

CASTORIADIS, ANTI-HUMANISM AND THE PROBLEM OF ALIENATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at reconstructing Cornelius Castoriadis' arguments for the pertinence of the concept of alienation and against its explicit or oblique rejection that made its appearance in the French philosophical scene during the 1960s, under the banner of anti-humanism. My claim is that these are important arguments that are still philosophically and politically relevant, even more so given the recent (re)turn to the concept of alienation, by philosophers and critical social theorists such as Rahel Jaeggi, Hartmut Rosa, Stéphane Haber and Miguel Abensour.

KEYWORDS

Alienation, Autonomy, Instituted Heteronomy, Marxism, French Ideology.

After a long presence in critical social theory and philosophy, at least since the publication of Karl Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* in 1932 (Marx 2007), the concept of alienation fell into disrepute during the 1960s, notably in France. Ever since, an injunction seems to have prohibited its use for several decades. This ban went hand in hand with the rejection of what has been called Humanism. In his 1974 *Althusser's Lesson*, Jacques Rancière encapsulates the atmosphere that dominated the French philosophico-political scene during the 1960s and the early 1970s as follows: "The death of man and the annihilation of the subject are on everyone's lips. Invoking Marx or Freud, Nietzsche or Heidegger, the 'process without a subject' or the 'deconstruction of metaphysics,' big and small mandarins are everywhere, tracking down the subject and expelling it from science [...]. The only disagreement among our academic philosophers concerns what sauce to eat 'the subject' with. As for 'man,' any *hypokhâgneux* [student of the preparatory course of entry to the Ecole Normale Supérieure] would blush to invoke him in a paper. The only ones who dare speak of man without provisos or precautions are, in fact, workers" (Rancière 2011, 84).

As this passage suggests, and is well known, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan are among the major figures who contributed to this atmosphere. According to Althusser, the young Marx is not really Marx, namely the scientist who

discovers the new continent of history; he is just a young Hegelian who works and thinks with idealist concepts, which means concepts that are not only theoretically inappropriate for analyzing the real, but also practically dangerous. Furthermore, for Althusser, the young Marx's humanism and the concept of alienation go together whereas the mature Marx, who rejects both the notion of alienation and that of human essence, is the proponent of a "theoretical anti-humanism" which is "the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and its practical transformation" (Althusser 2005, 236).¹ As for Foucault, he proceeded with a radical historicization of what he calls the discourse on man by claiming that it is a product of early modernity. This historicization implies that such a discourse can disappear, after having been dominant in philosophy and the human sciences. According to Foucault's famous phrase at the end of *The Order of Things*, as a "recent invention" of European culture, man could, in the near future, be "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault 1994, 386-87). Lacan's case is slightly different, since the concept of alienation is quite present in his theory (Lacan 1973). One might ask if this meant that his position was on the other side of the dividing line between humanism and anti-humanism. Not at all. Lacan gives a twist to the concept that renders it unrecognizable from that bequeathed by the tradition of social theory and philosophy. Whereas, in this tradition, the concept of alienation aims at bringing the pathologies of modernity and of capitalist relations to light, Lacan views alienation as constitutive of subjectivity.

In recent decades there has been a revival of interest in the concept of alienation. I believe that this is a positive development in so far as alienation is a valuable concept should one seek not merely to describe, but also to criticize, phenomena that would otherwise remain unnamed and thus obscured. Among those who have attempted to rehabilitate the concept are German philosophers and social theorists Rahel Jaeggi and Hartmut Rosa, as well as French philosophers such as Stéphane Haber and, in a more implicit manner, Miguel Abensour. In her book *Alienation [Entfremdung]*, Jaeggi claims that alienation is "a foundational concept of social philosophy" (Jaeggi 2014, xx), whose retreat from philosophical vocabulary is detrimental in view of the malaise provoked by contemporary "economic and social developments" (Ibid., xix). Jaeggi also asserts that the concept is related to several problematic assumptions, such as an essentialist view of the subject as unified and in full possession of its powers. Therefore, she takes into account the critique to which these assumptions have been subjected and proposes "a critical reconstruction of [the] conceptual foundations" (Ibid., xx) of alienation by referring both to the Hegelian-Marxist and to the existentialist paradigms. Rosa

