Reflections on Castoriadis and Bookchin

Yavor Tarinski

The primary threat to nature and people today comes from centralizing and monopolizing power and control.
Vandana Shiva[1]

Nowadays constantly we are being told “from above” that we don’t have a choice but to conform to the status quo. The dominant power institutions are doing everything they can to convince us that the solution to our social and environmental problems is going to be found in the very same policies that have created them in the first place. The T.I.N.A. narrative continues to dominate the mainstream discourse and the widespread consumerist culture, in combination with the long-lasting representative crisis, is infecting people’s imaginary with cynicism, general conformism and apathy.

But germs of other ways of thinking and living are trying to break their way through the passivity of present day logic. New significations that are going beyond the contemporary bureaucratic capitalist discourse, offering new sets of reasons and values, which to navigate societal life away from the destructiveness of constant economic growth and cynical apathy.

With popular dissatisfaction of the present order of things on the rise we can distinguish two significations that offer radical break with the present normality:

On the one hand, there is growing interest in political participation and direct democracy. Nowadays it is becoming almost unthinkable to think of popular unrest outside of the general frame of democracy: first, the demands almost always revolve around more citizen involvement in one form or

another; second, the way of organizing popular struggle for a long time have overpassed the centralism of the traditional political organizations, insisting instead on self-organization and collaboration.

On the other hand, ecology is emerging as major concern and as an answer to the contemporary growth-based politico-economic model that is responsible for the creation of tangible environmental crisis and rapidly unfolding climate change. It is being expressed in the form of popular struggles against capitalist extractivist projects, harmful to the environment, human health, as well as to local autonomy. It also takes the form of resistance to consumerist culture, both of whom boost innovative new theories like de-growth.

Amongst the diverse spectrum of thinkers that nowadays are developing these new significations we can distinguish Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin as two of the most influential. Both emerged from the Left and through their thought, as well as activist practices, managed to overpass the ideological dogmas and to develop their own political projects, incorporating and advancing further direct democracy and ecology. It's not surprising that they collaborated in the journal *Society & Nature*, and later in its successor *Democracy & Nature*, until 1996, when a bitter conflict between the two emerged[2].

Nowadays their legacy is being carried on by social movements and struggles that place these two significations at the heart of their political activities. Castoriadis's thought was revitalized with the popular uprisings across Europe of the last years and especially with the so called "Movement of the Squares" (also known as The Indignados), that was driven not by "pure" ideologies but by passion for political action and critical thinking, while Bookchin's project is being partially implemented in practice by the kurdish liberation movement in the heart of the Middle East (most notably in Rojava), influencing it to such a degree that it completely abandoned

its marxist-leninist orientation.

It must be noted that the target of the present text is not the development of a deep comparative analysis between the works of both of them, but instead an effort at underlying two elements of their thought that are especially actual for our current context and are charged with huge potential for change.

Direct Democracy

Both Castoriadis and Bookchin saw great liberatory potential in direct democracy and placed it at the heart of their political projects. They devoted great part of their writings on that matter, developing this notion beyond the frames set by traditional ideologies. In stark difference with authoritarian views, mistrusting society and thus calling to its subjection to hierarchical, extra-social mechanisms, on the one hand, and on the other, with such views that reject every form of laws and institutions, the two thinkers proposed the establishment of structures and institutions that will allow direct public interaction, while maintaining social cohesion through horizontal flow of power.

According to Castoriadis, the majority of human societies were established on the basis of heteronomy, which he describes as a situation in which the society's rules are being set by some extra-social source (such as the party, god, historic necessity etc.). The institutions of the heteronomous societies are conceived as given/self-evident and thus, unquestionable, i.e. incompatible with popular interaction. For him the organizational structure of the modern western world, while usually characterized as "democracy", is actually a liberal oligarchy, with some liberties for the people, but the general management of social life is being situated in the hands of tiny elites (Castoriadis. 1989).

