

WHAT HAS CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS TO SAY ABOUT YOUTH WORK?

INTRODUCTION

For over 30 years Cornelius Castoriadis has done my head in! In the mid-70's, being a pamphlet junkie, I could not resist his 'History as Creation', written under the pseudonym of Paul Cardan. Inside a few pages my head was throbbing. At the time I was a recent Marxist convert, bowled over by the sweeping explanatory power of Karl's grand theory. To be honest, the last thing I desired was some little known dissident revolutionary sowing uncertainty just as I had discovered certitude. Here was Castoriadis casting doubt as to whether any social theory or political programme could hold the key to understanding humanity's past, present or future. I was torn from his dangerous embrace by the damning verdict of my Trotskyist group's leadership. He was condemned as being little better than a liberal, a revisionist undermining the historical mission of the working class. This scathing put-down touched the raw nerve of my own liberal wavering in the face of Leninist orthodoxy and discipline, so I internalized my misgivings. To my shame, for most of the next decade, Castoriadis was consigned to a cardboard box under the stairs. For my part I strove to be the dedicated Marxist youth worker, armed with the correct scientific analysis, committed to politicising work with young people.

However, my cry of 'get thee behind me, Castoriadis' did not spare me the questions posed by life to anyone arguing for the radical transformation of society:

- To what extent do we have a real grasp of why people think and act in the ways they do? What do we mean by notions of individual and collective consciousness, by the very idea of personality?
- And, given that 'personalities', amongst other things, are black, white, straight, gay, women and men, born into contending classes, how might they discover and act upon a common sense of purpose in all their interests?
- How indeed might revolutionary social and political change come about? As Castoriadis puts it, "to what extent does the contemporary situation give birth in people the desire and capacity to create a free and just society?" [1988a:33]

As a would-be agent of change, inside and outside of work, I wrestled with these fundamental dilemmas. Neither Marxism nor Youth Work provided convincing answers. Both fell short of comprehending the whole picture. Of course Marxism's supposed commitment to class struggle as the motor of history seemed to resolve the matter. However, its singular failure to appreciate the individual in all her idiosyncrasy weakened its collective aspiration. As for Youth Work, its claim to be person-centred was built on the shakiest of foundations, an eclectic mix of generalisations drawn from a social psychology devoid of any sense of exploitation and oppression. Confronted with this divide I rushed from pillar to post, arguing in Marxist circles for the importance of individuality, ranting in the Youth Work milieu about the centrality of class conflict. Neither side was won over. It was the late 1980's before I began to renew my acquaintance with Castoriadis and his fix on this mess of contradictions.

BIOGRAPHY

And so to the man himself, he was born in Constantinople on March 22nd, 1922. Within months his family had fled the city amidst its Greek-Turkish tensions. By the time of his youth he was a 'bolshie' member of the Greek Communist Party, 'smitten' (in his own word) by philosophy and on his way to studying it, law and economics in Athens. The end of the Second World War witnessed him, latterly a heretical Trotskyist and thus the target for both Fascist and Stalinist retribution, fleeing to France on board a New Zealand troop ship. From this critical moment we follow a remarkable intellectual and political journey, central to which is a profound confrontation with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. His quest was to comprehend as well as possible and to contribute positively to humanity's struggle for autonomy, freedom and justice.

The ensuing twenty years saw Castoriadis pursuing his commitment to revolutionary politics, co-founding in 1948 the influential group 'Socialisme ou Barbarie', whilst earning a crust as a professional economist with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris. These were the days of his prolonged encounter with Marx from within Marxism. By the time the group disbanded in 1967 he was concluding that "... the very body of Marx's theory", for instance its failure to escape the shackles of the capitalist fixation upon production, "had become the principal obstacle to new reflection concerning the problems of revolution" [1988a:25]. Ironically as 'Socialisme ou Barbarie' dissolved, some of its key notions were springing into life in the hands of students and workers at the heart of the May 1968 uprisings in France. Such infamous slogans as 'Forbidding is Forbidden', 'Culture is Disintegrating. Create!' and 'Creativity, Spontaneity, Life!' echoed ambiguously motifs in Castoriadis' writings, a debt acknowledged openly by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, perhaps the most famous of the student leaders.

