The Theme of "The Rising Tide of Insignificancy" in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis*

*It's all one album. All the material in the albums [*We're Only in It for the Money*, a revised version of Zappa's solo album* Lumpy Gravy*,* Cruising with Ruben & the Jets *and* Uncle Meat*] is organically related and if I had all the master tapes and I could take a razor blade and cut them apart and put it [the "No Commercial Potential" project musical material] together again in a different order it still would make one piece of music you can listen to. Then I could take that razor blade and cut it apart and reassemble it a different way, and it still would make sense. I could do this twenty ways. The material is definitely related.* —Frank Zappa[1]

As coordinator of the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website's Bibliographers' Collective and responsible for its English and French Castoriadis bibliographies and webographies, I have the opportunity to take note not only of all texts written by Castoriadis, now listed in 20 languages, but also everything written *about* Castoriadis in those languages. Since his death in 1997, it is interesting to note, two particular themes—one specific, one general—stand out as most cited.

The specific one is Castoriadis's devastating criticism of Bernard-Henri Lévy, whose *Barbarism with a Human Face*, along with other "antitotalitarian" writings of the "new philosophers" in the 1970s, plagiarized the ideas behind Socialisme ou Barbarie's critique of "bureaucratic capitalism" and deformed them by eliding the fact that this was a critique of bureaucratic capitalism *both East and West*. Often, when Lévy makes some stupid new statement or outrageous new error, people cite Castoriadis's "The Diversionists"—where Castoriadis considered Lévy no better than "the eighth perfumer in a sultan's harem"—and "L'industrie du vide" (translated as "The Vacuum Industry")[2]—Castoriadis's defense of his friend Pierre Vidal-Naquet, whom Lévy had accused of being a "master censor" for having pointed out egregious errors in one of Lévy's books.

More than any other, Castoriadis's theme of a "rising tide of insignificancy" has posthumously caught people's attention. In part, this is due to easy internet circulation of a

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*The original paper was presented in English on March 28, 2014 during a „Kapitalismus und Befreiung–nach Castoriadis" Internationaler Workshop/„Kapitalismus als imaginäre Institution" Buchvorstellung organized by the Verein für das Studium und die Förderung der Autonomie at the Mehringhof in Berlin, Germany and on May 27, 2016 for *Babylonia* magazine's "B-Fest Cultural and Political Festival" at the University of Athens, Greece; in Spanish on November 24, 2016 for a Castoriadis "Encuentro" organized by La Cátedra Interinstitucional Cornelius Castoriadis at El Colegio de San Luis, San Luis Potosí, Mexico; in French on September 18, 2017 at the invitation of l'Atelier Castoriadis at the Centre Internationaliste Ryerson/Fondation Aubin, Montréal, Canada; and twice in Korean: at the Zentrum für Deutschland- und Europastudien (ZeDES), Chungang University, in Seoul, South Korea, on October 11, 2018, and at the Seoul Museum of Art, on October 14, 2018, at the invitation of the Welfare State Youth Organization. Both the French and the Spanish versions, as well as the English version presented at "B-Fest," included brief introductions specially written, respectively, for the San Luis Potosí, Montreal, and Athens audiences. Read in advance, this paper was also discussed on February 8, 2018 during a meeting with students from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and from other Paris-area educational institutions. It was also presented to Frédéric Brahami's EHESS seminar on Autonomy on April 2, 2019. To the original paper have been added a few new notes, as well as an entirely new section, all clearly indicated, for the version that appeared in *Im Labyrinth-Hefte für Autonomie*, 2 (December 2018): 27-70, published by the Verein für das Studium und die Förderung der Autonomie, as well as for the present Italian translation.

[1]Barry Miles, *Frank Zappa: The Biography,* 23rd print. ed. (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004), p. 160; found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We%27re_Only_In_It_For_The_Money

[2]"The Diversionists" (1977), now in *PSW 3*, and "The Vacuum Industry" (1979), translated in *RTI(TBS)*, p. 4. For a list of abbreviations, see the end of the present paper.

digitized recording of the November 1996 "Postscript on Insignificancy" interview,3 with popular radio host Daniel Mermet, now regularly cited, linked, tweeted and retweeted. This popularity is also due to its uncompromisingly scathing, plainspoken critique of contemporary society, which makes Castoriadis's still relevant views and analyses readily available to the general public, whether or not people have followed his political itinerary or his philosophical development. And the specific theme is related to the general one, for Lévy as authorial buffoon who nonetheless gets called a "philosopher" and who gets away with his errors because of what Castoriadis called the "*shameful degradation of the critical function*"4 is treated by Castoriadis as symptomatic of his broader "insignificancy" theme.

What is less clear is how this general, relatively popular theme, along with the specific theme exemplifying the general one, is understood in the context of Castoriadis's work as a whole, and whether the general one serves as no more than a slogan whose content is filled in by each person without regard to motivations underlying this critique. Moreover, as we shall see, the "insignificancy" theme crucially intervenes in the author's overall oeuvre at a strange time and in a strange way that makes it in some ways even harder for people to make out that theme's purpose and import.

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The theme of a "rising tide of insignificancy" 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.5 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 "insignificancy" 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.

Indeed, the "collapse of culture" in Russia was already broached as early as a pre-S. ou B. text from 1947,6 and in a 1983 lecture, Castoriadis reminds us that, like S. ou B., Hannah Arendt "saw very clearly that with totalitarianism we face . . . the creation of the meaningless."7 For him, this theme stemmed from an overall analysis of a Weberian rationalization process gone mad within "bureaucratic capitalism," whether of the "total and totalitarian" (Russian) or "fragmented" (Western) variety. We cannot retrace here all the stages in Castoriadis's evolving articulation of this devastating process of emptying meaning out of people's lives, from his earliest writings and commentary on Weber, when he became the first person to translate the great German sociological thinker into Greek during the Second World War, to the 1949 inaugural S. ou B. editorial "Socialism or Barbarism" (*PSW 1*); his 1956 essay on "Khrushchev and the Decomposition of Bureaucratic Ideology" (*PSW 2*); his statement in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961, also in *PSW 2*) that modern capitalism privatizes individuals while seeking the destruction of meaning in work, a destructive process that spreads outward in a generalizing way eventually to encompass all social activities and to become a destruction of

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[3]Now translated in *PSRTI*.
[4]"The Diversionists" (1977), now in *PSW 3*, and "The Vacuum Industry" (1979), translated in *RTI(TBS)*, p. 4.
[5]A careful reader may note the free borrowing here and below from the Anonymous Translator's Foreword to *RTI(TBS)*.
[6]"The Problem of the USSR and the Possibility of a Third Historical Solution," *PSW 3*, p. 52.
[7]"Destinies of Totalitarianism," *Salmagundi*, 60 (Spring-Summer 1983): 108.

social significations, especially those of responsibility and initiative; his 1965 talk given to Solidarity members on "The Crisis of Modern Society" (*PSW 3*) that incorporates issues of gender and youth; his negative conclusions in the 1967 circular "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (*PSW 3*) about the initial prospects for the shop stewards movement in England and for American wildcat strikes to provide an alternative to the growing bureaucratization of the labor movement; his 1968 reflections on the "tree of knowledge" threatening to "collapse under its own weight and crush its gardener as it falls" and on the juvenilization of all strata and segments of society ("The Anticipated Revolution," *PSW 3*); the 1979 text "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (also in *PSW 3*) where Castoriadis declares, "I have weighed these times, and found them wanting"; the updated version of this same text, "The Crisis of Culture and the State," as well as the ominously-titled essay "Dead End?" on the dangers of technoscience (both of these 1987 texts now appear in *PPA*); and on to such texts as "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" and "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (both are *La Montée de l'insignifiance* [*MI*] texts, originally published in 1990 and now in *WIF*), not to forget the 1982 text "The Crisis of Western Society" (*MI*'s introductory essay, now in *CR*). Indeed, even this brief listing of thematic precursor texts from all periods of his life leaves out many pertinent bibliographical hints and indications, such as the stunning sections of *Devant la guerre* (1981) on "The Destruction of Significations and the Ruination of Language" and on "Ugliness and the Affirmative Hatred of the Beautiful."

As these 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 insignificancy* 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[8] in order to understand that the "early Castoriadis"/"late Castoriadis" distinction, first hypothesized by Brian Singer,[9] 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:[10] 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."

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[8]As was granted by the family's "Association Cornelius Castoriadis" to Nicolas Poirier, who also happens to be a member of its secretive self-reelecting Council.

