In his 1965 talk "The Crisis of Modern Society", Castoriadis retrieves five crises or dimensions (107): (1) axiological; (2) productive; (3) political; (4) familial; (5) educational. While Castoriadis discusses the notion of crisis in other works of his, he focuses therein on one or two of these five specific elements (e.g. (1) in "The Crisis of Culture and the State", (1) and (3) in "Un monde à venir", (5) in "Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis"). Thus, what makes this particular 1965 talk so interesting is its broader, perhaps more superficial, but undoubtedly more comprehensive scope. In essence, it is as synthetic a picture of what Castoriadis understood as crisis, and particularly as modern crisis, as there can be. Also, it must be noted that Castoriadis revised his assessment of (4) in a later work of his focussed upon crisis ("The Crisis of the Identification Process"), which seems to reduce considerably the relevance of this element. Later assessments of (1)-(3) and (5) do not differ much from what he stated in 1965, instead.

(A)

It was May 1965, almost 50 years ago, when Paul Cardan, i.e. Cornelius Castoriadis (1922—1997), gave a talk at Tunbridge Wells, Kent, entitled "The crisis of modern society". The talk was published one month later in the *Solidarity* pamphlet number 23, albeit my references below are to the 1992 republication of the talk in *Cornelius Castoriadis, Political and Social Writings*, Volume 3 – 1961-79, edited by David Ames Curtis and published by University of Minnesota Press, pp. 106-117 (as usual, given that this conference paper is going to be published in an electronic scholarly journal, I try to make use of online references, the controversial nature of some of which I acknowledge). By no means does this talk alone cover all the relevant reflections by Castoriadis on either the notion of crisis as such or on the specificities of the modern age (e.g. "The 'Rationality' of Capitalism", in *Figures of the Thinkable*, 2005, pp. 81-122). Even less does it constitute Castoriadis' final word on socio-political, economic and axiological matters, given that he was active and productive for three decades following the talk discussed hereby. Still, this talk is as forceful a document on what Castoriadis understood to be crises and, specifically, modern crises, as there can ever be in his vast legacy of published materials. In what follows, I outline the main contents of Castoriadis' talk and offer some reflections that connect it with previous contributions of mine to our NSU research group and also further them in the subject area of

higher education.

(B)

The first and most obvious element of crisis in modern society is the contradiction that Castoriadis (106) individuates between ever-growing techno-scientific abilities (e.g. generating "energy from matter") and socio-political inabilities (i.e. the "tremendous chaos and sense of impotence" of modern communities). While human ingenuity gives rise to more and more complex technological applications of scientific knowledge, our capacity to steer human society towards full employment, genuine well-being, long-term political and economic stability, individual as well as collective harmony and happiness appears to decrease more and more.

"Progressive changes" in society are not denied, e.g. "so-called prosperity", "spreading of culture", "expanding society", "better health", "apparently… less cruel living conditions for most of the people" (107). Yet, according to Castoriadis (107),"people are dissatisfied… grumbling… protesting, constant conflicts exist", more "than most other societies we have known in history". Looking "a bit deeper" for the "roots" of this unprecedented dissatisfaction, Castoriadis retrieves five crises or dimensions of the modern crisis (107):

(1) axiological;

(2) productive;

(3) political;

(4) familial;

(5) educational.

(B1)

There exists a "crisis of social and human values" that Castoriadis does not intend to dismiss as an issue of mere "superstructure", like "traditional Marxists" would do, for shared values are necessary for social "cohesion" across class divisions: fear and oppression alone cannot suffice to keep a society together; "*positive* motives" are required as well, whether reducible to false consciousness or not (107). In modern societies, "religious values are out" and so are "moral values", if it makes sense to separate them from the religious ones in which they have been traditionally embedded and cultivated (107).

If we think of integrity, honesty, rectitude, propriety, at the official level there is little more than a veneer of formal respect for such ethical values, but it is so thin as to be, for Castoriadis, nothing but a rather transparent form of "hypocrisy" that fuels "widespread cynicism", to the point that "the general idea is that you can do anything and that nothing is wrong, provided you can get away with it, provided that you are not caught." (108) Not even nationalism, which had replaced to some extent the religions of old, is any "longer an accepted value." (108)

