

# Workers' Councils, [Cornelius Castoriadis](#) and the SI

In our comments on the first and only issue of the review of the [American section of the Situationist International](#), we began a discussion of the SI's championing of workers' councils as "the highest organizational form of direct democracy reached by the proletariat for the expression of its own power" and the place where "the renewed motion toward emancipation will begin" (to quote situationist Robert Chasse, writing in an essay contained in the review of the American section, which was published in 1969). We propose here to continue our discussion of this topic and its relevance to contemporary struggles.

## 1

The history of the SI's development of the theme of the councils is instructive. At least so far as one is able to judge by the contents of *The Situationist Anthology*, the first mention of workers' councils appears in *Internationale Situationniste* #6 (August 1961). "Of the tendencies toward regroupment that have appeared over the last few years among various minorities in the workers movement in Europe," an unsigned text pronounces, "only the most radical current is worth preserving: that centered on the program of workers councils." Unfortunately, this article -- which is entitled "Instructions for Taking Up Arms" -- does not specify which "tendency," "minority" or "current" in Europe is centered on the program of the councils. But, as we will see, the writer(s) of the "Instructions" certainly had the revolutionary group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in mind, for S. ou B. had been running articles on workers' councils all through the middle and late 1950s.

From 1961 to 1967, the situationists maintained their official adherence to the "program of the councils," and yet they never defined what that program might entail. The text "Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organizations," adopted by the 7th Conference of the SI (held in Paris in July 1966), begins with the following bold sentence: "Since the only purpose of a revolutionary organization is the abolition of all existing classes in a way that does not bring about a new division of society, we consider any organization revolutionary which consistently and effectively works toward the international realization of the absolute power of the workers councils, as prefigured in the experience of the proletarian revolutions of this century." But nowhere does the SI define or describe the precise content of "the experience of the proletariat revolutions of this century." Without bothering to define what is meant by a "workers' council," the situationists' ["On the Poverty of Student Life"](#) (November 1966) confidently announces that "the democracy of workers councils is the solution to all the present separations" (emphasis added).

Only three theses in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (originally written and published in 1967) concern workers' councils. The councils are defined in a single phrase: they vest "all decision-making and executive powers in themselves and [they] federat[e] with one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to the base and recallable at any time" (thesis 116). And yet Debord, quoting Karl Marx, feels entirely at ease with echoing the apparently unquestionable claim that the revolutionary workers' councils are that "long-sought political form whereby the economic emancipation of labor might finally be achieved." There can be no other form than that of the councils: though "the decision to set up workers' councils does not in itself provide solutions so much as it 'proposes problems,'" Debord

writes, "the power of workers' councils is the one context in which the problems of the revolution of the proletariat can be truly solved" (thesis 116, emphasis added). Again: "the councils may be seen in their true light as the only undefeated aspect of a defeated movement," existing "not at the periphery of an ebbing tide but rather at the center of a rising one" (thesis 118, emphasis added).

And yet, during the whole 1961 to 1967 period -- despite the apparent centrality of the councils to the situationist project -- the development of what the situationists meant when they used the words "workers' councils" remained a peripheral concern. A story Raoul Vaneigem tells in his 1991 preface to *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (written between 1963 and 1965) is significant from this perspective. As a result of some insignificant events involving the changing whims of the editors at Gallimard, Vaneigem had to "cut short [i.e., leave unwritten] a closing discussion of workers' councils as a social model (the book's second postscript, added in 1972, shows signs of an attempt to redress this)." But the 1972 postscript, "A Toast to Revolutionary Workers," emphasizes the significance of wildcat actions and riots, not workers' councils.

When the much-anticipated revolution began in Paris in May 1968, the situationists stuck by their official but drastically underdeveloped "theory" of the power of the workers' councils. One of the "slogans to be spread now by every means," "POWER TO THE WORKERS COUNCILS" appeared on the situationists' banners, in their telegrams to world leaders, and in their leaflets. It was a slogan to be spread in "announcements over microphones, comic strips, songs, graffiti, balloons on paintings in the Sorbonne, announcements in theatres during films or while disrupting them, balloons on subway billboards, before making love, after making love, in elevators, each time you raise your glass in a bar."

