

Socialisme ou Barbarie

A French Revolutionary Group (1949–65)

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The political and theoretical views developed by the radical group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* from 1949 onward, have only recently received some attention outside the French speaking world.¹ For a long period things were little different in France where the group and its similarly named periodical also received scant attention. This only changed after the students' and workers' rebellion in May-June 1968. The remnants of the journal, which had been unsaleable up to then – it had stopped appearing three years earlier- suddenly became a hot-selling item. Many of the 'heretical' ideas published in it seemed to be confirmed by the unexpected revolt. In 1977 the daily *Le Monde* wrote on the intellectual efforts of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*: "This work – although unknown to the public at large – has nevertheless had a powerful influence on those who played a role in May 1968." In the writings of the group one finds "most of the ideas which are being debated nowadays (from workers' control through to the critique of modern technology, of Bolshevism or of Marx)."²

In *Socialisme ou Barbarie* an attempt was made to consider the bureaucratization of social movements. The central questions were: is it an iron law that movements opposing the existing order either fall apart or change into rigid hierarchies? How can militants organize themselves without being absorbed or rigidified into a bureaucratic apparatus? *Socialisme ou Barbarie* first posed these questions because the group asked itself why things had gone wrong in the traditional labour movement. After all, in the course of the twentieth century this movement had increasingly alienated itself from its grass roots and taken on the shape of turgid labour and trade union bureaucracies.

In reaction to this development *Socialisme ou Barbarie* tried to stimulate new types of opposition. The approach used was that of direct democracy. The history of the group was essentially a lengthy search for a new relationship between spontaneity and organization, between practice

¹ Attention is generally focused not on the group as such, but on its prominent member Cornelius Castoriadis. See Brian Singer, "The Early Castoriadis: Socialism, Barbarism and the Bureaucratic Thread," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3 (Fall 1979), 35–56; Arthur Hirsh, "Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*," in *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz* (Boston 1981), 108–37; Cornelius Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1: 1946–1955. Translated and edited by David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis 1988).

² "Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis," *Le Monde*, 13 December 1977.

and theory. The debates which took place during this search often had a freshness which is still relevant today.

Socialisme ou Barbarie's most prominent intellectuals were Castoriadis and Lefort. Cornelius Castoriadis was born in 1922 and studied law, economics and philosophy at the University of Athens. Before the Second World War, during the dictatorship of Metaxas, he had joined the Greek Communist youth organization. However, when the Germans occupied the country and the Communist Party wanted to ally itself with the bourgeois resistance, Castoriadis rejected the decision. After a short period of political wanderings, he ended up with a small Trotskyist group led by Spiros Stinas. This was a risky choice, because Trotskyists were threatened from two sides in Greece. The occupying power persecuted them whenever possible and in 1943 executed the most important leaders, among them Pantelis Pouliopoulos and Yannis Xypolitos.³ When the country was 'liberated' in 1944, it was the Communists' turn. During massive 'mopping-up operations' they murdered at least 600 of Trotsky's followers, often after having tortured them.⁴ This traumatic experience was a determining factor in Castoriadis' further development. The Trotskyist view on Stalinism, which he had supported only a short time before, seemed less and less correct.

The Stalinists were not a part of the labour movement which had been absorbed by capitalism, as Trotsky had claimed, but bureaucrats, who opposed the workers as well as capitalism! When Castoriadis settled in France at the end of 1945 he joined the Parti Communiste International (PCI), the French section of the Fourth International, which had a few hundred members. He immediately started propagating his new position.

Claude Lefort was Castoriadis' most important partner in the building of the dissident current in the PCI. Born in 1924, Lefort was still a philosophy student when he met Castoriadis for the first time. As early as 1943 he had formed an underground group at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris, although the Trotskyist position on the Soviet Union and Stalinism had never seemed very convincing to him. When he first heard Castoriadis speak, Lefort was deeply impressed: "His analysis overwhelmed me," he said in an interview. "I was convinced by him even before he had come to his conclusions. [...] Castoriadis' arguments were in my view on a par with the best of Marx, but the Trotskyists called it heresy."⁵

From 1946 onwards Castoriadis and Lefort worked together. As was customary in the Trotskyist movement, both had cover names. The first called himself Pierre Chaulieu, the second Claude Montal.⁶ Hence they were at first known as the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency.⁷

³ Rodolphe Prager (ed.), *Les congrès de la Quatrième Vol.II: L Internationale dans la guerre* (Paris 1981), 347–49 and 464

⁴ Rene Dazy, *Fusillez ces chiens enragés. Le genocide des Trotskistes* (Paris 1981), 266–74.

⁵ "An interview with Claude Lefort," *Telos* 30(Winter 1976–77), 174.

⁶ For Castoriadis the use of cover names was not just a matter of Trotskyist folklore: He was a foreigner and worked in an intolerant environment: the OECD. Besides Pierre Chaulieu he also later used the pseudonyms Paul Cardan and Marc Coudray.

⁷ In a letter to the author, dated 19 October 1997, Claude Lefort writes: "I created, or more accurately contributed to the formation of, a tendency in the PCI a short while after my 'official' admission (at the end of 1944), at my own initiative. [...] The reason for my initiative was the following. In my eyes it was stupid and suicidal to think of mobilizing the party around the program of a CP-SP-CGT government, since the CP was not a variety of reformism that would be 'swept aside by the masses' once it was in power, but a counterrevolutionary force whose objective was the same as the Soviet Party's. It was in this state of mind that I met Castoriadis (when he arrived in Paris). He immediately gave me his support and, as I have stated several times, his analysis of the relations of production in

The political histories of Castoriadis and Lefort differed rather markedly. Castoriadis had been a member of a Communist party and later of a Trotskyist organization. In both cases he had only taken up an oppositional view during his membership. He was thus used to party discipline — at least for a while. Lefort, on the other hand, had no such experience. He had spent fewer years as a member of a party organization and had taken an oppositional view in the Trotskyist movement from the beginning. The idea of identifying himself with any party was therefore a strange one for him.⁸ This difference between them became more critical in later political debates.

With hindsight one can see that the first period after the Second World War -until 1947 — was of a different order from the time which followed. Before 1947 political relations were relatively open and flexible; later this was to change for a long time. The tension between the two superpowers only increased gradually. Stalin had not yet modeled the newly-conquered countries in Eastern Europe after the Soviet example and Truman had not yet decided to employ the enormous economic potential of his country as a weapon against communism.

In Western Europe the war had brought about a strong shift to the left. The Communist parties were more popular than ever. Their percentage of the vote often grew to a multiple of what it had been before the war: there was a massive increase in membership. After the years of misery in the depression and the war the population longed for progress and social reforms. Communists had been taken into the government in many countries. At the beginning of 1947 Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Iceland and Finland all had Communist ministers.

In the course of 1947 this relatively peaceful co-existence came to an end. The relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union had been worsening for some time. Economic problems came to the fore in Western Europe, while at the same time the American economy was in danger of overheating and frantically searched for new markets. It was in these circumstances that George Marshall, the American Secretary of State, developed the plan to offer Europe a substantial program of aid. In this way a number of aims could be achieved at the same time: the power of capitalism in Europe would be increased; American capital could secure its exports; and the influence of communism could be forced back. The Marshall Plan marked a turning point which led to a changed international constellation. In Western Europe the Communist ministers were put out of office. In Eastern Europe a political and economic transformation to ‘people’s democracies’ was enforced, which meant that these societies increasingly began to resemble Soviet society. The polarization between the blocks started dominating developments: the Cold War had started.

In France bourgeois circles had happily used the Communists and their influence in the large trade union federation CGT immediately after the end of the German occupation. By letting them form a government together with the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats in 1945 Charles de Gaulle — who had become prime minister for a short while in November — hoped to be able to discipline the workers. The Monnet Plan, which regulated the reconstruction, was supported by the Communist PCF. The New York Herald Tribune wrote on 12 July 1946: “The key for the success of the plan to date, which has been considerable, is the enthusiastic cooperation of the French Communist party.

Russia seemed brilliant to me. We succeeded in obtaining one seat on the Central Committee, which like the Party itself was minuscule: it went without saying that 1 occupied the seat.”

⁸ This difference was pointed out by Andre Liebich, “Socialisme ou Barbarie. A Radical Critique of Bureaucracy,” *Our Generation* 12, 2 (Autumn 1977), 56.

The Communists dominate the most important unions in the CGT, the large French trade union federation. The Communist leadership has been responsible for such surprising steps as the acceptance by the most important French unions of a kind of adjusted piece rate system, which rewards individual workers with a high output.⁹ This policy was also supported by the Social Democrats. The policies of the two French workers' parties led to wage decreases in a period of inflation and therefore helped to lower living standards.

The Communists' integration policy could not, however, altogether prevent the workers from standing up for their interests. In January 1946 typographers, demanding higher wages, went on strike. In July 1946, postmen stopped work. And in April 1947 there were strikes at the Renault car works, which had been nationalized a couple of years before. It was especially this last strike, in which Trotskyists had played a leading role (a "Gaullist-Trotskyist-anarchist chaos," according to the secretary of the CGT, Plaisance), that made clear that the Communists were starting to lose their grip on developments. On 30 April 1947 Communist leader Maurice Thorez informed the government that the PCF could no longer support the price and wage policy of the government. Ramadier, the social democrat prime minister, who was under pressure from Washington, used the opportunity to throw the Communists out of the government a few days later.