"[K]nowledge and art are important or have meaning… for only very limited strata of the population"; moreover, even in the "Renaissance" or "ancient Greece", art was a means of expressing shared values, rather than establishing them. (108) As for knowledge, scientists today are no longer seeking to read out "the eternal book of nature or of God's creation", but producing "three lines in a history of this experiment" that allowed for the production of "theory X… later superseded by… theories Y and Z." (108) On top of that, "there is no longer any scientific community with a common language", due to the hyper-specialisation of contemporary science. (108)

"The only value that survives today is *consumption*" as a way "to fill people's lives, to orient their effort, to make them stick to work", despite the evident and recurrent inadequacy of such a consumption, which is fostered by marketing manipulation, but "does not express organic human needs" and therefore falls flat and insufficient, growing "absurd" and de-humanising in the end—"the rat race" that US parlance captures poignantly. (109; emphasis added) People familiar with Castoriadis' work will certainly recognize here a theme that was to gain prominence in his later intellectual production (e.g. *The Big Sleep*, 2003).

(B2)

Concerning "work as a meaningful activity", it has been destroyed more and more "since the beginning of capitalism", the corrosive power of which has been studied by Marx and the Marxist school under the category of "alienation" and by Weber under that of bureaucracy (109). *Via* alienation and "bureaucratization", the meaningfulness of work has been erased both on the "*subjective*" side (i.e. the externally decided, planned and managed process of production, which the worker does not steer or perceive at all as her own) and on the "*objective*" side (i.e. workers no longer make any complete objects; rather sheer parts of an often unknown final thing assembled and experienced elsewhere). (109)

Also, insofar as capitalist production is possible only by teams of workers, there emerges group or collective identity, which could give some meaning to their work. However, such a path to meaningfulness is closed, for it is opposed vehemently by owners and managers, who fear profit- and/or power-reducing unionization, workers' democracy and/or industrial action.

(B3)

Political "apathy" is a fairly well-known "crisis" of the modern age. (110) Castoriadis claims it to be a symptom of a deeper malaise, since disaffection *vis-à-vis* political agency is caused by the "bureaucratization" of State institutions, political parties and trade unions: "people [are] excluded from their own affairs" (110), which are left in the hands of small groups of mediators for capitalists' interests and/or self-serving experts and professionals. As a consequence, people lose faith in the institutions that could give them a voice, which furthers the bureaucratization process into a "vicious circle" that reinforces the afore-mentioned "widespread cynicism" *vis-à-vis* society's official values and reduces politics, party and union life to yet another form of top-down marketing or "advertising" (111). Even democracy is reduced to the level of consumption.

(B4)

Castoriadis' longest analysis concerns the "crisis" in "family relationships." (112) According to him, "the authority of the man" and the "traditional standards" of "the patriarchal family" have eclipsed together with their religious and moral cocoons, as exemplified most notably in "sex morals" and the "more and more disrupted… relations between parents and children", while "nothing is put in their place." (112) It may be correct to say that the old patriarchal standards were "absurd, inhuman, alienated", but it is also true that "society cannot function harmoniously unless relations between men and women and the upbringing of children are somehow [socially] regulated" so as to foster society's reproduction and prevent unending conflict. (112)

Over millennia, patriarchy, matriarchy, polygamous families allowed for social reproduction and limited conflict levels through a web of deeply rooted institutions, whether "legal… economic… sexual… deeper psychological [or…] Freudian." (112) Modern societies have removed them and left no clearly discernible alternative, thus inducing "the breaking up of families, the homeless children, the tremendous problem of youth… the… mods and rockers, and so on." (112) This is essentially not a matter of siding with liberal morals or progressive ideals, but of determining whether "the reproduction of personalities having a certain relation to their environment" is possible under such changed conditions, i.e. "the continuation of society" itself (112)

Castoriadis observes that there are no clear gender and generational roles any more. The old ones may have been "inhuman… barbaric" but, as the continuation of society is concerned, they were "coherent" (113). The demolishing of old traditions creates "uncertainty" that translates into the "crisis" of women's "status" and "personality", as well as men's "complete disorientation" (113). This is a problem not only for the adults involved, but also and above all for the children, who can no longer "cho[o]se out of the[adults] what correspond[s] to [their] own nature", i.e. whether they are men or women and what sort of men or women to be. (113)

On the one hand, there endure forms of patriarchy that often lead to conflicts within families, whose children have been exposed to the new freedom of some peer of theirs. On the other hand, a common result of this critical freedom is the "disintegration" of long-established

family structures: "children just grow up. The parents play no significant role whatsoever, except perhaps providing pocket money, shelter, and food." (113) "In the majority of instances conditions are somewhere in between," namely a pendulum between the two extremes just described: "They are 'liberal' one day. And the next day they are shouting, 'This is enough'" (114). That means a conflict-ridden family life, which is likely to become even more conflict-ridden as "the children of today will have to produce and bring up children of their own." (114)

(B5)

The crisis in family structures is mirrored by a crisis in "education" (114). No longer do societies take for granted the vertical relationship between "master" and "pupil", though "the adult is necessary for the education of the children"; hence "the relationship must be shaped in a completely new way", but what? (114) As Castoriadis delivered his talk, he could not envision any clear new way to reshape this relationship.