But the workers of France did not organize themselves into workers' councils during the revolutionary crisis of May and June 1968. And so the situationists had to content themselves with such meagre consolations as this idea, proposed by Raoul Vaneigem in the aftermath of May: "Without really manifesting itself, a movement toward councils was implicitly present in the resultant of two contradictory forces: the internal logic of the occupations and the repressive logic of the parties and unions." (How d'ya figure that, Raoul? But he doesn't say.) Other paltry consolations include this piece of speculation, offered up by the SI in "The Beginning of an Era": ". . . the occupations movement was objectively at several moments only an hour away from such a result" as the establishment of workers' councils. "If, in a single factory, between 16 May and 30 May," the SI continued, "a general assembly had constituted itself as a council holding all powers of decision and execution, expelling the bureaucrats, organizing its self-defense and calling on the strikers of all enterprises to link up with it, this last qualitative step could have immediately brought the movement to the final struggle, the struggle whose general outlines have all been historically traced by this movement." (Whoa, now: that's a pretty big "if," isn't it?)

The situationists spent much of their efforts after 1968 promulgating the "program of the councils," but this time in much greater depth than before. But at no point did they question the historical inevitability of workers' councils: "the power of the councils" remained a simple article of faith, a totally unexamined assumption. The last issue of *Internationale Situationniste* (#12, September 1969) contains two major pieces on the councils: Rene Riesel's "Preliminaries on the Councils and Councilist Organization," and Raoul Vaneigem's "Notice to the Civilized Concerning Generalized Self-Management."

Riesel's piece is politico-historical in nature: it offers a short introduction to workers' councils as they were established and briefly maintained in Russia (in 1905), Germany (in 1918), Italy (in 1920), Spain (in 1936) and Hungary (in 1956). Riesel sums up his critique of these events as follows: "Despite all the beautiful history of the councils, all the councilist organizations of the past that have played a significant role in class struggles have sanctioned separation into political, economic and social sectors." That is to say, all of the workers' councils to date have allowed themselves to be placed, as it were, alongside such fundamentally antiworker bureaucracies as the State or the (Communist) Party. And yet, as Riesel writes, the "coherence [of the councils] is guaranteed by the single fact that they are the power; that they eliminate all other power and decide everything."

Though a fully-constituted workers' council has not yet come into existence in over a half century of struggles, Riesel is quite confident that the "new revolutionary proletarian movement" has no choice but to see the councils as "the sole form of antistate dictatorship of the proletariat, as the sole tribunal that will be able to pass judgment on the old world and carry out the sentence itself." Nothing other than workers' councils will ever do, even if Riesel finds that he cannot deny the fact that "it is quite likely that genuine councilist organizations will still take a long time to form and that other important revolutionary moments will occur before such organizations are in a position to intervene in them at a significant level." Why are workers' councils inevitable or unavoidable? Riesel answers: because "the workers continue to be the central force capable of halting the existing functioning of society and the indispensable force for reinventing all of its bases." Conclusion: we revolutionaries must have the workers with us if we want a total revolution; some of the workers in a handful of European nations have indicated -- sporadically, over the course of the last 50 years -- that they must have some kind of "council" for them to be involved in the revolution; therefore, we are all stuck with workers' councils, whether we like it or not.

Vaneigem's piece on "Generalized Self-Management" is purely speculative: it contains such helpful hints as "it will be a good idea for the councils to distinguish between priority sectors . . . reconversion sectors . . . and parasitical sectors [of the economy]," and "it will be a good idea for the assembly [of each council] to elect and control: an equipping section . . . ; an information section . . . ; a coordination section . . . ; and a self-defense section." All this flies right in the face of a very good point Riesel makes in his essay: "Only historical practice, through which the working class must discover and realize all its possibilities, will indicate the precise organizational forms of council power." In the meantime, it is nonproductive and even a little absurd to speculate in the manner Vaneigem does upon the nature of the workers' councils that the revolutionary proletariat should or will establish as it comes to power.

## 2

It has been our good fortune to locate and read copies of the two volumes of the *Political and Social Writings of Cornelius Castoriadis* (translated and edited by David Ames Curtis) that the University of Minnesota published in 1988. The first volume, subtitled "From the Critique of the Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism," covers the years 1946 to 1955, while the second, subtitled "From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism," covers the years 1955 to 1960. (A projected third volume will supposedly cover the 1960 to 1966 period, but it has not yet been published.) Castoriadis was a co-founder of the revolutionary group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and the author of several important S. ou B. texts on workers' councils that clearly had a strong

influence on the councilist theories and ideas of the members of the Situationist International. Though these two volumes arrived with the warning (issued by Castoriadis in 1972) that "We do not have any Good News to proselytize 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," we can't help but look to them for a way through the impasse we have reached.

Since Castoriadis has used several pseudonyms -- including Paul Cardan, Pierre Chaulieu and Jean-Marie Coudray -- it might be helpful if we included a brief biography of him here. He was born in Greece in 1922; in Athens he studied law, economics and philosophy. A member of the Greek Communist Youth since the age of 15, Castoriadis became a Trotskyist in 1942, and thus spent World War II avoiding both Stalinist and Nazi agents. He moved to Paris in 1945, and has lived there ever since. (But because he didn't become a French national until 1970, Castoriadis conducted nearly all of his pre-1970 political activities in Paris under aliases.) He was a member of the French section of the (Trotskyist) Fourth International until 1949, at which time he (and several other members, including Claude Lefort) left the Fourth International to form S. ou B. Over the course of the next 17 years, the group weathered and profited from two scissions between Castoriadis and Lefort, and included such other now well-known Parisian intellectuals as Jean-Francois Lyotard and [Pierre Guillaume](#). According to David Ames Curtis, in 1966 "Castoriadis convinced the group to disband, complaining that readers of the journal had remained mere consumers rather than active participants." There was some consolation in the knowledge that the views of the group, in the words of Curtis, "already were gaining acceptance in left-wing and student circles."

The discussion about workers' councils within the S. ou B. group appears to have started with the publication of Castoriadis' essay "The Proletarian Revolution Against the Bureaucracy" in issue #20 (December 1956). Like many of the pieces Castoriadis wrote at the time, this essay attempts to evaluate and update the guiding principles of the S. ou B. group in the light of current events. Though the essay cites the revolutionary events that took place in East Germany in June 1953 and in Poland in June 1956, it is mostly a response to the Hungarian Revolution, which broke out in November 1956. There was nothing "academic," speculative or undialectic about Castoriadis' motivations to begin such a discussion at that particular moment in time. If he used his essay (in part) to launch a discussion of workers' councils, it is only because workers' councils were actually established in 1956 by the Budapest proletariat in its revolution against the Hungarian bureaucracy. (In theory, Castoriadis could have begun this discussion as early as 1950, when Anton Pannekoek published *The Workers' Councils*, an account of events that took place in the first third of the twentieth century.) Based upon what was actually happening at the time, Castoriadis presented what he thought was "the clearest and the highest expression of the tendencies and goals of the workers of our epoch": the formation of workers' councils, which are nonhierarchical and directly democratic groupings of people, organized at their places of employment, that manage and direct their own productive activities without a separate class or strata of "managers" or "supervisors" of any kind "above" them; the federation of these councils with each other on the national level, and "the beginning of the whole set of tasks involved in directing the [entire] economy."

The unique strength of Castoriadis' work in this area consists in his awareness and careful documentation of the on-going existence of proto-councilist collectives -- right in the very heart capitalism's most advanced sectors of production! Indeed, in part thanks to Castoriadis, we can clearly see that these proto-councilist collectives are not accidental occurrences, nor

are they planned. Ironically, they are necessary and integral parts of the functioning of the capitalist mode of production, as well as the precursors of socialist society. Castoriadis writes:

"Modern social life has already created these [proto-councilist] collectivities and continues to create them. They are based on medium-sized or large enterprises and are to be found in industry, transportation, commerce, banking, insurance, public administration, where people by the hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands spend the main part of their life harnessed to a common task, where they encounter society in its most concrete form. A place of work is not only a unit of production: It has become the primary unit of social life for the vast majority of people."

"No modern factory could function for twenty-four hours," Castoriadis proclaims in "The Proletarian Revolution Against the Bureaucracy," "without this spontaneous organization of work that groups of workers, independent of the official business management, carry out by filling in the gaps of official production directives, by preparing for the unforeseen and for regular breakdowns of equipment, by compensating for management's mistakes, etc."

And yet these "elementary" or "primary" groups of workers -- though they can be studied by bourgeois sociologists -- cannot be officially recognized, sanctioned or empowered by the bureaucratic managers of these putatively capitalist enterprises. Such a recognition would be tantamount to admitting that the entire management strata is not only irrelevant and superfluous, but also wasteful, counterproductive and therefore (by its own logic!) irrational. "Those in authority in a large modern factory in fact spend less of their time organizing production than coping, directly or indirectly, with the resistance of the exploited," Castoriadis reminds us. "The net result is not only waste but perpetual conflict." And so the creation of workers' councils -- based upon the existence and functioning of the "elementary groups" -- would both dissolve the bases for perpetual conflict between "directors" and "executants," and would put an end to capitalism's inhuman, irrational and wasteful "privatization" of the free, spontaneous creativity of the people it enslaves.

By the publication of "On the Content of Socialism, II," which appeared in *S. ou B.* #22 (July 1957), Castoriadis was ready to sum up what his investigations into the Hungarian revolution had produced. "There is no question for us here of trying to draw up 'statutes,' 'rules,' or an 'ideal constitution' for socialist society," he writes.

"From this point of view, we obviously should condemn any fetishism for the 'soviet' or 'council' type of organization. The 'constant eligibility and revocability of representatives' are of themselves quite insufficient to 'guarantee' that a council will remain the expression of working-class interests. The council will remain such an expression for as long as people are prepared to do whatever may be necessary for it to remain so. . . . [T]he council is an adequate form of organization: Its whole structure is set up to enable this will to self-expression [of the workers] to come to the fore, when it exists."

For Castoriadis, future revolutions would necessarily strive for the takeover of the management of all production by the workers, themselves organized into workers' councils; the federation of the councils into a central assembly; the expropriation of the capitalists; the dissolution of the police and the army, and the arming of the proletariat; and the issuance of what Castoriadis refers to as a "call on the workers of other countries . . . [that would] explain to them the content and meaning of these measures," which "contain all that is essential to the

process of building socialism." Otherwise, these revolutions would be doomed to failure, precisely because they were partial or restricted in their fields of action.

### 3

In 1966, at least in so far as the extremists of the Situationist International were concerned, the views of the S. ou B. group were merely "impotent speculation." As early as 1961, the journal of the SI -- which, like S. ou B.'s journal, got its name from the group that published it -- made it clear that the SI, though it obviously valued the work of groups such as S. ou B. in France, Solidarity in England and Alternative in Belgium, did not wish to be associated with them. The SI's reasons for doing so were very abstract, even hypothetical, given the strong and explicit attachment these groups had to the critique of everyday life: "Those who put all the stress on the necessity of changing work itself, of rationalizing it, of interesting people in it, and who neglect the idea of the free content of life (i.e., the development of a materially-equipped creative power beyond the traditional categories of work time and rest and recreation time)," the SI wrote, "run the risk of providing an ideological cover for a harmonization of the present production system in the direction of greater efficiency and profitability without at all having called into question the experience of this production or the necessity of this kind of life" ("Instructions for Taking Up Arms," *I.S.* #6 August 1961). Despite this objection's lack of relevance to S. ou B.'s efforts, which appear to have been informed by a clear awareness of the "risk" cited by the situationists, the SI faithfully repeated it in the next two issues of their journal.

Starting in 1964, the SI attacked Castoriadis by name (or, rather, by alias) for the "specialization" of his efforts, which was one of the situationists' endearing ways of goading academics and militant intellectuals into forming their own autonomous revolutionary groups on the model of the SI. "Poor Heidegger! Poor Lukacs! Poor Sartre! Poor Barthes! Poor Lefebvre! Poor [Paul] Cardan!" mocks an unsigned article entitled "Now, the S.I." and published in *IS* #9 (August 1964). "Once the specialized thinkers step out of their domain, they can only be dumbfounded spectators of some neighboring and equally bankrupt specialization which they were ignorant of but which has become fashionable," the SI continues. "The former specialist of ultraleftist politics [Paul Cardan] is awestruck at discovering, along with structuralism and social psychology, an ethnological ideology completely new to him: the fact that Zuni Indians did not have any history to him appears as a luminous explanation for his own incapacity to act in our history. (Go laugh at the first twenty-five pages of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* #36)." In contrast to "specialists of thought" such as Paul Cardan, who can "no longer be anything but thinkers of specialization," the members of the SI lauded themselves for being thinkers of the totality in which specialization is negated. After that (that is, after 1964), the situationist line on Paul Cardan was set: "for a long time [we have] pointed out Cardan's unmistakable progression toward revolutionary nothingness, his swallowing of every kind of academic fashion and his ending up becoming indistinguishable from any ordinary sociologist" (*I.S.* #11, October 1967, p. 64).

Since we do not have access to volume 3 of Castoriadis's *Social and Political Writings* (as we have mentioned, it has not yet been published), we are not able to judge for ourselves if they indeed trace out an "unmistakable progression toward revolutionary nothingness" over the course of the 1961 to 1966 period. But the first two volumes make it clear that -- over the course of a fairly long period, that is, from 1946 to 1960 -- there is an unmistakable progression toward revolutionary significance in Castoriadis' writings. He begins as a

Trotskyist and anti-Stalinist; he then breaks with Trotskyism over the question of the bureaucracy, and begins a sustained critique of what he is the first to refer to as "bureaucratic capitalism"; he finds that workers' councils are adequate means by which a revolution that is both anticapitalist and socialist can be fought and won; and he ends by formulating the centrality of the critique of everyday life to all revolutionary struggles. In a word, his progression takes him from the Trotskyists to the situationists.

On 20 July 1960, one Pierre Canjuers (the pseudonym of S. ou B. member and contributor Daniel Blanchard) and Guy Debord signed their names to a text entitled "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program." In his translator's footnotes to *The Situationist International Anthology*, which includes this text as one of several "Miscellaneous SI Publications (1960- 1969)," Ken Knabb explains:

"Pierre Canjuers was at this time a member of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group. This text is described in *I.S. #5* [December 1960] as 'a platform for discussion within the SI, and for its link-up with revolutionary militants of the workers movement.'"

That is to say, the co-authored "Preliminaries" were intended as a "platform" for the Situationist International's link-up with Socialisme ou Barbarie. The slogan of such a link-up is provided within the text: "Everywhere the vastness of the new possibilities poses the urgent alternative: revolutionary solution or science-fiction barbarism" (obviously another version of "socialism or barbarism," a phrase originally used by Trotsky).

And so the co-authored "Preliminaries" offer a unique vision of the development of contemporary struggles: while Cornelius Castoriadis and the S. ou B. circle steadily "progressed" from Trotskyist to situationists-in-all-but-the-name (much like ex-Communist Party theoretician Henri Lefevbre, who also collaborated with Debord around 1960), Guy Debord came out of nowhere (or revolutionary lettrism, if you prefer). For a brief moment in time, they occupied the same passageway. Thereafter -- to hear the SI tell it -- Castoriadis became a revolutionary nothing, while Debord went on to make all of Paris dance.

Though everything would suggest that it be about nothing but workers' councils, "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program" doesn't say a goddamned thing about them! Not one fucking word. "The revolutionary movement can be nothing less than the struggle of the proletariat for the actual domination and deliberate transformation of all aspects of social life," Blanchard and Debord write, "beginning with the management of production and work by the workers directly deciding everything."

"Such a change immediately implies a radical transformation of the nature of work and the development of a new technology tending to ensure the workers' domination over the machines. This radical transformation of the meaning of work will lead to a number of consequences, the main one of which is undoubtedly the shifting of the center of interest of life from passive leisure to the new type of productive activity. This does not mean that overnight all productive activities will become in themselves passionately interesting. But to work toward making them so, by a general and ongoing reconversion of the ends as well as the means of industrial work, will in any case be the minimum passion of a free society. All activities will tend to blend the life previously separated between leisure and work into a single but infinitely diversified flow. Production and consumption will merge and be superseded in the creative use of the goods of society."

It's as if the situationist project never knew about or (perhaps more to the point) never needed to know about workers' councils -- or about any other revolutionary organizational form, for that matter, be it commune, soviet or factory committee -- and yet, for all that, could still be given shape, launched and taken up by others acting for themselves and on their own. The situationist project suggested by Blanchard and Debord's text doesn't find it necessary to specify, lobby for or speculate upon which or what kind of mass organ or organizational form the proletariat will use to accomplish the "shifting" tasks of the revolution. It is enough for it to say that the revolution consists in the "radical transformation" or "reconversion" of work in general and (this is the important point) at every single workplace. The revolutionary proletariat will see to the rest on its own. Or it won't.

In the case of the French revolutionary crisis of May 1968, the proletariat rejected work in general but balked at radically transforming every single workplace. The Situationist International, as we have seen, took the position in the post-1968 period that workers' councils were just under the surface of the May "events," and that its members should continue to try to generate interest in them, so that workers' councils would, as it were, come to the surface of the next revolutionary crisis. What position did Castoriadis take on the councils in the post-1968 period? Did he continue to evolve (and so move beyond the situationists, who either remained stationary or regressed) or did he merely continue to devolve into revolutionary nothingness? The former: he evolved.

To be an advocate of "the councils" and their "power" presupposes that one believes that work in general and every single workplace (taken together) is at the very heart of human society, of what it means to be human. "To say that a workers' council will be an organ of popular self-administration (and not just an organ of workers' management of production)," Castoriadis wrote in July 1957, "is to recognize that a factory or office is not just a productive unit, but is also a social cell, and that it will become the primary locus of the individual 'socialization.' " It is precisely because councilists place the primary locus of socialization in work and in the workplace that they believe it is so important that the power of the workers' councils be complete and unchallenged by bureaucrats and capitalists on this terrain. If work isn't the center of social life, then workers' councils quite obviously cannot be truly revolutionary organizations, no matter how or why they are established.

According to Castoriadis, writing in a 1972 "General Introduction" to his *S. ou B.* essays, the "generalized contestation" or the generalization of "the revolutionary problem" to "all spheres of social life" signified and set in motion by the world-wide revolutionary events of 1968 marks the end of the historical centrality of the traditional proletariat (the factory workers) as the privileged, sovereign and exclusive bearer of the revolutionary project. If "the proletariat" exists (and it most assuredly does), it includes within itself such exploited groups as youth, chronically-unemployed urban populations, women, gays and lesbians, "the insane," drug addicts and prostitutes -- as well as factory workers and other wage slaves that fit the traditional Marxist paradigm. It makes no sense at all to try to get these exploited groups to organize their workplaces in the form of councils: they have no workplaces! Or, rather, if they do have workplaces, they are clearly not the centers of their respective lives. We would go so far as to say that, in the wake of the revolts of the late 1960s, very few "real" (that is, traditionally defined) workers place their jobs, careers or workplaces at the center of their lives, and those who do position work in this fashion will no doubt be the least likely to be revolutionaries, militant workers or socialists.



Though Castoriadis does not suggest what new form of organization might be adequate to antibureaucratic and anticapitalist struggles in post-1968 society, he does give us a valid jumping off point. Back in July 1957 he wrote, To achieve the widest, the most meaningful direct democracy will require that all the economic, political and other structures of society be based on local groups that are concrete collectivities, organic social units. Direct democracy certainly requires the physical presence of citizens in a given place, when decisions have to be made. But this is not enough. It also requires that these citizens form an organic community, that they live if possible in the same milieu, that they be familiar through their daily experience with the subject to be discussed and with the problems to be tackled.

Anyone for a socialist society organized by, for and at the local level by neighbors' councils?

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