

From modernity to neoliberalism : what human subject ?

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Introduction

“What democracy ?” is the provocative title Castoriadis had chosen for a paper he presented at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1990 (Castoriadis, 2007d : 118-150) [[1](#)]. Whilst the planetary triumph of democracy was celebrated in the mass media as well as by many intellectuals, Castoriadis was questioning its mere possibility. To him, democracy should tie in its etymological sense : democracy is the power (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*). To put it in other words, democracy is the regime of autonomy. A democratic collectivity institutes itself creating its own laws (*auto-nomos*), values, social institutions and collective aims, without any reference to any kind of transcendence. This autonomous and democratic collectivity is also characterized by self-limitation : the people are totally responsible for themselves and must create their own principles of limitation, as nothing is limiting their power from the outside. As democracy is autonomous, self-instituted and self-governed (based on the direct participation and self-organization of the people), a representative democracy is not any more democratic for Castoriadis. Does this mean that the only democracy that has ever existed was the Athenian *polis* ? The answer is no. The Athenians *invented* democracy, but Castoriadis has stressed several times the fact that the Athenian *polis* is not a model but a germ (Castoriadis, 1997 : 267-289 and 2004, 35-64). Democracy understood as a dynamic project of autonomy has been revived several times by the Moderns : in the 11th and 12th centuries in Western Europe, and thereafter especially in periods such as the Enlightenment, the American and the French revolutions, the Paris Commune, the working class’ struggles in the 19th and 20th centuries, or May 68.

However, Castoriadis’ diagnosis of the contemporary situation is very pessimistic. According to him, the so-called ‘democracies’ in contemporary Western capitalist societies are in fact liberal oligarchies : they are “oligarchies because they are dominated by a specific stratum of people, liberal because that stratum consents a number of negative or defensive liberties to citizens” (2007d : 126). “Generalized conformism” is the only content of those ‘opened’ societies,

characterized by the reproduction of the same in the economy, politics as well as in culture (2007d : 126). This reproduction of the same is due to the general application of two norms : “one is the hierarchical-bureaucratic norm within those huge organizations of all sorts (be they productive, administrative, educational or cultural) in which most people spend their lives. The other is the norm of money, wherever today’s pseudo-marketplace setups prevail” (2007d : 126-127). The liberal societies are therefore “fragmented bureaucratic capitalist societies” (2007d : 127), in which the project of autonomy keeps disappearing. Castoriadis gives several reasons for that ‘eclipse’, but I would like to emphasize one of them : the collective project of autonomy is disappearing because autonomy is no longer *desired* by the contemporary capitalist individuals.

“What human subject ?” is therefore the question I have chosen to explore in the present paper, echoing Castoriadis’ question about democracy. Indeed, the democratic project of autonomy connects inextricably the individuals and the collective : “one cannot want autonomy without wanting it for everyone and its realization cannot be conceived of in its full scope except as a collective enterprise” (Castoriadis, 1987 : 107). This Castoriadian statement could sound like a vicious circle : an autonomous society presupposes autonomous individuals and autonomous individuals can only appear in societies that promote autonomy. But for Castoriadis, the circle is fruitful : individuals create themselves as autonomous while struggling for the creation of an autonomous society. In the *Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis calls this autonomous individual a *subject* : “but just what is this subject ? [...] It is certainly not the point-like ego of the ‘I think’. It is not the subject as pure activity, possessing no constraints, no inertia, this will o’ the wisp of subjectivist philosophers [...]” (1987 : 105). The autonomous ‘subject’ Castoriadis has in mind is obviously not the Cartesian *ego*.

But what is its positive definition ? What are the essential differences but also the possible connections between the ‘true’ autonomous subject which Castoriadis is praising for, the classical Cartesian *ego* and the capitalist individual ? If contemporary capitalist societies are not autonomous anymore, what could revive the capitalist individual’s desire for self-transforming into an autonomous subject ?

These are the three issues that I propose to consider in this paper. In its first part, I will present Castoriadis’ critique of the Cartesian *ego*, in order to show how he defines the ‘true’ autonomous subject by contrast. Secondly, I will examine if modernity, capitalism and neoliberalism have to be considered as three different types of society, or as one and the same society altering itself through time. [2] Indeed, we must first consider the collective level, if we want to understand the specific links and the differences between the Cartesian *ego*, the neoliberal individual and the autonomous subject. In the third and last part of this paper, I will extend Castoriadis’ analysis of the Cartesian *ego* and of the contemporary individual to its paradoxical consequences. As a conclusion, I will bring out the antinomy of desire for money and desire for autonomy, with the help of Aristotle’s analysis of money.

1. Ego cogitans is homo computans

From Castoriadis’ point of view, the Cartesian *ego* is not true subjectivity but only its ‘ghost’ because of four reasons : its artificial solipsism ; the narrowness of its so-called rationality, in fact limited to instrumental rationality ; its lack of self-reflexivity, in fact limited to self-referentiality and its unawareness of the fact that its ideal of pure rationality is a product of the imagination.

