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From Workers' Councils to Democratic Autonomy: Rediscovering Cornelius Castoriadis' Theory of Council Democracy

Cornelius Castoriadis is one of the most important democratic thinkers in the second half of the 20th century, and his theory of autonomy and the self-instituted character of society are fundamental to many post-Marxist of democracy. The role of the council system in Castoriadis' work, though, has rarely been investigated, and his analysis of the 20th century workers' councils has seldom been connected to his important concepts of autonomy and the instituting power. This article will remedy this lack of engagement with Castoriadis' analysis of the council system and argue that the emergence of workers' councils in Castoriadis' during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 provided a crucial impetus for his formulation of a theory of autonomy. Moreover, the article argues that the role of the council system in Castoriadis' work provides a privileged vantage point in order to nuance the critique – voiced by for example Jürgen Habermas and Castoriadis' early collaborator Claude Lefort – that Castoriadis exclusively valorise constituent politics without properly appreciating the importance of ordinary politics. Contrary to this interpretation, the article demonstrates how Castoriadis look to the councils to understand how democratic politics entails both the freedom to act anew and the need for institutional structure.

One reason why Castoriadis' engagement with the council system is mostly a neglected topic could be his distinct intellectual development. Together with Lefort, Castoriadis was the most prominent member of the influential left-wing group *Socialisme ou Barbarie (SouB)* and during the 1950s, he launched a critique of Soviet communism and Western capitalism through the concept of 'bureaucratic domination'. In this period, Castoriadis theorised the council system as the positive 'content of

socialism'¹, meaning that he worked out the concrete institutional preconditions for a self-managing counter-regime to bureaucratic domination. Castoriadis' self-proclaimed break with Marxism in 1964-65 altered his conceptual vocabulary altogether, as he developed a theory of autonomy and instituting power in critical dialogue with certain traits of scientism in the Marxist tradition, which denied human beings their creative and instituting capabilities². From the middle of 1960s and onwards, Castoriadis seldom discussed the councils in their own right, but instead as historical examples of democratic autonomy. Instead of understanding the councils as concrete political forms with specific institutional features, which principally secure self-management in perpetuity, as Castoriadis had earlier argued, the councils become paradigmatic for a practice of democratic autonomy, where the instituting dimensions of politics are emphasised.

In the reception of Castoriadis' work, the later post-Marxist period has received the greatest attention. Whereas it is commonplace to distinguish between the Castoriadis of *SouB* and the post-*SouB* period, less work has engaged with the first period, let alone tried to bridge the two periods. An exception is the work of Brian Singer³, who has discussed the transition from Castoriadis' critique of bureaucracy to his project of autonomy, and thus provides a rarely detailed analysis of Castoriadis' entire project. Although Singer's interventions are important, he does not mention the council system with a single word, and in a new chapter on Castoriadis, Singer discards the early Castoriadis and labels his *SouB*-writings as a "pre-history" and instead discusses the "philosophical basis of his project"⁴ – again without mentioning the council tradition as its historical and political basis. As such, the interpretive approach most often applied to Castoriadis' work is to regard the period from 1949 (the publication of the first volume of *SouB*) to 1975 (the publication of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*) as a relatively unimportant precursor to his project of autonomy and the instituting power. As such, most

analyses of Castoriadis are unsuccessful in demonstrating the fundamental relationship between Castoriadis' early critique of bureaucracy, his positive evaluation of socialism and the council system and his later project of autonomy and the instituting power⁵. Another interpretive approach is the work of Christos Memos⁶, who has delivered a reading of the early Castoriadis, which focuses on his position on the French left-wing, his dialogue with the council communist Anton Pannekoek and his reasons for breaking with Marxism. Unfortunately, Memos does not demonstrate the productive relationship between Castoriadis' theory of council democracy and his later project of autonomy. There is, hence, ample room in the literature on Castoriadis to reconstruct his theory of council democracy. Just recently, Christopher Holman has begun such reconstruction⁷. Holman focuses on the psychoanalytical and ontological elements of Castoriadis' theory of the imaginary, whereas this article focuses to a greater extent on the historical and political development of Castoriadis' theory of council democracy. Whereas Holman applies a psychoanalytic perspective in order to provide the argument that Castoriadis' council system is an institutional way of affirming "creativity through sublimating psychic desire"⁸, this article does not interpret Castoriadis' theory of council democracy through psychoanalysis, but instead points to the historical experiences of Hungarian Revolution as the critical impetus for his theory of council democracy.

As such, the article covers both the *SouB*-period and the post-*SouB* period and stresses the continuing engagement with the council tradition. Instead of positing an ultimate break between the two periods, I emphasise the continuities as well as the changes in Castoriadis' evaluation of the councils. My argument will be the following: Castoriadis' evaluation of the councils shifts from understanding the councils as a concrete, socialist form of government to an institutionalised form of constituent power, or what Castoriadis calls 'instituting power'. Hence, the council system is transferred from a discourse

of Marxism to a discourse of (radical) democracy; from an understanding of the councils as a concrete, instituted form to understanding the councils as an institutional expression of the instituting power. Such transposition, though, is not a complete break. As Castoriadis states, “what was intended by the term ‘socialist society’ we henceforth call autonomous society”⁹. Instead, Castoriadis’ theory of council democracy combines concrete form (the councils as the content of socialism) with instituting power (human creativity) in order to achieve a de-radicalised constituent power, which is accessible to the many. Against critics such as Habermas and Lefort, I argue that Castoriadis’ council democracy is not an argument for annihilating ordinary politics, but instead for a combination of ordinary and constituent politics, where the former has priority over the latter.

I begin by providing Castoriadis’ early account of council democracy as well as his theory of bureaucratic domination. Hereafter I explain Castoriadis’ general theory of autonomy and instituting power, as well as highlight the critiques by Habermas and Lefort. Lastly, I revisit Castoriadis’ second interpretation of the council system, nuance the critique and argue for the importance of Castoriadis’ theory of council democracy in the overall evaluation of his work.

‘The Content of Socialism’: Castoriadis’ Early Theory of Council Democracy

Castoriadis was not the first 20th century political thinker to formulate a theory of council democracy from the historical practices of either the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian soviets of 1905 and 1917, the German räte of 1918-1919 or the factory councils of Northern Italy in 1919-1920¹⁰. Before Castoriadis, Kropotkin, Bakunin and Marx all celebrated the Paris Commune, which in some ways was a historical precursor to the 20th century workers’ councils, and revolutionary leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky admired the councils, although they later dismantled the Russian soviets. Interwar council

communists like Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter agitated for the council system as the true legacy of the Russian Revolution, and other important early 20th century political thinkers like Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci were politically involved in the workers' councils. Moreover, Castoriadis' contemporaries Lefort¹¹ and Hannah Arendt¹² envisioned the council system – respectively – as an antidote to totalitarianism and the harbinger of novel forms of democracy or as the lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition and as an alternative to the political party in its parliamentary and vanguard-Leninist variants.

In formulating his early theory of council democracy, Castoriadis engaged in critical dialogue with other council communists such as Pannekoek, Tony Cliff and the so-called Johnson-Forrest tendency¹³. In an exchange of letters with Pannekoek in 1953, Castoriadis argued – contrary to Pannekoek – that the Russian Revolution, although it did overthrow a monarchical regime, was not the latest bourgeois revolution in line with the American and French revolutions, but that the Russian Revolution was characterised by the advent of a truly novel governing class: the bureaucracy¹⁴. Whereas theory had predicted that the transformation of the ownership of production would terminate the alienation of the workers, the reality in Russia was the opposite, as the fundamental opposition between capital and labour, which characterised capitalism, was only replaced with a new opposition between bureaucracy and labour. As such, the hierarchy characteristic of capitalism was not abandoned in Soviet communism, as the communist bureaucracy directed production and the workers executed the orders; and from their vantage point, the communist revolution had changed nothing in relation to the hierarchical system of production¹⁵. From this fundamental similarity, Castoriadis argues that the central conflict of modern society is between *directors* and *executants*, as both capitalism and Soviet communism divide society “into a narrow stratum of directors (whose function is to decide and

organize everything) and the vast majority of the population, who are reduced to carrying out (executing) the decisions made by these directors”¹⁶.

Castoriadis’ early theory of council democracy should be reconstructed from the background of this critique of bureaucracy, as well as from the practices of the workers’ councils of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The Hungarian councils signify for Castoriadis a possible solution to the problem of bureaucracy, as through the workers’ self-management of society in the council system, the bureaucratic distinction between directors and executants can be transcended. By joining together capitalist, representative democracy and communist one-party rule under the concept of bureaucratic domination, Castoriadis points to an alternative political system founded upon self-managing councils. In an article in *SouB* in December 1956, only a month after the uprising in Hungary, Castoriadis argues that the revolution

“... creates a new historical era. A host of problems are emptied of their content. A host of debates become pure and simply pointless. The time for subtleties and subterfuges has passed. For years to come, *all questions that count* can be summed up as follows: Are you for or against the action and the program of the Hungarian workers? Are you for or against the constitution of workers’ councils in all sectors of national life?”¹⁷.

The Hungarian councils express, according to Castoriadis, the possibility of politicising society by eliminating the bureaucratic opposition between decision-making and executing. Therefore, the councils not only reduce political hierarchy and increase workers’ power, but also provide the germs of a new form of government, as the ruling class, its party and the state apparatus crumble in confrontation with the councils. The Hungarian councils animate Castoriadis in his subsequent theorisation of the councils as concrete forms of socialist government in a tripartite series of articles,

‘On the Content of Socialism, I-III’, appearing in *SouB* in 1955, 1957 and 1958. As the insurrection of the Hungarian workers was the first full-blown popular uprising against bureaucratic communism, the content of socialism stands in need of a “revision” emanating from the “raw materials” found in “vast experience of ... the Hungarian workers’ councils, their actions and their program”¹⁸. Ultimately, for Castoriadis, there is a need of restructuring “*all of political theory* around the principles embodied in the soviets and the councils”¹⁹. As such, the events in Hungary in 1956 resonate with prior experiences with the council system, as “the Russian factory committees of 1917, the German workers’ councils of 1919, the Hungarian councils of 1956 all sought to express (whatever their name) the same original, organic, and characteristic working-class pattern of organization”²⁰. The reason for joining these historical situations into a tradition of working-class action is that these different organisations all aim, according to Castoriadis, at the elimination of the bureaucratic distinction between directors and executants. This implies that socialism as an alternative to both capitalism and bureaucratic communism is equal to the “people’s self-organization of every aspect of their social activities”²¹. Moreover, the institutional form that resists the crystallisation of an independent bureaucratic layer of management is, according to Castoriadis, the council form. Essentially, the council is a type of institution, which governs itself *without* instituting a hierarchical distinction between rulers and ruled. According to Castoriadis, though, “we should condemn any fetishism for the ‘soviet’ or ‘council’ organization”, as “the council is not a *miraculous* institution”²². Instead, the council is a structure that makes possible, but not secures, the realisation of popular self-management. On the contrary, representative democracy “inevitably contains a kernel of political alienation, namely the separation of representatives from those they represent”, and consequently, “to decide who is to decide is already not quite deciding for oneself”²³.

It is important to stress that Castoriadis at this point understands the councils as concrete political forms with a specific set of institutional structures. Hence, “to define the socialist organization of society in concrete terms”, Castoriadis contends, “is to draw all the possible conclusions from two basic ideas: workers’ management of production and the rule of the councils”²⁴. Formulated crudely, if the institutional structures of the council system are established, socialism is created. After Castoriadis’ break with Marxism, he distanced himself from this institutional understanding of the council system, as he began to develop a theory of autonomy and instituting power. The central reason why Castoriadis broke with Marxism was the deterministic understanding of history and human creation advanced in parts of this tradition. According to Castoriadis, historical developments are initiated by society’s instituting power; a fact, which parts of Marxism occulted with its emphasis on a deterministic understanding of historical and social development²⁵. With his newfound theoretical vocabulary, Castoriadis also reformulated his theory of council democracy. Importantly, I argue that Castoriadis has two different theoretical formulations of council democracy. The first formulation, which I have reconstructed above, understands the council system as a concrete form of socialist government, which through detailed institutional mechanisms, achieves self-management and counter bureaucratic domination. The second formulation of council democracy downplays the concreteness of institutional design and stresses the councils’ relation to the institution of society, that is, to the instituting power. In order to understand this formulation of council democracy, we need to engage with Castoriadis’ theory of autonomy.

Autonomy and the Instituting Power

Autonomy is the key concept in Castoriadis’ political thought. For Castoriadis, a society becomes autonomous, when it begins to have a *specific relation* towards itself; when it evaluates its institutions,

traditions and laws as *creations* brought into the world by itself, and therefore changeable by itself. This might seem banal, but that is not the case. According to Castoriadis, most societies throughout history have denied the fundamental fact that their institutions are self-created, and hereby deny that their structures are established by the activity of human beings. They are, in the language of Castoriadis, in a condition of *heteronomy* as they attribute the social order to “an extrasocial source of *nomos*”²⁶. Whether this is God, nature, reason, the forces of history, the inevitable process of progress or the invisible hand, most societies have explicated their structures by pointing towards forces outside of their own control. When societies relate to their institutions in this heteronomous manner, they come to understand them as unalterable, and politics consequently becomes merely the game of power *within* established institutions, never the question of how society as such ought to be structured. Or, in fact, politics ceases to exist in a heteronomous society, according to Castoriadis, as such societies seal off the possibility of consciously self-alteration and self-criticism. Another way to phrase it is that heteronomous societies deny the functioning of the instituting power, i.e. the human power to transform the basic coordinates of political life and associate themselves exclusively with constituted politics. Behind these notions that society can relate to its own institutions autonomously or heteronomously, lies Castoriadis’ basic argument that society is always *instituted*. Every society constitutes for itself a ‘world’ of meaning through which subjectivity, human relations, social status and political power come into being²⁷. The difference between how societies constitute a ‘world’ of meaning speaks to the fact that society’s institutions, values and hierarchies cannot be explained with reference to pre-existing laws, such as functionalism, structuralism or historical materialism argue. The consequence is that every society, whether it conceals this fact or not, is *instituted* by itself – by what Castoriadis calls the instituting power. Society’s evaluation of just and unjust, its assessment of death, its notion of truth, its modes of acquiring glory, its hierarchies and priorities – all that, which makes a

