

Crisis as an Ideological Problem

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Abstract: The contemporary economic crisis in Greece has not only proved the defects of the current economic system but has also revealed, among others, cultural and social aspects of decay. During the 1980s, Cornelius Castoriadis was constantly writing about the Western crisis. By referring to Ancient Greece, Enlightenment and humanism, Castoriadis emphasized the ignorance and apathy which prevailed upon the European values and legacies, leaving the societies in cultural stagnation which created a completely different state of mind –namely, standards of living, general welfare, comfort and consumerism were now replacing the values and norms. In his article, *The Crisis of Western Societies*, he mentioned the political ignorance of Western societies and he related it to the collapse of values, education and culture throughout the continent. Castoriadis's estimation seems to be inconsistent with Gramsci's idea of hegemony and ideology. In this study, the main aim is to evaluate Castoriadis's theory on a Gramscian basis. Although Castoriadis's inferences were drawn from the European society of 1980s, the consequences of such a comparison and synthesis could still provide us with some clues to rethink our current cultural state.

Keywords: Cornelius Castoriadis, Antonio Gramsci, hegemony, ideology, Western cultural crisis.

1. Society: Ignorance and Apathy

Cornelius Castoriadis (1992) analyzed the European crisis in two different aspects: Economy and policies, and social degeneration. Yet this work was more related to the European value system, so only the latter part of his theory will be examined.

Before considering the European social situation in detail, Castoriadis commented on the human condition. He emphasized the contradiction between the technological and scientific progress and the social development regarding human conditions. He claimed that now humans were capable of controlling their physical environment, but there was an apparent impotence in social and human affairs (Castoriadis, 1992, p.106).

Castoriadis argued that because of various on-going phenomena, the individual had become ignorant and apathic. As a result, European societies are becoming more and more ignorant and desperately individualistic; thus, “the crisis manifests itself at all levels of social life” (Castoriadis, 1992, p.107). Here the main problem is the loss of common values. Throughout history all societies have had a set of values (whether right or wrong) and a socially known and defined *sense of purpose* or *sense of meaning*. In modern times, either the values imposed by religions, or the other *secular* moral values are out of date and there is not a single coherent value system widely known and accepted:

Now we all know (it has been said for a long time but this does not diminish the importance of the phenomenon) that such a set of values, such a system of accepted goals and common beliefs as to what is right and what is wrong, what ought to be done or not done (irrespective of what the penal law says) hardly exists any more in today’s society (1992, p.107).

Initially, he focused on different social components such as family, education, work, political system and bureaucracy in order to explain why European societies have lost their values. By saying “the individual is not, to begin with and in the main, anything other than society. The individual/society opposition, when its terms are taken rigorously, is a totally fallacy” (Castoriadis, 1991a, p.61), he revealed that he considered the individual and society inseparable. Thus *the apathic and ignorant individual* is a mere representation of *the apathic and ignorant society*. Upon this presupposition he examines the aforementioned social components as follows:

1.1. Barren Political Terrain

According to Castoriadis, the massive bureaucratization of the state (including the other institutions involved in politics) leads to the exclusion of people from politics. The entire decision-making process is now left in the hands of officials and people are simply expected to pay taxes (1992, p.110). Thus, the present political parties have become bureaucratic machines and electoral power has lost its meaning. As a result of this loss of meaning, the main function of politics has become increasingly lax. Moreover, political rights have totally reduced to giving vote and changing nothing (Castoriadis, 1997a, p.258).

Castoriadis (1992) indicated that at first, bureaucracy used every opportunity to destroy people's will to participate in politics. Nowadays, a great number of people think that politicians manipulate society in order to look after their own interests rather than to *serve their people*. Hence, people now think that "*they are all the same gang*". He supports this idea since there is not much difference between political parties (neither government, nor opposition). As a result, the political arena has become highly unfertilized.

Because of the fact that parties do not have any meaning, politics has become a form of publicity campaign and another form of advertising.

But a modern society, with its established rules and deep-seated institutions, cannot be managed on this basis, even from the point of view of the rulers themselves. It cannot be run with the total abstention of the population from any intervention or any control in politics, for there is then no control by reality on the politicians (Castoriadis, 1992, p.111).

