

OCEANIC FUTURES

Kristin Lawler

OCEANIC FUTURES: MATAROA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN IMAGINARY

Anyone who talks about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life — without grasping what is subversive about love and positive in the refusal of constraints — has a corpse in his mouth.

— *Raoul Vaneigem, 1967*

Nearly a year ago, I wrote a short piece about the policies of austerity and the Euro “crisis” entitled, in part, *The Ikarian Dream*. Little did I know then what this dream of mine was about to produce. I should have because I am constantly making the case that there is nothing more materially transformative than a dream, nothing that fuels radical movements more powerfully than the imagination. That was in large part why I wrote the essay in the first place — to situate the American fantasy about the culture of southern Europe within the politics of a refusal of alienated labor and an embrace of all the vital forces that collude to resist it.

Well, thanks to that little piece, within the year, I miraculously found myself on Ikaria. Wacky! It all still feels like a dream to me — one in which all the wonderful, myriad attachments that I am deeply grateful to say form my very full life, were, for the first time in years, absent. I was free. Halfway around the world in the place I’d imagined. And just as it’s incredibly difficult to articulate the meaning of one’s dreams, without the help of an analyst anyway, I’m finding Mataroa really hard to write about with any rational power.

I have to start somewhere, though, so I suppose I should begin with the sea. Everything else in this world does. And it was fully the dominant motif, in form and in substance, of the Mataroa seminar, named, of course, after the storied ship of exiles that set sail from Piraeus and headed to Paris carrying its world-shaking exile cargo, especially the brilliant, severely underappreciated Greek anti-Stalinist then-Trot Cornelius Castoriadis, who went on to found the school of thought that in large part inspired the uprisings we call Paris

68. "All power to the imagination," the Paris graffiti shouted, invoking Castoriadis (the Situationists never acknowledged their debt to him, but whatever). "Workers of all countries, enjoy!"

But within the Mataroa seminar, the sea wasn't just a metaphor. It was fully, as American hip hoppers say, *in effect*. Look, it's no accident that Freud calls our deepest, most primitive, most unconscious and radically creative psychic space "oceanic." One simply *can't* relate to the sea without tapping, in some way, into the deepest parts of the unconscious, the phylogenetic and ontogenetic well that is the creative fount of language and of all attempts to intervene in the world once we've come to the traumatic realization that we are not, sadly, totally one with it. When we see the sea, we remember/imagine that there is enough, that we are all connected, that gratification and flow can be the true order of things. And that we could dive back in if only we'd just free ourselves.

Castoriadis was a heavily psychoanalytic cat, and I keep wondering if he had a thought like this on *his* Mataroa journey. That unconscious memory, our imaginary of connection, of pleasure, of peace, of abundance in time and in material life, of everyday vitality not deferred but really lived, is at the root of all liberatory politics. And like the psychoanalytic one, this political practice can't be effective on the level of the abstract. The transference has to *really happen*. The oceanic relentlessly insists on being, on creating. Castoriadis recasts Lacan's imaginary as a poesis, less an insubstantial image than a producing, a bringing-forth:

"...we are beings of the imagination and of the imaginary. The emergence of these determinations itself manifests the creation and *vis formandi* that appertain to being as such, but these determinations also concretely realize the mode of being of the creation and *vis formandi* specific to the properly human. Here we can do no more than note the fact that this *vis formandi* is accompanied, in the human sphere, by a *libido formandi*: to the potential for creation found in being in general, the human sphere adds a desire for formation. I call this potential and this desire the 'poietic' element of humanity."

When the imaginary is in effect it unfolds, becomes, as method actors say, really real.

On Ikaria, it did. It transcended the ideas in people's papers — broadly speaking, that another world is possible, and being fought for as we speak — and came to life. Still, the ideas were pretty fucking cool too. To me, they felt like home. Many of them I'd been writing about, advocating for, for a long time, so that was exciting. For starters, awhile back I'd abandoned that old Marxist canard about crisis being an unintended consequence of the logic of capital, and one that the working class can exploit for revolutionary purposes. *Not*. Crisis is a weapon used relentlessly, and increasingly, since the 1970s to discipline the working class by cultivating conditions of fear and impotence in those who would otherwise never accept the economic and political logic that this discourse supports. Crisis is a neoliberal strategy that must be met with refusal, not embrace. Mataroa knows this.

Most heartwarming to me was the Mataroan sensibility about the cultural politics of freedom. In our fight against the forces that would make every moment of the lifeworld and every iota of nature into fodder for profit, that would let nothing just be, I know that culture is our strongest and most resilient weapon. In particular, a culture that embraces the aspect of Mediterranean life that our oppressors disparage as "laziness" — what I call slacker politics and others called "de-growth" — was all over the meeting. This refusal to accept paid labor as the center of life and pleasure as marginal to it, is what essentially opposes the dominating logic of capital. In my analysis, this refusal is *both* a means to a better life and more power — through the fact that when the working class oversupplies a commodity like labor, its leverage to make effective demands goes down, and vice versa — *and* an end in itself. Among highly-paid workers and the working poor in America, in the high-tech first world and the proto-slavery of the third, overwork is both killing our bodies and spirits and compromising any leverage we might have to make a change.

I love the inspiration that the Mediterranean gives to all those stuck in the cultural prison of the Protestant work ethic — the idea that it's good that we should spend our precious moments working, doing useless shit to promote a destructive system, rather than, you know, really living. It's a scam, but because it's tapped into people's guilt about desire and pleasure and connection, it's had some insanely powerful effects, even now, when capital has amassed more guns and money and big data on all of us than it would seem to ever need. Why? Because capital knows, just like Max Weber did, that without the cultural intervention of the Protestant uptightness about valorizing work and avoiding pleasure, it can't stay in power. It knows, as us Mataroans do, that a new imaginary can change the whole game.

Ultimately, that was what was so powerful about Mataroa. We enacted a different imaginary. We didn't just talk about ideas of liberation and connection and leisure. We lived them. We swam. We roadtripped. We danced. We kicked it in an open air taverna on the sand, eating sardines, drinking wine, staring out at the impossibly blue sea while we talked and laughed and talked some more. Everyone seemed really open, even, shockingly, me. I dove in. I loosened up, open to thinking new thoughts, and I feel more alive because of it. And that feeling of being alive — that's where all good politics begins.

I allowed myself to imagine things I'd previously resisted. Although I went in pretty critical of one of the animating political ideas of the conference, the commons, ready to argue that the whole idea is based on stultifying, non-cosmopolitan concepts of identity and mutual obligation and rights to land and resources that resemble the conventions of property more than I'm comfortable with, instead, I listened. And what I heard was that the commons is more than an idea for me to critique — it's the stakes of people's very real struggles against the imposition of crisis, poverty, desperation. Most important in this respect, I went to a panegiri, the meaning of which was framed for me by one of my hosts and comrades, as an instance of this thing, the commons. Well, if a giant village party tangibly buzzing with libidinal energy, where people are drinking and dancing all night to a seriously fabulous band, is the commons, then hey, I'm in.

I haven't changed my mind about this entirely. I'm an American girl, so I like the commercial market more than my Mediterranean (or even other American) comrades do. Not as a totalizing logic, of course, but as a space. In Mediterranean parlance, I prefer the wildness, the potential for novelty, the mystery and the strangers and the tricksters of the souk to the earnest communitarianism of the commons. And although I will never move from certain central principles, the Mataroa oceanic has opened my mind to other ideas, other spaces, other logics. I have come to see that if pleasure and connection and a more natural rhythm of life is the animating principle of your political imagination, then we are allies.

Out of Mataroa, we comrades will build a radical network. A think tank, taking a strategic page from the insanely successful playbook of Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys. They imagined a new world, analyzed the state of friendly and opposing forces on the ground so that they'd intervene most effectively, and never stopped pushing their ideas. Now we live in the world their audacity built; their dream is our nightmare. But where they

gained power because they planned the violence and domination that could follow the cultivation of economic crisis, we will get stronger every time we strategize on the basis of cultivating the anti-crisis — the pleasure imaginary that connects us all through our oceanic origins. Where they imagine the profits that shock-and-awe crisis make possible, we imagine the transformations that appealing to the desires of vibrant, pulsating beings, fully embodied, experiencing joy and pain and anger and deep laughter, and love, can produce. Because of this, we will win.

Anyway, this is what I've always meant when I've advocated for a vitalist cultural strategy to oppose the cold dominating logic of capital. I dreamed it, and then it happened. In Ikaria, everything I've always said about political strategy *came true*. Substance and form — the ideas and the fabric of everyday life — came together. Because you simply can't oppose the logic of crisis — the idea that everything is so *fucking serious* that you'd better just put your heads down and *get to work, now! and leave the thinking to the authorities, by the way* — by reiterating that kind of very dead seriousness. You can only really do it with an everyday politics that opposes that logic not just at the level of substantive ideas but of formal relations of time and space as well, relations that first and foremost privilege the life force, the power of comradeship and laughter.

In Castoriadis's words, *"To pose the question of a new society is to pose the problem of an extraordinary cultural creation. And the question that is posed, and that I pose to you, is the following: Do we have before us, some precursory and premonitory signs of this cultural creation?"* He is asking if there are signs of the oceanic imaginary at play within contemporary society. From the Mediterranean comes the answer: yes.