Let us consider first the charge of artificial solipsism : Forgetting that he is in the world with others, the Cartesian *cogito* is presented by Castoriadis as “ [...] a pure gaze, the naked capacity for evoking something, setting it at a distance, a spark outside of time [...] ” (Castoriadis, 1987 : 105). On the contrary, Castoriadis states that the fundamental truth, forgotten by all subjectivist philosophies, is that “in the subject as subject, we find the non-subject” :

In the subject there is, to be sure, as one of its moments ‘that which can never become an object’, inalienable freedom, the always present possibility of redirecting the gaze, of abstracting from any particular content, of bracketing everything, including oneself, except inasmuch as the self is this capacity that springs forth as presence and absolute proximity at the very moment it places itself at a distance from itself. However, this moment is abstract, empty ; it never has and never will produce anything other than the silent and useless self-evidence of the *cogito sum*, the immediate certainty of existing as a thinking substance, which cannot legitimately express itself through language. For once even unpronounced speech makes a first opening, the world and others infiltrate from every direction ... (Castoriadis 1987 : 105-106).

In the ‘content’ of the thought, others are always present, because of the impossibility of thinking outside of language, which for Castoriadis is the first and most fundamental social institution. Furthermore, the support of this union of the subject and the non-subject within the subject, of this articulation of the self and the others, is the body :

It is because it ‘forgets’ this concrete structure of the subject that traditional philosophy, the narcissism of consciousness fascinated by its own naked forms, reduces to the level of the conditions of servitude both the other and corporeality. And it is because it wants to base itself on the pure freedom of a fictive subject that it condemns itself to rediscover the alienation of the actual subject as an insoluble problem. (Castoriadis 1987 : 106)

Therefore the ‘true’ subject is not the abstract, absolute and monadic subjectivity created by modern philosophy, but “the actual subject traversed through and through by the world and by others” (1987 : 106). This ‘true’ embodied subject is also characterized as the active and lucid instance constantly organizing the contents of its activity of thinking, with the help of those contents.

We may now turn to the second Castoriadian charge against the Cartesian *ego*. Whereas the Moderns are proud of their supposedly extremely developed rationality and rationalization of all fields of life and being, Castoriadis considers modern rationality to be limited, in fact, to instrumental rationality. The rationality in which modern societies have placed their trust is “...simply a matter of *form*, externally necessary connections, the perpetual dominance of the syllogism” (1987 : 156). In Castoriadis’ view, this kind of instrumental ‘rationality’ may be attributed even to a bacterium and more generally to any living being : “the living being discriminates, separates, chooses, identifies, works with classes, properties and relations [...] there is recognition of forms, there is always the ‘if...then’ syllogistic schema” (Castoriadis, 2002 : 91). As a result, the living being shapes the world as ‘its’ world, that is to say as a world in which it can live, preserving itself (Castoriadis, 1997b : 306-307). Castoriadis therefore calls the living being a ‘*pour soi*’ (for-itself), and states four levels of *pour soi* : the living being, the psyche, the social individual and society (Castoriadis, 2002 : 57). Each is characterized by the ability to calculate and perform

instrumental reasoning of the 'if...then' type.

As each *pour soi* is characterized by self-finality, it is important to stress, with Castoriadis, that this implies self-referentiality (2002 : 104). Self-referentiality is therefore not the same as self-reflexivity, and is not specific of human subjectivity. Castoriadis takes the example of the immune system of an organism (2002 : 104) :

There is constantly the essential presence of reckoning, of calculation, of computation. But there is also self-referentiality : the immune system is able to distinguish the self from the non-self and to act consequently. Because this system cannot exist without this capacity, some diseases, called precisely auto-immune, appear when this capacity collapses and when the cells of the immune system attack the self, not recognizing it anymore. More generally, if any system is endowed with the property of self-finality, self-referentiality is necessary implied. [3]

While increasing the scope of *pour soi* even to bacteria and stating that rationality and calculation are not specific of human beings, Castoriadis challenges the whole philosophical tradition of modernity, including Freud himself :

Freudian consciousness is first characterized by reasoning and calculation [...] This definition of reason or subjectivity has very ancient philosophical legitimacy : for Hegel, even apart from considering the subjectivity, "reason is operation in accordance with a goal". [4] It is teleological logic then. Hobbes had already defined reasoning as reckoning and in his *Ars Combinatoria*, Leibniz praised Hobbes for having seen that the activity of the reasoning subject is nothing else than reckoning [...] this confusion is to be avoided because calculating supposes ensidical operations [...] and is to be found wherever *pour soi* is involved. (Castoriadis 2002 : 103-104)

