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The Theme of “The Rising Tide of Insignificance” in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis¹

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The theme of a “rising tide of insignificance” might at first appear merely part of the dyspeptic ramblings of a disappointed and bitter old man nearing the end of his life. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. A brief anecdote illustrates this point. At a gathering a few years after Castoriadis’s death, a former S. ou B. member complained to me that this seemingly pessimistic “insignificance” theme took Castoriadis far afield from his earlier political concerns. Yet, this comrade was asked in turn: What does the “socialism or barbarism” alternative indicate but that, *throughout his life*, such *barbarism* was for Castoriadis an ever-present tendency of modern-day society, to be ignored at our peril? The comrade had no reply.

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As [a lot of] titles—and the mid-1940s to early 1990s texts to which they refer—indicate, what Castoriadis first labeled *barbarism* and later came to describe as a *rising tide of insignificance* points to a *self-reinforcing multidimensional disintegration of meaning initiated and sustained through a rationalization process gone awry in bureaucratic capitalism*. One did not have to gain special, privileged access to Castoriadis’s private papers in order to understand that the “early Castoriadis”/“late Castoriadis” distinction, first hypothesized by Brian Singer, does not hold, for one can readily glimpse from the public record a *magmatic unity-in-tension* at work in Castoriadis’s published writings as a whole: there is no specific, definable division point allowing one to separate the “early” from the “late Castoriadis” or any distinctive themes or set of approaches that would unilaterally distinguish a “before” from an “after.”

And yet this is precisely what, near the end of his life, Castoriadis himself attempted to do for his own work, at least as regards his publication plans. And he did so at precisely the moment when he first introduced this “rising tide” theme to the reading public!

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Of course, since I am arguing that the “rising tide of insignificance” theme itself is an extension, elaboration, and refinement, for more contemporary times, of the “barbarism” portion of the “socialism or barbarism” alternative Castoriadis had long expounded, I am not saying that this theme came into being only when its specific phrasing first appeared in print. Indeed, the now-eponymous text for *La Montée de l’insignifiance* (March 1996), which elaborates its major premisses, is an interview conducted back in June 1993. “The crisis of criticism,” Castoriadis said there—reminding us of the connection between the general “insignificance” theme and what he called the “*shameful degradation of the critical function*” when it comes to appraising authors like Lévy—“is only one of the manifestations of the general and deep-seated crisis of society.”

There is a generalized pseudoconsensus; criticism and the vocation of the intellectual are caught up in the system much more than was the case formerly and in a much more intense way. Everything is mediatized; the networks of complicity are almost omnipotent. Discordant or dissident voices are not

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stifled by censorship or by editors who no longer dare to publish them; these voices are stifled by the general commercialization of society. Subversion is caught within the all and sundry of what is being done, of what is being propagated. To publicize a book, one says immediately, “Here is a book that has revolutionized its field”—but it is also said that Panzini-brand spaghetti has revolutionized cooking. The word *revolutionary*—like the words *creation* and *imagination*—has become an advertising slogan; this is what a few years ago was called *cooptation*.

Here Castoriadis introduces, perhaps for the first time, the word “insignificant” as an operative concept for describing our contemporary state of affairs:

Marginality has become something sought after and central: subversion is an interesting curiosity that completes the harmony of the system. Contemporary society has a terribly great capacity for stifling any genuine divergency, be it by silencing it, be it by making it one phenomenon among others, commercialized like the others.

We can be even more specific. Critics themselves have betrayed their critical role. There is a betrayal of their responsibility and of their rigor on the part of authors; there is a vast complicity on the part of the public, which is far from innocent in this affair, since it agrees to play the game and adapts itself to what it is given. The whole is instrumentalized, utilized by a system that itself is anonymous. None of this is the making of some dictator, a handful of big capitalists, or a group of opinion makers; it is an immense social-historical current that is heading in this direction and that is making everything become insignificant.

This first use of the term is perhaps also his most sweeping employment of it: “. . . making everything become insignificant.”

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Already, within months of Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 election and her inauguration of the “right-wing counteroffensive,” Castoriadis enunciated a point that would appear in his work throughout the 1980s: “all the inherited conceptions—Marxism as well as Liberalism—find themselves totally insolvent.” For, like all ideologies, these nineteenth-century ones, prolonged into the twentieth century, mask present-day reality. “The Crisis of Western Societies”—described in 1982 as an “excerpt” from the (promised but never published) second volume of *Devant la guerre*—began to reorient Castoriadis’s critique of total and fragmented bureaucratic capitalism away from the theses found in his (controversially successful) first volume. Refusing to take Neoliberalism’s tenets at face value, he saw there how “the absolute mental pauperization of the ruling strata” was

expressed in the proclamations being made about the bankruptcy of Keynesianism (which amounts to saying that our failure to contain cancer proves Pasteur’s bankruptcy), the fad of monetarism (a rehash of the old quantitative theory of money, a tautology whose transformation into an “explanatory” theory has long been known to be fallacious), or new demonological inventions like “supply-side economics.”

This crisis is described more broadly as “a crisis of social imaginary significations, . . . these significations no longer provide individuals with the norms, values, bearings, and motivations that would permit them both to make society function and to maintain themselves, somehow or other, in a livable state of ‘equilibrium.’”