As the possibility of change has disappeared, the individual is confined to living in his/her own *little world*. Additionally, ideologies which were leading millions of people in the last century, have already died. Now individuals are highly *post-modern* and parties are ideologically unproductive. This also paves the way to *nothing will change* mentality. What is more, the pauperization of ideologies has slipped away the political basis of many parties. Socialist and communist parties still try to find a remedy in their ideology which no longer bares any motives for social change. To put it more concisely, the social movements which sought the rights and interests of minority groups and ecologists neither aim to obtain political power, nor to assume a political complementary project. On the other hand, liberal parties embellish their political programmes with new labels, but in reality, there is really no new manifesto under the sun (Castoriadis, 1997a, p.258).

1.2. Unions and Work

Similar to political parties, unions which are supposed to protect labour rights, have also become highly bureaucratized and most of them have all now become weakened and have thus lost their ability to negotiate on behalf of their sectoral or corporative interests. Castoriadis also criticizes their method in negotiation because it causes the fragmentation of the working classes. Hence, for Castoriadis, European society is very fragmented, egocentric and led by various lobbies which have no general agenda and even if they had one, they would be unable to impose it; such social inability and ignorance causes "a general blockage of the system" (ibid, pp. 258-259).

To deepen the crisis, *work* has also undergone a change -both on the objective and subjective sides. What Castoriadis meant by this is directly related to the intervention of the capitalist firms and the managerial bureaucracy in almost every corner of the production process. Therefore, nothing is actually created, nor produced any longer. Production has been confined to the production of *components*. And on the subjective side, a worker now has no opportunity to intervene in the process. The result of this is the alienation of the worker. Interestingly, capitalism created another form of alienation rather than the classical definition of Marxist alienation. Namely, the worker feels no emotional or professional commitment to his work and he also feels as if he is being manipulated.

Besides this, the worker, as an individual, has lost his meaning. What is more, the subject of modern production has now become *a group of workers*. But management also often denies this fact as they are trying to avoid the strengthening of workers in a collective unit. This also generates a contradiction (Castoriadis, 1992, pp.109-110). Since the alienated individual no longer fosters any commitment to his work, he seeks it within his own family instead; yet, the modern family does not provide him with this either.

1.3. Family and Education

According to Castoriadis (1997a, p.259), family is the focal point. For many years now, as the traditional roles of family members disintegrated, the concept of family has begun to shatter and this transformation has allowed individuals to have autonomy. However, personal freedom has become a double-edged sword since, although it has provided us with free will and various ways of living, it has also led us to disorientation and anomie. The social consequences of the change which family has undergone are still vague.

Castoriadis (1992) considered family as a part of this crisis. The extent of change within the family (sex morals, authority of man, parent-children relationship) reached the point that in the end it would prevent the future of society:

A society cannot function harmoniously unless relations between men and women and the upbringing of children are somehow regulated (I don't mean, of course, a mechanistic, legal regulation) in a manner that allows people to live their lives as individuals of one sex with the other, in a manner that allows new generations to be procreated and brought up without coming into conflict with the existing social arrangements (Castoriadis, 1992, pp.109-110).

He stated that without *family* the social roles of men and women could not be specified. As the parental figures continually change, the future of the youth seems to fall into uncertainty as well. Here Castoriadis might sound as if he defended the traditional family, but it is impossible to make such an

assumption. He indicated the instability of social assets, he compared the traditional family to the various forms of *modern* family and he drew attention to the vagueness of dos and donts in the upbringing of a child (ibid, pp.112-114).

The secondary structure which would literally build up *the ideal citizen* is the education system. Castoriadis (1997a, p.259) stated that even in the modern era, the education system and the surrounding culture seem to have a greater role than the family. However, he underlined the deterioration in the education system and emphasized the ambiguity of principles which would be transmitted from one generation to another via schools, universities, institutions etc. He defined this problem as “a crisis of curricula”.

Interestingly, Castoriadis positioned himself on the authoritarian side of student-teacher dichotomy which he acknowledged as “a crisis of authority in education”. Namely, the absolute authority of teacher has declined and the new teacher has become “a master-pal” (*maître-copain*). Castoriadis asserted that this new type of teacher has “succeeded neither in defining, nor affirming, nor extending themselves”. What is more, he claimed that education has lost its meaning; “education is no longer cathected as education by participants” and the aim of it has been reduced to simply obtaining a diploma and exercising a profession. (ibid, p. 260). Therefore, one could derive from his estimation that in the past education was value-oriented, although now, it has become money-oriented. The psychological aspect of this problem is also very profound since many people hate their work but they have to do it for a living. And at work, alienation is just around the corner for them to fall into such a vicious circle.

1.4. Culture and Art

Castoriadis continued his analysis by referring to the direct relationship between education and culture. Since the education system is based on the cultural codes of a society, it is directly affected and modified by society itself. What he tried to clarify was the decay of the content of knowledge as a result of educational and cultural deterioration. Culture has become a type of knowledge for the people who seem to be cultivated, the ones who go to museums, exhibitions, plays etc., or tourists who are mostly interested in being familiar with the culture of a country they visit. However, Castoriadis believed that this type of knowledge neither provides us with creative thought nor allows us produce anything authentic. Here, he problematized society’s self-representation (ibid, pp.260-261). According to Castoriadis, each society has a representation of its own which is singular and unique; and at the same time, in a physical or logical sense indefinable; a supranatural collective image:

For itself, society is never a collection of perishable and substitutable individuals living on some territory or other, speaking this or that language, practising ‘outwardly’ some customs or

other. On the contrary, these individuals 'belong' to this society because they participate in its social imaginary significations, its 'norms', 'values', 'myths', 'representations', 'projects', 'traditions', etc. and because they share (whether they know it or not) the will to be of this society and to make it be on a continuing basis. (Castoriadis, 1997a, p. 261).

In the past, the self-representation of the Western society with its norms, values, principles was concrete and definite. But now Western societies are unable to draw a certain image (or self-representation) of themselves; and this image, keeps on loosening, flattening out, and to some extent becoming self-contradictory because the values and norms which are supposed to unite society, no longer make it function. On the other hand, he stated that the problem is "society as such", that is to say, the main contemporary social dilemma originates in marginalized individualism. In other words, society has become *Evil* and the so-called "subjective lived experience of contemporary man" has resulted in the loss of social consciousness which has obviously represented itself in the narcissism of modern man (ibid, p.262). These critiques could be considered to be as aiming at *post-modernist attitude*. This vagueness of values and norms also manifests itself in art and culture. Art had always been an expression of life, during various periods in human history, such as the Renaissance, Elizabethan Period or in Ancient Greece. Namely, rather than being a part of it, art was spread to every corner of life; let us say in the past it was *an artful life*.

At this point, Castoriadis discussed the monopoly of scientists. (He reminds us of Foucault's theory of knowledge) He stated that as scientists control the production of knowledge, it is confined to a small amount of people, "scientist élites". Furthermore, as a consequence of technological progress there is no limit to the upcoming innovations and this also makes it difficult to establish a concrete scientific paradigm. On the other hand, with the increase of specialization, scientists are also isolated among themselves (Castoriadis, 1992, p.108).

He also underlined the present uncreativity and inability of cultural production. Even in France, the projects, designs and many other kinds of cultural product are examples of "mere plagiarism" (Castoriadis, 1997a, p.260). He mentions many masters of art such as Pindar, Sophocles, Dante, Giotto, Bach, Kafka etc., "...And then, in the same places, with the same geography, under the same sun, the 'same' people, practically the 'same' society does not create anything new" (Castoriadis, 1991b, p.223).

By referring to Hegel, Castoriadis related the crisis in a society to its culture. He stated that it was not possible to find the real reason why there were no great poets during the declination of Greek polis. Yet, he implied that if people still create great objects of art, this manifests the existence of values within that society which still inspire artists; (ibid, p.227) in other words, "the loss of the object

and the loss of meaning go hand in hand” (Castoriadis, 1997d, p.347). In this respect, he intertwined the lack of value system with uncreativity.