¹ Though I refer to the French edition of Althusser's *For Marx*, I use the English translation by Ben Brewster: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1964/marxism-humanism.htm> (accessed on September 27, 2022).

re-elaborates the concept of alienation by relating it to what he considers to be the main feature of contemporary societies: a novel experience of time in terms of acceleration which produces a “dynamic stabilization.” This experience of time fosters new forms of alienation pertaining to our relations to ourselves, to our activities, to others, and to the things of the world. To the muteness that is at the core of these relations Rosa counterposes resonance (Rosa 2010; 2019). Haber, who has extensively discussed the history and meaning of alienation since Hegel, agrees with Jaeggi in maintaining that contemporary critical social theory and philosophy should not eschew this concept. Furthermore, he proposes reading the *Paris Manuscripts* in a non-essentialist manner, as a text where the core problem is the subjective experience of the dispossession of power, capacities, and relations to the self, others, and the world; an experience that has an objective (systemic and institutional) counterpart (Haber 2006; 2008; 2013). Abensour’s case differs from the previous ones given that he does not explicitly engage in a project which seeks to rehabilitate this concept. Yet, his reading of Marx in his book *Democracy against the State. Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, can undoubtedly be seen as an effort to bring the pertinence of the concept to the fore: by highlighting the import of Feuerbach’s influence on Marx, notably regarding the former’s notion of inversion (where the subject becomes the attribute and the attribute becomes the subject), Abensour interprets Marx’s 1843 *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* (Marx 1982) as a text wherein one of the key questions is that of the manner in which the objectification of the political activity of the *demos* would not culminate in alienation (Abensour 2012, 141-190).

Abensour was an assiduous reader of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in his youth, during the 1960s, and he was deeply influenced by both the journal and the group that bore the same name (Abensour 2014, 17). While he subsequently collaborated with Castoriadis in reviews such as *Libre*, Abensour nevertheless does not refer to Castoriadis in the above-mentioned book, even though some allusions to issues addressed by Castoriadis are legible if one is inclined to read between the lines of certain chapters.² The case of the other three aforementioned theorist is, however, different in so far as, to my knowledge, neither Haber, nor Jaeggi, nor Rosa, pursue a dialogue with Castoriadis.³ It seems to me that this absence of dialogue could be explained by the fact that, while Castoriadis undertakes an extensive critique of Marx and Marxism without trying to distinguish between the two, Haber, Jaeggi, and even Rosa (in a less elaborate manner) argue that the rehabilitation of the concept cannot but make a detour through Marx. Also, and apart from the issue of national philosophical traditions, Jürgen Habermas’

² I have in mind, among others, the first pages of Chapter VI entitled “Vrai démocratie et modernité” (Abensour 2014, 191-203).

³ For a brief reference to Castoriadis see Haber 2015, 69.

critique of Castoriadis in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Habermas 1985, 374-380; 387-396), may have played a certain role in this absence.⁴ I think, however, that there are also two other, interrelated reasons: in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (which I suppose is the book by Castoriadis that these philosophers must have read), the author does not explicitly defend the pertinence of the concept of alienation, although its criticism was already on the rise. What is more, if one reads the book by taking the theme of alienation as a guiding thread, one realizes that alienation is an operative concept and as such it remains rather under-thematized; it is massively present, notably in the first part of the book, and yet, simultaneously, it is not thoroughly elaborated. It is almost as if Castoriadis took its meaning and content for granted.

Before turning to alienation, let me first refer briefly to Castoriadis' position vis-à-vis anti-humanism. For Castoriadis, French anti-humanism boils down to "French Ideology." In a short article published in 1978 in *Le Nouvel Observateur* entitled "The Diversionists" ("Les divertisseurs," which also means "The entertainers"), he maintains that Foucault, Althusser, and other structuralists (as well as Sartre before them), produce a "complementary ideology" working in parallel and in conjunction with the dominant ideology (or "main ideology," in his terms) which aims at corroborating the belief that "the problem of society is not on the agenda" (Castoriadis 1993a, 272) or that it will soon be solved. More precisely, the function of their discourses consists in diverting their public's attention and thought from the major problems of a given period. Thus, they contribute to the reproduction of the status quo. For example, Castoriadis claims that during the 1960s the practical-political stakes concerned "the extension of the revolutionary problematic to all domains of life, and in the first place to daily life, with the accent placed on the autonomous activity and struggle of human beings as *subjects* against an alienating system" (Ibid., 273). Althusserianism circumvented and concealed these problems by denouncing the idea of alienation, by presenting Soviet concentration camps as the outcome of the alleged inscription of Stalinism in the tradition of humanism, and by trying to persuade people "that they were nothing and that 'science' [...] is everything" (Ibid., 274). As a consequence, these are intellectuals who, far from contributing either to the preparation of May 68, or to its subsequent understanding (as some theorists had claimed at the time), "speak so that people *will miss the point*" ("parlent pour que les gens *pensent à côté*" - which one might also translate as follows: "so as to make people think beside the point") (Ibid.). Hence their role as diversionists. In the same vein, some years later, in 1986, in his severe but totally just critique of Luc Ferry's and Alain Renault's book *La pensée 68. Essai sur l'antihumanisme contemporain*, Castoriadis argues that Lacan, Foucault, and Althusser are "ideologues of man's

