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Plato and Castoriadis: The Concealment and the Unveiling of Democracy¹

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ABSTRACT In the first part of the paper Castoriadis' critical analysis of Plato's *Statesman*² is discussed and the main points of this critique, chiefly the concealment of politics and democracy are presented. The second part (which is followed by a short comparison of the projects of autonomy and Inclusive Democracy) briefly deals with Castoriadis' critique of contemporary political practice and theory, and depicts the unveiling of politics and of democracy—views which are particularly significant for us today.

1. Castoriadis' analysis of Plato's *Statesman*

Cornelius Castoriadis' recount with the founder of Western metaphysics is constant and abiding and in many of his texts Castoriadis challenges Plato's views and methodology, seeking to uncover and identify all the tenets of metaphysics.³ Castoriadis criticises Plato for distorting and falsifying basic Greek beliefs, not only in the *Statesman* but also in his other works. In the *Republic* and the *Laws*, he totally reverses the Greek conception of justice (p. 22). In other words, whereas the question of justice (who is to give and what, and who is to have and what) remains open within the polis and posits the question of distribution as an affair of

1. Parts of this article are based on the paper I delivered at the international conference on Cornelius Castoriadis 'Cornelius Castoriadis and Social Theory', University of Crete, Department of Sociology, Rethymnon 29–30 September 2000. I would like to thank **Rosalind Jones** for the translation. All references in the following footnotes refer to French editions, except where stated otherwise. For the corresponding English texts see David Ames Curtis' on-line bibliography and the detailed references therein: www.agorainternational.org.
2. As in his seminars in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in 1986, which were published in a book titled *Sur Le Politique de Platon* (Seuil, 1999). All page numbers in the main text refer to this book.
3. However, Castoriadis acknowledges the great philosopher and the strength of the Platonic philosophy, which consists of, among other things, the depth and manner of exposition of problems, its inquiring character, the constant questioning it poses against its own positions, the development of argumentation and rational reasoning (pp. 73–74). With particular reference to the *Statesman*, Castoriadis believes it is a work in which we can see a great genuine thinker at work, in the process of developing his thought, with no academicism or rules, with no concern for structure and form.

the citizens themselves, involves therefore the citizens in relations among themselves, Plato reverses this in a holistic conception reducing it to property of the whole. In other words, the 'Republic' is a well-ordered set, a well-categorised whole where each item has its own place and does not attempt, and must not attempt, to change.⁴

Plato is also the first to validate and justify the theory of inequality and hierarchy that he bases on the supposedly different nature of each person, to validate the division between classes in his *Republic* (p. 22). Certainly, within the Greek 'polis', there are slaves and freemen, rich and poor, rulers and the ruled, but Plato establishes and ratifies these divisions theoretically and philosophically.⁵

Another Platonic theory which is foreign to Greek thinking is his view of Being, which he identifies with the good, while in Ancient Greek thinking Being is not defined univocally, but in a dual sense as good and bad, cosmos and chaos.⁶

Plato also conceals the nature-law (*phusis-nomos*) opposition, which divides Greek thinkers and which was first postulated as such by the Sophists in the mid-5th century in Athens. He imposes the order of the universe on human affairs, thus concealing human creativity and the self-institution of society. Thus, he becomes the author of 'unitary ontology', which is the expression of heteronomy.⁷

Plato also establishes and validates the immortality of the soul, a belief foreign to the Greek imaginary, which from Homer up to the 4th century BC is dominated by the belief that humans are mortal and the word mortal itself signifies humans. In other words, for the Greeks there is nothing after death. Only the gods are immortal. Immortality is introduced for the first time by Plato and to validate it he has to banish from his *Republic* all talk of the bearer of mortality (i.e. Homer).

For Castoriadis, Plato is the total negation of Greek thought and indeed of political thought, something that is clearly exemplified in his seminars on the *Statesman*. In fact, Castoriadis' critique shows the Platonic concealment and distortion of important Greek beliefs, chiefly Greek beliefs concerning politics and democracy. With an exhaustive analysis of the Platonic text he points out the weakness of the arguments and accuses Plato of sophistry, rhetoric, theatricality, lying, dishonesty, *petitio principii* and above all of bias (*l'esprit partisan*) in his philosophy, which not only does not respect the different or opposite view and does not address it with logical arguments, but diminishes and devalues it as presumed lies or sophistry.

In the first place, Plato introduces the myth of the Golden Age of Cronos to distort Democritus' anthropogony,⁸ which was opposed to his own (p. 119). Indeed, the theory of evolution of man and society prevailed in the 5th century,

4. Plato, *Republic* 2, 433a.

5. It is worth noting that Aristotle later tries to offer a theoretical justification of the institution of slavery in *Politics* I.

6. Castoriadis, 'La polis Grecque et la création de la démocratie', *Domaines de l'homme*, p. 284.

7. 'Ontologie unitaire' (*op. cit.*, p. 286).