The problem of education is also a problem of "content", though, i.e. what exactly to teach. The humanities, in today's educational setting, teach us how disconnected we are from each other and our own past. They have a negative function. They can only tell us what a lack of harmony there is in our society and Castoriadis does not hint at any new way in which their relevance could be recovered.

Technical-scientific education seems a more obvious candidate for the modern curriculum, since a society with a high rate of techno-scientific development requires sophisticated technical competences from its members. (115) However, Castoriadis observes three contradictions that emerge from focusing upon technical-scientific education: (i) starting early with technical specialisation is "extremely destructive for the personality of the children", who desire ardently something far less arid and narrow-focused; (ii) today's specialisation will be useless tomorrow, hence you must continually re-educate people, i.e. establish "a 'permanent educational process'"; (iii) in order to let re-education occur so frequently, "you must have as general a grounding as possible", which is what too "narrow" a starting point makes impossible to attain. (115)

(C)

Castoriadis wraps up his talk by stating that, "[a]t the *personal* level", there is no longer any clear "meaning of life" and only highly uncertain "human motives" remain, apart from mass-marketed inane consumption, which is too poor a substitute for the religions of old or nationalism (115). At the "*social*" level, the result of such a widespread meaninglessness results "in the destruction and disappearance or responsibility" or the phenomenon of "privatization: people are… withdrawing into themselves." (115)

Yet the need for "positive socialization" endures, as expressed in "youth gangs"; and so does endure "the feeling that what is going on at large is, after all, our own affair", which engenders forms of "struggle" or the seeds for "new forms of life and social relations." (115) The cases of women's movements and the youth's rebellions are examples of such struggles and possibilities for new forms of life, where individuals have much more room for self-direction than before; the same is true of "informal groups and organizations" on the workplace (116), where "people refuse to be dominated and… manifest a will to take their lives into their hands" (117).

In short, although undoubtedly critical, "the crisis of modern society… contains the seeds of something new" i.e. something that could supersede it, resolve it, or maybe make crises acceptable and accepted as the price to be paid for increased autonomy. (117) However, "the new will not come about automatically"; unless "the mass of the people" engages in promoting this new reality as "a conscious action", the new reality may never "complete" or "establish itself as a new social system" (117).

(D)

Our old NSU research group on Castoriadis produced a considerable amount of interesting reflections on the productive and political crises identified by Castoriadis. Tokens of such reflections can be accessed easily on *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*, i.e. the journal that I edit. I

myself contributed to the literature along the same lines (e.g. Baruchello 2013b). Far less has been written on the axiological, familial and educational crises. I shall address here the first and the third. Please note that as the third crisis is concerned, my reflections on education are based on a short text prepared two years ago for the UK's *Appraisal* newsletter (no. 6 / October 2012, pp.1-2) and I decided to share them with the participants at this NSU symposium because: [a] they exemplify the capitalist process of elimination of obstacles and/or assimilation as instruments of all dimensions of life; and [b] I was advised to do so by members of our research group that came across them and found them valuable.

(D1)

Consumption, according to Castoriadis, is the one and only value left that allows capitalist societies to cohere positively. Apart from fear of unemployment and oppression on the workplace, i.e. apart from negative motives for social cohesion, people consume: (i) in order to give meaning to their lives (e.g. in the context of the prosperous Nordic countries, owning a gold Rolex watch or a fancy Porsche as a mode of supreme social statement and self-realisation); (ii) have a consistent aim in life (e.g. amassing enough money so as to buy such a watch or car); and (iii) be committed to their work (e.g. pursuing a corporate career that may lead one to the kind of remuneration needed in order to get hold of the much-desired watch or car without resort to outright crime, whether blue-collar [e.g. stealing the watch or car] or white-collar [e.g. embezzling corporate funds for the purchase of said watch or car]).