In 1970 he retired from his post as Director of the National Accounts & Growth Studies of the OECD. Thence in a dramatic shift he began to train as a psychoanalyst, starting to practice in 1974. Thus started his equally prolonged encounter with a second great white male theorist, Freud. Funnily enough, when I caught up with this perceived slide from the political to the personal, I warmed to the bloke even more. Certainly this required the partial suspension of my long-standing antipathy towards the pretension of most psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Given the depth of my prejudice, fuelled by my hostility to the exaggerated influence of social psychology in the training of youth workers, this was no mean feat! However Castoriadis' effort to understand at one and the same time the making of the individual and the making of the social gave me fresh inspiration. Rediscovering Castoriadis jolted my overwhelming emphasis on visible human activity as the basis for thinking about 'personality'. Castoriadis, along with Janet Batsleer and students at Manchester Metropolitan University in the late 90's, pushed me to ponder anew the unconscious, desires, dreams and the imagination.

By the time of his death in 1997, Castoriadis had left a legacy of critical thinking which challenged theoretical, political and professional assumptions across the board. As for Youth Work, his probing perspective ponders whether it can ever be an arena in which young people are free to criticise and improvise in their individual and collective attempts to control their own lives. He sheds a different light on the classic concern over whether Youth Work is an instrument of social control or social change. Specifically in terms of Youth Work's own history, but also much more broadly, he reflects upon and even despairs at the retreat of the liberal and critical tradition in the face of the neo-liberal, contemporary consensus. Vitally, he asks us whether we dare to rekindle a radical resistance to the 'generalised conformism' presently suffocating social life. Bluntly he wonders whether youth workers have an ounce of fight left in them.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Before exploring some of the key themes in the thinking of Castoriadis I must share a couple of concerns. Firstly his corpus of work is sweeping in its scope. He traverses in one way or another almost all of the natural, social and human sciences, never mind the arts, history and philosophy. To my mind he is often unnecessarily complex and dense. Like more than a few other Parisian intellectuals he can leave me feeling dizzy and daft. Thus I am conscious that I am open to the charge of grossly simplifying his outlook. Secondly, I am acutely aware that I could be drawing your attention to the similarities and differences between Castoriadis and thinkers from within and without the radical tradition, inside and outside of Youth Work. Alas, in the space allowed, I am unable to do justice to this widening of the debate. Sadly too, a pernicious outcome of this absence is to put Castoriadis seemingly on a pedestal in the grand manner to which many great thinkers are accustomed. I trust you will treat any evidence of such sycophancy, which is utterly at odds with Castoriadis' intentions, with the required contempt!

HISTORY AS CREATION

In thinking about history Castoriadis insists on the essential part played by human creativity. This is our individual and collective ability, leaning on the past, to construct the present and to imagine beyond the present. Whilst obviously this stress on 'human agency' (people make the world, who else?) is in tune with Marx's dictum that 'men make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing', Castoriadis rejects the idea that a template of explanation can be imposed upon history. There are no scientific laws to explain its unfolding. There is no inexorable dynamic of 'progress'. Indeed, in his view, history is unpredictable. None of which is to mean as he says time and time again that we shouldn't do our damndest to understand where we have come from, where we are up to, and where we would desire to go. It is no wonder that he admired Edward Thompson's wonderful 'The Making of the English Working Class'. It opens with the memorable declaration that "the working class did not arise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making" [1968: 9]. Human beings desiring, if you will forgive the banality, a better place to live, are capable of incredible leaps of thought and practice, what Castoriadis termed 'the masses' unpredictable ingenuity'. This said Castoriadis counsels caution. For

creativity can wear different faces. To hark back to the last century, humanity can imagine and design ways of acting together in equality and co-operation, for example, the Spanish communes of 1936, the Hungarian Workers' Councils of 1956 and the British Miners' Support Groups of 1984. On the other hand humanity can summon up the totalitarian nightmares of the Stalinist Gulag or Fascist Auschwitz. The dynamism of an emancipatory creativity is always opposed by those in power and by those who acquiesce under the gaze of the powerful.