I would like to emphasize this third point in Castoriadis' criticism of the modern subject. Self-finality and self-preservation through calculating rationality exist for all living beings. The only specific human characteristic is *self-reflexivity understood as self-transformation*. In order to fully understand this statement, we must turn to the fourth and last Castoridian charge against the Cartesian *ego*. In its perfect, mathematized and mechanized world, the Modern *ego* does not see that "...in the syllogisms of modern life, the premises borrow their contents from the imaginary..." (Castoriadis, 1987 : 156). Moreover, the ideal of rationality is in fact an 'obsession with rationality'. Castoriadis speaks therefore of a "pseudo-rationality " (Castoriadis, 1987 : 156) : "...arbitrary in its ultimate ends to the extent that these ends themselves stem from no reason, and it is arbitrary when it posits itself as an end, intending nothing but a formal and empty 'rationalization'. In this aspect of its existence, the modern world is in the throes of a systematic delirium..." (Castoriadis, 1987 : 156). The autonomization and development of technique for itself, no longer 'in the service' of any other ascribable aim (such as greater happiness or education or free time for all mankind), is for Castoriadis its most immediately perceptible and most directly threatening form. Modern rationality therefore seems not only to be criticized by Castoriadis, but unmasked as an insane, -that is, exceeding certain limits -, product of the imagination.

To put an end to this first section, we could of course 'critique the critique'. In many ways,

Castoriadis' portrait of the Cartesian *ego* seems exaggerated, if not caricatural.

Many scholars have studied the importance (even paradoxical) of the body, others and madness in Descartes' works. Moreover, the critique of Modern rationality (of its intrinsic irrationalism and violence) is due to Horkheimer and Adorno, whose work has influenced Castoriadis. However, it seems to me that Castoriadis' views are original and thought-provoking for the following reasons.

Firstly, his critique of the Modern subject challenges the commonplace according to which the subject is a Modern invention and did not exist in the Ancient world. Indeed, the 'true' subject is for Castoriadis the autonomous one, inherited from the Greeks, as the Moderns have inherited the Greek inventions of philosophy - defined as never-ending questioning - and democracy - defined as a society supported by itself, responsible for the invention of its own institutions. Castoriadis considers therefore the project of autonomy as a specific characteristic not of modernity but of the Greek-Western world. The autonomous subject he praises is a self-reflecting one, capable of transforming himself by thinking and acting deliberately. The 'true' subject is never done, but 'to be done'. It is self-creating as a reflexive and deliberate subjectivity, because challenging the laws of its own existence (the laws of Nature as well as the laws of Society). For instance, from a Castoridian point of view, Socrates and his interlocutors, as well as the contemporary psychoanalyst and the analysand, may be viewed as subjects, because they have undertaken the project of transforming themselves, which is never-ending.

Secondly, Castoriadis' caricature of the Modern subject seems to aim at emphasizing the ambivalent power of imagination in the constitution of the subject. On the one hand, Castoriadis considers Descartes as a typical representative of what he calls "inherited ontology" : the whole philosophical tradition since Plato has missed the comprehension of imagination as *vis formandi*, creation *ex nihilo* of new forms of being, i.e. the capacity of creating a form which was not there before (Castoriadis, 2007c : 72). Indeed, in his *Metaphysical Meditations*, Descartes explicitly reduces imagination to the recombination of pre-existing elements and contrasts the clarity of reason with the deceptive power of imagination. In his correspondence with Mersenne, Descartes also writes that only two things are conceived without the use of imagination : the certitude of the *cogito* and of the idea of God. For those reasons, it is important for Castoriadis to show that the *cogito* and the general ideal of a pure reason are *creations of a theoretical imaginary*, as all major philosophical concepts (Castoriadis, 1984 : xx-xxiii). The irony of the Castoridian critique therefore aims at showing that the so-called self-reflexive *cogito* is unable to reflect on its true foundation. This seems to me to deepen and to increase the critique of Modern rationality made by the Frankfurt School.

On the other hand, what characterizes the human being is to be a "mad animal" says Castoriadis, ironically inverting the Aristotelian definition of human as a "rational animal" (Castoriadis, 1987 : 299). This 'lunacy' refers to the defunctionalized processes of the *psyche* in relation to their biological substratum : the *psyche* of a human being doesn't function essentially to protect the body and to reproduce the species. Human beings can neglect their biological needs to death, as the extreme examples of the *infans'* anorexia or the philosopher's lucid suicide demonstrate (Castoriadis : 2002, 86). Instead of shouting to call the breast, the *infans* can phantasize it and be satisfied with that phantasm. Socrates preferred to die than to disobey the laws of Athens, in order to maintain the coherence and unity of his life and philosophical principles. This human 'lunacy' is due to the over-development of the human imagination, which originates in the first state of the *psyche*, which Castoriadis calls the "monadic core of primal subject". This monadic core is characterised as a continuous and unending flow of representations where the *infans* and the world, 'its'

representation, desire, affect and intention are one and the same (Castoriadis, 1987 : 294-300). This monadic core will be transformed into a social individual by the action of society (socialization by the mother). Nevertheless, a rest of this monadic core will continue to act in the depths of the psyche. Moreover, it will be partly responsible for all the most complex productions of human mind : it is the nostalgia for the primitive unity of this core, that will secretly guide the philosophers' or the scientists' desire for a unified and totally coherent system. Therefore Castoriadis emphasizes the fact that "the sperm of reason is also contained in the complete madness of the initial autism. [...] rather than being faithful to reason one betrays it, if one refuses to see in it something other than, of course, but *also* an avatar of the madness of unification" (1987 : 299).