For Castoriadis democracy is an essential element of the

social and individual autonomy (the people to set their own rules and institutions), which is the opposite of heteronomy. What he called project of autonomy entailed direct-democratic self-instituting by the society, consisted of conscious citizens, who realize that they draw their own destiny and not some extra-social force, either natural or metaphysical (Castoriadis. 1992). I.e. in the hands of society lies the highest power that is: to give itself the laws and institutions under which it lives.

Castoriadis derives his understanding of democracy from the classical meaning of the term, originating from Ancient Athens (demos/people and kratos/power). Thus on the basis of this he denotes the today's liberal regimes as non-democratic, since they are based on the election of representatives and not on direct citizen participation. According to him democracy can be only direct, thus incompatible with bureaucracy, expertism, economic inequality and other features of our modern political system (Castoriadis. 1989).

On more concrete level he suggested the establishment of territorial units with population of up to 100.000 people, which to self-manage themselves through general assemblies. For coordination between different such units he proposed the establishment of councils and committees to whom the local decision-making bodies to send revocable short-term delegates (Castoriadis. 2013, pp.42-43). Thus the power remains in the hands of the demos, while allowing non-statist coordination on larger scale.

For Bookchin too, the characterization of the today's system as a democracy was a mistake, an oxymoron. He reminds us that two centuries ago the term democracy was depicted by rulers as "mob rule", a prelude to chaos, while nowadays is being used to mask one representative regime, which in its essence is republican oligarchy since a tiny clique of chosen few rules over the powerless many (Bookchin. 1996).

Bookchin, like Castoriadis, based his understanding of democracy on the experience of the ancient Athenian politia. That is one of the reasons he placed so much attention on the role of the city (Bookchin. 1964). He describes how with the rise of what he called statecraft, the active citizens, deeply and morally committed to their cities, were replaced by subjected to parliamentarian rule passive consumers, whose free time is spent shopping in retail stores and mega malls.

After many years of involvement in different political movements, Bookchin developed his own political project, called Communalism. Based on direct democracy, it revolves extensively around the question of power, rejecting escapist and lifestyle practices. Communalism focuses instead on a center of power, that could potentially be subjected to the will of the people – the municipal council – through which to create and coordinate local assembles. He emphasized on the antagonistic character, towards the state apparatus, that these institutions have and the possibility of them to become the exclusive sources of power in their villages, towns and cities. The democratized municipalities, Bookchin suggested, would confederate with each other by sending revocable delegates to popular assemblies and confederal councils, thus challenging the need of centralized statist power. This concrete model Bookchin called libertarian municipalism (Bookchin. 1996), which have influenced to a big degree Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish struggle for social liberation.

A distinguishing feature of Bookchin’s vision of direct democracy in his communalism was the element of majority voting, which he considered it as the only equitable way for a large number of people to make decisions (Bookchin. 2002). According to him consensus, in which a single person can veto every decision, presents a danger for society to be dismantled. However, according to him, all members of society possess knowledge and memory, and thus the social collectivity

does not have interest in depriving “minorities” of their rights. For him the views of a minority are potential source of new insights and nascent truths, which are great sources of creativity and progress for society as a whole.

Ecology

Ecology played major role in the thought of the two big philosophers. Both of them however viewed it in stark contrast from most of the environmentalists of their time (and of today as well). Unlike the widespread understanding of nature as a commodity, as something separated from society, Castoriadis and Bookchin viewed it in direct link with social life, relationships and values, thus incorporating it in their political projects.

Castoriadis argues that ecology is, in its essence, a political matter. It is about political choices for setting certain limits and goals in the relationship between humanity and nature (Castoriadis. 1993). It has nothing to do with science, since the latter is about exploring possibilities and giving answers to specific questions and not about self-limitation. However, Castoriadis urges for mobilizing science’s resources for exploring nature and our impact on it, but he remains firm that the choice that will be made in the end will be in its essence a political one.

