

# CASTORIADIS AND LASCH NARCISSISTIC NIHILISM AND THE MIRAGE OF INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I try to exploit some ideas delivered by Castoriadis and Lasch, in the view of understanding the paradox of the persisting legitimacy of the tenets of Neoliberalism, despite the bankruptcy of its policies. In this respect, the notion of the *social imaginary significations* seems helpful, shedding light to the predominant self-image of the individual, under Neoliberalism, as *entrepreneur of himself*. Such self-image isolates the individuals from each other, bolstering their narcissism. As a result, an ideology of individual “autonomy” is produced. As Lasch has pointed out, late Capitalism’s narcissism is the hallmark of heteronomy, immersing individuals in a vain pursuit of power over each other, through the acquisition and accumulation of futile commodities, a pursuit which results to nothingness. The perpetually unaccomplished search for the promised bliss, keeps people attached to this *social imaginary signification*, not despite, but because of the failure of its promises, in a postmodern version of the myth of the Danaïds sieve.

## **KEYWORDS**

Neoliberalism, Social Imaginary Significations, Psyche, Postmodernity, Autonomy.

Castoriadis did not deal much with neoliberalism. There are scattered comments, where he expresses his contempt for the “gurus” of neoliberalism, and their discourse, which he considers as is “a gross farce intended for imbeciles.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “The incoherency - rather, the shameless trickery - of contemporary ‘Liberalism’ in this regard defies the imagination. Where and when has one ever seen an economically, politically, and socially neutral budget (on the revenue side as well as the expenditure side)? When, as is the case everywhere today, half of the national product goes through the public sector in one way or another (State, local government organizations, Social Security); when 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 when one notices that the situation is irreversible (ten years of Thatcher and Reagan made no essential changes therein), neoliberal discourse appears for what it is: a gross farce intended for imbeciles.” Cornelius Castoriadis, *Fait e à faire*, in *The Castoriadis Reader* (edited and translated by David Ames Curtis) Blackwell 1997, p. 410.

Yet this farce, despite the failure of its promises, despite its crises and its catastrophic bankruptcy- both in terms of logical coherence of theory and in terms of economic policy- continues to dominate triumphantly in public and private life and discourse for no less than a half of century.

In this text, I'll borrow some crucial concepts from the Castoriadian instrumentarium, and make use of them in an attempt to reconstruct an approach to understanding neoliberalism (an understanding that Castoriadis himself never delivered), which could possibly help to clarify certain dimensions of the phenomenon.

The concepts that I consider important for this reconstruction are:

- (1) His concept of the social imaginary significations.
- (2) His positive account of the *market* and the idea of the *consumer sovereignty*.
- (3) His concept of individual and social *autonomy*.

I will try to discuss neoliberalism in the light of the following considerations.

Namely:

- (1) Neoliberalism should be considered not as an economic theory or economic policy, but as a “total social fact” (to remember Marcel Mauss), comprising a crystallization of social significations in post-modern capitalism.
- (2) The myth of the market as a perfectly impersonal machine recognizing and serving the needs of consumers must be debunked along with the concomitant myth of the omnipotence of the market under neoliberalism: on the contrary, the *real* functioning of the market can be- under conditions- considered as *part of the project of autonomy*. In this regard, the tripartite distinction of social life into “private-private, private-public and public-public” [*oikos* (*household*) - *agora* (*forum/market*)- *ekklesia* (*assembly of demos*)] proposed by Castoriadis seems more promising than the usual bilateral market-state distinction, which cannot properly depict and thematize both the strong state authoritarian interventionism of neoliberalism and the constitutional degeneration of democracy.
- (3) The neoliberal figure of the individual as an *entrepreneur of himself* serves as an illusory simulacrum of the *individual* autonomy, but at the cost of definitely divorcing it from any project of *social* autonomy. Nevertheless, if we understand autonomy in the way Castoriadis does, such a divorce is the hallmark of *heteronomy*, and even entails the annihilation of individuality itself. Despite its self-contradictory character, nevertheless, such a delusion recurs in an endless vicious circle. We will discuss this last point, with the help of Christopher Lasch's theory of the narcissistic (or minimal) self.