8. Plato never refers to Democritus, in other words, as Castoriadis says, he condemns him to non-existence (*damnatio memoriae*).

underpinned by the idea of human self-creation and the self-institution of society. This idea is crystal clear and in Democritus' the *Mikro Diakosmos*,⁹ it is the rational view and is similar to the view we hold today: that in the beginning there was a natural, wild, primitive state, whereby life was not ordered (*sporadin*) without skills and basic measures of protection and gradually human beings invented skills, became organised, created communities, institutions, language, in other words they became social and political beings. Thus this conception accepts gradual humanisation and the human evolutionary process, according to which the *xreia* made people *promithesterous kai provouleptikoterous*. We also find this belief in other writers like Xenophanes¹⁰ and Protagoras.¹¹

The opposite view expressed by Plato, not just in *the Statesman* but in other works too¹² and which has its origins in Hesiod¹³ states that there was a *Golden Age*, of the reign of Cronos, according to which there was an abundance of goods and happiness, there were no *poleis*, and women and children did not belong to anyone. In the *Golden Age* the gods were herds of people who survived only because of the gods. After the *Golden Age* of the reign of Cronos comes the reign of Zeus, during which deterioration, disorder and decadence are introduced, but the god returns, bearing skills for man, fire and so on, in sum all the wherewithal of existence. In other words, all that was created by man—skills, *poleis*, institutions and so on are represented by Plato not through evolution, not gradually, nor by a regular historical process, but in cycles which repeat themselves, sometimes straightly, sometimes reversely. Thus, Plato introduces a non-historical view with the aim of bringing history to a halt. There is no history, there are only eternal cycles which occur throughout time (p. 139).

Thus, Castoriadis concludes, what Plato does is to expropriate and transform the anthropogony of the 5th century, suppresses its philosophical and political meaning, the historical character which it had for Democritus and others, thus concealing the idea of self-creation in humanity, so as to introduce

9. DK B5, 1 and 3.

10. DK B18.

11. Plato *Protagoras*, 321a ff. The theory of Protagoras was perhaps included in his lost work *Peri tis en arxi katastaseos* and it contends that in prehistoric times people did not have *aidon kai dikin*, so they were unable to co-exist and also could not be protect themselves from wild animals. They acquired these two ethico-political principles later and thus created polis and civilisation.

12. *Laws* 4, 713a–714b (cf. also 3, 677b ff). The differences in the two versions of the myth are noted by P. Vidal-Nâquet (*Le chasseur noir*, p. 399). See also Castoriadis, “Transposition platoniciene de l’age d’or”, in *L’âge d’or* ed. J. Poizier, figures libres 1996. Dikearchos also refers to the golden age of Cronos, which, he claims, was an age of great abundance and happiness that actually existed and is not just a myth. (See P. Vidal-Nâquet, *op. cit.*, p. 382 for sources and relevant bibliography). This inverse route of humanity also occurs in the Cynics, according to whom there first existed a natural state of happiness and then the *poleis* were created where madmen (*mainomenoi*) ruled (Diog. Laer. VI 24, 41, 47, 49, 92). But the Cynics do not accept that in the original natural state there was abundance of goods, but on the contrary, penury, which did not, however, impede the self-sufficiency and ordered life of the people. See A. Bayiona, *La philosophie politique des Cyniques*, Athens, pp. 50–52.

13. *Erga kai Imerai*, pp. 109–111.

the idea that everything is given to man by the gods.¹⁴ This is the most ‘cruel’ heteronomy.

Another basic premise of Plato in *The Statesman* and other dialogues (*Republic*) is that the statesman is identified with the king. Here again Plato distorts and violates accepted and widespread views in the Greek world. The identification of the statesman with the king, which is arbitrary and unargued (*petitio principii*), is unacceptable and outrageous for the Greeks, as for Athenians. In the age when Plato wrote, there were no kings in Greece, except for two kings in Sparta, who did not, however, have much power, since real power was exercised by *ephoroi* and *gerousia*. Nor were the tyrants called kings in the Greek world. As for the Macedonians, who had kings, they were not really part of what was considered the Greek world, because first they spoke a Greek dialect, which classified them as ‘barbarous’ as Demosthenes publicly states, and moreover they did not have *poleis* like the rest of the Greek world, but kings.¹⁵ When the Greeks speak about kings in the 5th and 4th century BC, they mean one and only one person, the *megalo vasilea*, the Persian king (p. 57).

The second identification of the statesman with the scientist, which is the main point of *The Statesman*, is purely a Platonic invention and sophistry, according to Castoriadis (pp. 57, 156). Political competence, for Plato, is achieved only by the scientist and only science can determine the statesman and politics (292b). The ‘science’ of politics is not for the many, the masses, but rather it is the prerogative of the oligarchy and of the few, of the *basilikou andros*. This view of Plato does not occur anywhere else in Greek classical writing, and conceals the true character of politics: the conventional, empirical and predictable character of political decisions, whereby it is not subject to ‘laws’, rules and constants, with its rivalries and oppositions, its antagonisms and unrighteous methods. Plato moves politics from the real to the theoretical and abstract, simultaneously concealing the true conception of the Greeks concerning politics, which relates to some knowledge and skill, practical and empirical. This view characterises politics in the existing *poleis*—as well as numerous texts of other writers like Herodotus, Thucydides, the tragics, Isocrates, Demosthenes and others.¹⁶ Similarly, in democracy, politics is the free conflict of opinions, free discussion in the *ekklesia tou dimou* and voting by all citizens for the final decision (*bouleusis*). In the democratic viewpoint there is—nor can there be, anyway—no ‘science’ of politics but only opinion (*doksa*) and because of this, it is the care,

14. Plato, *The Statesman*, 274c–d.

15. The Greek *polis* is based on the collective participation and responsibility of the citizens (see P. Vidal-Nâquet, *op. cit.*, p. 399).

16. Aristotle makes the distinction between science, art and prudence (*phronesis*) to state that what characterises politics is not science but prudence, that is, the capacity for judgement and orientation, the capacity for distinguishing the appropriate way to act from the inappropriate, the useful from the harmful, the significant from the insignificant etc. Prudence for Aristotle and for the Greeks generally, is to be found precisely where there is no science.

aim and definition of democracy that all citizens participate in the formation and ratification of decisions, so that all are considered politically equal. In practice this is expressed through participation in power, the real possibility all the citizens have to participate in all forms of power. Political competence in democracy is derived solely from experience in political matters, with free discussion, true participation in political life and power and these lead to the acquisition of true political education, true knowledge of political matters and of the way in which society and power function.