[9]See Brian Singer, "The Early Castoriadis: Socialism, Barbarism and the Bureaucratic Thread," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 3:3 (Fall/Autumn 1979): 35-56, and "The Later Castoriadis: Institutions under Interrogation," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 4:1 (Winter 1980): 75-101. I myself have consistently criticized Singer's thesis of an "early" and a "late Castoriadis" (modeled on an early/late Heidegger) since the 1992 Translator's Foreword to *PSW 3* (see: p. xvi).

[10]"Unities and Tensions in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis, With Some Considerations on the Question of Organization" (talk given at the Athens Polytechnic on December 7, 2007 for a meeting organized by the Autonomy or Barbarism group on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the death of Cornelius Castoriadis): http://static.issuu.com/webembed/viewers/style1/v1/IssuuViewer.swf?mode=embed&layout=http%3A//skin.issuu.com/v/light/layout.xml&showFlipBtn=true&documentId=100118125119-8932358d05a14596b3489930a358bd43&docName=athens-nostrikeoutword_1_&username=magmareview&loadingInfoText=Unities%20and%20Tensions&et=1263822617120&er=90 An earlier version, first read before a German-speaking audience in Vienna for another event celebrating the publication of a German-language Castoriadis translation, combined elements from the Translator's Foreword to my translation of Castoriadis's writings *World in Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) and a talk I delivered in English in September 2000 to a conference on Castoriadis held on the island of Crete: "Apropos of The 'Early' and 'Late' Work of Cornelius Castoriadis: For A Critical-Integrative Approach."

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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Three years after the publication of his *magnum opus*, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*,[11] Castoriadis published the first tome in his *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series. This 1978 volume—which brought together six major essays, previously published in various reviews and illustrative of key themes found in *Imaginary Institution*—was followed only a full six years later by a second volume in the *Carrefours* series, *Domaines de l'homme*. *Domaines*—prefaced by what is perhaps his most eccentric text, bizarrely defying even normal paragraph organization!—was so large and so disparate that, despite the effort to organize each of these sequential volumes into distinctive domains—"Psyche," "Logos," "Koinōnia" in volume one; "Kairos," "Koinōnia," "Polis," "Logos" in volume two—it encountered trouble finding an audience. A third volume, *Le Monde morcelé,* more manageable in size, thus appeared just four years after *Domaines* in 1986, prefaced by a short 1990 "Notice" intended to give readers a hint as to the (albeit enigmatic) overall coherence of its three interrelated sections ("Koinōnia," "Polis," "Logos"): "The world—not only ours—is fragmented. Yet it does not fall to pieces. To reflect upon this situation seems to me to be one of the primary tasks of philosophy today."[12] Readers may have found it difficult to appreciate the essential, but ontologically difficult to discern, connections among what he was admitting were these somewhat tangentially related texts.[13]

It was within this frustrating publishing context that Castoriadis found himself having to hold off for more than half a decade before publishing the fourth *Carrefours* volume, even as a large number of manuscripts and texts published in various journals continued to accumulate, awaiting anthologization. The "Notice" for *La Monteé de l'insignifiance*, dated "July 1995," sought a way out of this impasse—but at the expense of the (puzzlingly obscure) cohesion he had nevertheless previously wanted to affirm:

> I have brought together here most of my texts from the past few years that are devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics. A fifth volume of the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series will follow in a few months, containing writings bearing on psychoanalysis and philosophy.[14]

A strict, yet problematic, division was thus established between "Kairos"-, "Koinōnia"-, and "Polis"-themed texts in *Le Montée de l'insignifiance* and "Psyche"- and "Logos"-themed ones in *Fait et à faire*—the psychoanalytical/philosophical essays in this fifth *Carrefours* volume nonetheless being preceded by the eponymous "Done and To Be Done," a wide-ranging reply to contributors to the 1989 Castoriadis *Festschrift* that treated a broad range of ontological,

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[11] *IIS* was originally slated to be included among the Éditions 10/18 reprints of his *Socialisme ou Barbarie*-era texts.
[12] Avertissement, *Le Monde morcelé*, p. 7. Strangely, the publisher, Le Seuil, forgot even to list the previous volume in the series, *Domaines de l'homme*, among the books written "by the same author." See ibid., p. 4.
[13] [2018 Addition: Castoriadis kindly told me that my Translator's Foreword to *World in Fragments* was one of the best presentations of these issues relating to his philosophical views. Note, though, that, because of the exigencies and vagaries of the publication of Castoriadis's *Carrefours* texts in English-language translation, beginning with *PPA* (see http://kaloskaisophos.org/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdactfppa.html#PREFACE) the volumes published in English do not match, text for text and volume for volume, the contents of *Carrefours* volumes one through six and thus, despite the similarity in title names, *WIF* differs to some extent from *Le Monde morcelé*.]
[14] See, for this translation, the Foreword to *RTI(TBS)*, p. xi.

philosophical, psychoanalytical, ethical, political, economic, and social issues from *all* phases and features of his oeuvre.

A justification for such a distinction within Castoriadis's work itself exists that is neither entirely artificial nor a complete violation of Castoriadis's principles. For, he had affirmed, at least since his 1981 talk for Giovanni Busino on "The Nature and Value of Equality" (*PPA*), that, while a "cobirth" of philosophy and politics first occurred in ancient Greece, these twins are *nonidentical*, and so it would be just as misguided to try to deduce a philosophy from a politics as it would be to deduce a politics from philosophy.15 Yet the publishing considerations mentioned above were most likely paramount; he mentioned them to me directly and he never made any appeal in this respect to the "nonidentical" proviso that qualifies his "cobirth" thesis.

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So, the decision, within the *Carrefours* series, to separate topical subjects in a clear-cut manner from philosophical ones occurs just as the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme makes its appearance as the title of that series' fourth volume. We must try to be very clear about how such a division occurred, for that clear-cut break within what is still, I maintain, the *magmatic unity-in-tension* of Castoriadis's work is itself quite complex and difficult to discern.

Of course, since I am arguing that the "rising tide of insignificancy" 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,"16 Castoriadis said there—reminding us of the connection between the general "insignificancy" 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 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*.17

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[15]Previous specifications of this sort may be found in "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (now in *IIS*).

[16]Let us recall, regarding this contemporary "crisis of criticism," that, throughout *S. ou B.*'s existence (1949-1965), its subtitle was "An Organ of *Critique* and Revolutionary Orientation."

[17]"The Rising Tide of Insignificancy" (1993), translated in *RTI(TBS)*; see: pp. 130-31. As Castoriadis admitted in the 1973 General Introduction to his Éditions 10/18 S. ou B. reprints, S. ou B. itself had generally *underestimated* the power of "cooptation." There (*PSW 1*, p. 35), he speaks of "the established society's unbelievable capacity to reabsorb, divert, and recoup everything that challenges it (which was noted, but certainly underestimated in *S. ou B.* texts and which is a historically new phenomenon)."

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.
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> 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.[18]

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

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[2018 Addition: During the discussion period that followed a reading of the present paper in Spanish for a 2016 Castoriadis colloquium in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, a student asked me how the *psychoanalyst* Castoriadis viewed this "rising tide of insignificancy." I had to admit that, within the confines of an hour-long oral presentation, it was impossible to cover all aspects of this theme in his work and merely referred the questioner to a few relevant Castoriadis texts I had already mentioned in my presentation, explaining that the purpose of my talk was not to provide an exhaustive and unassailable account but to suggest a way of reading Castoriadis's work that might prove useful for readers in their efforts to think further on their own and to draw conclusions for themselves about both Castoriadis and our present-day situation. Nevertheless, a review of the properly psychological and psychoanalytical aspects of his work reveals additional features of his exposition of this overall theme that bear examination.

Begun in 1959, "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (MCR) endeavored to examine modifications within capitalism that would help account for the working class's failure, a year earlier, to oppose Gaullism, despite the negative effects de Gaulle's victory would soon have on its standard of living. To borrow the title of François Mitterrand's 1965 book, the General's triumph had established a *Permanent Coup d'État*. In this respect, Castoriadis's tripartite 1960-1961 article (*S. ou B.*, nos. 31-33) might be compared to Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), which attempted a Marxian-Freudian analysis of the rise of Nazism at the expense of the proletariat's class interests.[19] Yet Castoriadis's text was intended to show how modern capitalism could lead, via disengagement from bureaucratized labor and political organizations that exclude or effectively discourage working people's active participation, to apathy, depoliticization, and generalized *privatization*. Like the rest of the group, he saw in de Gaulle's ascension to power a potential modernization of French capitalism—with people

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[18]"The Rising Tide of Insignificancy," *RTI(TBS)*, p. 131.