With all this in mind Castoriadis ponders the formation of societies. How have they come into existence, been organised and how have they survived or not, as the case may be? His contention is that the overwhelming majority of societies, following the surge of creativity involved in making or 'instituting' themselves, stagnate into a defence of their very existence. Once made or 'instituted' these societies desire to be permanent, even eternal, and impose norms, values and goals for individual and collective life. The said society produces what Castoriadis terms an 'imaginary of significations' which constitute the glue binding the whole together. He uses the notion of the 'imaginary' to convey the sense that these significations are in no sense necessarily 'true' or 'rational'. They have been made up. To take but a few examples of the taken-for-granted significations in so many societies, we can note but the following:

- the necessity of obedience to the hierarchy
- the devotion to 'Leaders'
- the inferior 'servicing' status of women
- the unquestioning acceptance of a sacred text
- the notion of cultural or racial superiority to Others, whomever they might be.

However, crucially, these societies mask the origin of these significations and the institutions built around them, notably the Monarchy and the Church. Rather than being seen as invented, the society's own creations, these significations governing attitude and behaviour are experienced as coming from outside, classically from an all-seeing, all-knowing God. For Castoriadis, such societies dominant throughout history are 'heteronomous'. They believe that their existence, their sense of purpose and direction, depends upon Another, the Other. A God will see them through. Such societies demand allegiance to the prevailing order, to the voice of authority.

Yet even within these heteronomous societies, there has been conflict and dissent. Not everybody's desire to be free from imposed relations of oppression can be tamed into submission. Individuals and groups have struggled against the prevailing order, but their utterly vital efforts (for without them where would we be?) have almost always been hidden from history. For Castoriadis though this desire for autonomy as opposed to heteronomy, this wish to take responsibility for ourselves, not abandon our fate to a Supreme Being, sweeps into collective existence for the first time, as far as he can see, in classical Greece, in the Athenian polis. Here, briefly, institutions and ways of viewing the world were created – vitally democracy and philosophy – which opened up the unceasing interrogation of tradition. Of course, Athens was far from a perfect model, witness the status of women and slaves, but as Castoriadis underlines, its short-lived storm of self-criticism and active participation sowed a seed, both frail yet hardy, for the future. As it was, the provisional gains of the Athenian experiment,

their attempt to change the character of how we view ourselves and the world we live in, were almost forgotten.

From thence, through a period of over 1500 years, epitomised by what are known as the Dark Ages, heteronomy and the closed society ruled. By and large, folk did as they were told. According to Castoriadis, the next rupture of its claustrophobic domination emerged in the period of the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment. Demands for autonomy on a personal and collective level, the right to question and innovate, clashed and compromised with the authoritarian institutions of Church and Monarchy. Jumping ahead somewhat, over the last 200 years the banner of autonomy and emancipation from imposed authority has been carried most proudly by men and women contesting the oppression imposed on them because of their class, gender, race or sexuality. In these struggles of the social movements young people have not been backwards at coming forwards. This political conflict in all its varied forms - strikes in the workplace, demonstrations on the streets, occupations within communities - has been central to the making of today's society. Without these struggles our lives would be very different. This is a reality which today's spin-merchants attempt to erase from society's collective memory.