The 'Scientist' statesman (*o vassilikos anir*) according to Plato must have absolute power without any limit, must rule without laws, because he himself is the law (294a). This view is also foreign, unthinkable for the Greek world (pp. 145, 157). Greek writing and real political life advocate the importance and stabilising role of laws from Heraclitus¹⁷ and Pindar¹⁸ to Herodotus¹⁹ and Aristotle. Plato is rather the philosopher of the Hellenistic world and as such his views were the theoretical basis and ideological safeguard of Hellenistic absolute monarchies.²⁰

Another negative point of Plato's originality was his introduction of the correct polity (*orthi politeia*). It is an axiom of Plato's that there is one and only one *orthi politeia* defined by 'science', the science of the whole.²¹ This polity is the first (*proton*) and the best (*ariston*) and must be distinguished from the other polities, just as God is distinguished from humans (303b). On the basis of this ideal construction, reality and the existing polities are judged, and are found to be unoriginal, imperfect and imitations (*mimimata*) of this supposedly correct polity.

This is the great deception, the illusion of any idealist philosophy, instigated by Plato: he constructs an unreal ideal picture and afterwards claims that the real

17. Fr. 103

18. 'Law is the king of all, humans and gods' (Herodotus III, 38).

19. The famous dialogue of Xerxes, with Dimaratus, the former king of Sparta. When before the battle with the Greeks, Xerxes says that victory is certain because the Greeks do not have a leader, Dimaratus answers that 'you are wrong, because the Greeks in fact do have a leader, the law, which they fear more than your people fear you'. (Herodotus VII, 104).

20. Finally Plato admits that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to find a *vassilikos anir* in existing reality and thus the *polis* must have to do with the smaller evil, laws, which have omissions and shortcomings, and which he criticises vehemently (301e). This yielding to the laws is somewhat of a contradiction with the final paragraph of *The Statesman*, where Plato returns to the *royal art*, saying that it governs and controls the *polis*, weaving a tissue of all human types and skills, in harmony and friendship keeping the *polis* stable and assuring its happiness. For the value of the paradigm of weaving in today's reality, see Couloubaritsis, 'Le paradigme platonicien du tissage comme modele politique d'une societe complexe', *Revue de philosophie ancienne*, No 2 (1995), pp. 107–162.

21. 293c. This seventh *politeia* is not identified with any of the six existing ones. See *Republic*, 5, 449a and *Laws*, 8, 832c. This seventh *excellent, correct* state can, still according to Plato, be called either *kingdom* or *aristocracy*, depending on who the ruler is (*Republic*, 4, 445d).

world is an error, a lie, bad, ugly, imperfect, lacking in relation to the ideal picture.²² As a result he again distorts reality, concealing the idea that there can be no perfect polity, that there can be no law or laws that cover all aspects of reality forever. This is so, because there is always a deflection, a mismatch, between the general and universal rule and the particular reality, something that Plato is well aware of and is the first one to establish and analyse it in *The Statesman*.

This mismatch is not accidental nor is it symptomatic but is fundamental and innate to human reality. No law can ever express the continual change in social and historical reality.²³ Thus, the conventional and relative nature of politics is concealed, even though it is characterised precisely by changes, antitheses, conflicts, divisions, etc. Plato takes it out of its true context and into the theoretical and abstract context, transforming it into theory and science.

Therefore, every Utopia must be definitively condemned, that is, any attempt to define and achieve the so-called perfect society, the perfect polity. So if we are looking for the way towards a better society, we must not try to determine it once and for all but rather always look for the one which allows in the best possible fashion a continually changing socio-historical reality to find its corresponding legislation, in changing socio-historical reality (p. 53).

A final point Castoriadis notes on the *Statesman* is Plato's hostility to democracy, and his hatred of it. As in many other works of his²⁴ on this point, Plato not only criticises and rejects the Athenian democracy but is ironic about it, distorts and slanders it. He again criticises the sophists, calling them cheaters and counterposes them to the real politicians, the king scientists (291c). He also criticises rhetoric because it tries to persuade the masses through myth instead of teaching and counterposes it to the supposedly true politics, science (304d). In other words Plato criticises politicians and politics as practised under democracy. His hatred is not only against contemporary democracy, but mainly against the instituting democracy of the 5th century and against Pericles, whom he accuses expressly and by name.²⁵ Plato knows very well where to attack, not only at the 'demagogues', but at the heart of the democratic polis, the instituting and vigorous democracy of Pericles, as P. Vidal-Naquet also notes in the prologue to this book (p. 10).

Furthermore, Plato distorts the character of democracy, when he presents the people deciding over all issues, even scientific–technical subjects such as

22. P. 172. Plato calls the six existing regimes images, simulacres, *eidola* (303c).

23. Aristotle is perfectly aware of this (*Politics* 2, 1269a 9–13).

24. *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Thaetetus*, *Laws*. Castoriadis writes, characteristically: 'Plato consciously forges history, he is the first utiliser of Stalinist methods in this domain. If we knew the history of Athens from Plato only (*Laws*, 3), we would not know about the naval battle of Salamis, the victory of Themistocles and the worthless *demos* manning the oars' ('Les intellectuels et l'histoire', *Le monde morcélé*, p. 107).