[19]In "On the Content of Socialism, I" (1955; now in *PSW 1*; see p. 309, n. 25), Castoriadis favorably cited three Reich volumes—*The Sexual Revolution*, *Character Analysis*, and *The Function of the Orgasm*—as regards "the profound relation between class structures and the patriarchal regulation of sexual relations." But no mention of *Mass Psychology*.

increasingly seeking *individualistic* (if conformist) solutions—not the harbinger of a return to fascism and/or mass mobilization within traditional organizations.

A quarter century later, in a joint BBC discussion with Christopher Lasch, author of *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (1977), *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), and *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984), Castoriadis described retrospectively the origins of his "privatization" thesis:

> For me, the problem arose for the first time at the end of the 1950s with the crumbling of the working-class movement and the revolutionary project that had been linked with this movement. I was forced to observe a change in capitalist society, which was at the same time a change in the type of individuals this society was more and more producing. The change in individuals was caused by the bankruptcy of traditional working-class organizations— trade unions, parties, and so on—by disgust with what was happening, but also by the ability, during this period of capitalism, to grant a rising standard of living and to enter the period of consumerism. People were turning their back, so to speak, on common interests, common activities, public activities—refusing to take responsibility. In effect, they were retrenching—retreating into a sort of . . . "private" world.20

And yet, even with its exposition of the "fundamental contradiction" of capitalism—wherein "executants" (or "order-takers," i.e., workers) must be encouraged by"directors" (or "order-givers," i.e., managers) to participate in the production process (for, directors managing work from the outside cannot foresee all that must be done at the point of production) but also have to be excluded by the latter from effective participation (for, otherwise those directors would lose their *raison d'être* and workers' self-management would ensue)—MCR failed to account fully for the extent of the changes that had brought about this demobilization characteristic of modern capitalism.21 Once those who objected to MCR's novel arguments left the group (Castoriadis jokingly labeled them "neopaleo-Marxists"), *S. ou B.* published in 1964 a programmatic, 44-point editorial summarizing MCR's main theses while acknowledging their incompleteness:

> The crisis of capitalist production, which is only the flip side of this contradiction, already has been analyzed in *S. ou B.*, along with the crises of political and other kinds of organizations and institutions. These analyses must be complemented by an analysis of the crisis in values and in social life as such, and ultimately by an analysis of the crisis in the very personality of modern man, a result of the contradictory situations with which he must constantly grapple in his work and in his private life. This personality crisis also results from the collapse of values in the most profound sense of the term, namely, the

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[20]"Beating the Retreat into Private Life" (edited excerpt from Michael Ignatieff's BBC broadcast, "Voices," published in *The Listener*, March 27, 1986: 20-21, now in *PSRTI*; see pp. 67-68). In order "to avoid misunderstandings," Castoriadis clarifies that "nothing is ever fully private. Even when you dream, you have words, and these words you have borrowed from the English language. And what we call *the individual* is in a certain sense a social construct."

[21]"Society's philosophy becomes consumption for the sake of consumption in private life and organization for the sake of organization in collective life," Castoriadis wrote in MCR (*PSW 2*, p. 280). The other side of modern capitalism, however, is its potential for generalized contestation, beyond regimentation within traditional organizations, as he showed in "The Signification of the Belgian Strikes" (1961, now in *PSW 3*), which examined the mass protests of 1960-1961 in the Borinage area of Belgium that can be viewed retrospectively as a dress rehearsal for the outpouring of spontaneous activity in the May '68 rebellion in France.

> fact that without values no culture is able to structure personalities adequate to it (i.e., to make the culture function, if only as the exploited).22

This more "culturalist" approach—already advocated in the 1962 internal S. ou B. document "For a New Orientation" (now in *PSW 3*) that was rejected by the members of the "Anti-Tendency" who split from the group the next year—foregrounded "values" while anticipating his later study of "anthropological types" created or destroyed by capitalism (or by other social-historical forms) as well as fostering a Freudian perspective increasingly being developed by Castoriadis, who began his first analysis in the early 1960s and himself became a practicing psychoanalyst in the early 1970s.

As the final *S. ou B.* issue was going to press, Castoriadis gave a May 1965 talk in English, "The Crisis of Modern Society," to S. ou B.'s sister organization, London Solidarity. Examining "the crisis of values" not only in the workplace but also as regards "political alienation," "family relationships," and "education," he explained that "what is at stake here is the very problem of the continuation of society. I don't mean just biological reproduction, but the reproduction of personalities having a certain relation to their environment."23 The last installment of his five-part 1964-1965 *S. ou B.* series, "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (now the first half of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*), which had already developed his anthropological critique of Structuralism and Functionalism while introducing a new take on the goal of Freudian psychoanalysis,24 culminated in his elucidation of the "imaginary significations" that hold (or can no longer hold) a society and its individual members together. There, "the modern social imaginary" is said to have "no *flesh of its own* . . . it borrows its substance from the rational, from one moment of the rational which it thus transforms into a pseudorational, . . . it is doomed to crisis and to erosion and . . . modern society contains within it the 'objective' possibility of a transformation of what up to now has been the role of the imaginary in history."25 In the "Conclusions" offered to his working-class British comrades, Castoriadis speaks more simply of "the two polar categories that create society: the personality of man and the structure of the social fabric and its cohesion."26 On the societal level, he mentions an already familiar "destruction and disappearance of responsibility," "privatization" (defined as "people . . . withdrawing into themselves"), and "disrupted" community ties. Yet what he uncovers on the "*personal* level" is nothing less than a "radical crisis in the meaning of life and of human motives." Moreover, he remarks: "It is no accident that modern art and literature are more and more, if I may use the expression, 'full of the void'"—that is to say, these cultural forms themselves express a loss or devastation of meaning, or what he will call, nearly three decades later, a "rising tide of insignificancy."

In this more colloquial exposition, two additional points Castoriadis makes bear mention here. First, a section on "family relationships" that specifically mentions Sigmund Freud and

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[22]"Recommencing the Revolution," now in *PSW 3*, pp. 40-41.
[23]"The Crisis of Modern Society," in ibid., p. 112.
[24]"Freud's proposition ['Where Id was, Ego shall come to be' (*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*)] can be completed by its inverse: 'Where Ego is, Id must spring forth' (*Wo Ich bin, soll Es auftauchen*). Desire, drives—whether it be Eros or Thanatos—this is me, too, and these have to be brought not only to consciousness but to expression and to existence. An autonomous subject is one that knows itself to be justified in concluding: this is indeed true, and: this is indeed my desire" ("Marxism and Revolutionary Theory," 1965, now in *IIS* [1975], p. 104).
[25]Ibid., p. 160.
[26]This mention of "the two *polar* categories" is particularly interesting because, unless I am mistaken, it is not until a decade later, in the second half of *IIS*, that we encounter the precise phrase *monadic pole*—Castoriadis's term for designating the already broken-up (and thereby socialized) remainder of the original monad of the singular psyche.

"largely unconscious mechanisms" examines a crisis in the "process of identification." In the current age of "uncertainty," the "younger generations" find that they no longer have clear-cut and coherent parental role models to follow, ones that may indeed have been alienating in the past but that now have ceased to be fully operative. Immediately, there is a "total uncertainty that dominates relations between parents and children" as well as doubt as to what it now means to be a man or a woman, the two implying each other reciprocally.27 Castoriadis was elucidating here a context for growing contestation by youth and women in mid-1960s Western countries. Thus, a second—"very important"—point concerns the nature of and prospects for this crisis: "If there is a crisis, it is because people do *not* submit passively to the present organization of society but react and struggle against it, in a great many ways. And, equally important, this reaction, this struggle of the people, contains the seeds of the new. It inevitably produces new forms of life and of social relations." Premises for individual and collective autonomy were being created, but it is only in striving, amid present-day uncertainty and absurdity, for a different existence that such autonomy might be achieved. "In this sense," Castoriadis concludes, "the crisis we have been describing is but the by-product of struggle." In other words, people are driven, in the absence of uncontested and incontestable roles, to invent new personality traits and social purposes at odds with established but disintegrating conditions, and this concurrent process of meaning-destruction and meaning-creation lies at the heart of a potential revolutionary self-transformation of society.