However, over this last two centuries and more, the project of autonomy (to use Castoriadis' way of describing what in the past he himself would have seen as the struggle for socialism) has faced the formidable contemporary force of heteronomy, Capitalism, relentless in its compulsion to master the world. To complicate matters further, there has never been a neat divide between the two antagonists. Castoriadis talks of the 'mutual contamination' of both by each other, which always seems to be to the advantage of heteronomy [2003:135]. Thus from the capitalist point of view, it has derailed its opponent most successfully when its hierarchical and bureaucratic practices have insinuated themselves deep into the soul of the workers' movement. As for the project of autonomy, it has to be for ever aware Capitalism's "unbelievable ability to reabsorb, divert and recoup everything that challenges it" [1988a:35]. As I wander into the living room for a break from writing, the television advert throws my thoughts back into my face. 'Imagine creating your own world', it implores, 'create your own price plan!' In this context it is perhaps enough to mark the way in which the social movements have dissolved into being little more than identified markets – women, blacks, gays ('the pink pound') and youth. Thus the struggle for a collective political identity has been transformed, 'commodified' into the pursuit of a prescribed lifestyle.

As the 20th century drew to a close, Castoriadis concludes that the capitalist imaginary, its tapestry of themes into which we are all woven, seems to hold the upper hand. Such primary significations as the ever-expanding need to produce and consume and the assertion that this system is as good as it gets, seem beyond question. He recalls Robinson's paraphrase of Schumpeter, "the system is certainly cruel, unjust and turbulent, but it does deliver the goods and, damn it all, it's the goods you want" [2005:115]. The catastrophic capitalist compulsion to be the lord of all it surveys, to burrow its way into every nook and cranny of our existence, seems to have all but suffocated its adversary – the collective desire to make sense of the world for the common good. Indeed from the 1960's onwards Castoriadis argues that the

project of autonomy has been in disarray, symbolised by the increasing retreat from solidarity, apart from certain inspiring moments of resistance, into a 'privatised' world of passivity. In his later writings he talks of a rising tide of insignificance, within which a generalised pseudo-consensus stifles criticism, commercialises and trivialises dissent. As things stand in the first decade of the 21st century, in Western Europe certainly matters have, if anything, got worse. Has heteronomy in its capitalist guise, reflected in post-modernism's 'atrophy of the political' [1997:39], won the day?

Yet, as Castoriadis was always at pains to argue, this need not be the case. Humanity retains its potential to imagine and create an equal and just society, but there are no guarantees. To quote Castoriadis back in 1972, "we do not have any Good News to proselytise concerning the Promised Land glimmering on the horizon, any book to recommend whose reading would exempt one from having to seek the truth for oneself" [1988a:35]. With this stricture deeply in mind, we are forced to ask 'where are we up to?' For those of us opposed to the present situation, we need to explore again what might be the essential ingredients of a project to revolutionise society. And, as I shall go on to wonder, in what way does any of this have significance for the membership of the institution of Youth Work, its youth workers?

THE PROJECT OF AUTONOMY

For Castoriadis this project, this struggle to which he was utterly committed, recognises the inseparability of individual and social autonomy. I cannot be free unless you are also free! To be individually autonomous is to decide the rules by which you choose to live, except that such decisions cannot be made in isolation. We must face the consequences of our own and everyone else's needs and desires. Thus a group aspiring to autonomy or indeed the autonomous society of the future must decide collectively its social laws and values. Forgive the repetition, but crucially such a fledgling group, acting in the here and now, or the future autonomous society itself, knows that its members or citizens have created these norms and no-one else. Unlike the Ten Commandments, Chairman Mao's 'Little Red Book' or the FTSE Index these conclusions are forever open to challenge and change.

For Castoriadis the struggle to create an autonomous, open society as opposed to a heteronomous, closed society is never finished. Such a society will always be being composed and interpreted.. It cannot breathe without philosophy, the never-ending interrogation of supposed certainty and truth. Neither can it be sustained without an authentic democracy based on the direct power of its members within which all decisions and all representatives, if and when needed, are always open to repeal and recall.

An essential part of such a people's democracy is its collective sense of self-limitation. Merely to propose this is to expose the gulf between its sentiment and the present-day arrangements. How far are we from accepting that 'we can't all do or have whatever we fancy', which is expressed most dramatically perhaps by the ecological question, 'what on earth are we doing to and with the planet's resources?' Without doubt Castoriadis risks the sneers of all those wedded to perpetual production

and ceaseless consumption when he suggests that in the face of the potentially catastrophic effects of capitalist expansion upon the environment, this is a moment for ‘phronesis’, a degree of caution and prudence in how we face the future.