25. In the *Gorgias* he rejects all the significant politicians of Athenian democracy—Miltiades, Themistocles, Cimon, Pericles—because 'they never proved beneficiary for the people and the *polis*'.

medicine, ship-building, military affairs, architecture and so on. The people at no time took such decisions. The people chose General Nikias and it was Nikias who was responsible, not the people, for where, how and when battle would take place. The Parthenon was built by Iktinus and Pheidias, not by the people. Castoriadis rightly notes at that point the ‘theatricality, rhetoric and sophistry of Plato’ (p. 189). While, in other words, Plato criticises the dramatic writers, the sophists and the rhetoricians, he himself is proved to be a great dramatist, a great sophist and rhetorician in order to devalue democracy, to attack its very essence, to distort its basic meaning: the ability of the people *to govern themselves*. This is Castoriadis’ basic criticism of Plato, that Plato concealed that ability of the many to govern themselves and presented democracy as the regime of the amorphous masses, where ignorance, evil, unbridled passion, selfish interests reign, rather than ‘science’ and ‘goodness’.

To this end Plato uses all means, just and unjust, philosophical and theological: in the *Republic* he uses the ultimate weapons of metaphysics and the rule of ideas, in the *Laws* religious rule and in *The Statesman* criticism of the law and science. So Plato is responsible for the concealment of basic Greek concepts and significations and played an important role in the destruction of the Greek world at a theoretical level. That is, he presented a historical fact, the end of democracy, not as a historical tragedy but as intrinsic philosophical justice (p. 21). This slander against the people and democracy was carried over in the following centuries. It influenced and still influences views; it constituted the ideological armour of all the enemies of the people and of democracy.

Thus, Castoriadis clears up a widespread misunderstanding, whereby Plato is believed to be the cornerstone, or the foundation of Greek political thought and its representative par excellence. Actually he constitutes only one aspect of it; in fact he greatly distorts and negates Greek political thought.

There is another Greek political view, which has to be sought out, in certain sophists (Protagoras), in Democritus, Thucydides, in the three tragics,²⁶ etc. and above all in the democratic political creativity of the 5th and 4th century and in the instituting creativity of the people. The historical facts are bearers of ideas more significant than the ideas of philosophers and the institutions are bearers and embodiments of imaginary significations of a society.²⁷

26. V. Ehrenberg demonstrated the significance of tragedy for the political thought of ancient Athenians in his text ‘Origins of democracy’, *Historia*, Vol. 1 (1950), pp. 515–548. He writes that the tragedy contains the first signs of a democratic terminology. C. Meier also analyses the political significance of tragedy in his works *De la tragédie grecque comme art politique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1991) and *La politique et la grace* (Paris: Seuil, 1987). In the second work he notes, characteristically that: ‘the *Oresteia* is one of the most significant manifestations of Greek political thought’ (p. 21).

27. In fact, democratic ideas and arguments did not survive through any writer, nor is there any theoretician of democracy who could confront the anti-democratic theoretician, thus we need to reconstruct the democratic argument, assembling the scattered elements, from the minutest surviving fragments and mainly from the historical reality of facts and institutions.

In *Sur le Politique de Platon* Castoriadis restores the magmatic reality of ancient Greek thought and practice, formerly concealed by most analysts. He also shows its dichotomy into two *grosso modo* currents, antithetical to each other in many aspects mutually exclusive: one is the democratic view and practice, while the other one is antidemocratic, and its principal proponent is Plato.

In fact Castoriadis' analysis demonstrates the enormous difference between Platonic and democratic views on politics, or the enormous difference between Platonic and his own views on justice and democracy. The great rival of democracy is the rival of Castoriadian conceptions. Castoriadis' opinions on politics and democracy simultaneously refute Plato's political views. First of all, his search is not for the politician, as in Plato, but for *politics*. In the individual he opposes collective initiative and creativity. In fact for Castoriadis politics is the conscious, critical and self-critical, rational, collective activity and inquiry, regarding the institution of society in whole or in part. In this sense, politics emerges when the question of the validity of the institutions is posed, i.e. if and why the institutions are just: 'Are our laws just? Is our Constitution just? Is it good? Good in relation to what? Just in relation to what? On these eternally open questions the object of true politics is constructed, which therefore presupposes the questioning of existing institutions—even if it means their acceptance in whole or in part. Through politics, in this sense, man questions, and perhaps transforms, his way of being and his being as a social man.'²⁸

In this sense politics depends on and demands conscious choice, responsibility and activity by the people. The object of politics is defined as the creation of institutions, which, assimilated by men, permit and facilitate their personal autonomy and the possibility of their true participation in all forms of explicit power in society.²⁹ That is, the object of politics is freedom, individual and collective autonomy and not the happiness (*eydaimonia*) of Plato and Aristotle, nor the happiness promised by all totalitarian societies, fascist, communist or religious. This transformation of institutions leads to democracy, which is the regime of explicit, illuminating, collective self-institution.³⁰ Democracy means *people's rule*, true, direct participation by the people in power in all its forms and direct participation in discussions and decision-making, something that excludes the transfer of power to representatives.