A 1983 interview by a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst/sociologist afforded Castoriadis the occasion to provide his own professional take on "new clinical signs in the present social malaise." He notes that the "classic symptomatology, that of obsessional neurosis or hysteria, no longer appears as frequently and clearly." Increasingly, those coming to analysis exhibit "disorientation in life, instability, peculiarities of 'character,' or a depressive disposition." He thereby hypothesizes what he calls:

> a homology among an ongoing process, the relative destructuration of society, and a destructuration or lesser structuration of the personality, its pathology included. A large proportion of people seems to suffer from a sort of formless or "soft" neurosis: no acute drama, no intense passions, but a loss of bearings, going hand in hand with an extreme lability of characters and behaviors.28

As in "The Crisis of Modern Society," Castoriadis emphasizes here that, before they began to wear out and be challenged, traditional "models provided clear-cut bearings for the social functioning of individuals. . . . [T]here was no ambiguity over what a child could and could not, should and should not do. And that provided a clear outline of conduct for parents in the education of their children." As always, instances of transgression, acting-out, etc. confirmed those models rather than provided a social basis for their replacement with other ones. As in "Crisis," Castoriadis also explains to his interviewers that, on this level, he is above all

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[27]This early examination of changing gender roles (see also *IIS*, p. 97) thus highlights the centrality of such alterations for overall social change. Remarkable for the time, the fourth part of "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" also includes a passage on the unprecedented nature of contemporary homosexuality, treated by Castoriadis not as a dysfunction but as an instance of defunctionalization and interrogation of traditional roles: "It is superficial to recall, for example, that homosexuality has existed in all human societies—and to forget that in every instance it has been socially defined: a marginal deviance that is tolerated, or despised, or sanctioned; a custom that is accorded a value, institutionalized, possessing a positive social function; a widespread vice; and that today it is—but just what is it, in fact?" (ibid.).

[28]November 21, 1983 interview with Michel Reynaud and Markos Zafiropoulos, published in the first issue of *Synapse* (January 1984) and now translated in *RTI(TBS)* as "Psychoanalysis and Society II"; see p. 30.

describing a "de facto situation" about waning values, not expressing nostalgia for them or making "a value judgment" in favor of "this social system and these models," with their attendant "oppressive structures." The key point here, related directly to the later "rising tide of insignificancy" theme, is that, while previously the "d[y]sfunctioning of society was situated at other levels: class conflicts, economic crises, wars," present-day "norms and values are wearing down and collapsing" from within. "The models being proposed, to the extent that they still exist at all, are flat or hollow, ... The media, television, the advertising industry offer models, certainly. They are the models of 'success': they operate from the outside, but they cannot truly be internalized; they cannot be valued; they could never respond to the question: What ought I to do?" And again, *struggle*, or rather here its absence, appears crucial: "The economic crisis" of the late 1970s and early 1980s "would not have been lived in the same way by people if it had not occurred during this period of atrophy of values. Without this extraordinary wearing down of values, people would no doubt have acted differently."29 Moreover, the conservative counterresponse, during the Reagan-Thatcher era, to "what was considered a period of permissiveness" evinced no greater chance of success; for, beneath a "superficial political level" of personnel changes and an economic attack on the poor, "the underlying sociological situation" remained the same. "These same people who shout about law and order behave exactly like the rest of society," Castoriadis observes; "and, were one to return—it is not impossible—to a generation of 'strict parents,' that would change nothing, for these strict parents would still have to believe in something, and the entire way in which society operates would have to permit one to believe in that something, or make believe that one believes in it, without the antinomies and contradictions becoming too frequent and too flagrant."30 We are witnessing, Castoriadis asserts, a "wearing down of values," beginning with "the emptiness of the 'paternal discourse.'" Concomitantly, there is "a wearing down of reality-testing for children: there is nothing solid for them to run up against: they mustn't be deprived; they mustn't be frustrated; they mustn't be hurt; one must always 'understand' them."31

One is perhaps reminded here of the phrase "All that is solid melts into air," drawn from a passage in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto* to which Castoriadis often critically returned. Marx and Engels saw their times—wherein, too, "all that is holy is profaned"—as resulting from a "[c]onstant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation" that together serve to "distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones." Yet where Marx/Engels foresaw that man would "at last [be] compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind," Castoriadis came to express his doubts about the rationalist bent of both Marxism and Freudianism. In the 1967 circular announcing "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*," he stated, near the height of the Marx-Freud craze in France:

> Freud believed that progress in the field of knowledge and what he called "our god logos" would permit man to modify gradually his relationship to the obscure forces he bears within him. We have relearned since then that the relation between knowledge and the way people effectively act—both as individuals and as collectivities—is anything but

[29] Ibid., pp. 31-32.
[30] Ibid., p. 34.
[31] Ibid., p. 35.

simple and that the Marxian and Freudian forms of knowledge also have been able to become the source of new mystifications.[32]

For, as he explains in this same 1983 interview, "the problem today" is that "society, due to the wearing out of its imaginary significations (progress, growth, well-being, 'rational' mastery, etc.), is less and less capable of furnishing meaning."[33] What is occurring is nothing less than what Castoriadis would later agree is a "crisis of the imaginary":[34] "One has to at least be able to represent to oneself something that is not in order to be able [to] will [*vouloir*]; and, in one's deepest layers, one must want [*vouloir*] something other than mere repetition in order to be able to imagine. Now, no will on the part of present-day society can be glimpsed as concerns what it wants to be tomorrow—no will other than the frightened and crabby safeguarding of what is here today."

In "The Crisis of the Identification Process," a May 1989 talk to a group of psychosociologists, Castoriadis returned to what we saw was a key aspect of his 1965 talk: "[I]n contrast to what prevailed" in traditionally established societies and groups, even migratory ones—e.g., "Mongols, the Spartans, Phoenician merchants, gypsies, traveling salesmen"—he observes that "no existing totality of social imaginary significations is available, and no new one emerging, that would be capable of taking charge of and addressing this crisis of particular support networks." Indeed, "[i]f the crisis is affecting so central an element of social hominization as the identification process, that really must mean that this crisis is an overall and ongoing one."[35]

Instead of delving too deeply into how this 1989 presentation anticipates the "rising tide" theme—"the indefinite expansion of 'mastery,'" he asserts there, "at the same time . . . 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," whereas "meaning that is lived as imperishable by the men and women of today" is "nowhere to be found"—let us instead focus on what Castoriadis sees as one telling, if anecdotal, outcome concerning children today. Probably drawing here on his experience of his own young daughter's life at the time, he observes that, at birthday parties, presents no longer are reserved just for the birthday child, for now that child "(in reality, her parents)" is expected to distribute "gifts to the other children—lesser gifts no doubt, but gifts nonetheless—because it is intolerable for these beings to accept the fantastic frustration that consists in receiving gifts only on their birthdays." Not only has "reality-testing" by children collapsed amid an overall whittling away of patriarchal values; this example shows that the child's entire "relation to frustration, to reality, to the possibility of delaying gratification" is up for grabs. Castoriadis is not glowingly describing generalized gift-giving in a hyperinflationary potlatch utopia[36] but destruction of its very

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[32]"The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (translated in *PSW 3*; see p. 121). Castoriadis continues: "Over a century of historical experience—and at all levels, from the most abstract to the most empirical—prohibits us from believing in a positive automatic functioning of history or in man's cumulative conquest of himself by himself in terms of any kind of sedimentation of knowledge." Yet he adds immediately: "We draw from this no skeptical or 'pessimistic' conclusion": the "suspension of publication" of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* did not mean a suspension of the relevance of the "socialism or barbarism" alternative.

[33]"Psychoanalysis and Society II," *RTI(TBS)*, p. 44.

[34]"A Crisis of the Imaginary?" (1991), translated in *PSRTI*; see pp. 107ff.

[35]"The Crisis of the Identification Process," translated in *RTI(TBS)*, p. 211.

[36]The reference here, of course, is to the Lettrist International's journal, *Potlatch* (1954-1957), precursor to *Internationale Situationniste* (1958-1969). In *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group*, Castoriadis expresses his reservations with regard to MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales,

meaning here and now: "the consequence" in this specific case, Castoriadis concludes, is "the nullification, the becoming-insignificant, of the gift and of gratification." We thus discover, in this talk for a group of psychosociologists a full half decade before the publication of the interview whose title would become "The Rising Tide of Insignificancy," a precise example of how Castoriadis viewed the process of the growing destruction of meaning in a practice that borders on being a Maussian total social fact par excellence.]

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In the year 1989, as the world was preparing to witness, and indeed participate in and create, momentous changes, including the fall of the Wall, Castoriadis kindly asked me to contribute to Busino's Castoriadis *Festschrift*. Choosing the theme "Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis," I was able to show that, in contrast to those who developed the "socialism or barbarism" theme before him (Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky), Castoriadis treated this dynamic duality as a "present contending alternative"—a *real alternative*, one whose result is uncertain—and not as two simple alternate outcomes projected into a vague (yet "historically determined") future. However, the ironic twist I discovered while studying this theme was that, while the "meaning of socialism" was increasingly being explored and expounded upon in the pages of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the term *barbarism* had almost completely disappeared from Castoriadis's vocabulary (except as part of its masthead).37 By examining (1) crisis theory, (2) the creation/destruction pair, and (3) his conception of "culture," I demonstrated that this "present contending alternative"—with "barbarism" as half of that operative choice and active historical tendency within what came to be called the *dual institution of modernity*—did indeed remain a central theme in Castoriadis's work. And when (in a 1979 *Esprit* interview) he expressly resumed usage of the word

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the Anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences) and what he considered that group's overbroad, yet restrictive, conception of gift-giving; see ibid., pp. 3-4, as well as the Translator's Foreword, ibid., pp. xlvii-l.

[37]See n. 27 of my "Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis," *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (December 1989), reprinted in *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis*, ed. Giovanni Busino (Geneva: Droz, 1989): "My search was not exhaustive. I have relied on a combination of memory, a computer search of all Castoriadis articles translated by me, and the indexes to his various volumes of writings. The one exception, which Castoriadis brought to my attention, proves the rule and will demonstrate my point that the 'socialism or barbarism' theme has survived the period from 1953 to 1979 intact; it comes from 'Recommencing the Revolution' . . . . In Point 29 Castoriadis argues that the phase of bureaucratization and consumerization of the working class

> is neither superficial nor accidental. It expresses one possible destiny of contemporary society. If the term 'barbarism' has any meaning today, it does not mean fascism, or mass poverty, or a return to the stone age. It means precisely this "air-conditioned nightmare": consumption for consumption's sake in private life, organization for organization's sake in public life, and their corollaries—privatization, withdrawal from and apathy towards social questions, dehumanization of social relationships. That process is well advanced in the industrialized countries but it is engendering its own opposites. Bureaucratized institutions are abandoned by people who finally come into conflict with them. The race for ever-rising standards of consumption, for 'new' objects to consume, sooner or later reveals its absurdity. Those elements that allow the acquisition of consciousness, a socialist practice, and, in the last analysis, revolution, have not disappeared, but on the contrary proliferate in society today (Solidarity translation [now in *PSW 3*]).

In *IIS*, we shall see, this description of modern barbarism as an 'air-conditioned nightmare'—which he already mentioned in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" and which he here distinguishes from fascism, absolute or relative pauperization and ancient barbarism—will then be labeled a "general anaesthesia." An October 28, 1967 letter to readers announcing the split within the group [now in *PSW 3*] repeats this statement about 'barbarism' as the 'air-conditioned nightmare.' This repetition could be considered a second exception . . ."

"barbarism," he did so in order to affirm that he had "always" intended it as the absence of "historical productivity":

> To say {as you *Esprit* editors hypothesize} that a dull and lifeless social sphere has taken the place of a fecund one, that all radical change is henceforth inconceivable, would mean that a whole phase of history, begun, perhaps, in the twelfth century, is in the process of coming to an end, that one is entering into I know not what kind of new Middle Ages, characterized either by historical tranquillity (in view of the facts, the idea seems comic) or by violent conflicts and disintegrations, but without any historical productivity: in sum, a closed society that is stagnating or that knows only how to tear itself apart without creating anything. (Let it be said, parenthetically, that this is the meaning I have always given to the term "barbarism," in the expression "socialism or barbarism.")[38]

Castoriadis also reaffirmed, immediately afterward, that such usage was not intended to be predictive of a necessary future, nor was it meant to be the complete description of a present (that remained marked, too, by multiple forms of crisis and—often tacit or inexplicit—contestation, even as—and in some respects because—the "project of autonomy" seemed to be on the wane): "There's no question of making prophecies. But I absolutely don't think that we are living in a society in which nothing is happening any longer," he stated.

"The Crisis of Western Societies," first published in 1982, was reprinted as the introductory essay for *La Montée de l'insignifiance*.[39] This text sounded the "crisis" aspect of the socialism or barbarism theme—again without actually mentioning that theme, yet anticipating many motifs of its offspring, the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme.[40] My humble suggestion to Castoriadis in the Busino volume was that he return explicitly to this "socialism or barbarism" theme and place the alternative clearly at the very center of the (then-) present context of social decomposition both East and West. I called upon him to rework "the whole, updating the themes of the first volume [of *Devant la guerre*] and relating them directly to those that are to be developed in the second," so as to "more effectively bring out for his readers *and for himself* the contemporary stakes of the world struggle between barbarism and autonomous society as well as the continuing relevance of his main ['socialism or barbarism'] theme." By the time my contribution appeared (in December 1989), this suggestion was of course already becoming inoperative—due to what, in April 1990, Castoriadis called "the pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" and the collapse of Russia's post-totalitarian ("stratocratic") empire. Yet, as my text itself noted, Castoriadis had, over the previous decade (1979-1989), continued to explore the destruction of social forms that arises within this barbarism vs. autonomy struggle. As we now know from a posthumously published interview conducted soon after *Le monde morcelé* was published (October 1990), Castoriadis started to make this alternative explicit again in a way that should please our Greek friends from the now-defunct "Autonomie ou Barbarie" group:

> Will our collectivities prove capable of laying down their own laws, in full knowledge of the relevant facts? It remains the case that democracy cannot exist without a passion for democracy on the part of individuals, without a political sphere inhabited by all. Will human beings have this desire or—rejecting self-

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[38]"Unending Interrogation," now in *RTI(TBS)*; see: p. 272.

[39]In the 1996 *MI* reprint, Castoriadis omits "the first three pages of the 1982 text, which concerned the situations relating to Russia and the West in the early 1980s. They would no longer have today but a historical interest"—"although," as he characteristically added, "their substance remains, in my view, true" (*CR*, p. 253).

[40]The subheadings give a good idea of its motifs: "The Decomposition of Leadership Mechanisms," "The Vanishing of Social and Political Conflict," "Education, Culture, Values," and "The Collapse of Society's Self-Representation."

> limitation—will they be content with bread and circuses, cake and television? Here we rediscover the ancient dilemma: autonomy or barbarism.[41]

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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."[42] For, like all ideologies, these nineteenth-century ones, prolonged into the twentieth century and beyond, 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."[43]

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.'"[44] Initiating an anthropological motif central to the "rising tide" theme[45]—though it harks back to questions raised in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961)—he asked, "To what extent do Western societies remain capable of fabricating the type of individual necessary for their continued functioning?"[46]

When, in the mid-1990s, Castoriadis decided to publish his prior decade's more topical/less philosophical texts in *La Montée de l'insignifiance*, he greatly underestimated how many relevant texts were available.[47] The English-language Anonymous Translator included some of these texts in the 2003 electro-samizdat volume *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*[48] and announced the upcoming translation of many others relevant to the

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[41]See p. 21 of Christian Descamps's early 1990s "Entretien inédit avec Cornelius Castoriadis," *La Nouvelle Quinzaine Littéraire*, 1099 (16-28 février 2014): 20-21.

[42]"Unending Interrogation" (July 1, 1979 interview with *Esprit*), translated in *RTI(TBS)*.

[43]"The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982), now in *CR*, p. 255.

[44]Ibid., p. 262.

[45]"Without this [democratic] type of individual, more exactly without a constellation of such types—among which, for example, is the honest and legalistic Weberian bureaucrat—liberal society cannot function. Now, it seems evident to me that society today is no longer capable of reproducing these types. It basically produces the greedy, the frustrated, and the conformist" ("The Idea of Revolution" [1989], now in *RTI(TBS)*; see pp. 302-303).

[46]"The Crisis of Western Societies," *CR*, p. 259.

[47]As noted earlier, the *MI* "Notice" states (incorrectly): "I have brought together here most of my texts from the past few years that are devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics."