society *this particular* society cannot be attributed to functionality or inevitable historical progress, because they are created *ex nihilo*²⁸. This means that the institution of society is accomplished by society itself, albeit in a different capacity, namely by society as instituting power. To quote from the last pages of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*: “That which in the social-historical is positing, creating, bringing into being we call social imaginary in the primary sense of the term, or *instituting society*”²⁹. What lies beyond every concrete institution of society, i.e. *instituted* society, is society as *instituting*: “What escapes it [instituted society] as well is the very being of society as instituting, that is to say, ultimately, society as the source and origin of otherness or perpetual self-alteration”³⁰. In order to explicate this crucial idea of an *instituting power*, we can say that society manifests itself in two different modes: as instituted, that is, as a more or less stable ‘world’ organised by hierarchies and structures; and as instituting, that is, as the source of society’s own self-transformation. One could think of this duality in perhaps more well-known terms. Think for example of Bruce Ackerman’s distinction between constitutional and normal politics³¹: Constitutional politics is a mode of politics, which transforms the basic coordinates of political life and creates the framework for normal politics, which adheres to the confines established by constitutional politics. In one mode of politics, the general laws are created (society is created by the instituting power); in another mode of politics, citizens live by these already established laws (instituted society). Whereas Castoriadis’ instituting power is certainly broader in scope compared to what in political theory is called ‘constituent power’ – as Castoriadis’ instituting power designates the creative force, which brings temporary order to the fundamental chaos of being³² – it is indeed pertinent to use the two concepts interchangeably in political terms, as both designate the creative process through which society’s laws are created and transformed³³.

What is the relation between the distinction of instituting and instituted society and autonomy? The project of autonomy fundamentally consists in recognising that society itself is the source of its own institution. As Castoriadis aptly argues: “To be able to decide, however, is not only to be able to decide about ‘current affairs’, to participate in a state of affairs considered sacrosanct. Autonomy signifies giving one’s own law ... To participate in power is to participate in *instituting power*”³⁴. As such, “autonomy does not consist in acting according to a law discovered in an immutable Reason and given once and for all. It is the unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations as well as the capacity, in light of this interrogation, *to make, to do* and *to institute* (therefore also, *to say*). Autonomy is the reflective activity of a reason creating itself in an endless movement”³⁵. The project of autonomy, thus, begins with the awareness that the established order is *nothing but* a human creation. Entailed in autonomy is firstly the process of making the self-creation of society explicit; and secondly, creating institutions, where all citizens can participate in the instituting process. Moreover, the project of autonomy emerges within society as *instituted*; it disrupts its core institutions, as “the instituted society is always subject to the subterranean pressure of instituting society”³⁶. The project of autonomy thus entails a revolutionary kernel, because it implies the human ability to institute new forms of political life; to alter and abolish instituted reality.

Castoriadis’ theory of autonomy and instituting power has received various criticisms. I briefly engage with the critique by Habermas and Lefort, because Castoriadis’ later theory of council democracy, which I reconstruct below, provides a privileged vantage point to nuance these criticisms. Habermas’ critique of Castoriadis concerns his fundamental distinction between instituted and instituting society, and the value Castoriadis ascribes to the instituting elements of politics. According to Habermas³⁷, Castoriadis envisions an irreducible gap between politics as exceptional and instituting and as ordinary

and instituted, and that he *only* locates moments of freedom, autonomy and democracy in the process of instituting society; that is, that Castoriadis advances a vision of politics as *solely* extraordinary, revolutionary and constituent. As such, Habermas considers Castoriadis' concept of institution problematic because it lacks a normative foundation, which can guide the institution of society³⁸. Because Castoriadis, according to Habermas, advances a conception of human creation *ex nihilo*, he conceptualises the gap between the instituting power and instituted reality as irreducible and uncontaminated. In this way, Castoriadis has been accused of advancing a Schmittian theory of decisionism³⁹. Another way to phrase Habermas' critique – which I return to below – is that Castoriadis has no regard for ordinary politics, which is why he according to Habermas needs to assimilate concrete political struggles to the general opposition between autonomy and heteronomy. Hence, Castoriadis' privileging of extraordinary politics, according to Habermas, has the consequence that he denigrates representative government and thinks popular sovereignty in the tradition of Rousseau, Sieyès and Schmitt, namely as 'the people' above all law, unrepresentable, mute and indivisible. His former *SouB* comrade Lefort has voiced another critique of Castoriadis, which is directed at their diverging notions of autonomy and different understandings of the council system. Castoriadis and Lefort initially shared views on the critique of Bolshevism, as well as on important events throughout the 1950s such as the uprising in East Berlin in 1953, the factory occupations in France in the late 1950s and the insurrections in Poland and Hungary in 1956⁴⁰. Lefort left *SouB* in 1958 and instead began to develop his theory of democracy as an 'empty place' of power, which emerges with the decapitation of the monarch, and refers to the fact that power has become disincorporated in modern democracy, meaning that no determinate figure – like the monarch, the tribal leader or the divine prophet – can claim full legitimacy over political decisions⁴¹. Not even 'the people' can, as it always consists of a plurality of conflicting interests. The conflict characteristic of modern

democracy, according to Lefort, thus evolves around diverse claims to speak momentarily with the voice of the people. Consequently, any attempt to fully realise self-government through the institutional complex of the council system, which was Castoriadis' ambition in his early theory of council democracy, is redundant for Lefort. According to Lefort, such an idea "coincides with that of a self-enclosed society whose every activity is simultaneously correlated and measured against all others, according to a fixed standard"⁴². The very problem of advocating for a specific set of institutions is, according to Lefort, that one hereby understands society as a homogenous totality, which *can* actually master its own affairs successfully. Describing the council system as the 'content of socialism,' and specifying in detail the institutional structures of a council democracy is, according to Lefort, to place oneself in a position of absolute knowledge and to view society as a transparent totality. As such, Lefort argues that the domination and hierarchy, which the council system is to counter in Castoriadis' early analysis, are actually re-introduced in Castoriadis' detailed sketch of the institutional structures of the council system⁴³. As such, in order to keep the place of power empty, and not re-introduce a logic of sovereignty and homogeneity, Lefort argued for a pluraliation of political forms within a mixed regime, where parties, unions and councils collaborate⁴⁴. What I will argue below is firstly that Castoriadis, *pace* Habermas, provides a theory of council democracy in which constituent power and political form – extraordinary and ordinary politics – are entangled in order for autonomy to become accessible to the many on a regular basis. And secondly, that Castoriadis' later theory of council democracy, *pace* Lefort, does not envision the council system as realising a static form of autonomy, wherein society is fully mastered, but instead – by understanding the councils as institutional expressions of the instituting power – Castoriadis understands council democracy as a political form, which can continually combat heteronomy by its privileged access to the constituent power.

Interpreting the Hungarian Revolution Again: Council Democracy Re-Visited

With Castoriadis' theory of autonomy and the instituting power, his early formulation of council democracy becomes problematic. Why? If autonomy is the key political value, it means that the activity of creating new political forms is of primary importance for democracy. Only by partaking in the institution of society can autonomy be experienced. But Castoriadis' early description of the institutional mechanisms of a self-managing council system is a description of an *already instituted society*, where stable structures create certain outcomes (the avoidance of bureaucratic domination). As such, these structures ought not to be re-instituted because they already express a socialist form of government in the first place – the council is “the form at last discovered”, as Marx famously said⁴⁵ – and hence there is no need to re-activate the instituting power. The experience of participating in the instituting power has no independent value, as the councils in Castoriadis' early interpretation are predominantly associated with a fixed form. But as Castoriadis makes clear, instituted society is always under pressure from the instituting power; no political form can obtain pure stability in an autonomous society. Hence, Castoriadis' concept of autonomy, I argue, should not be understood as a fixed state that can be realised through a clever institutional blue-print. Instead Castoridian autonomy is always ‘becoming-autonomous’, i.e. a process through which the forces of heteronomy and bureaucracy are continually confronted. Consequently, Castoriadis cannot hold on to his concrete description of the council system after the development of the project of autonomy. Therefore, I argue, his analysis of the council system changes considerably in his later writings. The best way to grasp this change is by engaging with Castoriadis' second interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution in the article ‘The Hungarian Source’ (1976). Here, the council system is transferred from a discourse of Marxism with an emphasis on form to a discourse of democracy with an emphasis on continual re-activation of the

instituting power. On the one hand, this transfer could be understood as a de-contextualisation of key categories in Castoriadis' vocabulary. What was previously called 'bureaucracy' is now known as the general category of 'heteronomy'; what was known as 'socialism' and self-management is now called 'autonomy' and self-creation. Castoriadis acknowledged this continuity, as he argued that "those who believe that I am inspired exclusively by ancient history simply have not read me completely. My reflection began not with Athenian democracy (only in 1978 did I truly start working on it) but with the contemporary workers' movement"⁴⁶. But on the other hand, as I shall argue below, a vital change in the interpretation of the council system is acquired through Castoriadis' new conceptual language.

In his 1956-article on the Hungarian Revolution, Castoriadis asserted that for years to come, all important political questions could be boiled down to whether one was for or against the Hungarian councils. By 1976, in his second article on the revolution, Castoriadis uses this proclamation as the epigraph and adds that "twenty years later, I stand by these lines – more firmly, and more savagely, if possible, than when I wrote them"⁴⁷. In this new article, a novel conceptual language is employed to understand the councils. In the Hungarian Revolution we now not only find the source of the abolition of the bureaucracy, as in the earlier article; in addition, "we find a new departure, a new source, which forces us to reflect anew the problem of *politics*", which amounts to, as we know from the previous section, the "institution of society" as such⁴⁸. The emergence of councils forces us to reflect on the instituting dimension of society, insofar as the councils transgress the already established order of things and signify the positing of something new. As such, "the positive content of workers' councils, the demands for self-management and abolition of work norms, etc. was not a deduction, inference, choice of 'the only alternative' etc. It was an elaboration that *transcended* the given (and all that is given with the given, implied or contained in it) and posited something new"⁴⁹. The councils'

transgression of the existing order shows for Castoriadis the opposition between the instituting power and instituted reality, insofar as the councils did not emerge as a form of “repetition, neither *strictu sensu* nor in the sense of a ‘variant’ or the already given, but positing of new forms and figures and of new meanings – that is, *self-institution*”⁵⁰. Entailed in the councils’ sudden establishment of new institutions for self-rule is thus a deliberate process of self-institution, as the councils – by emerging within societies, which were dominated by bureaucratic power – did not respect the present institution of society and sought to institute society anew. It is by providing these arguments that Castoriadis connects the councils’ practice of instituting society anew with the project of autonomy. “When I speak about autonomous organs of the masses, I do not call them autonomous only because, for example, they do not ‘obey’ given individuals or parties or the ‘government’,” Castoriadis asserts; instead “I call them autonomous because and insofar as *they do not accept the established institution of society*”⁵¹.