This view and this practice are to be found in ancient democracy, the basic characteristics of which can be summarised as follows: the people are the chief source of all power and do not recognise any other source or cause of social

28. Castoriadis, 'Anthropologie, philosophie, politique', *La montée de l'insignifiance* (Paris: Seuil, p. 120).

29. Castoriadis, 'Fait et a faire', *Fait et a faire*, p. 62.

30. C. Castoriadis, 'La démocratie comme procédure et comme régime', *La montée de l'insignifiance*, 1996, p. 225.

institutions and law (*edokse ti bouli kai to dimo*). This means real participation in all forms of power, jurisdiction, legislation, government. This participation is realised through the drawing by lot (*klirosis*), which is the distinguishing feature of democracy. All citizens are designated judges, members of the council (*bouleutes*) and magistrates through the drawing by lot. Magistrates requiring particular knowledge and skills—generals, treasurers (*stratigoi, tamiai*), etc.—are chosen through voting in the people’s assembly (*ekklisia tou dimou*). All magistrates are under constant control (*dokimasia, euthuna*), and give a reason for and account of all their actions and can be removed at any time, while their service is annual. Social life is governed by rules of general validity, debated and made into laws directly by the community, that is, there is the rule of written law. There is no hierarchy or state (*kratos*) in the contemporary sense, as a mechanism of power separate from the body of citizens and over the citizens. There are no so-called specialists in politics, Plato’s scientists, there is no science of politics but only the conflict of opinions (*doksa*). All opinions count equally, whence also political equality. There is an open public space, which is not the property of anyone, in which all the important information is circulated and discussed and where all-important decisions are taken by the people.³¹

All this, which constitutes the meaning of democracy, has been concealed over many centuries. Even today the concealment of people’s ability to govern themselves is dominant. Even today, *mutatis mutandis*, democracy is concealed, even today political problems are distorted, because analyses revolve around which party is fit to govern, which political leader is good enough, or which party programme is better in order to be voted for, which modifications—always the secondary ones—should go into the Constitution, the priority of the economy, and so on. The main powers in the political game, the professional politicians and the parties, try to persuade the people—and they have succeeded—that they are not fit to govern themselves and are only fit to submit while the parties are fit to govern. That is to say the meaning of politics in the Ancient Greek sense, in the sense of Castoriadis, is concealed, as is the capacity of the people for self-government. The original political problem of *how* people become fit to govern themselves is concealed.

2. Castoriadis and contemporary political practice/theory

The concealment and devaluation of democracy was also to be found in Marxism and Communism. This fact is of great significance, given that the Marxist ideology

31. See Castoriadis, ‘La polis Grecque et la Création de la Démocratie’, *Domaines de l’homme*. See also Castoriadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and its Significance for us Today* (Athens, 1986) and Y. Oikonomou, ‘Ancient democracy’, *O Politis*, 121, Athens (January–March 1993).

trapped and guided millions of people all over the planet for more than a century, as a result of which their disillusionment and consequent withdrawal into the private sphere.³² Castoriadis criticised Marxism and Communism in practice at a very time that was difficult for free thought and criticism, in the 1950s and 1960s, when nearly all intellectuals in one way or another worshipped not only Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, but also Stalin, Mao and others; each of them in their own way supporting the communist parties. Castoriadis denounced and revealed the totalitarian and unfree character of the communist countries and the communist parties as well as the theoretical, economic and political impasses of Marxist theory.³³ He openly rejected Marxism because it had become an ideology, in the sense Marx³⁴ gave to the term, and therefore led to anti-democratic tendencies.

The concealment is also to be found in modern political practice³⁵ and thought³⁶ as well as in contemporary thinkers. Castoriadis criticises these views, which present democracy as a set of procedures³⁷ and not as a regime. He mainly criticises the view of Habermas on ‘communicative activity’ between subjects. This view of Habermas narrows the concept of politics, which greatly exceeds ‘inter-subjectivity’ and ‘inter-subjective communication’, and aims at the institution of the social, the anonymous collective.³⁸

Castoriadis also criticises post-modernism, which relativises everything and attributes the same value to all things, thereby concealing the specificity and meaning of democracy.³⁹

32. Can we imagine for one moment the consequences of this movement had it been fought under the banner of democracy?
33. Many of his texts from the period of *Socialisme ou barbarie* (1949–1965) and, mainly, ‘Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire’, *L’institution Imaginaire de la Société*.
34. That is, ‘a group of ideas which refer to a reality not to illuminate it and to change it, but to conceal it and justify it in the imaginary, and which permits people to say something and to do something else, to appear as something other than what they are’. *L’institution Imaginaire de la Société*, p. 15.
35. The famous ‘Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen’ after the French Revolution of 1789, in the introduction stated that ‘Sovereignty belongs to the people, who exercise it either directly or through their representatives’. Of course ‘directly’ has disappeared and since that time the so-called representatives have been dominant.
36. An exception was Rousseau, who in his *Du Contrat social* criticises representation and elections. The truly libertarian exceptions however mainly came from the anarchist camp (e.g. Bakunin).
37. Castoriadis, ‘La démocratie comme procédure et comme régime’, *La montée de l’insignifiance*.
38. ‘But the social is something entirely other than “many, many, many” “subjects”—and also something entirely other than “many, many, many” “intersubjectivities”. It is only in and through the social that a “subject” and an “intersubjectivity” become possible, (even “transcendentally”!). The social is the always already instituted anonymous collective in and through which “subjects” can appear, it goes indefinitely beyond them (subjects are always replaceable and being replaced), and it contains in itself a creative potential that is irreducible to “co-operation” among subjects or to the effects of “intersubjectivity”’. Castoriadis, ‘Individu, société, rationalité, histoire’, *Le monde morcelé*, p. 66.
39. Castoriadis, ‘L’époque du conformisme généralisé’, *Le monde morcelé*.