Castoriadis (2003, 2005) discusses elsewhere how people are bamboozled since childhood into internalising the mode of self-realisation that translates into a lifetime of actual or attempted consumption. What the 1965 talks highlights is, rather, how such a lifetime is the one that people seem to adhere to by and large, and how it fails to deliver the goods, i.e. the very same people cannot avoid perceiving at some point the futility of such a life. As Castoriadis also denounces elsewhere (2003), the perception of this futility is manifested acutely in the neuroses and psychoses of modern men and women, whose choice of consumption *qua modus vivendi* proves pointless when confronted by the awareness of mortality, which most consumers try to ignore for as long as possible (I discuss Castoriadis' take on human mortality in Baruchello 2012b & 2013a).

Consumption leads to mental pathologies. It is not consumption for survival and/or actual life-enhancement. It is removed from genuine needs—as distinguished from and opposed to artificially created wants—at least as much as it is from any articulate understanding of what really matters in human life in order to let individuals mature and flourish. In short, it is the kind of consumption fostered by mass consumerist capitalism, the origins, development and characteristics of which have been studied *inter alia* in classic works of institutional economics such as Veblen (1919) and Galbraith (1958) & (2007).

However, consumption is itself a symptom of an underlying malaise, which John McMurtry (1999, 2013) has diagnosed since the 1990s as *the cancer stage of capitalism*. Why a cancer? Because capitalism (1) aims at generating theoretically endless money-returns to money-investments, but (2) produces in practice a plethora of life-destructive externalities (e.g. industrial pollution, stress-related pathologies) that (3) life-protective institutions fail to counter insofar as they believe capitalism to be the solution. In essence, this pattern follows precisely that of cancerous pathologies, which are (1) caused by theoretically endlessly self-replicating cells that (2), in practice, damage their own life-host, (3) the immune system of which fails to recognize the self-replicating cells as a threat to its own existence.

The money-value sequence of capitalism is the ruling logic of human choices and behaviour under it, to the point that economic science takes it as the expression of rationality itself. Everything else, literally, stands as either a tool or an obstacle. Religion, ethics, nationalism (and nations themselves), knowledge and art are therefore either instruments or obstacles to the pursuit of profit, which, in the societies born from the 20th-century compromise reached by workers and capitalists, feeds upon mass consumption.

Historically, capitalism did sponsor in the past the development of science, the creation of the modern State and the establishment of liberal-democratic institutions. However, the intrinsic character of capitalism is not scientific, State-centred, national, or democratic: it is profit-centred. Were the circumstances to change, then the attribution of value under capitalist regimes to science, statehood, nationhood and democracy could change – and, as a matter of historical fact, have changed. Just consider the regular opposition under corporate business orders to:

(I) unprofitable science and forms of knowledge (e.g. early versions of electric cars, research

suggesting the dangerousness of GMOs, the teaching of humanities inside universities);

(II) modern States (e.g. *via* global free movement of financial capital and currency speculation, subtraction of public revenues by siphoning private revenues to fiscal havens, blackmailing governments by off-sourcing threats);

(III) nationhood (e.g. by marketing internationally standardised goods and behavioural codes, promoting English as the world's *lingua franca*, exerting continued pressure for international economic integration); and

(IV) democracy (e.g. by enmity to tax-centred egalitarian redistribution of wealth, political lobbying for destabilisation of countries owning publicly profitable resources, superseding popular representation and locally based regulatory legislation by supranational trade agreements).

(D2)

Before I conclude, let me spend a few words on knowledge and, specifically, on higher education or universities. Historically, universities are part of those civil commons that societies have evolved through the centuries. As such, the paramount goal of academic institutions has been to increase ranges of life capacity and, specifically, attain knowledge and understanding at the highest level of articulation, i.e. *qua* academic disciplines. Initially, access was limited to the male members of a tiny elite. Later on, access was widened to the female members of the elite. Eventually, in several countries, access was extended to large sectors of the population upon selection by intellectual merit rather than birth or wealth. Along this path, the polar star of universities has been *truth*, not wealth or profit.