## THE NEOLIBERAL IMAGINARY

Hayek has made it clear that what we (the neoliberals) really “need” is a “liberal utopia”: what neoliberalism brings cannot be just technical economic proposals,

such as “a reasonable freedom of trade” or “a simple reduction of controls”. Its power must be expressed as a real radicalism, which promotes ideas that can inspire enthusiasm. Freedom of business and freedom of opportunity are ideals that, Hayek says, can “feed the imagination” of large numbers of people.<sup>2</sup> It is more than clear that Hayek focus here explicitly on the *imaginary*. The *imaginary* is what neoliberalism itself understands as the main target of its hegemony and dominance. Therefore, that is where we need to turn our attention.

If we underrate the imaginary and limit our critique of neoliberalism at the level of what Castoriadis initially called an “ensemblistic-identitary logic” and later, an “ensidic logic”, then we risk to let the triumphant hegemony of neoliberal ideas- despite the shortcomings and failures of neoliberal policies- appear to us as a paradoxical, irrational and incomprehensible phenomenon.

The predominant, regime of accumulation in contemporary capitalism, which we call ‘Neoliberalism’ is not a logically coherent set of principles and policies. Like any other ideological phenomenon is a process of perplexed arrangements, contradictory in themselves, but rationalized and justified in the light of a set of strong beliefs.

The crisis of 2008 was not resolved, in the way theory would have predicted, by the “creative destructiveness” of spontaneous market forces. On the contrary, and pretty inconsistently with the neoliberal doctrine- the governments rescued large companies and banks, by a gigantic transfer of resources. The taxation that had been previously condemned by the neoliberals as a kind of “theft” in the case of funding the welfare state, now is favored and celebrated as the only way of keeping the system rolling. The famous “free and perfect competition” is nowhere to be found in a rapidly oligopolized and monopolized world economy. The demand for public goods is more and more satisfied through direct orders from specific

<sup>2</sup> “What we lack is a liberal utopia, a programme which seems neither a mere defense of things as they are, nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism (...) which is not severely practical and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible (...) free trade and freedom of opportunity are ideals, which still may arouse the imaginations of large numbers, but the mere ‘reasonable freedom of trade’ or a mere ‘relaxation of controls’ is neither intellectually respectable nor likely to inspire any enthusiasm.

The main lesson which a liberal must learn from the success of the socialists is that it was their courage to be Utopian which gained them the support of the intellectuals and thereby an influence on public opinion which is daily making possible what only recently seemed utterly remote. Those who have concerned themselves exclusively with what seemed practicable in the existing state of opinion have constantly found that even that has rapidly become politically impossible as the result of changes in the public opinion which they have done nothing to guide. Unless we can make the philosophical foundations of a free society once more a living intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the ingenuity and the imagination of our liveliest minds, the prospects of freedom are indeed dark.” Hayek, “The Intellectuals and Socialism”, in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*, 1967, University of Chicago Press, p. 194.

suppliers, by-passing the market mechanism. This tantamount to the creation of state-protected exclusive markets accessible only to few capitalists. The bankruptcy of a dramatically growing part of society exceeds by far the initially anticipated collateral losses in the “ideal” of the “two-thirds society”, as we are already heading for a “one-third society”.

And yet, despite all the contradictions, fails, and predicaments, neoliberalism not only keeps dominating the discourse of the ruling intelligentsia, but seems to have penetrated the souls and mentalities of most members of society and give meaning to their lives.

The symbolic universe of the market seems to be activated by a grid of significations that prove very strong in animating the agents. The triumph of neoliberalism lies in a radical shift of the *social imaginary significations*. We can identify this radicalization at three interrelated levels:

1. The utopia of absolute capitalization of all social relations. It has been rightly pointed out - though not given due importance - that capitalism is nourished by practices, morals and values that it has inherited and not inherently created.<sup>3</sup> Neoliberalism tends to occupy and colonize all spaces and dimension of the social and to impose “economic calculation” as the only generally valid social of valuation. Of course, the complete extinction of the “community” and its absorption by the “society”,<sup>4</sup> namely a total “modernization” is a utopia, no more plausible than the dream of a classless society. However, as this utopia is a genuine descendant of modern progressivism, its “purity” seems to offer an attractive and fascinating alibi to frustrated and repented ex-marxists, who find here an interesting substitute for the radical drive to destroy any pre-modern heritage, but without challenging capitalism itself, this time. Thus, they can serve as apologists of the system, without sparing their ‘progressive’ and even ‘radical’ profile, in sharp contrast (which does not exclude political solidarity with) to the conservative discourse of traditional apologists.

2. The disenchantment of any alternative anti-capitalist perspective. The bankruptcy and collapse of the bureaucratic social formations, described as “really existing socialism” deflated and castrated the revolutionary imaginative and fueled the delusion of the “end of history”, both at the level of intellectual conceptions and of popular representations. This process had begun well before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

<sup>3</sup> “The institutions in these societies include a strong democratic component. But the latter has not been engendered by human nature or granted by capitalism or necessarily entailed by capitalism's development. It is there as residual result, as sedimentation of struggles and of a history that has gone on for several centuries.” Cornelius Castoriadis, “Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy”, *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*, <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.html>, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> I am using these terms in the way Ferdinand Toennies does in his seminal work *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*.

3. The exacerbation of the isolation of the individual, which had been the product of consumerism since the period of the welfare state, but was maintained even after it, through private debt. The endless cycle of the hunter behind an ever-changing “object *a*”, to use this Lacanian metaphor,<sup>5</sup> that constantly inflates the imagination with promises of happiness, always leading to disappointment and delusion immediately after their realization, only to be invested in another object and then in another and so on. Consumerism that penetrates into more and more of the previously communal stages of social life, following of course the general commercialization and monetization that disintegrates the community.<sup>6</sup>

The synergy of these three parameters entails a vertiginous acceleration of the whole system, in an uncontrollable race, which seems to be less and less hindered by the decaying pre-capitalist forms, while new forms of resistance are not yet fully available. The classical ideologies (religious or secular) with their corresponding systems of signification are declining if not obsolete. Traditional forms of social struggle are also not effective anymore.<sup>7</sup> The prevailing values (competitiveness, productivity, profitability, investment, monetization, individual responsibility, happiness, etc. and ultimately will for *power* and *enjoyment (jouissance)*- refer to a supposedly “sovereign and independent” individual, understood as enclosed in a private universe, with an atrophic, if existent at all, public life.<sup>8</sup> The neoliberalism war cry for a *minimal state*, does not seem to apply in economic policy, where the state has still a huge weight, not to mention the monstrous leviathan of repression that attending and ensuring the neoliberal doctrine of shock. I think rather that the privileged field of the cult of privacy and the extinction of the public is what Castoriadis calls “psyche”(soul), a concept which comprehends individuality within the social structuring of the soul.<sup>9</sup> In this context one can account for the internalization of the neoliberal rule and the phenomenon of “self-exploitation”.<sup>10</sup> Castoriadis, of course, in stark

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent discussion of this process in Lacanian terms, see Carla Lou Andréa Ibled, *Beyond limits: a psychoanalytical study of the neoliberal imaginary*. Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2021 PhD in Politics and International Relations.

<sup>6</sup> The capitalist logic has progressively invaded the whole space of human existence (even the most intimate forms of relations between the subjects). Jean-Claude Michéa, “L’âme de l’homme sous le capitalisme”

Postface à Cornelius Castoriadis-Christopher Lasch, *La Culture de l’égoïsme*. Climats- Flammarion, 2012, 29.

<sup>7</sup> On this, see the discussion between Castoriadis and Lasch, Cornelius Castoriadis-Christopher Lasch, *La Culture de l’égoïsme*. Climats- Flammarion, 2012

<sup>8</sup> “The historical process of total privatization of all common values to which lead by its essence the liberal dynamics (...) such transgressive dynamics results in the dissuasion of any sense of historical continuity, any notion of public space.” (Jean-Claude Michéa, L’âme de l’homme sous le capitalisme”, op.cit., 30.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. The Harvester Press, 1984, pp. 3-45.

<sup>10</sup> On the notion of self-exploitation, see Byung Chul Han, Psychopolitics. *Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Verso 2017.

contrast to Thatcherite nominalist nonsense that “there is no society, but only individuals”, has pointed out that *there is nothing more social than the individual himself*. We must, however, resist the temptation to attribute this triumph of privacy to a phenomenon of the so-called ideological “superstructure” which is supposed to be contrasted with a rationally explainable “real”. On the contrary, it is a *real* form of life, through which members of society recognize themselves and give meaning to their lives. That is why I believe that the concept of “social imaginary significations” is a more appropriate concept for a critical understanding of them. Also, the Castoriadian concept of “magma”<sup>11</sup> helps us to see this regime in a context of multi-layered reality (as implemented in every different social formation), away from a functional reductionism and a suffocating determinism that would trap us in the myth of TINA.

### INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY WITHOUT DEMOCRACY?

Critical understanding, however, means raising the issue from the perspective of autonomy. But what about autonomy? Who does want autonomy? Who thinks he/she has already conquered it? And what autonomy are we talking about?

Foucault in his lectures on biopolitics<sup>12</sup> has highlighted the centrality of the businessman figure for the self-understanding of the subject in the neoliberal regime. The subject of business has been generalized as the model by which all members of society perceive themselves, give meaning to their lives and regulate their behavior. All, regardless of their position in the social division of labor, are considered as entrepreneurs of themselves, who themselves occupy the position of human capital. Everyone is a capital entrepreneur of himself, even when the only capital he has to invest is his mere labor force. This means that the “loneliness” and individual isolation of the entrepreneur, that is, his “loneliness” as individual capital having no other motive than his own profit and accumulation against all competitors, becomes a general condition of human “loneliness”, since all other social dimensions of the

<sup>11</sup> In his own words: “We cannot think of the social, as coexistence, by means of inherited logic, and this means: we cannot think of it as the unity of a plurality in the usual sense of these terms; we cannot think of it as a determinable ensemble of clearly distinct and welldefined elements. We have to think of it as a magma, and even as a magma of magmas – by which I mean not chaos but the mode of organization belonging to a non-ensamblist diversity, exemplified by society, the imaginary or the unconscious” Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. The MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.

human tend to be absorbed by the anxious pursuit of self-valorization as capital.<sup>13</sup> I think that the tripartite distinction suggested by Castoriadis is very appropriate in this case: *oikos* (household) - *agora* (forum/market)- *ekklissia* (assembly of demos) or respectively: private / private-private / public-public / public. In the context of this topic, we would say that the instance principally affected and devalued by neoliberalism is that of *demos*: that is, the very political praxis of self-institution of the *citizens*. The market-place tends to absorb and standardize the whole sociability of the separated individuals. Hence the obsession of the neoliberals to promote the market as the model of *all* social relations and to represent society as a market or as a “market game”.

However, this shift leads to a restructuring of the whole, where *the market itself* undergoes a significant alteration. The political level, under these conditions, is reduced in a non-elected technocratic governance, whose hallmark is not “non-intervention”, of course- quite the opposite- but arbitrary governing, immune from any political control by the *demos*. The decline of democracy therefore it is not accidental but programmatic to the neoliberal project, both in practice and theory.<sup>14</sup>

But this decaying of the political, affects also the *market*. It may not have been given the attention it deserved, that in Adam Smith's classic liberalism, the market is understood as a mechanism that checks and controls the greed and rapacity of private entrepreneurs, imposing on them, through unlimited competition, both an average profit rate and the lowest prices, as well as the best-adapted qualities of the commodities produced. Of course, this model refers to a simple commodity production model before the industrial revolution, and despite the minimalist role of the politician, it clearly presupposes the public concern to eliminate monopolistic concentrations of power that distort the above-mentioned regulatory function of the market. Smith is very concerned with the tendency of such monopolies to translate their economic power into *political influence* over the legislature and the executive,

<sup>13</sup> “A warlike society tends to produce men and women who are at heart antisocial. It should therefore not surprise us to find that although the narcissist conforms to social norms for fear of external retribution, he often thinks of himself as an outlaw and sees others in the same way (...). The ethic of self-preservation and psychic survival is rooted, then, not merely in objective conditions of economic warfare, rising rates of crime, and social chaos but in the subjective experience of emptiness and isolation”. Christopher Lasch, *op. cit.* 51.

<sup>14</sup> As Hayek clearly put it: “In a society in which the spirit of enterprise has not yet spread, the majority has power to prohibit whatever it dislikes, it is most unlikely that it will allow competition to arise. I doubt whether a functioning market has ever newly arisen under an unlimited democracy, and it seems likely that unlimited democracy will destroy it where it has grown up.” F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty. A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy* Complete edition in new one-volume paperback. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Melbourne and Henley, 1982, vol. 3: *The Political Order of a Free People*, 77.

a phenomenon he severely condemns as *corruption*.<sup>15</sup> In neoliberal capitalism, no one can deny that this Smith's nightmare is exactly what prevails worldwide, although misunderstood as Smith's dream.

Castoriadis offers a positive understanding of the market, as a mechanism indispensable for recognizing consumer preferences. This sovereignty of the consumer, despite the predictions of neoclassical and neoliberal economic theories is prevented in capitalism, where on the contrary the so-called "needs" are invented and dictated to the consumer by the capitalist producers.<sup>16</sup> Castoriadis suggests, contrary to the common wisdom of most Marxists of his age, that it is in socialism that the market should deploy its potential to serve the sovereignty of the consumer. Instead of totally abolishing the market altogether, socialism should find a way to articulate a democratic planification of the production of means of production with the workings of the market, regulating the production of means of consumption.

Following the tripartite division, mentioned above, we would say that in Capitalism in its pure (neoliberal) edition, the third instance, i.e., *demos* is programmatically colonized by the second, i.d. *private / public*. This is the process which W. Brown calls "the destruction of the demos".<sup>17</sup> An illustration of this is the very common phenomenon that many executives of big companies move to leading positions of the administration and vice versa. The very same people constitute the pool that staffs both the economic corporations and the political administration.

In addition, the second instance, the *market (private/public)* tends to succumb to the first one, the *private / private* sector: most sectors of the economy are oligopolistic or even monopolistic, and thereby they extinct the 'public' element of the market, i.e., the impersonal check and balance normally exerted by free

<sup>15</sup> On A. Smith's notion of corruption, see Dionysis Drosos, "A.Smith and K.Marx : Alienation in Market Society", *History of Economic Ideas* IV/1996/1-2.

<sup>16</sup> "Socialist society will have to regulate the pattern of its consumption according to the principle of consumer sovereignty, which implies the existence of a real market for consumer goods. The "general decision" embodied in the plan will define: (1) what proportion of its overall product society wishes to devote to the satisfaction of individual consumer needs, (2) what proportion it would like to allocate to collective needs ("public consumption"), and (3) what proportion it wants to apply to the development of the productive forces (i.e., investment). But the structure of consumption will have to be determined by the demand of consumers themselves". Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Content of Socialism*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/cornelius-castoriadis-on-the-content-of-socialism#toc13>

<sup>17</sup> On the issue of the dismantlement of democracy under neoliberalism, see Dionysis Drosos, "Markets, Commons and the Dystopia of Spontaneous Order" in International Conference, Sector of Philosophy of the University of Ioannina and the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (RVP): *Philosophy and Crisis. Responding to Challenges to Ways of Life in the Contemporary World*, Ioannina, July 2013, Council for Research in Values & Philosophy, 2018, vol. I. See also Dardot, Pierre & Laval, Christian, *The new way of the world: on neoliberal society*, Verso, 2013 and the seminal Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, MIT Press, 2017.



competition. Without competition, production, prices, and quality of commodities become a prey of unchecked private will.

For Castoriadis, democracy is the regime of autonomy. The project of autonomy is conceived as a unified individual and collective project at the same time. “one cannot want autonomy without wanting it for everyone and its realization cannot be conceived of in its full scope except as a collective enterprise”.<sup>18</sup>

In this respect, the celebrated autonomy of the neoliberal individual in a context of ‘limited’ democracy and depoliticization of politics is monstrous construction of the imagination. This is what Klimis names the ideal type of a “social-monadic *psyche*”.<sup>19</sup>

My point is that the account of narcissism provided by Lasch is very relevant to this respect; such individual ‘autonomy’ in a society regulated by bureaucracy and money at the same time, is a *contradictio in terminis*, and a monstrous, illusory substitute for a lost meaning in a social life sinking to nothingness.

## NARCISSISM AND ANNIHILATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

This under-functioning of the market attended by the growing state authoritarianism evidences a discrepancy from the official liberal ideology (celebrating the values of market society: freedom, democracy, individual autonomy). But it seems that the thick legitimacy of Neoliberalism relies to the *imaginary*, and is discernable at the level of the *soul* (in its Castoriadian meaning).

Regardless whether the term “narcissistic society” is legitimate or not, one cannot fail to notice the systematic devaluation of the public dimension and the apotheosis of privatization, in any aspect of social life, and especially the self-understanding of the individual as the entrepreneur of his/her self, favors the regression into a primordial narcissism. This narcissism appears under the travesty of an illusory omnipotent “individual autonomy”: the supreme work of art of the individual is, presumably, the invention of himself. And this, without raising the issue of the social autonomy, and even without any reference to any community whatsoever.

In reality this is an extreme form of heteronomy, a heteronomy voluntarily internalized by the subjects, who through a hypnotizing self-deception, imagine themselves as autonomous and omnipotent, at the very moment when they become more dependent on others and heteronomous than ever before.

<sup>18</sup> Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, Massachusetts : the MIT Press, 1987, 107.

<sup>19</sup> This capitalist individual is not a subject in the Castoriadian sense, anymore, as it is deprived of the human characteristic of *self-reflexivity understood as self-transformation*. See the excellent analysis of this monster, offered by Klimis. Sophie Klimis, “From modernity to neoliberalism: what human subject?”, *Rhuthmos*, 5 avril 2014.

It is undeniable, of course, that without some degree of narcissism it is impossible for people to act and live as social beings. Kohut points out the positive potential of narcissism and its prospect of maturing into more socially compatible and less archaic forms. And he enumerates the qualities that are signs of such maturation of narcissism: *empathy, humor, creativity, wisdom, acceptance of mortality*.<sup>20</sup> But more of those values are perspicuously in decline in neoliberal society.<sup>21</sup> We can therefore assume *a contrario* that the fixation of narcissism on an archaic level becomes more and more resistant and inflexible.<sup>22</sup> Thus, despite the emphasis on pleasure, the so-called “happycracy”<sup>23</sup> leads the consumer to self-doubt. By creating needs, rather than *satisfying* them; this pursuit for pleasure gives birth to new anxieties, instead of silencing the old ones. By fostering fantasies of greatness that always remain unfulfilled, it fosters self-pity and self-contempt.<sup>24</sup> A miserable isolated individual, trapped in a vicious circle of unfulfilled desires with no escape left, other than the even deeper immersion in this vicious circle.

<sup>20</sup> H. Kohut, “Forms and transformations of narcissism”, in *Search for the Self*, Vol. 1. Ed. P. Ornstein. New York: International Universities Press. pp. 427-460, 1966. Ronald R Lee Ph.D., “A Kohutian Theory of Narcissism” [http://www.eapsp.org.au/files/a\\_kohutian\\_theory\\_of\\_narcissism--1-.pdf](http://www.eapsp.org.au/files/a_kohutian_theory_of_narcissism--1-.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> The more competitive individualism prevails, the less important *empathy* becomes. The less self-secure the individuals feel, the lower the quality of their sense of humor (very often distorted into practices of bullying). Creativity cannot be stopped as long as life exists, but becomes more and more depended from, and subservient to processes of capitalization and profitability. The extreme fragmentation of knowledge prevents the formation of a unified and coherent awareness, contiguous to wisdom. But one of the most manifest and sinister habitus of our era is the repulsion of death and mortality. Whereas all human civilization were built on the way they used to face mortality, and give meaning to a life, which is bound to end someday, our contemporary materialist civilization, as far as it is emancipated from religious and secular ideologies, seems to prefer turn the eyes the other way and denies the unavoidability of death. Hence the dramatical shortening of the relevant ceremonies, the habits of mourning, the burning of the dead etc. People behave more and more as working machines who never die, but only stop functioning someday. Any search for a meaning is to be avoided as a loss of time and money.

<sup>22</sup> “When the superego consists not so much of conscious ego ideals but of unconscious, archaic fantasies about parents of superhuman size, emulation becomes almost entirely unconscious and expresses not the search for models but the emptiness of self-images”, Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1991, p. 85. The eclipse of the authority deprives the superego of the external alliances necessary to control dangerous instinctive desires. There is a “shift from a society in which Super Ego values (the values of self-restraint) were ascendant, to one in which more and more recognition was being given to the values of the id (the values of self-indulgence)” Christopher Lasch, *ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>23</sup> Cabanas, Edgar and Illuz Eva, *Happycracy. How the Science and Industry of Happiness Controls our Lives*. Universidad Camillo José Cela, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> “At first glance, a society based on mass consumption appears to encourage self-indulgence in its most blatant forms. Strictly considered, however, modern advertising seeks to promote not so much self-indulgence as self-doubt. It seeks to create needs, not to fulfil them; to generate new anxieties instead of allaying old ones” Christopher Lasch, *ibid.*, 181.

As early as in the 1950s, it was pointed out that the early capitalist, future-oriented work-ethic was in a way of being replaced by a hedonism focused on the present, immediate satisfaction. The inspiration for a future, rapidly changing, but which can be speculated on the basis of a projective, proportional, in any case recognizable resemblance to the past and the present, was vanishing. The respective virtues of achievement, perseverance, diligence, temperance, postponement of present satisfaction, etc. become devalued and obsolete. Immediate satisfaction hedonism manifests itself in non-productive, financial speculation for the elites and in consumerism for all. These practices invest the ideological glamour of individualism. They are considered as the outcome of capitalist rationalism and are glorified as the triumph of the value of individuality. However - and this is an idea that has been maturing since the 1950s - this hedonism is illusory. Not only because of the futility of material pleasures, but because of the never ending and never fulfilled character of such pursuit. "But this hedonism is a fraud; *the pursuit of pleasure disguises a struggle for power*"<sup>25</sup> (emphasis added). The supposedly "private" pleasures derived from the enjoyment of the commodity is an endless *will to power*. There is no consumerism without comparison and imitation, without a thirst for domination over the other. A demonic race whose purpose is never fulfilled. A sieve of the Danaids that they can never fill. An infinite accumulation of symbolic power, which by definition has no end in itself. If there is vanity, it's right here: the will to power is the will to nothingness. The apotheosis of individual difference ends up in an eternal leveling simulation. Millions of people accumulate exactly the same "unique" and designed "only" for them items. Its practical use is of secondary importance, as the programmed obsolescence of the commodities leads to a constant accumulation of useful things in disuse, no matter either they were really useful or useless in the first place. The goods produced, advertised, wanted and consumed can certainly be bad in many ways (for the environment, the not human creatures, for the health (physical and mental) of the children and adult people, and "for their hopes of self-rule and autonomy".<sup>26</sup> As Castoriadis calls those goods, they are a "pile of junk".<sup>27</sup> The realm of consumerism is not the realm of free desire, but that of heteronomy par excellence: "In the 'wealthy' countries, people 'want' these goods because they are raised from their tenderest years to want them (go visit an elementary school today, if you doubt it) and because the regime prevents them, in

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Lasch, *ibid.*, 66. "...contemporary hedonism (...) originates not in the pursuit of pleasure but in a war of all against all, in which even the most intimate encounters become a form of mutual exploitation". Christopher Lasch, *ibid.*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Baruchello, "Capitalism and Freedom: The Core of a Contradiction - An Essay on Cornelius Castoriadis and John McMurtry", in *Nordicum-Mediterraneum. Icelandic e-Journal of Nordic and Mediterranean Studies*. December 2008, Volume 3, number 2.

<sup>27</sup> "The Rationality of Capitalism", *Figures of the Thinkable. Including Passion and Knowledge*. [http://www.notbored.org/FTP\\_K.pdf](http://www.notbored.org/FTP_K.pdf) , 115.

a thousand and oneways, from wanting anything else. In all countries, they want them because, while capitalism did not invent *ab ovo* what is called the demonstration effect, it has raised it to a hitherto unknown degree of power.”<sup>28</sup>

Lasch describes the “narcissistic ego” (or “minimal ego”), as more and more empty of content, whose ends in life are more and more restricted to simple survival.<sup>29</sup> For Castoriadis this is understood as an “absence of project” for the individual and the society.<sup>30</sup> As Castoriadis put it - in perfect agreement with Lasch - “the accretion of consumption and satisfaction in private life is the accretion of naught”.<sup>31</sup>

And this is how, “the glorification of the individual is his annihilation”.<sup>32</sup>

Society no longer supports the reproduction of the anthropological types relevant to the foundation of the capitalist system. It does not reproduce their ethos.

The central figure of the typical capitalist businessman, who is prudent, frugal and takes risks, invests, tests innovations, no longer exists. In its place we find the speculator of the so-called casino economy, a virtual economy. The frantic pursuit of quick and non-productive lucrativeness makes obsolete the ethics of patience and diligence of the classic businessman.

Thus, as this system encourages everyone to have the figure of the entrepreneur as a model of his/her self-image, it is natural that the imitation would be a caricature of the original. Everyone, acting as an entrepreneur of his own, imitates the prevailing mode of entrepreneurship; he/she tends to become thirsty for immediate profit and power, an opportunist, manipulative self-seeking individual, indifferent for any work-ethic.

As has recently been argued, the imaginary identities that dominate the neoliberal universe are impossible to fulfill and all promises of fulfillment, happiness, and supremacy they carry are doomed to failure.<sup>33</sup> The new business ethic promoted by neoliberalism, while claiming that it is liberal and permissive, that it is the “celebration of life” as Hayek put it, in reality establishes and justifies harsh hierarchies between those who succeed and those who lose. It is a division that permeates the entire social body and consolidates the isolation and de-politization of individual life. The projected “autonomy” is therefore no more than a self-deception, as it is trapped in the oxymoron of an individual autonomy completely cut off from the any claim for social self-institution. In addition, it is trapped in failure, as the

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>29</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis-Christopher Lasch, *La Culture de l'égoïsme*. Climats- Flammarion, 2012, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis-Christopher Lasch, *op.cit.*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis-Christopher Lasch, *op.cit.*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism op.cit.*, 70.

<sup>33</sup> Carla Lou Andréa Ibled, *Beyond limits: a psychoanalytical study of the neoliberal imaginary*, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

unbridled pursuit of indulgence constantly leaves out a lack. However, this failure is also the secret of its success and dominance, as it leaves no way to cover the shortage other than the perpetual and uninterrupted continuation of this futile pursuit.

The question of autonomy is still open, depending on the ways the individuals will invent in order to break the cages of neoliberal individuation and institute new forms of subjectivation and new systems of social significations. But to do this, they have to engage in a process of transformation of their psyche, their representations, desires and affections, their imaginary (which means a transformation of the society at the same time) by their common “praxis instituyente”.<sup>34</sup> Such praxis must overcome the illusions and temptations of blind progressivism (incarnated in the ultra-modernizing neoliberal imaginary) and discover the political means to accomplish the emancipatory and egalitarian program, without compromising “the anthropologic conditions of the communitarian fact itself”.<sup>35</sup> The neoliberal illusion of a pure market society, wiping out the communitarian fact, results to the reign of narcissism, which severely jeopardizes any project of autonomy.

<sup>34</sup> On this perspective, see Eric Martin, “Du néolibéralisme au commun – Partie 2 Document de réflexion à partir de l’ouvrage *Commun* de Pierre Dardot et Christian Laval”, L’Institut de recherche et d’informations socio-économiques (IRIS), Février 2017 *Document de réflexion*.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Claude Michéa, “L’âme de l’homme sous le capitalisme”, Postface à Cornelius Castoriadis-Christopher Lasch, *La Culture de l’égoïsme*. Climats-Flammarion, 2012, 31.