2. A Different Society

All of these changes (in education, in family etc.) bring about another problem which is directly related to the future of Western societies. Young people are now confronted with a different society than that of their parents and grandparents. Family ties have loosened and education is not considered as an essential principle. Thus they are left with a new paradigm where values and norms have replaced by “standard of living”, “general welfare”, “comfort” and “consumerism”.

No religion, no political ideas, no social solidarity with a local or work community or with schoolmates. If she is not marginalized (drugs, delinquency, unstable personality), there remains the royal road of privatization, which she may enrich by indulging in one or several personal crazes (Castoriadis, 1997a, p.260).

As a result, for the *common people*, there is no value left but consumption. As he is not allowed to enter the reign of science and God has already been locked up in the church, there is no Northern Star to guide him through this period of human degeneration. The unique meaning of his existence is bestowed upon his amount (standard) of consumption (Castoriadis, 1992, pp.108-109).

In short, Castoriadis (1997a, p.258) stated that the individual was ignorant to the present economic and political problems. Therefore apathy and ignorance dominate every part of social relations. Such a psychological disorder could be seen as a direct result of the lack of ideals and values within Western society. Hence, the sociopolitical dynamics of the West has deteriorated.

At the center of Castoriadis’s critique of European society, the European value system is present. This point could be more interesting if related to the Gramscian perspective of social norms and values. Since Gramsci underlines the importance of the value system on hegemonical relations in a society, the set of values which Castoriadis support seems to be problematical. Yet, initially, what Gramsci said about *hegemony* and *value system* should be examined.

3. On Being a “Hegemon”

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx states “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class” (Marx and Engels, 2012, p.59). However, Gramsci is not satisfied with such a generalization since political dominance and struggle cannot simply be reduced to class confrontation but it is based on various complex social forces (Mouffe, 1979, p.180). According to him, between *the*

oppressors and the oppressed there lies a relationship of a different kind, other than an absolute coercive dominance. Here he conceptualizes *hegemony* as a form of “dominance of one class over the others”. Gramsci’s hegemony as a concept, represents a break with the traditional Marxist perspective on ideology. In other words, hegemony is not merely a domination, neither it is a coercive interpretation of sovereignty of one class upon another (Jones, 2006, pp.42-43).

For Gramsci there are various forms of government, not only a dictatorship; yet, hegemony is another form of governance over people. It is not concrete or apparent as a dictatorship, it is mostly based on the consent of people. Such a consent is supplied by popularization of the world view of the ruling class (Bates, 1975, pp.351-352). As a result, the bourgeoisie creates a value system of its own and imposes this throughout the society, and through this ideological illusion each class is kept under control. By covering itself behind such a powerful ideological shield, the bourgeoisie continues to dominate over other classes. The philosophy of the ruling class manifests itself as the *common world-view* and by the consent it creates, it also legitimizes itself (Fiori, 1970, p.238). Hence, Gramsci (cited in Femia, 1981, p.42) stated that consent is about the legitimacy of any ruling class and it is presented through the acceptance of the interests of the dominant group as the interests of the society as a whole. Building consent is managed by the formation of an intermediary of an ideology which is adopted by all social groups. Such an ideology could be considered as a synthesis of various political, economic, intellectual and moral norms which would be gathered to create a nationwide world-view (Mouffe, 1979, p. 181).

In addition, the proletarian world-view is intentionally misformulated by the bourgeoisie and they are far from realizing the situation in which they are found. This leads the working class to a type of (as it is referred by Étienne de La Boétie) *servitude volontaire*⁺ (Femia, 1981, p.31). Furthermore, Gramsci underlined the fact that *bourgeois norms* were also imposed to neutralize class conflict (ibid, p.34) and to mask the inequality of the system (ibid, p.45). As a result,

The proletariat can become the leading (dirigente) and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilise the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State (Mouffe, 1979, p.178).

Thus he considers bourgeois hegemony as an obstacle to proletarian class consciousness. At this juncture, Castoriadis’s understanding of European crisis seems to be more complex in Gramscian terms.

⁺ For more information about this term, Étienne de La Boétie, **Discours de la servitude volontaire**, Paris: Fayard, 1997.