The PCF and the social-democratic SFIO now increasingly opposed one another. The latter, pro-American and a participant in a number of later governments, was bitterly opposed by the former. In the period 1947–49 there were great strike waves throughout the country, now wholeheartedly supported by the PCF and CGT. The Social Democrats, for their part, attempted to undermine the workers' resistance. Financially supported by the CIA, they succeeded in splitting the CGT and in setting up a new 'moderate' trade union federation (Force Ouvrière). Although this remained a far smaller organization than the CGT, many trade union members became demoralized by the new divisions. Within a few years more than half the CGT members had departed, leaving about two million halfway through the 1950s. Force Ouvrière started out with a few hundred thousand members and never managed greatly to increase this number.

The Cold War, the economic recovery of the 1950s, and the antagonism between the two 'workers' parties' and their trade unions, resulted in a clear drop in militancy: the radical zeal disappeared. In 1947 there had been more than 22 million strike days; by 1952 this had dropped to less than one and a half million. The circumstances for radical socialists were naturally very difficult. Enormous political pressure was exerted on all kinds of far left groups (Council Communists, Trotskyists, Bordigists, etc.) to join one camp or the other: Washington or Moscow. Those who refused such a choice were not given a hearing and were deemed suspect. The anti-capitalist opposition was completely monopolized by the Communists. There was hardly any room for independent revolutionaries.

The isolation had two contradictory consequences. On the one hand the lack of successful practical activities led to a greater emphasis on theoretical-programmatic questions. Naturally this resulted in differences of opinion and quite often ended in large conflicts and even splits. On the other hand the enmity of the world 'outside' brought the small left-radical groups together, resulting in co-operative ties despite the political differences. There was a kind of 'dialectic' of division and reunion.

⁹ Bordigists: supporters of the theories of Amadeo Bordiga (1889–1970), the leader of the Italian Communist party in the early 1920s, who later organized an anti-Stalinist opposition.

The changed situation also led to intense debates within the international Trotskyist movement, especially about Eastern Europe. It is unnecessary to enter into the niceties of this discussion; it seems sufficient to note that there were minorities in a number of countries who refused to regard the Soviet Union as a 'transitional society' between capitalism and socialism, as had Trotsky. These minorities considered both East and West to have equally reprehensible systems of exploitation and repression. In the United States such a view was defended by a group known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency. Johnson was the pseudonym of the black revolutionary C.L.R. James, Forest the cover identity of Rae Spiegel (Raya Dunayevskaya), a former secretary of Trotsky. In Great Britain the opposition inside the Trotskyist movement was led by Ygael Gluckstein from Palestine, who operated under the name of Tony Cliff. In France it was Castoriadis and Lefort in their Chaulieu-Montal Tendency who voiced the opposition to the old viewpoints. All these opponents left the international Trotskyist organization, the Fourth International, between 1948 and 1951 in order to set up independent groups. They were to maintain regular contacts with each other. Castoriadis and Dunayevskaya were still working together in the Sixties.¹⁰

In August 1946 Castoriadis and Lefort published *On the Regime and Against the Defence of the USSR*, in which they criticized the Trotskyist critical-positive evaluation of the Soviet Union. They especially opposed the idea that Stalinist society – despite the shortcomings also admitted by the Trotskists (specifically the lack of any democracy)- should have to be defended against capitalism.

Castoriadis and Lefort proposed that a new elite, a “social layer” of bureaucrats, had achieved power in the USSR and that this elite exclusively defended its own interests rather than those of the Soviet workers. For this reason the Soviet Union was a new kind of society, which scrove for expansion just as much as Western capitalism.¹¹

In a later stage Castoriadis and Lefort abandoned the characterization of the Soviet Union as a new type of society and described it as 'bureaucratic capitalism.' According to them this was a society based on exploitation, without the classic laws of competitive capitalism but with the surplus value formation typical of capitalism.

Numerous articles were written by the opposition to convince their Trotskyist party comrades.¹² When this failed and the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency seemed doomed to remain a small

¹⁰ A comprehensive history of these splits and their mutual cooperation has yet to be written. Information on the American group may be found in Raya Dunayevskaya, *For the Record: The Johnson-Forrest Tendency or the Theory of State Capitalism, 1949–51: Its Vicissitudes and Ramifications* (Detroit 1972); on the British group: Richard Kuper (ed.), *The Origins of the International Socialists* (London 1971); on the French group, beside the other literature indicated in this essay: Jean-Francois Kessler, “Le communisme de gauche en France (1927–1947).” *Revue française de science politique* 28, 4 (August 1978), especially pp. 754 onwards. The ‘official’ Trotskyist critique of the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency was formulated by Pierre Frank in the article “‘Novateurs’ et ‘conservateurs’ dans la question de l’URSS,” *Bullerin Intérieur de l’IS*, June 1947; reprinted in Pierre Frank, *Le Stalinisme* (Paris 1977), 171–219.

¹¹ “Sur le régime contre la défense de l’URSS,” *Bulletin Intérieur of the PCI*, Nr. 31 (August 1946); reprinted in Cornelius Castoriadis, *La société bureaucratique. Vol. 1: Les rapports du production en Russie* (Paris 1973), 63–72; English translation: “On the Regime and Against the Defense of the USSR,” in: *Political and Social Writings*, I, 37–43. Also: “Le probleme de l’URSS et la possibilité d’une troisitme solution historique,” in: *L’URSS au lendenmain de la guerre. Matériel de discussion prépatoire au Ile congrès de la IVE Internationale*, part III, February 1947; reprinted in Castoriadis, *La société bureauctique*, 73–89; English translation: “The Problem of the USSR and the Possibility of a Third Historical Solution,” in *Political and Social Writings*, I, 44–55.

¹² In practice the Trotskyist movement is substantially an organization for debate, with numerous congresses and conferences. The Chaulieu-Montal Tendency, although officially only founded in August 1947, presented its own positions at the following meetings: the third PCI congress (September 1946), the fourth PCI congress (November

minority within a movement that was itself quite tiny,¹³ the dissidents decided to break with the Fourth International. At the end of 1948 ten or twenty of them left the organization.¹⁴ In March 1949 the group published the first issue of the magazine *Socialisme ou Barbarie* — a well-made periodical of one hundred pages or more. The reasons for leaving the Fourth International were once again explained in an open letter to the members of the Fourth International who had been left behind. Trotskyism was reproached for being a movement without political-theoretical power because it was incapable of finding an “independent ideological basis for existence.” Trotskyism could not truly liberate itself from Stalinism, because it continued to define itself as the opposite of Stalinism.

The central article of the first issue was an extensive text entitled “Socialism or Barbarism,” which amounted to a statement of the group’s position. This text was mostly written by Castoriadis. Just as Marx wanted to give a programmatic foundation to the League of Communists with his *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, so Castoriadis attempted to formulate a political foundation for the new organization with “Socialism or Barbarism.” He took the world situation, which had changed so thoroughly as a result of the Second World War, as his point of departure. Two “superstates” had divided the world between them: the United States and the Soviet Union. Both had expansionist tendencies and strove to dominate the other. The result of this would inevitably be a third world war, which would result in barbarism for international society, unless the power elites in East and West were overthrown through a radical-socialist revolution. Socialism or Barbarism: those were the only remaining roads for humanity.¹⁵

What would such a radical-socialist revolution mean? Its point of departure would lie in the most fundamental contradiction shared by East and West, bureaucracy and competitive capitalism: the contradiction between managing and subordinate labour. While it had seemed in Marx’s time that the ending of the private ownership of the means of production would be sufficient to remove injustice and exploitation from the world, it had now become clear — among other things because of the existence of the Soviet Union — that state ownership of the means of production did not necessarily lead to socialism or even improved circumstances. On the contrary, it might lead to increased exploitation and repression. Developments in competitive capitalism had shown that it was not just a question of the ownership of the means of production: to an increasing extent entrepreneurial leadership and capital ownership were being separated

1947), the preparatory congress for the World Congress of the Fourth International (March 1948), the Second World Congress of the Fourth International (April 1948) and the fifth PCI congress (July 1948). See also Rodolphe Prager (ed.), *Les congrès de la Quatrième Internationale*. Vol. III: *Bouleversements et crises de l’après-guerre (1946–1950)* (Paris 1988), 211–27.

¹³ About fifty people seem to have voted for the position of Chaulieu-Montal at the fourth PCI congress (November 1947). At the time the PCI had a few hundred or perhaps one thousand members. Compare “Rectification,” *Socialisme ou Barbarie* [hereafter SE], Nr. 1 (March–April 1949), 103.

¹⁴ In his letter to the author mentioned above, Lefort writes: “As early as ’47 a divergence arose: Castoriadis wanted us to wait until we had convinced as many members as possible before coming out with a definite program and an ‘unfurled banner.’ As for me, I thought that our group would rot inside the Party. I left the PCI before the others. Among other things, I was very doubtful regarding the project of drafting a new ‘Manifesto’ and announcing a new form of revolutionary leadership. Also, even though I had contributed most actively to the break with the PCI, I did not contribute to the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. As for what followed, the articles that I published made clear the distance that separated me from Castoriadis.”