As a consequence of this specificity, the self-creation of the true subject originates in the imagination, as imagination is the condition of possibility of both reflexivity and deliberate action. Indeed, reflexivity is the result of an imaginative internal split : "the possibility of making the self's own activity its explicit object, apart from any functionality" (Castoriadis, 2002 : 106-107). Deliberate action is "the possibility for a human being to put the results of his process of reflection into the relays conditioning his acts [...] or in other words : will or deliberate activity is the reflexive dimension of what we are as imaginative beings" (2002 : 113).

2. Modernity, capitalism, neoliberalism : one and the same social-historical *eidos* ?

Now that we have described Castoriadis' criticism of 'modern subjectivity', and what is 'true subjectivity' for him, we may go on with the question of the relationship between these two representations of subjectivity and the Castoriadian analysis of the capitalist and neoliberal individuals. As announced in the introduction, this presupposes to wonder whether modernity, capitalism and neoliberalism may be considered as one and the same society self-transforming through time. Or rather, when talking about 'modernity', 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' from a Castoriadian point of view, we are talking about a specific mode of being, which is the *social-historical* one. Criticizing what he calls "inherited ontology", Castoriadis created this expression to signify that, in the field of human affairs (Aristotle's *ta anthrôpina*), history is not merely a dimension of society : history is the self-deployment of society within time :

It is ... impossible to maintain an intrinsic distinction between the social and the historical [...]. The social is this very thing – self-alteration, and it is nothing if it is not this. The social makes itself and can make itself only as history ; the social makes itself as temporality [...] [and] it is instituted implicitly as a singular quality of temporality. In the same way, it is not that history 'presupposes' society [...]. The historical is this very thing — the self-alteration of this specific mode of 'coexistence' that is the social as such [...]. The historical makes itself and can do so only as social ; the historical is [...] the emergence of the institution and the emergence of *another* institution. (Castoriadis, 1987 : 215)

More precisely, history is the self-alteration of society in a process of creation and destruction of forms. These forms Castoriadis calls *eidè*. This is not an innocent terminological choice : from the point of view of the inherited ontology, creation and destruction of an *eidos* is impossible, unthinkable (Castoriadis, 2007f : 225). As the *eidos* provides specificity – in the sense of what is proper and common to all individuals of the same species – it is supposed to be eternal (uncreated and immortal). Furthermore, inherited ontology conceives "being as being-determined, beingness as

determinacy" (Castoriadis, 1987, 221). This interpretation of being is coextensive with inherited logic, which Castoriadis calls "identitary logic and also [...] set-theoretical logic" (Castoriadis, 1987 : 221). Acknowledged since Plato and Aristotle (as principles of identity and non-contradiction), this logic is based on two main operations : "*legein* : distinguish-choose-posit-assemble-count-speak" (1987 : 223) and "*teukhein* : assembling-adjusting-fabricating-constructing" (1987 : 260). According to Castoriadis, this inherited logic does not make creation thinkable at all, because it restricts processes of creation and destruction to recomposition and decomposition of pre-existing elements.

In opposition to this static 'inherited' conception of being, Castoriadis highlights that the social-historical mode of being is *essentially dynamic*. He is there referring to the creation of a primary *eidos* - the fact that society creates itself as society - which patterns itself in specific modes for each society, creating and articulating secondary *eidè* : a magma of social-imaginary significations, specific institutions, social aims, and also specific affects (Castoriadis, 2007c : 73-87 and Klimis, 2010). One of the most original aspects of Castoriadis' analysis of societies as social-historical forms (*eidè*) is his demonstration of the importance of the social imaginary significations (1987 : 135-164). According to Castoriadis, a society is not reducible to a functional role. In order to aim at perpetuating itself, a society must first define what is meaningful for itself. Creating and instituting its own imaginary significations, "Thus, each social-historical form is truly and genuinely singular ; it possesses an essential, not numerical or combinatorial, singularity [...]" (2007f : 225). Those significations are not created by individuals, but by an anonymous and collective imaginary. These imaginary significations (such as God, Nation, the Market, etc.) provide the true foundation of each society. [5] They materialize in political institutions, guide the social ends and give rise to specific affects in order to support them.