Unfortunately, this is changing more and more commonly across public universities worldwide. With rare exceptions, the transformation of academic faculties, departments and research centres into tools for the eventual generation of money returns to private money investors and/or managers has been revealed throughout by a set of higher-education policies observable in nearly all countries over the last ten- to twenty-five years. This set of

policies has regularly involved:

a. Increased private-public "partnerships" in research (e.g. company A sponsors university B to have students researching an A-enriching issue)

b. Increased private-public "partnerships" in teaching (e.g. privately funded chairs);

c. Outright privatisation of educational institutions;

d. Market-oriented selection of research programmes and curricula (e.g. reduction or elimination of liberal arts and humanities *in lieu* of market-specific training lines);

e. Selective privatisation of management, teaching and research positions (e.g. contracting out and part-time staffing);

f. Promotion of the managerial mind at all levels (e.g. bonuses for top administrators and lower staff salaries/higher student fees; private-funds attraction as promotion criterion);

g. The use of campuses as business opportunities (e.g. junk food dispensers, marketing surveys, pervasive billboards, renamed classrooms).

Often, these policies have been regarded as the expression of a relatively novel understanding of the long-established academic vocation of universities, namely the "knowledge economy". According to it, the pursuit of knowledge goes hand-in-hand with the eventual generation of money returns to private money investors and/or managers. Yet, this understanding is severely flawed:

1. Whereas the academic vocation is to engage in the pursuit of universal truths (hence "university"), knowledge is relevant to the economy if and only if it leads to the obtainment of particular profits; in other words, sales rule, and truth is therefore *not* the fundamental criterion of knowledge in the knowledge economy (e.g. WHO pandemic "media scares").

2. Whereas the academic vocation is to promote the free and open dissemination of knowledge, the economy-defining profit-motive calls for the restriction of information flows by, *inter alia*, private patents and copyright controls (e.g. "too expensive" indexes).

3. Whereas the academic vocation is to develop staff and students as intrinsically valuable human beings (hence "humanities") that are autonomous in thought and action, the economy-defining profit-motive promotes the instrumental use of staff and students (e.g. as cheap researchers, consumers, credit-seekers, future labour).

4. Whereas the academic vocation is to develop staff and students as free critical minds in nations constitutionally committed to liberty (hence "liberal arts"), the knowledge economy implies the market-based selection of staff's research (e.g. choosing "fundable" topics) and students' education (e.g. concerns about being "employable"), as well as the conditioning of their unconscious desires (e.g. scientifically crafted slave-reminiscent "branding").

As regards those who may have lost touch with the long-established academic vocation of universities, it should be highlighted that university research and education ought to aim at better understanding *as such*, i.e. devoid of any ulterior motive—profit included—that does not enable further understanding, which is what the profit-motive hampers most visibly as of points (1)-(2) above. Also, if genuinely followed, the academic vocation fosters the acquisition of independent, literate and constructive thinking, according to subsets of human understanding known as academic disciplines (e.g. physics, philosophy, anthropology). Their fundamental criterion of knowledge is the consistent evaluation of evidence according to evolved praxes of interpretation, identification, classification, analysis and testing. Truth, not profitable sales, guides them.

Truth and profit may sometimes go hand-in-hand. By providing knowledge and understanding at the highest level of articulation, universities have certainly educated generations of entrepreneurs, executives, white-collar workers and productive citizens of all sorts and stripes. They have been unquestionable centres of innovative thinking, creative experimentation, thorough revision and ground-breaking vision that translated at times into

better business life. At a deeper level, universities have cultivated methods, skills and values facilitating moral socialisation, humane civilisation and intelligent communication, i.e. essential yet regularly neglected preconditions for any economic activity whatsoever. In brief, universities have been instrumental to market efficiency in many ways. Nevertheless, this market-oriented function of universities has been just one of many, often indirect, and possibly adventitious: in the 20th century, cutting-edge research in physics was led in academes of countries that did not have a market economy.

Finally, let me mention one function that makes universities unique and may remind the reader of the reason why universities ought to be protected from too direct a market involvement as well as from the market's defining aim: profit. Universities, as long as they have been allowed to do their job with adequate funding and independence, have served as a *monitoring body* over the excesses, the threats and the falsities endangering the countries in which they were established, if not humankind at large. In this capacity, universities have produced research and issued warnings that have prevented terrible catastrophes, e.g. the thinning Ozone layer in the 1980s. Other times, their evidence and warnings have been ignored at great cost for all, e.g. John McMurtry's sophisticated critiques of deregulated financial wizardry in the 1990s and 2000s. Still, even when unheard or marginalised, academic disciplines have generated ideas, novel forms of reasoning and alternative approaches that can be used to cope with the disastrous effects of human and/or natural catastrophes. As long as funds and independence are guaranteed, universities can keep serving societies as vital monitoring bodies. Reduced to a mouthpiece of market forces, they will no longer be able to do it.

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