[48]As I was preparing *World in Fragments* for Stanford University Press in the mid-1990s, SUP Editor Helen Tartar discussed with Castoriadis the possibility of publishing another volume that would bring his analyses of contemporary society up to date. *RTI(TBS)* adopted as its subtitle his proposed title, "The Big Sleep," in honor of this never-written Castoriadis tome that would have brought the "rising tide of insignificancy"/"a society adrift"

"insignificancy" theme. Castoriadis's widow had previously declared to me that no new posthumous anthologies would be published after *Figures du pensable* (1999). The Anonymous Translator's risky act of unauthorized translation thus forced the Castoriadis heirs to publish a large number of these texts soon thereafter in *Une Société à la dérive*—then translated in a new pirate edition, *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today*, which was followed by *Postscript on Insignificancy, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*.[49]

We now see that many "figures of *barbarism*"—illustrated in such titles as "Beating the Retreat Into Private Life," "We Are Going Through a Low Period . . . ," "The Ambiguities of Apoliticism," "The Big Sleep of the Democracies," "A 'Democracy' Without Citizens' Participation," "Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth," "Politics in Crisis," "A Crisis of the Imaginary?", "Society Running in Neutral," "The Crisis of Marxism and the Crisis of Politics," "A Society Adrift"—were articulated in Castoriadis's writings and interviews during the last two decades of his life and that such texts anticipate the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme. As Russia was collapsing in the mid-1980s, Castoriadis not only turned his sights westward to criticize the "rehashing found in contemporary 'liberal' discourses where no new ideas are to be found and there is not a single effort to face up to the problems of the present,"[50] but criticized this rediscovery of liberalism as well as of individualism—"terms beneath which are hidden innumerable misunderstandings and fallacies"[51]—for its ideological masking of reality. Present-day democracy is "in fact, the regime of liberal oligarchy," which is "dying from privatization (gloriously named *individualism*), from people's apathy, from the unimaginable debasement of political personnel,"[52] he also asserted there, thus connecting his early 1960s critique of "modern capitalism" to the more recent rise of Neoliberalism while also updating that critique to encompass contemporary figures of barbarism. The "current state—of privatization and apathy," he said in January 1988,

> is untenable for this society in the long run. The "liberal republic"—that is to say, the regime of liberal oligarchy—cannot operate in an ongoing way on the basis of cynicism and "individualism." The people who are to make it operate cannot, as a whole, be totally cynical—or then the regime will collapse. Now, nothing in "liberal" discourse or in the "values" of the age explains why—save for the threat of the penal code—a judge shouldn't put his ruling up for auction or a president shouldn't use his office to fill his pockets.[53]

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theme to the fore in book form for an English-speaking audience. An April 1989 *L'Express* piece, where this title first appeared, was finally translated as "The Big Sleep of the Democracies" for *PSRTI*. It is, in fact, one of his most succinct summaries of what was called, in the *RTI(TBS)* Translator's Foreword, the "figures of contemporary barbarism."

[49][2018 Addition: In August 2017, a second edition of *PSRTI* appeared that contains a sixth Castoriadis dialogue (with Paul Ricœur) as well as a Translator's Postscript to the *Postscript on Insignificancy* Translation.]

[50]"We Are Going Through a Low Period . . . " (1986), translated in *ASA*; see: p. 172.

[51]"Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy" (a January 24, 1985 talk), translated in *RTI(TBS)*; see: p. 50.

[52]"What a Revolution Is" (a November 24, 1987 interview), translated in *ASA*; see: p. 194.

[53]"A Political and Human Exigency" January 1988, *ASA*, p. 200. [2018 Addition: Beginning with my September 2017 talk in Montreal, I make a point of emphasizing this last point about a president enriching himself within the context of a decline of democratic values; everyone recognizes immediately the Trump example, as well as Castoriadis's prescience on this score. In "The Crisis of the Identification Process," a talk delivered in May 1989, Castoriadis states: "But earning, despite the 'neoliberal' rhetoric, is now becoming almost totally disconnected from any social function and even from the system's internal legitimation. One does not earn because one has some worth; one has some worth because one earns," taking "Bernard Tapie in France, Donald Trump in the United States, Prince, Madonna, and so on" as his examples (*RTI(TBS)*, pp. 218-219).]

A few days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Castoriadis focused on attacking the "alarming vacuity" of political speech in the West as well as the emptiness of "neoliberal discourse [which involves] a wretched flattening out of what the great Liberals of the past used to say."[54]

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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," Castoriadis stated in "Done and To Be Done," should be viewed as "a gross farce intended for imbeciles."[55]

> [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).[56]

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."[57]

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.[58] 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."[59] Participating in this "crisis of social imaginary significations,"

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[54]"When East Tips West" (interview published November 1, 1989 in *Construire*, an organ of the Swiss cooperative Migros), translated in *ASA*, p. 207.

[55]"Done and To Be Done" (1989), republished in the *Carrefours* volume supposedly devoted exclusively to philosophical and psychoanalytical issues; now in *CR*, p. 410. Castoriadis adds, "The incoherency—rather, the shameless trickery—of contemporary 'Liberalism' . . . defies the imagination" (ibid.).

[56]Ibid.

[57]"When East Tips West" (interview published November 1, 1989). He adds: "Market logic would require, for example, that one might best be able to find a rational basis for the price of capital, or its true value. Now, that's impossible; there is no 'objective value' of capital" (*ASA*, p. 232). Seven months later, at the first Castoriadis Cerisy colloquium, he said: "Accompanying the Reagan-Thatcher offensive against the unions and wage levels, this regression allowed the Chicago tooth-pullers to trot out some old ideas refuted long ago (in fact, the quantitative theory of money), the 'experts' from the International Monetary Fund to hammer a few more nails into the poor countries' coffin, and Mr. Guy Sorman, in France, to become the apostle of the economic Enlightenment" ("What Democracy?" in *FTPK*, p. 230).

[58]Such criticisms usually neglect to mention his analyses of changes in modern capitalism, starting with his two Appendixes to the English-language Solidarity editions of "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (see now *PSW 2*, pp. 316-25 and 326-43).

[59]See "Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis for the Greek television network ET1, for the show 'Paraskiniom,' 1984 (with English-language subtitles). Video in Greek from publicly available online source. English translation: Ioanna." Available at: http://vimeo.com/85082034 or http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs9ZsKj-o1k . He elaborates further, saying "that the problem is not the pauperization of the proletariat, either relative or absolute, but

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 insignificancy continued, and continues, to rise.[60] 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."[61] 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."[62] 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,"[63] not as ones really embodying what the incoherent content of neoliberal ideology would have us believe.[64]

The "liberal (in the capitalist sense of the term) counteroffensive . . . initially represented by the Thatcher-Reagan couple" has indeed "won out all over"—among French "Socialists," the Scandinavians, etc., Castoriadis observed in "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991). Creating a "comfortable or tolerable situation" for "80 to 85 percent of the population (who are further inhibited by fear of unemployment), . . . all the system's shit is dumped on the 'lower' 15 or 20 per cent of society, who cannot react, or who can react only through vandalism, marginalization, and criminality: the unemployed and immigrants in France and England; Blacks and Hispanics in the United States, and so on."[65] What "this camouflage rhetoric allowed one" to do, "in default of the proclaimed objectives," was "to attain the new policy's real objectives: quite simply,

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that the problem lies elsewhere. The problem is that of freedom for people within production, the problem is in their everyday life, in the family, in education, and so on. From this standpoint, we offered an overall revision of the goals of action oriented toward real social change" (00:14:10 - 00:14:50).

[60]A more nuanced elucidation appears in "The *Coordinations*: A Preface" (drafted in 1994), translated in *RTI(TBS)*: "This offensive went hand in hand with—*was conditioned by but also has conditioned*—an ideological regression of uncommon breadth. The ideologies of the 'Left' entered into a new phase of intense decomposition while 'right-wing' currents were blissfully resuscitating basic errors that had been refuted three-quarters of a century ago (such as monetarism—a mere reissuance, under econometric cover, of the old quantitative theory of money, or supply-side economics, characterized by George Herbert Walker Bush himself as 'voodoo economics'). Moreover, these governments' proclamations stood in flagrant violation of their own practice—a phenomenon worth noting, not because it would be absolutely new, but because it was practically unheard of in the economic field. Thatcher and Reagan were elected by promising to rid society of 'Big Government'; at the end of their respective terms of office, the share of the GNP going to state outlays remained practically unchanged. They had denounced Keynesianism just as vehemently—but any Keynesian would have condemned as excessive to the point of caricature the Reagan Administration's deficits" (pp. 168-69, emphasis added). As noted in the *ASA* Translator's Foreword, "War Keynesianism was an option Castoriadis said Reagan employed in the 1980s, and Bush *fils* used it, to highly disastrous effect, in the 2000s" (*ASA*, p. xxxi).

[61]"The 'Rationality' of Capitalism," composed in 1996-1997 and translated in *FTPK*; see: p. 119.

[62]"Crisis of the Identification Process" (a May 1989 talk), translated in *RTI(TBS)*; see: p. 218.

[63]"What Democracy?" in *FTPK*, p. 208.

[64]Less explored by Castoriadis than Neoliberalism's incoherencies and its ideological screening of reality—and perhaps surprisingly so, given his longstanding interest in the relations of production—are the vast changes *at the point of production* that have been introduced in the course of the conservative counterrevolution.

[65]"The Dilapidation of the West" (1991), *RTI(TBS)*, pp. 90-91.

redistribution of national wealth in favor of the rich and to the detriment of the poor."66 After an interlude with the Supreme Court-mandated election of "the first MBA President" in the US leading to the largest economic collapse since the Great Depression, it is not surprising that this logic has developed far enough to make the "1 percent," in many people's minds, now a plausible target for the "99 percent."

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 insignificancy—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.67

Retaining the autonomy vs. barbarism theme within this contemporary meaning-vacuum, Castoriadis notes the flip-side of this "return to a blind and brutal form of liberalism," that is, the concomitant condition for its existence: "all these factors express, directly or indirectly, the crisis of the social-historical project of individual and collective autonomy."68 Already in 1986, he argued that "the strength of this pseudoliberalism . . . in large part, . . . comes from this, that 'liberal' demagoguery has known how to capture the profoundly antibureaucratic and antistatist movement and mood that has existed since the early 1960s (and that had escaped the shrewd notice of 'socialist' leaders)."69 It is not that Castoriadis remained stuck in an allegedly obsolete theory of "bureaucratic capitalism"; it is that what passes for "the Left" abdicated to the "Right" people's continuing feelings of opposition to bureaucracy and the State. In "A Society Adrift" (1993), he noted the "near-total disappearance of conflict, whether it be socioeconomic, political, or 'ideological.'" He did so not in order to revel in "insignificancy" or to remain blind to current possibilities for change, but in order to frankly admit how the "triumph of . . . the 'liberal'-capitalist imaginary, and the near-disappearance of the other great imaginary signification of modernity, the project of individual and collective autonomy" had greatly altered the situation he described in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution." This "victory of the so-called Neoliberal counteroffensive"—note the phrase "*so-called* Neoliberal"

> has imposed things that had previously seemed inconceivable: straightforward cuts in real wages, and sometimes even in nominal wages, for example, or else levels of unemployment that I myself had thought, and written, in 1960, had become impossible, for they would have provoked a social explosion. Well, nothing happened. There are reasons for that, some related to the economic cycle—the threat, in large part a bluff, of "crisis" tied to the "oil shock," and so on—but others much more deep-seated, ... Basically, we are witnessing the full-fledged domination of the capitalist imaginary: the centrality of the economic, the unending and allegedly rational expansion of production, consumption, and more or less planned and manipulated "leisure time." This evolution does not express only the victory of the dominant strata, who would like to increase their power. Almost all of the population participates therein. Cautiously withdrawn into its private sphere, the population settles for bread and spectacles. The spectacles are provided especially by television (and "sports"), the bread by all the gadgets available at various income levels. In one way or another, all social strata have access to this minimum amount of comfort; only minorities who have no weight are excluded therefrom. . . . The great majority of the population seems to settle for leisure

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[66]"The *Coordinations*: A Preface" (drafted in 1994), translated in *RTI(TBS)*; see: p. 169.
[67]"The 'Rationality' of Capitalism," translated in *FTPK*; see: p. 119.
[68]Ibid.
[69]"We Are Going Through a Low Period . . . " (1986), translated in *ASA*; see: p. 172.

> time and gadgets, with a few occasional corporatist reactions that are unlikely to have repercussions. This majority harbors no collective desire, no project apart from safeguarding the status quo.[70]

So as not to lead one to think that this "so-called Neoliberal" victory would entail a return to the *status quo ante*, Castoriadis immediately adds: "In this atmosphere, the traditional safeguards of the capitalist republic are coming down, one after the other," and he goes on to enumerate the ways in which this victory is indeed a pyrrhic one for capitalism, for, just as "humanity is busily sawing off the limb on which it is perched"[71] ecologically, there is, even in the absence of direct contestation, an ongoing destruction of the crucial significations that allowed capitalism to thrive and flourish.

This "victory of the so-called Neoliberal counteroffensive," which grants a "centrality of the economic," has led many, from power-obsessed Foucauldians to nostalgic Marxist fundamentalists, to believe that we are completely subjected to a totally new regime, one defined by neoliberal capitalist ideology, or that we can now return to the reassuring "laws" of capitalist accumulation, perhaps by finally getting the right interpretation of the "fetishism of commodities" in Chapter One of *Das Kapital*. What an understanding of capitalism as an imaginary institution of society shows—*when one takes into account the dual institution of modernity and the hypertrophically destructive "crisis of social imaginary significations" it is now undergoing*—is that there is no return to the *status quo ante*, nor is it (yet) plausible to believe that we are now living in a totally economic society, impenetrable to contestation and operating solely according to its own "logic." The danger of taking Neoliberalism at face value is that, in gullibly accepting its premisses, we may be "taken in" by them, thereby noticing neither its incoherency nor its self-destructive tendencies (which can then be exploited for social change, but only through a renewal of the project of autonomy) nor its more mundane "real objectives" (a radical redistribution of wealth via an imposition of the money norm that is, however, self-undermining). One is even tempted to say that there is an objective concurrence among equally dogmatic and farfetched and superannuated ideologies, the "market fundamentalists" of Neoliberalism dourly telling us that "there is no alternative" coinciding with a hopeful "return to Marx" that would conjure away all that has intervened since 1848 or 1867 and deliver us an automatically guaranteed future.

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Since we are looking closely at the impact this titular choice of phrasing ("rising tide of insignificancy") has had—an impact that has made it the top theme retained posthumously by readers—we should also note that the original 1993 interview—published a year later (June 1994) by interviewer Olivier Morel in his *La République Internationale des Lettres*—appeared there under a less gloomy, or at least more ambiguous, title: "Un monde à venir" (A world to come). It was only when *La Montée de l'insignifiance* came out in March 1996 that the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme first explicitly appeared in public, accompanied by the assertion that it goes beyond mere crisis:

> We are living a phase of decomposition. In a crisis, there are opposing elements that combat each other—whereas what is characteristic of contemporary society is precisely the disappearance of social and political

[70] "A Society Adrift" (1993), translated in *ASA*; see: p. 251.
[71] Castoriadis, in "Dead End?" (1987), *PPA*, p. 254, quoting E. O. Wilson of Harvard and Paul Ehrlich of Stanford in *Scientific American*, February 1986, p. 97.

> conflict. People are discovering now what we were writing thirty or forty years ago in *S. ou B.*, namely, that the opposition between Left and Right *no longer has any meaning*. . . . There are, in truth, neither opposing programs nor participation by people in political conflicts or struggles, or merely in political activity. On the social level, there is not only the bureaucratization of the unions and their reduction to a skeletal state but also the near-disappearance of social struggles.[72]

Between the time when Castoriadis wrote his July 1995 "Notice" for *MI* and *MI*'s publication the following March, major strikes broke out in France, especially among railway workers, in protest against Social Security reforms proposed by the neo-Gaullist government of Prime Minister Alain Juppé and supported not only by the business establishment but also by reformist unions and intellectuals.[73] These strikes were initiated and conducted from below, by grass-roots *coordinations* that bypassed the established unions.[74] In the heat of those events, Castoriadis found himself obliged to add a footnote to this reprinted interview that would come to be known as "The Rising Tide of Insignificancy": "Whatever their final outcome might be, the strikes unfolding now (November-December 1995) in France defy, by their implicit signification, this characterization."[75] This note was added to counter a (previously) factual statement: "There have never been so few strike days in France . . . as during the last ten or fifteen years—and almost always, these struggles are merely of a sectoral or corporatist character." 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 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?[76] 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[77]—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.[78] Indeed, in "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism," May '68 becomes most likely an exception[79] within a periodization

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[72]"The Rising Tide of Insignificancy," *RTI(TBS)*, p. 136 (emphasis added).

[73]S. ou B. cofounder Claude Lefort supported CFDT reformist leader Nicole Notat in "Les dogmes sont finis," *Le Monde* (January 4, 1996): 10. Castoriadis refused to sign both the pro- and anti-reform petitions, published respectively in *Esprit* (signed by Pierre Rosanvallon, Alain Touraine, and Lefort, among one hundred others) and *Le Monde* (the latter instigated by Pierre Bourdieu). See Castoriadis's December 1995 *L'Événement du jeudi* interview "No to Resignation, No to Archaism," translated in *ASA*.

[74]See Castoriadis's "The *Coordinations*: A Preface," written to introduce Jean-Michel Denis's study of this subject.