Autonomy, as Castoriadis now formulates it in relation to the Hungarian councils, means that the collectivity does not accept a law posited by external actors, and in addition, that when the group posits its own laws, it does so without splitting itself into directors and executants. From this analysis of the Hungarian councils, two vital changes in Castoriadis’ theory of council democracy are achieved, which together signify shift from understanding the council system through a discourse of Marxism to a discourse of democracy. The *first* shift has to do with political subjectivity and implies a change from a proletarian subject located in the terrain of economic production to a popular subject without any specific location. As the experiments with council organisation point toward the problem of the institution of society as such, “their exemplary character does *not* stem from being *workers’* councils; it is not linked to their ‘proletarian composition’, to their springing from ‘productive enterprises’, or even to the external aspects of the council ‘form’ as such”⁵². This is very important, as in Castoriadis’ early

analysis of the councils their hallmark was precisely their ‘proletarian composition’, the council ‘form’ as such with its specific institutional mechanisms. But as a consequence of Castoriadis’ theory of autonomy and the councils’ intimate relation to the institution of society, the council form is no longer tied to the economic sphere, but instead to the collectivity as an instituting agent. Hence, it is not the council form itself, which accounts for its exemplarity, but the fact that the councils are *transformable* – a form, which is equally able to change itself and society. As such, their exemplary character is democratic and constituent, not socialist and institutional, in nature:

“Their decisive importance lies in (a) the establishment of *direct democracy* – in other terms, of *true political equality* (equality as to power); (b) their rootedness in existing concrete collectivities (which need not be the ‘factories’); and (c) their demands relative to *self-management* ... Implied in these points is a striving toward the abolition of the established *division* of society and of the *essential separation* between main spheres of collective activity. Involved here are not only the division between ‘classes’, but the division between the ‘rulers’ and the ‘ruled’ (including the division between ‘representatives’ and ‘represented’)”⁵³.

The significance of the council system, once it is connected to the concept of autonomy, is now freed from its socialist origins and its economic roots and becomes a political project with the aim of politicizing society and restoring ‘rulers’ and ‘ruled’ into one combined figure: the autonomous many.

The *second*, crucial shift in the evaluation of the council system in the light of the theory of autonomy is – as Castoriadis suggests above – that the councils cease to be important merely because of their specific form, but instead as examples of the instituting power in action. The councils are important because of their ability to disrupt the already instituted hierarchies of political life. It is not only their form (local self-management, imperative mandate, instant recall, federalism), which makes them democratic institutions, but also the fact that they render possible the control of the instituting power

over its instituted reality. Now, this presents us with a paradox, which Castoriadis will not try to solve because the preservation of the paradox is what makes the council a unique political institution in his evaluation. The paradox goes as follows: The ambition of democratic politics in a Castoriadian register is to ensure that the instituting power takes precedence over instituted powers, because this is the condition for living autonomously. This generally implies that every institution is subordinate to society's instituting power. The paradoxical element of Castoriadis' second formulation of council democracy is that although the instituting power stands above instituted reality, although 'the people' is superior to its institutions, they need institutional ways exercising their instituting power. The councils thus mediate between an instituting power, which creates new forms and instituted structure. Castoriadis' re-evaluation of the councils through the theory of autonomy thus amounts to an understanding of the councils as *institutionalised* spaces for exercising the *instituting* power, as they combine the constituent character of the instituting power with the stability of instituted form. This means that the political environment of the councils, according to Castoriadis, fosters the *recognition* of society's instituted character and thus of its transformability, and in addition, it provides the *ability* of instituting new laws collectively and without hierarchy. The council system is thus an institutionalisation of society's self-instituting power and equals the constitution of a political space through which 'the many' can participate equally in the exercising of this power. As such, Castoriadis argues,

“Politics is not a struggle for power within given institutions, nor is it simply a struggle for the transformation of institutions called ‘political’, or of certain institutions or even of all institutions. Henceforth politics is the struggle for the transformation of the *relation* of society to its institutions, for the instauration of a state of affairs in which man as a social being is able and willing to regard the institutions that rule his life as his own collective creations, and hence is willing to transform them each time he has the need or the desire”⁵⁴.

We may further explicate the idea of the council system as an ‘institutionalised instituting power’ by relating it to the criticisms by Habermas and Lefort. The crux of Habermas’ critique was that Castoriadis tends to exclusively valorise spontaneous, exceptional politics without properly appreciating the importance of the quotidian practices of ordinary politics. Habermas suggests that Castoriadis argues for a pure instituting society, which will never ground itself in instituted reality due to the constant re-activation of the instituting power, as this is the only way autonomy be realised. Politically this would be akin to a *permanent revolution* – politics in an exclusively constitutional key with clear references to Rousseauian, Siéyesian and Schmittian versions of popular sovereignty. Moreover, according to Lefort, Castoriadis covers up democracy’s inherent emptiness by formulating a vision of council democracy, which seeks to realise complete autonomy through concrete institutional design. This ambition, according to Lefort, departs with the plurality, ambiguity and conflictual nature of modern democracy. Castoriadis’ second theorisation of council democracy, I argue, is at odds with these criticisms. The principle of autonomy, which can be realised through the council system does neither amount to a permanent revolution, constantly negating and destroying every instituted reality, as Habermas argued, nor does it signify a static state of complete mastery without conflict as argued by Lefort. The council movement, for Castoriadis, is not an attempt to exercise a pure revolutionary power, not an aspiration of eliminating all institutional structures and let loose an uncontaminated and instituting power. “To abolish heteronomy”, Castoriadis argues, “does not signify abolishing the difference between instituting society and instituted society – which, in any case, would be impossible – but to abolish the *enslavement* of the former to the latter”⁵⁵. What happens in the councils, rather, in Castoriadis’ analysis, is the realisation that if ‘the people’ wants to live autonomously, institutions, laws, traditions and customs should not dominate it. The project of the council system is that *we* should dominate *our* institutions, because they have been *created* by us: “The collectivity will give itself its

rules, knowing that *it itself* is giving them *to itself*, that these rules are or will always become at some point inadequate, that it can change them – and that they bind it so long as it has not changed them in a *regular way*”⁵⁶.

The regularity stressed by Castoriadis signifies that the council system is not an attempt to go beyond instituted reality, structure and procedure, but that instituted society should always be subordinated society as instituting. No institution should be able to enslave its instituting origin; no law should achieve status as sacrosanct. The council system is an *institutional expression* of this hierarchical relation between instituted and instituting society. In this analysis, the council system is therefore crucial because it is an institution, which makes society’s *instituting* power accessible and open to mass participation. As such, the council system in Castoriadis’ analysis is a political space, which provides the grounds for society’s self-alteration. This combination of form and *transformability*, of instituting power and institutionalisation, has according to Castoriadis always at the centre of the council tradition:

“The Commune of 1871, the soviets of 1905 and 1917, the factory committees in Russia in 1917-1918, the factory councils in Germany in 1919-20, and the workers’ councils in Hungary in 1956 were organizations formed to combat the ruling class and its state [i.e. expressions of the instituting power] *and at the same time* new forms of human organization based on principles radically opposed to those of bourgeois society [i.e. political forms] ... it shows that the proletariat has the need and at the same time the ability to argue the question of social organization as such not simply during a revolutionary explosion, but systematically and permanently”⁵⁷.

The fact that the councils, according to Castoriadis, are both temporary organs of struggle and permanent organs of popular self-rule show that they function as institutionalised spaces for the collective exercising of society’s instituting power. Through the councils, Castoriadis suggests, the

collectivity can partake in the instituting power *both* ‘during a revolutionary explosion’ and ‘systematically and permanently’. The unbridgeable gap between extraordinary and ordinary politics, which Habermas criticised Castoriadis for reproducing, is simply difficult to square with his theory of the council democracy. In the council system, the extraordinary and the ordinary fuse because of Castoriadis’ repeated stress on the need for *continual* institutional renewal. As Jay Bernstein has also argued, Castoriadis “poses the being of the social-historical as neither act nor product, neither instituting nor instituted, but as the continual passage from one and the other without rest and resolution”⁵⁸. As such, Lefort’s interpretation of Castoriadis’ council system as a fixed state with perfect autonomy is greatly at odds, I argue, with Castoriadis’ second formulation of council democracy. The heart of the matter is that autonomous institutions cannot be given once and for all, and hence that democratic institutions need to have mechanisms of self-alteration inscribed in them. In this way, crucially, autonomous society

“can be neither the absurdity of a society without institutions nor one of good institutions given once and for all, since every set of institutions, once established, necessarily tends to become autonomous and to enslave society anew to its underlying imaginary significations. The content of the revolutionary project can only be the aim of a society that has become capable of perpetual renewal of its institutions. Postrevolutionary society will not simply be a self-managed society; it will be a society that self-institutes itself explicitly, not once and for all, but continuously”⁵⁹.

Conclusion

The ambition of this article has been to interpret Cornelius Castoriadis’ theory of council democracy, which is mostly a neglected part of his writings. Moreover, by turning to Castoriadis’ engagement with the council tradition, we are able to nuance the critique of his theory of autonomy as well as reach a novel formulation of council democracy. My main argument is that Castoriadis delivers not only one

formulation of council democracy, but two distinct formulations. As the early formulation gives way for the later one, the council system is transferred from a discourse of Marxism with emphasis on form to a discourse of democracy with an emphasis on the councils as a way to institutionalise the instituting power. Castoriadis' early formulation of council democracy, as argued, was developed in dialogue with *SouB's* notion of bureaucratic domination and the division between directors and executors. The council system here expresses a refutation of bureaucracy, insofar as it constitutes a self-managing political system. This status as self-managing organs is achieved by a host of concrete institutional mechanisms, and the council system is conceptualized as the concrete content of socialism and a specific proletarian form of government. As Castoriadis develops the theory of autonomy and the instituting power, his analysis of the council system changes respectively. Instead of identifying the councils with a specific set of institutional mechanisms, the councils are now understood as institutionalised spaces for the self-alteration of society. They are institutions, where questioning and renewal can take place, not for the sake of finding the right institutions once and for all, but with the ambition of the continual re-institution of the polity. With this reformulation of council democracy, the socialist connotations of the system as a proletarian government originating in the sphere of production give way for the democratic idea of how a collectivity can control its institutions by continually re-creating them, as new forms of domination arise. Castoriadis hence represents a crucial renewal of the council tradition, because he redirects the emphasis to the constituent elements of council politics rather than its formal, institutional structures. By interpreting the council system as a combination of instituting power and institutional structure, Castoriadis' second formulation of council democracy helps to nuance the critique that he exclusively valorises constituent politics without properly appreciating the importance of the quotidian practices of ordinary politics. By understanding the council system as an institutionalised way in which the instituting power can become accessible and

tangible to all citizens, Castoriadis does not envision the gap between constituent and constituted politics as clear-cut and unbridgeable. Instead, as Castoriadis himself argues, democracy in general and council democracy in specific “is the union *and* the tension of instituting society and of instituted society, of history made and history in the making”⁶⁰.

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Notes

¹ Castoriadis, “On the Content of Socialism, II”, 90-154; Castoriadis, ‘On the Content of Socialism, III’, 155-192.

² Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.

³ Singer, “The Early Castoriadis”, 35-56; Singer, “The Later Castoriadis”, 75-101.

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- ⁴ Singer, “Cornelius Castoriadis: Auto-Institution and Radical Democracy”, 141.
- ⁵ See for example Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic*; Klooger *Castoriadis: Psyche, Society, Autonomy*; Adams, *Castoriadis’s Ontology: Being and Creation*.
- ⁶ Memos, *Castoriadis and Critical Theory*.
- ⁷ Holman, “The Councils as Ontological Form”, 131-149.
- ⁸ Holman, “The Councils as Ontological Form”, 132.
- ⁹ Castoriadis, “Socialism and Autonomous Society”, 317.
- ¹⁰ For analysis of the 20th century council movement, see Anweiler, *The Soviets*.
- ¹¹ Lefort, “The Hungarian Insurrection”, 201-223. Available at <http://notbored.org/SouBA.pdf> (Accessed 14 March 2020); Lefort, “The Age of Novelty”, 23-38.
- ¹² Arendt, *On Revolution*.
- ¹³ Hastings-King, *Looking for the Proletariat*, 165-189.
- ¹⁴ Castoriadis, “Letter to Anton Pannekoek, no. 2”. Available at <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2011/10/25/letter-2-castoriadis-to-pannekoek/> (Accessed 14 March 2020).
- ¹⁵ Castoriadis, “Socialism or Barbarism”, 82-83.
- ¹⁶ Castoriadis, “On the Content of Socialism, II”, 93.
- ¹⁷ Castoriadis, “The Proletarian Revolution Against Bureaucracy”, 61-62.
- ¹⁸ Castoriadis, “On the Content of Socialism, II”, 90.
- ¹⁹ Castoriadis, “Proletariat and Organization, I”, 214.
- ²⁰ Castoriadis, “On the Content of Socialism, II”, 95.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

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- ²² Ibid., 95, 96.
- ²³ Ibid., 144, 98.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 95.
- ²⁵ Castoriadis, “General Introduction”, 25-29.
- ²⁶ Castoriadis, “Power, Politics, Autonomy”, 162.
- ²⁷ Castoriadis, “The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge”, 33.
- ²⁸ Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 172-173.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 369.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 371.
- ³¹ Ackerman, ‘Neo-Federalism?’, 153-194.
- ³² Castoriadis, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy”, 103-104.
- ³³ For the relation between Castoriadis’ instituting power and constituent power, see Kalyvas, “The Radical Instituting Power and Democratic Theory”, 9-29.
- ³⁴ Castoriadis, “Socialism and Autonomous Society”, 321.
- ³⁵ Castoriadis, “Power, Politics, Autonomy”, 164.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 52-53.
- ³⁷ Habermas, “Excursus on Cornelius Castoriadis”, 327-335.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 330.
- ³⁹ Breckman, “Cornelius Castoriadis contra Postmodernism”, 40.
- ⁴⁰ Lefort, “Interview with Lefort”, 177.
- ⁴¹ Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 9- 20.
- ⁴² Lefort, “Interview with Lefort”, 180.

⁴³ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁴ For Lefort's theory of council democracy, Popp-Madsen, "The Self-Limiting Revolution", 168-188.

⁴⁵ Marx, "The Civil War in France", 187.

⁴⁶ Castoriadis, "Done and to be Done", 404.

⁴⁷ Castoriadis, "The Hungarian Source", 250.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 254.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 259.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 257.

⁵¹ Ibid., 263.

⁵² Ibid., 260.

⁵³ Ibid., 260.

⁵⁴ Castoriadis, "General Introduction", 31.

⁵⁵ Castoriadis, "Socialism and Autonomous Society", 330.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁷ Castoriadis, "Proletariat and Organization, I", 198-199 (italics added).

⁵⁸ Bernstein, "Praxis and Aporia in Habermas' Critique of Castoriadis", 119.

⁵⁹ Castoriadis, "General Introduction", 31.

⁶⁰ Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 108.