

His distinctive humor enriched his ideas and played a role in their recognition [1]

I believe this is true not just for me, but remembering Cornelius Castoriadis is like recalling an intellectual with a distinctive sense of humor, and yes, of course, his ideas, which over time have been proven right. He even ‘predicted the collapse’ of the Soviet Union. Jean L. Cohen, a professor of political thought, fondly recalls Castoriadis as a “huge personality with a superb sense of humor and great wit.” Humor is vital if we want to articulate visions of the future using concepts not simply inherited. In this way, the brilliant Castoriadis did just that, with an overdose of humor, in both its critical and satirical forms. Many other writers also remember the French philosopher and theorist not only for his significant contributions, but for his sharp intellect and unmistakable humor.

Can one argue that Castoriadis’s use of humor helped distinguish him within the Parisian intellectual scene and continues to influence people today? Humor alongside his ideas—indeed, in a way, yes. As many have noted, and as is evident in various video and audio recordings that remain, he was an exceptionally intelligent individual: serious, but also endowed with a unique sense of humor. This humor was not only present in his personality but also found its way into his writings, and it remains alive today. Why alive? Because each time one reads even a few pages -whether in Greek, French, or in English (translated by David Curtis, ‘a gifted’ Paris-based American)- a genuine smile, often even a giggle, emerges. Almost every paragraph offers such a moment. A giggle that creates a connection, a special bonding between reader and author.

I had exchanged a few letters with Castoriadis as an 18-year-old aspiring writer, and I met him in person in 1996, a year before his death. I traveled specifically to visit him at his summer house on the Greek island of Tinos. I had also suggested to two friends from London ‘to follow me’, and they did. Once communication with him had been established, everything seemed somehow easier. I remember, on one occasion in Paris, I had sent him a letter accompanied by an actual horseshoe. So, when I found myself near his house and called him, I introduced myself by saying, “I am Dimitris [Eleas], the person who sent you the horseshoe” [2]. That remark made him remember me. I mentioned that two friends were with me, and he invited all of us to his home. He took us to his writing office. It was an old but beautiful house, with thick stone walls and dark yellow window frames and doors. He

offered us coffee, water, and cigarettes...

In our conversation, about many things, I remember how vivid he was, constantly moving his hands as he spoke. The movement of his hands lent the meanings a quality of restrained grandeur. With him, there was no chance not to smile or laugh at something he said or at a passing remark he would make. I recall that when he said, “In Paris there is a favorable climate for philosophy,” I followed by asking whether Germany also continued this tradition—for example, through the work of philosopher Jürgen Habermas. My question clearly implied that Habermas was engaged in serious philosophical work. He immediately shot back, waving his hands –perhaps even letting out a small sigh– and said, “Nah, not even Habermas!” (It is worth noting that Habermas had criticized Castoriadis’s idea as an ability to value one imaginary over another [3].) Thus, I remember Castoriadis not only for his ideas, but also for his personality and his deep love of life. The next day, we made a plan to go together to the sea. We drove there in a car, with Cornelius himself as driver [4]. His thought possesses an experiential depth –an ethos– I witnessed firsthand. And I felt his humor as an affirmation of dignity, ‘the glory of the Greek imaginary’.

But who was he, and how did he become Castoriadis? What might have contributed to the quality of being amusing in speech? In just ‘a few lines’: Castoriadis lived in three cities—Constantinople (now Istanbul), Athens, and Paris. He was born in the first, in 1922, grew up in Athens, and left for France at the age of 23. It was in Paris that he was intellectually formed, and where he died in 1997. A bibliophile from a young age, he buried himself in books. He was inspired by Max Weber’s work on bureaucracy and also read the writings of Karl Marx. At the age of just 13, he lost all his hair, and his mother, Sophia Castoriadis, suffered a mental breakdown and died a few months later. Yet the loss of hair –despite the trauma– seemed to give him a kind of inner strength at a very tender age. His friends, half-teasingly, began to call him “globos” [“light bulb”]. In 1945, he arrived in Paris with its libraries, Witty Individuals, and “the biggest A” in the world. In 1948, together with co-founder Claude Lefort, and together with other friends and partners, created the group and the journal, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (*Socialism or Barbarism*) (1948-65 the journal, until ‘67 the group) [5]. Under various pseudonyms, Castoriadis published many of his early texts in its pages. At the same time, he began working professionally as an economist at the OECD (1948-70), an experience that deeply influenced his views on Marxism. He initially approached Marxism with seriousness and