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This contextualization of Neoliberalism within the “insignificancy” theme of contemporary figures of barbarism has *major implications for our contemporary understanding of capitalism and its imaginary institution*. “Neoliberal discourse,” he stated in “Done and To Be

Done,” should be viewed as “a gross farce intended for imbeciles.”

[T]he rhetoric of Thatcher and of Reagan has changed nothing of importance (the change in formal ownership of a few large enterprises does not essentially alter their relation to the State), . . . the bureaucratic structure of the large firm remains intact [and] half of the national product transits the public sector in one way or another (State, local governmental organizations, Social Security); . . . between half and two-thirds of the price of goods and services entering into the final national expenditure are in one way or another fixed, regulated, controlled, or influenced by State policy, and . . . the situation is irreversible (ten years of Thatcher and Reagan made no essential changes therein).

In the general feigned amnesia, the fact that “liberal ideology had already been demolished by some academic economists in the 1930s” is simply buried. “People pretend to forget that the present-day economy is an economy of oligopolies, not a competitive economy.” Reagan-Thatcher rhetoric “changed nothing of importance”? Castoriadis, and in particular his “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” are often criticized for outdated descriptions of a bygone Fordist world of full employment. Yet members of S. ou B.—or, at least those ones who endorsed that controversial text—had been, Castoriadis asserted, “perhaps . . . the only ones who, in ’59-’60, said that the problem in the modern, Western, developed, capitalist society is NOT an economic problem.” Participating in this “crisis of social imaginary significations,” latter-day Liberalism is not to be taken seriously on its own narrow ideologically economic terms. Neoliberal *rhetoric* changed nothing; but that does not mean that nothing important changed as the tide of insignificance continued, and continues, to rise. Neoliberal discourse does not define the new reality; instead, the continuing and deepening destruction of meaning inherent in the capitalist rationalization project includes the irrationalities of a dissembling neoliberal ideology as well as the real consequences of the “reactionary counteroffensive.” In May 1989, Castoriadis stated that the “sole signification truly present and dominant today is the capitalist one, that of the indefinite expansion of ‘mastery,’ which at the same time—and here we come to our central point—finds itself emptied of all the content that might endow it with the vitality it once enjoyed and that could, for better or for worse, allow the processes of identification to be carried out.” As a result, “despite the ‘neoliberal’ rhetoric,” earning money “is now becoming totally disconnected from any social function and even from the system’s internal legitimation.” Yet also despite that rhetoric, “[t]his mixture of the money norm and of the bureaucratic-hierarchical norm suffices for us to continue to characterize the rich liberal societies as societies of fragmented bureaucratic capitalism,” not as ones really embodying what the incoherent content of neoliberal ideology would have us believe.

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This “unmitigated triumph of the capitalist imaginary under its crudest and coarsest forms,” as Castoriadis described it soon before his death, *did not happen in a vacuum*, as one says—or, *rather, it was the context of the vacuum—rising insignificance—that allowed this triumph*. The “conservative counterrevolution”

exploited the bankruptcy of the traditional “left-wing” parties, the trade unions’ enormous loss of influence, the monstrosity, now manifest, of the regimes of “actually existing socialism” even before their collapse, the apathy and privatization of whole populations, and their growing irritation with the hypertrophic growth and absurdity of state bureaucracies.

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But Castoriadis also seemed to be acknowledging, more broadly, some limits to, or countervailing tendencies regarding, the “insignificancy” thesis, *and he did so precisely where this thesis would be introduced for the first time to the general public.*

These were [in 1995] the most massive strikes in France since May ’68. Might one argue that Castoriadis had missed, or effectively lost interest in, what was then being prepared, just as he had offered his negative conclusions about chances for consequential contestation within French society right before the May events? Here we are given the benefit of hindsight. Yes, it is strange that the “rising tide of insignificancy” theme appears explicitly at the very moment it seemed overturned by events themselves. But not only we but Castoriadis himself benefitted from hindsight. In his case, when looking back at May ’68—whose “immense possibilities” for “the historical period now opening” he glimpsed in June 1968—he saw how the pull both of consumer society (reestablished by de Gaulle’s reopening of gas stations) and of the microbureaucracies, with their crazed or criminal ideologies, brought people back from the breach they had opened. Indeed, in “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism,” May ’68 becomes most likely an exception within a periodization of modernity that ends in 1950—i.e., right after the creation of S. ou B.! Castoriadis was also given a chance, after the 1995 strikes, to revise his “insignificancy” thesis. “[W]ould you now speak of a ‘rising tide of significancy’?” he was asked in April 1996.

No, that would be too rash; I stick to my terms. I added this note because it seemed to me obvious that what had been going on before, in terms of the waning of political and social conflict, could not be applied to this period strictly speaking, precisely because this movement, though in appearance corporatist with a very narrow scope, was in fact the result of a deep sense of dissatisfaction [with] the whole system. . . . I would not hurry to attach a qualification to what happened in November and December and what’s happening now in terms of either “this was a last flame” or “this is a new beginning.” We have to see what will happen. Nothing has changed very much. But there are signs that tend to show that something more than “a last flame” was at work. These signs are, for instance, a revival of social criticism, a revival of social critiques of the system, . . . , everyone realizes that the situation is at a dead end, and that this dead end is unbearable. So for the time being I think we have to keep our eyes open.

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