Of enormous importance in thinking about the project of autonomy is its relationship both to theory and education. As early as 1964 Castoriadis suggests “theory as such is a making/doing, the always uncertain attempt ...to elucidate the world”, doubting the total grasp of any theoretical explanation as such [2005: xxx]. Thirty years later Castoriadis reflects that social theory rather than being a constant search for knowledge is reduced in the main to the reiteration of established beliefs. On what basis he asks does the social theorist stand outside of and contemplate the very social relations of which she is an integral part? For there are no such grounds available to the social individual. There is no elevated vantage point from which the intellectual speculates as if she is above it all. To paraphrase Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher who did not abandon his critical role, the theorist tries to stand still within and make the defining comment upon the movement of a turbulent stream, whose unpredictable currents will sweep both him and his conclusions off their feet.

This same tension haunts the social educator, in our case the youth worker, whose relationship to her students, if it seeks to encourage autonomy, cannot be based upon her hierarchical status or the supposed superiority of her knowledge. Her task, following Aristotle, is to play a part in educating both herself and her students to be citizens capable of governing and being governed. Indeed a radical ‘paideia’, a process of life-long learning, seeks unceasingly to undermine imposed authority, understanding that the claim to know more or better so easily masks a desire for power.

AND, SO TO YOUTH WORK

There is little doubt that the 20th century history of Youth Work places it firmly in the camp of heteronomy. Its wish has been to socialise young people into an acceptance of such key significations as ‘discipline’, ‘the work-ethic’ and ‘reverence for authority’. In the early days of a new millennium what has changed? Today, both ‘directeurs and executants’, to borrow a phrase from Castoriadis’ early writings on bureaucracy, the order-givers and the order-takers within Youth Work, talk of ‘respect’ and ‘prescribed behavioural outcomes’. In defence of their pragmatic acquiescence to an agenda of social control, they intone, ‘we must fit in, young people must fit in – there’s no other game in town’. Of course, critical opposition to this sad scenario exists. Against the tide, individuals duck and dive, doing their best to ride the waves of compliance. However, explicit dissent is dismissed as political naiveté, the time-worn response of the politically neutered. The majority’s supposedly superior common sense dictates that once again heteronomy, doing as you are told, seems to be in the ascendancy. Unfortunately their advocacy of subservience to New Labour’s less than new arrangements forgets Youth Work’s own history. Our status as officers or workers is not a gift from our betters. Rather it is the fragile outcome of previous contests around the meaning and significance of Youth Work.

Indeed, in its early days an alternative to conformity was proposed by working-class youth organisations, confident in the ability of young people to be part of changing the world. Throughout Youth Work's history dissidents expressed a commitment to a democratic approach full of optimism about young people. Disconcertingly these voices were sometimes found to be within the institution's hierarchy, its great and good, giving the impression that on the ground practice was more enlightened than was really the case. However, more recently and in a collective form I have underestimated, the struggle for autonomy surfaced in the social-democratic inspired birth of the professional Youth Service following the 1959 Albermarle Report. Its person-centred, process-led perspective, drawing on Paulo Freire and Carl Rogers, amongst others, challenged and disturbed the conservative concord within the work. By the mid-70's this critique was under pressure itself from the proponents of a radical youth work practice, symbolised by separate work with young women and with black young people. Whereas the desire to change things via professionalism was bedevilled by its top-down origins, in the heady days of its youth the radical critique emerged from below, intimately related to the social movements of the time. It was creative and oppositional, of the autonomous tradition, but this period was short-lived. Whilst a fusion of the person-centred with the political, often labelled as Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Discriminatory Practice, aspired to be the official line of the institution, not least within the corridors of the training agencies, its health was fading fast. In particular two developments contributed to its abandonment of an autonomous orientation. Firstly, the initiatives forsook self-criticism, falling back on a closed theory, which explained everything in the name of the Other, the Enemy, be they men or white people. For a period to criticise this heteronomous way of explaining oppressive relations was defined without trial as essentially sexist or racist. Secondly, as the tide turned against municipal socialist-feminism and the crumbling social movements, more than a few of its zealots rationalised their embrace of so-called 'new managerialism'. If they couldn't win hearts and minds, they would impose their agenda by bureaucratic and technical means. No wonder they danced in joy as New Labour came to power. By the mid-1990's a living, collective current identifying itself with the liberal, libertarian or radical positions of the 60's and 70's had all but vanished. Is this the end of the story?