⁴ For an illuminating interpretation of Castoriadis which also argues against Habermas' reductive reading, see Ciaramelli, 1989.

impotence before his own creations; and it is a feeling of impotence, discouragement, tiredness, that they have come to legitimate after May 68” (Castoriadis 1997a: 54). Also, he sees the “death of politics” as the “inescapable corollary” of the discourse on the death of man (an “inanity” in his proper words) (Ibid., 51).

One finds a quite succinct advocacy of humanism in the introductory paragraphs of the 1986 article on “The State of the Subject Today,” where Castoriadis focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on psychoanalysis. Although no name is mentioned in these paragraphs, it seems to me obvious that Castoriadis has again in mind, among others, Foucault and Lacan but also Martin Heidegger and the Heideggerians, and probably Jacques Derrida – given Derrida’s essay “The Ends of Man” (Derrida 1972) and the book with the same title based on a Colloque de Cerisy dedicated to Derrida (Nancy 1981). After having said, in his well-known ironic and rejective style which at times obscures the content of his arguments, that their theories are bygone philosophical fashions, Castoriadis claims that “the talk about the death of man and the end of the subject has never been anything other than a pseudotheoretical cover for an evasion of responsibility” (Castoriadis 1997b, 137) – an issue which, as is well known, is crucial for Castoriadis. And in order to substantiate his defense of the question of the subject, he formulates it in a manner reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur’s gesture in *Oneself as Another*, where the issue of human selfhood is addressed through the question “Who?” pluralized in the sub-questions: “Who is speaking? Who is acting? Who is recounting about himself or herself? Who is the moral subject of imputation?” (Ricoeur 1992, 16). For Castoriadis “there is no conceivable human tongue in which it is impossible to pose the following questions: *Who* did this? *Who* said that?” (Castoriadis 1997b, 138). In a nutshell, the question of the subject is related to the possibility of imputation, the absence of which would render society inconceivable.⁵

Let me now turn to the issue of alienation. In considering this issue, I shall focus on the following texts: the essay “On the Content of Socialism,” published in three parts in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1955, 1957, and 1958; the first, unpublished version of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory”⁶ (which forms the first part of Castoriadis *magnum opus*), as well as several related manuscripts of the 1960s published posthumously, in 2009, in the volume *Histoire et création*; and *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.

“Alienation in Capitalist Society”: this is the title of the concluding section of the first part of the essay “On the Content of Socialism” (Castoriadis 1988a, 305). The role of this section in the essay should not pass unnoticed. The problem of alienation is pivotal

⁵ Warren Breckman (1998) discusses in detail Castoriadis’ defense of the subject and his position in the French post-Marxist intellectual debate.

⁶ The date that this first version was written is unknown.

in Castoriadis' critique of capitalism and in his investigation of the content of socialism. In this essay Castoriadis makes a twofold gesture towards the Marxian problematic of alienation: he follows it and simultaneously modifies it. He follows it in so far as he approaches alienation in tandem with objectification; he modifies it in so far as he changes the perspective from which he interprets class division. Allow me to develop these two points.