conviction, but later moved away from it. In Paris, Sigmund Freud would influence him decisively. Through reading Freud and engaging with several psychoanalysts, Castoriadis began to see clearly what was missing from Marx: namely, the human subject. Marx, in Castoriadis's view, underestimated the significance of the individual—and the moral dimension. As a result, Castoriadis turned his reflection toward the human being and the role of each person within the social-historical. For him, the role of every individual matters. His work is a continuous critique, one that itself invites critical interpretation. The two central pillars of the Castoriadian creation, are: “the imaginary institution of society”, with its distinctive understanding of the social-historical, and “autonomy”. As we have seen, he lost all his hair—and what could worthily replace the absence of a comb, or more profoundly, the absence of a mother, in the years to come? One possible answer is humor. Its secret source is sorrow, and yet it holds the power to make a person's life and work truly unique. Humor, it fosters individual autonomy, can also lead to a more joyful life. It becomes a means of resilience, and of self-creation. Something that can be called, ‘the imaginary foundations of humor’—a capacity to confront the unexpected events that life inevitably brings.

For sure, Cornelius Castoriadis, while widely recognized today for his serious philosophical and political thought, is also remembered for his engaging personality. He was a dynamic intellectual who stood out -not only for his ideas and his bald head- but also for his lively presence and sharp wit. Humor is what set him apart from many of his contemporaries in the often-serious French intellectuals. Why is he remembered this way? Because he had a gift for arranging words with precision and impact—such as in the astonishing phrase: “USSR: Four words, four lies”, which is the most riveting political micro-narrative of all time. How can you persuade someone without first making them laugh? Incidentally, Milan Kundera had published that phrase in the *New York Times* as one of his favorites, mentioning Castoriadis too. Thus, breaking away from intellectual trends, Castoriadis was critical of the prevailing intellectual fashions of his time, including structuralism, existentialism, and postmodernism, often with a comedic humorous ability. Let it be mentioned here that Joel Whitebook wrote that “Castoriadis lived in Paris for fifty years -the city that gives birth to intellectual fashions- though he himself remained outside of them.”

Can one argue -after reading this far- that Castoriadis possessed a unique perspective? In a way, yes, as he combined intellectual rigor with personal charisma, making him a

memorable figure. He loved to write fierce, often humorous or ironic critiques, and he relished endless debate. Over time, Castoriadis 'became known' for precisely that. While he was sharply critical of others -including figures such as Bernard-Henri Lévy, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis Althusser- he often did so in ways that were entertaining. Humor brings insight and in 'the castoriadian hands', it becomes an instrument of social criticism, — laughing at power is crucial as humor allows finding the truth. Humor can also be understood as a creative act, close to Castoriadis's notion of the radical social imaginary, showcasing the human ability to unstoppably create new meanings / forms. After all, he was not only a social theorist; he was also an economist and practicing psychoanalyst, and his work spanned many fields. The panoply of his ideas contributed significantly to a range of disciplines—from psychoanalysis to political theory and philosophy.

How does Castoriadis write within his own texts? Tiptoeing through ancient Greek literature -and demonstrating an uncanny ability to connect seemingly unrelated (and perhaps truly unrelated) things- he articulates astonishing insights. When he states that "the modern equivalent of the Sicilian Expedition is the conquest of the Moon," he is profoundly right. Wit also consists in seeing resemblance in things that differ. Elsewhere, he asks rhetorically, "How does man differ from animals?"—and answers, "Why, in madness, of course." He even frames it as 'an aphorism': "Man is that mad animal whose madness discovered reason." He also writes, "Man is a mad animal, radically unfit for life" [6]. And when asked how he knows that a cow is wild, he responds with vivid intensity: "Well, just look at the expression on its face, isn't it obvious?" This is how he captivates the listener, transmitting knowledge hand-in-hand with humor. To laugh, indeed, is divine. (As for how I ended up inside the car Castoriadis himself was driving, back in 1996—that is the "Personal testimony" I shared in my modest 2014 book.)