4. Castoriadis vs. Gramsci

Briefly speaking, beneath Castoriadis's concern of European crisis appears to lay the protection of bourgeois value system. Yet there is much vagueness in his theory. Several questions could be formulated as such: What exactly are European criteria? Do these criteria actually reflect the salvation of the *oppressed* or do we need them to legitimize the present system? Additionally, is it possible to consider the so-called European values as bourgeois values? Is it possible to create a more egalitarian and democratic world by recreating the bourgeois state which seems to lose its strength?

From Castoriadis's theory it is rather difficult to derive further conclusions but either way, his expectation and belief in European values seem to be interrelated with the concept of hegemony which Gramsci created. In Gramscian sense these values themselves are a part of the hegemonic relations between the bourgeoisie and the working class. Despite the fact that Castoriadis severely criticizes the change and deterioration of European values and the triumph of consumerism and capitalist principles, by bestowing a special mission on Europeans *as bearers of modernity and humanity*, he approves European cultural and political hegemony.

On the other hand, Gramsci defined civil society (cited in Bates, 1975, p.353) as a social composition of "private organisms" (schools, churches, clubs, journals, parties etc.) which formulate social and political consciousness. Castoriadis also mentioned how the individual was created by the state, but he seemed to support this relationship and additionally he stated that due to the deterioration of political parties, unions and education system, *the ideal European* can no longer be *produced*. Therefore, although Castoriadis unnoticeably followed Gramsci's analytical steps, he considered the cultural dominance of the ruling class in a totally different perspective. He criticized the education system and the process of cultural production, but in spite of rejecting how the state imposes its values upon individuals, *en revanche*, he affirmed such an authoritarian relation.

Like Gramsci, Castoriadis also criticized the political stance of the trade unions but Gramsci described the working class institutions (cited in Femia, 1981, p.35) as "fully incorporated into the capitalist system" and "mere instruments of political order". Thus, he did not believe in any struggle within this system since it is impossible to overcome social inequality through a system which is based upon it.

The most problematic part of Castoriadis's theory is his *European perspective*. He not only ignored hegemony within the European society, but he also legitimized the domination of European values all around the world as if there is no other choice for the other cultures. Although he did not offer Ancient Greek democracy and values as the only remedy for the *human condition* and he was not interested in reviving direct democracy, his constant reference to *European value system*, implies the Western domination as the ultimate goal.

Castoriadis (1997c, p.269) defined creation as the capacity to bring forth new forms, invent something which has never before existed. What is more, he considered European experience as unique and he ignored the historical, cultural, political and economic attributes of other societies in the past and their future potential. It appears to be impossible to possess creative instinct out of Europe. Especially in his writings on the question of autonomy, he underlined the radical ruptures which caused an overall change and development in human history and he stated that this only happened twice; first in Ancient Greece and then in Western Europe. Moreover by calling European creativity as *ontological creation* he attributes *the possibility and potential to create to European existence* (1997b, p.311).

For Gramsci the comparison between East and West was mostly focused on state's position. Gramsci claimed that in the East, the state was so overwhelming (*pyrrhic predominance*) (cited in Thomas, 2009, p.199) that it tended to spread everywhere and this also implied its weakness rather than its strength. In the West, however, there is a proper relationship between civil society and state. Although Gramsci compared East and West (cited in Thomas, 2009, p.203) he did not try to emphasize on "geopolitical division of the globe into qualitatively different historical times", rather he focused on how one social formation dominates over the others both in the East and the West. Namely, he examined hegemony as a concept, how it was created and exerted and what should be done to overthrow it.

By clarifying the ideologically and culturally modified world perception, Gramsci transcended Castoriadis's Western-oriented, monocultural perspective. He rejected the distorted values and cultural codes imposed by *the oppressors*. On the other hand, Castoriadis internationalized this value system and dictated them not only on Europeans themselves, but also on other cultures and societies. His argumentation seems to be self-contradictory because the insistence on being a European *of a certain age* and *of a certain value system* makes it impossible to recreate and re-establish a new society. Thus with such an understanding no further *radical ruptures* would take place.

