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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

David Ames Curtis

A year ago, the Editors of *Thesis Eleven* had the splendid idea of honoring Cornelius Castoriadis with a special issue devoted to his work on the occasion of his 75th birthday. They honored me, his English-language translator, by asking me to serve as editor. What, I asked myself, might such an issue contain?

It didn't seem necessary to reintroduce the reader to the life and history of this eminent figure or to present overall, summary expositions of his previous work. That has been done elsewhere, many times before. Besides, *Thesis Eleven* readers are already familiar with a dozen of his texts that appeared here for the first time, starting with 'From Ecology to Autonomy' in Number 3. Neither did it seem suitable to offer a traditional, late-in-life Festschrift, which can tend toward the hagiographical, the general appraisal of past work, and the encomium. Castoriadis is still very much alive and still producing creative, critical new work. What seemed most fitting, then, was to solicit a series of texts from writers who take Castoriadis's writings, including the most recent ones, as points of departure for their own investigations.

One of the best-known themes in Castoriadis's work is the 'cobirth' of philosophy, politics and democracy in ancient Greece. This cobirth entails a particularly difficult knot of problems because, while socially-historically specific, it forms the basis for reasoned, public inquiries and investigations about Greek society, our own society and other societies. Vassilis Lambropoulos has returned to this theme in a critical manner, noting Castoriadis's occasional apparent conflation of the birth of *politics* (the birth of the *polis*) with the subsequent birth of *democracy* (which Castoriadis calls 'a tragic regime'). Neither of these, Castoriadis has argued, can be deduced from any philosophy, nor can either yield one. But what are the social-historical origins of politics and democracy in relation to philosophy? *Cleisthenes the Athenian*, my recent translation of Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's classic 1963 text, presents the argument that influenced in part Castoriadis's thinking on this cobirth. Lambropoulos offers a rich alternative reading of the birth of a tragic politics, based upon the political poetry of the early Athenian philosopher and statesman Solon.

Sthasis Gourgouris has chosen to examine the overlap between *philosophy* and *sublimation* in Castoriadis, whose work is as strongly informed by

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psychoanalytical as by social–historical considerations. In many respects, Gourgouris’s highly serious, reconstructive paper reads like an essay Castoriadis himself might have written. Ranging from the Freudian *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* in ‘Marxism and Revolutionary Theory’ (1964–5) to Castoriadis’s recent work on ‘Psychoanalysis and Philosophy’ (1996), Gourgouris gathers the scattered references to these two themes. Sublimation, he finds, serves as a bridge between the psychical and social–historical domains – which are each irreducible to the other, Castoriadis argues, but which both have, in their ‘coincidence’ (Gourgouris’s term), profound ramifications for the practice of philosophy. After the political origins and implications of philosophy explored by Lambropoulos, Gourgouris brings out some psychoanalytical ones. Interestingly, another figure besides Castoriadis who looms large for both contributors is the critical theorist Theodor Adorno, though in a highly negative way for Lambropoulos and quite positively for Gourgouris.

Fabio Ciaramelli is perhaps the most accomplished commentator on the properly philosophical aspects of Castoriadis’s writings. In his contribution, Ciaramelli teases out additional meaning from Castoriadis’s philosophical work in relation to the ideas of Freud, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and others. The psychoanalytical as well as social–historical sides of the question of origin and creation are addressed, examined and shown in relief in the light of 20th-century philosophy. Ciaramelli’s ‘homage’ to Castoriadis is not hagiography but, rather, is reminiscent of ‘The Sayable and the Unsayable’, Castoriadis’s own 1971 ‘homage’ to Merleau-Ponty.

With all this emphasis on philosophy, one might be tempted to conclude that there really is an ‘earlier’ and ‘later’ Castoriadis, wherever one might mark the break and whichever of the two one might prefer. Stephen Hastings-King, a young historian who has just completed a thesis on *Socialisme ou Barbarie* – the first such effort in a quarter-century – dispels the illusion of a necessary ‘choice’ between these chronologically binary opposites by returning to the history of Castoriadis’s revolutionary group, carrying with him some of the tools Castoriadis himself has fashioned since the group’s demise. Excerpted from a larger work in progress, his piece examines *Socialisme ou Barbarie* during the crucial years leading up to the Hungarian Revolution (whose content the group had in large part anticipated). Hastings-King scrutinizes S. ou B.’s affective embeddedness in the ‘Marxist imaginary’, understood here not as a collection of texts or as a set of discursive practices but as an entire vision of the world and revolution – of which *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, more than any other revolutionary Marxist organization, had made creative use in the postwar period before breaking with that vision in the name of revolution during the early 1960s.

The interest of these contributors’ texts lies, I believe, not in their being some sort of representative selection and discussion of Castoriadis’s main themes. Instead, we have here a number of relatively youthful contributors (ranging in age from 37 to 42) who have taken what to each individually is

of interest, inspiration and concern in Castoriadis's writings and applied his ideas and problems to their own work. These texts are but a few examples of what may be seen as a (small but growing) trend among scholars and writers toward taking Castoriadis's themes as points of departure for their own interrogations and investigations. Among recently published books that embody such a tendency are Lambropoulos's *The Rise of Eurocentrism*, Gourgouris's *Dream Nation* and Joel Whitebook's *Perversion and Utopia*. Also of note is the new book by *Democracy and Nature* editor, Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*, which makes extensive use of Castoriadis's ideas in its second and third parts. Some scholars working on the Johnson–Forest Tendency and C. L. R. James – including Kent Worcester (whose recent *Political Biography* of James includes key references to Castoriadis) and Scott McLemee – are finding that Castoriadis's political and social thought cannot be ignored. A graduate student at Columbia University, Andreas Kalyvas is writing his thesis on Castoriadis because the latter's ideas offer a way to cut through many of the false dilemmas today plaguing 'political philosophy'. These burgeoning efforts, often on the part of a younger, post-1968 generation, are perhaps the best tribute to be rendered to Castoriadis on his 75th birthday. They continue the pioneering work of such English-language writers on Castoriadis as Dick Howard, Brian Singer and Arthur Hirsh.

In the English-speaking world, 1997 is a banner year for Castoriadis. Almost simultaneous with the appearance of this special issue is the publication of two new volumes: a retrospective *Castoriadis Reader* and a collection of some of his more recent writings, *World in Fragments*. Moreover, this year will see the long-awaited issuance of the paperback edition of Castoriadis's magnum opus, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Continuing a decade-and-a-half-long commitment to timely publication of Castoriadis's work, a commitment that continues previous efforts by London Solidarity and *Telos*, we conclude this special Castoriadis section with two new translations taken from the author's most recent French volume, *La Montée de l'insignifiance*. 'The Crisis of the Identification Process' and 'Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics' offer additional occasions, for those who have been stimulated by Castoriadis's still relevant and evolving themes and ideas, to make something meaningful of them for themselves. It is hoped that this trend will continue and that further creative uses of Castoriadis's work will appear in future issues of *Thesis Eleven* – whose Editors I thank for making this extraordinary opportunity possible.

David Ames Curtis