This singular dynamics of a social-historical *eidos* seems to me to be considered as its *rhythm*, just as Castoriadis (2007c : 75) speaks about *tempi*, "pulsating processes" in which phases of creation of forms alternate with phases of destruction of forms (without any hidden principle of progress, nor decadence). When talking about "rhythm", I am more precisely referring to the pre-Platonic meaning of the Greek term *ruthmos* : self-deployment of a moving form, which is synonymous to self-creation of an *eidos*. [6] This, I postulate, helps us to perceive the radicality of the Castoriadian idea of creation - irreducible to the laws of causation. With 'rhythmicity', we don't speak of a combination of pre-existing and static elements, but of modulations that *are* the process of self-transforming of the social-historical *eidos*. Therefore, talking about the rhythmicity of the *eidos* of modernity allows us to consider the question of its singularity, through the main *eidetic modulations* of Enlightenment, capitalism and neoliberalism.

The most accurate way is to pay closer attention to the relationship between what Castoriadis considers to be the two main imaginary significations of modernity : the unlimited expansion of "so-called rationality" (the so-called rational mastery of everything), and the "revival of the project of autonomy" (the challenging of the established order) (Castoriadis, 1987 : 156-164 ; 1996b : 129-131).

Within a first rhythmic modulation, it seems that something like a 'swinging harmony', or even a 'discordant harmony' [7] is attained through the interaction of those two contradictory imaginary significations. For centuries and especially during the Enlightenment, one could say that the imaginary signification of autonomy guided the expansion of instrumental rationality. For example, according to both Descartes' enthusiastic account of medical progress in the *Discours de la Méthode* and Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, more technical progress would lead to more freedom and happiness for

all human beings. What has often been called 'the first phase of capitalism' also fits into this dynamic. Castoriadis stresses the fact that the workers' struggle for emancipation enabled the expansion of capitalism : the tendency for capitalism, during the first half of the 19th century, was toward impoverishment and overproduction (Castoriadis, 2007b : 68). The struggles of the working class thwarted these tendencies, "...imposing wage increments and shorter working hours, creating enormous domestic consumer markets, and preventing capitalism from drowning in its own wares." (2007b : 68). Castoriadis also describes the Schumpeterian 'entrepreneur', who he considers as the only human type created by capitalism, in a rather positive way : "a person having a passion for creating this new historical institution, the enterprise, and for constantly expanding it, introducing new technical complexes and new methods in an attempt to penetrate the market" (Castoriadis, 1996a : 68). So we could see the Schumpeterian 'entrepreneur' as a variation on modern subjectivity, stressing instrumental rationality but not totally apart from the project of autonomy : this 'entrepreneur' was searching for and wanting more and more progress in science and knowledge, that is to say, somehow, more freedom for himself and for others.

But little by little, within a second rhythmic modulation, the expanding rational mastery spread to 'everything', nature as well as human beings. Unlimited expansion of technology became an aim in itself, to the detriment of the project of autonomy. Castoriadis therefore notes the disappearance of the ideal and vision of 'progress', leaving only the empty form of "more and more for its own sake" (2007d : 149). Belief in the progress of 'technoscience' for its own sake resembles the ancient religious beliefs : nobody seems able to question it. New 'opium of the masses', the expansion of 'technoscience' is furthermore a mere pretext for the vacuity of the whole system (2007d : 149). Castoriadis notes the limitations of this type of rationality, that will never be more than the rationality of a system of means, aiming at the unlimited expansion of production, itself necessarily subordinated to the unlimited expansion of consumption. Therefore, the unlimited expansion of consumption seems to be the final aim of capitalism, which is absurd : "everything that may be invented is invented, everything that may be produced is produced, the corresponding 'needs' will be invented afterwards" (Castoriadis, 1996a : 71). So neoliberal society has without any doubt become a heteronomous one, subordinate to imaginary significations such as 'market' or 'economic growth'. Castoriadis' diagnosis is therefore that Western societies are not democratic, but, rather, masked oligarchies. Furthermore, in Castoriadis' view, these 'oligarchies' are about much more than a few men's will to power. It is about the general denial of mortality in our civilization (1996a : 71 and 2007d : 149-50).

3. The neoliberal individual : not a subject anymore but the oxymoron of a social monadic psyche ?

We still have to make a step forward to end our reasoning. We have to bring out the specificity of the relationship between the 'individual' and 'society' in contemporary neoliberalism. Following Castoriadis' analyses in different texts, it is possible to reconstruct the portrait of a new anthropological type, whose characteristics seem to be as follows. His general identificatory model is "the individual who earns as much as possible and enjoys himself as much as possible. Earning money is disconnected from any social function and even from any legitimization within the system : you don't earn money because of your worth : rather, you have worth because you earn money" (Castoriadis, 1996b : 131). So enjoying oneself becomes the only criterion for a successful life, which means that everybody is trying to avoid any kind of frustration. This leads to a strange kind of 'education'. In neoliberal societies, parents seem not to educate their children anymore : *they do not give them any sense of limitation, which means that they do not socialize them*. From a concrete example, the fact of giving presents to every child at a birthday party, Castoriadis shows how

parents are constantly trying to deny frustration (1996b : 133). This also means that parents invalidate the *devenir signifiant* of the present and the pleasure which characterizes it. Without any frustration, there is no more fantasizing ('phantasmatisation') of the absent object, no imaginary compensation for its absence. Therefore, there is also no more sublimation, no more investment in collective significations, nor any possibility of developing any autonomous and singular creation. The message these parents implicitly convey to their children is : "enjoy yourself, the rest is not important" (1996b : 133).