BATTLING BACK – RENEWING A CRITICAL YOUTH WORK PRACTICE?

The present situation can easily induce pessimism, but remembering our Gramsci, let us show optimism of the will and believe that a renaissance of a collective, radical practice is possible. Drawing on Castoriadis, what might be among the essential ingredients in the renewal of a sense of purpose within the work?

1. Youth workers must strive to be critical thinkers. They need to become philosophers, the ceaseless interrogators of whatever proposals are put before them. Thus they must abandon their historic allegiance to 'common-sense', whilst refusing the closed certainties of religious and secular ideologies, be they Christian, Muslim, Feminist, Marxist, Neo-Liberal or whatever. In countering heteronomy they must debate and organise independently of their management.

2. Youth workers must be authentic democrats. They need to question the absurdity of unaccountable and unrecallable representation, symbolised by today's parliamentary democracy. Consequently in their work with young people, they should endeavour not to mimic the roles and institutions of the present-day democratic charade [Youth Councils, Youth Parliaments or Young Mayors]. With all its pressures, they ought to foster the direct involvement of young people in any decision-making process, knowing that this is the only way that any of us become democratically educated
3. Fifty years ago Castoriadis was reflecting on the insanity of ever-increasing production and consumption, pursued without the slightest concern about the planet's resources. In my younger days under the spell of Trotsky's belief in our mastery over Nature – 'we can move mountains' – I failed miserably to appreciate the environmental dilemmas. Today, youth workers must be sincere ecologists, which will be no easy matter. It's tricky and complex with more than a few Greens becoming the new authoritarians. In terms of dialogue with young people both parties will have to confront one of contemporary society's most powerful imaginaries, 'the never-satiated compulsion to consume'. Few of us have resisted its seduction.
4. Since the mid-70's I have been obsessed with the profound question of how best to understand why individuals act as they do. At this moment I am thrown into turmoil by Castoriadis. As is clear I think the Heteronomy versus Autonomy thesis is of real value. However it can lead to a dubious dualism. It's either one or the other. To some extent this is illustrated in Castoriadis' insistence on 'the intimate solidarity between a social regime and the anthropological types needed to make it function'. As examples he cites the selfless civil servant or the dedicated teacher. Presumably in a heteronomous society these souls are committed to the sustenance of the social order. For my part I have fought all my political life against the notion of a general typology of personality. Of course there is no time here to discuss this further. All I can suggest is that it seems to me more fruitful to explore the tension in all of us between being heteronomous or being autonomous, between accepting or challenging the system. How open to influence is this fluctuating balance of allegiance? Thus, in my view, there is a contradiction between his functionalist notion of 'anthropological types' fabricated by a particular society and his description of a psychoanalytic process focused on the liberation of the particular individual, the pursuit of autonomy. His sociological argument is in danger of reducing humanity to the brainwashed servants of the powerful. On the other hand, his psychoanalytic proposal that the creative impulse flowing from the Unconscious is stifled in the main by social and political orthodoxy has significant implications for work with young people. Youth workers worth their salt need to think anew about how they interpret their own and young people's 'behaviour'. In particular they need to be wary of the seductive simplicities offered by the recent revival of an instrumental adolescent psychology, dressed up as Positive Youth Development [Smith 2003].