¹⁵ *Lettre ouverte aux militants du P.C.I. et de la ‘IVe Internationale’*, SB, Nr. 1 (March–April 1949), 90–101.

while the importance of the managers versus the owners had increased.¹⁶ Everything therefore revolved around the struggle against hierarchy and bureaucracy. All power must reside in the rank and file, among the working population.

Right from the start there was a debate on matters of organization in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. What exactly was the group's self-definition? Was it to be a collection of independently acting militants, with no responsibilities whatsoever, or was it necessary to develop a common praxis alongside the journal? If so, should such activity assume the role of a vanguard, or not? How was the organization to be internally structured? Was democratic centralism finished or not?

In April 1949 the majority of the group voted for a resolution which was to serve as a programmatic basis for future work. In it the Leninist conception of arousing political consciousness in the working class from the outside was rejected, as was the idea that the group was to be merely "a collection of individuals" who would restrict themselves to publishing a "more or less academic journal." Yet despite this delineation of aims, the group remained more or less old-fashioned: *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was to develop into a revolutionary party, capable of leading and co-ordinating the independent workers' struggle, directed at the conquest of state power.¹⁷

There was opposition to this resolution, but it was weak. It was only in 1951–52, after a small group of ex-Bordigists had joined,¹⁸ and the membership had shrunk further, that the few opponents decided to voice their own opinion more openly.¹⁹ Claude Lefort, especially, opposed the attempts to form a vanguard party.

In the preceding years Lefort had gradually developed his doubts about thinking in terms of a vanguard, not in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, but through articles in *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal founded in 1945 by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Lefort's friend and philosophy tutor, among others.²⁰ At the end of 1948 Lefort had published a noteworthy essay in that periodical, in which he blamed Trotsky for hesitating too long before frontally opposing Stalin's party bureaucracy. He ascribed this to Trotsky's glorification of the party as a "godlike factor in historical development." "Trotsky's battle against the bureaucracy," according to Lefort, "had no foundation because objectively Trotsky was himself a founder of this bureaucracy." When at last Trotsky did reject the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (in the 1930s) it was too late.²¹ In another article published in 1949 Lefort paid attention to anarchism, which he strongly criticized. "Anarchist consciousness is a traumatized consciousness," he argued, "it

¹⁶ "Socialisme ou Barbarie," SE, Nr. 1 (March-April 1949). English translation: "Socialism or Barbarism," in *Political and Social Writings*, I, 76–106. In a debate on *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in the journal *Arguments*, vol. I, Nr. 4 (June-September 1957) Gérard Genette and Edgar Morin suggested in their contributions that this approach was closely related to that of the Cold War propagandist (and ex-Trotskyist) James Burnham, who had proposed in his book *The Managerial Revolution* (New York 1941), that the managers were the new ruling class. Lefort protested against this interpretation in the same issue of *Arguments*.

¹⁷ "Le parti révolutionnaire (Résolution)," SE, Nr. 2 (May-June 1949), 99–107.

¹⁸ See Véga and others, "Déclaration Politique," SE, Nr. 7 (August-September 1950), 82–94, and [Philippe Bourin], *La gauche communiste d'Italie* (Brussels 1982), 168–83.

¹⁹ Castoriadis: "By the end of 1952 the group was reduced to about ten members and its publications were irregular and scarce." "An Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis," *Telos* 23 (Spring 1975), 134.

²⁰ Practically from the beginning Claude Lefort was a contributor to *Les Temps Modernes*; in the second issue, which appeared in 1945, an article of his on the Marxist analysis of fascism was published. His work for the journal would continue up to 1954.

²¹ "La contradiction de Trotsky et le problème révolutionnaire," *Les Temps Modernes* 39 (December 1948 – January 1949), 46–69; published in English as "The Contradiction of Trotsky," in Claude Lefort, *Political Forms of Modern Society*. Edited and Introduced by John B. Thompson (Cambridge 1986), 31–51.

is a simple refusal of exploitation and not its negation, that is to say, the contradiction which leads to a new historical expression.” At the same time he praised it as a source of inspiration for a radical type of Marxism, which opposes state power and exploitation.²²

Lefort’s development caused tensions within *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. In June 1952 he left the organization along with some supporters, but after a short while he returned.²³ Two texts were then published in the journal, explaining the prevailing differences of opinion within the group. Castoriadis still argued for the idea that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* ought to be the nucleus of a revolutionary vanguard party; Lefort, on the other hand, placed the systematic support for workers’ control at the centre of his considerations. The essence of Castoriadis’ reasoning was that the group should contribute to the overthrow and destruction of capitalist society and the bourgeois state. For this a political party was needed to lead and co-ordinate the workers’ resistance. The fundamental contradiction between management and subordinate labour, which dominated East and West, could not be overcome with one blow: the party had to be a leadership striving for its own disbandment. This disbandment could, however, only take place after the revolution.²⁴ Lefort’s position was that the essential problem was not the organization of the revolution, but workers’ power. The power of the workers would make a revolution possible, but a revolution would not guarantee workers’ power. The only way in which the proletariat could develop its power was through autonomous forms of organization. Everything depended on this and not on the party, which was simply a historically determined expression of specific labour experiences and could therefore be superfluous or even undesirable in other circumstances. This is why *Socialisme ou Barbarie* should not so much concern itself with revolution and the conquest of state power, as with the experiences of the working class in the process of organizing itself.²⁵ In a later article Lefort further elaborated his position and tried to analyze the ‘proletarian experience’ as the guiding principle of life for the working class.²⁶ With this approach Lefort was an important predecessor of the later attempts at analyzing capitalism ‘from below’ by Raniero Panzieri, Edward Thompson, Erhard Lucas and others.

The heated internal debates in the group were soon followed by discussions with outsiders on similar questions. Members of the group were criticized from the ‘left’ because of their position on the vanguard, and from the ‘right’, because they were too hostile towards the Stalinist glorification of the party. It is noteworthy – but also understandable, in view of the differences of opinion – that almost automatically a division of labour was created between Lefort and Castoriadis. The latter took up the defence against party opponents, while the former opened the attack on those who favoured a vanguard-party conception.

In November 1953 Anton Pannekoek, the aging Dutch Council Communist, sent a letter to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* which was also published in the journal.²⁷ In his letter Pannekoek wrote that he sympathized with the group in many ways, but that he also had two fundamental differences of opinion: the evaluation of the Russian revolution of 1917, and the question of the vanguard

²² Review of Alain Sergent and Claude Harmel, *Histoire de l’Anarchie*, vol. I, in *Les Temps Modernes* 56(1950), 2269–74.

²³ “La vie de notre groupe,” *SE*, Nr. 9 (April-May 1952), 28.

²⁴ Pierre Chaulieu [Comelius Castoriadis], “La direction prolétarienne,” *SB*, Nr. 10 (July-August 1952), 10–18; English translation: “Proletarian Leadership,” in: *Political and Social Writings*, 1, 198–206.

²⁵ Claude Mental [Claude Lefort], “Le prolétariat et le problème de la direction révolutionnaire,” *SB*, Nr. 10 (July-August 1952), 18–27.

²⁶ [Claude Lefort], “L’expérience prolétarienne,” *SB*, Nr. 11 (November-December 1952), 1–19.

²⁷ “Une lettre de Anton Pannekoek,” *SP*, Nr. 14 (April-June 1954), 39–43.

party. Unlike *Socialisme ou Barbarie* he did not regard the October revolution as a proletarian revolt, which had later degenerated into a bureaucratic state capitalism. Instead he thought that right from the start this had been a bourgeois event, which could never have resulted in socialism. As for the vanguard organization, that was totally rejected by Pannekoek. He believed that revolutionaries should not build up a party but should engage solely in propaganda and theoretical debate. Their task was to call for workers' control and not to 'lead' a liberation struggle.

In his answer Castoriadis concentrated on the question of the vanguard organization. His most important proposition was that it was precisely when revolutionaries did not build a party, that the way was cleared for a bureaucratic dictatorship, as in the Soviet Union.

“Just as the only ‘guarantee’ against making mistakes consists of thinking for oneself, so the only ‘guarantee’ against bureaucratization is to be found in permanent action in the anti-bureaucratic sense, by fighting against the bureaucracy and by showing in practice, that a non-bureaucratic vanguard organization is possible and that it can maintain non-bureaucratic relations with the class. For bureaucracy is not born out of incorrect theoretical opinions, but out of its own necessities in a certain stage. It is necessary to show precisely through acting that the proletariat can do without the bureaucracy.”²⁸

A second letter from Pannekoek in which he elucidated certain elements of his theory was not published by *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.²⁹ Pannekoek's central proposition was that a revolutionary party could not save a revolution from bureaucratization; on the contrary, it represented “a step in the direction of new repression.”³⁰ In a later unpublished letter to Castoriadis, Pannekoek added that he certainly believed in the existence of vanguards, but that it seems wrong to him to capture these vanguards in disciplined organizations: “It is always the case,” he wrote, “that certain persons come to the fore through their deeds, their courage or their clear vision. In speaking or acting quickly; together these persons in fact form a vanguard, which we see appearing in every action. In fact they become leaders; (...) When they come together in permanent groups or parties with fixed programmes these fluent relations become petrified. They then regard themselves as unofficial leaders and want to be followed and obeyed.”³¹

Jean-Paul Sartre took up a position totally opposed to that of Pannekoek. He turned the Communist Party into a fetish. In his great philosophical work *L'être et le néant* of 1943 he had defended the proposition that those who are repressed always need an institution outside and

²⁸ Pierre Chaulieu [Cornelius Castoriadis], “Reponse au camarade Pannekoek,” SB, Nr. 14 (April-June 1954), 44–50.