For Castoriadis, just like for Marx, humans are active beings. Objectification is constitutive of their activity: every human activity –practical, theoretical, or linguistic– is a process which ends at the existence of a thing in the world that is separate from the subject, that stands vis-a-vis its author. Following Marx, Castoriadis distinguishes objectification from alienation: the latter is that version of the former where the products of human activity do not only acquire an independent existence but also dominate the producer, the creator, instead of being controlled by her. In alienation, the object “escapes its author without its author being able to escape it” (Ibid.). In tune with Marx, Castoriadis also claims that, whereas every alienation is an objectification, “not every form of objectification is necessarily a form of alienation insofar as it can be consciously taken up again, reaffirmed or destroyed” (Ibid.). Alienation is the process whereby humans are deprived of their capacity to transform the world through their activity and to have command over this activity. The activity thus appears as alien to the subject who is split “between what [s]he would like to do and what [s]he has to do” (Castoriadis 1988b, 94). Furthermore, Castoriadis echoes Marx by referring to an “enslavement to the machine, and through the machine, to an abstract, foreign and hostile will” (Castoriadis 1988a, 306). All in all, for Castoriadis the stakes are the same as for Marx; they have to do with the very “self-expression and self-creation” of human beings (Ibid.).

Let me now elaborate on the second point, i.e., Castoriadis' modification of the Marxian problematic of alienation. As is well known, the members of the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* were among the first theorists who undertook a critical analysis of the Soviet regime from a revolutionary standpoint. Castoriadis' contribution to this collective project, developed in numerous essays (Castoriadis 1974), brings the specific class structure of the regime to light while also uncovering the pressing theoretical and practical problems that this “new and monstrous form of exploiting society and totalitarian oppression” (Castoriadis 1988b, 90) posed to whoever was receptive enough to its novelty. Like other members of the group, notably Claude Lefort (1979), Castoriadis was led to re-examine the Marxist tradition and to think with and against Marx. This is, schematically, the context in which Castoriadis modifies the Marxian understanding of alienation.

It is through the issue of management that Castoriadis thematizes the problem of alienation. This thematization derives from the position according to which the

fundamental division of contemporary societies is not that between the owners of the means of production and the owners of labor power. In Castoriadis' words, "in our time the problem of the division of society into classes appears more and more in its most direct and naked form, and stripped of all juridical cover, as the problem of the division of society into directors and executants" (Castoriadis 1988a, 297) – a division constitutive of the Soviet regime as well. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss in its entirety Castoriadis' multifaceted analysis of the question of management.⁷ For my purposes, it suffices to say that one of the merits of this analysis consists in demonstrating that management, far from being neutral, is an activity with multiple pre-suppositions and with farfetched ramifications that differ radically from the handling of "problems admitting of a single, unique solution at the end of one rigorously defined path" (Castoriadis 1988c, 180). Management involves the choice of objectives and the choice of the means for attaining them. This dimension of choice, constitutive of managerial activity, involves the exclusion of alternative objectives and means. Castoriadis lays bare this core element of management against its dissimulation by the dominant political and economic discourse as well as by the contemporary theorizations of management both in industrial sociology and in Marxism (Ibid., 170ff.). He thus shows that the issue of management points to a process of raising questions about society, about what its goals should be and how they should be attained. This is the reason why management, far from concerning exclusively the economic sphere, concerns society as a whole. Through these lenses, alienation consists in being dispossessed of the possibility and the capacity to raise practically significant questions and to make choices about society and about the way in which it should be, by participating in the process of deciding about objectives and about the means to attain them, in all the spheres of social life.⁸ In divided societies the activity of raising questions and taking decisions about society remains implicit, veiled, and restrained to the "narrow stratum of directors (whose function is to decide and organize everything)" while "the vast majority of the population [...] are reduced to carrying out (executing) the decisions made by these directors" (Castoriadis 1988b, 93). For the latter, this entails being alienated from their own lives. Against this background, self-management appears as the sole way through which this process can become explicit and expand to encompass every member of

⁷ See, indicatively, the discussion of the four different but intertwined types of managerial functions (the coercive, the administrative, the technical, and the truly managerial), whose change or disappearance is correlated with worker's management (Castoriadis 1988b, 109-12).

