* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

⁴⁴ Castoriadis, “Les divertisseurs,” in *La Société française* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1979), 223-37. See also Castoriadis, “Sartre, le stalinisme et les ouvriers,” in *L’Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*: Vol. I: *Comment lutter* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1974), 179-248.

⁴⁵ It is interesting to remember that the French Communist Party renounced the idea of the Dictatorship of Proletariat in 1976. They privileged the democratic route to power.

⁴⁶ Castoriadis, *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.