²⁹ Cajo Brendel – a Pannekoek sympathiser – has suggested that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* did not publish the letter because it contained too much “fundamental criticism of Castoriadis.” See Cajo Brendel (ed.), “Une correspondance entre Anton Pannekoek et Pierre Chaulieu,” *Cahiers du communisme de conseils*, Nr. 8 (May 1971), 15–35. Material in Pannekoek's papers shows this to be untrue. In a letter to ‘Chaulieu,’ dated 3 September 1954, Pannekoek writes that his second letter was written with little care because he had no intention of publishing it (Pannekoek Archive, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, file 108/3). *Socialisme ou Barbarie* did, though, print a reaction by the Dutch Council Communist Theo Maasen: “Encore sur la question du Parti,” SB, Nr. 18 (January-March 1956). Just like Brendel, Maasen (1891–1974) belonged to the Spartacus group. Biographical facts may be found in *Daad en Gedachte* 10, 6 (June 1974).

³⁰ “Deuxième lettre d'Anton Pannekoek a Pierre Chaulieu,” published in Cajo Brendel, “Une correspondance,” 32–5.

³¹ This is the letter of September 3, 1954 already quoted in note 30.

above them in order to resist.³² In the 1950s Sartre developed this idea to show that the Communist party was vital for the struggle against capitalism. In a series of articles in *Les Temps Modernes* Sartre claimed that the working class does not exist as a class as long as it is not organized in a vanguard party: “The worker is a sub-human (sous-homme) if he simply accepts being what he is”; “he only becomes human when he “becomes conscious of his sub-humanity.” This consciousness implies resistance and organization. However, the proletariat does not by itself come into existence. — it is the result of a separate factor, a “third,” which brings together isolated individuals. This binding factor is the Communist Party. In short: “A worker in contemporary France can only express and fulfil himself through acting in the class under the leadership of the Communist Party.”

Sartre’s reasoning — which is Stalinist not in itself but in its conclusions (Merleau-Ponty called it “ultra-bolshevist”) — created an absolute contradiction between spontaneity and organization. Spontaneity was nothing, was incoherent “loneliness.” Organization, party-organization, was everything. If the workers lost their trust in the Communist Party, then they lost not only their trust in the party, but also in politics and in their own class. “The universe” would then “be bourgeois.”³³

Claude Lefort wrote an extensive response to Sartre in *Les Temps Modernes*. He opposed his conclusion as well as his arguments. The party or whatever kind of radical organization, was never a ‘third.’ external factor outside the mass of the workers, but always a form of expression of that mass. While Sartre approached the subject ‘from above,’ Lefort again thought ‘from below’:

“The point is to understand the revolutionary struggle by situating it in the total experience of the class. The dynamic of the Russian revolution cannot be seen by itself, but must be looked at in connection with a specific proletariat, situated in historically determined production conditions and maintaining relations with other exploited classes; these circumstances cannot be compared with those of any other proletariat in Europe. The organization of Bolshevism, its rigorous centralism, should not be seen as a necessary characteristic of the labour movement, but a particular solution for the relations between the masses and their vanguard. The problem is to know how bolshevist politics simultaneously expresses the ripeness and the problems of the Russian proletariat. Moreover, one tends to ask oneself what the point is of the party in the experience of the workers, especially in these times. But that is precisely the particular question which certain people want to avoid at any cost.”

Party organization should be a flexible structure, adjusted to the social relations in which the struggle takes place. The Communist parties, on the other hand, were nothing but elements of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. In this connection Lefort distinguished between two bureaucratic variants in the labour movement: the social democratic and the Communist. The social democratic bureaucracy identified itself with the interests of the ruling bourgeoisie. The Communist party bureaucracy identified itself with the interests of the Soviet Union and was therefore ultimately a mortal enemy of the native bourgeoisie. The Communist party used the aggressiveness of the workers to be able to establish a bureaucratic dictatorship based on

³² Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’être et le néant* (Paris 1943), 492 onwards.

³³ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Les communistes et la paix,” *Les Temps Modernes*, Nr. 81 (July 1952), 1–50, Nr. 84–85 (October–November 1952), 695–763, Nr. 101 (April 1954), 1731–1819.

the East-European model and therefore misused the socialist inclination of the class. In that sense the Communist party no longer was revolutionary, because it was anti-capitalist, but not socialist. The real socialist alternative therefore was to be found outside the established 'workers' parties. Since Stalinist parties were also in a certain way an expression of workers' experiences, it would be necessary from an anti-bureaucratic perspective to discover why the majority of the class follows the politics of the Communists and in what ways it nevertheless distinguished itself from those politics and the organizations related to it.³⁴

Whatever the differences of opinion within *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the dislike of every kind of bureaucracy and undemocratic structures was common to all members of the group. When the organization started to grow in the 1950s³⁵ there were more opportunities, not just to think about and write on anti-bureaucracy, but also to act. This was all the more so because gradually social unrest increased. In the 1970s Castoriadis described the changes which became visible from 1952–53:

The Korean War was ending, Stalin died, the workers of East Berlin revolted, the entire public sector in France went on strike. New life was breathed into the group, new people joined, the publications became more regular and their contents improved. [...] Furthermore, the group was stimulated by the Twentieth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, Poznan and of course the Hungarian revolution and the Polish movement. [...] The Algerian war started in November 1954. The Mollet government began a gradual mobilization from 1956 in order to be able to send troops to Algeria. The soldiers called up demonstrated and stopped the army trains. The economic chaos increased and the movement started stirring. In the autumn of 1957 there was considerable unrest in the factories – the situation was unstable and open.³⁶

It was under these changing circumstances that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* started its work in the factories. Right from the start the organization had defended the position that a bureaucratic layer of bosses had developed in the trade unions (and especially in the CGT), which had established increasingly close ties with the state apparatus. This trade union bureaucracy had become an independent factor, which functioned as a sort of link between the state apparatus and the working class, and therefore tried to reconcile both sides with each other. On the one hand the bureaucracy partially accepted the demands of the workers in order to retain its own mass base, but on the other it also tried to meet the demands of the state apparatus in order to remain 'respectable' and to be acceptable as a partner in negotiations.³⁷

³⁴ Claude Lefort, "Le marxisme et Sartre," *Les Temps Modernes*, Nr. 89 (April 1953) 1541–70. This was a reaction to the first two parts of Sartre's series of articles. The discussion was continued, but did not result in any basically different points of view: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Reponse a Lefort," *Les Temps Modernes* 89 (April 1953), 1571–1629; Claude Lefort, "De la reponse a la question," *Les Temps Modernes* 104 (July 1954), 157–84. Also Pierre Chaulieu [Cornelius Castoriadis], "Sartre, le Stalinisme et les ouvriers," *SE*, Nr. 12 (August-September 1953), 63–88; English translation: "Sartre, Stalinism, and the Workers," in: *Political and Social Writings*, 1, 207–41.

³⁵ In a letter to Pannekoek, dated 1 November 1953, the well-informed Cajo Brendel wrote: "insofar as they [Socialisme ou Barbarie] are not students or intellectuals, they are fellows who belong to the 'Angestellten' or 'Funktionare' in some firm or another." (Pannekoek Archive, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, File 8/7).

³⁶ Castoriadis, "An Interview," 134–5.

³⁷ Alex Carrier, "Le cartel des syndicats autonomes," *SE*, Nr. 1 (March-April 1949), 62–77; Daniel Mothe, "Le probleme de l'unité syndicale," *SE*, Nr. 14 (April-June 1954), 27–37.

This was not in itself a new analysis; it had long been a part of Trotskyist thought. The essential thing was what kind of political conclusions were drawn from it. Did revolutionaries have to try to reconquer the trade unions from within and to dethrone the bureaucrats; or was it, on the contrary, more desirable to work outside the unions and build up new organizations? In practice *Socialisme ou Barbarie's* factory work usually amounted to the latter, but not everybody was happy about this. In the period 1954–55 a debate on this topic took place in the journal. Daniel Mothé defended the position which supported working outside the unions. Other participants in the debate, like the anarchist Fontenis, thought that revolutionaries should be active in the trade unions because this was the only way for them to make contacts with the workers and win their trust:

“Fighting from the outside implies cutting oneself off from one’s audience. And let us not forget that in certain sectors, where the workers are distributed amongst an infinite number of workplaces or small firms, the trade union meeting is the only way in which the workers can be brought together and to made to listen.”³⁸

Socialisme ou Barbarie's most important factory work took place in the Renault factories in Paris-Bilancourt, although actions were also organized in other places, including an insurance firm. The driving force at Renault was Daniel Mothé, a politically experienced worker who had joined the group in 1952. Like his fellow group members he had received his inspiration and general ideas about what was happening in modern capitalist firms from the American group of sympathizers around C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya.