He also criticises the ideology of ‘human rights’ and shows that it constitutes a deception.⁴⁰ He also criticises the myth of equality, promoted by the ideologues of liberalism and of liberal oligarchies and he demonstrates that there can be no political equality without economic equality. Characteristically, he says that it is a joke to say that political equality exists between a scavenger and an ultra-rich businessman.⁴¹

This, precisely, is Castoriadis’ original and political contribution:⁴² the reinstatement of democracy, of direct democracy, as the focal point of political theory and, closely related to it, the criticism of representation.⁴³ Modern and contemporary political thinkers ignore it, scandalously, trapped in liberal, Marxist and social-democratic illusions while never concerning themselves with the ‘metaphysics’ of representation.⁴⁴

According to Castoriadis, ‘representation’, in theory and in practice, is the *alienation* of power (alienation here in the legal meaning of the word: *transfer of property*), that is, the transfer of power from the ‘represented’ to the ‘representatives’.⁴⁵ Representation creates a ‘division of the political function’, a division between the rulers and the ruled, between the leaders and the led, which is also realised through the elections.⁴⁶ This is something the Ancient Greeks knew well,

40. Castoriadis, ‘Anthropologie, philosophie, politique’, *La montée de l’insignifiance*, p. 123.

41. Castoriadis, *op. cit.*, p. 123; also ‘Nature valeur de l’égalité’, *Domaines de l’homme*.

42. Apart from for his contributions to other disciplines, philosophy, psycho-analysis, etc.

43. Already in the 1960s he speaks of direct democracy, self-management and the alienation of the representative system. See for example Castoriadis, “Le contenu du socialisme II” (1957), in *Le contenu du socialisme*, ‘Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire’ (1964), in *L’institution imaginaire de la Société*, and ‘La Révolution prématurée’, *La société Française*, (1968). See too ‘Reflections sur le “Développement” et la “Rationalité”’, *Domaines de l’homme*, (1976), p. 42, and ‘La révolution hégélienne 1956’ (1976). Also his texts such as ‘La polis Grecque et la création de la démocratie’ (1979), *Domaines de l’homme*, pp. 288–289. *Ancient Greek Democracy and its Significance for us Today* (Athens, 1986). ‘Fait et à faire’ (1989), in *Fait et à faire*, pp. 65–68. The transition to the democratic project occurs in the sixties and is expressed, among others, by the replacement of the Marxist contradiction ‘productive relations–productive forces’ by the contradiction ‘rulers–executives’. This new view ends in the replacement of the ‘socialism or barbarism’ dilemma (‘socialisme ou barbarie’) by the ‘democracy or oligarchy’ dilemma.

44. Castoriadis, *Fait et à faire*, p. 65. A negative point that Castoriadis attributes to contemporary political philosophers is that they do not concern themselves with political reality, which they hand over contemptuously to the sociologists.

45. ‘From the moment that, definitely and for a certain amount of time (e.g. five years), someone who entrusts power to certain people, is automatically alienated politically.’ Castoriadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and its Significance for us Today* (Athens: Ypsilon), p. 34.

46. Rousseau wrote in *Du contrat social* about the English people (because only England had a Parliament at the time of Rousseau) that they believe they are free because they can vote, but in reality after the time of voting they lose their freedom. Castoriadis adds to this by saying that they lose their freedom not only after the time of voting, but the rest of the time too. See Castoriadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and its Significance for us Today*, p. 34.

which was why they considered elections characteristic of aristocracy and oligarchy and the drawing by lot characteristic of democracy, as Aristotle notes.⁴⁷ The predominant idea today that there are political ‘specialists’, or ‘specialists’ of the universal and technicians of the whole, ‘makes a mockery of the very idea of democracy’.⁴⁸ Moreover, real power does not belong to the 300 or 400 elected members of the parliament, the so-called representatives of the public will, but to the parties and especially to the one that wins the elections and thus becomes the chief holder of power. Behind the parties are the real holders of power, huge economic interests, ‘inter-related’ interests in the current jargon, supra-national organisations and the logic of the economic marketplace, the owners of the extremely powerful mass media and information technology.⁴⁹

Castoriadis’ criticism is connected to a project for an other society, an other institution, a project for true freedom, true equality, true democracy. This project is a creation of Western history, it emerges for the first time in Ancient Greece and comes to an end with the defeat of the Athenians by the Macedonians. It emerges again in Western Europe before the Renaissance—around the 13th century, according to Castoriadis—and it creates a liberatory movement, that once again calls into question the existing institution of society and makes way for another social institution. This project cannot be founded rationally, philosophically, ontologically, economically or in any other theoretical way. We cannot pass from ontology to politics, nor can we extrapolate a politics from philosophy.⁵⁰ The rational philosophical foundation of the project of autonomy, of democracy, of freedom, is logically a non sequitur because it takes what is to be demonstrated as a given, since our decision to philosophise is in itself a demonstration of freedom: to philosophise means to try to be free at the level of thinking.⁵¹ Moreover, philosophy cannot found itself, and every such attempt leads to an illusion or a vicious circle.⁵²

We cannot found politics on transcendental extra-social entities, nor on some so-called objective external criteria (laws of history, of the economy), nor on any so-called higher ethical or human principles. The opposite view was the delusion of Marx and Marxism with its enormously catastrophic consequences.⁵³ In this context, Castoriadis criticises modern foundational views, whose main proponent

47. Aristotle, *Politics*, 4, 1294b 9–11: ‘Drawing magistrates by lot is democratic though electing them by voting is oligarchic’. See Y. Oikonomou, ‘Ancient democracy’, *O Politis*, No. 121, Athens (January–March 1993). Elections, moreover, in Ancient Greece had nothing to do with representation, but rather with the election of the best to office, where they would need specialised knowledge, skills and experience.