⁸ As Castoriadis will write in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," society's "own alienation and inertia prevent it from giving itself any new tasks or asking itself any new questions. For this reason it encounters no crucial problems that might put to the test its basic inability to make an explicit choice, even an irrational one. Indeed, nothing helps it to imagine that it might someday have to act on such a choice" (Castoriadis 1988d, 280).

society, in all domains of activity; and the councils prove to be the institution that corresponds to self-management, because they offer a mode of organization that can host and foster humans' "will to self-expression" (Ibid., 96).⁹

Castoriadis' position that the separation between the functions of direction and the functions of execution is the locus of class division and thus alienation, and the ensuing focus on the issue of management entail an emphasis on power relations and politics, in the broad sense of the term, which implies the necessity of debate, discussion and dispute about all matters pertaining to the social world (which means that no issue is considered as self-evident, not even that of the so-called "human needs"). This political dimension also applies to the sphere of production. Against this backdrop, Castoriadis also tackles the question of political alienation proper, which he construes as "the expropriation of the power of the many for the benefit of the few" (Ibid., 99) by separate, bureaucratically structured bodies such as the state and the parties. Castoriadis even goes so far as to claim that the existing political institutions tend to destroy "at its roots" (Ibid., 142) the will of people to get involved in public affairs and to participate in politics.

Although Castoriadis does not put in doubt that alienation appears in the sphere of production, he nonetheless challenges the determining role that Marx and Marxism attribute to this sphere. Production does not have the status of a domain vis-à-vis of which the other domains and their respective forms of alienation are derivative. For Castoriadis "the structures of class domination impose themselves right away on all three levels [the economic, the cultural and the sexual] at once and are impossible and inconceivable outside of this simultaneity, or equivalence" (Castoriadis 1988a, 307). A crucial consequence of this approach is that it invalidates the idea that the end of alienation in the allegedly determining domain would automatically bring about the abolition of alienation in all the other, allegedly secondary domains. Furthermore, Castoriadis contends that Marx's analysis of alienation presents a flaw, which consists in that he fails to appreciate the mode and the content of the struggle against alienation, in all its versions, including political alienation. This struggle is constitutive of capitalist societies; it becomes revolution when it "reaches a certain intensity" (Castoriadis 1988c, 156). This is the reason why alienation is the problem par excellence that revolutionary theory must address.

To be sure, there are some terminological differences between the essay "On the Content of Socialism" and Castoriadis' subsequent texts of the 1960s. For example, in

⁹ It is worth citing the whole passage: "The council is not a *miraculous* institution. It cannot be a means for the workers to express themselves if the workers have not decided that they will express themselves through this medium. But the council is an *adequate* form of organization: Its whole structure is set up to enable this will to self-expression to come to the fore, when it exists" (Castoriadis 1988b, 96).

the latter texts the use of the term socialism recedes, without disappearing, in favor of the term autonomy. Nonetheless, one should not overemphasize this terminological change, lest one wants to arrive at the conclusion that Castoriadis' critique of Marx and Marxism signals the wholesale rejection of all his previous analyses. To be more precise, it seems to me that in order to grasp the content of an autonomous society in Castoriadis' sense one cannot but suppose that such a society would be implicated in a process of reorganization of its production so as to change "the very content of work" (Castoriadis 1988b, 102), in the manner presented in the essays of the 1950s.¹⁰ Furthermore, in the texts of the 1960s there is a displacement toward a more philosophical inquiry, ontological to be precise, and an enrichment of the problematic of alienation through a turn to Freudian theory and the question of the unconscious – here the dispute with Lacan is pivotal. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the core of Castoriadis' outlook on the problem of alienation remains unaltered given that he continues to view alienation "as a reality that has to be overcome" (Castoriadis 2009, 153)¹¹ and to resort, albeit in a rather implicit manner, to the couple "objectification/alienation," for example when he underscores that "alienation appears *in*" the relation between society and the institution "but *is not* this relation," (Castoriadis 1987, 114) or, to give another example, in the following passage: "once an institution is established it seems to become autonomous, [...] it possesses its own inertia and its own logic [...] in its continuance and in its effects, it outstrips its function, its 'ends,' and its 'reasons for existing' [...] what could have been seen 'at the start' as an ensemble of institutions in the service of society becomes a society in the service of institutions" (Ibid., 110). In these texts, alienation is more directly presented as the other of autonomy and as the synonym of heteronomy – "alienation or heteronomy" is an expression that the author repeatedly employs.

In these texts Castoriadis does not try to defend the concept against its explicit rejection, which had already made its appearance in the French philosophical scene. But he does position himself against what I would call the oblique rejection of alienation. In this case, the term is maintained and used, but the concept is deprived of its critical content and edge: alienation is turned into an ontological or structural determination of humans and their history. Lacan is one of Castoriadis' targets here; the other is, rather unjustly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as the first draft of "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" testifies (Castoriadis 2009: 167) and as Nicolas Poirier has thoroughly discussed in his book *L'Ontologie politique de Castoriadis. Création et institution* (Poirier 2011, 284-300).

¹⁰ "What was intended by the term 'socialist society' we henceforth call autonomous society," writes Castoriadis in the 1979 Introduction to the volume *Le Contenu du socialisme* (Castoriadis 1993b: 317).

¹¹ I translate all the passages from this volume.

When addressing these approaches, Castoriadis has an interesting set of arguments, according to which they tacitly presuppose what they seemingly want to destroy: the phantasm of total transparency and plenitude, the denial of human finitude, or the idea that the human subject is solely the product of its proper activity and that its relations to others, to objective exteriority and to history are secondary, and destructive of its very being.¹² In a word, the real but unavowed starting point of these approaches is an image of the human subject with God-like attributes. It is only from such a viewpoint, Castoriadis claims, that every objectification (be it theoretical, practical, or linguistic) as well every relation to the other, to exteriority or to history can be seen as intrinsically alienating. And then, in a second step, from the fact that humans are beings of language, that they are always already in relation with others, that they are bodily creatures, that they cannot control history since history is the element in which they are immersed, these approaches arrive at the conclusion that alienation is constitutive. For Castoriadis, if this conclusion has any meaning at all, it lies in that it reproduces the “theological view of alienation” (Castoriadis 2009, 153), where the latter is understood as “man’s privation of the attributes of [an] absolute Other and as the absolute dependance on this other” (Ibid., 157).¹³ To this, Castoriadis retorques that alienation is a “historical-practical category” related to the historical existence of the project of autonomy; it is “what the project of autonomy encounters in the domain of the individual as well as in the domain of the collective” (Ibid., 181). In other words, alienation is conceivable as a category because there are, in history, indications of the fact that humans recognize institutions as their own products, which they consciously (which means reflectively and deliberately) reproduce or venture to change, and even to destroy.

From the above, one can infer that Castoriadis deems necessary and undertakes distinguishing a proper from an improper construal and use of the concept of alienation. This endeavor suggests how crucial the concept and the corresponding problem are for him. An improper construal is premised upon the confusion of objectification with alienation. Instead of considering the phenomenon of alienation as a problem to be overcome, this construal attributes the status of an ontological or structural given to it, thus rendering it “perennial” (Castoriadis 1987, 113). The proper construal, which Castoriadis defends and whose philosophical and practical presuppositions he tries to explore and elucidate, asserts the close and intricate relation between objectification and alienation without confounding them. Against this backdrop, this construal leads

¹² This argument, amply developed in the first unpublished version of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory”, can be read between the lines of the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis 1987, 101-14).

¹³ “[...] l’aliénation a été théorisée comme privation, pour l’homme, des attributs de cet Autre absolu et dépendance absolue à son égard.”

to the acknowledgement of the fact that the products of past human activity become “the created conditions of action” (Castoriadis 2009, 176), conditions that humans cannot circumvent but must, on the contrary, take into account (“tenir compte”) in their effort to give meaning to their lives, to the past and to the world. Taking these conditions into account, far from amounting to being determined by them, means being open to time, to (past, present and future) others, and to the world, as well as being capable of acting with the view to transform these selfsame conditions. Thus, this construal preserves the critical core of the concept; its horizon is the end of alienation, which consists of a different relation between humans and the products of their activity.