Inspired by developments in the United States, the American revolutionaries assumed that 1914 had been a kind of watershed in the history of capitalist management techniques. After that year Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “scientific management” was applied more and more widely. When the Ford system with its conveyor belts was added to this (in the period 1924–28), labour processes changed fundamentally. The educational level demanded for workers decreased, the pace of work and the sequence of work acts were no longer dictated by humans, but by machines. Influenced by the great economic recession of 1929 this change was accelerated even more. The mass of workers became “hunted, working for starvation wages,” dominated by “a staff of managers who can only carry out the production through the use of a hired gang [...] of gangsters, murderers, foremen.”³⁹ The new structure of the labour process left its mark on the daily life and the consciousness of the workers, according to this same analysis. The point was to study the consequences of these changes for the self-organization of the workers.

As early as 1946 the group around James and Dunayevskaya published a pamphlet entitled *The American Worker*. In this publication Paul Romano (“I am a young worker approaching thirty”) described his life in and outside the factory: the physical exertion demanded by the work, the weekend, family life and forms of shop floor resistance⁴⁰ This approach, a novel one at the time, with a view of modern capitalist reality from the perspective of the daily life of the (male) worker, was an attractive one for European radical leftists. The story by Paul Romano was serialized in

³⁸ G. Fontenis, “Presence dans les syndicats,” *SE*, Nr. 15–16 (October-December 1954), 60–5; and with a similar content: Henri Féraud, “L’unité syndicale,” *SE*, Nr. 17 (July-September 1955), 61–5.

³⁹ C.L.R. James, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950). Quoted here from the third edition (Detroit 1969), 39–40. The second edition (1956) had a foreword which was signed not only by James but also by Castoriadis.

⁴⁰ Paul Romano and Ria Stone [Grace C. Lee (Boggs), *The American Worker* (Detroit 1946).

Socialisme ou Barbarie and later in an Italian periodical as well.⁴¹ The Americans were also the first of the radical leftists to set up factory work. Worker members of the group founded a paper called *Correspondence* in 1953, meant to be an organ of independent (not controlled by the trade unions) workers' struggles in the factories.⁴²

All this stimulated *Socialisme ou Barbarie* into making similar efforts. Developments in factories were reported more and more often in the journal, a series was published on 'Life in the Factory' and the American example was followed by producing a factory paper.⁴³ In April 1954 workers in one of the Renault workshops distributed a leaflet on wage levels; this leaflet gained a lot of support among other groups of workers in the firm and as a result the first issue of *Tribune Ouvrière*, a stenciled, independent monthly paper for the personnel of the car factory, appeared in May 1954.⁴⁴ With or without direct influence from *Socialisme ou Barbarie* similar newspapers came into being within a short time outside Paris (Nantes, Bordeaux, Toulouse) and in other firms in Paris (Bréguet, Morse, etc.) At the beginning of 1958 they decided to work together.⁴⁵

The year 1958 marked a break in French post-war history. On 13 May the army took power through a coup in the Algerian colony in the hope of being able to fight the liberation movement more effectively. In France itself the highest circles of the state apparatus were in a state of panic – fearing that they were no longer capable of 'controlling' developments in the home country and the colonies. For a long time nothing had been heard from General de Gaulle, who had been prime minister in '45-'46 and had for a number of years (1947–53) vainly attempted to control the turn of events with his own party (the *Rassemblement du Peuple Français*). Now, on 1 June 1958, he was ordered by the National Assembly to reform the state apparatus. He carried out this task conscientiously. On 21 December he had himself voted head of state, after which he concentrated more and more power in his own hands. In 1962 he passed a new law which allowed the president to be chosen by the people and no longer by parliament. His regime started to take on 'bonapartist' trappings; it increasingly took on the characteristics of a conservative dictatorship.

Castoriadis regarded this development as the political expression of a deep crisis of French capitalism. As early as mid-1958 he published an analysis in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in which the deep-seated unevenness of post-war French development played a central role. He considered the country to be split into two contrasting economic sectors: a very modern and dynamic versus an obsolete and backward capitalism. He supposed that these two sectors (the France "of 1958" and the France "of 1858") could not tolerate one another. "The fast development of a large, modern industry cannot, in the course of time, be combined with the maintenance of entire economic sectors (agriculture, small-scale trade, small-scale industry) in their present anachronistic form and the conservation of the corresponding layers of the population." The continued existence of a backward sector, which still carried a lot of political weight, had contributed to the blocking of the parliamentary system. It had strengthened the process of disintegration of the bourgeois

⁴¹ Paul Romano, "L'ouvrier américain," SE, Nrs. 1–6 (1949–50); Paul Romano, "L'operaio americano." *Battaglia Comunista*, February-March 1955.

⁴² "Un journal ouvrier aux Etats-Unis," SE, Nr. 13 (January-February 1954), 82.

⁴³ G.Vivier, "La vie en usine," SE, Nrs. II, 12, 14, 15–16, 17 (November 1952 -September 1955).

⁴⁴ "Un journal ouvrier chez Renault," SE, Nr. 15–16 (October-December 1954), 71–82. More theoretically on the setup of the paper: Daniel MothC, "Le probleme du journal ouvrier," SE, Nr.17 (July-September 1955), 26–48. Also, on the activities at Renault: Daniel Mothe, *Journnal d'un ouvrier (19~6~58)* (Paris 1959) and by the same author, *Militaitt chez Renault* (Paris 1965).

⁴⁵ "Comité de Liaison," SE, Nr. 24 (May-June 1958), 160.

political forces; consecutive governments had been made subservient to the special interests of one group or another; through this splitting of forces the state apparatus lost its ability to act on behalf of the interests of capitalism as a whole. "Parliament and government [...] have become almost exclusive instruments of those specific interests." The lack of even one specific 'workers party' had strengthened this bourgeois impasse. The reformist pressure which could have forced the bourgeoisie to discipline itself and consolidate into one conservative political party, was lacking. Large parts of the state apparatus were therefore obsolete from a modern capitalist point of view; the taxation system was mostly indirect, the credit system "exceptionally modern under Napoleon III," etc. Together these factors had, according to Castoriadis, resulted in a situation in which French capitalism after 1945 had been unable to work out a coherent policy and to put it into practice. The objective course of development after 13 May 1958 was therefore the restructuring of the bourgeois state and the elimination of the backward elements of French society.

In Castoriadis' eyes, de Gaulle's coup was not a defeat for the French working class. The fact that only a small part of that class had taken part in the demonstrations called on 28 May 1958 by the CGT and the Communists did not, from his point of view, mean that the class was beaten or depoliticized. On the contrary, the situation was continually debated in the factories. But the workers – partly because they did not yet know what de Gaulle would be able 'to deliver' – did not feel like fighting for a return to the situation before 13 May: "The workers and more generally the largest part of the wage earners are sick of the capitalist republic." The workers therefore awaited further steps by de Gaulle; his deeds would determine their reaction. Should the project succeed and result in a modernization of capitalist relations in France, then a non-violent democratization seemed possible. If on the other hand de Gaulle's project were to fail partially or totally, and the situation were to worsen politically and economically, then a massive workers' protest seemed quite likely.

In these circumstances Castoriadis saw a dual task for the revolutionary socialists: On the one hand they should help build independent workers' organizations and papers, similar to those starting to come to the fore at Renault and at other firms; at the same time there would have to be a co-ordination of the various resistance committees and a national workers' paper. On the other hand the revolutionaries, now spread out all over the country and in numerous groups (the "diffused vanguard"), would have to be brought together in one organization – a new type of party, based on experiences since 1917:

"The programme of this organization should be socialism, embodied in workers' power, the total power of the workers' councils which will realize the workers' management of the firm and of society. The structure of the organization should be democratic-proletarian, and it should express the domination by the grass roots in all aspects of life and organizational activity, and which in itself suppresses the distinction between leaders and led. The methods of work must agree with the priority of the grass roots and should give all militants the possibility of understanding what the organization is doing, and to control it."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Pierre Chaulieu (Comelius Castoriadis), "Perspectives de la crise française," SE, Nr. 25 (July-August 1958), 41–66.

Castoriadis' opinion about the tasks of French revolutionaries was certainly not commonly shared in Socialisme ou Barbarie.

In September 1958 Socialisme ou Barbarie definitively split. Two Dutch Council Communists were present. In their account of the events — published in the contemporary paper Spartacus — they assumed that there had been three currents within the group:

- a. a group still strongly inspired by Leninism, to which the ex-Bordigist Véga belonged; this current was referred to as the “right wing” by the Dutchmen;
- b. the “centre” around Castoriadis;
- c. the “left” around Lefort.