48. Castoriadis, ‘La polis Grecque et la Création de la démocratie’, *Domaines de l’homme*, p. 290.

49. If we are to speak of the global situation, we must refer to the international global directory, the real government of the world, consisting of five main organisations: International Monetary Fund, World Bank, OECD, World Trade Organisation, NATO orchestrated by the US. See I. Ramonet. ‘Pour changer le monde’, *Penser le XXI siècle* (Manière de voir No 52, Juillet-Aout 2000), p.6.

50. Castoriadis, ‘Nature et valeur de l’ égalité’, *Domaines de l’homme*, p. 308.

51. Castoriadis, ‘Individu, société, rationalité, histoire’, *Le monde morcelé*, p. 66.

52. Castoriadis, ‘Nature et valeur de l’ égalité’, *Domaines de l’homme*, p. 309.

53. Castoriadis, ‘Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire’, *L’ institution imaginaire de la Société*.

is Habermas. The latter tries to found practice and politics on ideas of ‘communicative action’, of ‘mutual comprehension’ and of the ‘ideal state of reason’, which, Habermas thinks, are built on linguistic mechanisms of reproduction of the ‘species’. Castoriadis considers Habermas’ attempt to ‘rationally’ derive the normative from the *fact* (the idea of a good society from the objective social reality, the *jus* from the *factum*), to be the search for ‘a mythical biological foundation’, something which amounts to a ‘biological positivism’ and leads to the paradox that freedom is both a destiny written in the genes and at the same time a Utopia.⁵⁴

The only foundation for the project of autonomy, and more generally for politics, which is at the same time the basic element of its realisation, is the will and *praxis* of humans (will in the Ancient Greek sense of *vouleusis*, that is, rational decision through dialogue and discussion). Without will we not only cannot have *praxis* but we cannot have thought.⁵⁵ This project is not without content nor is it entirely vague. Its roots lie in historical and social reality and experience, as already mentioned, and Castoriadis gives us so to speak its general principles, and therefore the general principles of an autonomous society:⁵⁶

- The existence of a true public sphere which really belongs to the community⁵⁷
- The recovering of power by the community of citizens
- The abolition of the political division into the rulers and the ruled, the leaders and the led
- The abolition of the priority of the economy, and the establishment of economic equality
- Free circulation of important information for the whole of the community
- The abolition of bureaucracy
- Complete decentralisation
- Rule by the consumers
- Self-managed producers

54. Castoriadis, ‘Individu, société, rationalité, histoire’, *Le monde morcelé*, pp. 68, 69. For the relation between *factum* and *jus* (fact and *value*, fact and *norm*) see ‘Anthropologie, philosophie, politique’, *La montée de l’insignifiance*, p. 117ff. See also A. Kalyvas, ‘Norm and critics in the theory of autonomy of Castoriadis’, *Constellations*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1998). In the latter article there is also a discussion of the problem of the normative superiority of the project of autonomy.

55. Castoriadis, ‘Pouvoir, Politique, L’Autonomie’, *Le monde morcelé*, p. 133.

56. ‘Fait et a faire’, *Fait et a faire*, p. 74.

57. The privatisation of the public sphere is the main characteristic of today’s liberal oligarchies. Privatisation, not in the legal sense, but in the political one. The public sphere in an autonomous society is truly public—Castoriadis calls it an assembly (*ekklesia*). The political organisation of a society is always articulated, explicitly and implicitly, into three spheres: the private (*oikos*), the private/public (*agora*) and the public/public. The latter is the sphere of power. In an autonomous society these three spheres are independent from each other, while totalitarianism tends to break down their independence and unite them and also tends to completely privatise the public/public sphere (*ekklesia*). See Castoriadis, ‘Fait et a faire’ (1989), *Fait et a faire*, p. 62 sq. ‘Quelle démocratie’, *Figures du pensable*, (1990), p. 152. ‘La démocratie comme régime et procédure’, *La montée de l’insignifiance* (Paris, 1996), p. 228 sq.

- No enactment of decisions without participation in decision-making
- Self-limitation of the instituting society (true division of the powers).⁵⁸

The project of autonomy is undergoing eclipse today, but it has not disappeared. For it to be revived there has to be a re-discovery or rather a re-invention of the meaning of democracy, which from the time of Plato has been continually attacked, distorted and concealed. This means, after the collapse of the communist regimes and the refutation of the Marxist and communist Utopia, and thereby the release of millions of people from the relative ideological illusions, that there has to be liberation from the ideology of representative oligarchy.

A significant problem is whether humans today, spectators, consumers, passive voters, briefly, objects of politics, will decide to react to their socio-political degeneration and reclaim the status of citizenship, to once more become *polites* and *eleutheroi* in the ancient democratic sense, so well expressed by Aristotle: the 'citizen is only defined by his participation in justice and other forms of power',⁵⁹ the 'citizen is he who has the capacity to govern and be governed'.⁶⁰

Another significant political problem, also concealed and in need of examination is how direct democracy can be realised in today's societies of millions of people.⁶¹ Castoriadis' answer is that the solutions which lead to 'alienating political structures', in other words to 'representations', must be rejected. Solutions must be sought which 'give the best possible power to communities whose dimensions permit direct self-government or solutions that maximise the participation of citizens in decisions and their control over what happens in the units, whose dimensions (or on subjects whose nature) does not permit direct self-government'.⁶²

One question to be examined is *why* people accept the representative system and alienate their political power to so-called representatives; another question, closely connected with this is *how* people can become able to reject the contemporary imaginary signification of representation and become able to govern themselves. So the questions are: *why* and for how long people will accept being represented and not exercising power for themselves? *How* can they be organised on their own and *what* new organisational forms of action can be created? Another question: How is it possible for us to continue to believe and to try to realise the project of autonomy, when we see that the project has been eclipsed?⁶³

58. Castoriadis also states certain principles that must form the basis of any democratic organisation of the economy, the point of departure for any discussion of problems in a democratic economy. See 'Quelle démocratie', *Figures du pensable*, (1990), p. 174. Thus, it is clear that autonomy for Castoriadis refers also to the political and socio-economic domain.