Therefore the solutions that should be given to every ecological crisis should be political. Castoriadis remains critical of the green parties and the parliamentary system in general, since through the electoral processes it strives at “liberating” the people from politics, giving it instead solely in the hands of professional “representatives”. As a result of this the people are left to view nature in de-politicized manner, only as a commodity, because of which many contemporary ecological movements deal almost exclusively with questions about the environment, disconcerned with social and political matters.

Following this line of thought it comes as no surprise that Castoriadis remains critical towards the rear occasions when big green movements and parties are coming up with proposals of political nature for resolving the environmental crisis (Castoriadis. 1981). This is so, because most of the time, although their political proposals revolve around more popular participation – for example green parties that have come up with proposals for sortition and rotation of their M.P.'s, more referendums etc. – they are still embedded in the contemporary parliamentary regime. Being advocate of direct democracy, Castoriadis believes, that single elements of it, being embedded in the representative system, will loose their meaning.

Similarly to him, Bookchin also links the ecological sphere with the social one and politics in general. For him nearly all of the present ecological problems result from problems deeply rooted in the social order – because of which he spoke about social ecology (Bookchin. 1993). Ecological crises couldn't be neither understood nor much less resolved if not linked to society, since economic, cultural, gender and other conflicts in it were the source of serious ecological dislocations.

Bookchin, like Castoriadis, strongly disagreed with environmentalists who looked to disconnect ecology from politics and society, identifying it instead with preservation of wildlife, wilderness or malthusian deep ecology etc (Bookchin. 1988). He insisted on the impact on nature that our capitalist hierarchical society is causing (with its large scale, profit-driven, extractivist projects), thus making it clear that unless we resolve our social problems we cannot save the planet.

For Murray Bookchin the hierarchical mentality and economic inequality that have permeated society today are the main sources of the very idea that man should dominate over nature. Thus the ecological struggle cannot hope for any success

unless it integrates itself into a holistic political project that challenges the very source of the present environmental and social crisis, that is, to challenge hierarchy and inequality (Bookchin. 1993).

Conclusion

Despite the differences and disagreements between them, Castoriadis and Bookchin shared a lot in common – especially the way they viewed direct democracy and ecology. Their contributions in these fields provided very fertile soil for further theoretical and practical advance. It is not by chance that in a period in which the questions of democracy and ecology are attracting growing attention, we listen ever more often about the two of them.

These concepts are proving to be of great interest for increasing number of people in an age of continuous deprivation of rights, fierce substitution of the *citizen* by the *consumer*, growing economic inequalities and devastation of the natural world. Direct democracy and ecology contain the germs of another possible world. They seem as two of the best significations that the grassroots have managed to create and articulate as potential substitute to the rotting ones of hierarchy and commodification which dominate and destroy our world today.

Bibliography:

Bookchin-Öcalan correspondence
Bookchin, Murray. Ecology and Revolutionary Thought (1964)
Bookchin, Murray. The Communalist Project (2002)
Bookchin, Murray. The Crisis in the Ecology Movement (1988)
Bookchin, Murray. What is Communalism? (1996)
Bookchin, Murray. What is Social Ecology (1993)
Castoriadis, Cornelius. Democracy and Relativism (2013)
Castoriadis, Cornelius. From Ecology to Autonomy (1981)
Castoriadis, Cornelius. The Project of Autonomy is not Utopia (1992)

Castoriadis, Cornelius. The Problem of Democracy Today (1989)
Castoriadis, Cornelius. The Revolutionary Force of Ecology (1993)
Castoriadis, Cornelius. Worker Councils and the Economy of the Self-managed Society (1972)

Notes:
[1] Stephen Spencer, Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity, and Representation (2014). Routledge p.204
[2] https://www.democracynature.org/vol3/biehl_bookchin.htm

Η ελληνική μετάφραση του κειμένου δημοσιεύεται στο **Ουλαλούμ**.