Using this yardstick, they wrote the following:

“It is not the left wing which completed the break, but the right and centre, which deliberately steered for it. So deliberately, that the break came before the congress where left, centre and right were to discuss their differences of opinion. This congress was to take place in Paris on Saturday, 27 and Sunday, 28 September 1958. It did not take place. At least, it did not take place as planned. [...] Two meetings had been organized, on Thursday 18 and 25 September, to prepare for the congress. Both right and left had prepared a text which would serve as a point of departure for the discussion. Both of these texts [...] naturally had an entirely different character; one could clearly discern the fundamental differences which had existed between the two currents for a long time: but there was nothing which indicated that the existing situation, in which the left and right worked in a single group, would shortly come to an end.⁴⁷ [...] The] differences were in no way brought to a head in the bulletin, which had been compiled by a member of the left wing. [...] The debate on both texts, which started on Thursday, 18 September, consequently had a vehement but at the same time friendly character. On Wednesday, 24 September something unexpected happened. The centre published a sequel to its text, which especially concerned the position and presentation of the left. The accent of this second paper was extremely sharp. The left were accused of propounding their theory ‘while knowing better,’ and of ‘knowingly misleading the workers.’ Its behaviour was even described as ‘dishonest,’ while the criticism of the right and the centre by the left, was turned into a downright caricature. Under these circumstances the preparatory meeting of Thursday, 25 September lost every semblance of geniality. The left expected that, at the very least, certain statements, like those concerning ‘deceit’ and ‘deception’ would be dropped immediately because upholding them would naturally make any discussion impossible. The most important spokesman of the centre refused. He declared that it was not his habit to be swayed by his emotions and that he had calmly considered every word and did not wish to take back a single word or sentence. At that the comrades of the left stood up and left the room. On Friday, 26 September

⁴⁷ The Dutch observers sometimes combined “right wing” and “centre” into “right wing,” so as to more easily create a contrast with the “left wing.”

they met separately and took the decision that they would not be present at the congress, which started on the 27th. Thus came the break-up.”⁴⁸

The splitting-up of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was the result of the fact that the majority of the group wanted to form a vanguard organization in the short term, because they judged the conditions to be favourable (De Gaulle’s coup, their own growth).⁴⁹ The minority, which saw nothing in such a project, was a nuisance and was therefore ‘removed’ through a contrived break.

In the preceding period Lefort’s opposition had already intensified. He himself has indicated two reasons for this. On the one hand there was the close co-operation which had grown between Castoriadis and Dunayevskaya in the 1950s. Lefort largely appreciated Dunayevskaya’s opinions on the day-to-day resistance of industrial workers and her ideas on autonomous forms of organization. However his abhorrence of her philosophical approach, with which she, according to Lefort, wanted to create “in vague Hegelian terms” a synthesis between world history and social life, was stronger: “The close relationship between Castoriadis and [Raya Dunayevskaya] for the first time made me aware of the deep conceptual differences which formed the basis of our political differences.”⁵⁰ On the other hand Lefort had strengthened his opposition in reaction to the current in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* which was still inspired to a large degree by the Bolsheviks, and to which several newcomers – among them Jean-Francois Lyotard and Pierre-Francois Souyri – belonged, as well as Vége.⁵¹

The split was merely the sudden end of a process of alienation which had been going on for years. After the split *Socialisme ou Barbarie* published texts by Castoriadis and Lefort outlining their opposing positions. The central proposition of Castoriadis’s article was that any organization could degenerate into a bureaucratic monster, but that such degeneration could definitely be prevented if a conscious permanent struggle is waged against it. Furthermore, this could best be done by structuring the organization on a grass-roots basis. The working class badly needed a new type of organization along these lines, in view of existing needs for information, discussion, the exchange of experiences and communal action.⁵² In his article, Lefort recognized the need for organized workers’ action as well as for co-ordination and the exchange of experiences; but he denied that a separate party was necessary for this, as Castoriadis thought. That task could be fulfilled by groups of workers and employees in the firms, without intervention by a separate vanguard. The revolutionary socialists must, insofar as they themselves are wage labourers in a firm, actively participate. And insofar as they, as intellectuals, stood outside the production

⁴⁸ “Splitting in de Franse groep ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie’: Brieven uit Frankrijk,” *Spartacus* 18, (11 October – 6 December 1958), 21–25.

⁴⁹ The growth of the organization – comparatively speaking of course – is shown by the increased sales of the paper to 700–1000 copies per issue and the fact that discussion meetings were attended by more than 100 people. See Castoriadis, “An Interview,” 134.

⁵⁰ Lefort, “An Interview,” 177.

⁵¹ For Lyotard, autobiographically, see: “Nes en 1925,” *Les Temps Modernes* 32 (1948), 2052–7; he was the Algeria specialist in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and published frequently on the subject in the periodical. See his *La guerre des Algériens; écrits 1956- 1963* (Paris 1989). Souyri (1925–1981) acted as China specialist within *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and published in the journal under the name P. Brune. He also made numerous contributions to the historical journal *Annales* see. Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Pierre Souyri. Le marxisme qui n’a pas fini,” *Esprit*, January 1982.

⁵² Paul Cardan [Cornelius Castoriadis]. “Prolétariat et organisation,” *SE*, Nr. 27 (April-May 1959), 53–88.

process, they could give theoretical and practical help to the struggle on condition that they subordinated themselves to the broad movement.⁵³

The split-off group around Claude Lefort, which also included Henri Simon, a white-collar worker who would play an important role in further developments, founded the Informations et Liaisons Ouvrières (ILO). The group published a paper under the same title. It changed its name in 1960 to Informations et Correspondance Ouvrières (ICO) and existed until 1973.⁵⁴ ICO took the position that trade unions have a system-stabilizing function in capitalism; that is the way they are seen by the bourgeoisie and that is the reason the state apparatus absorbs them in numerous consultative organs and commissions.

The workers understand this; they don't see the unions so much as an organization of their own, but as a service provider, which they can call on. The relation between workers and unions is businesslike, a 'realistic' relationship: "The unions use the workers as an army with which they can manoeuvre on the political chess board. The workers make the same use of the trade unions."

Just as on a national scale the trade unions were simply the intermediaries between the workers and the capitalists (and not the direct representatives of the workers), so the trade union delegates in the firms were simply intermediaries between the staff and management. According to ICO this did not, however, mean that trade unions were degenerate, as Castoriadis thought they were. On the contrary, they formed "very lively and efficient" bureaucratic machines, which did have their uses for the workers. Beside the formal and distant trade union apparatus there was a second level: that of practical solidarity and group consciousness in different departments and places of work within the firms. The communal interest promoted there happened without the trade unions. In those places there was still autonomous activity, which should be supported by revolutionaries — not as representatives of an outside party, but as colleagues.⁵⁵

ICO did not want to play any kind of vanguard role; the only task they set themselves was the establishment of contacts between different (groups of) workers. ICO's paper was a means of transferring ideas; it was not distributed to propagate the ideas of a particular group, but to exchange information and experiences. ICO hung on for fifteen years. However, it became increasingly clear that the group was deceiving itself. For their paper was obviously not just a means of transferring ideas. Yvon Bourdet, who was himself an ICO member for quite some time, wrote:

"The militants of the 'I.C.O.' group [...1 did not succeed in realizing their theory or their announced absence of theory; they could not reduce their own role to that of neutral information provider, which limited itself to announcing certain workers' struggles outside the place where they occurred; they knew very well that the stories they were distributing were not just any old stories. Would they have printed the

⁵³ Claude Lefort, "Organisation et parti," *SL*, Nr. 26 (November-December 1958), 120–34. Castoriadis replied to Lefort in: "Prolétariat et organisation (suite et fin)," *SE*, Nr. 28 (July-August 1959), 41–72.

⁵⁴ On the history of the ILO-ICO: "Entretien avec H. Simon — De la scission avec 'Socialisme ou Barbarie' à la rupture avec I.C.O.," *Anti-Mythes* 6 (September 1974); Lefort, "An Interview," 179–80; Richard Gombin, *The Origins of Modern Leftism* (Harmondsworth 1975), 112–6; "Grafrede voor een groep," *Daad eil Gedachte* 10, 1 (January 1974), 4–10.

⁵⁵ [Henri] Simon, 'L' Travailleurs, syndicats et militants," *Noir et Rouge* 19 (November 1961), 10–33. This article may be read as a programmatic text of the ICO. *Noir et Rouge* was an anarchist journal in which ICO members like Henri Simon and Yvon Bourdet, though not themselves anarchists, published theoretically orientated articles.

story of a freshly converted trade union activist (except to mock him)? There can be no doubt that their trade mark censored their potential correspondents a priori.”

Despite their intention of maintaining an invisible role, the ICO activists could not prevent themselves from operating as the members of a group with some very specific ideas.⁵⁶ The only alternative to this situation would have been for the group to ignore its own aims and simply print everything, without any limitations. But this would have made nonsense of the group’s aim to provide a voice for autonomous struggle. After the revolt of May 1968, when the membership of ICO grew explosively, this dilemma arose. Part of the new membership began to argue for activities which went further than the ICO advocated and the resulting tensions ultimately led to dissolution of the organization.