For Castoriadis, this paradoxical 'education' is the sign of the denial of death : in neoliberal societies, there can be no more bereavement nor mourning rituals. The accumulation of gadgets and presents at every minute is a way of masking the horror of death (2007d : 149), which is no longer symbolically elaborated in rituals, tales, etc. And this tendency continues in adult life : doing a job which is most of the time not invested as socially useful, only wanting to earn as much money as possible, trying to enjoy oneself as much as possible, wanting to stay young and fit forever, jogging to forget that death is near (1996b : 134).

Castoriadis does not say so explicitly, but these characteristics of the neoliberal individual remind us remarkably of his descriptions of the monadic core of the primal subject : self-centered, all-powerful, asocial and antisocial, always searching for pleasure and satisfaction, trying to destroy or incorporate within itself everything from the outside world (Castoriadis, 1987, 294-300 and Klimis, 2007). But on the other hand, the most important characteristic of this monadic core, unlimited activity of the imagination, seems to be missing. So we are led to a crucial question : does the neoliberal society create individuals that are social *analoga* of the monadic psyche ? This sounds paradoxical : how could a 'society' possibly be made up of monadic psyches, disconnected from each other, self-centered, orientated only towards their own pleasure ? That would mean that instead of creating individuals assuring their own reproduction, this society creates individuals who are logically going to try to destroy the social institution itself. And yet, that is what neoliberal society is actually doing !

Has this society produced a kind of individual that resembles the monadic psyche, but which, *being a social creation*, is not able to reactivate the imaginative potential of that monad ? Does this mean that our society does not provide for its individuals socialization but dehumanization ? We must remember that Castoriadis describes the monadic psyche as a little 'monster' that becomes human only through education and through the limits imposed on its unlimited imaginative activity by the parents, representing society (1987 : 297-308). As time goes by, the 'monster' becomes a 'social individual' while accepting those social limitations : "But hate of the ego goes on living in the psychical depths, almost silently" (2007^e : 156). Hatred for this 'social individual' which the monadic nucleus sees a dangerous stranger (2007^e : 156). According to Castoriadis, hatred is therefore the most original affect of the human *psyche*, because hatred is the reactivation of the all-powerful state of the monadic psyche. Hatred is the innate tendency of the monad to destroy everything that prevents it from enjoying itself. Therefore, if society raises its individuals as 'social-monadic' ones, this can only encourage hatred. And this cannot lead to anything but social self-destruction.

I therefore propose to consider the power that accompanies the unlimited expansion of instrumental rationality as the expression of the triumph of the monadic psyche, which has succeeded in subverting the process of socialization from within. This would be the last, tragic characteristic of the ambivalent power of human beings' imaginary : instead of aiming at creating imaginary significations, their defunctionalized imagination would have led them to adore the nonsense.

Instead of aiming at reproducing themselves like all other living beings, their defunctionalized imagination would have led them to construct societies that aim at destroying themselves. Castoriadis gives us evidence for this thesis, saying that the capitalist system has survived only because of anthropological types inherited from other phases of society : 'the honest judge', 'the devoted teacher', 'the conscientious worker' (Castoriadis, 1996a : 68). Because they believed in values such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, state service etc., those 'types' did their jobs well, and helped capitalist society to stay well. But when the only value is money, Castoriadis asks, what prevents a judge from putting up his judgement for auction ? (1996a : 68) The conclusion is : individuals living for money, which is the only capitalist value and aim, will not be able to keep their society alive for very long. Furthermore, for the first time in human history, a society, capitalist society, has produced a type of individuals that may lead not only to the destruction of *their* society, but of *any form of society* : capitalism has developed itself by irremediably depleting the planet's natural resources as well as the historical heritage created by previous ages and that it cannot reproduce (2007d : 146).