59. Aristotle, *Politics* III, 1275a 25.

60. Aristotle, *Politics* III, 1277b 17–20.

61. Castoriadis, 'Quelle démocratie', *Figures du pensable*, p. 146.

62. Castoriadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and its Significance for us Today* (Athens: Ypsilon), p. 52.

63. This question is a paraphrasing of a question posed by Hans Joas: 'How can we continue to believe in and to try to realise the project of autonomy, when the myth of the revolution has died?' (Hans Joas, 'Cornelius Castoriadis' political philosophy', *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 174).

Castoriadis gives the following answer: from the moment the project is a creation of human thinking/doing/praxis and of Greco-Western history, it is the free and historical acknowledgement of the value of that project and the reality of its partial realisation up to now, which attaches us to it, which drives us to continue to desire the project and to try to give it its contemporary form.⁶⁴ And more personally: ‘As far as I as a free person am concerned, I am content to obey the leaders I have elected as long as they act legally and have not been recalled. But the idea that someone can represent me would seem to me unbearably insulting, if it was not so comical’.⁶⁵ This perhaps, also answers the question ‘why we want or why must we want democracy’, which was not answered by Castoriadis where it was posed.⁶⁶

We now understand why Castoriadis, apart from his continuous criticism of Plato, found necessary the detailed criticism of one of his mature works, *The Statesman*. He had to bring to light clear all the rhetoric and sophistries, the calumniations and forgeries of the great philosopher, which influenced thought for many centuries, and still influence views today, and conceal the true meaning of politics and democracy.⁶⁷ He had to clear away the mists from a false picture of reality, as he did in his first works by criticising Communist practice and Marxist theory. As he did with his criticism of inherited Greek–Western metaphysics and thought,⁶⁸ with his criticism of the myths of capitalist liberalism and today’s Western representative oligarchies, under the guise of so-called representative democracy.

3. The project of autonomy and the project of inclusive democracy

An extension of Castoriadis’ ideas, in the form of a synthesis of his project of autonomy with the socialist project and the projects which emerged with the rise of the ‘new social movements’ (Green, feminist, identity movements, etc.), is expressed by the project of Inclusive Democracy, which is being promoted by this journal.⁶⁹ This is the project for political and economic democracy, as well as ecological democracy and democracy in the social realm. There are significant similarities but also some important differences between the autonomy and the Inclusive Democracy projects.

Thus, as regards the similarities between the two projects, both Castoriadis’ project of autonomy and the project of Inclusive Democracy offer a ‘non-objectivist’ grounding to the project of radical transformation of society. Thus, they both depart from both the usual non- ‘objectivist’ argumentation as well as

64. Castoriadis, ‘La ‘fin de la Philosophie?’’, *Le monde morcele*, p. 246.

65. Castoriadis, ‘Fait et a faire’, *Fait et a faire*, p. 66.

66. Castoriadis, ‘La démocratie comme procédure et comme régime’, *La montée de l’insignifiance*, p. 226.

67. Castoriadis, ‘Les Intellectuels et l’Histoire’, *Le monde morcélé*, p. 107.

68. In his text ‘Valeur, égalité, justice, politique: de Marx a Aristote et d’Aristote a nous’ (*Les carrefours du labyrinthe* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), he also demonstrated the problems, the omissions and the impasses of the Aristotelian views on justice and equality.

69. See T. Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy* (Cassell, 1997).

some variants of it in the libertarian space. Furthermore, they both distance themselves from the common nowadays postmodernist ‘non-objectivist’ conformist talk.⁷⁰

Also, both projects make concrete proposals for the economic organisation of a liberatory society. Thus, Castoriadis in his early works proposed a detailed description of a “socialist” economy and both in his early and in his later works has, rightly, insisted on the need to describe the institutional framework of the future society so that its feasibility is demonstrable. These points (in a different, in certain ways, context) have been taken up by the project for an Inclusive Democracy.

However, the project of autonomy and the project of Inclusive Democracy diverge on certain important issues, and it would be interesting to, at least, present some of these points of divergence. There are two major areas of difference between the two types of proposals for a possible future organisation of society.

First, Castoriadis’ proposal presupposes a money and real market economy in which there is equality of wages. On the other hand, inclusive democracy presupposes a marketless and moneyless economy that implies a very different way for remuneration of labour to meet both the satisfaction of basic needs and freedom of choice.

Second, the allocation of scarce resources in Castoriadis’ economy takes place through planning controlled by the decisions of workers’ councils and through a real market based on impersonalised money. On the other hand, the allocation of resources in inclusive democracy takes place through planning controlled by the decisions of citizens’ assemblies (as regards basic needs only) and through an artificial market based on personalised vouchers (as regards all other needs). These differences have of course important implications on many other aspects of social and economic organisation.

Despite the above differences, however, it must be stressed that both the autonomy project and the project for an Inclusive Democracy belong to the libertarian democratic tradition, and a detailed discussion and contradistinction between both would certainly be beneficial to libertarian theory and practice.

70. T. Fotopoulos, ‘Towards a democratic liberatory ethics’, *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (November 2002), pp. 361–395.