Socialisme ou Barbarie steadily grew from 1958 onwards. Many public meetings were organized and the influence amongst Parisian students and workers at Renault grew. The paper *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, which functioned as an overall paper of the various independent workers’ groups, did fairly well. Castoriadis did not, however, simply see this fortunate development as ‘confirmation’ of correct opinions. His attitude concerning the opinions of the group, such as those which he himself had helped shape, became on the contrary more critical. By the middle of the 1950s he had already brought his doubts about certain important aspects of Marx’s theory to the fore in a series of articles entitled “On the Content of Socialism.” At an early stage Castoriadis was critical of two particular elements of historical materialism: Marx’s economic theory and Marx’s position on technology. The author of *Das Kapital* had assumed that in capitalism the labour power of the workers was a commodity, just like any other. By putting it this way, however, Marx had made a fatal mistake. For labour power does not have a fixed use and exchange value which may be objectively determined. The capitalist who buys a ton of coal knows how much energy he may extract from it assuming a particular state of technology; but if he buys labor for a month he can never be certain what the output of that labour power will be. For labour power is a human commodity, which can oppose its use. For the same reason labour power does not have a fixed – scientifically calculable – price, since the height of the wage is not the result of invisible economic laws, but of the relationship of forces between capitalists and workers. What Castoriadis reproached Marx for was therefore that he had kept the concept of class struggle – which was after all essential for him – outside his economic theory, and had therefore not been radical enough. If one did include the concept of labour as a human commodity in the analysis, then all the other laws which Marx had formulated (labour value, increase in the organic composition of capital, tendential decrease of the rate of profit) would turn out not to be laws at all, but the more or less accidental result of relations of force and conflict situations. For a vision of socialism this criticism had far-reaching consequences. If there were no economic laws, then one could no longer maintain that capitalism would reach its end for economic reasons. The nature of history became unpredictable and every historical situation was by definition open.⁵⁷

In traditional ‘scientific socialism’ the technological forces of production (machines) were regarded as an independent and neutral factor. The factory, for example, was described in *Das Kapital* as a peak of efficiency and rationality. Capitalist technology used in such a factory was simply the technology. The problem in a society based on competition and profit lay exclusively

⁵⁶ Yvon Bourdet, *Qu’est-ce qui fait courir les militants?* (Paris 1976), 274–6.

⁵⁷ Pierre Chaulieu [Comelius Castoriadis], “Sur la dynamique du capitalisme,” *SE*, Nr. 12 (August-September 1953), 1–22 and Nr. 13 (January-March 1954), 60–81.

in the application of technology: in socialism other priorities in production would be set and the workers would themselves manage the factories. Castoriadis, on the other hand, did not regard technology as neutral; in this field, too, he discerned the problem of force relations and struggles. He regarded the continued splitting up of particular tasks (conveyor belts and tile like) as a method used by management to increase their control over the workers. By exactly proscribing every bodily movement in connection with machines their independence could be further affected. Technology was, therefore, first and foremost class-technology. In socialism, a new technology should be developed, which enriches the labour process and increases the autonomy of the workers.

From 1958–59 Castoriadis combined his earlier analysis of the main contradiction in capitalism (the contradiction between management and those actually doing the work) with his criticism of Marx's ideas about economy and technology. The new critical theory of society which grew from this assumed that the real contradiction of capitalism would no longer be sought in the economic area (the Marxist contradiction between the social form of production and private ownership of the means of production), but within production itself. In every firm and in every office, Castoriadis stated, there was a permanent struggle between the managers, who wanted to make everyone work as hard and as well as possible, and the blue and white collar workers who were alienated from their work. Management faced a very fundamental problem: it was impossible to formulate all-encompassing rules and regulations which prescribed all labour tasks for all personnel. A minimum space was always needed for improvisation and individuality, since there was no such thing as total knowledge of all people and all situations. This meant that a certain effort was also always required from the workers, an effort which went further than the official requirements. Hence the paradoxical fact that the production process stopped short in very short order, as soon as everyone did exactly what they're supposed to, according to management rules. This was also the explanation for the possibility of 'working-to-rule.' While management was forced on the one hand to appeal for the co-operation of the staff, it continually tried to limit this room for irregular activity. This was the reason for the introduction of 'scientific work organization' and similar experiments. But management would, by definition, never succeed in entirely reducing humans to robots.⁵⁸

With these thoughts Castoriadis made a very real contribution to left-radical theorizing. The problem was, however, that Castoriadis positioned his theories in an interpretation of post-war capitalism which turned out to be untenable. He transformed the proposition that the economic contradiction was not the most vital into the proposition that there were no longer any contradictions in capitalism at all. And he changed the thesis that the tendential decrease of the profit rate was not an economic law into the thesis that capitalism had definitely conquered the economic crisis. In this manner Castoriadis, like so many others, became the victim of the illusion that the period of rapid growth which had started in about 1950 would continue indefinitely.

⁵⁸ Pierre Chaulieu [Cornelius Castoriadis], "Sur le contenu du socialisme," SE, Nr. 17 (July-September 1955), 1–25; Nr. 22 (July-September 1957), 1–74; Nr. 23 (January-February 1958), 81–125. An English translation of the article's first part appeared as "On the Content of Socialism, I," in: *Political and Social Writings*, I, 290–309. A concise summary of the theory presented in "Sur le contenu du socialisme" was published in Paul Cardan [Cornelius Castoriadis], "Socialism and Capitalism," *International Socialism*, n 4 (Spring 1961), 20–27. In the same periodical there is a critical reaction by Ken Coates, "Socialism and the Division of Labour. Some Notes on the Views of Paul Cardan," *International Socialism* 5 (Summer 1961), 18–23, in which Castoriadis' ideas on the possibility of avoiding a division of labour are described as unrealistic. Daniel Mothe, described a number of the contradictions noted by Castoriadis on the basis of his personal experiences at Renault in: "L'usine et la gestion ouvrière," SE, Nr. 22 (July-August 1957), 74–111.

In 1959 Castoriadis circulated a text in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in which he not only explained that capitalism had economically stabilized itself, but also that the living standards of the working class would steadily improve. He added that trade unions had become cops in the system, exchanging wage increases for the obedience of the workers; that political life no longer concerned the population and had become the concern of specialists; that the workers no longer participated in the actions of the workers' parties; that all of society was privatized.⁵⁹

The 'right wing,' as described by the Dutch Council Communists, opposed these new propositions. Its members could not understand how Castoriadis could still regard himself as a revolutionary, if he saw developments so pessimistically. Pierre Souyri, especially, threw himself at a study of the 'classics' (Hilferding, Luxemburg, Lenin, Bukharin) to show how capitalism could only continue to produce new economic crises. His conclusion was that in capitalist development long periods of economic recession varied with periods in which new paths of recovery were explored. The long 'depression' of 1874–1896 had resulted in modern colonialism and finance capital; the problem period 1930–1950 had resulted in an economy marked by extensive state intervention, which would itself run into problems.⁶⁰

The discussions between Souyri, Lyotard and others on the one hand, and Castoriadis on the other, went on for many years. The gap between them became unbridgeable and led to the second split of the group in 1963. The 'orthodox' side took on the paper *Pouvoir Ouvrier* after consultation. This was not all that surprising in view of their continued belief in the importance of workers' struggle. Castoriadis, on the other hand, kept *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. *Pouvoir Ouvrier* was to continue publishing up to 1969.

After Castoriadis had broken with the most essential positions of Marxism, he concluded in the period 1963–65 that the entire philosophical foundation of historical materialism should be rejected. In a series of articles on "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" Castoriadis explained his considerations.⁶¹

In the first place he rejected the proposition that in human history economic development (forces of production and factors of production) is the most important factor, for a particular sector of society can never be more 'important' than another: "One cannot say in general that the economy determines ideology, nor that ideology determines the economy, nor finally that economy and ideology determine each other, for the simple reason that economy and ideology [...] are themselves products of a particular stage (and in fact a very recent stage) of historical development." A general-genetic perspective was necessary: "In the same jungle, separated by a few kilometers, two primitive tribes with the same weapons and tools, develop social structures and cultures which differ enormously from each other. Was it God who determined that it should be so, was a specific tribal 'soul' the cause? No, a study of the total history of both tribes, of their mutual relations etc., makes it possible to understand how the different developments have taken place." Marx's position on the 'primacy' of the economy and the forces of production was an incorrect generalization of one special historical case, namely the transition of feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe between 1650 and 1850, when an already well-developed bour-

⁵⁹ Paul Cardan [Cornelius Castoriadis], "Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne," SE, Nr. 31 (December 1960-February 1961), 51–81; Nr. 32 (April-June 1961), 84–111; Nr. 33 (December 1961-February 1962), 60–85.

⁶⁰ Lyotard, "Pierre Souyri."

⁶¹ Paul Cardan [Cornelius Castoriadis], "Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire," SE, Nr. 36 (April-June 1964), 1–25; Nr. 37 (July-September 1964), 18–53; Nr. 38 (October-December 1964), 44–86; Nr. 39 (March-April 1965), 16–66.

geoisie pushed aside the absolutist monarchy and the feudal remnants out of economic necessity. But this model of historical development was certainly not applicable to other places and times.

In the second place Castoriadis opposed the “objectivist rationalism” of the Marxist approach, which assumed that history was dominated by laws. If one accepted this thought, then individuals and classes in fact lost all freedom, for all of their deeds necessarily followed from the ‘laws’ of history. In fact history in no way developed rationally. It was a complicated combination of rationality and irrationality; human acts often led to unintended results which — partially — themselves acquired a life of their own. There was an interchange between ‘objective’ logic, which ran outside the control of people, and ‘subjective’ logic, which flowed from the choices and deeds of groups, of people. That was why it was nonsense to suggest — as Marxists did — that “the secret” of history has been revealed. Such a claim was just as much beside the truth as the claim that “we at last possess the secrets of nature,” and itself led to misplaced elitist thinking:

If ultimately there is a true theory of history, if there is rationality at work in events, then it is clear that the leadership of development should be entrusted to specialists in this theory, to the technicians of this rationality. The absolute power of the Party [...] then has a philosophic status. He who strives for a new society truly based on workers’ control should no longer base himself on Marx’s historical materialism, but help work on a new theory and politics, which realizes that there is no such thing as a total view and leadership of history: Whoever wants to be a revolutionary can no longer regard himself as a Marxist.

The left-criticism of Marxism, which Castoriadis developed in 1964–65, had important consequences for *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, because on the inside Castoriadis was considered the “brains” of the group. The undermining of the trusted political-theoretical foundations resulted in a weakening of mutual ties; the lack of a ‘programme’ or concrete goal began to have a paralysing effect. Furthermore, growing doubts had inspired Castoriadis to philosophical, abstract thoughts, which were not understood by many group members. The periodical had become the most important activity of the group, but was no longer the result of a collective effort. “There was no longer a point to maintaining the magazine and the group under these circumstances.”⁶² In the middle of 1965 the fortieth and last issue of the periodical appeared. The subscribers and readers were, however, only informed of the definitive demise of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in June 1967. The ‘official’ obituary, a leaflet, described the disappointment which had grown amongst the members of the group about the poor results of many years’ work. Readers had not co-operated actively with the paper but had only consumed it; new members had joined not out of revolutionary conviction but out of social need; the French population in general was depoliticized. In this situation there was no longer any room for an organization like *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The members would remain active but went their own separate ways. If the possibilities for a group or periodical were to improve once again, then they would be prepared “to restart our enterprise on a firmer foundation and with a different relation towards those who have followed our work.”⁶³ Nothing ever came of it.

Quite soon after the founding of *Information et Correspondance Ouvrières*, Claude Lefort had also parted with this group and left Henri Simon and others behind. After this he would never again become active in an organization. In order to understand this break in his life, it

⁶² Castoriadis, “An Interview,” 142.

⁶³ (La suspension de la publication de *Socialisme ou Barbarie*,” quoted here from the reprint in Comelius Castoriadis, *L’expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, vol. II (Paris 1974), 425.

is important to point at Lefort's connection with Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908- 1961), who had great influence on him from the beginning of the 1940s and was also a close friend.⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, who is sometimes described as the philosopher of ambiguity and equivocality, rejected any kind of total thinking. According to him, it would be impossible ever to know all of reality, if only because we are part of that reality and help to influence it. A position 'outside' or 'above' the world did not exist; human observation was always only partial and always took place from a partial perspective. For this reason we see ourselves in everything that we see and every thought about the world is 'ambiguous.' In Merleau-Ponty's eyes Socrates, the tireless questioner, was the true philosopher, steeped in the provisional and incomplete nature of the truth.⁶⁵

On the basis of this tradition of doubt and proper modesty in questions concerning 'the truth,' Lefort began to realize that his earlier discussions with Castoriadis had taken place within the wrong framework.

"Within the limits of a certain logic we were both partially correct and partially wrong. He [Castoriadis] was right when he said that self-rule does not entirely exist within the limits of the organs of places of work or industries, but should be realized on a scale which encompasses all of society. He was also right in saying that those who saw this not only had the right attitude for defending that idea, but also to attempt to reach that goal as well as they could; such acting further assumes that a course of action is determined, that a vote is taken on decisions, discipline, etc. I was right when I said that the relevant thing was not the concept of self-rule, the accompanying programme, or an anti-bureaucratic speech, but social practice, the real social relations which would be found in the Party — which in its turn would, as soon as it had made itself the sole owner of that which is revolutionary and universal, would necessarily subordinate the struggle of the self-governing organs to its own strategy. I proposed that the party had an indestructible urge to consolidate and expand its position and that the ruling group within the party had the same indestructible urge to order, protect and consolidate its own position, quite apart from the ideas of individuals. This was the logical framework which had to disappear, the underlying assumption which had to be rejected."⁶⁶

Both Castoriadis and Lefort had reasoned in their own way as if they stood outside the world and could disclose the 'truth.' They merely differed in their opinion about the nature of this truth. But would the discussion not take on a completely different character if one were to give up the pretence of 'total truth'? Could it not be true that precisely this striving for the truth was the ideological basis of modern bureaucracy, which attempted to subject everything to its 'generally valid' rules? It was in this direction that Lefort began to search. He still supported the struggle for self-determination, the building of democratic organs at a grass roots level, but he now tended to identify with decentralized thinking. He continued to support the struggle against the monopoly of power, knowledge and the means of production. But he rejected the idea that this struggle should be fought according to a general plan (with or without the Party) and that 'everything would change' after the revolution. From his own approach Castoriadis had reached the same

⁶⁴ The closeness that Lefort felt with Merleau-Ponty is clearly shown by the fact that he wrote a subtle postscript for the last, uncompleted, work by his friend, *Le Visible et l'Invisible — suivide notes de travail*. Texte établi par Claude Lefort accompagné d'un avertissement et d'une postface (Paris 1964).

⁶⁵ See, among others, Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (1945), *Humanisme et Terreur* (1947), *Eloge de la Philosophie* (1953) and *Les Aventures de la Dialectique* (1955), all published by Gallimard. Beside the *Eloge*, which is more of a concise expose, these books all refer to political theory.

⁶⁶ Lefort, "An Interview," 181.

conclusion. He too rejected the ‘rationalism’ which forms the basis of all thinking in terms of the absolute truth.⁶⁷

May ’68 brought Lefort and Castoriadis to the fore. Together with Edgar Morin — a radicalized former Communist⁶⁸ — they wrote *May 1968: The Breakthrough*. It was available in the bookshops as early as June. Of course, their ideas still differed. Castoriadis, for example, called for the formation of a new organization which could provide continuity and reinforce radical élan, while Lefort was very cautious in this respect. There were, however, also similarities. The revolt had, after all, shown with dazzling clarity that a revolutionary spirit could come, just like *Socialisme ou Barbarie* had claimed, not just from the factories hut also from elsewhere. In all those places where there was a contradiction between management and executive labour — at the universities where authoritarian administrators could decide the future of students — radical opposition could grow. Lefort was especially impressed by the students, because they did not allow their struggle to be led by predetermined strategies or rigid organizations, but acted and spoke here and now. It was precisely this that Castoriadis regarded as wrong and one cause of the failure of the revolt. Of course he also dismissed the idea of a Leninist master plan, but he nevertheless thought that structuring the revolt would have produced more significant results.⁶⁹

I will not follow the further development of Lefort and Castoriadis here, although it should be noted that both developed their critique of the pretensions of all theory much further in the 1970s and 1980s. It also is remarkable that one of those group members who had opposed the political consequences of this line of thinking in the 1950s (i.e. Jean-Francois Lyotard) became a founding father of postmodern relativism in the 1970s.⁷⁰ *Socialisme ou Barbarie*’s main achievement has been its fundamental critique of social hierarchy. On a practical level, this critique allowed the group to take workers’ everyday experiences more seriously than most other political currents did at the time (although this “view from below” was male and factory centered). On a theoretical level, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* gradually radicalized its anti-bureaucratic opposition to the point where it finally revealed the inner connection between hierarchical structures and the category of absolute truth.

⁶⁷ Castoriadis, too, was influenced by Merleau-Ponty. He and Lefort therefore both delivered a contribution to the special issue which the periodical *L’Are* devoted to Merleau-Ponty.

⁶⁸ Until the middle of the 1950s Edgar Morin had been a member of the PCF. He headed *Arguments*, the magazine for ‘doubters,’ which appeared between 1956 and 1962, and also published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* now and again. See also Edgar Morin, *Autocritique* (Paris 1959), and Jean-Baptiste Pages, *Comprendre Edgar Morin* (Toulouse 1980).

⁶⁹ Jean-Mate Coudray [Cornelius Castoriadis], Claude Lefort and Edgar Morin, *Mai 1968: La Breche* (Paris 1968; reprint: Brussels 1988).

⁷⁰ See in English: Lefort, *Political Forms of Modern Society*, and Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Trans. Kate Soper and Martin H. Ryle (Brighten 1984). See also: Dick Howard, *The Marxian Legacy* (London 1977), chapters 9 (on Lefort) and 10 (on Castoriadis); Giovanni Busine (ed.), *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société*: In philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis (Geneva 1989); and Claude Habib and Claude Mouchard (eds), *La democratie a l’oeuvre: autour de Claude Lefort* (Paris 1993). Lyotard gained fame in the 1970s as a leading postmodern philosopher through publications such as *Economie libidinale* (Paris 1974), *Instructions paiennes* (Paris 1977), and *La condition postmoderne* (Paris 1979).

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