[75]*RTI(TBS)*, p. 136, n. 6.

[76]See "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (dated July 1967; now in *PSW 3*), the circular announcing the review's suspension *sine die*.

[77]"The Anticipated Revolution" (1968), now in *PSW 3*; see: p. 145.

[78]See "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986), now in *WIF*. This excerpt—from another promised but never published work—is nevertheless meant as a defense of May '68 and the movements of the Sixties, as against the attempt to turn these events and these movements into forerunners of contemporary liberal "individualism."

[79]"After the movements of the 1960s, the project of autonomy seems totally eclipsed. One may take this to be a very short-term, conjunctural development. But the growing weight, in contemporary societies, of privatization,

of modernity that ends in 1950—i.e., right after the creation of S. ou B.!80 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.81

He went on to say that he had been considering for some time the idea of launching a journal along with some people to whom he had been talking about this project. But in that interview, he also examined how the grass-roots workers' movement was unable to sustain itself in a lasting way with a broader program and to surmount the dilemma of remaining the reaction it was or of becoming coopted or itself bureaucratized. The imaginary of present-day society is not something easily sloughed off, and the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme remains operative.

In light of all this, the Anonymous Translator concluded that Castoriadis

> quite willingly considered the possibility that mass action from below might come to upset, pose a challenge to, or at least temporarily escape the logic of those disturbing underlying trends whose contours he had been tracing out. After all, his denunciations of the "vacuum industry," of the "void" of present-day Western societies and of their inability to offer anything other than hollow alternatives to the Third World and to Arab and Muslim cultures prey to religious and nationalistic fanaticism, as well as his analyses of the growing meaninglessness already discerned in Russian totalitarianism and in modern capitalism, were predicated upon, if not the hope, at least a strong desire that positive new options might continue to be created, to swell up from underneath today's stultifying complacency and generalized conformism.82

And remarkably, that is what, it seems to me, has been retained, as readers and listeners have, following his death, made Castoriadis's plainspoken criticism of a "rising tide of insignificancy" the most popular and noticed feature of his work, instead of viewing that theme as faulty, cynical, pessimistic, or resigned. "Everyone realizes that the situation is at a dead end, and that this dead end is unbearable," he said. People did not need Castoriadis in order to know that. But they have recognized in his passionate denunciation of the established disorder things they too sense and feel and think. We live in dysphoric times.83 "The American people think politics and politicians are full of baloney. They think the media and journalists are full of baloney. They think organized religion is full of baloney. They think big business is full of baloney. They think

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depoliticization, and 'individualism' makes such an interpretation most unlikely" ("The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" [1991], now in *WIF*, p. 39).

[80]After noting the crucial "concomitancy between the social, political, and ideological restlessness of the 1750-1950 epoch and the creative outbursts in the fields of art and culture," he notes, by way of contrast, how the "post-1950 situation goes together with a visible decadence in the field of spiritual creation" (ibid., p. 40).

[81]"A Rising Tide of Significancy? A Follow-Up Interview with *Drunken Boat*," in *RTI(TBS)*, pp. 156-57.

[82]Foreword, *RTI(TBS)*, p. xlviii.

[83]Except, perhaps, for those who think we will soon *become our gadgets*, downloading our personalities into them, and thus live forever.

big labor is full of baloney." That was not Castoriadis speaking, but Castoriadis quoting former Republican Party Chairman Lee Atwater.[84]

What also is remarkable, in retrospect, is how tenuous it was that this theme came to people's attention and was retained by them in the generally welcome way it has been, near the end of Castoriadis's life and then posthumously. *La Montée de l'insignifiance* came into being as a book to solve a frustrating publishing situation, and its selection of texts underestimated how many texts were available and relevant to the collection while undermining the global-integrative approach to world-fragmentation found in the previous volumes of the *Carrefours* series, especially the immediately prior one, *Le Monde morcelé* (world in fragments). *MI*'s eponymous text previously bore a different title. Just as the book was coming out, stunning new wildcat events seemed to belie, at least temporarily, the apparently gloomy theses it was expounding. And it took a wildcat posthumous publishing project in another language to force out additional texts dealing with the "Insignificancy"/"A Society Adrift"/"The Big Sleep" theme, so that readers could obtain a broader, more complete, and more detailed view of what that theme entailed.

Here we witness the confluence of the purposeful and the fortuitous in the creation of the magmatic unity-in-the-making that is Castoriadis's overall oeuvre. Other texts and other titles could, under changed circumstances, have served to bring what we now know as the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme to the fore. This oeuvre could have been cut up in different ways and still have ended up, as it did, communicating its meaningful challenge to contemporary meaninglessness. And, as with Frank Zappa's assertion in the quotation that serves as an epigraph for the present text, the razor—the principle of ensemblistic-identitary division—that was used to cut up this oeuvre could itself have been used to cut up the material in different ways and, still, its basic import could have been understood and retained. "The rising tide of insignificancy" theme thus itself stands as tender testimony to the force of Castoriadis's ongoing opposition to barbarism as well as to the precariousness of all our efforts to create meaningful, sustainable responses in the face of the chaos of the world.

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[84] "Politics: Are U.S. Visions and Values Drying Up?" *International Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1990, p. 5, quoted by Castoriadis in "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism," *WIF*, p. 68. Shortly before his 1991 death from brain cancer, Atwater, who also apologized for the "naked cruelty" of the cynical ("Willie Horton") presidential campaign he organized in 1988, wrote the following remarkable statement, which (despite its converted-Catholic context) reads like a variation on Castoriadis's "insignificancy" theme: "My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood. The '80s were about acquiring — acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn't I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know who will lead us through the '90s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee_Atwater).

ABBREVIATIONS

ASA = http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: October 2010.
CL *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Trans. Martin H. Ryle and Kate Soper. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1984. 345pp.
CR = http://becomingpoor.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/the-castoriadis-reader.pdf *Castoriadis Reader* Ed. David Ames Curtis. Malden, MA and Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1997. 470pp.
DR = http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: January 2013. 63pp.
FTPK = http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures_of_the_Thinkable.pdf or http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf) *Figures of the Thinkable (including Passion and Knowledge)*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: February 2005. 428pp.
IIS = http://libcom.org/files/57798630-Castoriadis-The-Imaginary-Institution-of-Society.pdf *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1987. 418pp. Paperback edition. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1997. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.
OPS = http://books.google.com/books?id=6_SX7oSEgXsC&pg=PP1&dq=%22On+Plato%27s+Statesman%22#v=onepage&q&f=false *On Plato's Statesman*. Trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. 227pp.
PPA = http://autonomousuniversity.org/sites/default/files/Castoriadis_Power-Politics-Autonomy.pdf *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy. Essays in Political Philosophy* (N.B.: the subtitle is an unauthorized addition made by the publisher). Ed. David Ames Curtis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 304pp.
PSRTI = http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf *Postscript on Insignificancy, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2011. Second edition: *Postscript on Insignificancy, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy, followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. August 2017.
PSW 1 = http://libcom.org/files/cc_psw_v1.pdf *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 1: 1946-1955. *From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*. Trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 348 pp.
PSW 2 = http://libcom.org/files/cc_psw_v2.pdf *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 2: 1955-1960. *From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism*. Trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 363 pp.
PSW 3 = http://libcom.org/files/cc_psw_v3.pdf *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 3: 1961-1979. *Recommencing the Revolution: From Socialism to the Autonomous Society*. Trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 405 pp.
RTI(TBS) = http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf or http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: 2003. Notice. Ibid., p. ii. Foreword. Ibid., pp. xi-li.
SouBA = http://soubtrans.org/SouBA.pdf Jean Amair, Hugo Bell, Cornelius Castoriadis, S. Chatel, Claude Lefort, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Daniel Mothé, Panonicus, Paul Romano, Albert Véga, Jack Weinberg, *A* Socialisme ou Barbarie *Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Originally published without copyright in France by Acratie in 2007. Edited by Helen Arnold, Daniel Blanchard, Enrique Escobar, Daniel Ferrand, Georges Petit, and Jacques Signorelli. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. With a Translator/Editor's Introduction by David Ames Curtis (March–April 2016). London: Eris, 2018 (sold at cost). 488pp.
WIF = http://books.google.com/books?id=VVN4HmMz64AC&pg=PP1&dq=%22world+in+fragments%22#v=onepage&q&f=false *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. Ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. 507pp.
WoC = http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf *Window on the Chaos, Including "How I Didn't Become a Musician"* (Beta Version). Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: July 21, 2015.