5. As Castoriadis often notes, one of the most dominant imaginaries historically is the belief that without hierarchy, without so-called experts, life would collapse. In his analysis of the work place he illustrates, to the contrary, that the company would disintegrate if the supposed subordinates, classically the clerical staff, did not correct constantly the mistakes of their management. In this context youth workers must struggle against the widely held view that it is the Executive, whether they be David Cameron or his clone, Nick Clegg, Richard Branson or Alex Ferguson, who hold the key to success. It will be well worth revisiting critically the person-centred, non-directive approaches fostered in the 60's and 70's. All the more so given the contempt with which such permissive ideas were regarded during New Labour's authoritarian occupation of power.
6. Controversially, given the significant influence of religion upon Youth Work, Castoriadis challenges youth workers to face up to their own mortality. To recognise our mortality is to accept fully our essential responsibility for the world in which we live. Freed from the suffocating, illusory mask of immortality proffered by religion, the figment of an eternal insurance policy, we know, recognising our debt to the past that the present and the future depend on our active creativity. If Armageddon occurs it will not be God's judgement. It will be the tragedy of our own collective, human doing.
7. Castoriadis throws down the gauntlet to youth workers when he speaks about education. In his eyes, the key to having a chance of changing affairs is the development of radical pedagogy. Such an oppositional educational practice is suffused with optimism about humanity's potential. Echoing the sentiments of liberals and libertarians from John Dewey to A.S. Neill, he stresses that education is about 'becoming a person'. He asserts that the educational relationship must be based on nurturing to the maximum the conscious self-activity of all those involved. He demands that any educational institution, not least Youth Work, must at every turn answer the questions, "why are we learning, discussing, doing this?" At the height perhaps of 60's naïveté, Youth Work desired to be holistic and emancipatory. For sure it fell short of these ideals, but today it seems to have abandoned this unpredictable commitment in favour of doing as prescribed. Without doubt, in far more difficult circumstances than 40 years ago, youth workers must try to breathe fresh life into pedagogy, the point of which "is not to teach particular things, but to develop in the young person the capacity to learn : learn to live, learn to discover, learn to invent"[1997:130].
8. Youth workers must be philanthropists not misanthropists. As I construct this sentence I can but smile. In my time I've hardly been a great supporter of Youth Work's philanthropic tradition, its ideology of doing good from above to a backward working-class youth. Perhaps, in vain, I wish to propose an alternative definition of philanthropy in harmony with its Greek origin, 'philanthropos', a love for humanity. This seems important within a contemporary climate of misanthropy, fuelled by a dislike towards and distrust

of others, perhaps especially ‘dangerous youth’. Indeed, at the risk of being misinterpreted wilfully, I will stand with Castoriadis in saying that it was the teacher or youth worker, who we loved and who loved us, who inspired our love of learning. Of course, in the present climate such a proposal is to invite not only scorn, but outraged, even violent hostility. So I’ll settle for suggesting that, even though young people can be bloody hard work, we must reclaim the politics of ‘being on their side’.

AND, THE WIDER STRUGGLE CONTINUES

At this point I suspect that I reach an ironic moment in the proceedings. I have tried to draw out the significance of Castoriadis’ thinking for a resuscitation of the Radical Youth Work project. However, in truth, Castoriadis has a lot, but no more and no less to say to youth workers than anyone else. All those desiring to play a part in changing the world are social and political educators, whether they be parents, community activists, trade union militants or indeed youth workers. Of course all those opposing change have a social and political agenda too, despite their usual apoplexy at such a suggestion, and I have collided with many of this persuasion across Youth Work. Ironically, within the profession, the overwhelming majority from either side would be deeply reluctant to admit that the basis of their interference in a young person’s life is but a matter of opinion. Yet, whether we wish to socialise young people into believing in or politicise them through a critique of the status quo, ours is a subjective act. Our intervention into social relations is not objective, scientific or based on some certificated body of superior professional knowledge. None of which is to deny that, in my opinion, some opinions are infinitely more informed and better than others. Whether I can persuade anyone to agree with me is the very stuff of political debate and struggle. Even now to question Youth Work’s special status is likely to be viewed as an act of treason by a fledgling profession, serviced by a mini-bureaucracy of managers and consultants, desperate for official approval.

