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Cornelius Castoriadis

Obituary

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Pseudonyms used by Cornelius Castoriadis: Pierre Chaulieu,
Paul Cardan

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Cornelius Castoriadis, who has died at the age of 75, was one of the most impressive and influential intellectuals on the French left, travelling over half a century from Stalinism through Trotskyism and Leninism and finally past Marxism itself, away from prevailing forms of socialism towards a more autonomous and libertarian approach to politics altogether. He was best known to English-speaking anarchists as the ideological inspiration of the Solidarity group during the 1960s and 1970s.

Kornelios Kastoriades was born on 11th March 1922 to a francophile Greek family in Istanbul which soon moved to Greece, and he grew up in Athens where he studied law, economics and philosophy. He was drawn to left-wing politics as a boy and joined the Young Communists in 1937 and the Communist Party in 1941, but he soon turned against the party line and joined an extreme Trotskyist fraction in 1942. He was also involved in the resistance movement against the German occupation of Greece. He ran into personal danger from enemies on either side, and in 1945 he made his way to France, where he spent the rest of his life.

By profession he was a statistical economist, and from 1948 he worked as a senior official at the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) in Paris. But by vocation he was a revolutionary propagandist, and during the same period he wrote prolifically for left-wing publications and held regular meetings in Paris. In 1946 he joined the French section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, the Parti Communiste Internationaliste, but he formed a dissident fraction which left it in 1948. He became a founding editor of the paper *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which from 1949 acted as the focus of one of the most active groupuscules of the New Left, campaigning against all actually existing forms of socialism, whether reformist or revolutionary, and for a new form of socialism which would bring real liberty, equality and fraternity. As 'Pierre Chaulieu' or 'Paul Cardan' or Jean-Marc Coudray', he produced a series of essays which appeared as articles and then as pamphlets, were translated into several languages, and reached small but active groups in other countries.

In this country his influence was exerted through the Solidarity group, founded in 1960, which attempted to play a similar part in the British left (and whose main leader coincidentally came from a Greek family and used various pseudonyms). During a period of more than twenty years, conscientious translations of the writings of 'Paul Cardan' (often improved versions of the originals) appeared as articles in *Solidarity* magazine or as *Solidarity* pamphlets or books, and introduced his ideas to the English-speaking world—and beyond, since they were widely read not only in Britain and America but in many parts of both Western and Eastern Europe. Revolutionary and libertarian socialists of all kinds in all places were impressed by such texts as *Socialism Reaffirmed*, *Socialism or Barbarism*, *The Meaning of Socialism*, *The Crisis of Modern Society*, *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, *History and Revolution*, *Redefining Revolution*, *History as Creation*, and were stimulated to rethink their ideas.

His key doctrines were that class society is divided not according to the ownership or control of property but according to the possession or exertion of power (essentially between order-givers or directors and executants or order-takers), that the various attempts at political and social revolution (especially by Communist Parties) have succeeded only in replacing the old bureaucracies by new ones, that Marxist analysis itself shows that all the varieties of Marxism (including that of Marx himself) cannot succeed, and that other ways must be found for individuals to take power over their own lives, based on the principles of autogestion—self-management—and autonomy.

His influence was most obvious in the 'events' of 1968 in France, many of whose leaders especially Daniel Cohn-Bendit—were impressed by his critical approach to all old politics, though as it happened the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* paper and group had ceased a couple of years earlier. In particular his concept of autogestion had a wide appeal for the rebels outside the established political parties. Eventually he abandoned not only Marxism but socialism, and by the end of the 1970s he adopted the term 'autonomous society' instead. His line clearly converged with that of anarchism, but although he made occasional references to the anarchists, like many former Marxists he had little respect for them, and in return anarchists took little notice of him. This was probably a mistake, since many of his positive as well as negative ideas are highly relevant to the work facing the anarchist movement in the contemporary world.

In 1970 he retired from the OECD and became a French citizen. He turned to psychology and became a psychoanalyst in 1974, associated with the 'Fourth Group' of dissident Lacanians. He began to achieve recognition as a leading intellectual, was an editor of two leading magazines—*Textures* (1971-1975) and *Libre* (1976-1980)—and in 1980 he became a director of studies at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales at the University of Paris. He conducted an ambitious programme of work

and, at last able to write freely under his own name, he produced a score of books. A series of cheap collections of his early writings appeared from 1973 to 1979, accompanied by *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* in 1975, and followed by a series of collections of later writings under the general title *Carrefours dans la labyrinthe* from 1978 to 1997.

At the same time he became better known in the English-speaking world with the appearance of American translations of some of his writings—*Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (1984), *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), a three-volume collection of *Political and Social Writings* (1988-1993), an anthology of *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (1991), *World in Fragments* (1997)—and another anthology, *The Castoriadis Reader* (1997), just before his death. But he was still virtually ignored by the political and intellectual establishments in the English-speaking world.

Towards the end of his life he turned increasingly to linguistics and mathematics, ancient history and pure philosophy. He developed an idiosyncratic humanist position which emphasised the part played by individual imagination and creative culture in human affairs and which included a remarkable 'ethic of mortality', arguing that the absence of any kind of divinity above humanity and of any kind of existence after death made it all the more important to accept a tragic sense of both private and public life and to concentrate on the development of autonomous individuals in an autonomous society here and now. He always opposed all kinds of intellectual obscurantism, though he never escaped the obscurity of modern discourse in French, and his style became increasingly esoteric and neologistic. At his worst he might be arrogant and abstract, but at his best he could be inspiring and realistic. He always had a wide circle of friends, to whom he was known as 'Corneille' and with whom he enjoyed furious arguments, and he also earned increasing respect from a larger public. He will probably be remembered for his negative work, which helped to destroy

some of the most harmful myths of our time, rather than for his positive work, which tried to construct a new world in their place; yet now that the former task is completed, the latter task becomes increasingly urgent. "Whatever happens", he said at the end of his life, "I shall remain first and foremost a revolutionary". Other revolutionaries still have much to learn from him.

Cornelius Castoriadis died in Paris following a heart operation on 26th December 1997, and was the subject of long obituaries in the French press. Obituaries appeared in this country in *The Guardian* and *The Times* (the latter being an abridged and expurgated version of the present article).