Besides, within the Gramscian framework, whole cultural, social and political system is consisted of two classes: the oppressors and the oppressed. This might not seem to be adequate under existing circumstances. However, undoubtedly, his work to decode the hegemonic relations in society, could give us a more concrete social analysis. Castoriadis's expectation of European domination seems highly nostalgic and does not provide us with any immediate steps for change. If there is a problem with consumerism and its effects then the whole economic system (capitalism) should be rejected. Moreover, Castoriadis's vagueness in norms and values also seems problematic. With such an attitude, the ideal value system could be defined and redefined by anyone or any ideology. How could we reach a democratic European society if we do not know exactly which values we are supposed to support?

Also by sticking to a concrete and fixed value system, it is impossible to find openings to recreate the future.

Besides, Suzi Adams (2011, p.176) stated that Castoriadis considered European culture as a whole, following a linear line from Aristotle onwards. This also represents a modernist perspective of history. It is not possible to assume neither that European values and norms have remained unchanged, nor that they have been homogeneous throughout history.

On the other hand, Europe has changed to a great extent especially after the end of the Cold War. Nowadays, it is almost undeniable to ignore the immigrants and their values. Thus, under the existing circumstances, dictating only one type of understanding and way of life seems to be inapplicable. Gramsci's analysis does not offer any schedule or schema on value systems, since his theory of hegemony excludes any ethnic or cultural arguments. However, by showing how values are used to control, he emphasized the fact that either in Europe or in any other parts of the world, the *oppressors* use their power to dictate their values and by using these values, they create a world of illusion for the ones they dominate. Hence, Gramsci's estimation could entirely lead us to come to understand how we could build a value system for all.

What is more, at first, Castoriadis might appear to be criticizing the capitalist system but he does not mention any *oppressors or oppresseds*. Therefore, this leads to the ignorance of the fact that the system is not the same for everyone and naturally the intrinsic values and norms of this system are not the same for everyone either. There could not be, therefore, one specific predefined set of values for everyone.

However, Castoriadis was wistful about social change:

But the new will not come about automatically. Its emergence will be assisted by the actions of people in society, by their permanent resistance and struggle, and by their often unconscious activity. But the new will not complete itself, will not be able to establish itself as a new social system, as a new pattern of social lie, unless at some stage it becomes a conscious activity, a conscious action of the mass of the people. For us, to help initiate this conscious action and to help it develop, whenever it may manifest itself, is the real new meaning to be given to the words "revolutionary politics (Castoriadis, 1992, p.117).

Gramsci also believed in *revolution*, but in another aspect. Since the proletariat is poisoned by a different world-view, a borrowed/adopted ideology from another class, they could only reveal their inner or real conception through activity (bargaining, strikes, riots, factory takeovers etc.) (Femia, 1981, pp.43-44). He considered hegemony as an important analysis unit and a key instrument for revolutionary theory. He constantly underlined the importance of establishing a counter-ideology

which would form the new proletarian hegemony and would result in revolution (ibid, p. 52). At this juncture, Castoriadis searched for a solution within the present system whereas Gramsci tries to create an alternative to it.

5. Conclusion

What Castoriadis characterized as “the crisis of Europe” is actually the crisis of the norms and values of the ruling class in the Gramscian sense. By regarding every social component such as school, church and family as an intermediary of value transfer from one generation to the other, he deduced individuality to a mere production of any other social outcome. Without a doubt, individuals are products of their own society but individualism and privatization do not have to be considered detrimental since they may unexpectedly lead to human emancipation. Additionally, Gramsci’s perspective on values as an ideological shield for bourgeois hegemony could pave the way to individual emancipation since the norms and values imposed by ruling classes are revealed as an adopted value system, and this might increase the opportunity to redefine a new set of values.

As a result, Castoriadis’s European-based, monolithic theory seemed to legitimize European domination and considered the Euro-bourgeois values as international, which manifests itself as another form of modernistic attitude towards other societies and cultures. On the contrary, Gramscian perspective more or less, appealed to every society since the *oppressor and oppressed* dichotomy is not authentically European, it is an international problem of capitalism. In this respect, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony could provide us with the decoding of the illusive common ideology and by doing so, it is more likely to redefine a new individualism and subjectivity rather than being confined to everything European.

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