Across forty years from the 1950s to 1990s, Cornelius Castoriadis developed a critique of bureaucratic capitalism. The article looks at the strengths and weaknesses of Castoriadis’ theory. The weaknesses stem from Castoriadis’ economic theory; the strengths from his theory of meaning. Castoriadis’ attempt to link a critique of growth to the critique of bureaucracy fails but his analysis of the tenuousness of meaning in modern bureaucratic societies is much more successful. Bureaucratization causes the draining of meaning (imaginary significations) from societies dominated by public and private bureaucracies. Superficiality, incoherence and sterility triumph over sense. Societies become consumed by hobbies and lobbies, and foist a huge amount of junk on their denizens. Junk science, junk art, junk politics, junk culture and junk everything proliferates. Everywhere one turns trivial pursuits prevail.

Cornelius Castoriadis was a leftist. Throughout his life, he identified with left-wing causes. He began youthful political life as a Communist-turned-Trotskyist. In exile, in France, he moved to a kind of independent leftism that began with a trenchant critique of Jean-Paul Sartre’s apologetics for Communism and mutated into a vision of a non-bureaucratic self-managed society. For a time, Castoriadis thought of the benchmark society as ‘socialism’ but he eventually stopped using that term and opted to talk instead about an ‘autonomous society’. It was never entirely clear what Castoriadis meant by autonomy. He didn’t quite mean the autonomous individual of John Stuart Mill’s liberal society. His concept of autonomy referred more to a society than an individual. An autonomous society was one capable of self-critique. It contained individuals who were capable of criticizing the society they were members of. An autonomous society was one that could re-invent itself in a deep-going way with new laws and practices.

That was very much the left-wing Castoriadis. But there is another Castoriadis, one who is less obvious but also less obviously a left-winger. There are several threads in Castoriadis’s thought that have a right-wing resonance. For one thing, Castoriadis thought of autonomy not only in terms of critique,
which is a left-wing platitude, but also in terms of creation which has much wider and more interesting significance. Since Schumpeter, many conservatives have strongly identified with capitalism’s process of creative destruction.\textsuperscript{1} Furthermore, Castoriadis identified the well-spring of creativity with the West, hardly a standard left-wing nostrum. He thought (correctly) that autonomous societies were a function of the Greco-Western tradition. He understood very clearly that the larger part of high-level human creation, not least the arts and sciences, were produced by a relatively small band of Western societies. He attributed that to their relative autonomy. They encouraged (at their peak) critical people who not only questioned the laws of society (as well as the laws of science and the laws of art) but who also possessed a love of creation—an \textit{eros} of making, innovating, and bringing-into-being.

Contra-wise, Castoriadis was no fan of Third World politics.\textsuperscript{2} While anti-colonial third-world-ism became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, Castoriadis kept a skeptical distance from it. This was a movement that he knew could only end in tears. He was not wrong. Castoriadis was also a defender of the institution of the family.\textsuperscript{3} He expressed a deeply skeptical view of feminism.\textsuperscript{4}


\textsuperscript{3} ‘The crisis of the family today does not consist only, and not so much, in its statistical fragility. What is at issue is the crumbling and disintegration of the traditional roles—man, woman, parents, children—and the consequences thereof: the formless disorientation of new generations.’ Yes, agreed Castoriadis, there were moments of legitimate emancipation in the undoing of traditional roles. ‘But the ambiguities of its effects have long been noted. The more time passes, the more one is justified in asking oneself whether this process is expressed more by a blossoming forth of new ways of living than by sheer disorientation and anomie.’ See ‘The Crisis of Western Societies’ [1982], \textit{The Castoriadis Reader} (1997), Oxford: Blackwell, p. 259.

\textsuperscript{4} ‘No doubt, heteronomous societies have created immortal works—or, quite simply, a countless host of beautiful objects. And already, this statement shows—from a democratic perspective, as a matter of fact—the untenability of the historical proscriptions today’s new