4. The antinomy between the desire for autonomy and the desire for money

To complete our development, we must consider our last question : if the neoliberal society is not autonomous anymore, what is likely to revive its individuals' desire for autonomy ? In comparison with the Greeks, the most striking point of the *eidōs* of the Western type society is the disappearance of the idea of 'self-limitation'. This is certainly one of the main reasons why the project of autonomy has almost disappeared in neoliberal societies. In order to understand why there is a necessary link between autonomy and self-limitation for Castoriadis, let us first focus on the meaning of the Greek notion of *peras*. *Peras* is that which provides a limit, sketches a form, therefore it is that which enables the construction of an *eidōs*, that which makes things *thinkable*. On the contrary, *a-peiron* is that which is without limits. Therefore, it is that which can neither be apprehended, nor defined : *apeiron* is the indeterminate, beyond, or beneath, human comprehension. In his seminar course on ancient Greece at EHESS, Castoriadis carefully studied the poetical and philosophical representations of *peras* and *apeiron*, *khaos* and *kosmos* (Castoriadis, 2004 : 171-201). He emphasised the fact that one of the 'truths' contained in the Greek myths is to represent *kosmos* emerging from *khaos* and forever grounded on *khaos*, as in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Anaximander inherited this poetical representation, stating that *apeiron* was the first principle and origin of the *kosmos*. For Castoriadis, this means that the Greeks were conscious of this fundamental and universal truth : all significations are grounded on nonsense, and, insofar as they are imaginary creations, they are somehow nonsensical themselves (2004 : 167-169). The tragical dimension of the human condition will be constantly to confront *khaos*, *apeiron* and nonsense, in an endless quest to create an orderly and meaningful world (*kosmos*, *peras*).

Whenever he mentions the Athenian *polis*, Castoriadis emphasises the importance of self-limitation for the self-creation and self-institution of democracy (1997 : 282-286 ; 2008 : 125-131). The Athenians had to limit themselves in order to be able to face their absolute power to invent their own laws, rules and institutions. That is the reason why they invented two main institutions of collective self-limitation : the 'accusation of unlawfulness' (*graphè paranomôn*) and tragedy. As every citizen could make a proposal of law at the Assembly (*ekklesia*), every citizen could bring another before the court, accusing him of inducing people to vote for an unlawful law. The accused citizen was judged by a jury of citizens and he was acquitted or convicted. In the latter case, the law was annulled (1997 : 283). Athenian tragedy had the function to give to all citizens to see that Being is Chaos (1997 : 284). Tragedy also showed that *hubris* was essentially due to the inability to self-limit :

hubris is the transgression of a limit that was not pre-given. *Hubris* is the error and failure of practical wisdom (*phronèsis*). Therefore, the tragic imaginary representations revealed the necessary connection between individual and collective self-limitation. According to Castoriadis, self-limitation was therefore one of the main conditions of possibility of political freedom and autonomy for the Athenians.

In contrast, from a modern point of view, any form of limitation is seen as an unbearable restriction or even as an attack on individual freedom. Therefore, the expansion of so-called 'technological progress' as well as the expansion of the desire for money, show how dangerous these imaginary significations are, *because they destroy the meaning of limitation and promote what is without any limits* (endless 'progress', 'endless' consumption). More precisely, the promotion of *apeiron* for itself, through these neoliberal imaginary significations, appear to be self-destructive of what Castoriadis has called 'human self-creation'. [8]

For a better understanding, let us go back to Aristotle's interpretation of the invention of money. In *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes between two sorts of 'goods'. The natural goods, for example products from hunting or agriculture, are the ones providing true wealth "because the quantity of such goods sufficient for a happy life *is not unlimited*" (1256b30-32, my emphasis). On the contrary, "another type of acquisition exists which is called chrematistic, because there seems to be *no limit* to the wealth and the possession of such goods" (1256b41-1257a1). Natural goods allow the satisfaction of natural needs. Therefore they enable the perpetuation of life (*zèn*), understood in a biological sense, and also of what Castoriadis calls the ensemblist-identitary dimension of society. But those natural goods also lead to the good life (*euzèn*), that is : the true life of a human being actualizing his reason (*logos*) and his intellect (*noûs*), because those goods are subordinated to a measure, which is a 'right measure'. Necessarily limited, the possession of such goods is a mere means, subordinated to the superior aim of the good life : an active life of deliberating, judging and deciding about political things ; or a contemplative life, trying to understand the principles and causes in every sphere of being.

On the contrary, 'chrematistic' acquisition (money) alienates : it makes people desire 'the unlimited' (*apeiron*), because money becomes the final and only aim in human life, subverting all virtues : "but the aim of courage is not to make money but to make people brave, the aim of medicine is not to make money but to make people healthy again" (1258a10-14). For Aristotle, money is "against nature" in the strongest sense : "mere convention, absolutely unnatural" (1257b10-11) ; money is a symbolic substitute aimed at complexifying exchanges, while establishing an equivalence between things which are not naturally commensurable (the product of a shoe-maker's work and the product of an architect's work, for instance).

Therefore, I think we may consider money as an invention *ex nihilo*, the invention of a measure which is a pure human creation. The invention of 'money' is part of the process of the human self-creation. But, paradoxically, money makes human beings revert to an *analogon* of their most 'biological' life and move away from their 'human' and good life. If money triggers the desire for what has no limits, it is because "men are intent upon living only (*zèn*), and not upon living well (*euzèn*) ; and, as their desires upon living are unlimited they also desire that the means of gratifying them should be without limit" (1257b40-1258a2). "Putting the finishing touches to what nature has created", in a very weird way, the technical and symbolic invention of money, as *specifically human*, is nevertheless what makes human beings behave *as if* [9] they were purely natural beings such as bacteria.

To sum it up, money is *at the same time* a human invention *ex nihilo* which contributes to the human self-creation, *and* that which may take human beings back to a most primary stage of living, artificially reconstructed (not even the animal one, but the microbial). As *endless*, the desire for money is a regression. It is also contradictory to 'true' humanity, because human self-creation is based on self-limitation. Therefore, if we are living 'the tragedy of money' in real life today and not watching it at the theatre, that is because, as Aristotle had already understood, *money is, in its essence, tragic*. [10]

Conclusion

Modern rationality has produced a society – the society we are now living in – which seems to aim at its own destruction, for the first time in human history. This is so for two reasons : first, if the final goal of this civilization is unlimited consumption, it would imply the destruction of Earth's natural resources, which are *not* unlimited, and therefore the destruction of our planet itself. Second, because for the first time in history the education of neoliberal society produces individuals who do not aim at the perpetuation of society : nowadays, modern rationality has come to raise social *analogues* of monadic psyches. However, the 'social individual' implies precisely a radical transformation of the monadic psyche, through the action of society (i.e. socialisation). As a paradoxical result of the modern confusion between *ego cogitans* and *homo computans*, contemporary neoliberalism has done something far worse than teaching its individuals to return to their monadic status. It has created, from its collective imaginary, a monstrous kind of social individuals whose living root — imagination — has been drained off, and who resembles a kind of self-centred ghost. In a way, we may say that what Freud called the 'death instinct' now makes our society go round.

But since human affairs are not ruled by Fate, and because Freedom is our will, *this ought to be different*. When speaking about 'The' neoliberal society, I fall of course myself into the trap of metaphysical desire for unity and its monolithic kind of holism. Several rhythmical modulations work within our societies in contradictory directions. New values and new aims appear, calling for a sense of responsibility extending, like never before, to the entire Earth. We are challenged to invent new and creative ways of collective self-limitation. This involves inventing a new concept of 'good life' for all human beings, extended to all living beings, where technological progress must be submitted to cosmo-political aims. The current financial crisis may be a chance, but only if we take it as an opportunity to deliberately modulate the *eidos* of our society in a new direction. All of this implies that we are still capable of both criticism and imagination. All of this implies that the project of a personal and collective autonomy is still in fuction.

Therefore, the social-monadic *psyche* itself is an ideal type, in the Weberian sense, or more precisely, what could be called a 'theoretical fiction'. [11] No social-monadic *psyche* exists as such in real life. When designing it, my purpose was to fix the dynamics of a social and psychic tendency, in order to be able to reflect upon it. In neocapitalist societies, we can observe the true and effective power of this tendency in individuals to be self-centred, all-mighty, searching always more instinctual satisfactions and pleasures, living only for the present moment. This means that society somehow fails to limit the desires of the monadic core that still remains in the depth of each psyche. More exactly, the failure of neoliberal societies is to refrain from limiting those desires, but on the contrary encourage them. Neoliberal societies do not provide any compensatory satisfaction to help the psyche to invest collective significations, as the unlimited desire for 'money' is their only significance, aim, value, institution and even affect. So, as Castoriadis said, we are at a cross-roads : we have to decide in which direction we want to investigate the abyssal complexity of human self-

creation.

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Notes

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[2] From now on, I will call contemporary capitalism 'neoliberalism', in order to distinguish it from the first phase of capitalism.

[3] All translations of Castoriadis' texts that have not yet been translated into English are mine.

[4] Castoriadis, 2002 : 104. Footnote 3 says Castoriadis is quoting the *Preface* of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Jean Hippolyte (1941 : 20).

[5] Castoriadis challenges Marx, contending that the imaginary significations are the true sub-structures of society, rather than the modes of production.

[6] See Benvéniste's (1966) pioneering study on the Greek notion of *ruthmos*, followed by Meschonnic (1982 and 1995), showing the political-poetical *continuum* within rhythm. Pascal Michon (2007) has applied this concept of rhythm to the analysis of societies in a very thought-provoking way.

[7] I am thinking of the *palintropos harmoniè* in Heraclitus's fragment 51 (Diels), discussed in Castoriadis 2004 : 235. Heraclitus is referring to the movement in two opposite directions when one is using a bow or a lyre. Castoriadis translates this expression by '*harmonie oscillante*'.

[8] By "human self-creation", Castoriadis means that human beings do not have any pre-given 'essence'. Their essence is to create themselves as human beings in creating what being human means to them (Castoriadis, 2007a : 16).

[9] I refer here to the Kantian *als ob*, precisely to show the contemporary subversion of this creation of modern rationality and criticism.

[10] "Tragic" meaning here capable of bearing contradictory significations such as the famous Sophoclean *deinotès* which characterizes human beings as "extraordinary and marvelous" but at the same time "terrible and dreadful" creatures. See Castoriadis (2007a) and also Klimis (2004).

[11] See Klimis (2007) on Castoriadian monadic psyche seen as a theoretical myth.