As I have already implied, this construal is in tune, but of course not identical, to the Marxian understanding, enriched through Castoriadis’ turn to Freudian theory. And it is worth underlying at this juncture that, in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* and in the other preparatory texts of the 1960s to which I have referred, some of the most positive remarks on Marx concern the problem of alienation. Allow me to quote one of the most telling passages: “So what is alienation? We have given the following answer: [it is] the autonomization of the imaginary in the institution which leads to the autonomization of the institution as such; and this answer is not essentially different from the one given by Marx when he was referring to man’s own creations, to the products of his work and activity which get separated from him, confront him like independent forces and dominate him. The meaning that these two answers share is that alienation [...] originates in history, that it has neither a transcendent source nor a transcendental foundation” (Castoriadis 2009, 170-171).¹⁴ More generally, Castoriadis adopts the schemes that are present in the young Marx, not only in the *Paris Manuscripts* but also in the *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”*: the scheme of loss or dispossession and the scheme of inversion, where the end becomes means, the subject turns into object, the creator perceives herself as the created, activity reverses into passivity or the part presents itself as the whole. Therefore, I would also claim that Castoriadis’ at times ferocious and unjust critique of Marx should not totally disguise his debt to him; or, to put it in another way, the concept of alienation probably offers a good guiding thread in order to uncover aspects of Castoriadis’ debt to Marx concealed under this critique. I would thus also agree with Thibault Tranchant who, in his PhD Dissertation *Raison et création. Le constructivisme et l’institutionnalisme postmétaphysique de Cornelius Castoriadis*, claims that the concept of alienation plays a significant role in the whole of

¹⁴ “Qu’est-ce que donc l’aliénation ? Nous avons répondu : l’autonomisation de l’imaginaire dans l’institution qui entraîne l’autonomisation de l’institution comme telle, et cette réponse n’est pas, dans son essence, différente de celle que Marx fournissait en parlant des créations propres de l’homme, des produits de son travail et de son activité qui se séparent de lui, le confrontent comme des forces indépendantes et le dominant. Le sens commun de ces réponses est que l’aliénation, [...], s’origine dans l’histoire, qu’elle n’a ni source transcendante ni fondement transcendantale.” See also Castoriadis 1987, 111; 132.

Castoriadis' work "which is inscribed in a problematic of 'autonomization' or 'alienation' of the instituting act" (Tranchant 2019, 279).

To conclude, I would argue that Castoriadis' explicit and implicit defense of the concept of alienation as well as his "precocious critique of anti-humanism" (Audier 2008, 221) can contribute to what Haber (2006, 62) has called the current "rediscovery of alienation". Long before this rediscovery, Castoriadis insists on the pertinence of alienation as a concept which "investigates not only what prevents us from living well but also, and more important, what prevents us from posing the question of how we want to live in an appropriate way" (Jaeggi 2014, xxii). Furthermore, he grapples with and tries to avoid several of the problems that have accompanied the history of the concept in modernity, some of which are also present in Marx. He takes his distance from the essentialism and the subjectivist ontology with which the modern notion of alienation was correlated: "In the subject as subject we find the nonsubject, and all the traps it falls into have been dug out by subjectivist philosophy itself for having forgotten this fundamental truth" (Castoriadis 1987, 105). In the same vein, Castoriadis repudiates the ideal of a fully transparent society, an ideal which animates what he calls the "mythical sense" of communism (Ibid., 110) and which is also present in Marx himself, with the argument that the institution, *qua* institution, signals an irreducible and unsurpassable distance between society and its creations that cannot and should not be abolished. But, contrary to other French thinkers of the 1960s, Castoriadis does not take the further step which consists in rendering "the model of alienation [...] the most sophisticated and dense form [of the traditional philosophical subjectivism], the form that must be attacked" (Haber 2006: 61). From Castoriadis' point of view, the end of alienation would not signify the full reappropriation of the products of human activity, although it would signify the (fragile and interminable) reappropriation of humans' power to act, to be agents, individually and collectively. As a struggle against total determination by the unconscious and by the discourse of the Other, or against the autonomization of institutions, the struggle for autonomy, which is the struggle against alienation, is premised upon the recognition of the fact that *there is* an unconscious, that *there is* a discourse of the Other which cannot and should not be eliminated - "never will my discourse be wholly mine," Castoriadis claims (1987, 103)-, that the products of human activity *do* acquire a separate existence vis-à-vis their authors and, finally, of the fact that our relation to the social-historical is "a relation of inherence, which as such is neither freedom nor alienation, but the ground upon which freedom and alienation can exist" (Ibid., 112). The absence of such a recognition is, it seems to me, an essential aspect of alienation, in the sense that it presupposes the denial of the structure of the human psyche, of separation and of time; in other words, it presupposes what Castoriadis calls "the phantasy of mastery" (Ibid., 373). I believe that his work shows that it is possible

to think and speak of alienation as a problem to overcome –or at least to restrain– without sharing this phantasy.

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