Ironically, whatever its rhetoric, state-funded Youth Work seems to have embraced with few tears the prescriptive agenda espoused until its recent demise by New Labour. In tune with the times, reflecting the widespread fatalism felt by so many, youth workers seem to be shrugging their shoulders in resignation at their situation. And yet, the struggle is not over. We do not need to accept the prevailing heteronomous view that human beings are the objects of history; that somehow we are nothing but pawns in the hands of a destiny determined either by God, Nature or the Global Market. In the spirit and pursuit of autonomy we must reaffirm that human beings create history. In doing so, therefore we know that the task is to nurture our striving to be individually and collectively autonomous. This never-ending process of mutual education will take place wherever we decide to give it a go - in the family, in school, in the workplace, within the community. It will be at its most intense in the collective passion of political struggle. Without doubt Youth Work can be such an arena, but it will be tough. Practitioners such as me have wasted perhaps more promising circumstances, but we can learn from the past if we are self-critical together. What’s certain is that isolated individuals will not reforge a creative and questioning youth work practice. For this task we need each other’s energy, analysis, experience, warmth, wit and humanity.

In his earlier writings, for instance, ‘On the Content of Socialism’, Castoriadis [1988b: 90-193] attempted to map out in detail the character of a future society, but over the years his work became more abstract. Nonetheless, David Curtis, his indefatigable translator, is right to stress the presence in his writings of the evocation of a way of living together that is cooperative and improvisatory, like the best kind of jazz or the finest moments in Youth Work! It is “a kind of life that does not deny rationality, planning and organising, but does not confuse the plan with living nor does it live for the plan.” [Foreword, 1988a: xviii] It is a kind of life that requires the passionate commitment of its participants. In his fondness for Greek sources Castoriadis quotes from the great chorus in ‘Antigone’, ‘there are many amazing phenomena, but none as amazing as the human being’. His emphasis on the heights to which humanity can climb contrasts with the sullen or complacent routine passivity prevalent today, summed up in the absurd adage, ‘nothing ever changes and nothing ever will’. As citizens and youth workers we must keep aflame a belief in the possibility of creating together a world that truly belongs to us all, the autonomous society of Castoriadis’ and our imagination. Indeed, in the last year or so the embers of resistance have been poked into life by the emergence of the In Defence of Youth Work Campaign, which asserts in the name of democracy and emancipation, ‘the essential significance of the youth worker, whose outlook, integrity and autonomy is at the heart of fashioning a serious, yet humorous, improvisatory yet rehearsed educational practice with young people’ [IDYW: 2009]. I will leave the last word with Castoriadis himself. “It is not what is, but what could be and should be, that has need of us.” [1997:130]

Bibliography and Further Reading

Castoriadis, C. [1988a, 1988b, 1993], *‘Political and Social Writings’*, 3 Volumes, edited and translated David Ames Curtis, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

- see the General Introduction to Volume 1, which is especially useful, otherwise these stimulating collections are most accessible to those with a Marxist inclination or background.

Castoriadis, C. [1997], *‘The World in Fragments’*, edited and translated David Ames Curtis, Stanford: Stanford University Press

- see particularly ‘The Greek and The Modern Political Imaginary’ and ‘Psychoanalysis and Politics’

Castoriadis, C. [1997], *‘The Castoriadis Reader’*, edited and translated David Ames Curtis, Oxford: Blackwell

- see ‘Culture in a Democratic Society’ and ‘Done and To Be Done’

Castoriadis, C. [2003], *‘The Rising Tide of Insignificance’*

Castoriadis, C. [2005], *‘Figures of the Unthinkable [including Passion and Knowledge]’*, both edited and translated from the French anonymously as a public service, accessible for download at

<http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis.html>

- both these collections are especially valuable as they contain lectures by and interviews with Castoriadis, which, to my mind, present him at his most approachable.

In Defence of Youth Work [2009] at <http://indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk>

Smith M.K. [2003], 'From youth work to youth development: The new government framework for English youth services', *Youth & Policy*, 79

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