While Castoriadis is praised by me for his humor, it is worth noting that the notion of a general lack of humor among French intellectuals might be a bit of an oversimplification. However, there is a reason for this perception: although Castoriadis lived in Paris, he remained somewhat on the margins of the French intellectual establishment. Other thinkers -such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida- received more institutional support. This marginalization is something even his biographer, François Dosse, has observed. In an interview with the Greek daily *'To Vima'*, Dosse asked: "How is it possible that a thinker of such caliber remained on the sidelines during his lifetime?" It remains an

enigma. Of course, in Paris, at an earlier stage, they were a few renowned figures like Molière and Denis Diderot, who were certainly known for their humor, wit and comedic talent. The former authored *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673), and the latter was labeled a “laughing philosopher”. Yet, the academic traditions of some French thinkers might be seen by some as gravitating towards more serious and introspective explorations, which may have led to the impression that humor is less prevalent in French intellectual circles.

So, with Castoriadis, humor –a fundamental human trait– returns to the center of Parisian intellectual life. The Cornelius Castoriadis I met possessed humor, kindness, and an intellect of many carats. There is hope that more people will come to discover him and his work. His influence is clearly growing, as evidenced by the expanding Wikipedia page and, of course, by the dedication of his literary executors—to whom hats off: Zoé Castoriadis, Sparta Castoriadis, and Cybele Castoriadis. In my humble opinion, what truly sets Castoriadis apart is not only his brilliant ideas but the humor that permeates them like a silver bullet. His humor, as I see it, offers the key to understanding the roots of a large corpus of writings across several fields and explains why he can rightly be called “a genius”. It was the humor of a good man –and indeed, the humor of a good philosopher, psychoanalyst, and social critic– whose ideas can help expanding social justice, inclusion, and the ongoing, unfinished project of democracy. Cornelius Castoriadis is buried in Montparnasse Cemetery, a place I visited in 2012 alongside the translator mentioned earlier [7], but his ideas are everywhere, and with them, his ‘eternal apeiron humor’ has never vanished... I wish to conclude this text with the same words, Jean L. Cohen ended her article on the JHI Blog: “For me, Paris will never be the same without him.”

References and ideas for further reading:

Castoriadis, Cornelius: *The Imaginary Institution of Society (L’Institution Imaginaire de la Société)*. trans. by Kathleen Blamey. MIT Press, 1987 [In French, 1975].

Castoriadis, Cornelius: *The Castoriadis Reader*. ed/trans by David Curtis. Blackwell, 1997.

Endnotes

[1] As for the essay published here: I had the honor of having it read by the renowned American psychoanalyst and philosopher Joel Whitebook (who agrees with me on Castoriadis's humor and its importance, and even offers a few examples—taken from an e-mail of his to my humble self), by the renowned French biographer of Castoriadis, François Dosse (who likewise agrees with me, and says that he himself did not give sufficient attention to Castoriadis's humor—again, from an e-mail of his to my humble self), and also by Professor Giorgio Baruchello, who writes to me: “I listed Castoriadis among a select group of philosophers endowed with a rare sense of humor. I am glad to read that you would easily and wholeheartedly agree with me on that point!”—from an e-mail of his to my humble self). I thank them all warmly. On this occasion, let me also add that, on ‘the subject of CC & his humor,’ I have dealt with it in short texts published in news sites and newspapers such as *Dissident Voice*, *The National Herald*, *The Books' Journal*, *Countercurrents*, *Neos Kosmos*, *Pressenza New York*, and *SLpress Athens*.

[2] Eleas, Dimitris: *Private Cornelius: A Personal Testimony on Castoriadis*. Fwd. by Giorgos I. Iliopoulos/introd. by Demosthenes Davvetas. *Angelakis Publications*, 2014. p. 46. (This book is in the Greek language.)

[3] Habermas, Jürgen: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. trans. by Thomas McCarthy. *Polity and Blackwell Press*, 1987 [In German, 1985]. pp. 327-35.

[4] Eleas, Dimitris: *Private Cornelius: A Personal Testimony on Castoriadis*. p. 56.

[5] Dosse, François: *Castoriadis: Une Vie. La Découverte*, 2014. pp. 83-99. (This is an excellent biography of Cornelius Castoriadis, published in Paris by a historian of ideas with a powerful pen.)

[6] Castoriadis, Cornelius: *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. trans. by David Curtis. *Stanford University Press*, 1997. p. 262.

[7] David Curtis was Castoriadis's translator for thirteen years. A short while after

Castoriadis's death, other fine translators went on translating his works from French into English, as well as into other languages. Noteworthy translators (and editors as well) include: Zoé Castoriadis, Helen Arnold, Andrew Cooper, Gabriel Rockhill, John Garner, María-Constanza Garrido Sierralta, Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay.