

THE RISING TIDE OF INSIGNIFICANCY

(THE BIG SLEEP)

by Cornelius Castoriadis*

translated from the French
and edited anonymously
as a public service

*"Cornelius Castoriadis" is here a pseudonym for Paul Cardan.**

**A Paul Cardan (active 1959-1965) was a pseudonym for Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997).

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*Much Castoriadis material has gone out of print and much more remains to be translated into English, publication projects in which T/E is currently engaged.

CONTENTS

<i>Notice</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in English with Standard Abbreviations</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in French with Standard Abbreviations:</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>On the Translation</i>	<i>liii</i>

PART I: KAIROS

§The Vacuum Industry (1979)	3
§Psychoanalysis and Society I (1982)	13
§Psychoanalysis and Society II (1984)	30
§Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy (1985)	46
§The Gulf War Laid Bare (1991)	57
§Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth (1991) with Edgar Morin	63
§The Dilapidation of the West (1991) §Postscript (1994-1995)	73 106
§The Revolutionary Force of Ecology (1993)	109
§The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (1994)	124
§A Rising Tide of Significancy? A Follow-Up Interview with <i>Drunken Boat</i> (1996)	155
§The <i>Coordinations</i> in France (1996)	165

PART II: KOINŌNIA

§Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics (1990)	179
§The Crisis of the Identification Process (1990)	208
§Freud, Society, History (1996)	231

PART III: POLIS

§Unending Interrogation (1979)	259
§The Idea of Revolution (1989)	288
§The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions (1993)	311
§Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime (1996)	329

PART IV: LOGOS

§Complexity, Magmas, History: The Example of the Medieval Town (1993)	363
<i>Appendix</i>	387

N.B.: Years in parentheses indicate, here and in footnotes, the first date of publication of a text in English or French, whichever occurred first. See each individual publication note for date of composition.

**BOOKS BY CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS
PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH, WITH
STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS:**

- CL* *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Trans. Martin H. Ryle and Kate Soper. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1984. 345pp.
- CR* *The Castoriadis Reader*. Ed. David Ames Curtis. Malden, MA and Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1997. 470pp.
- IIS* *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1987. 418pp. Paperback edition. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1997. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.
- OPS* *On Plato's Statesman*. Trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. 227pp.
- PPA* *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy. Essays in Political Philosophy* (N.B.: the subtitle is an unauthorized addition made by the publisher). Ed. David Ames Curtis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 304pp.

PSW 1 Political and Social Writings. Volume 1: 1946-1955. From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism. Trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 348 pp.

PSW 2 Political and Social Writings. Volume 2: 1955-1960. From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism. Trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 363 pp.

PSW 3 Political and Social Writings. Volume 3: 1961-1979. Recommencing the Revolution: From Socialism to the Autonomous Society. Trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 405 pp.

RTI The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep). Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: December 4, 2003.

WIF World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination. Ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. 507pp.

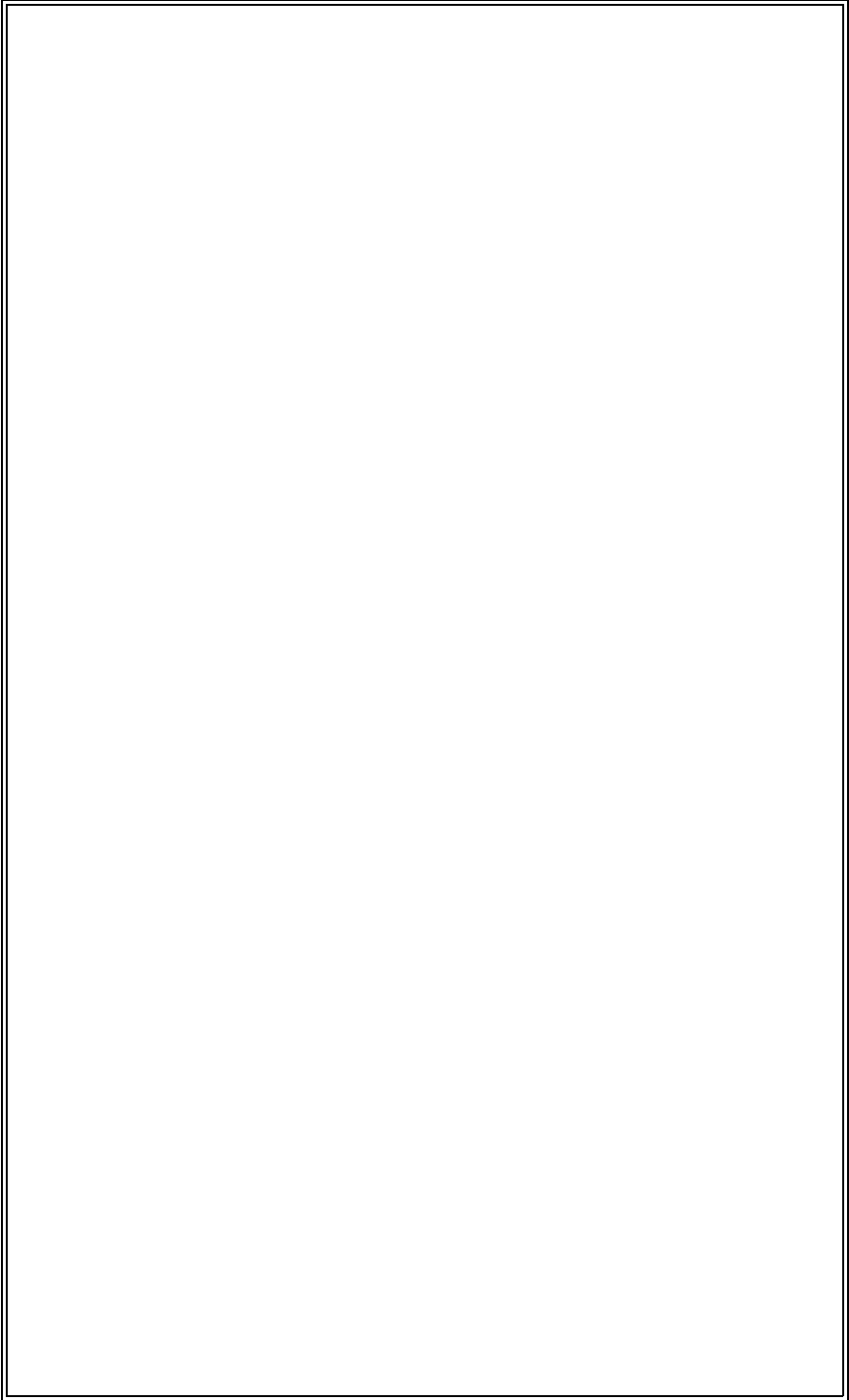
**BOOKS BY CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS
PUBLISHED IN FRENCH, WITH
STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS:**

- CL* *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978. 318pp.
- CMR 1* *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 1: *L'impérialisme et la guerre*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 443pp.
- CMR 2* *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 2: *Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 318pp.
- CS* *Le Contenu du socialisme*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 441pp.
- D* *Dialogue*. La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 112pp.
- DEA* *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Avec Daniel Cohn-Bendit et le public de Louvain-la-Neuve. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981. 126pp.
- DG* *Devant la guerre*. Tome 1: *Les Réalités*. 1^e éd. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982. 285pp. 2^e éd. revue et corrigée, 1983. 317pp.

- DH* *Domaines de l'homme: Les carrefours du labyrinthe II.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. 460pp.
- EMO 1* *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier.* Tome 1: *Comment lutter.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.
- EMO 2* *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier.* Tome 2: *Prolétariat et organisation.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.
- FAF* *Fait et à faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe V.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997. 284pp.
- FP* *Figures du pensable. Les carrefours du labyrinthe VI.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 308pp.
- IIS* *L'Institution imaginaire de la société.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975. 503pp.
- M68* Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Jean-Marc Coudray. *Mai 68: la brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements.* Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1968. 142pp.
- M68/VAA* Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Cornelius Castoriadis. *Mai 68: la brèche suivi de Vingt Ans après.* Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1988. 212pp.
- MI* *La Montée de l'insignifiance. Les carrefours du labyrinthe IV.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996. 245pp.
- MM* *Le Monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990. 281pp.
- P-SI* *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance.* Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet (novembre 1996). La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998.

- 37pp.
- SB 1* *La Société bureaucratique. Tome 1: Les rapports de production en Russie.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 317pp.
- SB 2* *La Société bureaucratique. Tome 2: La révolution contre la bureaucratie.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 441pp.
- SB(n.é.)* *La Société bureaucratique* (nouvelle édition). Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1990. 492pp.
- SF* *La Société française.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 315pp.
- S. ou B.* *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Organe de Critique et d'orientation révolutionnaire.* Paris. 1949-1965.
- SPP* *Sur Le Politique de Platon.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 199pp.
- SV* *Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique. Séminaires 1986-1987. La Création humaine, 1.* Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002. 496pp.

A complete bibliography of writings by and about Cornelius Castoriadis can be found at:
<http://www.agorainternational.org>



Foreword

In March 1996, when *La Montée de l'insignifiance* (MI), the fourth volume in Cornelius Castoriadis's *Carrefours du labyrinthe* (CL, Crossroads in the labyrinth) series, was published, the author prefaced the book with the following brief "Notice":

I have brought together here most of my texts from the past few years that are devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics. A fifth volume of the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series will follow in a few months, containing writings bearing on psychoanalysis and philosophy.

One will encounter a few repetitions among these texts. Such repetitions are inevitable when one has to familiarize different audiences with the author's presuppositions, which are not obvious to everyone. It is difficult to eliminate them without destroying, each time, the logical order of the argument. I hope to be able to count on the reader's indulgence.

July 1995

Castoriadis's Socialisme ou Barbarie-era writings (1946-1965) had already been republished, along with new and previously unpublished material, by Éditions 10/18 between 1973 and 1979, and his *magnum opus*, *L'Institution imaginaire de la Société* (IIS, The Imaginary institution of society), an outgrowth of his final *S. ou B.* writings (1964-1965), had appeared in 1975. Two other "books"¹—a joint

¹As noted in the Translator's Afterword to *On Plato's Statesman* (OPS), none of Castoriadis's many "books" were actual written volumes

talk with Daniel Cohn-Bendit published as *De l'écologie à l'autonomie* (*DEA*, From ecology to autonomy), and a volume devoted to posttotalitarian Russian "stratocratic" expansionism, *Devant la guerre* (*DG*, Facing war)—had come out in 1981. And Castoriadis had already published three *Carrefours* tomes: the eponymous first volume in 1978, a second volume entitled *Domaines de l'homme* (*DH*, Domains of man) in 1986, and *Le Monde morcelé* (*MM*, World in fragments) in 1990. As promised in his *MI* Notice quoted above, a fifth, more psychoanalytically- and philosophically-oriented volume, *Fait et à faire* (*FAF*, Done and to be done), did indeed appear in 1997, the year of his death.

While these first three *Carrefours* volumes enjoyed respectable sales in France, they did not have the full public impact Castoriadis perhaps had hoped for. The second one in particular, *DH*, was a massive tome of a quite heteroclitic nature, very difficult for readers and reviewers alike to get a firm grasp on. And so he waited a shorter time (a four-instead of an eight-year hiatus) before publishing a smaller, more compact or concentrated volume, *MM*. The decision to publish two additional volumes, six and seven years after the third one in the series, with contents separated between the topical (*MI* addressing primarily social and political matters) and the psychoanalytic-philosophical (*FAF*) was thus, to a considerable degree, a marketing decision on the author's part, though it was also a decision not entirely alien to his own political and philosophical concerns.

Castoriadis had long felt that no politics could be

composed at one time for book publication. Castoriadis was primarily an essayist and editorialist for various reviews as well as a public speaker for a variety of audiences who subsequently collected his writings and speeches for book publication, never an author of weighty tomes.

deduced from a philosophy (Plato's *hubris*), nor could any philosophy be deduced from a politics (at times, Marxism's error).² At the same time, as he explains,

since the end of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, I am no longer directly and actively involved in politics, save for a brief moment during May 1968. I try to remain present as a critical voice, but I am convinced that the bankruptcy of the inherited conceptions (be they Marxist, Liberal {in the Continental sense of conservative believers in the "free" workings of a "capitalist market"}, or general views on society, history, etc.) has made it necessary to reconsider the entire horizon of thought within which the political movement for emancipation has been situated for centuries. And it is to this work that I have harnessed my efforts since that time.

This statement about a "necessary . . . reconsider[ation of] the entire horizon of thought within which the political movement for emancipation has been situated for centuries," to which he had "harnessed [his] efforts since" his last overt

²In "The Rising Tide of Insignificance," Castoriadis stated in a subsequently deleted passage: "For example, in Marxism, or what passes for such, there is a false deduction of a bad politics from an absurd philosophy." As noted in a Translator/Editor (T/E) footnote to this eponymous interview, this view echoes positions advanced in *IIS*. But it may also have been cut because Marxism also has the tendency, noted in the body of this Foreword, to subordinate philosophy to political considerations (based, however, on a philosophical interpretation of the political role of the proletariat).

and organized collective political engagement³ appears in the eponymous interview "The Rising Tide of Insignificance," which offers, in his "critical voice," diagnoses of the contemporary age. So, even in one of his more topical texts, he refers to the philosophical work that must come to inform (though never dictate) ongoing interventions in the social and political spheres. Philosophy and politics—whose "cobirth" occurred, Castoriadis argues, first in ancient Greece and a second time in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages—remain in his work the nonidentical yet intertwined twins he consistently described them as being. There is an arbitrariness as well as a certain necessity to this imaginary act of separation effectuated by Castoriadis himself within his own magmatic *oeuvre*.

The publication history in English of Castoriadis's *Carrefours* series writings is even more complicated and varied. The first volume in the series was translated, as is, in 1984 as *Crossroads in the Labyrinth (CL)*, while selections from *DH* and *MM*, many of them originally written in English, appeared in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy (PPA, 1991)*, in between the first two and the third selection of *S. ou B. -10/18* texts known collectively as the *Political and Social Writings (PSW, 1988 and 1993)*.⁴

³Castoriadis made a brief attempt to reform Socialisme ou Barbarie during the May '68 student-worker rebellion. As the "events" themselves were unfolding, former members distributed a tract he wrote. An extended version of this tract appears as "The Anticipated Revolution" in *PSW 3*.

⁴On the publication of *PPA* specifically, see now Curtis's 2003 Preface to the Electronic Reprint of the 1989 Editor's Foreword to *PPA*: <<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/www.kaloskaisophos.org/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdactfppa.html>>.

Additional selections from *DH* and *MM*, as well as a few texts (see below) from the newly published *MI* were gathered together in the *Castoriadis Reader (CR)* and in *World in Fragments (WIF)*, both of them published the year of his death. Castoriadis was thus able to see the bulk of his *Carrefours* writings appear in English during his lifetime—albeit in a somewhat jumbled manner. But as we have seen, Castoriadis's own method for presenting the *Carrefours* texts in French was itself a work in progress, constantly open to question along the way by the author himself. Concrete plans were already underway shortly before his death for his long-time collaborator and friend David Ames Curtis to present in English remaining *Carrefours* texts, many of them already translated by Curtis and published in various journals or still in manuscript form awaiting book publication.⁵

The present volume, *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (RTI)*, which takes its name from *La Montée de l'insignifiance*, thus does not contain all the same material as that original French-language book. The first three texts from the initial *Kairos* section—"The Crisis of Western Societies" (now in *CR*), as well as "The Movements of the Sixties" and "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" (both now in *WIF*)—had already been claimed. And while the *Koinōnia* section remains intact in this English-language electronic book version, the first, third, and fourth chapters of *MI*'s third and final section, *Polis*—"The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," "Culture in a Democratic Society," and "The Ethicists' New

⁵Some of Curtis's unpublished translations were around so long awaiting publication that they had been saved in a computer format incompatible with existing disk operating systems, and thus required retyping.

Clothes"—also had been preempted by prior publication in *WIF* and *CR*. The *MI* texts preserved in *RTI* are as follows: "Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth," "The Dilapidation of the West," "The Rising Tide of Insignificance," "Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics," "The Crisis of the Identification Process," "Freud, Society, History," "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions," and "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime."

To fill the gaps created by the vagaries of the Castoriadis publishing history in English, we have delved back into the second, third, and fifth *Carrefours* volumes. There we have found, for *RTI*, other texts compatible with the fourth volume's original topical themes concerning society and politics. As noted above, Curtis had already prepared many of these texts for publication. The first four chapters of *RTI*—"The Vacuum Industry," "Psychoanalysis and Society I" and "II," and "Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy"—have been drawn from *DH*'s *Kairos* section, and the first chapter of *RTI*'s *Polis* section—"Unending Interrogation"—comes from the corresponding section of *DH*, as well. "The Idea of Revolution," the only chapter from *MM* yet to be published in book form in English (it, too, had been listed on several previous book proposals presented to American and British publishers but each time had to be dropped for reasons of space), is now also included in *RTI* as a useful counterpart on modern revolutions to his piece on the birth of Athenian democracy. Finally, from *FAF*, the fifth and last of the *CL* volumes Castoriadis published while he was alive, we have included "Complexity, Magmas, History: The Example of the Medieval Town" in an added *Logos* section. Thus, with the exceptions of a few topical *Kairos* texts from *DH* dealing mostly with Marxism, totalitarianism, the erstwhile "Soviet

Union," its former satellites, and French politics—"Transition," "Illusions ne pas garder," "Le plus dur et le plus fragile des régimes," "Pologne, notre défaite," "Le régime russe se succédera à lui-même," "Marx aujourd'hui," "Quelle Europe, Quelle menaces, Quelle défense?," "La 'gauche' en 1985," and "Cinq ans après"—of *DH*'s "Les destinées du totalitarisme," as well as of its intriguing, still untranslated Preface and of one last *FAF* text—"Passion et connaissance"—all *Carrefours* series texts published during Castoriadis's lifetime are now available in book form in English. A translation of the posthumous sixth *Carrefours* tome, *Figures du pensable* (*FP*) will soon appear as *Figures of the Thinkable* (*FT*), with "Passion and Knowledge" replacing an *FP* text published long ago in *PPA* ("The Social-Historical: Modes of Being, Problems of Knowledge"). And an English-language collection of previously untranslated *DH* texts, along with other uncollected writings on Russia, is currently in the works. Other volumes in English are now in the planning stages. The reader's patience is requested as these electronic publishing projects are presently being undertaken under a highly difficult set of circumstances.

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For, we are indeed embarking on a new stage in the publication of Castoriadis's writings in English. After the early pamphlet translations of the pseudonymous "Maurice Brinton" published by Socialisme ou Barbarie's British sister organization London Solidarity, and after the writings in *Telos* and other journals, plus two book-length volumes (*CL* and *IIS*), prepared by various translators or written directly in English by Castoriadis himself during the 1970s and

1980s, Curtis came on the scene in the mid-1980s, eventually translating, editing, and publishing approximately a million words of Castoriadis's writings (*PSWI-3*, *PPA*, *WIF*, *CR*). He meticulously prepared each volume, adding explanatory footnotes, citation references in English, glossaries, bibliographical appendixes, and so on. *Le Monde*, in particular, praised Curtis for being instrumental to the increasingly broad U.S. reception of Castoriadis's work:

In America . . . where it has the advantage, in the person of David Ames Curtis, of benefitting from a remarkable translator, [Castoriadis's thought] interests not only 'radical' intellectuals but also, in a larger way, numerous researchers in the social sciences.⁶

While his editorial ambitions were not as great as those of, say, a James Strachey who prepared the *Standard Edition* of Sigmund Freud's work, nor was the time yet appropriate for such an undertaking since Castoriadis was still then a living, active writer, Curtis tried to present Castoriadis's work with all the scholarly seriousness and careful attention to detail that this great author's evolving corpus warranted. Each translated volume was prefaced by an in-depth Foreword that set the book in perspective, provided information the reader might not otherwise have available to her, anticipated common questions and criticisms, presented the translator himself and his motivations so as not to hide these essential aspects of the process of presenting the work of another in the International Republic of Letters, and yet carefully

⁶Christian Delacampagne, op-ed piece entitled "Cornelius Castoriadis et l'esprit d'utopie," *Le Monde*, December 22, 2000, p. 18.

avoided taking advantage of the translator's position as the first reader in a foreign language of the writings being presented so that the labor of autonomous interpretation and creative reception of the author's ideas would remain within the purview of the reading public. Castoriadis went so far as to praise Curtis's Translator's Foreword for *WIF* as "one of the best things ever written about my work." A little more than two months before his final hospitalization, Castoriadis also wrote the following appreciation of Curtis's professionalism:

David is the kind of translator one encounters rarely: he is extremely conscientious, tirelessly verifying everything he does, never hesitating to ask the opinion of the authors about what might pose a problem in the texts on which he is working. He has now translated six volumes of my writings, which have been published by the University of Minnesota Press, Oxford University Press, Stanford University Press, and Blackwell. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, for whom he has also translated and published several works in translation and who, a philologist by trade, is demanding to the point of scholasticism as concerns the exactitude and accuracy of expressions, is full of praise for him.⁷

Castoriadis's elder daughter, Sparta, recalls him going on and on at a family gathering about how pleased he was in particular about the *Castoriadis Reader*, the "greatest hits"

⁷Excerpts from the French original of this letter are available on the web: <<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/www.kaloskaisophos.org/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdactf.html>>.

volume Curtis had edited.

Things took a dramatic, unexpected, still largely inexplicable turn, however, at the end of 1997. Castoriadis's final illness, surgery, and unsuccessful recovery lasted the entire fall of that year. During that time, Curtis aided the Castoriadis family morally, organizationally, professionally, even financially. Near the end, "Maurice Brinton," himself a doctor who was following Castoriadis's medical case closely, called Curtis from England to request that Curtis prepare an obituary, because Curtis was, he said, the most informed, qualified, and appropriate person to do so in the English-speaking world. And Castoriadis's soon-to-be widow, Zoé, explained to Curtis that, while Castoriadis left no written will for his closest relatives, he had foreseen at least one thing for the time after his own death: attending together their friend François Furet's funeral, Zoé had asked her husband what arrangements should eventually be made for him; she had assumed that, a nonbeliever, Cornelius would opt for cremation, but instead, to her great surprise, he asked her to bury him across the street from "David and Clara" in the Montparnasse Cemetery, so that Curtis and his life-partner Clara Gibson Maxwell might always be close to him. At Mrs. Castoriadis's request, Curtis researched this possibility so that the necessary arrangements could be made at the appropriate time. Upon learning of his demise, Curtis sent out an e-mail version of the obituary to persons and organizations interested by the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International (CC/AI) Website,⁸ including Castoriadis

⁸With Castoriadis's knowledge and encouragement, Agora International set up the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website in July 1997 at Ohio State University (OSU). Both Curtis and Castoriadis had

family members, and he began trying to place this obituary with a large-circulation newspaper or journal.⁹ At the burial ceremony, his widow collapsed, sobbing, into Curtis's arms, telling him in a loud voice that her husband had "loved you so much." This she did with no one else at the grave site. And yet, according to a former Castoriadis student who had attended a postfuneral event at Castoriadis's residence later that day, plans to exclude Curtis were already beginning. These plans culminated in daughter Sparta calling Curtis a week after the funeral to request, without explanation, that Curtis cease "all work" concerning her father—as if this were something within her control. Aware of the extended nature of the mourning process in general, of the jealousy in this particular case consequent upon Castoriadis having given more thought to his friend and collaborator than to his own family for the period after his death, of the paranoia, perhaps too, of survivors bereft even of a last will and testament who found themselves in the difficult role of literary executors for which they were ill-equipped, Curtis

attended an OSU conference in April of that year organized by OSU Modern Greek Department Chairman Vassilis Lambropoulos. It was Lambropoulos who put Curtis in touch with the person who became and still is the CC/AI Website's web guy, OSU librarian Beau David Case. The obituary mentioned in the text is to be found at <http://www.agorainternational.org/about.html> now that Case, as well as Lambropoulos, have moved to the University of Michigan.

⁹Major newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Independent* refused to consider publication of this text. It was eventually published as "Cornelius Castoriadis: An Obituary" in *Salmagundi* (118-19 [Spring-Summer 1998]: 52-61)—a journal that had previously published several of Castoriadis's essays, some of them translated by Curtis—and was reprinted in *Free Associations*, 43 (1999): 321-30, as part of a special issue on Castoriadis.

vowed immediately to wait at least five years before going public with his concerns. He even renewed his conciliatory efforts at the end of that self-imposed time interval, but to no avail during an additional year-long period. It would thus be difficult to say that Curtis has not been extremely patient and forbearing toward the Castoriadis family.

In the interim, family members set up in France an *association loi 1901* whose ambition was to become the "official" [*sic*] Castoriadis nonprofit organization. They also set up a rival to the CC/AI Website, though theirs has been updated only twice in six years, as well as another, semisecret one off-limits to the "Association Cornelius Castoriadis's" (ACC's) own rank-and-file members,¹⁰ and they recruited Pierre Vidal-Naquet to be President of this family-sponsored organization. While Curtis was invited to an initial ACC organizing meeting, he was excluded from a second one. The ACC was officially formed in June 1999 at its first General Assembly meeting in Paris. Vidal-Naquet—champion of Athenian democracy, denouncer of torture and of *raisons d'État*, historian of May '68, point man in France against "negationists" (Holocaust deniers), and the most respected living engaged intellectual in contemporary France—found himself reduced to presenting statutes in whose drafting many "founding members" had not participated, ones that were far removed from the direct-democratic ideals and practices his long-time friend "Comeille" had consistently advocated. Reading these statutes out loud to the assembled members of this new organization, Vidal-Naquet interrupted himself to say, "Well, ahem, it ain't Athens, but that's how it is (*bon, bref*,

¹⁰The URL is: <<http://www.castoriadis.org>>. Visitors to this website receive a "forbidden access" notification.

c'est pas Athènes, mais c'est comme ça)." He also went on to assure those attending that there would be "absolute freedom of expression" within the organization and without, the ACC simply reserving the right to sue in cases of possible slander or libel.

Not surprisingly, this "official" group, which took its name from Cornelius Castoriadis himself but which violated the man's most deeply-held principles, foundered on its own organizational contradictions and internal personality disputes. In particular, elder daughter Sparta and widow Zoé engaged lawyers to sue each other over the estate, it was learned from Sparta's own mother Jeanine "Rilka" Walter (Comrade Victorine in the Fourth International). The ACC's hand-picked first treasurer, son of a family friend, resigned without public notice and subsequently refused to explain the reasons for his decision. An attempt to move the headquarters out of Castoriadis's apartment, where his widow still resides, was resisted by Mrs. Castoriadis, but neither this inconclusive fight nor the stakes surrounding it were ever revealed to the organization's members. A select Publication Committee was appointed from above. It refused to integrate other interested parties into its projects, despite prior promises to do so to which Vidal-Naquet had affixed his moral "guarantee." This Publication Committee eventually resigned *en masse* (again without public explanation) and was replaced by the ACC's own officers (which in French is called *cumul des mandats*, or the holding of multiple offices). The same former student who had warned Curtis of what was afoot after Castoriadis's funeral later informed him that, among the ACC elected directors (five officers and five additional Council members) and with others surrounding the Castoriadis family, things had long ago degenerated into a "war of all against all," so

that Curtis was not, by far, the only target of Castoriadis family ire. This person also informed Curtis that selection of speakers at Castoriadis conferences could sometimes be blocked by Mrs. Castoriadis herself; for example, former S. ou B. member Daniel Blanchard (Canjuers in the group) was accepted for the June 2003 Cerisy Colloquium only after strong resistance from Zoé because he had not been "orthodox" (!) enough, and Curtis himself could not be invited to speak at this or previous meetings in which she was involved on account of her personal objections to him.

Right before the September 2001 biennial General Assembly, Sparta Castoriadis's own half sister had vowed that she would no longer serve on the ACC Council, and at the start of that meeting their mother, in her "disgust" at her daughter Sparta and at Cornelius's last wife, Zoé, privately urged Curtis to "do everything in your power to embarrass them as much as possible in public." Instead, Curtis made the constructive proposal that the ACC create an "anti-Council" chosen by lot among rank-and-file members, along the lines of schemes proposed at various times by Vidal-Naquet, sortition being a democratic practice long championed by Castoriadis, as well. In extemporaneous remarks he delivered at a joint 1992 conference with Castoriadis and his fellow *Cleisthenes the Athenian* author Pierre Lévêque, Vidal-Naquet exhorted his audience:

Try proposing it! I happened to propose it in the institutions of the École, where I proposed one day in 1968 that to the École's Council be added an anti-Council chosen by lot. Everyone laughed in my face! Only once have I succeeded in winning passage of this idea, that was in 1981; by way of an article in the newspaper *Libération* that attracted the

attention of [Education Minister] Savary, I got what today is called the C.N.U. to be chosen by lot, and it worked quite well. Never had one had so free and independent a C.N.U. than thanks to this drawing of lots. The funny thing is that I believe Pierre Lévêque had been chosen by lot. Well, it is all this that renders democracy possible.¹¹

At that ACC General Assembly, President Vidal-Naquet immediately endorsed Curtis's Vidal-Naquet-inspired "Athenian" proposal. And yet he insisted at once that the possibility of an "anti-Council" would have to be studied first by the ACC Council. Two-and-a-half years later, no known discussion has been initiated, no known action has been taken. Indeed, all ACC Council meetings are held in secret. Their agendas have not been publicly announced in advance. No minutes of what was discussed have been communicated to the organization's members. And no decisions subsequently made have been announced in timely fashion. It is even unclear whether the Council meets as often as required by the organization's own statutes, given the huge personality conflicts that occur within it. When officers have resigned, this information, too, has been kept quiet. Searches for replacements have not been opened to rank-and-file ACC members either for

¹¹Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes, the Athenian. An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato*, with a new discussion *On the Invention of Democracy* by Pierre Lévêque, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Cornelius Castoriadis, trans./ed. David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996), p. 109.

suggestions or for participation. And the silent choices to replace the mysteriously disappeared were never reported in public. Indeed, no list of current officers' and Council members' names, addresses, and phone numbers is made available to the membership. Moreover, the officers proposed at the September 2001 General Assembly to abolish its own Council as an efficiency move. When someone in the audience who knows the Castoriadis family intimately explained that this proposal was being advanced for fear that Curtis, specifically, might be elected to one of the ten extant posts, the allegation stood unchallenged. At that meeting, Curtis received a majority from those present and voting for Council member positions, but he was excluded by fiat of the officers on account of additional, spoiled ballots that were designated as counting against his election.

As so many contradictory explanations have been advanced, it has been extremely difficult to discern in what the Castoriadis family animus against Curtis consists. What seems most difficult is "getting to Yes," as the expression goes. During one meeting, with Zoé, Sparta, and a member of the erstwhile Publication Committee who had been a part of S. ou B., an agreement was worked out on the upper floor of a Parisian café chosen by the family as a neutral meeting place. At the moment Curtis repeated what had just been decided upon, Mrs. Castoriadis rose up from her seat and began screaming, distraught, in public, before running down the staircase and out of the building; the two others sat in silence, and so no final agreement was reached. Similar hysterical episodes occurred four times during Mrs. Castoriadis's and Curtis's last one-hour meeting together, at the end of the Cerisy Colloquium. When it came to setting down in writing a formal agreement in the weeks that followed, new objections were raised at every turn, with

Zoé stating that, "anyway, everything will be decided at the last moment" concerning the *RTI* and *FT* translations. In other words, no language could ever be considered binding on the family, and so no foreseeable and reasonable agreement equally applicable to all parties could be reached.

The primary sticking point seems to have been those meticulous footnotes and highly-praised Translator's Forewords for which Curtis became well known, Castoriadis frequently referring to his American translator as his "angel." In *On Plato's Statesman*, the one translation the Castoriadis family allowed him to publish in the past six years, he was granted permission to write only a Translator's *Afterword* separated as far as possible from the book's front matter, so petty had the family's objections become.¹² In particular, family members became incensed because Curtis pointed out in this *Afterword* an error in the original French transcription of this series of Castoriadis seminars (which transcription had been approved by the Castoriadis family but from whose preparation Curtis, among others, had been excluded). The family, in particular Zoé, also seemed concerned that well-edited English-language translations of Castoriadis's writings might cut into sales of the French originals in a world where English is the dominant language

¹²Psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook got into the act after being asked by the Castoriadis family to prepare a volume of Castoriadis's psychoanalytic writings. He informed Curtis that the latter could write a translator's foreword for this book if and only if he promised not to make any "political" comments! Philosophy professor Dick Howard later followed suit; editor of a new series in political philosophy at Columbia University Press, Howard stipulated through CUP that Curtis would be allowed to translate a volume written by Socialisme ou Barbarie cofounder Claude Lefort only if Curtis would refrain from writing not only a foreword but explanatory notes, glossary, or any other words at all.

and French-language books are notoriously lacking in the most elementary scholarly apparatus. She also tried to force upon Stanford University Press (SUP) an entire half of another, non-*Carrefours* posthumous Castoriadis volume when SUP requested that the volume of *Carrefours* selections they had contracted to publish in translation be split into two smaller tomes for financial reasons, Zoé later admitting to Curtis that she thought that this would be the only way she could sell those particular texts abroad. Even an e-mail from Curtis to SUP editor Helen Tartar, drafted jointly in advance by the two of them and then sent cc: to Mrs. Castoriadis in order to explain that these additional writings were perhaps not the most appropriate contents for *RTI* and that other Castoriadis interviews and writings might be more germane (again, see below), failed to change her determination to peddle as much copyrighted material as possible, no matter how thematically unrelated to the book in which they were to be included.

But why not just accede to whatever might be the Castoriadis family demands at a given moment, so that *at least something* could be published? Was it not pride, egotism, *hubris*—or all three—for Curtis to refuse to give in to these demands, however contradictory and enigmatic they might be to fulfill, and to continue to insist upon publishing quality footnotes, apparatus, and translator's forewords (or "afterwords")? These were the questions Curtis asked himself every day for six years. And the answer was always the same. Besides an unwillingness to lower professional standards and his moral commitment to Castoriadis himself to publish quality translations already completed, in response to the above queries Curtis had to ask himself another question: What would it mean to say that it is alright to be silenced in the cause of continuing to publish

Castoriadis's work? If Curtis agreed to such a pact, where process takes a permanent back seat to "results," how would he then be able to defend anyone else in the "Association Cornelius Castoriadis" (or anywhere else) whom these self-appointed censors might also try to silence (such as a Daniel Blanchard)? Castoriadis had always read Curtis's translator's forewords in advance of publication, and he made suggestions Curtis would often incorporate, but sometimes they would disagree and Curtis would publish under his own name and responsibility his own words, without the least opposition from the author whose work was being introduced by his translator. Unfortunately, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who had set himself up as the moral guarantee of the family's Association, promising zero tolerance for censorship of any kind, in the end never resigned his post when faced with the reality of both prior censorship and widespread blacklisting. Heartbroken, Curtis was forced to conclude that Vidal-Naquet is not a man of his word but someone who stands bereft of the courage of his erstwhile convictions. And while Curtis still defends Vidal-Naquet in the latter's conflict with Noam Chomsky over a petition Chomsky circulated about alleged "findings" made by the negationist Robert Faurisson, a defense that cost Curtis his position on the Board of Editorial Advisors of *Democracy & Nature*, it will now be up to Vidal-Naquet to defend himself over this fresh charge of failure to defend freedom of expression, for this time it is Curtis himself who feels compelled to lodge it.¹³

¹³See note 18a in the electronic reprint of Curtis's "On the Bookchin/Biehl Resignations and the Creation of a New Liberatory Project," originally published in *Democracy & Nature*, 11 (1999): 163-74) and now available in full at: <<http://www.agorainternational.org/dnweb1.html>>.



The old saying goes, "There are two things you don't want to see being made, sausage and legislation." Originally attributed to the German statesman Otto von Bismarck, this adage has often been applied to the American law-making process. It is a telling statement in more ways than one.

The general idea is that one's degustatory enjoyment, one's pleasure in consumption, would be spoiled by intimate familiarity with the process of production. An interesting proposition. And yet one belied, precisely in the case of "sausage-making," by the dire consequences of consumer ignorance. Investigative journalist Upton Sinclair exposed the plight of immigrants in the unhealthy conditions (for producers as well as consumers) prevalent at turn-of-the-century Chicago meat-packing plants. His novel, *The Jungle*, which had been rejected by many publishers for its socialist ideas, eventually became, under threat of self-publication, a best seller that went on to impel passage of the Pure Food and Drugs and the Meat Inspection Acts of 1906.

Which brings us to legislation. The idea, once more, is that appreciation of the effects of law-making, the public good obtained, would be spoiled by too close inspection of the legislative process. An equally curious proposition. Here, an "interest"-based theory of government offers the semblance of an explanation: while one might want to avert one's eyes from the "procedures" (often labeled healthy and astute "horse-trading" or rotten "pork-barrel legislation," depending on one's particular view of the ultimate results in each case), the final outcome ensures a "democratic representation" of the various interests that make up a body

politic, thus becoming, without too much reflection, its own justification. Taste and awareness again seem at odds, as do means and ends, process and result, experience and knowledge, and so on—a general alienation of man from his works, presented as the condition for achieving desirability.

How uncanny that, just a few years after Bismarck is said to have uttered this enduring dictum, its two elements, sausage-making and legislation, would come together in America in such a revealing way. The work of Sinclair and other investigative reporters helped make "progressive-era" legislation possible—"palatable," one might say—and President Theodore Roosevelt benefitted from their endeavors in order to institute these and other popular reforms. The socialistic implications of this sort of journalism were too disturbing, however, for President Roosevelt, who soon joined the chorus of those who employed the derogatory epithet of *muckraking* to denigrate these writers' efforts and thus helped to undercut the reform movement associated with his presidency.

There still survives today a naive view of legislation, dressed up in Kantian cum utopian cum Marxian verbiage as purely procedural instantiation of communicative action. In "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime," Castoriadis thoroughly criticizes this exclusively process-oriented (i.e., substance-less) Habermasian conception of democracy that is shared by John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin. What the saying we are examining here tells us is that law-making activities in modern societies, its procedures of enactment, are a literally *obscene* process whose workings cannot stand public scrutiny. And the sausage-making metaphor associated with it goes to show, in the case of Sinclair's *Jungle*, the dire consequences that may result from unexamined and disempowered life in society.

Taking now legislation, law-making, in the broader sense intended by Castoriadis—that is, as the positing of explicit laws, but also of norms, values, customs, ways of making, doing and saying things—we ask why it is so difficult for us to look at our "laws" and the process of their "enactment." This is not to say that sociological, historical, and political-scientific studies are lacking. Quite the contrary. But in a democracy, it is the collective positing activity of law-making that especially counts, not its theorization and manipulation from the outside by self-appointed "experts" of all stripes.¹⁴ And it is conscious and willed collective positing activity—*autonomy*, in Castoriadis's terms, which has both its social and individual sides—that, according to the main argument of the present volume, is in crisis. Contrary to the practices of many, and especially to the posturings of those who now pose as prime proponents of "antitotalitarianism," Castoriadis wishes to bring out in plain terms "the burning issues of the day: the decomposition of Western societies, apathy, political cynicism and corruption, the destruction of the environment, the situation of the poor countries of the world," as he says precisely in the volume's eponymous interview. *RTI* takes a good, long, hard look at the obscenity of our current "legislation"—the laws and rules by which we live our lives or, rather, by which we avoid living our lives in full knowledge of the relevant facts.

This last phrase, "in full knowledge of the relevant facts (*en connaissance de cause*)" is taken, let us note, from Castoriadis's landmark 1957 essay on a self-managed

¹⁴This point was best made by Castoriadis in "On the Content of Socialism, III" (1958, *PSW* 3), with its recognition of the primacy of the workers' own critique of industrial organization for any pertinent critique of industrial sociology.

society, the second part of "On the Content of Socialism." For, the theme of a "rising tide of insignificance" might at first appear merely to be a part of the dyspeptic ramblings of a disappointed and bitter old man nearing the end of his life. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. A brief anecdote illustrates this point. At a gathering a few years after Castoriadis's death, a former S. ou B. member complained that this seemingly pessimistic "insignificance" theme took Castoriadis far afield from his earlier political concerns. Yet what, this comrade was asked in turn, does the "socialism or barbarism" alternative indicate but that, *throughout his life*, such *barbarism* was for Castoriadis an ever-present tendency of modern-day society, to be ignored at our peril?¹⁵ The comrade made no reply.

Indeed, the "collapse of culture" in Russia was a theme already broached as early as a pre-S. ou B. text from 1947,¹⁶ and in a 1983 lecture on Hannah Arendt, Castoriadis reminds us that, like S. ou B., she "saw very clearly that with totalitarianism we face . . . the creation of the *meaningless*."¹⁷ For him, this theme stemmed from an overall analysis of a Weberian rationalization process gone mad within "bureaucratic capitalism," whether of the "total and totali-

¹⁵On "socialism or barbarism" as a "present contending alternative," see Curtis's "Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis," *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (1989): 293-322; reprinted in *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société*, ed. Giovanni Busino (Geneva: Droz, 1989), pp. 293-322.

¹⁶"The Problem of the USSR and the Possibility of a Third Historical Solution," *PSW* 3, p. 52.

¹⁷"Destinies of Totalitarianism," *Salmagundi*, 60 (Spring-Summer 1983): 108.

tarian" (Russian) or "fragmented" (Western) variety. We cannot attempt to trace here all the stages in Castoriadis's evolving articulation of this devastating process of emptying meaning out of people's lives, from his earliest writings and commentary on Weber, when he became the first person to translate the great German sociological thinker into Greek during the Second World War, to the 1949 inaugural *S. ou B.* editorial "Socialism or Barbarism" (*PSW 1*), his 1956 essay on "Khrushchev and the Decomposition of Bureaucratic Ideology" (*PSW 2*), his statement in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961, also in *PSW 2*) that modern capitalism *privatizes individuals* while seeking the *destruction of meaning in work*, a destructive process that spreads outward in a generalizing way eventually to encompass all social activities and to become a destruction of social significations, especially those of *responsibility* and *initiative*, his 1965 talk given to Solidarity members on "The Crisis of Modern Society" (*PSW 3*) that incorporates issues of gender and youth, his negative conclusions in the 1967 circular "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (*PSW 3*) about the initial prospects for the shop stewards' movement in England and for American wildcat strikes to provide an alternative to the growing bureaucratization of the labor movement, his 1968 reflections on the "tree of knowledge" threatening to "collapse under its own weight and crush its gardener as it falls" and on the *juvenilization* of all strata and segments of society ("The Anticipated Revolution," *PSW 3*), the 1979 text "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (also *PSW 3*) where Castoriadis declares, "I have weighed these times, and found them wanting," the updated version of this same text, "The Crisis of Culture and the State," as well as the ominously-titled essay "Dead End?" on the dangers of

technoscience (both of these 1987 texts now appear in *PPA*), and on to such *WIF* texts as "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" and "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (both *MI* texts, originally published in 1990), not to forget the 1982 text "The Crisis of Western Society" (*MI*'s introductory essay, now in *CR*). Indeed, even this brief listing of thematic precursor texts from all periods of his life leaves out many pertinent bibliographical hints and indications, such as the stunning sections of *DG* on "The Destruction of Significations and the Ruination of Language" and on "Ugliness and the Affirmative Hatred of the Beautiful."

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There is, we noted, both a certain artificiality or arbitrariness and a certain logic to Castoriadis's choice in the mid-1990s to divide his topical writings from his psychoanalytical-philosophical ones and to place them in separate volumes. The dual character of his choice may be glimpsed as well in an editorial story that will serve to introduce and to explain our choice of subtitle for *RTI*.

SUP editor Helen Tartar visited Paris in May 1996, after preparations for the *WIF* translation were well underway and just two months after *MI* appeared in France. Tartar proposed to commission Castoriadis for an entirely new volume to be published in English, discussing with him at some length the possibility of his writing a book dealing with post-1989 Western societies. Here is how Curtis, in his September 2000 talk at the Crete Castoriadis Conference, described his subsequent consultation with Castoriadis on this idea for a book whose title was to be drawn from title of a Raymond Chandler novel denoting death:

When, a year or two before his death, Castoriadis was offered an American contract to write a book on his theme of *The Big Sleep* in contemporary Western societies, I could tell he was tempted by this offer to let him bring his political views up to date, but he then suddenly said that all he wanted was to "do pure ontology." I knew that the context was that he felt he had accomplished a great deal already in writing about topical political matters and that this work would stand and could continue to influence those who were willing to let themselves be moved by it and who wanted to go further themselves—and not that he had decided to put all of his past political efforts behind him. So I looked at him squarely, and asked if he really meant that about "pure ontology." His answer was equivocal, informed by his impending sense of mortality. A more revealing admission came when he said that he used to think *every day* about re-forming a revolutionary group but that the conjunctural situation, as well as psychological impediments to group activity, were so discouraging that he had begun to think about this "only once every other day." In his last interview, published about a month after his death, he stated nevertheless that he would *always* remain a revolutionary. How he might express this, in philosophy, in psychoanalytic practice, in political engagement, in artistic expression, and so on, remained for him an open question. To the extent that we are interested in engaging his legacy meaningfully and confronting it fully, this is a question that still lies before us, too, not behind us.

We now take *The Big Sleep* as *RTI*'s subtitle, in order to distinguish *RTI* and its contents from the overlapping but nonidentical *MI* and in honor of a similarly topical volume once projected but never written. As explained below, we have included in *RTI* a number of non-*Carrefours* texts that develop, beyond *MI*, this important theme.¹⁸

The *Big Sleep* expresses what we may call the *figures of contemporary barbarism* Castoriadis spied on the horizon and already saw at work in 1990s society. For example, the Asian financial crash of late 1997 occurred while Castoriadis was already in a coma and facing death. Had he not anticipated this or similar events in his comments on the "vast financial casino" into which the world was being transformed? Also, he continues ecological concerns already expressed in such texts as *DEA* and "Dead End?" when he explains that,

prosperity has been purchased since 1945 (and already beforehand, certainly) at the price of an irreversible destruction of the environment. The famous modern-day "economy" is in reality a fantastic waste of the capital accumulated by the biosphere in the course of three billion years, a wastefulness that is accelerating every day. If one wants to extend to the rest of the planet (its other four-fifths, from the standpoint of population) the liberal-oligarchic regime, one would also have to provide it with the economic level, if not of France,

¹⁸Of particular note is that fact that the phrase *the big sleep* actually appeared in the French title of one of Castoriadis's interviews: "Le grand sommeil des démocraties". *L'Express international*, 1970 (14 April 1989): 54-55.

let us say of Portugal. Do you see the ecological nightmare that signifies, the destruction of nonrenewable resources, the multiplication by fivefold or tenfold of the annual emissions of pollutants, the acceleration of global warming? In reality, it is toward such a state that we are heading, and the totalitarianism we have got coming to us is not the kind that would arise from a revolution; it is the kind where a government (perhaps a world government), after an ecological catastrophe, would say: You've had your fun. The party is over. Here are your two liters of gas and your ten liters of clean air for the month of December, and those who protest are putting the survival of humanity in danger and are public enemies.

And in the most explicitly ecological text now in *RTI*, he adds a concern about the growing unmanageability of immigration within the current global imbalance:

We know that a terrible economic and social imbalance exists between the rich West and the rest of the world. This imbalance is not diminishing; it is growing. The sole thing the "civilized" West exports in the way of culture into these countries is coup d'État techniques, weapons, and televisions displaying consumer models that are unattainable for these poor populations. This imbalance will not be able to go on, unless Europe becomes a fortress ruled by a police State.

Many more of these interrelated figures of contemporary barbarism are to be found among the pages of the present

volume, where he also repeatedly underscores, in the face of an "unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery," the waning of those manifestations of the project of autonomy that had once made the "dual institution of modernity" an eminently contestatory form of society.

Nevertheless, his dark diagnoses of trends within present-day society never induced Castoriadis to adopt a fatalistic prognosis. A 1991 exchange with the editors of *Esprit* that was perhaps dropped from that journal's final printed version for reasons of space had these editors inquiring of him: "Added up, your position seems rather pessimistic"—to which Castoriadis firmly replied: "Why would that be pessimism rather than an attempt to see things as they really are?", a response that clearly echoes the "sober senses" quotation from Marx Castoriadis repeatedly cites here in *RTI* as well as elsewhere. Indeed, in an earlier *Esprit* interview presented now in *RTI*, Castoriadis turned their own pessimistic questioning of him back against them in order to affirm the following:

To say {as you *Esprit* editors hypothesize} that a dull and lifeless social sphere has taken the place of a fecund one, that all radical change is henceforth inconceivable, would mean that a whole phase of history, begun, perhaps, in the twelfth century, is in the process of coming to an end, that one is entering into I know not what kind of new Middle Ages, characterized either by historical tranquillity (in view of the facts, the idea seems comic) or by violent conflicts and disintegrations, but without any historical productivity: in sum, a closed society that is stagnating or that knows only how to tear itself apart without creating anything. (Let it be said,

parenthetically, that this is the meaning I have always given to the term "barbarism," in the expression "socialism or barbarism.") There's no question of making prophecies. But I absolutely don't think that we are living in a society in which nothing is happening any longer.

That interview statement was made in 1979. The figures of contemporary barbarism return, along with figures of contemporary autonomous resistance thereto, in a rhetorical question Castoriadis poses in "Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics," a talk delivered a decade later:

Can one exit from this situation? A change is possible if and only if a new awakening takes place, if and only if a new phase of dense political creativity on the part of humanity begins—which implies, in turn, that we exit from the state of apathy and privatization characteristic of today's industrialized societies. Otherwise, although historical novation certainly will not cease since any idea of an "end of history" is multiply absurd, the risk is that this novation, instead of producing freer individuals in freer societies, might give rise to a new human type, whom we may provisionally call zapanthropus or reflexanthropus, a type of being that is kept on a leash and maintained in the illusion of its individuality and of its liberty by mechanisms that have become independent of all social control and that are managed by anonymous apparatuses already well on the way toward achieving dominance.

Philosophical anthropology, as well as the social and political anthropology conceived by Castoriadis in terms of his major motif of "the imaginary institution of society," come to inform his reflections on this Big Sleep into which Western societies are rapidly falling. Nevertheless, this broad anthropological perspective is not a new one within his overall *oeuvre*. We can see its already starting to constitute a principal concern of his at least as far back as 1962 in the internal programmatic *S. ou B.* text "For a New Orientation" (*PSW 3*), when he urged the group to consider the work of Margaret Mead and other anthropologists, its becoming explicitly thematized in "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (his final *S. ou B.* writings from 1964-1965, which became the first half of *IIS*), and its being articulated in clear revolutionary terms in his 1979 preface to the 10/18 volume of writings on the content of socialism, when he speaks of the "transformation of society, the instauration of an autonomous society involv[ing] a process of anthropological mutation" ("Socialism and Autonomous Society," *PSW 3*, p. 328).

In *RTT*'s eponymous interview from 1994, Castoriadis notes that

we are touching here upon a fundamental factor, one that the great political thinkers of the past knew and that the alleged "political philosophers" of today, bad sociologists and poor theoreticians, splendidly ignore: the intimate solidarity between a social regime and the anthropological type (or the spectrum of such types) needed to make it function. For the most part, capitalism has inherited these anthropological types from previous historical periods: the incorruptible judge, the Weberian civil servant, the

teacher devoted to his task, the worker whose work was, in spite of everything, a source of pride. Such personalities are becoming inconceivable in the contemporary age: it is not clear why today they would be reproduced, who would reproduce them, and in the name of what they would function.

He had already articulated this problem more succinctly and sharply in "The Idea of Revolution" (1989):

Without [the democratic] type of individual, more exactly without a constellation of such types—among which, for example, is the honest and legalistic Weberian bureaucrat—liberal society cannot function. Now, it seems evident to me that society today is no longer capable of reproducing these types. It basically produces the greedy, the frustrated, and the conformist.

Here we have, in a nutshell, Castoriadis's radical anthropological analysis of the crisis of contemporary society and of the rising tide of insignificance that crisis expresses in its tendency to induce "the Big Sleep": figures of a *social-historically-instituted*—and not of a universal, biologically-based (classical Freudian)—"death 'instinct.'"¹⁹

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In the many talks and interviews Castoriadis gave between 1979 and 1996 that make up a large portion of the

¹⁹Need we repeat here the role *repetition* plays in stunting the possibility of creative alternatives?

present volume, it is remarkable how often his questioners try to draw him into purely "Franco-French" quarrels and other, merely transient issues. It is equally remarkable how often and determinedly he resists limiting his responses to those sorts of terms. Castoriadis witnessed only the first stages of the internet bubble, and he did not live to see its bursting, let alone Seattle in 1999, September 11, 2001, various massive financial and business scandals,²⁰ the "war on terrorism," the "second" Gulf War, and so on and so forth. *RTI* certainly is not to be read as a "guide" to the early twenty-first century world in which we live today, for it does not dispense one with having to think for oneself. And yet, this refusal to devote time to the ephemeral, to passing phenomena, and this persistent concentration on long-term trends ensure that *RTI* will remain relevant to people today as they seek to make sense for themselves of drastically changed world circumstances.

Castoriadis comes out fighting at the start of *RTI* with "The Vacuum Industry," our loose and humorous translation of the title of Castoriadis's 1979 defense of Vidal-Naquet in a polemic with the writer Bernard-Henri Lévy. This title—"L'industrie du vide," literally "the emptiness industry"—perfectly captures the themes Castoriadis will develop in the present volume. Cornelius had already ferociously criticized "BHL" and the so-called New Philosophers two years earlier in "The Diversionists" (*PSW* 3). BHL's *Barbarism with a Human Face*, he felt, had shamelessly plagiarized the ideas of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* while diverting that group's radical critique into a vague

²⁰"If financial statements aren't honest, then capitalism is in trouble," a *Washington Post* editorial ("Players in the Scandal," *International Herald Tribune*, January 29, 2002: 6) rather belatedly comes to realize.

"antitotalitarianism" that concealed its own totalitarian roots (BHL himself being an ex-Maoist). His animus against BHL was evident in that earlier article when he asked (p. 275), "How is it that [BHL] is able to go out and 'market' philosophy, instead of being the eighth perfumer in a sultan's harem—which, perhaps, would be more in line with the 'order of things'?" What is interesting is that what could have been merely another Franco-French argument or a personal vendetta is turned by Castoriadis into a general reflection on the failure of critics to resist the promotional hype of the media industry. Rather prescient in this regard is Castoriadis's related point that, with the exception of a few journals like the *New York Review of Books*, book criticism no longer fulfills its appointed function in contemporary society. It is therefore worthwhile quoting *in extenso* a recent critical review published by *NYRB* of BHL's latest book. *Who Killed Daniel Perl?*, which is currently enjoying considerable success stateside, is said to be:

unsound on matters of fact . . . deeply flawed, riddled with major factual errors . . . much of it is invented and its political analysis ill-informed and simplistic. The book's principal problem is the amateurish quality of much of Lévy's research. The section on the English childhood of Moar Sheikh begins raising one's doubts about the author's veracity. . . . BHL's grasp of South Asian geography is especially shaky. . . . Gossip and hearsay are repeated as fact. . . . More seriously, there are numerous occasions where Lévy distorts his evidence and actually inverts the truth. . . . Lévy's misuse of evidence here is revealing of his general method: if proof does not exist, he writes as if it did.

Indeed, the reviewer goes on to note:

It is an alarming reflection of how widespread is the ignorance of Islam in general and of Pakistan in particular that only one of the many reviews of the book that I have seen in the US, by a Pakistani writer, has called attention to BHL's errors and elisions, or even bothered to note his disturbing expressions of contempt for ordinary Pakistanis . . . *Who Killed Daniel Perl?* is not only an insult to the memory of a fine journalist who refused to accept the crude ethnic stereotyping that Lévy indulges in, and who was notably rigorous in checking his facts. It also shows the degree to which it has become possible for a writer to make inaccurate and disparaging remarks about Muslims and ordinary Pakistanis as if it were perfectly natural and acceptable to do so.²¹

A very damning assessment—and one quite reminiscent, a quarter century later, precisely of the kind of criticisms Castoriadis made against BHL. What this reviewer nevertheless fails to note is a likely connection between these recent "inaccurate and disparaging remarks about Muslims and ordinary Pakistanis" and BHL's own prior championing of certain other forms of a politicized monotheism. Another book, another diversion.

RTI continues with two interviews from the mid-1980s on "Psychoanalysis and Society." The first, originally conducted in English, offers a good, brief introduction to his

²¹William Dalrymple, "Murder in Karachi," *The New York Review of Books*, December 4, 2003: 53-56.

psychoanalytic views, which "Freud, Society, History" will then develop in greater depth. The second broaches a few of the personality changes in contemporary society Castoriadis will examine more thoroughly in "The Crisis of the Identification Process" and will relate there to the question of "anthropological types" mentioned above.

Next comes "Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy." Already in 1985, and thus well before the collapse of Russian and Eastern European Communism and the accompanying "pulverization of Marxism-Leninism," Castoriadis was already reorienting his critique away from "Marxist" regimes—"I presume everyone here is clear about what really goes on [there]"—and turning his attention toward that other nineteenth-century ideology that survived and flourished in the twentieth century: "Liberalism," in the Continental sense of conservative ideological advocacy of the supposedly unfettered workings a "free-market," plus "representative democracy." There follow two 1991 pieces occasioned by the "first" Gulf War: "The Gulf War Laid Bare," written just before its outbreak, and "Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth," a joint interview with his long-time friend Edgar Morin conducted soon after its conclusion.²² The former remains remarkably relevant today, especially in its comments about the illusions of declaring instant "Nescafé victory" and about the "favorite blunder" of military strategists who, in declaring that the war in Iraq will not become another Vietnam, completely "forget that war involves people." It also contains a number of bracingly disabused statements about Israelis,

²²Morin reportedly had some discussions with Castoriadis later on, before his friend's death, about the two of them going to Chiapas together to meet and debate with members of the Zapatista movement.

Palestinians, Arab regimes, and the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, themes developed further in his debate with Morin and in other *RTI* texts. And how even more compelling today is Castoriadis's outspoken perspective on, for example, the ineffectiveness and uselessness of the United Nations in our age of unilateral preemptive strikes.

Another 1991 interview, "The Dilapidation of the West," now brings us to the heart of the "rising tide of insignificance" theme. We are fortunate to have a Postscript written by Castoriadis in English three years later, as well as an update to this update, in Castoriadis's brief additional mention of Rwandan genocide for the 1995 French version published in *MI*.

Now, "The Gulf War Laid Bare" as well as the next piece in the present volume, an interview on "The Revolutionary Force of Ecology," did not appear in any of the *Carrefours* volumes. We have included in the 2003 English-language *RTI* edition these two non-*Carrefours* texts, along with a follow-up interview to the book's eponymous chapter and "The *Coordinations* in France," in order to extend the "rising tide of insignificance" theme beyond the texts printed in the French *MI* volume and to show how deeply and broadly engaged Castoriadis remained at the end of his life, offering original and trenchant public statements of criticism and reflection on contemporary social, political, and ecological matters—his desire to confine himself to "pure ontology" notwithstanding. Indeed, we could easily have cast a much vaster net beyond these four particular texts.²³ Let us note that the length of the resulting list indicates that Castoriadis himself underestimated how many texts, including printed

²³See the Appendix to the present volume.

interviews and published talks, he had available that were "devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics"; for, in this light, *MI* can hardly be said to include "most of my texts from the past few years" on these topics. This brief look at non-*Carrefours* texts also offers an occasion to marvel at how open and available Castoriadis made himself, not only to academic audiences or to established newspapers and magazines like *Le Monde* and *Esprit*, but also to more obscure activist journals, such as the anarchist arts review *Drunken Boat*, and to the author of a small book on grass-roots labor organizing, for whom Castoriadis wrote the only known book preface he composed during his lifetime.

When the 1994 eponymous interview "The Rising Tide of Insignificance" was reprinted in *MI* in early 1996, Castoriadis added a footnote concerning the huge labor strikes and student demonstrations that in the interim had seized hold of France: "Whatever their final outcome might be, the strikes unfolding now (November-December 1995) in France defy, by their implicit signification, this characterization." That is to say, he quite willingly considered the possibility that mass action from below might come to upset, pose a challenge to, or at least temporarily escape the logic of those disturbing underlying trends whose contours he had been tracing out. After all, his denunciations of the "vacuum industry," of the "void" of present-day Western societies and of their inability to offer anything other than hollow alternatives to the Third World and to Arab and Muslim cultures prey to religious and nationalistic fanaticism, as well as his analyses of the growing meaninglessness already discerned in Russian totalitarianism and in modern capitalism, were predicated upon, if not the hope, at least a strong desire that positive new options might

continue to be created, to swell up from underneath today's stultifying complacency and generalized conformism.

In his follow-up interview to "Rising Tide . . . ," *Drunken Boat's* Max Bleckman questioned Castoriadis closely and at great length about this footnoted admission. This, then, is a precious document for bringing *MI* up to date at the beginning of the third millennium. After his death, the Seattle protests in 1999 and the subsequent growth of an "antiglobalization" movement that is presently morphing into an *altermondialization* (alternative globalization) movement at least in France, might seem to some a further proof of the inaccuracy—or, more accurately, the limitations or current inapplicability—of his "rising tide of insignificance" theme. Now, no one can presume to know how Castoriadis might have greeted these new developments and would have modified or extended his views. To the extent that one wishes to think the present-day situation out for oneself, but with the aid of Castoriadis's past reflections, the carefully nuanced and vigilant response the latter provides in "A Rising Tide of Significance?" may prove to be of great assistance. In particular, we can discern his enduring concern with the *question of organization* when he examines the uniquely French phenomenon of *coordinations*, those grass-roots labor groupings created recently to bypass the traditional union bureaucracies. The mixed assessment he provides of these *coordinations* here and in his preface to a book on the same subject may serve as a caution to our enthusiasm and may encourage us, as well, to conduct an in-depth and balanced appraisal of today's potentials for collective self-activity.

The fascinating detail Bleckman brings out is that the events of November-December 1995 in France had inspired Castoriadis to consider forming a new group—and

not an academic or intellectual one, but one committed to presenting before as wide an audience as possible the current political stakes for revolutionaries, as well as an analysis of the difficulties and obstacles movements for radical change face today. Indeed, we have gleaned from other sources additional, though inconclusive, indications of Castoriadis's general motion in that direction shortly before his death. And as noted above, in his final interview he proclaimed that he would always remain a revolutionary.²⁴

Castoriadis asked himself, at least every other day, whether he should re-form a revolutionary organization. It is difficult to conceive how, if we are to take Castoriadis's ideas and analyses seriously, we can avoid posing the same question to ourselves. And to the extent that we want to remain serious about our commitment to the autonomous self-transformation of society and not to live life as compromised greedy frustrated conformists lacking a moral compass, sometimes we may just have to decide that radical departures from the normal but obscene operation of society, of institutions, and of organizations are warranted and even desirable.

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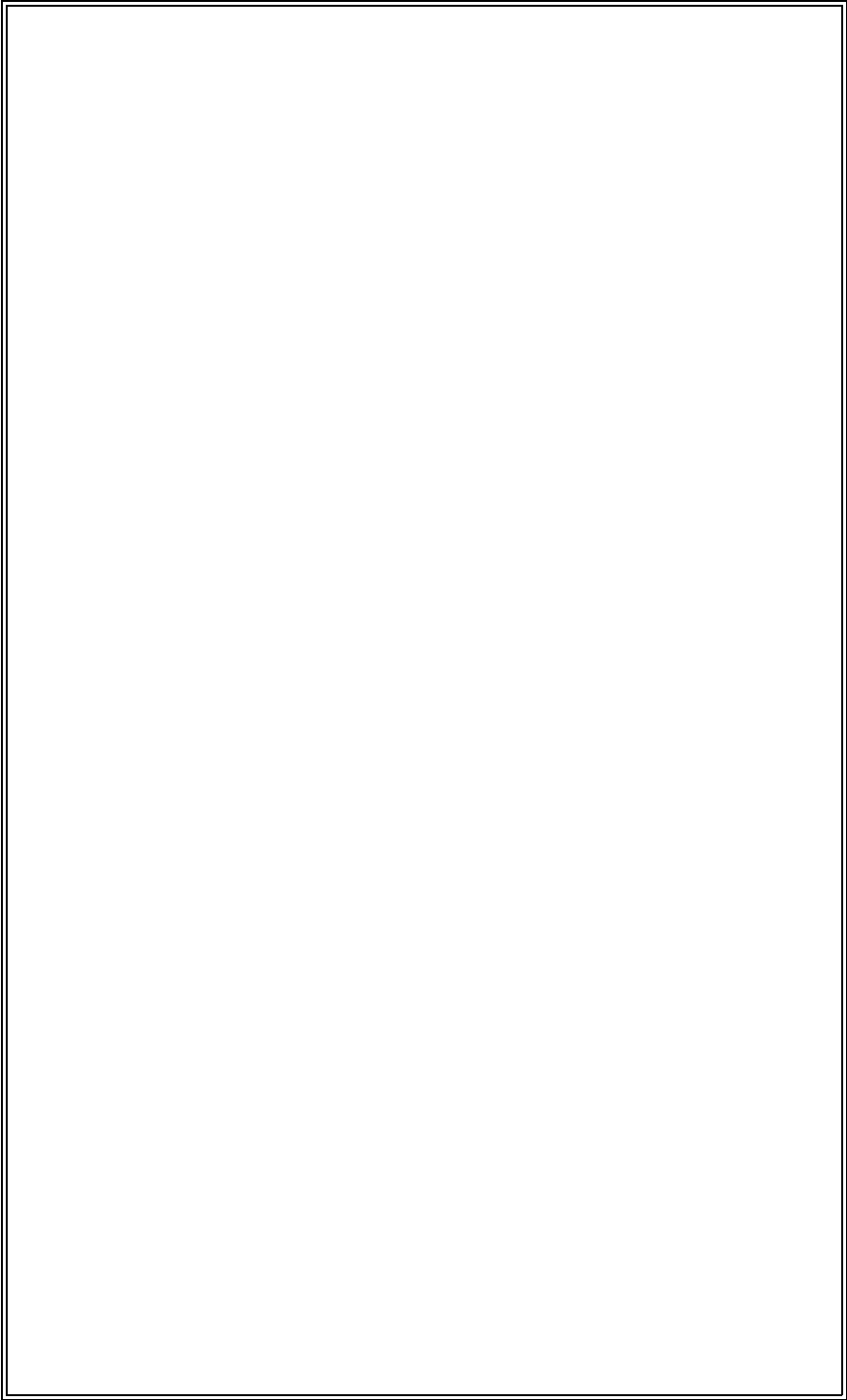
Two final comments about the title page of this electronic edition. As noted there, the present volume is translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. An alternative would have been, under

²⁴"La dernière interview de Cornélius [sic] Castoriadis, 'Pourquoi je suis révolutionnaire,'" *L'Événement du jeudi*, 8-14 janvier 1998: 80-81. This interview was reportedly published without the Castoriadis family's consent.

current circumstances, for Translator/Editor to have publish these writings under a pseudonym. In either case, this Foreword would still be lacking one thing Curtis's Forewords and Afterword always conscientiously included: a self-presentation. Unfortunately, neither an anonymous nor a pseudonymous T/E can do so. On the other hand, and let this last observation serve as a concluding remark on the title page, on pseudonyms, and on the present volume in general: Cornelius Castoriadis has expired, but in a new way now the writings of Paul Cardan live on!²⁵

November-December 2003

²⁵The reader is also requested to refer to the Notice to the present volume.

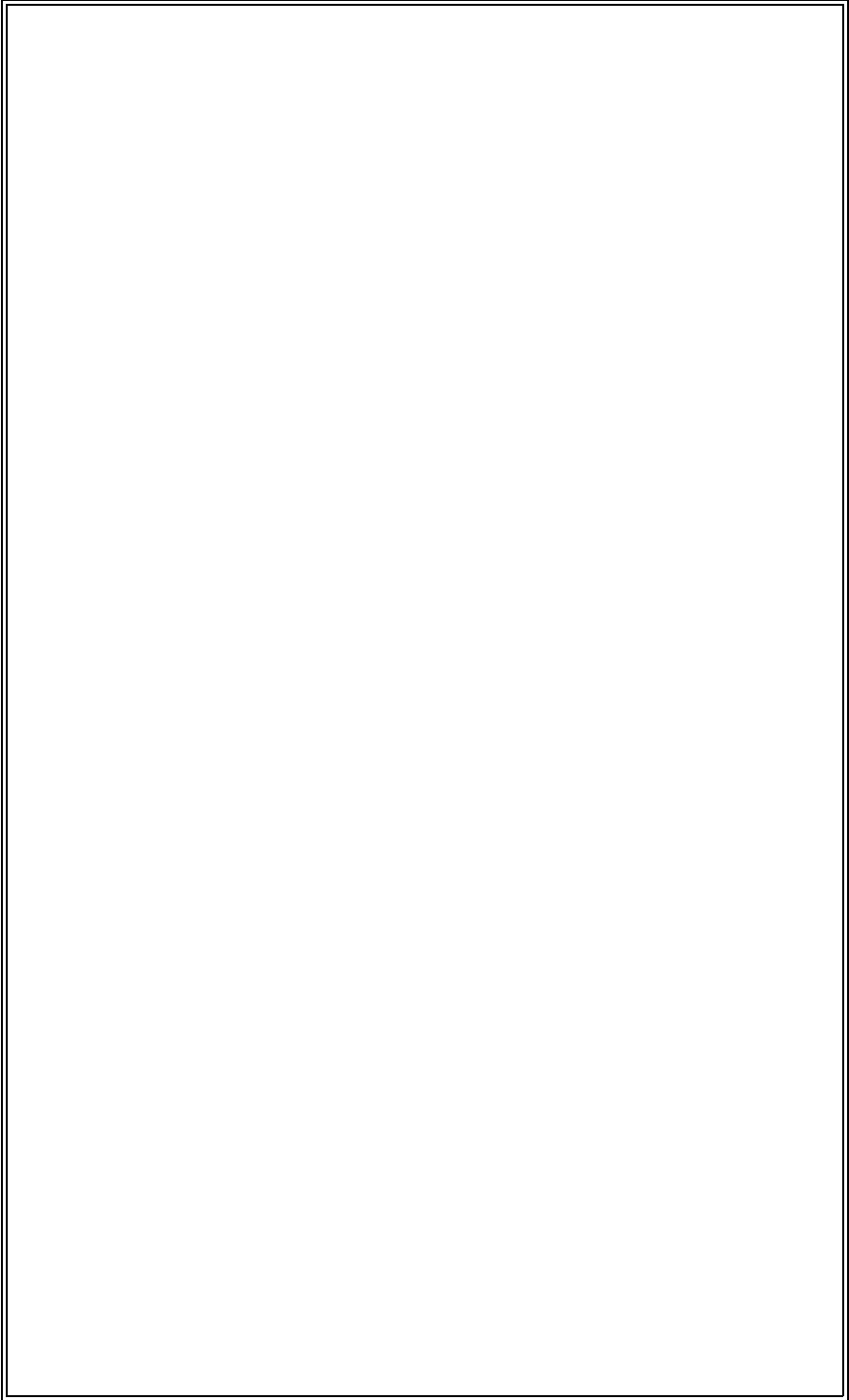


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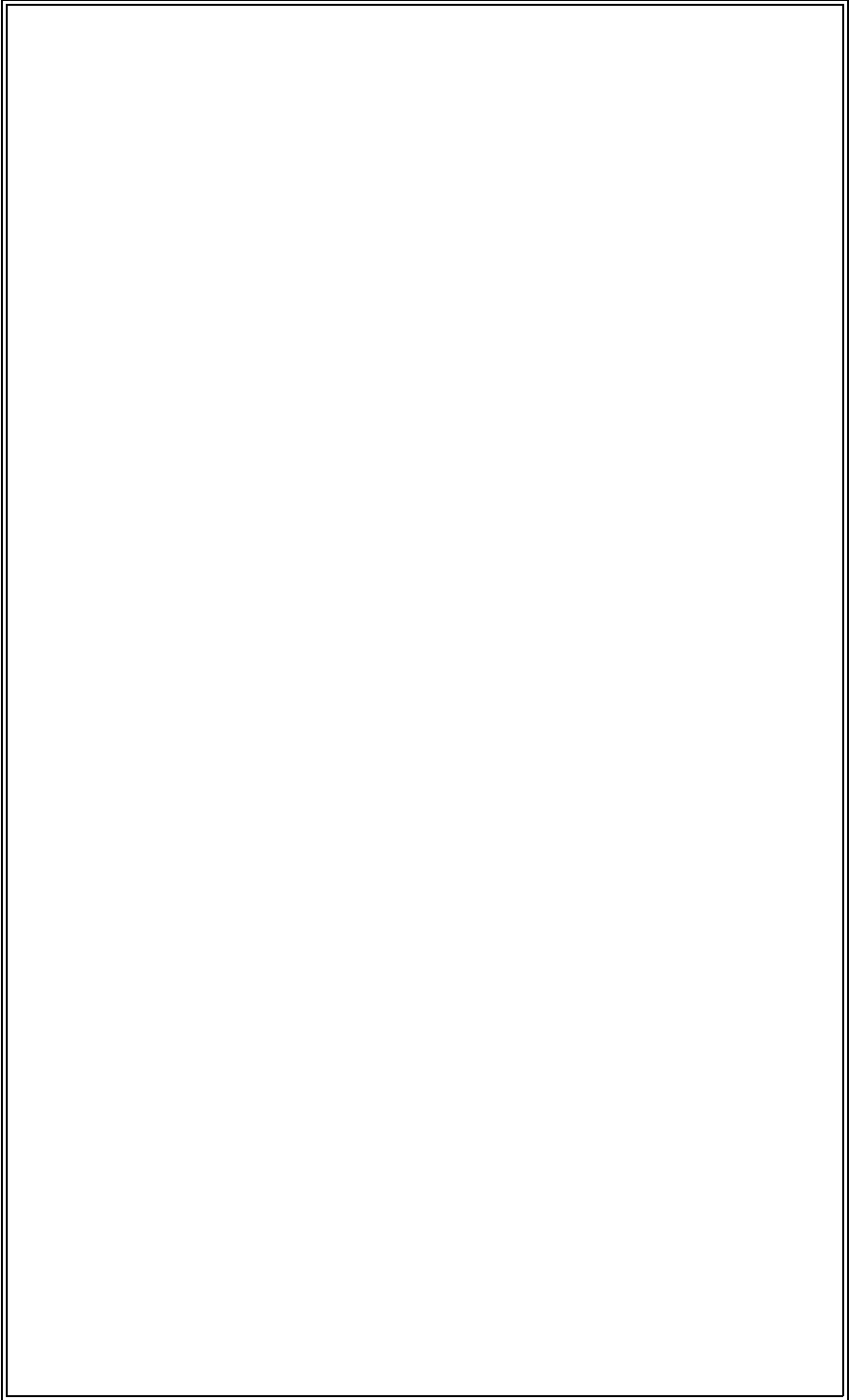
It is unfortunate that, under current circumstances, the present volume has not been able to benefit from the eye of a professional copyeditor and proofreader, as had been the case with Castoriadis volumes published by commercial and academic presses. The reader's indulgence, and her suggestions for improvements in subsequent editions, would therefore be most appreciated. For questions of terminology, the reader is referred to David Ames Curtis's Appendix I: Glossary in *PSW 1* and Appendix C: Glossary in *PSW 3*, as well as to his "On the Translation" in *World in Fragments*.¹

We note here simply a list of the many English-language phrases Castoriadis employed in his original French-language texts: "fast food," "attention span," "lobbies," "supply-side economics," "Big Government," "shop stewards," "[they] never had it so good," the "one best way" (three times), "double bind," "hopeful and dreadful monster," "bill of rights," "due process of law," "ready made," "us-and-them," "We the people," and a phrase, "the one precise essential," drawn from the English-language translator's Prefatory Remarks to a book by Max Weber, a translator's preface Castoriadis had cited as an informative aid for the appreciation of Weber's work.

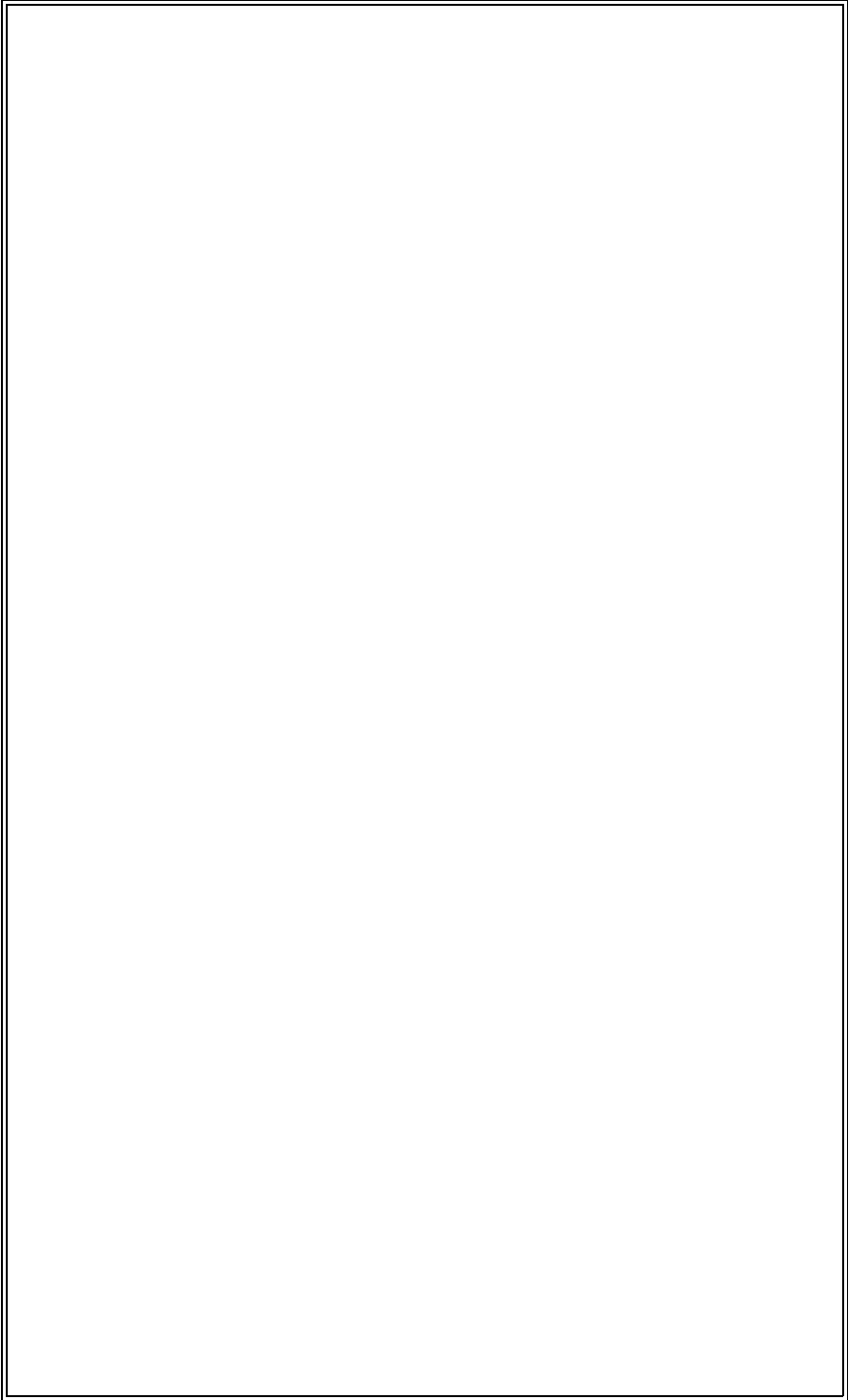
¹ Curtis may be contacted at <curtis@msh-paris.fr>.



**THE RISING TIDE OF
INSIGNIFICANCY**



PART ONE
KAIROS



The Vacuum Industry*

It is regrettable that Pierre Vidal-Naquet's letter, published on page 42 of the June 18, 1979, *Nouvel Observateur*, had several important passages amputated:

All one need do, indeed, is to cast a quick glance at this book in order to notice that, far from being a major work of political philosophy, it is literally teeming with gross errors, vague approximations, false quotations, and raving statements. With all the publicity hype surrounding this book, and independent of any political question, and in particular that of the necessary struggle against totalitarianism, what really matters is to reestablish, in discussions among intellectuals, a minimum of integrity. . . . Whether it would be in biblical history, in Greek history, or in contemporary history, Mr. Bernard-Henri Lévy displays, in all fields, the same appalling ignorance, the same astounding impudence, let one judge: (. . .).

*In a letter addressed to the editors of several newspapers and news weeklies, Pierre Vidal-Naquet expressed his astonishment at the diatribes with which Parisian reviews [*la critique parisienne*] had, nearly unanimously, greeted Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Le Testament de Dieu* (Paris: Grasset, 1979), a work that, as he said, "literally teems with gross errors and statements of a delusional nature." Of all the publications that received this letter, only *Le Nouvel Observateur* printed it (on p. 42 of its June 18, 1979 issue), accompanied by an incredibly rude and dishonest response from the author whose work was being challenged. Vidal-Naquet responded to him in turn on p. 37 of the June 25, 1979 issue. The note to be read here was published in this same weekly on pp. 35-37 of the July 9, 1979 issue. The entire printed record of this correspondence was republished in *Quaderni di storia*, 11 (January-June 1980): 315-29. "L'industrie du vide" was reprinted in *DH*, pp. 28-34.

Shmuel Trigano had corroborated this judgment in advance, concerning biblical history and exegesis, in the May 25, 1979 issue of *Le Monde*. It is simply indecent to speak on this score of "priggish games" and to claim that someone wants to "censure all speech that would not have first appeared before the grand tribunal of certified teachers (*agrégés*)," as has had the effrontery to claim someone who is in the media almost as much as the "Gang of Four" and in order to produce the same sort of vacuity. Vidal-Naquet did not ask editors to "reinforce their control over the production of ideas and over their circulation." He stood up against the *shameful degradation of the critical function* in today's France. Obviously, editorial directors are *also* responsible for this degradation—as they were (and as they remain) responsible for having, decade upon decade, presented the totalitarian power of Stalins and Maos as "socialism" and "revolution" or for having allowed these to be presented as such. But perhaps the author, from the perch of the new "ethics" he wants to teach to the world, will tell us, as the "philosophers of desire" did not so long ago, that "responsibility is a cop's concept"? Perhaps he only has a prison and policeman's notion of responsibility.

In the "Republic of Letters," there are—there were, before the rise of the impostors—some mores, some rules, and some standards. If someone does not respect these, it is for others to call them to order *and* to warn the public. If that is not done, as has been known for a long time, unchecked demagoguery leads to tyranny. It brings about the destruction—progressing before our very eyes—of *effectively actual*, public, social norms and behaviors, which the common search for truth presupposes. What we are all responsible for, precisely qua *political* subjects, is not the timeless, transcendental truth of mathematics or

psychoanalysis: if that sort of truth exists, it is shielded from all risk. What we are responsible for is the *effectively actual presence* of this truth in and for the society in which we live. And it is truth that brings about the ruination of totalitarianism as well as publicity-driven imposture. Not to stand up against imposture, not to denounce it, is to render oneself coresponsible for its possible victory. More insidious, publicity-driven imposture is not, in the long run, less dangerous than totalitarian imposture. Via different means, one like the other destroys the existence of a *public space for thought*, for confrontation, for mutual criticism. The distance between the two, moreover, is not so great, and the procedures used are often the same. In the author's response, we find a good sampling of the procedures of Stalinist deceitfulness. Caught with his hand in the sack, the thief cries "Thief!" Having falsified the Old Testament, he accuses Vidal-Naquet of falsification on the same subject, and on this same subject he refalsifies himself (claiming that he did not write what he wrote and sending the reader back to other pages that have nothing to do with the matter at hand). Here we find once again the same procedures of intimidation: you see, now pointing out an author's errors and falsifications is like being an "informer", writing "police reports," and engaging in "petty scholarly militarism" and taking on the job of the "prosecutor." (That is how French Communist Party leader Georges Marchais tells off the press: "Gentlemen, you do not know what democracy is.")

What really matters to me, obviously, is not the personal case but, rather, the general question Vidal-Naquet raised at the end of his letter, which I reformulate here: Under what sociological and anthropological conditions, in a country with a great and venerable culture of learning, can

an "author" be permitted to write *just anything*, can the "critics" praise him to the skies, can the public follow docilely along—and can those who unveil the imposture, without in any way being reduced to silence or imprisoned, elicit no effective response?

This question is but one aspect of another, much vaster question: that of the decomposition and crisis of contemporary society and culture. And, of course too, that of the *crisis of democracy*. For, democracy is possible only where there is a democratic *ethos*: responsibility, shame, frankness (*parrhēsia*), checking up on one another, and an acute awareness of the fact that the public stakes are also personal stakes for each one of us. And without such an ethos, there can no longer be a "Republic of Letters," but only pseudotruths *administered* by the State, by the clergy (whether monotheistic or not), or by the media.

This process of accelerated destruction of the public space for thought and of the rise of imposture would require a lengthy analysis. Here, I can only indicate and describe in brief terms a few of its conditions of possibility.

The first of these conditions concerns "authors" themselves. They must be devoid of any feelings of responsibility and any sense of shame. Shame is, obviously, a social and political virtue: without shame, no democracy. (In the *Laws*, Plato quite rightly saw that the Athenian democracy had accomplished marvels so long as *shame, aidōs*, reigned there.) In these matters, the absence of shame is *ipso facto* contempt for others and for the public. Indeed, to invent facts and citations one must have a fantastic contempt for one's own craft, for the truth, too, certainly, but just as much for one's readers. One must have this contempt for the public, squared, to feign, when these blunders are pointed out, to turn the accusation of ignorance

against the person who pointed them out. And one must have unequalled shamelessness—or rather, the shamelessness the Communists and the Fascists have already shown to us—to refer to Pierre Vidal-Naquet as a "*probably* antitotalitarian intellectual" (my emphasis; the style of insinuation, which could be retracted if things turned bad, stinks of French Communist Party newspaper *l'Humanité* at five-hundred miles' distance)—Vidal-Naquet, who for more than twenty years happens to have been on the front lines of those who denounced totalitarianism and who fought against the Algerian War and torture in an age when that, far from bringing in comfortable author's royalties, entailed considerable risks.

Yet individuals richly endowed with this lack of qualities have existed at all times. Generally, they made their fortunes in other forms of trafficking, not in peddling "ideas." Another evolution was necessary, precisely the one that has made of "ideas" an object of trafficking, expendable commodities that are consumed one season and then thrown away (forgotten) with the next change of fashion. That has nothing to do with any "democratization of culture"—any more than that the expansion of television would signify a "democratization of information," but quite precisely *uniformly oriented and administered disinformation*.

That the media industry would make its profits as it can is, in the instituted system, only logical: its business is business. That it finds unscrupulous scribes to play the game is not surprising, either. Yet all this has still another condition of possibility: the attitude of the public. The "authors" and their promoters fabricate and sell their junk. But the public buys it—and sees therein only some junk, some fast food. Far from offering any consolation, this behavior is expressive of a catastrophic degradation—one

that risks becoming irreversible—of the public's relationship to the written word. The more people read, the less they *read*. They read books that are presented to them as "philosophical" like they read detective novels. In a sense, certainly, they are not wrong. But in another sense, they are unlearning to read, to reflect, to engage in criticism. They are simply catching up, as the *Nouvel Observateur* said a few weeks ago, with "the chic-est debate of the season."

Behind this lie some historically weighty factors. There is corruption of one's mental mechanisms by fifty years of totalitarian mystification: people who have for so long accepted the idea that the Stalinist terror represented the most advanced form of democracy have no need to make any great intellectual contorsions in order to swallow the statement that Athenian democracy (or self-management [*autogestion*]) is equivalent to totalitarianism. But there is also the crisis of the epoch, the spirit of the times. A pathetic epoch it is, one which, in its impotence to create or to recognize the new, has been reduced to rehashing, remasticating, spitting out, and vomiting up forever a tradition it is not even truly capable of knowing and bringing to life.

Finally, what is needed, too—both as condition and result of this evolution—is the alteration and basic degradation of the traditional function of book-review criticism [*la critique*]. Book-review criticism must cease to be *critical* and must become, more or less, part of the promotional and advertising industry.

We are not talking here about art criticism, which raises other questions; nor are we talking about criticism in the domains of the exact sciences, or about specialized disciplines, where until now the research community has been able to impose its scientific ethos. In these domains,

moreover, the mystifications are also rare for a good reason: trafficking in Bamileke customs or the decimals of Planck's constant does not bring in anything.

But trafficking in general ideas—those at the intersection of the "human sciences," philosophy, and political thought—is beginning to bring in a lot, particularly in France. And it is here that the function of criticism could and should be important, not because it is easy, but precisely because it is hard. Faced with an author who claims to be talking about the totality of history and about the questions this totality raises, who can tell, and how, if he is a new Plato, Aristotle, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegle, Marx, or Tocqueville—or some counterfeiter?

Now, do not come and tell me that it is up to the readers to judge: that is obvious, and futile. Nor that I am inviting book-review critics to function like censors, to place a screen between authors and the public. That would be a great bit of hypocrisy. For, contemporary book-review criticism is already carrying out this censorship function on a massive scale: it buries beneath silence everything that is not fashionable and everything that is difficult. Among book critics' crowning jewels of shame, for example, is the following: they mention Emmanuel Lévinas, fleetingly, only after he, ransacked and chopped into little pieces, was thrown into the Lévy fruit salad. And insofar as things depend on it, book-review criticism imposes the "products." If French book critics are to be believed, nothing but masterworks have been produced in this country {since the nineteen-fifties}, and *nothing* would be bad or subject to criticism. It has been ages since I have seen a book critic criticize an author. (I am not talking about cases in which book critics are obliged to give echo to polemics among authors, nor of "politically"-oriented criticism.) Everything

that is published—everything that is talked about—is marvelous. Would the result be different if there were prior censorship and if the book critics wrote on somebody's orders? Commercial-advertising subservience does not differ so much, from this point of view, from totalitarian subservience.

There are formal standards of rigor, of craft, for which book-review criticism has to demand respect, and the book critic has to inform the reader when such is not the case. Book reviews that would be as honest and faithful as possible must be written about the content of the works reviewed. (Why can *The Times Literary Supplement* or *The New York Review of Books* do it but not French critics?) And the book critic has to risk rendering a basic judgment, something he risks *whatever he might do*. Whatever they might do, French book critics who have praised to the skies all these years the succession of stars of the French Ideology will forever remain seated before history wearing their dunce's caps.¹

The respect for formal standards of rigor is not a "formal" question. The book critic has to tell me whether the author is making up facts and inventing quotations, either gratuitously, which creates a presumption of ignorance and irresponsibility, or for the needs of his cause, which creates a presumption of intellectual dishonesty. To do this is not to be a pig but to do one's work. Not to do it

¹Castoriadis mentions "the French Ideology" in "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1979), *PSW* 3, p. 304, and in "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986), *WIF*, p. 51; in the latter essay, a critical review of a book by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, he refers the reader, apropos of this "French Ideology," to "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation" (1977), in *CL*. —Translator/Editor (hereafter: T/E)

is to abuse the public's confidence and to steal one's own salary. The book critic is charged with a public, social, and democratic function of checking up on authors and educating readers. You are free to write and to publish whatever you want. But if you plagiarize Saint-John Perse, be forewarned that that will be said high and loud. The educational function is for future authors and readers, and it is all the more vital today as high-school and university education is continually deteriorating.

Respect for these standards is important for two reasons. First, because it shows whether or not the author is capable of subjecting himself to certain laws, of imposing self-discipline without material or external constraints. There is no logical necessity here: in the abstract, one can conceive of a brilliant author who would mangle facts and botch quotations to his heart's content. And yet, by one of those mysteries of the life of the mind [*esprit*]*—*which are obviously inscrutable for our department-store geniuses—hardly any examples of these are known. *It happens that* the great creators have always also been ardent *artisans*. It happens that Michelangelo himself went to oversee the extraction of his marble in the quarries. And it happens that, when an archaeologist tried to denounce some "inaccuracies" in *Salammbô*—a novel, not a historical work—Gustave Flaubert was able to demonstrate to this scholar that he knew Punic and Roman archaeology better than the archaeologist did.

The second reason is that there is no abyss separating the "formal" from the "substantial." If book critics had flinched at this now-famous Hali-baba-carnassus author, they would easily have discovered, one thing leading to another, that the "author" was drawing his "dazzling erudition" from Bailly (an excellent dictionary for high-

school seniors, but not for an investigation into Greek culture) and that the asinities he had recounted about the absence of "conscience" in Greece collapses already before Menander's "For mortals, conscience is god." If they had flinched at Robespierre's "killing of God," they would perhaps have seen more readily what sticks out here like a sore thumb: that the "author" is falsifying the facts in order to connect atheism and Terror and clouding up the massive historical evidence that goes to show that "monotheisms" have been, infinitely more than other beliefs, sources of holy wars, of extermination for those who are allodox, accomplices of the most oppressive powers, and that they have, in two and a half cases out of three, explicitly called for or tried to impose a nonseparation of the religious and political spheres.

If book critics continue to abdicate their function, other intellectuals and writers will be duty bound to replace them. This task is now becoming an ethical and political task. That *this* pile of junk would go out of fashion is a sure thing: it has, like all the products of today, its own built-in obsolescence. But the *system* in and through which these piles of junk mount up has to be combated in each of its manifestations. We have to struggle for the preservation of an authentic public space for thought against the powers of the State, but also against the bluffing, demagoguery, and prostitution of the spirit [*esprit*].

Psychoanalysis and Society I*

Donald Moss: Why don't you talk a little bit about how the practice of psychoanalysis helped you, as you said, to "see more clearly," and about the way your sight was cleared?

Cornelius Castoriadis: Well, it is a totally different thing to work with abstract concepts, just to read books by Freud, etc. and to be in the actual psychoanalytic process, to see how the Unconscious works, how the drives of people manifest themselves, and how (not mechanisms, we cannot really call them *mechanisms*) but say, more or less stylized processes are established, whereby this or that type of psychical alienation or heteronomy comes to exist. This is the concrete aspect. The more abstract aspect is that there is, I think, still a lot to be done at the theoretical level, both to explore the unconscious psyche and to understand the relation, the bridge over the abyss, which is the relation between the unconscious psyche and the socially fabricated individual (the later depending, of course, on the institution of society and of each given society). How is it that this totally asocial entity, the psyche, this absolutely egocentric, areal or antireal center, can be transformed by the actions of society and institutions, starting of course with the first surroundings of the child in the family, into a social individual that talks, thinks, can refrain from immediate satisfaction of drives, and so on? A fantastic problem, with tremendous political import, which one can see almost

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immediately. You see what I mean?

D.M.: Can you articulate further your sense of this?

C.C.: We were speaking before about Russia, Stalinism, Nazism and saying that these phenomena can hardly be understood without taking into account the tremendous appeal that *force* exerts on humans, that is, on the psyche.

D.M.: Yes. . . .

C.C.: And why is this so? We have to try to understand that. We have to try to understand this tendency of people (the main obstacle you find all the time when you engage in revolutionary or radical politics) to give up initiative, to find some protective shelter either in the figure of a leader or in the scheme of an organization as an anonymous but well-functioning setup, which guarantees the line, the truth, one's belonging, etc. All these factors play a tremendous role—and, after all, it is against all that that we are struggling.

David Lichtenstein: This makes me think of your use of the word *autonomy*. You've said things about individual autonomy and autonomy as a collective response. Can you elaborate on the parallels?

C.C.: Yes. What is collective autonomy? Well, what is its opposite? The opposite is heteronomous society. What are the roots of heteronomous society? Here we come up against what I think has been a misleading central idea of most political movements of the Left, and first and foremost of Marxism. Heteronomy has been confused, I mean identified, with domination and exploitation by a particular social stratum. But domination and exploitation by one particular social stratum is but *one* of the manifestations (or realizations) of heteronomy. The essence of heteronomy is more than that. You find

heteronomy in primitive societies, actually in all primitive societies, yet you cannot really speak, in such societies, of a division into dominant strata and dominated strata. So, what is heteronomy in a primitive society? It is that people strongly believe (and *cannot but* believe) that the law, the institutions of their society have been given to them, once and for all, by somebody else—the spirits, the ancestors, the gods, or whatever—and are not (and could not be) their own work. This is also true in historical societies (in the narrow sense of *historical*), which are religious societies. Moses received the law from God, so, if you are Hebrew, you cannot put into question the law. For then, you would be putting into question God himself. You would have to say, *God is wrong*, or *God is unjust*, which is something inconceivable as long as you remain within the framework of the beliefs of a religious society. The same is true for Christianity, or for Islam.

So, heteronomy is the fact that the institution of society, which is the creation of society itself, is posited by the society as given to society by somebody else, a "transcendent" source: ancestors, gods, God, nature, or—with Marx—"laws of history."

D.M.: Not "somebody else," but "something else."

C.C.: Right, something else. And, according to Marx, you will be able to institute a socialist society at the moment and place where the laws of history will dictate a socialist organization of society. It is the same idea.

So, society is alienating itself to its own product, which is institutions. And autonomy is not just the self-institution of society, because there is *always* self-institution of society. God does not exist, and "laws of history," in the Marxian sense, do not exist. Institutions are a creation of man. But they are, so to speak, a blind creation. People do

not know that they create and that they are, in a certain sense, free to create their institutions. And they mix up the fact that there can be no society (and no human life) without institutions and laws, with the idea that there has to be some transcendent source and guarantee of the institution. You see what I mean?

D.M.: Yes.

C.C.: Let us go a bit further. What would be an autonomous society? An autonomous society would be a society that knows that its institutions, its laws, are its own work and product. Therefore, it can put them into question, and change them. At the same time, it would recognize that we cannot live without laws. Right? O.K.

Now, as to the autonomy of the individual. I would say an individual is autonomous when he or she is really able to alter lucidly his or her own life. This does not mean he is master over his life; we are never masters of our lives, because we cannot eliminate the Unconscious, eliminate our belonging to society, and so on. But we can alter our relation to our Unconscious; we can create a relation to our Unconscious that makes a qualitative difference from the state where we are just dominated by our Unconscious without knowing anything about it. Right? We can be dominated by our Unconscious, that is, dominated by our own past. We are alienating ourselves, without knowing it, to our own past, not recognizing that we have, in a sense, to be ourselves, the source of the norms and the values we propose to ourselves. Of course, we are not the absolute source, and of course there is the social law. But I obey the social law—if and when I obey the law—because either I think that the law is what it ought to be, or perhaps I recognize that it is not what it ought to be but, in this particular context, given, say, the will of the majority, being

a member of the collectivity I have to obey the law even if I consider that it ought to be changed.

D.M.: Now, you have made a kind of equation between the Unconscious and our past. You said, "dominated by our Unconscious, dominated by our past." In a certain way, this strikes me as an optimistic idea about the Unconscious because it implies that it is accessible through work—one can remember—in a certain way, and the more one remembers, the less one is dominated, and finally . . .

C.C.: No . . . not the more one remembers: the more one becomes able to work through the remembrance. Right?

D.M.: Yes. What are the limits, in your thinking, to this remembrance and this working through? Where does it become problematic? Where are the edges?

C.C.: First of all, let me make one thing clear. I do not identify the Unconscious and the past. The Unconscious is, of course, not just the past. This is a point on which perhaps some present-day psychoanalysts see things more clearly than Freud. There was a Freudian idea, so to speak, a model plan of the treatment: to have the patient remember would have a cathartic effect, a dissolving effect on, say, the complex or the network of complexes. But in fact you can, to a very wide extent, work through actual material, not always necessarily through remembrance, because the structure is there. I mean the past is present in the present.

D.M.: Um-hm.

C.C.: Right? It is clear with the dream. The, at any rate unattainable, identity of the meaning of this dream with some configuration dating from childhood is not in itself very significant or very imperative. What is important is that the patient can really see through this meaning and hopefully alter his or her attitude in relation to this meaning

and all the complex structure of drives, affects, emotions, and desires linked to it. So, the past and the Unconscious are and are not the same, both theoretically and in the practice of the psychoanalytic treatment. Now, you ask: "What are the limits?" This is a very important question. I mean, after all, why is it that a psychoanalytic treatment does not always work?

D.M.: Yes. And another point would be that idea of the appeal of the force. It is a very powerful fact that force has its appeal. I think that, in the ideal psychoanalysis, force would lose its atavistic appeal, perhaps have appeal in a different sense, but not in the atavistic way. I am interested in the convergence of that ambition as it occurs in psychoanalysis, namely, the elimination of the atavistic appeal of force, and that same ambition as it is lived out in political life, where one tries to create social organizations that stand against the atavistic appeal of force. I'd like to know your thoughts about how these two projects can be mutually informative.

C.C.: It is a very difficult problem, and I don't think I know the answer. First of all, psychoanalytic treatment tries to help people become autonomous in the sense we said before, therefore also to destroy in themselves the blind appeal of force. As a matter of fact, I think this is the only relevant political contribution of practical psychoanalysis. I don't think of a political use of psychoanalysis, except that of helping individuals to become lucid and autonomous and thereby, I think, more active and more responsible in society. This entails also: not taking the given institution of society or the given law as something that cannot be touched upon. Now, as regards collective attitudes, I think what we try to do is to try to dissolve the illusions that are contained almost all the time in this appeal of force. And

this entails both the critique of ideology and the critique of the actual functioning and consistency of the existing apparatus of domination, for instance. At the same time, I have always thought that an authentic revolutionary organization (or organization of revolutionaries) ought to be also a sort of exemplary school for collective self-government. It ought to teach people to dispense with leaders, and to dispense with rigid organizational structures without falling, so to speak, into anomie or microanomie. I think this is the relation of the two sides of the problem.

D.L.: There is a question that comes up here, another complicated question about the origins of autonomy and social relationships in infancy and about pre-oedipal object-relations as a kind of model or a ground of rapprochement that is then repeated in collectivity. This, as opposed to the point of view which is something more linked to the "orthodox Freudian" view that in fact the infant is radically separate, and that the socialization process is entirely a dialectic *with* society, that there is no inherent social quality of the infant at the beginning.

C.C.: You know, my own conceptions which are not quite Freudian would lead, in this respect, to conclusions very similar to the Freudian ones. I think what you have initially is a sort of psychical monad, which is asocial and antisocial. I mean that the human species is a monstrous species that is unfit to live, biologically as well as psychologically. That it is biologically unfit to life is clear. We are the only animal that does not by instinct know what is food and what is poison. No mushroom-eating animal would ever eat a poisonous mushroom. But we have to *learn* that! I never saw a dog or a horse trip; in fact, horses trip very rarely and then only in the artificial conditions we put them in. We trip all the time. This is the biological side of it.

The same is even more true on the psychical side. I think there is an embryonic psyche in every living being, and especially in what we call higher species. But there is also a gap between this "functional" psyche of animals, and human psyche: the latter corresponds to a tremendous, monstrous development of this "faculty" of traditional psychology, thoroughly neglected by traditional philosophy, which is imagination. Imagination is the capacity to posit as real that which is not real. It breaks the functional regulation of the prehuman "psyche."

So, we are saddled with a being that, as we know from Freud, from psychoanalytic practice, and from everyday life, is able to form its representations according to its desires—which makes it psychically unfit to survive. Beneath this tremendous outgrowth of the imagination survive broken pieces of the animal, biological and psychical, self-regulation. This animal, *homo sapiens*, would have ceased to exist if it had not at the same time, through I don't know what process, possibly some sort of a neo-Darwinian selection process, created something radically new in the whole natural and biological realm, that is, society and institutions. And the institution imposes on the psyche the recognition of a reality that is common to everybody, that is regulated, and that does not just obey the wishes of the psyche.

D.M.: But that is very interesting what you just said, because it is a way of saying that the appeal of force is related to survival in that, as you say, this collectivity, this society, imposes reality on an image-making device which, without that imposition, would die. . . .

C.C.: . . . or would get hyperpsychotic.

D.M.: Hyperpsychotic, yes. But the imposition is, in a certain way, by force.

C.C.: Violence.

D.M. Violence.

C.C.: No problem about it. And without that violence, you can't have a survival of the human species. That is why I'm very strongly against some pastoral and idyllic dreams of well-meaning people like us, that you could have a happy and glorious and chocolate-tasting entry into social life. This thing just cannot exist. If you ever had a child, and in whatever way you are bringing it up, from the first month onward it will inexplicably, at some point in time, start crying and screaming like hell. Not because it is hungry; nor because it is sick. Just because it discovers a world that is not plastic to its will. And we ought to be serious. Not only unconsciously, even consciously we would, all of us, wish a world that would be plastic to will, right?

M.&L.: Sure.

C.C.: Who could say the contrary? We say this cannot be, we resign from this wish, and the wish is still there. As a psychoanalyst, I would say that a person who cannot have a fantasy involving omnipotence is very seriously sick, you see what I mean? The capacity for fantasies of omnipotence is a necessary component not only of the unconscious life, but also of the conscious life. If you can't go on daydreaming, thinking "The girl will come to the appointment," or "I will write my book," or "Things will go as I wish them," you are really very sick. And, of course, you are also sick if you cannot correct this fantasy and say, "No, she didn't like me, it was clear," or "She has a boyfriend and is very much attached to him."

So, there is this psyche, with its imagination and omnipotence fantasies, and there is a first representative of society with the child, which is of course the mother. And

the function of the mother is both that she limits the child—she becomes the instrument by which the child starts to recognize that everything is not obeying his omnipotence wishes—and at the same time helps the child make sense of the world. The role of this first person is essential and imperative; the mother, or the person who plays her role, maybe the father, maybe a nurse, or maybe even, like in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a talking machine (where, of course, the effects would be different and rather bad). The mother helps the child make sense of the world and of himself in a way very different from the initial way of the psychical monad. The way of the psychical monad is that everything depends on its wishes and its representations [and that everything conforms to them]. The mother destroys this, and has to destroy it. This is the necessary, inevitable, violence. If she does not destroy it, then she drives the child to psychosis.

D.M.: Do you think, therefore, that this appeal of force is, in a certain strange way, a kind of wish to return to that mother?

C.C.: It is a very strong remnant of the attachment to a first figure which was, as I call it, the master of signification. And there is always somewhere somebody who plays this role of master of signification and who possibly can be Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin or Ronald Reagan—I don't care. I think the psychical root of political and social alienation is contained in the first very pregnant relationship. But there are the next stages, as well. You know, saying it properly, and within quotations marks: "normal bringing up."

The mother has to give up this role of master of signification. She has to say to the child that if this word means that, or if this act is prohibited, it is not because it is

my desire, but because such is the reason for it, or that is how everybody means it, or such is the social convention. Thereby, she divests herself of this omnipotence that the child, using precisely its own projection schemes, has attributed to her. The child projects on somebody—here, the mother—its own fantasized omnipotence, which it was to abandon at some stage. When it thinks falsely, "But Mommy is omnipotent," Mommy has to say, "No, I am not." "Words do *not* mean what I want them to mean," contrary to what Humpty Dumpty says to Alice, "They mean what people mean by them," and so on.

D.L.: How do you respond, then, to the position that someone like D. W. Winnicott develops in saying that the early situation of the mother is not one of master of signification, but rather of coparticipant of signification? That is, that the original social moment is one that the mother and baby share, that is, the infant experiences the mother as sharing the fantasy world. The infant imagines the breast, and in imagining the breast and screaming for the breast, in the moment of imagination, the breast miraculously appears and thus there is some kind of fundamental relationship between fantasy and sociability.

C.C.: As long as this is the case, it is not true that it is a sharing or a coparticipation. I mean, as long as we are in this stage, the child imagines that the breast appeared because he or she wished it to appear. The decisive moment, as Freud knew very well, is the moment the child becomes aware that it wishes for the breast to appear and the breast does not appear. And there is always a moment like that and this corresponds, like Melanie Klein would say, and very rightly so, to the "bad breast." This is also the root of the fundamental ambivalence in all human relations. I mean the Other has, all the time, inherited these two sides

of the good breast and the bad breast, the good figure and the bad figure. Most of the time, the one totally covers and dominates the other. Therefore, we love or we hate people. For people we are related to, one or the other element predominates. But we all know that in even the greatest love there is always hidden the negative element, which does not prevent it from being a love.

The real change comes first, when the child has to admit that the mother [and not itself] is master of the breast and the master of signification. And another breaking point is when the child discovers that there is no master of signification. Now, in most societies, up until now, this only happens to a very limited number of people. Because Jahveh is master of signification, or the Secretary of the Party, or perhaps the scientist.

D.M.: So, when the Grand Inquisitor claims that people need the Church to be their master of signification (he doesn't, of course, use that phrase), and accuses Christ of cruelty for refusing to take on the role of master of signification, what do you think of that? What do you think of the Inquisitor's plan?

C.C.: I think that the positing of the problem is genuine. It corresponds with what you are saying. The only thing is that the Inquisitor takes a normative position and says that this fact is transhistorical, and produces a situation that is as it ought to be. We say that there is another stage.

D.M.: I think it is crucial to locate the psychical roots of autonomy in the later stages of realizing that there are no masters of signification, rather than in the return to some kind of infantile state of shared signification.

C.C.: But "shared signification" implies what? Unless you have a concept of some biological sociability of the human animal, which I don't believe can hold water, the

shared signification can come only from positing two separate and independent persons, as entities in themselves. There is A and there is B and there is he or she and me and he or she thinks or wishes or calls things that way and I call them this way and some common ground can be found. But this is a quite late stage.

Some embryonic elements of this—this is a difficult point because, after all, we can never be in the psyche of an infant of six months or even eighteen months—some embryonic elements of this might be there before. But I think that this situation exists qualitatively only from the point in time when the infant has been able to recognize its mother as both an independent and limited entity.

D.L.: Are you talking about an Oedipal resolution?

C.C.: No, I think that is another specific discussion. What has not been recognized among left-wing critics of the Oedipal construction of Freud, granted that there is a lot of patricarchic ideology in the Freudian construction, is that the main point about the Oedipal problem for Freud is the problem of civilization. It is not such much the wish to make love to your mother and kill your father; it is the problem that as long as you are only two there is no society. There has to be a third term to break this face-to-face. The face-to-face is fusion, or totally dominating the other, or totally being dominated by the other. The other is the total object, or you are the total object of the other. And in order that this sort of quasi-psychotic absoluteness be broken, you have to have a third term. And never mind if it is the father or the maternal uncle. I mean the discussions between Bronislaw Malinowski and Géza Róheim are so irrelevant. Is it the father, or is it the maternal uncle, and so on—the main point is not there. The main point is that you can't have just two; you must have a third element. Of course,

this does not lead to the conclusion that the father must be the master—that is a total non sequitur. And you even must have a fourth element. I mean this couple has to behave in such a way as to bring the child to the awareness that the father is not the source or the origin of the law, and that he himself is just one among many, many other fathers—that there is a human collectively, you see?

And this Freud had seen. People always quote the myth of *Totem and Taboo* ending up with the killing of the father and the ceremonial ritual feast. They forget the collective oath of the brothers, which is the real founding stone of society. Each of the brothers renounces omnipotence, renounces the omnipotence of the primaeval father: I am not going to have all the women and I will not kill anyone. This is self-limitation through collective positing of the law.

D.M.: That's a good place to think about what you were saying before. This union of radicals, or collection of radicals exemplary in its capacity for self-government and its capacity to avoid the attraction of force and domination. When you were saying that, I was thinking about the brother horde in *Totem and Taboo*. Do you think that they are a kind of mythic metaphor for the group of revolutionaries that you were describing?

C.C.: That's not the way I would put it. I just want to say that when Freud was writing *Totem and Taboo*, he was facing the problem of the initial institution of society. Of course, *Totem and Taboo* is a myth and it is silly to criticize it even if Freud took it to be a sort of history about the exactness of which we would never be sure but which represents more or less how things happened—this is irrelevant. I mean, he was wrong in that. But his preoccupation was with the ontological conditions for a

society to exist in which nobody could exert unlimited power like the *primaeval* father. In this respect, not the myth itself, but the meanings that are in the myth are very important. I mean society is there precisely at the moment when there is a self-limitation of all the brothers, all the brothers and sisters.

D.M.: But even in that myth, they create a totem, and the totem is always present, as a master of signification. It is there as a reminder always.

C.C.: Yeah, and with the ambivalent relation to it. I think, precisely, that the totem is the embodiment of the heteronomy in hitherto existing societies. This is the point where Freud is very deep, though probably unconsciously so, but such is a great thinker. What is the totem? After a while it becomes a pantheon of gods, or the unique god, or the institution, or the Party. And this is what the Lacanians and other people would call "the symbolic." Here we can see the shortcomings of the concept: making of it a *normative* concept. For the totem is the "symbolic" rendered totally independent and endowed with magical power. It is an imaginary creation instituted and endowed with magical power.

D.L.: But as you say, it's always necessary that there be institutions.

C.C.: Ah, yes, but not as totems.

D.L.: So they would be created and taken down . . .

C.C.: That's right.

D.L.: . . . in continual construction

C.C.: That's right. With this particular relationship that certainly is very difficult to achieve: I know that the laws are our creation, that we can change them. But as soon as we have not changed them, in a society which I recognize is in fact run democratically, I am still obliged to

follow them, because I know human community is not possible otherwise.

People usually forget that laws of language are, after all, shared conventions. And there have been silly people like Roland Barthes saying that fascism and heteronomy are there in the language because you can't change the rules. This is not fascism or heteronomy. It is the recognition of the fact that there can be no human collectivity without somehow arbitrary and conventional rules. And, on the contrary, language does not put me into serfdom; it liberates me.

D.M.: But when those rules begin to have an aura about them, a totemic aura, then they become problematic.

C.C.: That's right. Then they become alienating.

D.L.: To follow another point. The brothers did not in fact renounce omnipotence, but split off part of their omnipotence and preserved it in the totem.

C.C.: They renounce omnipotence and they attribute an imaginary omnipotence to the totem. And that's the compensating factor in this alienated, still alienated, psychological economy of the brothers in the myth. The political question is: Is this compensating, alienating factor really necessary for the human collectivity? I say there is no *theoretical* answer to the question. I mean, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and this is what radical or revolutionary action is all about. Positing and trying to prove in fact that we do not need a totem, but that we can limit our own powers without investing them in a mythical entity.

D.L.: It would follow then that there is a parallel in "working through" between the collectivity and the individual. That is, that there's a kind of uncertainty about history, a vision of indeterminacy in which one does not

resolve the question of history and in which one does not solve the past and know from the past exactly what to do. A collectivity is able to take a position in which the future can be worked through.

C.C.: Absolutely. That's absolutely correct and I think this is the correct position. In fact, I think the true human position is *to assume*, in the French sense of the word: to accept, to take over the indeterminacy, the risk, knowing that there is no safeguard, and no guarantee. I mean the safeguards and the guarantees that exist are trivial and not worth talking about. In the real decisive moment, there is no safeguard and no guarantee. We have to take the risks and to take the risks means we are responsible for our actions. Of course, a full concept of responsibility would imply conscience. Always there is the "I did not know." I mean you can argue that way in front of a court, but in front of your own eyes, even though knowing we are not omniscient, you still cannot simply argue, "I did not know." You just have to take on a standard by which you are really responsible.

D.M.: Are there people in France who are engaged in dialogue like the one we just made? I mean, not just here and there, but is there any kind of . . .

C.C.: I wouldn't be able to answer. . . . This is the sort of dialogue I am trying to promote.

D.M.: I mean, are you successful—are you being successful?

C.C.: I cannot judge. Not very much for the time being, though.

D.L.: Well, those of us doing it in New York would certainly like to stay in contact with you.

C.C.: By all means. I would be very glad. I found our discussion to be very positive.

Psychoanalysis and Society II*

Michel Reynaud: In terms of your double practice, in politics and in psychoanalysis, do you see the appearance of any new clinical signs in the present social malaise, and how do you interpret them?

Cornelius Castoriadis: Your question contains, as you know, multiple traps. To diagnose significant changes in symptomatology, one would have to have at one's disposal all at once a rigorous and univocal nosology, temporal distance, reliable methods of statistical observation, etc. None of that exists—or even has any meaning—in the domain with which we are concerned. Keeping this firmly in mind, I agree with the long-held view that—psychosis aside—the manner in which neurosis, and psychological disorders more generally, are manifesting themselves has changed. The classic symptomatology, that of obsessional neurosis or hysteria, no longer appears as frequently and clearly. What is observed much more often among people who ask to be analyzed is disorientation in life, instability, peculiarities of "character," or a depressive disposition. To me, this series of phenomena seems to establish a homology among an ongoing process, the relative deconstruction of society, and a deconstruction or lesser structuration of the personality, its pathology included. A large proportion of people seems to suffer from a sort of formless or "soft" neurosis: no acute drama, no intense passions, but a loss of bearings, going hand in hand with an extreme lability of characters and behaviors.

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M.R.: Could you be more specific about what you call deconstruction?

C.C.: This is a new sociological and cultural phenomenon. We can gauge it by comparison with the past—a past that some of us still know. Not only in traditional societies, but even in Western capitalist society, socially imposed and accepted—that is to say, internalized—"values" and "norms" existed. Corresponding to these were ways of being and ways of making and doing things, "models" for what each person could be and had to be, according to the place into which her birth, her parents's wealth, etc. had thrown her. Even if transgressed—and certainly they were—these models were generally accepted; when combated, they were combated to make other values prevail (for example, submissive worker/revolutionary militant). Such as they were, these models provided clear-cut bearings for the social functioning of individuals. For example, in the raising of children, there was no ambiguity over what a child could and could not, should and should not do. And that provided a clear outline of conduct for parents in the education of their children.

Quite obviously, all that cohered more or less with the instituted social system. Here I am speaking about the *de facto* situation: a value judgment about this social system and these models is another matter. We know that both went hand in hand with oppressive structures. Nevertheless, it functioned. The disfunctioning of society was situated at other levels: class conflicts, economic crises, wars.

At present, norms and values are wearing down and collapsing. The models being proposed, to the extent that they still exist at all, are flat or hollow, as is said. The media, television, the advertising industry offer models,

certainly. They are the models of "success": they operate from the outside, but they cannot truly be internalized; they cannot be valued; they could never respond to the question: What ought I to do?

Marcos Zafiroopoulos: Could it be said that now there are systems of identification that are being proposed outside the family, that it is no longer a question of systems internal to the family, which used to be transmitted from father to son?

C.C.: You are right, and I was going to come to that. In its time, the family formed the concrete link between the social institution and the process of forming and educating the individual psyche; it matters little, in this regard, that (justified) criticisms can be made about its patriarchal character, etc. The great fact today is the dislocation of the family. I am not talking about divorce statistics, but about the fact that the family is no longer a normative center for people: parents no longer know what they should permit or prohibit. And they have just as bad a conscience when they do prohibit as when they do not. In theory, this family role could have been filled by other social institutions. In Western societies, school was, quite obviously, such an institution. School, however, is itself in crisis. Everyone talks now of the crisis of education, the crisis in its programs, in its contents, in the pedagogical relationship, etc. In my case, I have written about it since the early sixties.¹ The essential aspect of this crisis, however, one that no one talks about, lies elsewhere. It is that no one any longer invests in, that is to say, cathects, as such, the school and education. Not so very long ago, school was, for

¹In "Student Youth" (1963) and "The Crisis of Modern Society" (1965), both now in *PSW* 3.

parents, a venerated place, for children an almost complete universe, for teachers more or less a vocation. At present, it is for teachers and pupils an instrumental form of forced labor, a site for present or future bread-winning (or an incomprehensible and rejected form of coercion), and, for parents, a source of anxiety: "Will my child get into the right schools [*l'enfant, sera-t-il ou non admis à la filière menant au Bac C*]?"

M.Z.: Shouldn't one introduce here distinctions according to which social class one comes from? In the sixties, there was an upturn in educational consumption for all social classes. Today, in order to assure one's place in the process of social reproduction, one no longer can gain legitimacy simply with an inherited status; one must gain the approval that comes with a diploma, even if one has some small economic capital. Is it not a bit paradoxical, in relation to what you are saying, this educational overconsumption and this lack of cathexis of which you are speaking?

C.C.: It is only apparently a paradox. Economic value having become the only value, educational overconsumption and anxiety on the part of the parents of all social categories concerning the scholarly success of their children is uniquely related to the piece of paper their children will or will not obtain. This factor has become ever more weighty these past few years. For, with the rise in unemployment, this piece of paper no longer automatically opens up the possibility of a job; the anxiety is redoubled, for now the child must obtain a good piece of paper. School is the place where one obtains (or does not obtain) this paper; it is simply instrumental—it no longer is the place that is supposed to make the child a human being. Thirty years ago, in Greece, the traditional expression was: "I am

sending you to school so that you may become a human being—*anthrōpos*."

M.R.: Hasn't what you're describing in fact accelerated over the past few years? Since 1975, people are looking in all directions, and in somewhat desperate fashion. For the last four or five years {i.e., since the end of the seventies}, to the loss of general values has come to be added a sense of disarray.

C.C.: Certainly. The economic crisis would not have been lived in the same way by people if it had not occurred during this period of atrophy of values. Without this extraordinary wearing down of values, people would no doubt have acted differently.

M.R.: Isn't there a risk of a return, by a swing of the pendulum, to extremely rigid values?

C.C.: There has indeed been a return of reactionary policies, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, supported by the rejection of what was considered a period of permissiveness. But what actually happened? The effects have remained limited to the superficial political level; or, on the economic level, the poorest layers of society have been attacked. Nothing, however, in the underlying sociological situation has been modified by Reagan's presidency or Thatcher's government. These same people who shout about law and order behave exactly like the rest of society; and, were one to return—it is not impossible—to a generation of "strict parents," that would change nothing, for these strict parents would still have to believe in something, and the entire way in which society operates would have to permit one to believe in that something, or make believe that one believes in it, without the antinomies and contradictions becoming too frequent and too flagrant. That is not the case, and we are as far as ever from such a situation.

M.Z.: Perhaps it would be that, fathers no longer having any beliefs, they transmit this nonbelief to their sons, and the sons inherit this nonbelief. At that point, the law would no longer be an impediment to the demand for enjoyment [*jouissance*]. This might explain, on the clinical level, signs like the wave of drug addiction we are now dealing with.

C.C.: What you are saying could be made more precise by asking a question: What is it, today, to be a father? Let us suppose that the answer to the question, *What is it to be a mother?* is less difficult—though that would be superficial, because in fact the two are inseparable, and because, moreover, in reality more and more women are obliged to assume both roles. I do not have the figures in my head at this moment, but in the United States the number of female "heads of households" is constantly on the rise; among Blacks, it has reached an enormous proportion, on the order of 90 percent in the case of single "heads" of households. But let us center on this point: What is it to be a father? Is it simply to feed the family? Is there a "paternal discourse" [*parole du père*], what is it, where is it, what is it worth, what gives it value? We began with changes in symptomatology and we related that to a certain wearing down of values—concretely represented in the family by the emptiness of the "paternal discourse" (or, what boils down to the same thing, the void of the father's place in the mother). And at the same time there is, as a function of a host of factors, a wearing down of reality-testing for children: there is nothing solid for them to run up against: they mustn't be deprived; they mustn't be frustrated; they mustn't be hurt; one must always "understand" them. You know, perhaps, that marvelous flash of wit by D. W. Winnicott: "I always give at least one

interpretation per session, so that the patient is sure I have not understood everything." I am tempted to say, without kidding, that from time to time one must show the child that one does not "understand" her. The de facto experience that one is not necessarily "understood," even by those beings who are the closest, is constitutive of the human being.

All that is found again on the level of education. School today proposes for itself simultaneously two contradictory objectives, each of which, taken separately, is absurd: mass production of individuals predestined to occupy this or that place in the apparatus of production, by mechanical or early selection; or, "giving the child free reign to express himself."

M.Z.: To return to France, don't you think that the Left's arrival in the government, which is nonetheless a date of historical importance, might represent the establishment of a new environment—or are we still in the stage of mere social reproduction?

C.C.: What we are attempting to discuss and discern is situated at much deeper levels of the social world than political changes in France. The political regime cannot do very much; indeed, it manifestly does not understand very much at all, and what it does changes nothing as to the tendencies we have been evoking here. On the contrary, it would rather be reinforcing them.

M.Z.: Don't you think, nonetheless, that the reintroduction of the notion of history into the speech of the present political leaders distinguishes them from the technocratic mentality of the previous set of leaders?

C.C.: But does it suffice that the President of the French Republic discovers one day the distressing quality of history textbooks and demands an increase in school hours devoted to history? Can the collapse of historical awareness

in our societies, the absence of a project for the future, and the placement of the past into the Frigidaire of history be countered by textbooks and supplemental hours? We live in a society that has instaurated with the past a quite original and unprecedented type of relationship: complete disinvestment. Of course, we have numerous admirable specialists—the search for scientific knowledge requires that—but for everyone else, the relationship to the past is, at best, touristic. One visits the Acropolis like one goes to the Balearic Islands.

M.R.: Our relation to history is probably connected to family history.

C.C.: Undoubtedly. Formerly, something like a family history was transmitted from generation to generation. Today, this nuclear family, withdrawn into itself, in which, at best, one speaks vaguely of a grandfather and stops there, fits perfectly the society we are living at this instant.

We must insist on one point: All this is profoundly linked to the collapse of any prospects for the future. Until the early seventies, and despite the already clear-cut wearing down of values, this society still supported future-oriented representations, intentions, projects. It matters little what the content was; it matters little that for some it was revolution, the *grand soir*, for others progress in the capitalist sense, increases in living standards, etc. There were, in any case, images that appeared to be credible, ones to which people adhered. These images have been emptied from within for decades, but people did not see it. Then, almost at once, it was discovered that this was all just wallpaper covering—and the next instant, this wallpaper itself became torn. Society has discovered itself to be without any representation of its own future, and projectless

as well—and that, too, is a historical novelty.

M.Z.: Don't you think that in France, after the experience of the Left in power, and the exhaustion of a certain type of discourse, there will necessarily be a renewal of political discourse?

C.C.: I do not see why there would necessarily be a renewal. Of course, discourses will always be fabricated. We are, anyhow, in France; even when everything will become glazed over, dissertations will continue to be impeccable. But I am speaking of things of substance. The substance of a discourse is its political imagination, and that has simply disappeared. This disappearance of imagination goes hand in hand with the collapse of will. One has to at least be able to represent to oneself something that is not in order to be able to will [*vouloir*]; and, in one's deepest layers, one must want [*vouloir*] something other than mere repetition in order to be able to imagine. Now, no will on the part of present-day society can be glimpsed as concerns what it wants to be tomorrow—no will other than the frightened and crabby safeguarding of what is here today. We live in a defensive, contracted, withdrawn, chilly society.

M.Z.: Aren't we in a sort of passage, from the man of guilt (with, behind him, the father, myth, etc.) to the man of anxiety and enjoyment?

C.C.: Your question touches on two points. First, I cannot prevent myself from contrasting what is happening with what I want to happen, my aim, my political and psychoanalytic project. My aim is for us to pass from a culture of culpability to a culture of responsibility. Now, a culture of anxiety and enjoyment, in the sense in which you speak of it, would be moving us still further away from that. But, second point, a culture of anxiety and enjoyment—is it,

quite simply, possible? We are touching here, once again, on the fundamental, and more than just obscure, problem of the articulation between the organizations of the psyche and the institution of society. A culture of culpability—as also a culture of shame, to borrow E. R. Dodds' theme²—is perfectly conceivable because the affects on which the social fabrication of individuals in these cultures plays in privileged fashion can bear an instituted structure, can be its subjective inclination. It is, however, unclear—at least for me—how a coherent social institution, one capable of functioning, could be built upon anxiety and obligatory enjoyment.

M.R.: Functioning responsibly is a cortical operation, whereas functioning through culpability is much more instinctual.

C.C.: Undoubtedly, there is a misunderstanding here. A culture of responsibility is not at all, for me, a culture that would make function, in individuals, only their intellect and their reason. I would not be a psychoanalyst if I thought that such a thing were either possible or desirable.

I have in mind individuals who are capable of taking responsibility for both their drives and their belonging to a collectivity, which can exist only as instituted, which cannot exist without laws or by some miraculous agreement of spontaneities, as some of our naive leftist friends believed and still believe.

M.Z.: We are perhaps now in the second moment of the considerable cultural shock that was 1968, of the idea of indefinitely enjoying oneself [*jouir*]. At the time, it was: God is dead, we can do anything. Now we are coming to

²E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

realize that one cannot do very much of anything.

C.C.: On the contrary, it is because God is dead—or because he never was—that one cannot do everything. It is because there is no other instance of authority or "agency" [*instance*] that we are responsible.

M.Z.: I believe that people are in the process of experimenting collectively, in a whole section of French society, on this aspect of things; whence the possibility of an appeal to a Master who would present himself as a savior. Master thinkers, gurus, etc., all that has been proliferating since 1968 in a paradoxical manner.

C.C.: But without truly taking root. The gurus of each Autumn have faded by the next Spring. However, one could in effect have said that, in the abstract, the situation, such as it is, might have led to the emergence of an authoritarian figure—or fascist or totalitarian movements, etc. But in fact it isn't doing so, and I do not believe that this is an accident. At most, one might have a sort of soft authoritarianism, but to go any further something else would be required. Crisis does not suffice; to make a fascist or totalitarian movement, there needs to be a capacity to believe and an unleashing of passion, each one connected to the other, each one nourishing the other. Neither the former nor the latter exists in present-day society. That is why all the extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing sects are condemned to making their ridiculous gesticulations. They play their petty roles, marginal marionettes in the overall political spectacle, but nothing more. The French population is absolutely not ready to put on jackboots and meet by the hundreds of thousands in the Place de la Concorde to acclaim I don't know who or what. In history, certainly, nothing is impossible, but in my view an "appeal to the Master" is more than improbable, in France as well as

in America or in Germany.

M.R.: One is tempted to ask you the question: Where do passions come from?

C.C.: I don't know. Passions here signify, of course, the near-total mobilization of the affect upon an "object." Now, as you know, the affects and their movements are the most obscure part of psychical functioning. We have daily proof of it in psychoanalysis. To the extent that the affects depend on representations, the labor of psychoanalytic interpretation functions. To the extent that representations depend on affects, one is aware that one has very little grasp at all.

M.Z.: I believe that a central point in your reflections is the passage from what you call the psychical monad to socially organized individuals. I believe that it is truly there that it can be said: "There is a man." Could you summarize this idea for us: How does a human being, a man, constitute himself? Moreover, do you think that desire is a social force?

C.C.: Desire, as such, could not be a social force; for it to become so, it must cease to be desire; it must be metabolized. If one speaks of desire in the true sense of the term, unconscious desire, it evidently is an antisocial, and even an asocial, monster. A first, superficial description: I desire that; it take it. I desire someone, I take him or her. I detest someone, I kill him. The "reign of desire" would be that. That, however, is still superficial, for this "desire" is already immensely "civilized," mediated by a recognition of reality, etc. True desire forms immediately the psychical representation that would satisfy it—and it satisfies itself therein. It also forms contradictory representations: I am man and woman, here and elsewhere, etc. Against the absurdities of those in the desire chorus {since the mid-

sixties }, it may immediately be seen that desire is death, not only of the others, but first of all of one's own subject. Desire itself, however, is only the first breakup of the psychical monad, of the first, originary unity of the psyche, the limit point one can attempt to describe as follows: pure pleasure of representation of the self by the self, completely enclosed upon itself. From this monad derive the decisive traits of the Unconscious: absolute "self-centeredness," the omnipotence (wrongly labeled *magical*—it is real) of thought, the capacity to find pleasure in representation, the immediate satisfaction of desire. These traits obviously render radically unit for life the being that bears them. The socialization of the psyche—which implies a sort of forced rupture of the closure of the psychical monad—is not only what adapts the human being to this or that form of society; this is what renders it capable of living at all. By means of this process of socialization of the psyche—of the social fabrication of the individual—human societies have succeeded in making the psyche live in a world that contradicts head-on its own most elementary exigencies. *That* is the true sense of the term *sublimation*: sublimation is the subjective, psychical side of this process that, seen from the social side, is the fabrication of an individual for which there is diurnal logic, "reality," and even acceptance (more or less) of its mortality. Sublimation presupposes, obviously, the social institution, for it signifies that the subject succeeds in cathecting objects that no longer are private imaginary objects but, rather, social objects, the existence of which is conceivable only as social and instituted (language, tools, norms, etc.). These are objects that have a validity, in the most neutral sense of the term, and impose themselves on an anonymous and indefinite collectivity. If one really thinks about it, this passage is

rather miraculous.³

M.Z.: The passage to social exchange, for there no longer are just objects of the drive, but equivalences.

C.C.: Yes, certainly, there are equivalences and there are also, just as striking and important, complementarities. The objects in question here are not and cannot be isolated or for the moment; they necessarily form a coherent, functioning system. Here is what the Unconscious could never produce; here is the work of what I call the social imaginary or instituting society.

In this process of socialization, we always observe this extraordinary mutual adjustment between a social institution—which can exist only in deploying itself in these immense systems of objects, norms, words, significations, etc.—and a psyche for which, at the outset, nothing of all that could make any sense, since their very mode of existence is contrary to the most deep-seated exigencies of the psyche. The psychical monad is lead to renounce in part these exigencies—and that always signifies a violence exerted upon it, even when that occurs under the "mildest" of conditions—at the same time that it creates, successively, a series of "secondary" organizations, which cover it over without ever making it disappear and which approach the mode of operation required by "reality"—that is to say, society. There is in this process, however, always one constant—that is why I spoke of "mutual adjustment." The social institution can make the psyche do just about everything—as proved by the infinite diversity of human cultures—but there are a few minimum requirements. The social institution can refuse the psyche just about everything (trivialities aside), but there is one thing that the institution

³See *IIS*, chapter 6, in particular pp. 301-20.

cannot refuse it if this institution is to exist as a permanent, stationary regime of society—and that is meaning.

M.Z.: You mean to say the symbolic system.

C.C.: In my terminology, it is a matter of *social imaginary significations*. And that has been, of course, the role of this central institution of society that was until very recently, in all societies, religion. Here we meet up again with the problem today: present-day society, due to the wearing out of its imaginary significations (progress, growth, well-being, "rational" mastery, etc.) is less and less capable of furnishing meaning. That each individual fabricates his own meaning for himself can be true only at a secondary level; never at the radical level.

M.Z.: Is this wearing out of meaning related, in your opinion, to this "call for help" directed toward psychoanalysts?

C.C.: That, in reality, something like that is occurring is incontestable. That things should have to happen like that is another question.

M.Z.: How would you define the goal of analysis?

C.C.: The goal of analysis is to aid the subject to become autonomous, as far as is possible. And once again, let us avoid misunderstandings. Autonomy does not mean the victory of "reason" over the "instincts"; autonomy signifies another relation, a new relation between the conscious Ego and the Unconscious or the drives. I wrote {back in the mid-sixties} that one had to complete the famous phrase of Freud, "Where Id was, Ego shall come to be," with "Where Ego is, Id must spring forth."⁴ The task of analysis is not the "conquest" of the Unconscious by the Conscious but, rather, the establishment of another relation

⁴See *ibid.*, pp. 102-4. [Note added in 1986.]

between the two, which may be described as an opening of the Conscious to the Unconscious—not an assimilation, or a drying up, of the Unconscious by the Conscious. And in this work, I do not see how one could fail to recognize, if one wishes to remain coherent, that we are guided by an idea, an aim: the idea of a human subject who can say, in full knowledge of the relevant facts: "That is my desire" and "I think that that is true"—not, "Maybe yes, maybe no."

M.R.: Or else say, "That is true," without being able to say "I think" beforehand.

C.C.: I believe that the "I think that . . ." clause is important, for it opens things up for discussion and criticism. I think that that is true; I know that this is my desire. Now, this statement, which passes by way of an "I think" and an "I know," is not an inarticulate, formless cry of a drive; it is a statement of the conscious Ego that opens itself up at the same time in order to receive all that the subject is—which does not necessarily mean that it "approves" of everything: "I know that that is my desire" can very well be accompanied by "and I won't follow it."

M.Z.: At bottom, for you, your psychoanalytic engagement and your political engagement are of the same nature.

C.C.: I could not maintain them together if I did not think the thing in this way.

M.R.: We would also like for you to talk to us about the second volume of *Devant la guerre*, on which you are now working. But it is getting late

C.C.: That will be for another occasion.⁵

⁵This second volume was never published. Nevertheless, an excerpt from this work in progress appeared as "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982), now reprinted in *CR*. —T/E

Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy*

Contrary to what the moderator has announced, I have no intention of entering into an open debate with Revel.¹ I shall simply offer a few general and brief reflections upon the question of the Third World and Third Worldism.

But first of all, in order to avoid misunderstandings, I would like to say a few words about where I am coming from. I am speaking as someone who has criticized Russian bureaucratic totalitarianism since 1945 and the colonial bureaucracies of Communist obedience as soon as they appeared. I have conducted this critique in the name of, and starting from, a political project for social transformation whose basic content is effective self-governance of society as articulated in and through the self-governance of the groups that make it up—groups of producers, local groups, and so on. This is still my project.

A discussion like the one taking place here obviously includes weighty presuppositions that—no point in hiding it—are philosophical as well as political. These presuppositions concern one's view of history.

In modern Europe, there have been two views of the history of humanity, and these views continue today to form

"Tiers monde, tiers-mondisme, démocratie" was a speech given during the "Third-Worldism in Question" colloquium organized by *Liberté sans frontières* on January 24, 1985. Originally published in *DH*, pp. 104-11.

¹It is unclear here whether this would be the historian Jacques Revel, who is now President of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (where Castoriadis taught) or the writer Jean-François Revel. —T/E

the core of the two dominant ideologies. At bottom, they are but two sides of the same coin, for both appeal to an evolutionary process, a march of progress, as an immanent tendency—no matter what happens—of human history.

For the first of these views, the liberal view {in the Continental sense}, which, historically speaking, is the older of the two, there exists in the human being a natural tendency toward the greatest possible liberty, a recognition of the rights of the other, democracy. History leads, or has to lead, toward a canonical state of society, the "representative" republic plus the free market and competition among producers, which ensures, at the same time, man's exercise of his "natural" and "inalienable" rights. Typically and generally speaking—there are certainly exceptions—those who hold such a view are not content just to propose this form of society as the "good society" or to call upon people to struggle for human rights; they affirm that what is at issue here is the very form toward which history is intrinsically tending. This can be confirmed by examining thinkers as far removed from each other as Immanuel Kant, for whom the *Aufklärung* is an obligatory moment in universal history, and Alexis de Tocqueville, who sees the tendency toward equality dominating the entire modern era and invincibly overcoming all obstacles it might encounter—an equality which, he says, undoubtedly corresponds to a design laid out by Providence.

What those who hold the second view, the Marxist view, affirm is much clearer and firmer: history develops toward ever more elevated forms. This "ever more" returns, apropos of anything and everything, like an obsession, in Marx as well as in Lenin. In this development, as one knows, the determining factor is not a tendency toward a

political regime but the growth of productive forces and the succession of the modes of production. Political regimes are but a consequence thereof. Capitalism's domination of the modern era does not appear then as what it is—namely, arbitrary creation of a particular humanity—but as fated phase of all historical movement, at once fated and welcome, since it is the mode of production that assures maximum productivity and efficiency and that, wrenching people from the traditional conditions of life, from their particular limited horizons, and from their superstitions of all kinds, obliges them to "face with sober senses [their] real conditions of life, and [their] relations with [their] kind" (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*).² As a function of its "internal contradictions," capitalism in this view is pregnant with a socialist revolution, one that will transform the mode of production but that will also, in addition and as if by a miracle, achieve all the aspirations of humanity. Capitalism engenders the agent and the bearer of this revolution, the proletariat. In the only version of Marxism that has proved to be historically effective—Leninism—the proletariat is replaced, however, by the Party, which possesses socialist consciousness and inculcates that consciousness into the proletariat, and which, in any case, directs the latter and, by means of its alleged possession of the "true theory," is judge of last resort as to what is to be done and not to be done.

As is also known, however, the proletariat ceased, after a certain period of time, to manifest itself as a revolutionary factor and began to appear more and more integrated into capitalist society. The hopes revolutionaries

²Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works In One Volume* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 38. —T/E

or certain ideologues placed in the proletariat weakened or vanished. Nevertheless, in the place of an analysis and a critique of capitalism's new situation, these hopes were purely and simply transferred elsewhere. This is the essence of those supremely ridiculous operations that, for intellectuals *over here*, were Fanonism, "revolutionary" Third-Worldism, Guevarism, and so on. And it obviously is not by chance that these operations had the support of that paradigm of political confusion, Jean-Paul Sartre, or of other minor scribblers who, moreover, have since that time become complete turncoats.

Such operations are ridiculous because they consist simply in taking up again the schema developed by Marx, lifting out the industrial proletariat, and substituting for the latter third-world-peasants. This is theoretical penury, an absence of all reflection: whatever criticisms may be directed at Marx, while it is true that he imputed to the proletariat a revolutionary role, this imputation was made by virtue of certain characteristics that, wrongly or rightly, he recognized therein, characteristics that issue precisely from its "education" by big industry and urban life. The illegitimate substitution that has since followed could not have any result, except—and here is a key aspect of the question—to serve as an ideological cover for a particular social category of the population in underdeveloped countries in its march toward power: the social microstrata or substrata made up of students, intellectuals, and the aspiring "political cadres" of those countries, who found therein—as they continue to find in a vulgar and bastardized Marxism—an ideological tool for setting up organizations on a militaro-Leninist model and struggling for power. And in three or four quite notorious cases, they have indeed seized power.

I do not think it would be useful at this time {1985} either to return to the theoretical critique of Marxism or to an analysis of the reality of "Marxist-Leninist" regimes. I presume everyone here is clear about what really goes on in Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and so on.

On the other hand, it seems to me indispensable to bring the discussion back to the other point, liberalism. For, by virtue of one of those highly irrational and, alas, all too frequent swings of the historical pendulum, we are witnessing a return, pure and simple, in the other direction, as if the bankruptcy of Marxism "proved" that liberalism is the ideal or sole possible regime.

We came here to discuss the Third World, and I will not waste my time on the question of "liberalism" and "individualism" (terms beneath which are hidden innumerable misunderstandings and fallacies) in the rich countries. I note simply that representative republics have, formally speaking, been established [*instaurées*] in most Latin American countries for more than a century and a half and in the rest of those countries for approximately a century. Also, that India has been a parliamentary republic since Independence. Lastly, that, at the moment of their decolonization, the African countries were, with just one or two exceptions, endowed with constitutions copied from European models. And I note, too, that in all these cases regimes that in Europe and North America are called *democratic*—namely, liberal-oligarchic regimes—have never been able to take root.

Long before the CIA and the multinationals, military and other dictatorships occupied a special place in the political history of Latin America. With just one or two exceptions, liberal constitutions coexisted there with a near-feudal situation, if not worse, in the countryside.

Apart from one brief interruption, India has lived since 1947 under a parliamentary republican regime, with a constitution that guarantees human rights and so forth. But a caste regime as rigid now as it was in the past is still in place, so that there are still pariahs. These pariahs do not engage in any revolutionary struggle or in any mass political campaign to change their situation via the law. In some—quite rare—cases where they have wanted above all else to stop being pariahs, they have instead embraced Islam, because Islam does not recognize castes.

As for the situation in Africa, we know of the desolation that has been wrought. Where "constitutional" appearances are maintained, "democracy" is a farce. Elsewhere, all is tragedy. Europe has given Africa many gifts (though *not* slavery, a gift of the Arabs—who were even stricter monotheists than the Christians). Among other things, Africa has been given by Europe its division into so-called nations, bounded by meridians and parallels. Next, it has been given jeeps and machine guns, by means of which any sergeant can seize power and proclaim a socialist people's revolution while massacring a fair proportion of his compatriots. Televisions, too, rank among these gifts; they allow this same sergeant or his colleagues to go about stupefying the population. Europe has also made a gift of "constitutions"—and of much in the way of industrial machinery. But it has not made a gift of capitalism, nor of liberal political regimes.

For, as a productive/economic system, capitalism is not exportable just like that, and the liberal-oligarchic regime, fallaciously called *democracy*, is not exportable, either. No immanent tendency pushes human societies toward all-out "rationalization" of production to the detriment of all else, or toward political regimes that accept

certain overt forms of intestine conflict while securing certain liberties. Historical creations, these two forms have nothing fated about them—and their historical concomitancy is, itself too, in broad terms contingent. As a productive/economic system, capitalism presupposes at the same time its expression as an *anthropolitical mutation* in *certain* countries of Western Europe, one that the colonists of *certain* settlement colonies carried with them on the soles of their shoes. But this mutation is not necessarily contagious. It *can* be: Japan is obviously the extreme case, as the sub-Saharan countries are the extreme example of the contrary. And the adoption of capitalism does not *entail* a liberal political regime—as Japan shows us once again from 1860 to 1945, or South Korea after the war.

And neither are liberal-oligarchic regimes exportable. Why speak of *liberal oligarchy* when unreflective journalists, politicians, and writers talk of *democracy*? Because democracy signifies the power of the *dēmos*, of the people, and because the regimes to which I have just referred happen to be under the political domination of particular strata: big finance and industrialists, the managerial bureaucracy, the upper levels of the state bureaucracy and of the political bureaucracy, and so on. The populations living under those regimes certainly have rights. These rights certainly are not "merely formal," as has stupidly been said by some people; they are just *partial*. The population, however, does not have power: it does not govern, nor does it control the government. It makes neither the law nor the laws. It does not judge. It can periodically sanction the apparent—emerged—part of society's governors via elections—that is what happened in France in 1981 {when President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and his center-right government were defeated}—but so as

to bring to power others of the same stripe {since the French Socialists then took political power, in an alliance with the French Communist Party}—and this is probably what is going to happen in France in a few months {with the 1986 election of centrist and conservative parties to government and with the appointment of neo-Gaullist Jacques Chirac as prime minister under France's then-President, the Socialist François Mitterrand}.

The institutions in these societies include a strong democratic *component*. But the latter has not been engendered by human nature or granted by capitalism or necessarily entailed by capitalism's development. It is there as residual result, as sedimentation of struggles and of a history that have gone on for several centuries. Of these institutions, the most important one is the anthropological type of the European *citizen*: historical creation of a type of individual, elsewhere unknown, who can put into question the already instituted and generally religious representation of the world, who can contest existing authority, think that the law is unjust and say so, and who is willing and able to act to change the law and to participate in the determination of her own fate. This is what is, par excellence, not exportable, what cannot appear from one day to the next in another culture whose instituted anthropological presuppositions are diametrically opposed.

The democratic, or emancipatory, or revolutionary movement is a creation that surged forth for a first time in ancient Greece, disappeared for a long while, and has been resurgent under changed forms and with altered contents in Western Europe since the end of the High Middle Ages. It expresses no human nature, no immanent tendency or law of history. Nor does it constitute, unfortunately, a catalyst or an enzyme that, instilled in infinitesimal quantities in any

society whatsoever, would inevitably make society evolve toward calling its traditional institutions into question. This is certainly possible but in no way necessary. In particular, the cases of India, the Muslim world, and even Russia seem to illustrate the nearly insurmountable obstacle the continued adherence of a population to a religion, or its residual effects (that is, *in the absence* of factors of another type that counterbalance religion), constitutes for the birth and development of such a movement. At the other end of the spectrum of possibilities, consider this: All that was needed was a tiny relaxation of state terror for the Democracy Wall in Beijing to be covered with dazibaos contesting authority. And recent changes in several Latin American countries are heading in the same direction.

Let us conclude.

We affirm that, *for us*, all peoples and all individuals have the same rights to be free, to seek justice, to achieve what they consider to be their well-being. I specifically say *for us*, for this is not the case for a faithful member of a proselytizing religion and—to take the least controversial example—certainly not the case for a true Muslim, at least if he is faithful to the prescriptions of the Koran. And in this *for us* is to be found the whole paradox of our situation. For, since Herodotus, ours is the first and only culture to affirm that all cultures have, as such, the same rights. And undoubtedly, too, *for us*, this is one point where other cultures are truly lacking in relation to our own. *But also*, the content of our culture obliges us to judge negatively (and to condemn) cultures and regimes that torture, kill, or imprison without due process; or that include mutilation in their array of legal penalties; or that persecute those who do not belong to an official religion; or that tolerate and encourage practices like the excision and infibulation of

women. And it is here, too, that the emptiness of "liberalism," of "individualism," and, more generally, of "human rights theories" becomes manifest. For, certainly the first of these rights (and the presupposition for all right and for all discourse on rights) is the right of men and women to institute a culture or to adhere to an existing culture. What then must be said of institutions of society that enjoy popular support but that include features that in our view are monstrous? Of course, such adherence is fabricated by the already existing institution of society. But so what? Should we then "force to be free" these people who have internalized, certainly without any free choice, the caste system? I think that one of the functions today of the simple-minded discourse on "human rights" and on "individualism" is to conceal a flight from political and historical responsibility. This responsibility consists in being able to affirm loud and clear that *we* do not want, neither here nor elsewhere, any society in which the hands of thieves are cut off, and this affirmation is made in terms of an ultimate and radical political option that there can be no question of "grounding" (upon what?); but we, and what we are and what we do, are the ones who bear witness for, and who are the most fragile guarantors of, this responsibility, for our salvation and for our damnation.

It will be said, however, that these are just minor quibblings when "our" own society is readying itself, perhaps, to destroy life on Earth and, moreover, is constantly destroying it a little bit at a time. Yes, certainly that is so, in a sense. This leads me to the main point of my conclusion: It is idle and vain to discuss our attitudes toward third-world countries when in our own countries reigns the total political void we know today.

We can and should exercise our critical faculties

with regard to third-world governments and regimes, as well as with regard to our own. We can and should try to elucidate the questions, for "us" as well as for "them," and to spread ideas. We can and should support movements we judge to be democratic and emancipatory in third-world countries. But at present, *we* cannot "have a policy" toward them. For—and this is a truism—that pertains to governments, and they are what they are.

In other words, the question—What, then, are the political conclusions to be drawn from everything we have just said?—can be answered with another question: Conclusions *for whom?* *Who* makes this policy? We are not governments, and governments follow policies determined by entirely other considerations. It could be said, for instance: No aid, below a given level of political liberties (which is in no way obvious: Should we, must we, because of Mengistu Haile Mariam, let *all* Ethiopians die of hunger—or send aid, even when knowing that four-fifths of it would be siphoned off by the regime and its men?). But *who* would be applying this rule? Can it be forgotten that a good number of South-American torturers have been "educated" by the CIA in installations of "the greatest democracy on earth"? Or that France, under Giscard as well as under the "Socialists," is keeping afloat in Africa some completely corrupt, terror-based regimes? And does one believe that either of these questions could, at present-day, become domestic political issues in the United States or in France?

So long as the present political resignation of the Western peoples continues, every attempt of ours at an *effective political* response to the problems of the Third World is, at best, utopian, at worst, an unconscious and involuntary [*non voulue*] cover for real policies unrelated to the interests of the Third World.

The Gulf War Laid Bare*

So long as one is not straight about the nature of the conflict, the true motivations of both sides, and the possible effects of foreseeable outcomes, the question of whether or not it was necessary to go to war must be rejected.

Saddam Hussein could not care less about the Palestinians, and the same goes for the Koran. These matters came to his mind when, faced with violent reactions to his annexation of Kuwait, he had to find some allies in a hurry. The conquest of Kuwait is strictly related to territorial, financial, and power goals. If Kuwait's borders are artificial, so are those of Iraq and of all the other countries in the region (and of many others). In 1980, Saddam did not attack Iran to liberate the Palestinians but, rather, to enlarge his territory and his resources and to convince the Westerners and the Soviets to arm him to the teeth. He does not represent the poor against the rich, or the South against the North. He rules over a naturally wealthy country that he has ruined in order to arm himself and to maintain his regime of terror. He cuts his opponents to pieces and has gassed the Kurdish minority. Only "progressives" are ready to forget all that, for Saddam happily completes the collection of executioners (Stalin, Mao, Castro, Pol Pot) they have always ardently defended.

The Westerners talk of "law." A funny idea, to defend law and human rights at the sides of Hafez El-Assad and King Fahd. They also talk of "international law." This indefinitely elastic law was and remains in hibernation

"La Guerre du Golfe mise à plat" was originally published in *Libération* (Paris), February 5, 1991: 14. [The English-language translation was proposed to a number of American reviews and newspapers that rejected publication of the text. —T/E]

when it comes to the West Bank, Lebanon, Cyprus, Grenada, and Panama. No one is against self-determination for the Kuwaitis. We therefore should also ask about self-determination for the Palestinians, the Kurds (massacred in concert by Saddam, the Iranians, and our allies the Turks), the people of Timor and a few assorted Balts, Armenians, Georgians, and so on.

The Westerners also say they could not let Saddam's power grow inordinately, at the risk of his obtaining direct or indirect control (through dictating prices) over a large portion of the world's petroleum resources, dominating the Middle East, and attacking Saudi Arabia and/or Israel. Supposing Iraq were crushed, however, another, even more formidable regional superpower, Iran, would be established. And Syria, with its designs on Lebanon and its scores to settle with Israel, would become even more menacing.

Contrary to what is said, the real war aims of the United States bear little relation to oil: above 25 dollars a barrel, other energy sources become profitable in the middle term. These aims basically concern the U.S.'s quite myopic will to impose its "order." That new order passes by way of crushing Iraq. Suppose Irak is crushed. The result in the region, and in all Muslim countries (Turkey, for the moment, excepted), will be still greater chaos. The idea that an "International Conference" could settle anything at all is a fairy tale. Hatred and resentment not only on the part of Arab, but also of Muslim, populations (see, already, Pakistan) have already reached the point of paroxysm. Whatever happens, Saddam will be—indeed, already has been—transformed into a hero. Such is the kinship religious fanaticism shares with paranoid systems of thought: as the victor, it was God who made you triumph; as the vanquished, he granted you the martyr's glory. The

effects would have been fairly much the same if Saddam had been allowed to digest Kuwait. The Westerners were and remain caught in a trap largely manufactured by themselves when they armed Saddam, left the Palestinian question to rot, and so forth. They are now creating a situation whose abominable effects will be felt for decades.

Fanaticism has won out. Characteristically, the few Arab intellectuals who, it seemed, had absorbed the values of criticism and reflection are today actively participating in the mythologization of Arab history: the Arabs have been, for thirteen centuries, pure white doves; all the evils they have suffered were inflicted on them by Western colonization. No doubt it is on account of Wall Street that they were enslaved during four centuries by their coreligionists, the Turks. And Western imperialism would explain how some of them now enslave the Kurds, others the Berbers, and Mauritanian Arabs the Black Africans in their region.

The Palestinians remain the losers. On the level of States, Arab solidarity is one tall story. All Arab governments not only could not care less about the Palestinians, but they have every interest in the Palestine question *not* being settled. At the price of a few dollars for some, of verbal posturings for others, these rotten regimes procure on the cheap a diabolical external foe onto which their respective populations' passion and hatred can be diverted.

Israel does not want to give back the territories, and it will never do so voluntarily. If it had wanted to, it would already have done so. The sort of haggling that goes on over whether the PLO is representative or not would better be left to the region's open-air markets. Internationally supervised elections in the territories would have shown who was representative and who was not. What the Israeli

"Right" wants, and what the "Left" dares not really oppose, is the definitive annexation of the right bank of the Jordan, stepping stone to an even "Greater Israel." That this last objective is delirious changes nothing. Even though they were immersed in it themselves only three decades or three centuries ago, the Westerners are incapable of understanding what a religiously-inspired nationalism can entail (among the Israelis as well as among the Arabs).

Then there is the illusion of technomilitary solutions, electronic warfare, and Nescafé-victory: twenty days after operations began, the Iraqis are still capable of knocking down a few of the coalition's planes, and an Iraqi column penetrates into Saudi territory, unobserved, for dozens of hours. One evening, a few Iraqi colonels may empty their revolvers into Saddam, or the infantry in Kuwait may fall apart. Most likely, the Iraqis will resist for a long time. The strategists hastened to proclaim that Iraq is not Vietnam and that, for lack of a jungle in which to hide, the Iraqis will fold under bombardment. Once again, these strategists have committed their favorite blunder: they forget that war involves people. The jungle is not the desert. Nevertheless, until there is proof to the contrary, Iraq and Vietnam have one decisive thing in common: a large mass of people willing to die rather than surrender. (That their "reasons" may be mad changes nothing.) When it comes to removing the Iraqis from their shelters at bayonet point, and when the number of human casualties on the coalition's side begins to rise skyhigh, it will be sociologically interesting to study the evolution of public opinion in the West as well as in the Maghreb.

With a few rare exceptions, Western intellectuals have so far behaved not much better than their Muslim brothers. The great majority remain silent. Among those

who speak up, some submit to the blackmail of "Arabism," of "Islam," of "Western guilt," or give in to their stupid hatred of America, whatever it might do, when they do not surrender to their shameful fascination for tyrants and brute force. Others—their minds clouded by the absolute horror that Saddam, his regime, and the fanaticism he whips up does indeed represent—readily overlook the motivations and war aims of the Westerners, their shameful alliances, the hypocrisy of the invocation of "law," the way President George Herbert Walker Bush has pushed full steam ahead toward war, the intolerable practices and attitudes of the Israeli government.

If, as has rightly been said, one must count among the principal victims of this war the rather slight chances for democracy and secularism that existed in the Muslim world, the war also sheds harsh light on the functioning of the much-vaunted Western "democracies." As was to be expected, everything has been "executed" by "the executive"; the role of citizens in the definition of ends and means has been nil. It will be said that polls report large support for government policy among the people. Let us talk about it. A few days before hostilities broke out, a poll stated that three quarters of French people thought "no cause, no matter how just, justifies recourse to war." That's a monstrous position: if this noble principle had always applied, these same French people would still be serfs. It is of small consequence. The government worried little about this lovely polling result. And rightly so. A few days after hostilities broke out, more than two thirds of these same French people approved of the war. This reversal of opinion cannot be attributed to additional reflection on the matter—in early January, all the givens were already in place—or to the artificiality of polling. Sad to say, but

people have readily joined the winning side, fascinated as they are by America's airlifted electronic "big stick." Those are the kind of "citizens" this "democracy" manufactures.

The conflict already goes well beyond the case of Iraq and Saddam Hussein. It is in the process of transforming itself into a confrontation between, on the one hand, societies held in the grip of a tenacious religious imaginary, now reactively reinforced, and, on the other, Western societies which, somehow or other, have been delivered from this imaginary but have revealed themselves incapable of transmitting to the rest of the world anything other than the techniques of war and the manipulation of opinion. Machine guns and television sets, but not *habeas corpus*, have proved exportable. In this situation, both sides are at issue. What matters for us in the West is that the present state of our societies renders them unfit to exercise any influence other than material. A society devoted to the cult of consumer spending and televisual zapping cannot erode the anthropological grip of the Koran or, to take another example, of Hinduism. Apathetic citizens, ensconced in their private little worlds, do not offer examples for imitation or incitements for reflection to peoples who, lost in the modern world, are now falling back on their ethnoreligious identity.

What, then, is to be done? Should one elect another people, as Brecht once said? Certainly not. Should the people be changed? Well, who will change them? The people must change themselves. To this change, each can contribute, within herself and around herself, each time she is able to speak.

On the near side of such a change, there will never be anything but false answers to monstrously ill-posed questions.

Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth*

Cornelius Castoriadis: The decision to wage the [Gulf] war showed a total disregard for long-term factors, particularly the risk of deepening the existing cultural, social, political, and imaginary rift between the Western countries and the Arab world.

Edgar Morin: We can now {March 1991} draw up an initial retrospective assessment. This war was waged in a region where all problems are not only interdependent but tied together in a series of Gordian knots. That's why, both before and during the war, I thought that the main line of demarcation was not between pacifists and warmongers but, rather, between those who wanted to undo these Gordian knots and those who wanted only to strike Saddam's Iraq and avoid the Palestinian problem.

Today, the issue is whether the war has cut through these Gordian knots, has further entangled them, or whether it allows one now to undo the gravest ones. It's important that the war was short, that it didn't employ poison gases or terrorism, that it didn't become generalized, that it didn't go all the way, since President George Herbert Walker Bush didn't push on to Baghdad, and finally that it allowed the Iraqi people to express their hostility to Saddam Hussein. This has, to our great relief, allowed us to avoid a series of catastrophes a long and intractable war would have set off.

But that's not enough for us to gauge this war. Who would have thought in 1919, after the Treaty of Versailles, that the main effect of the 1914-1918 war would be not the

*Discussion with Edgar Morin, originally published in *Le Monde*, March 19, 1991. Reprinted in *MI*, pp. 51-57.

weakening of Germany and the sidelining of the USSR but the unfurling of these two powers under totalitarian banners? It was only after 1933 that it became apparent that the Great War had brought about effects that were the opposite of those sought by the victors. So, too, is it that what is going to occur in the future will give the Gulf War its meaning.

The future depends, obviously, upon the new situation that is going to take shape in the Middle East. I think that this situation has already been altered by the overall responsibility America has taken on throughout the whole region after its victory. America today is no longer just the sword of a Cold War West, with Israel as its forward eastern stronghold. It is tending to become responsible for a general pacification with regard to its Arab and European allies, and with regard to the United Nations, too. Thus, as soon as the fighting stopped, Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker did indeed establish a "linkage" between the Kuwaiti question and the Middle East question, something that until then they had refused to do.

And today a chance exists for there to be a convergence of efforts to resolve the most virulent of problems, the one that binds the independence of Palestine to the security of Israel, since it's an idea shared by the Europeans, it's the idea of the January 15 Mitterrand plan, it's the USSR's idea. In Israel itself, the disappearance of the Iraqi threat and the impossibility, under present circumstances, of achieving the dream of a Greater Israel that would drive the Palestinians off their lands go together to create new conditions for acceptance of the freedom of a people whom the Israeli army locked up in ghettos for the full duration of this war.

Finally, the UN, whose role had been eclipsed at the stage of the land attack against Iraq, is once again becoming the embryo of an international authority. After August 2, 1990, it had shown itself capable of cracking down on state piracy, and it might prove capable of regulating international tensions. That depended upon the accord struck between the US and the USSR, which depended in turn upon the antitotalitarian revolution broached by Gorbachev. It's clear that if the counterrevolution triumphs in the USSR, the UN will be weakened. But presently we're going through a sunny spell favoring hope and action—though we don't know how long this spell will last.

C.C.: I don't in any way share your view of the UN's role, even hypothetically. I don't think that the situation surrounding an accord between the US and the USSR, which does explain the Security Council's behavior, might be the enduring and normal state of relations between these two countries. The French and the English will continue to align themselves with the United States. But in the end the USSR hasn't given up great-power status any more than China has.

At present, the question at hand is that of the Middle East. Will the Security Council's unanimity be able to withstand its onslaught? Will everyone rally to the position of the American hawks and the Israeli right, who would just as soon see the Palestinians leave for Jordan? There's Jerusalem. There's the Kurdish problem. And who's going to challenge Hafez al-Assad? If there's an accord, the risk is that it will once again be concluded at the Palestinians' and the Kurds' expense.

The UN has never been anything but an organ through which the great powers deal with their disagreements. It's worth as much as the Holy Alliance

between 1815 and 1848 or the concert of powers after the 1878 Congress of Berlin. It can seem to act so long as transient agreements among the powerful hold up.

But behind all that is posed the question of the relationship between the Islamic world and the West. On the one hand, there is the Arabs' tremendous self-mythologization. They present themselves as History's eternal victims. Now, if there ever was a conquering nation, it was that of the Arabs from the seventh to the eleventh century. Arabs didn't sprout up naturally along the slopes of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco; they were living in Arabia. In Egypt, at the start, there wasn't a single Arab. Today's situation is the result, first of all, of conquest and of the more or less forced conversion of subject populations; then of the Arabs' colonization, not by the West, but by their coreligionists, the Turks, over a period of centuries; and, finally, of the Westerners' semicolonization of these Arabs during a relatively much shorter period of time.

And, politically speaking, where are the Arabs at, at the present hour? These are countries in which the structures of power are either archaic or a mixture of archaism and Stalinism. They've taken the worst of the West and tacked that onto a culturally religious society. Within these societies, theocracy has never been shaken off. The penal code is the Koran. The law doesn't result from the national will; it's sacred. The Koran itself isn't a revealed text, written down by human hands; it's substantially divine. This deep-seated mentality persists, and it resurfaces when one is faced with modernity.

Now, modernity is also the emancipatory movements that have gone on for centuries in the West. There have been centuries-old struggles to separate the religious from the political. Such a movement never developed in Islam.

And this Islam is faced with a West that no longer remains alive except by devouring its inheritance; it maintains a liberal status quo but no longer creates significations that are emancipatory in character. The Arabs are pretty much being told: Throw away the Koran and buy Madonna videos. And at the same time, they're being sold Mirage fighter planes on credit.

If there's a historic "responsibility" of the West in this regard, it really lies here. The void of signification in our societies that lies at the heart of modern democracies cannot be filled by more gadgets. Nor can it dislodge the religious significations that hold these societies together. That's what makes the prospects for the future so weighty. The effect of the war is already, and tomorrow it will be even more, an accentuation of this cleavage that is casting Muslims back toward their past.

It is, moreover, tragically amusing to see today that, were Saddam Hussein to fall, there's a big chance he'd be replaced by a fundamentalist Shiite regime—that is to say, the kind of regime the West hastened to combat when it was installed in Iran.

E.M.: Before the war, Jean Baudrillard had proved in logical fashion that, in any case, there couldn't be a war. You have, in turn, just proved logically that, given all the contradictions at work, and so on, no progress is possible. Fortunately, life, in what it has that is innovative, doesn't obey logic, as you very well know. There is, in any case, a new world situation that perhaps will allow us to escape this vicious cycle. But let's get to the bottom of things.

At ground level, the North African masses seem elated to be taking an oppressor for a liberator. That's true. But this isn't some Arab or Islamic trait: we've lived it here at home, too, be it only in idolatry for Stalin or Mao,

something that didn't happen so long ago. We've experienced religious, nationalistic, and messianic forms of hysteria. But today our Western European peninsula is living at low mythological tide. We no longer entertain big hopes. So we believe, in this perhaps temporary state, that passions and forms of fanaticism are peculiar to the Arabs.

From a higher elevation, we can express our regret that democracy hasn't succeeded in implanting itself outside of Europe. But one need only think of Spain, of Greece, of yesterday's Nazi Germany, and of France itself to understand that democracy is a system that is hard to take root. It's a system that feeds upon diversity and conflict—so long as it is capable of regulating these and of rendering them productive—but that can also be destroyed by diversity and conflict. Democracy wasn't able to implant itself in the Arab-Muslim world first of all because that world wasn't able to achieve the historical stage of secularization [*laïcisation*], though it undoubtedly carried the seeds of it from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, whereas the European West was able to enter into that stage beginning in the sixteenth century. Only secularization, which signals the decline of religion in the State and in public life, allows democratization. Even in those Arab-Islamic countries where there have been powerful secularizing movements, democracy has seemed but a weak solution as compared to revolution, which at the same time allowed emancipation from a domineering West. Now, the promise of nationalist revolution, like that of Communist revolution, has in fact been a promise of a religious type, the former bringing the religion of the nation-State, the latter that of earthly salvation.

Finally, let us not forget that the secular message coming from the West arrived at the same time as

imperialist domination and the threat of cultural homogenization. Our technoindustrial sweep over the rest of the world brought along with it a loss of identity.

So, in resisting a threat to their identity, people found themselves obliged to cling to a foundational past as much as to an emancipatory future. This resistance has recently been magnified by another phenomenon of capital importance, one that began to loom larger in the eighties: the collapse of an emancipatory future. This loss of the future is something that we, too, have suffered; we've lost the "progressive" future the development of science and of reason once promised us. The ambivalent features of science and reason have become more and more apparent, and we've lost any "radiant" future of earthly salvation, which collapsed decisively with the Berlin Wall.

When the future is lost, what remains? The present, the past. So long as we continue to consume, we over here live from day to day in the present. What can they over there consume of the present? What did the fabulous Western- or Soviet-model recipes for development bring them? Underdevelopment. So, when there's no more future and the present is in a sorry state, what remains is the past.

That's why the tremendous upsurges in fundamentalism mustn't be seen as the Arab countries falling back upon themselves, like some soufflé that has collapsed. These upsurges are the products of a historical loop in which the crisis of modernity—that is to say, of progress—itself gives rise to this fundamentalism.

You speak, rightly so, of the problem of meaning. For us, History no longer has a remote-control meaning. For us, the old certainties are in a very sorry state.

Up till now, it has always been thought that human beings need certainties in order to stay alive. When the

great certainty-bearing religions declined, other rationalistic, scientific certainties brought with them the assurance of guaranteed progress. Can we imagine a humanity that accepts uncertainty, questioning, with all that that entails in the way of risks of anxiety? Certainly, a huge mutation in our way of being, of living, and of thinking would be required.

This is, nonetheless, our new destiny. But that doesn't mean that we would be able to live without roots, without myths, or without hopes—provided that we know that our myths and our hopes, as Pascal knew, come close to being a kind of religious faith, a wager. We have to make our roots operate in a new way, within space and time. What we must not do is live day to day within the present but replenish ourselves, rather, in the resources of the past ("What thou hast inherited from thy fathers, acquire it to make it thine" said Goethe).¹ And we should no longer project ourselves into a promised future but into one that is wanted and willed. Our myth is that of human brotherhood [*fraternité*] rooted in our homeland-Earth.

We are at a new beginning, and it's in this sense that I believe it possible to bring the U. N. embryo to life, as well as to try to defuse what remains the world's powder keg on the fault line running stretching across the three monotheistic religions, between East and West, between religion and lay culture [*laïcité*], between modernism and fundamentalism, and, finally, between humanity's progress and a great regression.

¹Morin's quotation from Goethe was cited by memory; it was rediscovered in *Totem and Taboo*, cited in note 1 on page 158 of volume 13 of the *Standard Edition* of Freud's works, where the editor identifies this quotation as coming from *Faust*, Part I, Scene I. —T/E

C.C.: It seems clear to me that the world situation is intolerable and untenable, that the West today has neither the means nor the will to modify this situation in any essential way, and that the emancipatory movement has broken down. It seems just as clear to me that, in order to make and do things [*faire*], one must have the will to make them and to do them. Still, one must look reality in the face. When Edgar Morin brings up the problem of identity, he's in fact referring to the problem of meaning, which is what confers upon the believer an identity: I am a good Muslim, a good Christian—or even a bad Christian. For, even qua bad Christian, I am something definite.

We are sons and daughters of . . . ; but we are also those who aim at That is to say, we have a project that is no longer Paradise on Earth, that is no longer messianic or apocalyptic, but that does say something about that toward which we are heading. That's what the West is missing today. The sole thing pushing these societies is the push toward naked wealth and raw power.

Parenthetically speaking, we do know that for a whole period of time the Arabs were more civilized than the Westerners. Then, poof! But what they picked up from the heritage of Antiquity never was political. The Greeks' political problematic, which is fundamental for democracy, never cross-pollinated [*n'a fécondé*] either Arab philosophers or Arab societies. The free towns of Europe wrested communal liberties for themselves at the end of the tenth century. This is not a matter of "judging" the Arabs: we are taking note of the fact that it took ten centuries for the West somehow or other to release political society from the grip of religion.

I shall end with an anecdotal remark. Before the war, George Herbert Walker Bush was considered by his

fellow citizens to be a weakling. Now, he's a hero. But America is going to find itself again immediately faced with its real domestic problems, before which Bush will be impotent. The crisis of American society is going to continue, with the decay of its cities, its social rifts, and all the rest we know. And that's also what is beginning to happen in Europe and what is going to get worse so long as peoples remain dull and apathetic.

E.M.: Our society continues on in a bad way. All the processes at work are leading us toward a great civilizational crisis. Are we regressing or are we progressing? Once again, let us expect the unexpected. Let us save at least within ourselves the most precious treasure of European culture: critical and self-critical rationality.

C.C.: When the Greeks, already on the decline, conquered the East, the East was Hellenized in a few decades. When Rome conquered the Mediterranean world, it Romanized that world. When Europe played the same role, it didn't know how to influence the local cultures in any depth. It destroyed them without replacing them.

What remains today as a defensible heritage of what Europe has created and as a germ for a possible future is a project of autonomy for society. That project now finds itself going through a critical phase. It's our responsibility to revive that project, to advance and to cross-pollinate the world's other traditions.

The Dilapidation of the West*

Esprit: With the Gulf War and the end of Communism, current events seem to be raising the question of the value of the democratic model. Shouldn't it be said that, after all, some form of relativism exists within the international order? Is there, on the other hand, a new bipolarity, or a renewed supremacy on the part of the United States?

C.C.: With the collapse of the Russo-Communist empire, China's impotence, the (perhaps temporary) confinement of Japan and of Germany within the field of economic expansion, and the manifest nullity of the 12-member European Community as a political entity, the United States occupies alone the stage of world politics, is reaffirming its hegemony, and claims to be imposing a "new world order." The Gulf War has been one manifestation of this trend. Nevertheless, I do not think that one could speak of an absolute supremacy or of a unipolar order. The United States has to confront an extraordinary number of countries, problems, and crises for which their planes and their missiles offer them no assistance. Neither the growing "anarchy" in the poor countries of the world, nor the

"Le Délabrement de l'Occident," an interview conducted by Olivier Mongin, Joël Roman, and Ramin Jahanbegloo, was published in *Esprit*, December 1991, pp. 36-54, and reprinted in *MI*, pp. 58-81. [David Ames Curtis's English-language translation, with translator's notes, originally appeared in *Thesis Eleven*, 41 (1995): 94-111, as "The Dilapidation of the West: An Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis." The Postface was originally written March 22, 1994, in English specially for the *Thesis Eleven* translation and subsequently translated into French by Castoriadis himself for the reprint of his interview. We have now followed the June 1995 French version of the Postscript, which appeared in *MI* with added mentions of Rwanda and Burundi. See also note 13, below. —T/E]

question of underdevelopment, nor that of the environment can be settled by bombardments. And even from the military point of view, the Gulf War probably showed the limits of what the United States can do—short of using nuclear weapons.

At the same time, the United States is undergoing a process of subsidence, an internal dilapidation which, I believe, people in France are not taking into account—wrongly so, for the U.S. is the mirror in which the other rich countries of the world can gaze at their future. The fraying of the social fabric, the ghettos, the population's unprecedented apathy and cynicism, corruption at all levels, the fantastic crisis in education (a majority of graduate students are now foreign born), the challenge to English as the national language, the continuing degradation of the economic and productive apparatus—all this ultimately serves to undermine the United States's potential for world hegemony.

Esprit: Does not the Gulf crisis show the failure of the supposed universality of Western values?

C.C.: The Gulf crisis has served, in awesome fashion, to bring out some factors that already were known, or that should already have been known. We saw the Arabs, and Muslims in general, identify in massive numbers with this gangster and executioner of his own people who is Saddam Hussein. As soon as Saddam took a stand against "the West," they were ready to forget about the nature of his regime and the tragedy of his people. The demonstrations subsided after Saddam's defeat, but the undercurrent is still there: Islamic fundamentalism is as strong as ever, and it is extending its grip over regions that were believed to be embarked upon another course (North Africa, Pakistan, sub-Saharan countries). It is accompanied

by a visceral hatred of the West—which is understandable, since an essential ingredient of the West is the separation of religion and political society. Now, Islam—like, moreover, almost all religions—claims to be a *total* institution; it refuses to grant a distinction between the religious and political spheres. This current culminates in and builds its enthusiasm upon an "anticolonialist" rhetoric that, in the case of Arab countries, is—this is the least that can be said—hollow. If today there are Arabs in North Africa, it is because this area was colonized by Arabs beginning in the seventh century; likewise for the countries of the Middle East. And the first non-Arab "colonizers" of the Middle East (and of North Africa) were not Europeans but other Muslims—first the Seljuk Turks, then the Ottoman Turks. Iraq remained under Turkish domination for five centuries—and under a British protectorate for forty years. I am not trying to minimize the crimes of Western imperialism but rather to denounce the mystification that presents the Muslim peoples as having no responsibility for their own history, as having never done anything other than submitting passively to what others, that is to say the Westerners, have imposed on them.

Esprit: Are we not witnessing here the limits of this universalism that is represented by the West, now that it is being confronted with an antidemocratic form of culturalism?

C.C.: There are several levels to this question, a question that today is reaching a tragic intensity. In a sense, "universalism" is not a creation specific to the West. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are "universalistic" since their appeal is addressed, in principle, to all human beings, who all have the same right (and even the same duty) to convert. This conversion presupposes an act of faith—and

it entails an adherence to a specific world of *significations* (and of norms, of values, etc.) that, moreover, is *closed*. This closure is the characteristic trait of highly heteronomous societies. What is characteristic of Greco-Western history is the rupture of this closure, the calling into question of the significations, institutions, and representations established by the tribe. This gives an entirely different content to universalism, for this rupture goes hand in hand with the project of social and individual autonomy, therefore with the ideas of liberty and equality, self-government of collective units and the rights of the individual, democracy and philosophy.

Now, here we encounter a paradox of the first magnitude, one that is blithely passed over, however, by those who discourse about the rights of man, the indeterminacy of democracy, communicative action, the self-foundation of reason, and so on—the Panglosses who go on spouting their navel-watching rhetoric without ever allowing themselves to be distracted by the sound and fury of effectively actual history. The "values" of the West claim to be universal—and undoubtedly they are, even superlatively so, since they presuppose and entail a disengagement from every particular form of social-historical closure within which human beings always necessarily at the outset find themselves caught. One cannot avoid seeing, however, that these "values" have a particular social-historical *rootedness*, and it would be absurd to claim that this rootedness was contingent. To proceed rapidly and to take up the matter *in medias res*, let us say that this rupture of closure lies *behind* us, five or twenty-five centuries behind us. Others, however, do not have it behind them. We can defend "our values" reasonably, but this is possible precisely because we have

erected reasonable discussion as the touchstone of what is acceptable and unacceptable. If someone else enters into this discussion, this person has in fact tipped to the side of our tradition, where everything can be examined and discussed. If, on the other hand, he barricades himself behind some sort of divine revelation, or even simply behind a tradition that he considers sacred (this is, in a certain way, the case of the Japanese today), what would it mean to impose upon him a reasonable discussion? And we tend to forget too easily what happened not that long ago in Christian lands to books that claimed to be conducting simply a reasonable discussion without reference to faith and what happened to the authors of those books.

For others—be they Islamic, Hindu, whatever—to accept universalism with the content the West has tried to give to this idea, they would have to exit from their religious closure, from their magma of imaginary significations. Until now, they have not done so very often—it is among them, par excellence, that pseudo-Marxism or Third Worldism has served as a substitute for religion—and they are now even, for reasons to which we shall return, clutching to religion.

We cannot discuss here and now why it has been, and still is, thus. Why, for example, did Hindu philosophy never challenge the existing social world, or why did Arabic commentators on Aristotle write interminably about his metaphysics and his logic but completely ignore the entire *political* problematic of the Greeks? Likewise, one had to wait for Spinoza, the excommunicated Jew, to find an instance of political reflection within the Jewish tradition. We can pause, however, to examine the factors that *today* render the rich Western societies incapable of exerting an emancipatory influence upon the rest of the world, asking

ourselves not only why these societies do not contribute to the erosion of religious significations, inasmuch as these significations block the constitution of a political space, but also why the rich societies are perhaps tending in the long run to reinforce the grip of these religious significations.

What is the "example" the liberal-capitalist societies offer to the rest of the world? First, that of wealth and of technological and military prowess. This is in fact what others would really like to adopt, and sometimes they succeed in doing so (Japan, the "four dragons," and soon, undoubtedly, a few other countries). But as these examples show, and, contrary to Marxist and even "liberal" dogmas,¹ as such this neither implies nor entails anything relative to the emergence of an emancipatory process.

At the same time, however, these societies present to the rest of the world an image in the form of a foil, that of societies in which a void totally lacking in signification reigns supreme. The only value in liberal-capitalist societies is money, media notoriety, or power in the most vulgar, most derisory sense of the term. Here, community is destroyed. Human concern for others [*la solidarité*] is reduced to a few administrative measures. Faced with this void, religious significations are able to stand their ground and even to regain in power.

There is, of course, what the journalists and the politicians call "democracy"—which in fact is a liberal oligarchy. One would search in vain here for an example of a responsible citizen—that is, someone "capable of

¹"Liberal" is meant here in its continental sense of an advocate of "free-market" capitalism and would be associated, in Anglo-Saxon parlance, with a *conservative* ideology. Castoriadis expands on his notion of a "liberal oligarchy" below. —T/E

governing and being governed," as Aristotle said²—and of a political collectivity that actually reflects and deliberates. Thanks to a long series of previous struggles, some important and precious—though partial—liberties of course manage to survive. These liberties, however, are essentially defensive in character. In the effectively actual social-historical reality of contemporary capitalism, these liberties function more and more as the mere instrumental complement of the mechanisms that maximize individual "enjoyments" [*jouissances*]. And these "enjoyments" are the *sole* substantive content of the "individualism" being pounded into our heads these days.

{I take exception to this brand of "individualism"} because there can be no pure—that is to say, empty—individualism. Individuals who are allegedly "free to do as they please" do not do just anything or no matter what. Each time they do precise, definite, particular things; they desire and emotionally cathect certain objects and reject other ones; they value this or that activity, and so on. Now, these objects and these activities are not and can never be determined exclusively, or even essentially, by "individuals" alone; they are determined by the social-historical field, by the specific institution of the society in which these individuals live and by its imaginary significations. One can undoubtedly speak of an "individualism" on the part of true Buddhists, even if its metaphysical presuppositions are diametrically opposed to those of Western "individualism" (there, the nothingness of the individual; here, the substantial and autarchically-established reality of the individual). But what is the substantive content of a Buddhist "individualism"? In

²Aristotle *Politics* 1252a16. —T/E

principle, it is the renunciation of the world and of its "enjoyments" or "pleasures." Likewise, in the contemporary West, the free, sovereign, autarchic, substantial "individual" is hardly anything more, in the great majority of cases, than a marionette spasmodically performing the gestures the social-historical field imposes upon it: that is to say, making money, consuming, and "enjoying" (if that happens to occur . . .). Supposedly "free" to give to his life the meaning [*sens*] he "wants," in the overwhelming majority of cases this individual gives to his life only that "meaning" that has currency, that is to say, the non-sense of indefinite increases in the level of consumption. This individual's "autonomy" is turned back into heteronomy, his "authenticity" is the generalized conformism that reigns around us.³

This boils down to saying that there can be no individual "autonomy" if there is no collective autonomy, and no "creation of meaning" by each individual for his life that is not inscribed within the framework of a collective creation of significations. And it is the infinite insipidity of these significations in the West today that is the condition for its inability to exert an influence upon the non-Western world, to contribute to the erosion of the grip religious and other similar significations have over that world.

Esprit: There would no longer be, then, any overall meaning. But does that necessarily mean that there would be no peripheral meanings, in this or that sector of society, in the freedom of individuals, and to the extent that each individual would be able, so to speak, to construct a meaning for itself?

On the other hand, a sort of slippage of language

³See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1992), in *WIF*. —T/E

apparently has occurred during our discussion. When it is said that meaning no longer exists, people automatically hear that *pregiven* meaning no longer exists. Now, the problem does not lie there, in that the absence of a *pregiven* meaning does not necessarily create a void. There might be, on the contrary, a chance, a possibility for some freedom that would permit people to exit from a state of "disenchantment."

But is not the big question, then, whether this test of freedom is not *itself* untenable?

C.C.: Clearly, I was not speaking of the disappearance of a *pregiven* meaning, and its disappearance I do not deplore. *Pregiven* meaning *is* heteronomy. An autonomous society, a genuinely democratic society, is a society that calls all *pregiven* meanings into question; it is a society in which, for this very reason, the *creation of new significations* is liberated. And in such a society each individual is free to create for her life the meaning she wants to create (and that she is capable of creating). It is nevertheless absurd to think that she can do so out of all context and beyond all social-historical conditioning. Given what the individual is ontologically, this proposition is in fact a tautology. The *individuated* individual creates a meaning for her life by participating in significations that her society creates, by participating in their *creation*, either as "author" or as (public) "receiver" of these significations. And I have always insisted on the fact that the genuine "reception" of a new work is just as creative as the creation thereof.

This may be seen clearly in the two great periods of our history during which the project of autonomy emerged and truly *individuated* individuals appeared for the first time. In ancient Greece, the rise of truly individual creators

and of a public capable of accepting their innovations goes hand in hand with the rise of the *polis* and of the new significations it embodies: democracy, isonomy, liberty, *logos*, reflectiveness. Though much more complex, in modern Western Europe the situation is analogous. Great art and philosophy, and even scientific research, certainly remained for a long time intimately connected with religious significations, but already the way in which art, philosophy, and science were situated in relation to those significations had changed. And relatively early on, great "profane" forms, and works, were created; society gave rise to these nonsacred forms and works and proved capable of welcoming them. Milan Kundera has shown this in the case of the novel, and he has emphasized that its "function" was to call the established order and daily life into question. And how could we forget the greatest writer of modern Europe, Shakespeare, in whom we find not an ounce of religiosity? By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the European creation had freed itself from all "pregiven" meaning. It is one of those marvelous "coincidences" of history that the last very great religious work of art, Mozart's *Requiem*, was written in 1791—at the moment the French Revolution was going to launch its attack against the Church and against Christianity, a few years after Lessing had defined Enlightenment thinking as the triple rejection of Revelation, Providence, and Eternal Damnation, and a few years before Laplace had responded, apropos of the absence of God in his *Système du monde*, that he had no need of that particular hypothesis. This elimination of "pregiven" meaning did not keep Europe from entering, for one hundred and fifty years, from 1800 to 1950, into a period of extraordinary creation in all domains. For the great novelists, the great musicians, the great painters of this

period, no pre-given meaning existed (any more than for the great mathematicians and scientists). In the fields of research and of meaning-creation a lucid intoxication took hold. It is certainly not accidental that the most weighty signification to be found in their works is a permanent interrogation concerning signification itself. In this way Proust, Kafka, Joyce, and so many others link back up with Athenian tragedy.

If this period comes to a close around 1950 (an evidently "arbitrary" date, it is there to give an idea), it is not because we have entered into a more "democratic" phase than before. Indeed, without the least paradox the opposite could be maintained. Rather, it is because the Western world has entered into crisis, and this crisis consists precisely in this, that *the West ceases to call itself truly into question*.

Esprit: Would there not, then, be a relationship between this meaningless void and the loss of this great art of which you have spoken?

C.C.: Clearly the two go together. Great art is both society's window onto the chaos and the form given to this chaos (whereas religion is the window toward the chaos and the *mask* placed upon this chaos.) Art is a form that masks nothing. Through this form, art shows the chaos indefinitely—and thereby calls back into question the established significations, up to and including the signification of human life and of the contents of this life that have been left the furthest beyond discussion. Love is at the center of personal life in the nineteenth century—and *Tristan und Isolde* is both the most intense presentation of this love and the demonstration that it can be achieved only through separation and death.

Far from being incompatible with an autonomous, a

democratic society, great art is for this reason inseparable from such a society. For, a democratic society knows, has to know, that there is no guaranteed signification, that it lives over the chaos, that it is itself a chaos that must give itself its form, one that is never settled once and for all. It is on the basis of this knowledge that it creates meaning and signification. Now, this is the knowledge—which also may be called knowledge of death, a topic to which we shall return—that contemporary society and contemporary man object to and reject. Great art thereby becomes impossible, at best marginal, without re-creative participation on the part of the public.

You asked whether the test of freedom is becoming untenable. There are two responses to this question, and they are of a piece [*solidaires*]. The test of freedom is becoming untenable to the extent that one happens to *do nothing* with this freedom. Why do we want freedom? We want it, in the first place, for itself certainly, but also to be able to *make and do* things. If one has nothing to do, if one can do nothing, if one does not want to do anything, this freedom is transformed into the pure figure of emptiness. Horrified by this void, contemporary man takes refuge in the laborious overfulfillment of "leisure" pursuits, in a more and more repetitive and ever accelerated performance of routine. At the same time, the test of freedom is indissociable from the test of mortality. ("Guarantees of meaning" are obviously the equivalent of a denial of mortality: here again the example of religions speaks volumes.) A being—an individual or a society—cannot be autonomous if it has not accepted its mortality. A genuine democracy—not a simply procedural "democracy"—a self-reflective and self-instituting society, one that can always put its institutions and its significations back into question, lives precisely in

the test of the virtual mortality of all instituted signification. It is only starting from here that it can create, and, should the opportunity arise, instaurate "imperishable monuments": imperishable in the sense that they demonstrate, for all persons to come, the possibility of creating signification while living on the edge of the Abyss.

Now, the ultimate truth of contemporary Western society is evidently to be found in the desperate and bewildered flight before death, the attempt to cover over our mortality. It is coined in a thousand ways: by the suppression of mourning, by "morticians," by the interminable tubes and hoses of the relentless health-care profession, by the training of psychologists specialized in "assisting" the dying, by the relegation of the aged to nursing homes, and so on and so forth.

Esprit: If one refuses to despair of modern democracy, if one thinks that there should still be some possibility of creating social significations, does not one then collide against an anthropological line of argument, a discourse somewhat Tocquevillean in character that stretches from François Furet to Marcel Gauchet and that consists in saying that in the evolution of democratic societies individuals are led to take refuge in the private sphere and to become individualized? Is that not a structural inclination of modern societies? Conversely, if one agrees with your thinking, which is oriented toward action, what are the conditions for an autonomous form of action in a democratic society? Is there not the possibility of acting publicly amid all this commotion?

C.C.: The "structural inclination" of which you speak is not "structural," it is *historical*—it is that of modern capitalist societies, not that of democracy.

But first a "philological" remark. I think that there

is a confusion that weighs heavily upon contemporary discussions. In Tocqueville, the meaning of the term "democracy" is not political; it is sociological. It is equivalent, in the final analysis, to the elimination of hereditary statuses, which thereby instaures an "equality of conditions," at least on the juridical level. This equalization culminates, or can culminate, in the creation of a mass of undifferentiated individuals, who embrace this lack of differentiation and refuse excellence. At the end of this path lies the "tutelary State," the most benevolent and the most terrible of tyrants, as well as "democratic despotism" (an absurd notion, in my view, since no form of despotism can exist unless it instaures new differentiations). Tocqueville accepts the movement toward equalization, which he considers to be a historically irreversible tendency (willed by Providence, in his view), but his pessimistic streak is still nourished by his nostalgia for former times, when individual excellence and glory were not rendered impossible by what he calls "democracy."

For me, as you know, the primary meaning of the term democracy—whence all the rest flows—is political: a regime in which all citizens are capable of governing and being governed—the two terms being indissociable—a regime of explicit societal self-institution, a regime of reflectiveness and self-limitation.

Once that is posited, the anthropological question evidently becomes fundamental. It has always been at the center of my concerns, and that is why, since 1959-60, I have granted such importance to the phenomenon of the *privatization* of individuals in contemporary societies and to

the analysis of this phenomenon.⁴ For, beginning in the fifties, modern capitalist society achieved equilibrium and secured its survival by throwing people back into the private sphere and by confining them within this sphere (which was rendered possible by the economic well-being of the rich countries but also by a whole series of social transformations, notably concerning consumption patterns and "leisure" pursuits), parallel and synchronous with an immense movement of *withdrawal* on the part of the population, of apathy and of cynicism with regard to political affairs. (While "spontaneous" in appearance, this movement essentially has been induced by what occurred during the entire preceding period of history.) Moreover, despite a few counterphenomena to which we shall return, this evolution has only become accentuated since the fifties. Now, the paradox is that capitalism has been able to develop and to survive only through the conjunction of two factors, both of which are anthropologically related and both of which capitalism is in the process of destroying.

The first was social and political conflict, as expression of the struggles of groups and of individuals for autonomy. Now, without this conflict there would not have been, on the political level, what you call "democracy." Capitalism as such has nothing to do with democracy (one needs only look at pre- as well as postwar Japan). And on the economic level, without social struggles capitalism would have collapsed dozens of times over already during the past two centuries. The potential for increased unemployment was absorbed by reductions in the duration

⁴See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 31-33 (December 1960—April 1961—December 1961), and now in *PSW* 2, pp. 226-343. —T/E

of the work day, the work week, the work year, and work life; production found outlets in domestic consumer markets that were constantly being enlarged by working-class struggles and by the rises in real wages these struggles brought with them; the irrationalities of the capitalist organization of production were corrected, for better or worse, thanks to the ongoing resistance of working people.

The second factor is that capitalism is able to function only because it has inherited a series of anthropological types it did not create and could not itself have created: incorruptible judges, honest Weberian-style civil servants, teachers devoted to their vocation, workers with at least a minimum of conscientiousness about their work, and so on. These types did not arise and could not have arisen by themselves; they were created during previous historical periods in relation to values that were considered at the time both sacrosanct and incontestable: honesty, service to the State, the handing down of knowledge, craftsmanship, and so forth. Now, we live in societies where these values have notoriously become a laughing stock, where the amount of money you have pocketed, it matters little how, or the number of times you have appeared on television alone count. The sole anthropological type created by capitalism, the one that was indispensable for its establishment [*s'instaurer*] at the outset, was the Schumpeter-style entrepreneur: someone who cares passionately about the creation of this new historical institution that is the *business enterprise* and who strives constantly to enlarge it through the introduction of new technical complexes and of new methods of market penetration. Even this type is being destroyed by what is now occurring; as far as production is concerned, the entrepreneur is being replaced by a managerial bureaucracy;

as concerns the making of money, stock-market speculation, hostile takeovers, and financial dealings bring in much more than "entrepreneurial" activities.

Therefore, at the same time that we are watching, through this process of privatization, the increasing dilapidation of the public space, we are also witnessing the destruction of the anthropological types that have conditioned the system's very existence.

Esprit: You have described the present regime as a "liberal oligarchy" that functions in a closed sphere and is very content to do so since in this way it can conduct its business without interference—the population not intervening, in fact, except to choose one or another political team. Are you sure things function exactly like that? There are still some social struggles, some lively forms of conflict going on in this society—though less so, no doubt, than in the past, when things were centrally organized around work and there were struggles connected with trade-union conflicts. It is unclear, however, whether it can be said categorically that all people are falling back on the private sphere.

Let us take an extreme example: riots like the one at Vaulx-en-Velin {in October 1990} also bear witness to a will to participate actively that is as strong as that encountered in the workers' movement during the nineteenth century. Fifty years ago, in contrast, French society was much less participatory, much more exclusive than it is today. There nevertheless has been, so to speak, some democratic "progress"—even if it is through a triumphant media culture. Therefore, it cannot simply be said that all that is just a demand for buying power and for entry into the capitalist system.

C.C.: What's at issue is to establish what one

considers essential or central to the system and what one considers secondary, peripheral, just "noise." The liberal oligarchy certainly does not function in a closed sphere. What must be understood is that the *less* it functions in that way the *more* it gains strength—precisely as an oligarchy. In fact, sociologically speaking, it is rather "closed" (see the social origins of those recruited for the top schools, etc.). From its own point of view, it has every interest in enlarging its recruitment base, the breeding ground for self-cooptation. It would not become more "democratic" for all that—any more than the Roman oligarchy became democratic when it finally accepted the idea of including the *homines novi*. On the other hand, a liberal regime (as opposed to a totalitarian regime) enables the oligarchy to perceive "signals" emanating from society, even outside the official or legal channels, and, in principle, to react, to seek reconciliation. In reality, it does so less and less. What did Vaulx-en-Velin amount to (besides the creation of a few new committees and bureaucratic posts "to deal with the problem")? Where are things at in the United States, with the ghettos, the drugs, the collapse of education, and all the rest?

In reality, after the failure of the movements of the sixties, the two "oil crises," and the liberal (in the capitalist sense of the term) counteroffensive, which was initially represented by the Thatcher-Reagan couple but which has finally won out all over, we are seeing a new arrangement of "social strategy." A comfortable or tolerable situation is maintained for 80 to 85 percent of the population (who are further inhibited by fear of unemployment), and all the system's shit is dumped on the "lower" 15 or 20 per cent of society, who cannot react, or who can react only through vandalism, marginalization, and criminality: the

unemployed and immigrants in France and England; Blacks and Hispanics in the United States, and so on.

Of course, conflicts and struggles remain and reappear here and there. We are not living in a dead society. In France, these last years, there have been the college students, the high-school kids, the railroad workers, the nurses. And an important phenomenon has arisen: coordinating committees [*coordinations*] have been created. These *coordinations* are a new form of democratic self-organization of movements that expresses people's experience of the bureaucracy and their contempt for it—even if parties and trade unions still are out there trying to swallow up these movements.⁵

⁵An illustration of this point is given in a short *Libération* (Paris) newspaper item of March 26, 1992 (p. 37), a few months after Castoriadis's interview with *Esprit*. While the national student *coordination* was gearing up for a day of action in all major cities and towns against the Socialist Education Minister Lionel Jospin's proposed university education reforms, a separate "provincial *coordination*," organized by the student union close to the Socialists, was granted a special audience with Jospin's assistant, who promised to this second "*coordination*" significant concessions. A clever way for the Socialists, politically under great pressure at the time, to let off a little steam, and for its student-union ally, the UNEF-ID, to affect the status of an influential and effective political player. *Coordinations* have again sprung up amidst the more recent (March 1994) student-worker protests against conservative Prime Minister Edouard Balladur's plan for a "youth minimum wage" lower than the national one. Nurses, railway workers, and other categories of the working population in France have created *coordinations* in the past decade, most notably during the massive strikes of November-December 1995. See Castoriadis's preface to Jean-Michel Denis's *Les Coordinations. Recherche désespérée d'une citoyenneté* (Paris; Éditions Syllepse, 1996), pp. 9-13 (now in the present volume) and *Drunken Boat's* follow-up interview to Castoriadis's "The Rising Tide of Insignificance" interview (also now in the present volume). —T/E

It should also be noted, however, that these movements against the existing order are most of the time corporatist in character. In any case, they remain very partial and very limited in their objectives. Everything happens as if the enormous sense of disillusionment provoked both by the collapse of the Communist brand of mystification and by the silly spectacle of the actual functioning of "democracy" were leading everyone to lose their will to bother themselves anymore about politics in the true sense of the term, the word itself having become synonymous with crooked schemes and suspect maneuverings. In all these movements, any idea of broadening the discussion or of taking larger political problems into account is rejected as downright evil. (And they cannot even be blamed for this, for those who have tried to "politicize" these movements are in general the last remaining dinosaurs, Trotskyists and the like.) The most striking case is that of the ecologists, who have been dragged kicking and screaming toward debates concerning general political issues—whereas the ecological question itself involves, quite obviously, the totality of social life. To say that the environment must be saved is to say that the way of life of society must be changed radically, that one is willing to give up the frantic consumer race. This is nothing less than *the* political, psychical, anthropological, and philosophical question posed, in all its profundity, to humanity today.⁶

I do not mean by this that the only action alternatives are that of all or nothing, but rather that a lucid action must always keep the global horizon in sight, must be engaged in

⁶See now "The Revolutionary Force of Ecology" (below in the present volume) and its fourth note, on French political-ecology groups. —T/E

the generality of the social and political problem, even if it must also be aware that for the moment it can obtain only partial and limited results. Moreover, this exigency must be assumed by the participants.

On the other hand, it cannot be said, as you have done, that society today is much more inclusive, without asking: Inclusive *within what?* It is inclusive within what it itself is, within this magma of dominant imaginary significations I have tried to describe.

Esprit: There is a point that we have not yet broached but that you just touched upon when you spoke of the inconsistencies of the ecology movement. This is the problem of technical change. We do not hesitate to ask you this question, for you are one of the rare contemporary philosophers to have a familiarity with the exact sciences. We are in an age in which some people tend to see in technology the source of all our society's evils. Do you think that technique has become, in effect, a completely autonomized system upon which the citizen no longer has any means to act?

C.C.: Two facts seem to me incontestable. First, that technoscience has become autonomized: no one controls its evolution or its orientation and, despite the existence of a few "ethics committees" (their ridiculousness is beneath comment and betrays the vacuousness of the whole affair), no one takes into consideration at all the indirect and the lateral effects of this evolution. Second, that it has an *inertial* trajectory, in the sense this term is given in physics: left to itself, the movement continues.

This situation embodies and expresses all the traits of the contemporary age. The unlimited expansion of pseudomastery is pursued here for its own sake; it is detached from any rational or reasonably discussible end.

Whatever can be invented will be invented; whatever can be produced (at a profit) is produced, the corresponding "needs" being stirred up afterward. At the same time, the meaninglessness and emptiness of all this is masked by scientific mystification, which is today more powerful than ever—and this, paradoxically, at a moment when genuine science has become more aporetic than ever as concerns its foundations and the implications of its results. Finally, we find again in this illusion of omnipotence the flight before death as well as its denial: I am perhaps mortal and weak, but there are strength and power somewhere, at the hospital, inside the particle accelerator, within the biotechnology laboratories, and so on.

That this evolution, destructive as it is, is also in the long run self-destructive of technoscience itself seems to me certain, but it would take too long to discuss that matter. What must be emphasized right now is, first, that this illusion of omnipotence must be dispelled. Second, that for the first time in the history of humanity the extremely difficult question of setting controls (other than ecclesiastical ones) on the evolution of science and of technique is posed in radical and urgent fashion. That requires us to reconsider all the values and habits that rule over us. On the one hand, we are the privileged inhabitants of a planet that is perhaps unique in the universe—in any case, if the truism may be granted, unique for us—of a marvel that we have not created and that we are, rapidly, in the process of destroying. On the other hand, we obviously cannot give up knowledge without renouncing what makes us free beings. Like power, however, knowledge is not innocent. One therefore must at least attempt to comprehend what one is in the process of trying to know and be attentive to the possible repercussions of this

knowledge. Here again appears, in multiple forms, the question of democracy. Under present conditions and within present structures, it is unavoidable that decisions on all these matters are limited to ignorant politicians and bureaucrats and to technoscientists who are motivated, in the main, by a logic of mutual competition. It is impossible for the political collectivity to form on its own a reasonable opinion on these matters. More important still, on this level we are, so to speak, putting our finger on the question of the essential norm of democracy: self-limitation, the avoidance of *hubris*.⁷

Esprit: What you call the "project of autonomy" therefore ultimately passes by way of education.

C.C.: In a democratic society, the centrality of education is beyond discussion. In a sense, it can be said that a democratic society is an immense institution of continuing education, a permanent institution of self-education for its citizens, and that it could not live without that. For, as a *reflective* society, a democratic society has to appeal constantly to the lucid activity and the enlightened opinion of all citizens. This is exactly the opposite of what takes place today, with the reign of professional politicians, "experts," and televised polls. It is not a matter, not essentially in any case, of the education dispensed by the "Ministry of Education." Nor will we approach democracy through the implementation of an *n*th "educational reform." Education begins with the birth of the individual and ends with the individual's death. It takes place everywhere and always. The walls of the city, books, shows [*les spectacles*], and events educate—and, today, in the main "miseducate"—citizens. Compare the education Athenian

⁷On all these points, see "Dead End?" (1987), in *PPA*. —T/E

citizens (and women and slaves) received when they attended performances of tragedy with the kind of education a television viewer receives today when watching *Dynasty* or *Perdu de vue*.⁸

Esprit: This issue of self-limitation brings us back to the debate over mortality and immortality, which appears central: what is striking when one reads you is the impression that there is, on the one hand, the political writings and, on the other, the work of the philosopher-psychoanalyst. But in fact there is in your works an ongoing shared theme, which is the question of time: How is one both to reestablish a relationship with time and to exit from the phantasm of immortality?

C.C.: It is, first, a matter of exiting from the modern illusion of linearity, of "progress," of history as cumulation of acquisitions or process of "rationalization." Human time, like the time of being, is the time of creation/destruction. The only "cumulation" there is in human history, over the long term, is that of the instrumental, the technical, the ensemblistic-identitarian. And even that is not necessarily irreversible. A cumulation of significations is nonsense. Over historically given segments of time, there can be only a profoundly *historical* (that is to say, anything but linear and "cumulative") relationship between those significations that are created by the present and those that are created by the past. It is only in exiting from the phantasm of immortality (whose aim, as a matter of fact, is to abolish time) that a genuine relationship to time can be knit together. More exactly—since the expression "relationship

⁸*Perdu de vue* was a popular French television show presenting "real-life" incidents involving missing persons—one precursor to today's "reality TV." —T/E

to time" is bizarre, time is not something external to us with which we might have a relationship; we *are* in time even as time is making us—it is only then that we are truly able to be present in the present while being open to the future and while nourishing with the past a relationship that is one neither of repetition nor of rejection. To liberate oneself from the phantasm of immortality—or, in its vulgar form, from a guaranteed form of "historical progress"—is to liberate our creative imagination and our creative social imaginary.

Esprit: Here one thinks of one of your texts in your new book, *Le Monde morcelé*, entitled "L'état du sujet aujourd'hui."⁹ There the question of the imagination clearly becomes central. What is at issue, indeed, is the liberation of a subject capable of imagining, that is to say, at bottom, of imagining *something else* and therefore of not being alienated by past-present time. What is interesting is that the work already is this capacity to become an imagining subject. Should one expect of this imagining subject in a democratic society to make works, in the sense of products, or is not this imagining subject at bottom *already* the work?

C.C.: There are several levels to the question. First, the subject *always* is an imagining subject, whatever it does. The psyche is radical imagination. Heteronomy can also be seen as the blockage of this imagination within repetition. The work of psychoanalysis is directed toward the subject's becoming autonomous in the double sense of the liberation of its imagination *and* of the instauration of a reflective and deliberative instance that engages in dialogue with this imagination and judges what it produces.

This same "becoming-autonomous" of the subject,

⁹"The State of the Subject Today" (1986), now in *WIF*. —T/E

this creation of an imagining and reflective individual, will also be the work of an autonomous society. I am obviously not thinking of a society in which everyone would be Michelangelo or Beethoven or even an unequaled artisan. But I am thinking of a society in which all individuals will be open to creation, will be able to receive creation in a creative way, even to do with it what they will.

Esprit: The problem of "making a work," in the sense of a work of art, therefore is secondary.

C.C.: It is secondary in the sense that not everyone can, or has to, be a creator of works of art in the proper sense of the term. It is not secondary in the sense of the creation by society of works in the most general sense of this term: works of art, works of the mind, institutional works, works "pertaining to nature [*de culture de la nature*]," if I may so express myself. These are creations that go beyond the private sphere; they have to do with what I call the "public/private" and "public/public" spheres.¹⁰ These creations necessarily have a collective dimension (either in their realization or in their reception), but they are also the ballast of collective identity. This, let it be said parenthetically, is what liberalism and "individualism" forget. In theory and strictly speaking, the question of a collective identity—of a whole with which one might, in key respects, identify, in which one participates and about which one might bear some concern, and for whose fate one feels oneself responsible—cannot and must not be raised in liberalism and "individualism"; it has no meaning there. As it is nevertheless an unavoidable question, in actual practice liberalism and "individualism" shamefully and

¹⁰See "Autonomy: Politics," a section of "Done and To Be Done" (1989), in the *Castoriadis Reader*, pp. 405-13. —T/E

underhandedly fall back upon empirically given forms of identification, and in reality on "the nation." The nation emerges like a rabbit out of the hat of all contemporary theories and "political philosophies." (One speaks at one and the same time of the "rights of *man*" and of the "sovereignty of the *nation*"!) Now, if the nation is not to be defined by reference to "blood right" (which leads us directly to racism), there is only one basis upon which it can be defended in reasonable fashion: as a collectivity that has created works capable of claiming a universal validity. Beyond some folkloric anecdotes and some references to a largely mythical and unilateral "history," to be French signifies that one belongs to a culture stretching from the Gothic cathedrals to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and from Montaigne to the Impressionists. And as no culture can claim for its works a monopoly on the claim to universal validity, the imaginary signification "nation" cannot but forfeit its cardinal importance.

If its institutions constitute a collectivity, its works are the mirrors in which it can look at itself, recognize itself, call itself in question. They are the tie between its past and its future; they are an inexhaustible deposit of memory and at the same time the mainstay of its future creation. That is why those who affirm that in contemporary society, within the framework of "democratic individualism," no place exists any longer for great works, are, without knowing it or wanting it, pronouncing a death sentence upon this society.

What will be the collective identity, the "we," of an autonomous society? We are the ones who make our own laws; we are an autonomous collectivity made up of autonomous individuals. And we are able to look at ourselves, recognize ourselves, and call ourselves back into question in and through our works.

Esprit: But does not one have the feeling that this "looking at oneself in a work" has never functioned contemporaneously with the work itself? The great periods of artistic creation are not *at the same time* the moment during which society sees itself in its works. The society of the time does not see itself in Rimbaud or in Cézanne: it is after the fact that it does so. On the other hand, should we not today consider ourselves tributaries of all the traditions that have made our society what it is, even if they are not all mutually compatible?

C.C.: You are taking one case, almost unique in history, certainly full of significance but not the one you attribute to it. To be brief, on this scale the "misunderstood genius" is a product of the end of the nineteenth century. With the rise of the bourgeoisie came a profound scission between popular culture (which, moreover, was rapidly destroyed) and the dominant culture, the bourgeois culture of *pompier* art.¹¹ The result was the appearance, for the first time in history, of the phenomenon of the *avant-garde* and of an artist who is "misunderstood," not "by accident" but *of necessity*. For, the artist was reduced at that time to the following dilemma: to be bought by the bourgeois of the Third Republic—to become an official, *pompier*-style artist—or to follow his own genius and to sell, if lucky, a few canvasses for five or six francs. There followed the well-known degeneration of the "avant-garde," when the only

¹¹The word *pompier* refers to painting and other artworks that are academic in style, superficial in form, and conventional in content; *pompier* art, often contrasted with styles like Impressionism that were developed outside the established salons, was shown in fire stations (hence the name *pompier*) and other established institutional settings.

thing that counted was to "shock the bourgeoisie" [*épater le bourgeois*]. This phenomenon is connected with capitalist society, not democracy. It expresses precisely the non-democratic scission between culture and society as a whole.

In contrast, Elizabethan tragedy or Bach's *Chorales* were works that the people of the time went to see in the Globe Theater or sang in the churches.

As to the question of tradition, a society is not obliged to repeat its tradition in order to maintain a relationship with it; quite the contrary, even. A society can maintain with its past a relationship of rigid repetition—which is the case in what are called, as a matter of fact, *traditional societies*—or simply a erudite, museum-centered, and tourist-oriented relationship—which is more and more the case in our society. In both cases, the past is in fact dead. A past can be alive only for a present that is creative and open to the future. Consider the case of Athenian tragedy. Among the forty or so works that have been handed down to us, there is only one, *The Persians* by Aeschylus, that is inspired by an actual event; all the others take their subject matter from the mythological tradition. Each of these tragedies, however, remodels that tradition; they renew its signification. Between the *Electra* of Sophocles and the *Electra* of Euripides there is, so to speak, nothing in common, save the canvass of action. There is a fantastic freedom there that is nourished by laboring upon a tradition and that creates works of which neither the rhapsodists who recited the myths nor even Homer could ever have dreamed. Nearer to us, we can see how Proust transsubstantiates, in his profoundly innovative oeuvre, the entire French literary tradition. And the great Surrealists were nourished infinitely more by this tradition than the Academicians of their day.

Esprit: We are not going to open up again the debate about French intellectual life, but it is striking to observe, in relation to the problem of mortality, the present current of deconstruction upon a Heideggerian or Jewish background. Some people go on and on about mortality or finitude, but nothing can be said about this finitude except to note that it is finitude.

Do we not have here a symptom of a sort of blockage? If one follows along with this current, what one must above all avoid doing is to take any action, and one ends up singing the praises of passivity. If we grant that not all those people are buffoons—and not all of them are, surely—still we see that this thinking of finitude ends up, so to speak, biting its own tail. Why, then, does this kind of thought maintain such a grip over people?

C.C.: As far as I am concerned, I see in it just one more manifestation of the sterility of our epoch. And it is not an accident that this goes hand in hand with those ridiculous proclamations about "the end of philosophy," the confused conjectures about "the end of grand narratives," and so on. Nor is it surprising that those who represent these tendencies themselves prove incapable of producing anything other than commentaries upon the writings of the past and studiously avoid any mention of the questions science, society, history, and politics actually are raising today.¹²

This sterility is not an individual phenomenon. It expresses, as a matter of fact, the social-historical situation. There is also certainly a, so to speak, "intrinsic" philosophical factor: the internal critique of inherited thought, notably of its rationalism, obviously should be

¹²See "The 'End of Philosophy?'" (1988), now in *PPA*. —T/E

conducted. The pompous pronouncements of "deconstructionism" notwithstanding, this critique is being conducted in reductionist fashion. To reduce the entire history of Greco-Western thought to "the closure of metaphysics" and to "onto-theo-logo-(phallo)-centrism" is to conjure away a host of infinitely fecund germs contained within this history; to identify philosophical thought with rationalist metaphysics is simply absurd. And on the other hand and above all, a critique that is incapable of positing other principles than those it criticizes is itself condemned, as a matter of fact, to remain within the circle defined by the objects criticized. In this way, the whole critique of "rationalism" that is being conducted today ultimately ends up simply with an irrationalism that is only its flip side and, at bottom, a philosophical position as old as rationalist metaphysics itself. To disengage oneself from inherited thinking presupposes the conquest of a new point of view, which is what this tendency is incapable of producing.

But once again, it is the social-historical situation as a whole that weighs so heavily here. The inability of what today passes for philosophy to create new points of view, new philosophical ideas, expresses, in this particular field, the inability of contemporary society to create new social significations and to call itself into question by its own means. What I have just tried to do is to shed light, as much as is possible, on this situation. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that, when all is said, we do not and cannot have an "explanation" for what is going on. Just as creation is not "explicable," neither is decadence or destruction. Historical examples abound, but I will cite only one. In the fifth century B.C.E., there were at Athens, not to mention anyone or anything else, three great tragedians, Aristophanes, and Thucydides. In the fourth century

B.C.E., nothing comparable. Why? It could always be said that the Athenians were beaten in the Peloponnesian War. So? Were their genes transformed in the process? Athens in the fourth century is already no longer Athens. There obviously were the two great philosophers, who took to flight at dusk but who were in essence the strange products of the preceding century. There were above all the rhetoricians—with whom we are today so abundantly provided.

All this is combined with a total lack of political responsibility. Certainly, most of these "philosophers" today would shout, to whomever will listen, their devotion to democracy, the rights of man, antiracism, and so forth. But in the name of what? And why should one believe them when they in fact profess to be absolute relativists and proclaim that everything is only a "narrative"—or, to be vulgar about it, a piece of gossip? If all "narratives" are of equal value, in the name of what would one condemn the "narrative" of the Aztecs, with their human sacrifices, or the Hitlerite "narrative" and everything it implies? And how is it that the proclamation of "the end of grand narratives" is not itself a narrative? The clearest image of this situation is provided by the "theories of postmodernism," which are the plainest—I would say the most cynical—expression of the refusal (or the inability) to call the present-day situation into question.¹³

¹³Again, see "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1992), in *WIF*. Also to be noted here is that a question and reply that appeared on the proof copy (and thus was included in the *Thesis Eleven* translation, since this hand-corrected proof copy was the one made available by the author to the translator at the time) was eliminated at this point, perhaps for space considerations, from the final version printed in *Esprit* (the interview ends neatly at the very

As for me, precisely because I have a project I am not abandoning, I owe it to myself to try to see reality as clearly as possible, as well as the actual forces at play in the social-historical field. As someone else said, I am trying to look at things with "sober senses."¹⁴ There are moments in history in which all that is feasible in the immediate term is a long and slow work of preparation. No one can know if we are traversing a brief phase of sleep in society today or if we are in the process of entering into a long period of historical regression. I, however, am impatient.

bottom of page 54), and thus (inadvertently or by design?) from the *MI* reprint, too. Here is the English-language version of the passage in question:

Esprit: Added up, your position seems rather pessimistic.

C.C.: Why would that be pessimism rather than an attempt to see things as they really are? One certainly could be mistaken, which is another matter. But there is also another way of being mistaken, one practiced to the full by everyone and that I have always avoided like the devil: it is to postulate the existence of a "good solution." This is the way the Marxists reasoned morning, noon, and night: Since the revolution *must* be inevitable, such and such an analysis of the present situation is "true" while another is "false."

A few other words and passages were also altered in this way, but in those cases, it would seem rather more clearly that the intention was to drop certain words and phrases, and so this final translation reflects those changes. The interesting omission is of "and negative" after "defensive" in Castoriadis's characterization of certain liberties. In "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime" (1996), now in the present volume, Castoriadis explains why "even Isaiah Berlin's qualification that [these rights and liberties] are 'negative' is inadequate." —T/E

¹⁴This phrase comes from the *Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and was already cited above in the second note for "Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy." —T/E

Postscript

The above interview took place almost four years ago {December 1991}. In one sense, especially insofar as the discussion of its main theme, the dilapidation of the West, is concerned, there is not much to add to it. In another sense, the changes in the planetary scene and its dynamic would require a totally new development which cannot be given here and now, but of which I shall try to sketch some of the main lines below.

The state of deep political apathy characteristic of Western societies remains as strong as ever. It has certainly played a central role in the dramatic demonstration, over the last two years, of the political nonexistence of "Europe" occasioned by the Yugoslavian events. The same events, as well as those of Somalia and Haiti or of Rwanda and Burundi, have shown the derisory character of the "New World Order" and the real impotence of U.S. policy.

Islamic fundamentalism is now tearing apart Algeria, where the toll of terrorism and counterterrorism is mounting every day. In a different way, the same is true of Sudan. The effects of the "peace" agreement between Israel and the PLO remain more than doubtful, given the attitude of the Israeli colonists as well as growing Palestinian opposition, both from the "right" and from the "left," to Arafat.

But much more important is the wholesale change in the world perspective. The basic assumptions on which any reasonable analysis during the 1950-1985 period would have to base itself are obsolete or are rapidly becoming so. The countries of the ex-USSR are in a chaotic state and nothing, absolutely nothing, can be said as to the direction toward which they are moving; as a matter of fact, there simply *is* no "direction" whatsoever. This already, in and of

itself, introduces an essential instability into international relations, totally different from the more or less regulated tensions of the Cold War period. This coincides with a phase when the West is becoming increasingly incapable of managing both its domestic and its foreign affairs. Some more words on this are in order here.

Despite some asides on the world character of capitalism, imperialism, and so on, the whole of the economic, political, and social analysis of developed capitalism, from Smith and Ricardo through Marx and up to the Keynesians and the neo-neo-classical economists, was done within a "national" framework. "National" economies were, e.g., the central object of inquiry (Marx can be taken as analyzing either a single, isolated national economy or a fully homogenized "world economy," which boils down to the same thing), with "foreign trade" as an *ad libitum* and minor addition. The relative success of Keynesian analysis and macroeconomic policies in the immediate postwar decades was based on the fact that national governments were more or less able to manage, through budgetary and monetary measures (including manipulations of the exchange rate, over which they were supposed to exercise sovereign power), the level of employment, rate of growth, level of prices, and external balance. But "national" economies, in the traditional sense, exist less and less. Therefore, and independent of the degree of imbecility of politicians, national policies are less and less able to influence economic developments. Through a funny coincidence, this process came to the forefront during the same period (the decade of the Eighties) when the Thatcher-Reagan neo-"liberal" craze spread throughout the rich countries (including "socialist" France and Spain). The outcome was the present-day chaotic state of the world

economy, in which all sorts of catastrophic "accidents" are possible. Now, one should remember that the social and political stability of the rich "liberal" countries in the postwar period was strongly predicated upon the ability of the system to supply the goods—i.e., approximately full employment and rising consumption levels.

The mess is compounded by developments in the Third World. Leaving aside the Islamic countries, about which I have already spoken, and Latin America where prospects remain obscure, a clear-cut division into two zones is rapidly establishing itself. A zone of atrocious misery, tribal strife, and death (mainly, but not only, Africa), where even the traditional and Western-supported corrupt dictatorships are becoming more and more unstable. And the East-Asian zone of rapidly industrializing countries under more or less authoritarian political regimes, with plenty of cheap, overexploited labor, the competition of which, both in the form of exports and of "relocation" of plants, compounds the economic problems of the rich countries. But certainly dwarfing all this is the Chinese process of dizzyingly rapid capitalist industrialization within the crumbling political structure of Communist political rule. Whatever the future developments in China may be, they are certain to throw totally off-balance the fragile existing world disorder.

—March 22, 1994 — June 1995

The Revolutionary Force of Ecology*

QUESTION: What, for you, is ecology?

C.C.: It is the understanding of the basic fact that social life cannot fail to take into account in a pivotal way the environment in which social life unfolds. Curiously, this understanding seems to have existed to a greater extent formerly, in savage or traditional societies. A generation ago, in Greece, there still were villages that recycled almost everything. In France, maintenance of waterways, forests, and so on has been an ongoing concern for centuries. Without any "scientific knowledge," people had a "naive" but firm awareness of their vital dependence upon the environment (see also {Akira Kurosawa's} film *Dersu Uzala*). That changed radically with capitalism and modern technocracy,¹ which are based on nonstop and rapid growth

*Originally published in *La Planète Verte* (Paris: Bureau des élèves des sciences politiques, 1993), pp. 21-25, this interview was conducted by Pascale Egré. [An initial translation, of questionable quality, appeared as "World Imbalance and the Revolutionary Force of Ecology" in *Society and Nature*, 5 (January 1994): 81-90. In retranslating this article, we have used a photocopy of Castoriadis's own hand-corrected French-language copy of this interview. —T/E]

¹It is strange to find this term *technocracy* used here, given Castoriadis's many denials that a technocracy (i.e., rule by technicians) is possible—starting at least in 1957, with "On the Content of Socialism, II": "Modern capitalism is bureaucratic capitalism. It is not—and never will be—a technocratic capitalism. The concept of a technocracy is an empty generalization of superficial sociologists, or a daydream of technicians confronted with their own impotence and with the absurdity of the present system." (*PSW* 2, p. 111-12; *CR*, p. 67). It is thus unclear

of production and consumption and which entail some already obvious catastrophic effects upon the Earth's ecosphere. If scientific discussions bore you, you need only look at the beaches or gaze at the air in big cities. So, one can no longer conceive of a politics worthy of the name that would lack a major concern for ecology.

Q.: Can ecology be scientific?

C.C.: Ecology is essentially political; it is not "scientific." Science is incapable, as science, of setting its own limits or its goals [*finalités*]. If science were asked the most efficient or the most economic means of exterminating the Earth's population, it can (it should, even!) provide you with a scientific answer. Qua science, it has strictly nothing to say about whether this project is "good" or "bad." One can, one should, certainly, mobilize the resources of scientific research to explore the impact that such and such an action within the sphere of production might have upon the environment, or, sometimes, the means of preventing some undesirable side effect. In the last analysis, however, the response can only be political.

To say, as was said by the signers of the "Heidelberg Appeal" (which, for my part, I would call, rather, the Nuremberg Appeal), that science, and science alone, can resolve all problems is dismaying. Coming from so many Nobel Prize winners, it expresses a basic illiteracy, a failure

if the use of this word is a slip of the tongue on the speaker's part or, perhaps, a mistranscription of a first instance of the term *technoscience* (see below) on the publisher's part. The word *technocracy* becomes even more problematic when we read, below, "that the scientists have never had, and will never have, anything to say about [technoscience's] use or even its capitalist orientation." —T/E

to reflect on their own activity, and total historical amnesia.²

Statements like this are being made when, but a few years ago, the main inventors and builders of nuclear bombs were making public declarations of contrition, beating their chests, declaring their guilt, and so on. I can cite J. Robert Oppenheimer and Andrei Sakharov, to mention only them.

It is precisely the development of technoscience and the fact that the scientists have never had, and will never have, anything to say about its use or even its capitalist orientation that has created the environmental problem and the present gravity of this problem. And what we notice today is the enormous margin of uncertainty contained in the data and in the evolutionary prospects for the Earth's environment. This margin, obviously, lies *on both sides*. My personal opinion is that the darkest prospects are the most likely ones.

The real question, however, doesn't lie here. It is the total disappearance of prudence, of *phronēsis*. Given that no one can say with certainty whether the greenhouse effect will or will not lead to a rise in the sea level, nor how many years it will take for the ozone hole to spread over the entire atmosphere, the only attitude to adopt is that of the *diligens pater familias*, the conscientious or dutiful father of the family who says to himself, "Since the stakes are enormous, and even if the probabilities are very uncertain, I shall

²Calling for a "scientific ecology," as opposed to "irrational preconceptions," the Heidelberg Appeal was "publicly released at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. By the end of the 1992 summit, 425 scientists and other intellectual leaders had signed the appeal. . . . Today, more than 4,000 signatories, including 72 Nobel Prize winners, from 106 countries have signed it," according to the Scientific and Environmental Policy Project http://www.sepp.org/heidelberg_appeal.html. —T/E

proceed with the greatest caution [*prudence*], and not as if it were all a trivial matter."

Now, what we are witnessing at present, for example during the Rio Carnival (labeled a *Summit*), is total irresponsibility. This total irresponsibility may be seen in the determination of President George Herbert Walker Bush and of the liberals {in the Continental sense of conservative "free-market" advocates}, who invoke precisely the flip side of the uncertainty argument (since nothing has been "proven," let's go along as before . . .). It may be seen in the monstrous alliance between right-wing American Protestants and the Catholic Church to oppose all birth-control assistance in the countries of the Third World, when the connection between the demographic explosion and environmental problems is manifest. At the same time—the height of hypocrisy—some claim to be concerned about the living standard of these populations. In order to improve this standard of living there, however, one would have to accelerate the destructive production and consumption of nonrenewable resources.

Q.: During the Rio Summit, two conventions, which some consider historic, were nonetheless adopted: the convention on climatic change and the one on biodiversity. Are they part of this "Carnival"?

C.C.: Yes, for they propose no concrete measures and are accompanied by no sanctions. They are the tribute vice pays to virtue.

A word about biodiversity. One must nevertheless remind the signers of the Nuremberg Appeal that no one knows at present how many living species are to be found on the Earth. Estimates range from ten to thirty million, but even the figure of a hundred million has been advanced. Now, of these species, we know only a modest portion.

What is known with near certainty, however, is the number of living species we are rendering extinct each year, in particular through the destruction of the tropical forests. Now, E. O. Wilson estimates that, in the next thirty years, we will have exterminated nearly twenty percent of existing species—or, using the lowest total estimate, 70,000 species on average per year, *two hundred species per day!* Independent of any other consideration, the destruction of a *single species* can lead to the collapse of the equilibrium, therefore the destruction, of an entire ecotope.³

Q.: Reading some of your articles, one gets the impression that ecology is only the tip of an iceberg that conceals a reappraisal not only of science but also of the political system and of the economic system. Are you a revolutionary?

C.C.: *Revolution* does not mean torrents of blood, the taking of the Winter Palace, and so on. *Revolution* means a radical transformation of society's institutions. In this sense, I certainly am a revolutionary.

But for there to be revolution in this sense, profound changes must take place in the psychosocial organization of Western man, in his attitude toward life, in short, in his imaginary. The idea that the sole goal of life is to produce and to consume more—an idea that is both absurd and degrading—must be abandoned; the capitalist imaginary of pseudorational pseudomastery, of unlimited expansion, must be abandoned. That is something only men and women can do. A single individual, or one organization, can, at best, only prepare, criticize, incite, sketch out possible orientations.

³Castoriadis quotes E. O. Wilson at greater length in "Dead End?" (1988), on p. 254 of *PPA*. —T/E

Q.: What parallel would you draw between the decline of Marxism and the boom in political ecology?

C.C.: The connection is obviously complex. First, one must see that Marx participates fully in the capitalist imaginary: for him, as for the dominant ideology of his age, everything depends on increasing the productive forces. When production reaches a sufficiently elevated level, one will be able to speak of a truly free society, a truly equal one, and so on and so forth. You do not find in Marx any critique of capitalist technique, either as production technique or as the type and nature of the products manufactured.

For him, capitalist technique and its products are an integral part of the process of human development. Neither does he criticize the organization of the work process in the factory. He criticizes, certainly, a few "excessive" features, but as such this organization seems to him to be a realization of rationality without the addition of quotation marks. The main thrust of his criticisms bears on the usage that is made of this technique and of this organization: they solely benefit capital, instead of profiting humanity as a whole. He does not see that there is an internal critique to be made of the technique and organization of capitalist production.

This "forgetfulness" on Marx's part is strange, for, during the same age, one finds this type of reflection present among many authors. Let us recall, to take a well-known example, Victor Hugo's *Les misérables*. When, in order to save Marius, Jean Valjean carries him through the sewers of Paris, Hugo indulges in one of his beloved digressions. Basing himself no doubt upon the calculations of the great chemists of the age, probably Justus Liebig, he says that Paris casts into the sea each year, via its sewers, the

equivalent of 500 million gold francs. And he contrasts this with the behavior of Chinese peasants who manure the land with their own excrement. That is why, he practically says, China's earth is today as fertile as on the first day of creation. He knows that traditional economies were recycling economies, whereas the economy today is an economy of wastefulness.

Marx neglects all that, or makes it into something peripheral. And this was to remain, until the end, the Marxist movement's attitude.

Starting by the end of the 1950s, several factors were to come together in order to change this situation. First, after the Twentieth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, the Hungarian Revolution the same year (1956), then Poland, Prague, and so on, the Marxist ideology lost its attraction. Then began the critique of capitalist technique. I mention in passing that in one of my texts from 1957, "On the Content of Socialism,"⁴ I developed a radical critique of Marx as having totally left aside the critique of capitalist technology, in particular at the point of production, and as having completely shared, in this regard, the outlook of his era.

At the same time, people were beginning to discover the havoc capitalism had wreaked upon the environment. One of the first books to have exerted a great influence was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*,⁵ which described the havoc insecticides inflicted upon the environment: insecticides destroy plant parasites but also, at the same time,

⁴See "On the Content of Socialism, II," in *PSW 2*; excerpted version in *CR*. —T/E

⁵Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). —T/E

insects—therefore, the birds that feed upon them. This is a clear example of a circular ecological balance and of its total destruction via destruction of a single one of its elements.

An ecological awareness then began to form. It developed all the more rapidly as young people, discontent with the social regime in the rich countries, were no longer able to contain their criticisms within traditional Marxist channels that were becoming practically ridiculous. Criticisms predicated upon ever growing poverty no longer corresponded to anything real; one could no longer accuse capitalism of starving the workers when working-class families each had one, then sometimes two cars. At the same time, there was a fusion of properly ecological themes with antinuclear ones.

Q.: Is ecology then the new *fin de siècle* ideology?

C.C.: No, I would not say that. And in any case, ecology is not to be made into an ideology in the traditional sense of the term.

But the need to take the environment and the balance between humanity and the planet's resources into account is just so obvious for any genuine and serious politics. The frenetic rush of autonomized technoscience and the huge demographic explosion that will continue to be felt for at least a half century imposes this upon us.

The effort to take these things into account has to be integrated into a political project, one that of necessity goes beyond "ecology" alone. And if there is no new movement, no reawakening of the democratic project, "ecology" can very well become integrated into a neofascist ideology. Faced with a worldwide ecological catastrophe, for example, one can very readily see authoritarian regimes imposing draconian restrictions on a panic-stricken and

apathetic population.

It is indispensable to insert the ecological component into a radical democratic political project. And it is just as imperative that the reappraisal of present-day society's values and orientations, which is implied by such a project, be indissociable from the critique of the imaginary of "development" on which we live.⁶

Q.: Are the French ecological movements the bearers of such a project?

C.C.: I think that among *les Verts* {the Greens} as well as among the members of *Génération Écologie*, the political component is inadequate and insufficient.⁷ People

⁶See "Reflections on 'Rationality' and 'Development'" (1977), now in *PPA*. —T/E

⁷*Les Verts* (the Greens) were founded in 1984 by Antoine Waechter as the successor to several previous political-ecology formations dating prior to René Dumont's 1974 French presidential candidacy. *Génération Écologie* is the political formation, founded in 1990, of Brice Lalonde, May '68 student Sorbonne leader, creator in 1971 of *Les Amis de la Terre* (Friends of the Earth), Dumont's 1974 presidential campaign director who himself ran as a French presidential candidate in 1981 on an ecology ticket, and then Minister of the Environment in 1988 under Socialist French President François Mitterrand. In 1992, a year before the present interview was conducted, *Génération Écologie* elected 108 candidates in regional elections where the rival *Verts* also scored victories. Talks for a fusion of the two groups foundered, and Lalonde's group eventually supported successful neo-Gaullist presidential candidate Jacques Chirac in both 1995 and 2002. Breaking with Waechter's "neither Left nor Right" position (see next paragraph of the present interview), *les Verts* participated in the "plural Left" government of Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin after Chirac's 1997 decision to call snap legislative elections resulted in the loss of his legislative majority. Waechter now heads a third political-ecology party, the *Mouvement écologiste indépendant*, billing itself as "100 percent ecologist." Most recent reports

there are not reflecting at all upon the anthropological structures of contemporary society, upon the political and institutional structures, upon what a true democracy would be, the questions that its instauration and its operation would raise, and so forth.

These movements deal pretty much exclusively with questions of the environment, and they are hardly concerned at all about social and political questions. It is understandable that they want to be "neither Left nor Right." But this kind of point of honor of not taking a position on the burning political questions of the day is quite liable to criticism. It tends to make these movements into forms of lobbies.

And when there is a raising of consciousness about the political dimension, it still seems to me to be inadequate. That was the case in Germany, where the Greens had instaured a rule of rotation/revocability for their deputies. Rotation and revocability are key ideas in my political reflections. Separated from the rest, however, they no longer retain any meaning. That is what happened in Germany, where, inserted into the parliamentary system, they lost all meaning. For, the very spirit of a parliamentary system is to elect "representatives" for five years in order to get rid of the political questions, to leave these questions to "representatives" so as not to have to bother with them, that

signal a possible rapprochement with *Les Verts*. Let it be noted that these are not the only political-ecology parties vying for votes in French elections; eight established political-ecology groups and numerous other such formations were among the large number of political organizations that, altogether, ran over 8,000 candidates in the 2002 legislative elections for 555 National Assembly seats. In a continued electoral alliance with the defeated Socialists, *Les Verts* were able to retain only three seats that year. —T/E

is to say, quite the contrary of the democratic project.

Q.: Does this properly political component of a project of radical change also include North-South relations?

C.C.: Of course, It's a nightmare to see well-fed people watching the Somalis dying of hunger, then return to their soccer game. But it is also, from the basest realistic standpoint, a terribly short-term attitude.

People shut their eyes and let these people go on being famished. But in the long run, they will not let themselves remain famished. Clandestine immigration increases as demographic pressures rise, and what is certain is that we have not seen anything yet.

Chicanos cross the Mexican-American border practically without any obstacle, and soon it will be not only Mexicans. Today, in the case of Europe, they pass, among other places, across the Strait of Gibraltar. And these are not Moroccans; they are people coming from all corners of Africa, even Ethiopia or the Ivory Coast, who endure unimaginable sufferings in order to get to Tangier and to be able to pay the smugglers. But tomorrow, it will no longer be Gibraltar. There are perhaps 40,000 kilometers of Mediterranean coastline, what Winston Churchill called "the soft underbelly of Europe." Already, escapees from Iraq are crossing through Turkey and clandestinely entering Greece. Then, there is the whole Eastern border of the Twelve. Is one going to set up a new Berlin Wall 3,000 to 4,000 kilometers long in order to prevent starving Easterners from entering the rich half of Europe?

We know that a terrible economic and social imbalance exists between the rich West and the rest of the world. This imbalance is not diminishing; it is growing. The sole thing the "civilized" West exports in the way of

culture into these countries is coup d'État techniques, weapons, and televisions displaying consumer models that are unattainable for these poor populations. This imbalance will not be able to go on, unless Europe becomes a fortress ruled by a police State.

Q.: What do you think of Luc Ferry's book,⁸ which explains that *les Verts* are the carriers of an overall world view that challenges man's relations with nature?

C.C.: Luc Ferry's book picks the wrong enemy and ultimately becomes a diversionary operation. At the moment when the house is on fire, when the planet is in danger, Ferry picks an easy target in the person of certain marginal ideologues who are neither representative nor truly menacing, and he says not a word, or hardly one, about the true problems. At the same time, he opposes to a "naturalist" ideology an entirely superficial "humanist" or "anthropocentric" ideology. Man is anchored in something other than himself; the fact that he is not a "natural" being does not mean that he is suspended in midair. There is no point in going on and on about the human being's finitude when it comes to the philosophy of knowledge and forgetting this finitude when it comes to practical philosophy.

Q.: Is there any founding philosopher of ecology?

C.C.: I don't see any philosopher who could be designated as the founder of ecology. There certainly is, among the English, German, and French Romantics, a "love of nature." But ecology is not "the love of nature." It's the necessity of the self-limitation (that is to say, the true freedom) of the human being in relation to the planet upon

⁸Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order* (1992), trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). —T/E

which, by chance, he exists, and which he is in the process of destroying. On the other hand, one can certainly find in several philosophies this arrogance, this *hubris*, as the Greeks said, presumptuous excess, which enthrones man in the place of "master and possessor of nature"—an assertion that is actually quite ridiculous. We are not even masters of what we will do, individually, tomorrow or in a few weeks. But *hubris* always summons *nemesis*, punishment, and that is what is in danger of happening to us.

Q.: Would a rediscovery of ancient philosophy's sense of balance and harmony be beneficial?

C.C.: A rediscovery of philosophy as a whole would be beneficial, for we are going through one of the least philosophical periods, not to say antiphilosophical periods, in the history of humanity. The ancient Greek attitude, however, was not an attitude based on balance and harmony. It starts from the recognition of the invisible limits on our action, of our essential mortality, and of the need for self-limitation.

Q.: Might one consider the rise of a concern for the environment as one characteristic of a return of the religious, under the form of a faith in nature?

C.C.: First of all, I do not think that, despite what people are saying, there would be a return of the religious in the Western countries. Next, ecology, correctly conceived (and from this point of view, this is the near general case), does not make of nature a divinity, any more than of man, indeed.

The only relationship I can see is very indirect. It has to do with what has made religion have such a hold over almost all societies. We live in the first society since the beginning of the history of humanity where religion no longer occupies the center of social life. Why this enormous

place of religion? Because it reminded man that he is not master of the world, that there was something other than him, which it "personified" in one manner or another: religion called it *taboo*, *totem*, *the gods of Olympus*—or *Moirai*—*Jehovah*, and so on. Religion presented the Abyss and at the same time it masked it in giving it a face: it's God, God is love, and so on. And it thereby also gave meaning to human life and death. Certainly, it projected onto divine powers, or onto the monotheistic God, some essentially anthropomorphic and anthropocentric attributes, and it is precisely in this that it "gave meaning" to all that is. The Abyss became, in a way, familiar, homogeneous with us. At the same time, however, it reminded man of his limitation; it reminded him that Being is unfathomable and unmasterable. Now, an ecology that is integrated into a political project of autonomy has to indicate this limitation of man as well as remind him that Being has no meaning, that it is we who create meaning at our risk and peril (including under the form of religions . . .).⁹ There is, therefore, in a sense, proximity, but in another sense, irreducible opposition.

Q.: More than the defense of nature, you wish then for the defense of man?

C.C.: The defense of man against himself, that's the question. The principal danger for man is man himself. No natural catastrophe equals the catastrophes, the massacres, the holocausts created by man against man.

Today, man is still, or more than ever, man's enemy, not only because he continues as much as ever to give himself over to massacres of his fellow kind, but also

⁹On these points, see "Institution of Society and Religion" (1982), now in *WIF*. —T/E

because he is sawing off the branch on which he is sitting: the environment. It is awareness of this fact that one ought to try to reawaken in an age where religion, for very good reasons, no longer can play this role. It is a matter of reminding men not only of their individual limitation but also of their social limitation. It is not only that each is subject to the law, and that one day everyone is going to die; it is that all of us together cannot do just anything; we ought to self-limit ourselves. Autonomy—true freedom—is the self-limitation necessary not only in the rules of intrasocial conduct but also in the rules we adopt in our conduct toward the environment.

Q.: Are you optimistic about the reawakening of this awareness of man's limits?

C.C.: There is, in humans, a creative power, a potential to alter what is, which by nature and by definition is indeterminable and unpredictable. But it is not, as such, positive or negative, and to speak of optimism or pessimism at this level is just frivolous. Man, qua creative power, is man when he builds the Parthenon or the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, as well as when he sets up Auschwitz or the Gulag. The discussion about the value of what he creates begins afterward (and it is obviously the most important one). At present, there is this agonizing interrogation concerning contemporary society's slide into a more and more empty sort of repetition; then, assuming that this repetition might give way to a resurgence of historical creation, an interrogation concerning the nature and value of this creation. We can neither ignore or hush up these interrogations nor respond to them in advance. That's history.

The Rising Tide of Insignificancy*

Olivier Morel: I would like to begin by evoking your intellectual itinerary, which is both atypical and symbolic. What is your judgement today of the adventure you began in 1946 with the founding of Socialisme ou Barbarie?

Cornelius Castoriadis: I have already written about all that at least twice,¹ so I shall be very brief. I began to be interested in politics at an early age. I discovered both philosophy and Marxism at the same time, when I was twelve, and I joined the illegal organization of Communist Youths under the Metaxas dictatorship during my last year in high school, at age fifteen. After a few months, the comrades in my cell (I should like to mention here their names: Koskinas, Dodopoulos, and Stratis) were arrested, but, even though they were brutally tortured, they did not turn me in. I thus lost contact, which I did not regain until the start of the German Occupation. I rapidly discovered

¹This radio interview by Olivier Morel was originally broadcast in France by Radio Pluriel. Appearing under the title "Un Monde à venir" (A world to come) in *La République Internationale des Lettres*, 4 (June 1994): 4-5, the interview was reprinted as "La Montée de l'insignifiance" in *MI*, pp. 82-102. [The present translation, based on the *République Internationale des Lettres* version, was originally to be published in the American anarchist review *Drunken Boat*. It now follows the French book version. For additional publication information, see the publication note to the next chapter. —T/E]

¹In my 1973 General Introduction to the first volume of *La Société bureaucratique* (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1973), now in *PSW 1*, and in "Done and to be Done" (1989), now in *CR*.

that the Communist Party had nothing revolutionary about it but was instead a chauvinistic and totally bureaucratic organization (what would today be called a totalitarian micro-society). After an attempt at "reform" with some other comrades, which of course quickly failed, I broke with the Party and joined the most left-wing Trotskyist group, which was led by an unforgettable revolutionary figure, Spiros Stinas. But there, too, with the help also of a few books miraculously saved from the dictatorship's *autodafés* (Boris Souvarine, Anton Ciliga, Victor Serge, Alexander Barmine—and, obviously, Trotsky himself, who articulated *a,b,c* clearly but didn't want to spell out *d,e,f*), I soon began to think that the Trotskyist conception was incapable of accounting for the nature of both the "Soviet Union" and the Communist parties. The critique of Trotskyism and my own conception of things took on definitive form during the first Stalinist *coup d'État* attempt in Athens, in December 1944. Indeed, it became clear that the CP was not a "reformist party" allied with the bourgeoisie, as the Trotskyist conception would have had it, but was aiming at the seizure of power in order to set up [*instaurer*] a regime of the same type as existed in Russia—a bit of foresight that was strikingly confirmed by the events that followed, starting in 1945, in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. This also led me to reject Trotsky's idea of a "degenerated workers' State" and to develop the conception, which I still consider correct, that the Russian Revolution had led to the instauration of a new type of exploitative and oppressive regime in which a new ruling class, the bureaucracy, had formed around the Communist Party. I called this regime total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism. Having come to France at the end of 1945, I presented these ideas within the French Trotskyist party, and this attracted to me a

number of comrades with whom we formed a tendency critical of the official Trotskyist policy. In the Autumn of 1948, when the Trotskyists addressed to Tito, who by then had broken with Moscow, the simultaneously monstrous and ridiculous proposal to form a United Front with him, we decided to break with the Trotskyist party and we founded the group and review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, whose first issue came out in March 1949. The review published forty issues, until the Summer of 1965, and the group itself was dissolved in 1966-1967. Work during this period at first consisted in deepening the critique of Stalinism, of Trotskyism, of Leninism, and, finally, of Marxism and of Marx himself. This critique of Marx can be found already in my 1953-54 *S. ou B.* text, "Sur la dynamique du capitalisme" (nos. 12 and 13), which was critical of Marx's economics; in the 1955-58 articles "On the Content of Socialism" (now in the first two volumes of my *Political and Social Writings*), which were critical of his conception of socialist society and of labor; in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-61; now in the second volume of my *Political and Social Writings*); and, finally, in texts written starting in 1959 but published in *S. ou B.* in 1964-65 under the title "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (now the first part of *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, 1975; *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 1987).

Since the end of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, I am no longer directly and actively involved in politics, save for a brief moment during May 1968. I try to remain present as a critical voice, but I am convinced that the bankruptcy of the inherited conceptions (be they Marxist, Liberal {in the Continental sense of conservative believers in the "free" workings of a "capitalist market"}, or general views on society, history, etc.) has made it necessary to reconsider the

entire horizon of thought within which the political movement for emancipation has been situated for centuries. And it is to this work that I have harnessed my efforts since that time.

O.M.: Has the political and militant dimension always been your basic priority? Might a philosophical stance be the silent point that predetermines your political positions? Are these two activities incompatible?

C.C.: Certainly not. But first a clarification: I have already said that for me, from the outset, the two dimensions were not separate, but at the same time, and for a very long time now, I have thought that there is no direct path from philosophy to politics.² The kinship between philosophy and politics consists in this, that both aim at our freedom, our autonomy—as citizens and as thinking beings—and that in both cases there is, at the outset, a will—reflective, lucid, but in any case a will—whose aim is our freedom. Contrary to the absurdities now once again enjoying currency in Germany, there is no rational foundation for reason, nor is there any rational foundation for freedom. In both cases there is, certainly, a reasonable justification—but that comes downstream; it is based upon what autonomy alone renders possible for human beings. The political pertinence of philosophy is that it is precisely philosophical critique and elucidation that enable one to destroy false philosophical (or theological) presuppositions that have so often served to

²Here a line seems to have been dropped from the final published French version:

For example, in Marxism, or what passes for such, there is a false deduction of a bad politics from an absurd philosophy.

This statement appears quite compatible with arguments advanced in *IIS*, though perhaps it interrupted the flow of the argument here. —T/E

justify regimes based upon heteronomy.

O.M.: The labor of the intellectual, therefore, is critical to the extent that it shatters self-evident truths, to the extent that it is there to denounce what appears to go without saying. This undoubtedly is what you were thinking when you wrote: "One only had to read five lines of Stalin to understand that the revolution could not be *that*."³

C.C.: Yes, but here again a clarification is necessary. The labor of the intellectual ought to be critical, and in history it has often been so. For example, at the moment of the birth of philosophy in Greece, the philosophers called into question the collective, established representations, ideas about the world, the gods, the good civic order. But rather quickly there was a degeneration: the intellectuals abandoned, they betrayed, their critical role and became rationalizers for what is, justifiers of the established order. The most extreme example—but also undoubtedly the most eloquent, if only because he embodies a destiny and an almost necessary culmination of the inherited philosophy—is Hegel, with his celebrated proclamations: "All that is rational is real, and all that is real is rational." In recent times we have two flagrant cases, in Germany with Heidegger and his deep-seated adherence, beyond happenstance and anecdotal evidence, to the "spirit" of Nazism, and in France with Sartre, who since at least 1952 went about justifying Stalinist regimes and, when he broke with ordinary Communism, went over in support of Castro, Mao, and so forth.

This situation has not changed very much, except in its expression. After the collapse of totalitarian regimes and

³See "Intellectuals and History" (1987), now in *PPA*, p. 12. —T/E

the pulverization of Marxism-Leninism,⁴ a majority of Western intellectuals pass their time glorifying Western regimes as "democratic" regimes—perhaps not "ideal" ones (I know not what that expression means) but the best regimes humanly achievable—and claiming that if one lodges any criticisms against this pseudodemocracy it will lead us straight to the Gulag. We thus have an endless critique of totalitarianism, which comes seventy, sixty, fifty, forty, thirty, or twenty years too late (many of today's "antitotalitarians" supported Maoism in the seventies). In this "antitotalitarian" critique, its proponents permit themselves to pass silently over the burning issues of the day: the decomposition of Western societies, apathy, political cynicism and corruption, the destruction of the environment, the situation of the poor countries of the world, and so on. Or, another way of doing the same thing, one retreats into one's polystyrene tower and tends one's precious personal productions.

O.M.: In sum, there would be two symmetrical figures: the responsible intellectual, who takes his responsibilities seriously but who ends up in murderous irresponsibility, as in the case of Heidegger and Sartre, whom you denounce, and the out-of-power intellectual, who ends up absolving himself of any responsibility for the crimes actually being committed. Can things be formulated in this way, and where then do you situate the correct role of the intellectual and of criticism?

C.C.: One must rid oneself of both an overestimation and underestimation of the role of the intellectual. There are thinkers and writers who have exercised immense influence

⁴See "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" (1990), now in *WIF*.
—T/E

in history—not always for the best, moreover. Plato is undoubtedly the most striking example here, since everyone still today, even when he does not know it, reflects in Platonic terms. But in every case, starting from the moment when someone gets involved in expressing his opinions on society, history, the world, and being, he enters into the field of social-historical forces and begins to play there a role that can stretch from the insignificant to the quite considerable. To say that this role is a role of "power" would be, in my opinion, an abuse of language: the writer, the thinker, with the particular means her culture gives to her, her capacities, exercises some influence within society, but that pertains to her role as citizen; she says what she thinks and speaks out on her own responsibility. No one can rid oneself of this responsibility, even the person who does not speak and who thereby lets others speak and allows the social-historical space to become occupied, perhaps, by monstrous ideas. One cannot at the same time indict "intellectual power" and denounce for complicity with Nazism the German intellectuals who kept quiet after 1933.

O.M.: It seems that it is becoming more and more difficult to find points of support for one's criticism and for expressing what one thinks is working badly. Why does criticism no longer function today?

C.C.: The crisis of criticism is only one of the manifestations of the general and deep-seated crisis of society. There is a generalized pseudoconsensus; criticism and the vocation of the intellectual are caught up in the system much more than was the case formerly and in a much more intense way. Everything is mediatized; the networks of complicity are almost omnipotent. Discordant or dissident voices are not stifled by censorship or by editors who no longer dare to publish them; these voices are stifled

by the general commercialization of society. Subversion is caught within the all and sundry of what is being done, of what is being propagated. To publicize a book, one says immediately, "Here is a book that has revolutionized its field"—but it is also said that Panzini-brand spaghetti has revolutionized cooking. The word *revolutionary*—like the words *creation* and *imagination*—has become an advertising slogan; this is what a few years ago was called *cooptation*. Marginality has become something sought after and central: subversion is an interesting curiosity that completes the harmony of the system. Contemporary society has a terribly great capacity for stifling any genuine divergency, be it by silencing it, be it by making it one phenomenon among others, commercialized like the others.

We can be even more specific. Critics themselves have betrayed their critical role. There is a betrayal of their responsibility and of their rigor on the part of authors; there is a vast complicity on the part of the public, which is far from innocent in this affair, since it agrees to play the game and adapts itself to what it is given. The whole is instrumentalized, utilized by a system that itself is anonymous. None of this is the making of some dictator, a handful of big capitalists, or a group of opinion makers; it is an immense social-historical current that is heading in this direction and that is making everything become insignificant. Obviously, television offers the best example: due to the very fact that something is the top story for twenty-four hours, it becomes insignificant and ceases to exist after these twenty-four hours are up, because one has found or one has had to find something else to take its place. This cult of the ephemeral requires at the same time an extreme contraction: what on American television is called "attention span," the useful duration of attention of a viewer,

which was ten minutes still a few years ago, gradually falling to five minutes, to one minute, and now to ten seconds. The ten-second television spot is considered the most effective medium; it is the one used during presidential campaigns and it is fully understandable that these spots contain nothing of substance but are devoted instead to defamatory insinuations. Apparently, it is the only thing the viewer is capable of assimilating. This is both true and false. Humanity has not degenerated biologically; people are still capable of paying attention to a well-reasoned and relatively long speech; but it is also true that the system and the media "educate"—that is, systematically deform—people, in such a way that they finally won't be able to show an interest in anything that lasts beyond a few seconds, or at most a few minutes.

There is here a conspiracy—not in the legal sense but in the etymological sense: everything "conspires," "breathes together," is blowing in the same direction—of a society in which all criticism is losing its effectiveness.

O.M.: But how is it that criticism was so virulently fecund during the period that culminated in 1968—a period without unemployment, without economic crisis, without AIDS, without Jean-Marie Le Pen-type racism—and that today, with economic crisis, unemployment, and all the other problems, society is apathetic?

C.C.: We must revise the dates and periods. Basically, today's situation already was there at the end of the 1950s. In a text written in 1959-60 ("Modern Capitalism and Revolution"), I was already describing society's entry into a phase of apathy, of individual privatization, of the withdrawal of each into his tiny personal sphere, of a depoliticization that was no longer just conjunctural. It is true that during the sixties the

movements in France, in the United States, in Germany, in Italy, and elsewhere, the movements of youth, of women, and of minorities seemed to disprove this diagnosis. But as early as the mid-seventies one could see that there was in all this a kind of last great flare-up of the movements that began with the Enlightenment. The proof of this is that all these movements ultimately mobilized only minorities of the population.

There are conjunctural factors that played a role in this evolution—for example, the oil crises. In themselves, these oil crises hardly are of any importance, but they facilitated a counteroffensive, a form of crisis blackmail on the part of the ruling strata. Yet this counteroffensive could not have had the effects it had, had it not met up with an increasingly lackluster population. At the end of the seventies, one saw in the United States, for the first time in perhaps a century, labor agreements between businesses and unions in which the latter accepted wage cuts. We are seeing levels of unemployment that would have been unthinkable at any time since 1945. I myself had written that such levels had become impossible, since they would immediately have made the system explode. Today it is clear that I was mistaken.

But behind these conjunctural factors, much weightier factors are at work. The gradual, then accelerated collapse of the left-wing ideologies, the triumph of consumer society, the crisis of modern society's imaginary significations (significations of progress and/or of revolution)—all that, to which we shall return, manifests a crisis of meaning, and it is this crisis of meaning that allows conjunctural factors to play the role they play.

O.M.: But this crisis of meaning or of signification has already been analyzed. It seems that we have passed, in

a few years or decades, from crisis as *Krisis*—in the sense, for example, of Edmund Husserl⁵—to a discourse on crisis as loss and/or absence of meaning, to a sort of nihilism. Might there not be two temptations, as close to each other as they are difficult to identify: on the one hand, one can deplore the present decline of the Western values inherited from the Enlightenment (we have to digest Hiroshima, Kolyma, Auschwitz, totalitarianism in the East); and, on the other, one can proclaim (in the nihilistic or deconstructionist outlook) that decline is itself the very name of late Western modernity, that the latter either cannot be saved at all or can be saved only by a return to (religious, moral, phantasmatic, etc.) origins, that the West is guilty of combining reason and domination in a way that achieves its empire over a desert? Between these two tendencies, of mortification that imputes Auschwitz and Kolyma to the Enlightenment philosophers and of nihilism relying (or not) on a "return to origins," where do you situate yourself?

C.C.: I think, first of all, that the two terms you are opposing to each other here ultimately boil down to the same thing. In good part, the ideology and mystifications of deconstructionism are based upon the "guilt" of the West: briefly speaking, they proceed from an illegitimate mixture, in which the critique (already first undertaken a long time ago) of instrumental and instrumentalized rationalism is surreptitiously thrown together with a denigration of the

⁵See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970). This text, originally published in German in 1954, was drafted by Husserl between 1934 and his death in 1938, according to the English-language translator. —T/E

ideas of truth, autonomy, and responsibility. One plays on the guilt of the West in relation to colonialism, to the extermination of other cultures, to totalitarian regimes, to the phantasm of "mastery" in order to leap to a fallacious and self-referentially contradictory critique of the Greco-Western project of individual and collective autonomy, of aspirations toward emancipation, of the institutions in which the latter have been, be they partially and imperfectly, embodied. (The funniest thing is that these same sophists do not refrain, from time to time, from posing as defenders of justice, democracy, human rights, and so on).

Let us leave Greece aside here. For centuries, the modern West has been animated by two totally opposite, though mutually contaminated, social imaginary significations: on the one hand, the project of individual and collective autonomy, the struggle for the intellectual as well as spiritual and also socially real and effective emancipation of the human being; on the other, the demented capitalist project of an unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery, which for a long time has ceased to concern merely the forces of production and the economy so as to become a global project (and for that reason all the more monstrous), that of a total mastery of physical, biological, psychical, social, and cultural data. Totalitarianism is only the most extreme point of this project of domination—which, moreover, is inverted into its own contradiction, since in it even the restrained, instrumental rationality of classical capitalism becomes irrationality and absurdity, as Stalinism and Nazism have shown.

To return to the point of departure of your question, you are right to say that we are not living today a *krisis* in the true sense of the term, namely, a moment of decision. (In the Hippocratic writings, the crisis point in an illness,

the *krisis*, is the paroxysmal moment at the end of which the sick patient either will die or, by a salutary reaction provoked by the crisis itself, will initiate a process of healing. We are living a phase of decomposition. In a crisis, there are opposing elements that combat each other—whereas what is characteristic of contemporary society is precisely the disappearance of social and political conflict. People are discovering now what we were writing thirty or forty years ago in *S. ou B.*, namely, that the opposition between Left and Right no longer has any meaning: the official political parties say the same thing; {neo-Gaullist French Prime Minister Edouard} Balladur is doing today {in 1994} what {Socialist French Prime Minister Pierre} Bérégovoy did yesterday. There are, in truth, neither opposing programs nor participation by people in political conflicts or struggles, or merely in political activity. On the social level, there is not only the bureaucratization of the unions and their reduction to a skeletal state but also the near-disappearance of social struggles. There have never been so few strike days in France, for example, as during the last ten or fifteen years—and almost always, these struggles are merely of a sectoral or corporatist character.⁶

But as was already said, the decomposition of society may be seen especially in the disappearance of significations, the almost complete evanescence of values. And the latter is, in the end, threatening to the very survival of the system. When, as is the case in all Western societies,

⁶Whatever their final outcome might be, the strikes unfolding now (November-December 1995) in France defy, by their implicit signification, this characterization. [Note added by the author for the French reprint.]

it is openly proclaimed (and in France the glory goes to the Socialists for having done what the Right dared not do) that the sole value is money, profit, that the sublime ideal of social life is to enrich yourself, is it conceivable that a society can continue to function and reproduce itself on this basis alone? If that is the case, public servants ought to ask for and accept baksheeshes for doing their work, judges ought to put their decisions up for auction, teachers ought to grant good grades to the children whose parents slip them a check, and the rest accordingly. I wrote almost fifteen years ago about this, that the only thing stopping people today is fear of penal sanctions.⁷ But why would those who administrate these sanctions themselves be incorruptible? Who will guard the guardians? The generalized corruption one can observe today in the contemporary politico-economic system is not peripheral or anecdotal; it has become a structural, a systemic trait of the society in which we live.

In truth, we are touching here upon a fundamental factor, one that the great political thinkers of the past knew and that the alleged "political philosophers" of today, bad sociologists and poor theoreticians, splendidly ignore: the intimate solidarity between a social regime and the anthropological type (or the spectrum of such types) needed to make it function. For the most part, capitalism has inherited these anthropological types from previous historical periods: the incorruptible judge, the Weberian civil servant, the teacher devoted to his task, the worker whose work was, in spite of everything, a source of pride. Such personalities are becoming inconceivable in the

⁷"Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1978), now in *PSW* 3, p. 303. —T/E

contemporary age: it is not clear why today they would be reproduced, who would reproduce them, and in the name of what they would function.

Even the anthropological type that is a specific and proper creation of capitalism, the Schumpeterian entrepreneur (who combines technical inventiveness with an ability to round up capital, organize a business firm, explore, penetrate, and create markets), is in the process of disappearing. That type is being replaced by managerial bureaucracies and speculators. Here again, all these factors are conspiring with one another. Why struggle so hard to produce and to sell at a time when a successful killing in the exchange rate markets on Wall Street in New York or elsewhere can bring you 500 million dollars in a few minutes? The amounts at stake each week in speculation are on the order of the GNP of the United States for a year. The result is to put a drain on the most "entrepreneurial" elements, drawing them toward these kinds of activity which are completely parasitic from the point of view of the capitalist system itself.

If one puts all these factors together and takes into account, moreover, the irreversible destruction of the terrestrial environment which capitalist "expansion" (itself a necessary condition for "social peace") necessary entails, one can and one should ask oneself how much longer the system will be able to function.

O.M.: Are not this "dilapidation" of the West,⁸ this "decomposition" of society, of values, this privatization and this apathy of citizens also due to the fact that, faced with the complexity of the modern world, the challenges have

⁸See "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991, Postscript 1994-1995), now in the present volume. —T/E

become too great? We are perhaps citizens without a compass . . .

C.C.: That citizens are without a compass is certain, but that relates precisely to this dilapidation, to this decomposition, to this unprecedented wearing out of social imaginary significations. One can note it yet again in other examples.

No one knows any longer what being a citizen is, but no one even knows any longer what it is to be a man or a woman. Sexual roles have dissolved; one no longer knows in what that consists. In former times one knew it, on the various social, economic, and group levels. I am not saying that that was good; I am taking a descriptive and analytical point of view. For example, the famous saying, "A woman's place is in the home" (which precedes Nazism by several millennia), defined a role for the woman: this is criticizable, alienating, inhuman, whatever you want—but in any case a woman knew what she had to do: be at home, take care of the house. Likewise, the man knew that he had to feed his family, exercise authority, and so forth. Likewise, in the sexual game: in France one makes fun (and, I think, rightly so) of Americans' ridiculous legalism, with the stories of sexual harassment (which no longer have anything to do with abuses of authority, the position of the boss, etc.), the detailed regulations published by universities on the explicit consent required on the part of the woman at each stage in the process, and so on—but who does not see the profound psychical insecurity, the loss of bearings for one's sexual identity, that this legalism is pathetically trying to palliate? The same goes for parent-child relations: no one knows today what it is to be a mother or a father.

O.M.: This dilapidation of which you are speaking is certainly not the sole fact in Western societies. What

should be said about the other ones? On the other hand, can one say that it is also bringing down with it Western revolutionary values? And what is the role, in this social evolution, of the much talked-about "guilt" of the West?

C.C.: In the history of West, there is an accumulation of horrors—against others just as much as against itself. This is not the privilege of the West: whether it's China, India, Africa before colonization, or the Aztecs, horrors have piled up everywhere. The history of humanity is not the history of class struggle, it is the history of horrors—though it is not only that. Here, it is true, there is a question open to debate, that of totalitarianism: Is it, as I think, the culmination of the folly of "mastery" in a civilization that has provided the means for extermination and indoctrination on a scale hitherto unknown in history; is it a perverse fate immanent to modernity as such, considering all the ambiguities modernity bears within itself; or is it something else again? For our present discussion, this question is, if I dare say so, theoretical to the extent that the West has directed the horrors of totalitarianism against its own (including the Jews), to the extent that "Kill them all, God will recognize His own" is a phrase not of Lenin's making but of a very Christian duke, spoken not in the twentieth century but in the sixteenth, to the extent that human sacrifices have been practiced abundantly and regularly by non-European cultures, etc., etc. Khomeini's Iran is not a product of the Enlightenment.

There is, in contrast, something that is specific and unique to the West and its burdensome privilege: this social-historical sequence that began with Greece and that was resumed, starting in the eleventh century, in Western Europe is the sole one in which one witnesses the emergence of a project of freedom, of individual and

collective autonomy, of criticism and self-criticism: discourses denouncing the West are its most striking confirmation, for one is capable in the West—at least some of us are—of denouncing totalitarianism, colonialism, the traffic in Blacks or the extermination of the American Indians. But I have not seen the descendants of the Aztecs, the Hindus, or the Chinese undertake an analogous self-criticism, and still today I see the Japanese denying the atrocities they committed during the Second World War. The Arabs unceasingly denounce their colonization by the Europeans, imputing to the latter the ills they themselves suffer—poverty, the lack of democracy, the arrested development of Arabic culture, and so forth. But the colonization of certain Arab countries by the Europeans lasted, in the worst of cases, 130 years (that's the case of Algeria, from 1830 to 1962). These same Arabs, however, were reduced to slavery and colonized by the Turks for five centuries. Turkish domination over the Near and Middle East began in the fifteenth century and ended in 1918. It happens that the Turks were Muslims—therefore the Arabs do not talk about them. The flourishing of Arabic culture stopped around the eleventh century, the twelfth at the latest, eight centuries before there was a question of conquest by the West. And this same Arabic culture was built upon the conquest, the extermination, and/or the more or less forced conversion of conquered populations. In Egypt, in 550 CE, there were no Arabs—no more than there were any in Libya, in Algeria, in Morocco, or in Iraq. They are there as descendants of conquerors who came to colonize these countries and to convert the local populations of their own free will or by force. But I see no criticism of these facts in the circle of Arabic civilization. Likewise, one talks about the traffic in Blacks by Europeans starting

in the sixteenth century, but it is never said that the traffic in Blacks and their systematic reduction to a state of slavery was introduced into Africa by Arabic merchants starting in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (with, as always, the willing participation of Black kings and tribal chiefs), that slavery never was spontaneously abolished in Islamic lands and that it still subsists in some of them. I am not saying that all that erases the crimes committed by the Westerners; I am saying only this, that the specificity of Western civilization is this capacity to call itself into question and to undertake self-criticism. There are in Western history, as in all other histories, atrocities and horrors, but it is only the West that has created a capacity for internal contestation, for challenging of its own institutions and of its own ideas, in the name of a reasonable discussion among human beings that remains indefinitely open and that recognizes no ultimate dogma.

O.M.: You say somewhere that the weight of responsibility of Western humanity—precisely because it is this part of humanity that has created internal contestation—makes you think that a radical transformation must take place here first.⁹ Do the prerequisites for a genuine sort of autonomy, for emancipation, for a self-institution of society, perhaps for some "progress"—in brief, for a renewal of the imaginary significations created by Greece and resumed by the European West—seem to be lacking today?

C.C.: First, we mustn't mix up our discussion with the idea of "progress." There is no progress in history, save in the instrumental domain. With an H-bomb you can kill

⁹See, for example, "The Idea of Revolution," now in the present volume.
—T/E

many more people than with a stone hatchet, and contemporary mathematics is infinitely richer, more powerful and complex, than the arithmetic of primitive peoples. But a painting by Picasso is worth neither more nor less than the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira, Balinese music is sublime, and the mythologies of all peoples are of an extraordinary beauty and depth. And if we're talking on the level of morality, we have only to look at what is going on around us for us to stop talking about "progress." Progress is an essentially capitalist imaginary signification, one that even Marx let himself be taken in by.

That said, if one considers the present-day situation, a situation not of crisis but of decomposition, or dilapidation of the Western societies, one finds oneself faced with an antinomy of the first magnitude. Here it is: What is required is immense, it goes very far—and human beings, such as they are and such as they are constantly being reproduced by Western societies, but also by the other societies, are immensely far removed from that. What is required? Taking into account the ecological crisis, the extreme inequality of the division of wealth between rich countries and poor countries, the near-impossibility of the system to continue on its present course, what is required is a new imaginary creation of a size unparalleled in the past, a creation that would put at the center of human life other significations than the expansion of production and consumption, that would lay down different objectives for life, ones that might be recognized by human beings as worth pursuing. That would evidently require a reorganization of social institutions, work relations, economic, political, cultural relations.

Now, this orientation is extremely far removed from what humans today are thinking, and perhaps far from what

they desire. Such is the immense difficulty to which we have to face up. We ought to want a society in which economic values have ceased to be central (or unique), in which the economy is put back in its place as a mere means for human life and not as its ultimate end, in which one therefore renounces this mad race toward ever increasing consumption. That is necessary not only in order to avoid the definitive destruction of the terrestrial environment but also and especially in order to escape from the psychological and moral poverty of contemporary human beings. It would therefore be necessary, henceforth, for human beings (I am speaking now of the rich countries) to accept a decent but frugal standard of living and to give up the idea that the central objective of their life is that their level of consumption increase 2 or 3 percent per year. For them to accept that, it would be necessary that something else give meaning to their lives. One knows, I know, what this other thing might be—but obviously that does not mean anything if the great majority of people do not accept it and do not do what must be done for it to be achieved. This other thing is the development of human beings instead of the development of gadgets. That would require another organization of work, which ought to cease to be a drudgery in order to become a field for the deployment of human capacities. It would also require other political systems, a genuine democracy that includes the participation of all in the making of decisions, another organization of *paideia* in order to raise citizens capable of governing and of being governed, as Aristotle so admirably said¹⁰—and so on.

Quite obviously, all that poses immense problems. For example, how could a genuine democracy, a direct

¹⁰Aristotle *Politics* 1252a16. —T/E

democracy, be able to function, no longer on the scale of 30,000 citizens as in classical Athens, but on the scale of 40 million citizens as in France, or even on the scale of several billion individuals on the planet. These are immensely difficult, but in my opinion soluble, problems—on the condition, precisely, that the majority of human beings and their capacities be mobilized to create the solutions instead of being preoccupied with knowing when one will be able to have a 3-D television set.

Such are the tasks that lie before us—and the tragedy of our age is that Western humanity is very far from being preoccupied with them. For how long will this portion of humanity remain obsessed by these inanities and these illusions that are called commodities? Would some sort of catastrophe—an ecological one, for example—lead to a brutal awakening, or rather to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes? No one can answer these types of questions. What one can say is that all those who are aware of the terribly weighty character of the stakes involved must try to speak up, to criticize this race toward the abyss, to awaken the consciousness of their fellow citizens.

O.M.: An article in *Le Monde* by Frédéric Guassen recently mentioned a qualitative change: a dozen years after the "silence of the intellectuals" {under the Socialist French President François Mitterrand}, the collapse of totalitarianism in the East functions as a validation of the Western democratic model, intellectuals are speaking up again to defend this model, invoking Fukuyama, Tocqueville, and there is the reigning consensus about "weak thought."¹¹ That certainly is not the "change" you

¹¹See Italian postmodernist Gianni Vattimo's *Il pensiero debole* (Milan, 1983), cited by Castoriadis in other texts. The Frédéric Guassen article

have been calling for.

C.C.: Let us state straight off that the vociferations of 1982-1983 around the "silence of the intellectuals" were nothing but a minor politician-led operation. Those who were vociferating wanted the intellectuals to rush to the aid of the French Socialist Party, which few people were ready to do (even if not a few of them profited from it to obtain their posts and so on). Since at the same time—for this and other reasons—no one wanted to criticize it, nothing was said. But all that concerns just the Parisian microcosm; it is of no interest, and it is far removed from what we are talking about. And neither has there been a recent "reawakening" of the intellectuals in that sense.

I also think that what you call the ambient Tocquevillianism is going to have a short life. Tocqueville, no one will contest, is a very important thinker; he saw in a very young United States of the 1830s some very important things, but he didn't see other ones that were just as important. For example, he did not grant the necessary weight to the social and political differentiation already fully installed during his time or to the fact that the imaginary of equality remained confined to certain aspects of social life and hardly affected the effectively real relations of power. It would certainly be very impolite to ask today's Tocquevillians, or alleged Tocquevillians: What then do you have to say, as Tocquevillians, about the strong social and political differentiations that in no way are being attenuated, about the new ones that are being created, about the highly oligarchical character of the alleged "democracies," about the erosion of the economic as well as

mentioned in the interview is "Le murmure des intellectuels," *Le Monde*, April 17, 1993: 2. —T/E

anthropological conditions for the "march toward the equality of conditions," about the clear incapacity of the Western political imaginary to penetrate quite vast regions of the non-Western world? And what about the generalized political apathy? Certainly, on this last point, we will be told that Tocqueville had already glimpsed the emergence of a "tutelary State"; but this State, while it may indeed be "tutelary" (which cancels out any idea of "democracy"), is in no way, as he believed, "benevolent." It is a totally bureaucratized State, delivered over to private interests, eaten up by corruption, incapable even of governing, since it has to maintain an unstable equilibrium between the lobbies of all sorts that fragment contemporary society. And Tocqueville's "growing equality of conditions" has come to signify simply the absence of external signs of inherited status and the equalization of all by the general form of equivalence, namely, money—provided one has some. If you want to rent a suite at the Hotel Crillon or the Ritz, no one is going to ask you who you are or what your grandfather did. All you need is to be well dressed and to have a well-provisioned bank account.

The Western-style "triumph of democracy" lasted a few months. What one sees now is the state of Eastern Europe and the ex-"Soviet Union," Somalia, Rwanda-Burundi, Afghanistan, Haiti, sub-Saharan Africa, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Algeria, and I shan't go on. All these discussions have been terribly provincial. One discusses these matters as if the subjects that are fashionable in France exhausted, by themselves, the preoccupations of the whole planet. But the French population represents one percent of the world population. This is beneath ridiculousness.

The overwhelming majority of the planet is not living the "equalization of conditions" but, rather, poverty

and tyranny. And contrary to what both Marxists and {conservative "free-market"} Liberals believed, this impoverished and tyrannized majority in no way is in the process of preparing itself to welcome the Western model of the liberal-capitalist republic. All it looks for in the Western model are weapons and consumer goods—not *habeas corpus* or the separation of powers. This is strikingly so in Muslim countries—one billion inhabitants—in India—almost another billion—in most of the countries of Southeast Asia and Latin America. The world situation, which is extremely grave, makes a mockery of the idea both of an "end of history" and of a universal triumph of the Western-style "democratic model." And this "model" is being emptied of its substance—even in its countries of origin.

O.M.: Your acerbic criticisms of the Western Liberal model ought not to prevent you from seeing the difficulties with your overall political project. In a first stage, democracy is for you the imaginary creation of a project of autonomy and self-institution, which you wish to see triumph. In a second stage, you draw upon this concept of autonomy and self-institution to criticize liberal capitalism. Two questions: Is this not a way for you, first of all, to mourn the death of Marxism, both as project and as critique? And is there not, in the second place, a sort of ambiguity, to the extent that this "autonomy" is precisely what capitalism structurally needs in order to function, atomizing society, "personalizing" its clientele, and making citizens docile and useful so that they all will have internalized the idea that they are consuming of their own free will, obeying of their own free will, and so on?

C.C.: Let me begin with your second question, which rests on a misunderstanding. The atomization of

individuals is not autonomy. When an individual buys a fridge or a car, he does what forty million other {French} individuals do; there is here neither individuality nor autonomy. This is, as a matter of fact, one of the mystifications of contemporary advertising: "Personalize yourself, buy Brand X laundry detergent." And millions of individuals go out and "personalize" (!) themselves by buying the same detergent. Or else, twenty million {French} households at the same hour and at the same minute press the same button on their television set in order to watch the same asinities. This is the unpardonable confusion of people like Gilles Lipovetsky and others,¹² who speak of individualism, narcissism, and so forth, as if they themselves had swallowed this deceptive advertising. As precisely this example shows, capitalism has need not of autonomy but of conformism. Its present-day triumph is that we are living an era of generalized conformism¹³—not only as concerns consumption but also as concerns politics, ideas, culture, and so on.

Your other question is more complex. But first a clarification of a "psychological" nature. Certainly, I was a Marxist, but neither criticism of the capitalist regime nor the emancipatory project is an invention of Marx. And I believe that my path shows that my primary concern never was to "save" Marx. Very early on I criticized Marx, and I did so precisely because I discovered that he had not remained

¹²See Gilles Lipovetsky's *L'Ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), a book Castoriadis mentions in the Author's Note to his critique of Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut's *La Pensée* 68, "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986), now in *WIF*. —T/E

¹³See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalized Conformism" (1989), now in *WIF*. —T/E

faithful to this project of autonomy.

As to the underlying nature of the question, we must reexamine matters upstream. Human history is creation. This means that the institution of society is always self-institution, but a self-institution that does not know itself as such and does not want to know itself as such. To say that history is creation signifies that one can neither explain nor deduce this or that form of society on the basis of real factors or logical considerations. It is not the nature of the desert or the landscape of the Middle East that explains the birth of Judaism—or, moreover, as it is again in fashion to say, the "philosophical" superiority of monotheism over polytheism. Hebrew monotheism is a creation of the Hebrew people, and neither Greek geography nor the state of the productive forces at the time explains the birth of the democratic Greek *polis*, because the Mediterranean world was full of cities and slavery was found everywhere around there—in Phoenicia, in Rome, in Carthage. Democracy was a Greek creation, a creation that certainly remained limited, since there was slavery, the status of women, and so on, but the importance of this creation was the idea, unimaginable at the time for the rest of the world, that a collectivity can self-institute itself explicitly and self-govern itself.

History is creation, and each form of society is a particular creation. I am speaking of the imaginary institution of society, for this creation is the work of the anonymous collective imaginary. The Hebrews imagined, they created their God as a poet creates a poem, a musician a piece of music. Social creation is obviously infinitely broader, since it is, each time, creation of a world, the proper world of this society: in the world of the Hebrews, there is a God with quite particular characteristics, a God

who has created this world and men, given them laws, and so forth. The same thing is true for all societies. The idea of creation is not at all identical to the idea of value: it is not because this or that individual or collective thing is a creation that it is to be valued. Auschwitz and the Gulag are creations under the same heading as the Parthenon or Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral. There are monstrous creations, but absolutely fantastic ones. The concentration camp system is a fantastic creation—which does mean that one has to swallow it. Some advertising people say, "Our firm is more creative than others." It actually can be so while creating idiocies and monstrosities.

Among the creations of human history, one is singularly singular: the one that permits the society under consideration to itself call itself into question. This is the creation of the idea of autonomy, of the reflective return upon oneself, of criticism and self-criticism, of a questioning that neither knows nor accepts any limit. This creation therefore takes place at the same time as democracy and philosophy. For, just as a philosopher cannot accept any external limitations on his thought, so democracy recognizes no external limits to its instituting power; the sole limits result from its self-limitation. It is known that the first form of this creation arose in ancient Greece; it is known, or it ought to be known, that it was resumed, with different characteristics, in Western Europe beginning already in the eleventh century with the creation of the first bourgeois communes that demanded self-governance, then with the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the workers' movement, and more recently with other emancipatory movements. In all this Marx and Marxism represent only a moment, an important one in certain

regards, catastrophic in others. And it is thanks to this series of movements that there subsists in contemporary society a certain number of partial liberties, essentially partial and defensive ones,¹⁴ that have become crystallized in a few institutions: the rights of man, the prohibition of *ex post facto* laws, a certain separation of powers, and so on. These liberties have not been granted from on high by capitalism; they have been wrested and imposed through these centuries-old struggles. They are also what makes the present-day political regime, not a democracy (it is not the people who hold and exercise power), but a liberal oligarchy. This is a bastard regime, one based upon the coexistence of the dominant strata's power with an almost uninterrupted effort at social and political contestation. But as paradoxical as this might appear, it is the disappearance of this contestation that is endangering the stability of the regime. It is because workers did not just go along [*ne se laissaient pas faire*] that capitalism was able to develop as it did. It is far from certain that the regime will be able to continue to function with a population of passive citizens, resigned wage-earners, and so on.

O.M.: But how could a participatory democracy function today? What would be the social relays of an effective sort of contestation and criticism? You sometimes mention a strategy of waiting or patience, which would

¹⁴Previously, the text (as given here via translation) read, "essentially negative and defensive ones," but a second instance of *partielles* has come to replace *négatives* in the final French book version (*MI*, p. 101), and we have followed this reading. On the reason why "negative" is inadequate and would have had to be changed, see note 13 in "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991), above in the present volume. Nevertheless, there now is a bit of redundancy here with the two instances of "partial." —T/E

await an accelerated dilapidation of the political parties. There could also be a worst-case strategy, which would wish for an aggravation of the situation so that one will exit from the current generalized apathy. But there is also a strategy of urgency, which would go beyond the unforeseeable. But how and by whom will what you term "conceiving something else, creating something else" arrive?

C.C.: You said it yourself: I cannot by myself alone furnish an answer to these questions. If there is a response, it is the great majority of people who will provide it. For my part, I observe, on the one hand, the immensity of the tasks and their difficulty, the extent of the apathy and privatization in contemporary societies, the nightmarish intricacy of the problems facing the rich countries and those that are posed to the poor countries, and so on. But also, on the other hand, one cannot say that Western societies are dead, simply writing them off from history. We are not yet living in fourth-century Rome or Constantinople, where the new religion had frozen all movement and where everything was in the hands of the Emperor, the Pope, and the Patriarch. There are signs of resistance, people who are struggling here and there; there have been in France for the past ten years the *coordinations* {grass-roots coordinating committees of striking workers organized separately from the established unions};¹⁵ there are still some important books that appear. In the Letters to the Editor columns of *Le Monde*, for example, one often finds letters expressing entirely healthy and critical points of view.

I obviously cannot know whether all that suffices in

¹⁵See "The *Coordinations*: A Preface" (1996), now in the present volume.
—T/E

order to turn the situation around. What is certain is that those who are aware of the gravity of the questions raised ought to do everything in their power—whether by speaking out, by writing, or simply by the attitude they adopt in the place they occupy—so that people might awaken from their contemporary lethargy and begin to act in the direction of freedom.

A Rising Tide of Significancy?

A Follow-Up Interview with *Drunken Boat*

Max Blechman: In your 1993 discussion with Olivier Morel on the "the rising tide of insignificance," you offered a grim picture of French society. According to this analysis, France is not suffering an internal political crisis properly speaking; for, far from there being any debate or political conflict, there is a generalized consensus that dominates political life. To illustrate this point you called attention to the fact that there has been a steady decrease in strike days in France and that the demands of workers are usually corporatist. When you included this interview in your book, *La Montée de l'insignifiance*, you added a brief note, written during the strikes of the students and the workers of November and December {1995}, stating that whatever the ultimate outcome of the new social movement may be, it has an implicit significance that challenges this characterization. Later, in an interview conducted shortly after the strikes of the whole public sector that had virtually paralyzed France for over a month, you suggested that the movement was not fundamentally corporatist but, to the

*This never before published follow-up interview was conducted in April 1996 by Max Blechman, editor of the American anarchist review *Drunken Boat*, for an issue that eventually was published instead in book form: *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1999). The interview with Castoriadis was dropped by the publisher for reasons of space before publication. All endnotes, with the exception of the fourth one, were written by Bleckman; all translations are his in those notes. This text and its notes have been edited for publication with Bleckman's consent and consultation. —T/E

contrary, a radical rejection of things in general.¹ Does this new movement and your concomitant change in perspective imply that you have a more optimistic analysis of French political life? Given that this was perhaps the most radical and popular protest movement in France since 1968,² would you now speak of a "rising tide of significancy"?

Cornelius Castoriadis: No, that would be too rash; I stick to my terms. I added this note because it seemed to me obvious that what had been going on before, in terms of the waning of political and social conflict, could not be applied to this period strictly speaking, precisely because this movement, though in appearance corporatist with a very narrow scope, was in fact the result of a deep sense of dissatisfaction: "*On en a marre*," "we are fed up" with all this. And all this was not just {neo-Gaullist Prime Minister Alain} Juppé's attempt to reform Social Security³ or this and that and the other; it was the whole system. This, I'm sure,

¹"Les intellos entre l'archaïsme et la fuite," interview conducted by Philippe Petit in *L'Événement du Jeudi*, December 21-27, 1995, p. 32: "But it is obvious, when one considers the reactions of the strikers as well as the attitude of the majority of the population, that at the heart of this struggle there is something else: a profound rejection of the state of affairs in general."

²See for example Bernard Cassen, "Quand la société dit non," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1996, p. 8: "Never, since 1968, has a movement evoked such . . . a quest for meaning."

³On the 15th of November 1995—a period when student strikes and occupations, ostensibly for improved studying conditions, were gaining a national momentum—Prime Minister Alain Juppé made a series of proposals to cut the expenses of the social security system, to privatize the hospitals and the phone company, and to raise the retirement age in the entire public sector, inspiring the latter to join the student revolt.

is still there now, but I would not hurry to attach a qualification to what happened in November and December and what's happening now in terms of either "this was a last flame" or "this is a new beginning." We have to see what will happen. Nothing has changed very much. But there are signs that tend to show that something more than "a last flame" was at work. These signs are, for instance, a revival of social criticism, a revival of social critiques of the system, even considering the attempts to revise Marx, and apart from the fashion/counter-fashion of the movement, everyone realizes that the situation is at a dead end, and that this dead end is unbearable. So for the time being I think we have to keep our eyes open. I have spoken to some friends about beginning some kind of bulletin or journal. I must add that my remarks on the waning of the social and political conflict apply to all the rich countries, not just to France.⁴

M.B.: What would you qualify as important in this movement aside from the length of the strikes, the wildcat initiatives, the sheer number of the strikers, the size of the protests (two million two hundred thousand people taking the streets on the 12th of December, again two million on the 16th, etc.)? Do you, for instance, consider the student general assemblies, their occupation committees that spontaneously developed in some fifty universities, their national coordination committee, and the dialogue that emerged in December between striking students and striking workers as constituting its most important break with Leftist movements in France since 1968?

C.C.: Yes. But in this respect, apart from the students, the railway workers and the others didn't go as far

⁴This last sentence was added by Castoriadis in handwriting while reviewing and correcting the transcribed interview. —T/E

as in 1968, and that is another reason why I am cautious in my appreciation of the movement. There were not enough worker-organization committees worth speaking of in terms of the railway workers and the others, and these worker-organization committees were the only new forms of organization that have appeared since 1968. There were a series of delegates from different parts of the country attempting to formulate decisions on a national stage. The local general assemblies were a presupposition of that; they elected delegates, but the general assemblies were not the problem; the real question was, "What about the national level?" In previous struggles of the railway workers and Air France and others, coordination committees had been created to answer this question and to move forward, to solve this problem. In this way they were able to escape bureaucratic control of the movement. This has not happened in the movement of November and December, and this is another way of saying that the trade unions were not sufficiently challenged.

M.B.: In this respect the analysis of the trade unions of the 50s and 60s that you articulated in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* remains pertinent. The CGT {*Confédération Général du Travail*} and the other trade unions followed the movement only to contain it and assure their place at the round-table of negotiations with the State. Would it be correct to say that as such you target the trade unions as a major force, or the major force, in preventing the strike of the public sector from becoming a general strike (extending to the private sphere), or in curtailing the autonomy of the movement?

C.C.: I do not "target" the unions; this is what they do, this is their business! It is as if you were to ask, "Are you tracing politicians to the capitalist system and the State?" Well, alright, but this is their business; the trade

unions for over a century now have been based on the size of their demonstrations and the difficulty or incapacity of the workers' movement to manage its own affairs. The workers delegate their power to the union bureaucracy, and the same happens in America with the AFL-CIO. Of course, the role of the trade unions can be ambiguous, but one should not be astonished if on occasion the unions take on the role of stifling or suppressing or deviating the movement.⁵ That's precisely their function in society.

M.B.: How do you view a trade union like SUD {*Syndicat Unitaire Démocratique*} that is explicitly based on *autogestion* (self-management, self-government) and is inspired by libertarian politics? They specifically challenged the restrictive bureaucracy and the reformism of the CGT, FO {*Force Ouvrière*}, and particularly the CFDT {*Confédération Française Démocratique des Travailleurs*}, and saw their ranks swell by the hundreds, during and after the strikes, mostly by railway workers who decided to leave the traditional trade unions.⁶ Two weeks ago during the

⁵By way of illustration, consider the following statement of an FO (*Force ouvrière*) delegate reported in *Le Monde*, December 18, 1995: "I am convinced that the confederal directors of the CGT and FO never wanted a general strike. Viannet and Blondel [the presidents of the CGT and FO respectively] shit in their pants at the idea. The movement was becoming too spontaneous, too autonomous . . . they slammed on the brakes in an attempt to avoid our organizing strike committees in every neighborhood."

⁶SUD was created in 1988 with the stated aim of challenging the corporatism of trade unionism and of resisting privatization in the French state economy. According to *Le Monde* (January 6, 1996), "Its founders are inspired by the anarcho-syndicalism of the beginning of this century . . . of a syndicalist movement that would achieve the project of social emancipation."

elections of the SNCF {Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer, the public French railroad company.}, SUD surprised everyone by gaining scores comparable to those of CFDT and FO. Are we witnessing a break with traditional trade unionism, or do you believe that SUD is, by virtue of being a trade union, likely to fall eventually into the traditional role of being a bureaucratic intermediary between workers and the State?

C.C.: It is obvious that the success of SUD represents the deep disappointment workers feel toward the trade-union bureaucracy and especially the CFDT bureaucracy. Now, as far as they adopt the traditional trade-union form, one always has to wonder if they are not going to fall in the same traps into which all the historical attempts to revive the trade-union movement fell. Recall that one of the major points of the population during the movement was that they don't want another trade union. And once the movement was over they refused to develop the coordination committees. This expresses the real problematic of the situation: if we keep on functioning as a coordination-committee, either it will transform into a trade union and then the trade union will again cause the same problems, or we remain a coordination committee, and it will just decay (because people will not go on gathering in meetings all over France, traveling six or twelve hours on the road, if there is nothing tying them together anymore like a political movement). So there are lots of question marks here, and we must keep our heads clear.

M.B.: You have taken your distance from active political engagement since the events of May '68 and have increasingly devoted your time to theoretical work. I was therefore surprised to hear you say a moment ago that you are considering starting a bulletin. What is the incentive

behind this new project and how would you describe it?

C.C.: The bulletin, or journal, is a kind of experiment. If it succeeds it will mean something, that there is a fire that is still alive. If there are very few responses, that too will be a sign, though that won't mean in and of itself that the project will stop.

M.B.: Was it the revitalization of a radical politics during the movement of last winter that inspired you to launch this project?

C.C.: No, the idea has been around since last spring. Considering how depressing things have become, people were saying, "Why don't we do something?", and perhaps they were already scenting the coming events of November and December.

M.B.: It seemed to me you were fairly isolated during the debates that have been called "the war of the intellectuals" in December. There were basically two camps that were defined during that period, those liberals who signed a statement published in *Esprit* critically supporting Juppé's Social Security reform (a position ironically shared by your former collaborator of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Claude Lefort),⁷ and those close to Pierre Bourdieu, who signed a statement in *Le Monde* which was against the reform but remained uncritical of the unions and combined old-hat Marxism with vague republicanism. You refused to sign either statement, but at the same time there was no "third camp" position that entered into public discussion. Who then do you expect to participate in such

⁷While the movement itself was going on, Lefort expressed his admiration for Nicole Notat (the president of the CFDT who supported the Juppé reforms, catalyzing a rupture in her own union) in "Les dogmes sont finis," *Le Monde*, 4 January, 1996: 10.

a project among the French public intellectuals of today?

C.C.: The project obviously will not appeal to those around Bourdieu or *Esprit*. As for Lefort, I have not worked with him since 1958.

M.B.: Yet after Lefort left Sou B. you both collaborated again in the late 70s

C.C.: But that was purely on an intellectual level, because nothing else could be done then! We published two journals, as you know, *Textures* and then *Libre*, which were very theoretical. These journals had no connection whatsoever with any practical activity. They were certainly anti-establishment, but that is the most that could be said of them.

M.B.: And yet more specifically these journals did give voice to a theory of political autonomy and to a libertarian critique of the State that was nurtured by the anthropological work of Pierre Clastres, who was on the editorial committee of *Libre*. Now that Clastres is gone, and Lefort has essentially endorsed parliamentarian politics, is there an intellectual milieu, or at all an intellectual environment, that can engage in such a theoretical adventure today?

C.C.: Maybe there is, but what we have in mind is not at all a theoretical project. What is missing today is not intellectual work but the ability of intellectuals to be in touch with what is actually going on at a deeper level of society, and this is what we are going to try to fight against.

M.B.: The two are separate?

C. C.: For me there is a separation between the two

. . . .

M.B.: You therefore see little purpose in, for example, critiquing Habermas's criticisms of direct democracy, or creating a theoretical bridge between your

ideal of a democratic polis and Hannah Arendt's, but want the bulletin to function exclusively as a grassroots forum?

C.C.: Nobody cares about Habermas's ideas on democracy; there are really no practical issues in his political philosophy.⁸ Hannah Arendt is another thing, and we have a lot of common ground in this respect, but you know there is little difference between her thinking {at that time} and what *S. ou B.* was always saying.⁹ The real purpose of the bulletin is to address the difficulties that the

⁸The relationship of Castoriadis's thought to that of Habermas has been the object of a number of studies since Habermas's 1985 text on Castoriadis, which was translated as "Excursus on Cornelius Castoriadis: The Imaginary Institution" and published in *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 327-35 and 419nn1-3; see also: 318-26. For the differences between Castoriadis's conception of democracy and that of Habermas see, for example, Konstantinis Kavoulakos, "The Relationship of Realism and Utopianism in the Theories on Democracy of Jurgen Habermas and Cornelius Castoriadis," *Society and Nature*, 2:3 (1994): 69-97 and Andreas Kalyvas, "The Politics of Autonomy and the Challenge of Deliberation: Castoriadis contra Habermas," *Thesis Eleven*, 64 (February 2001): 1-19. Castoriadis criticizes Habermas's analysis of democracy in "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime" (see below in the present volume).

⁹Castoriadis' radical democratic politics and its connection to Hannah Arendt's political Hellenism has been a theme explored in the Australian journal, *Thesis Eleven*. For an interesting account of the "romantic Hellenism" that is said to underlie Castoriadis' thought, see Peter Murphy, "Romantic Modernism and the Greek Polis," *Thesis Eleven*, 34 (1993): 42-66. For a comparative analysis of Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis, one may consult Gillian Robinson's "The Greek Polis and the Democratic Imaginary" *Thesis Eleven*, 40 (1995): 25-43. [Castoriadis criticizes Arendt in his interview "The Idea of Revolution" (1989) and in his talk, "Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions" (1992), now in the present volume. —T/E]

radical movement faces now and how to clear the ground for its development.¹⁰ We want to reject the Bourdieu approach and the *Esprit* approach, and to try to formulate proposals that may make a difference. The issue is not to create a new theoretical direction. Perhaps I am too presumptuous, but I could start a theoretical review anytime I want. That is not the problem. The problem is to try to bridge the gap between all the developments and ideas which we have engineered over the last forty years, and the sense among people that these are far away and irrelevant to their concerns. That is the main question.

¹⁰Castoriadis died December 27, 1997, before exploring this idea of a "bulletin or journal" any further.

The *Coordinations*: A Preface*

Jean-Michel Denis's book, which you are about to read, is not the first work on the coordinating committees [*les coordinations*] that appeared in France between 1986 and 1988. But it is, to my knowledge, the first important published work on this topic that offers a synthetic overview. It is also the first to raise questions that go beyond the mere description or analysis of facts and that connect up, in this apparently minor way, with some of the most weighty interrogations that can be posed about the evolution of our society and about its future. The following few lines are intended to aid the reader in situating his book explicitly within this broader context.

The appearance of various *coordinations* during the 1986-88 period (coordinating committees established by college students and high-school students, railway workers, teachers, SNECMA {*Société Nationale d'Etudes et de Construction de Moteurs d'Aviation*} aeronautical and space workers and Air France employees, nurses) is striking on account of a set of features that should briefly be recalled. This series of movements arose in the middle of a long period of social apathy. From the outset, these "spontaneous" movements situated themselves outside the trade unions (and, even more so, outside the political parties). Several aspects of these self-organized movements are reminiscent of the movements of the 1968-1974 period.

*Originally published as the preface to Jean-Michel Denis, *Les Coordinations. Recherche désespérée d'une citoyenneté* (Paris; Éditions Syllepse, 1996), pp. 9-13. [As indicated in the text, this piece was drafted in 1994 but was not published until 1996. —T/E]

Sporadic and short-lived, limited to sectors that can, without abuse of language, be described as atypical and peripheral in relation to the traditionally active and combative sectors of the wage-earning population, they nonetheless awakened a significant response in public opinion.

These features single out the *coordinations* movement in contrast to the most clear-cut characteristics of the social-historical period through which we are passing. Indeed, the neutral or partisan observer cannot help but be struck by the extreme weakness—more than that, the near complete disappearance—of the workers' movement and, more generally, of social and political conflict over the past few decades. To limit ourselves to those aspects that are closest to our present object, let us mention simply the dilapidation of the trade unions, both in number (dues payers) and in active participants (militants), the disappearance of large-scale strikes ordered and controlled by the trade unions, the drastic drop in strikes and movements of all sorts, and {since the early 1980s} the repeated acceptance, by the trade unions and by their members, of contracts that included wage cuts or layoff plans. Some of these features have been more marked in France than elsewhere, in other cases the opposite is true, but in the main these features are common to all industrialized countries.

These phenomena date back a long time. Their causes, or rather their conditions, are obviously multiple in character, and this multiplicity is accompanied by differences in size and intensity, according to countries and periods. Everywhere, however, the result is one and the same as to its core meaning. That does not mean that causes or conditions lose their signification by cancelling each other out. Rather, it refers to the following fascinating

and mysterious property of great social-historical movements: their overdetermination, and the synergy, itself variable, of apparently (and "really") disconnected factors that in no way are foreordained to come into play synchronously and that cannot simply be added up, for each one acquires its meaning and efficacy only through its being conjoined with the other ones. The following lines will also, I hope, provide an illustration of this idea.

Thus, in order to understand this atony, this sluggishness, one can—and one will not be completely wrong—invoke the change in the economic atmosphere {since the mid-1970s} (a change that has more or less been imputed to the two "oil crises" and that has become, moreover, the magic formula for all journalistic explanations and the cloak cast over the misery of politicians' oligophrenia). Certainly, in relation to the previous thirty-year period (1945-1975), economic expansion in the rich countries has slowed, and sometimes has stopped, at the same time that unemployment was reaching levels that were unprecedented for the postwar period. None of all that has helped to encourage a combative attitude on the part of the workers or of wage-earners in general. It would be superficial, however, to dwell upon these factors. We do not notice notable differences from these attitudes in countries hit less hard by recession, nor are we seeing a resurgence of movements during the periods of economic upturn that have occurred, like the one we are witnessing at this very moment (1994). More importantly, people fail to ask themselves about what, in the social situation and the relations of force, has allowed this economic evolution to take place. In fact, the oil "crisis" or "crises" could have been faced with completely

different economic policies from those that were followed,¹ and everything happened as if the ruling strata had made the most of the general uneasiness in order to force acceptance of policies whose goals were of an entirely other sort. Roughly speaking, we can say that since 1979 what would traditionally have been called a "right-wing offensive" (or "counteroffensive"), which may be symbolized by the names of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, but which goes well beyond these two figures as well as the countries they have devastated (the French "socialists" have been equally conspicuous in their fight for "the return to profitability" and the "restoration of business profit margins"). This offensive went hand in hand with—was conditioned by but also has conditioned—an ideological regression of uncommon breadth. The ideologies of the "Left" entered into a new phase of intense decomposition while "right-wing" currents were blissfully resuscitating basic errors that had been refuted three-quarters of a century ago (such as monetarism—a mere reissuance, under econometric cover, of the old quantitative theory of money, or supply-side economics, characterized by George Herbert Walker Bush himself as "voodoo economics"). Moreover, these governments' proclamations stood in flagrant violation of their own practice—a phenomenon worth noting, not because it would be absolutely new, but because it was practically unheard of in the economic field. Thatcher and Reagan were elected by promising to rid society of "Big Government"; at the end of their respective terms of office, the share of the GNP going to state outlays remained

¹I spoke about this as early as 1974 in my Author's Introduction to the second English edition of *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, now in *PSW 2*, pp. 331-43.

practically unchanged. They had denounced Keynesianism just as vehemently—but any Keynesian would have condemned as excessive to the point of caricature the Reagan Administration's deficits. Yet this camouflage rhetoric allowed one, in default of the proclaimed objectives, to attain the new policy's real objectives: quite simply, redistribution of national wealth in favor of the rich and to the detriment of the poor.

Nevertheless, the evolution we are discussing here dates back to a period well before 1975-1980. It is not the Right's offensive that can explain the current political and social apathy; it is the latter that has permitted the triumph of the former. Richard Nixon was no less "reactionary" than Reagan—but he could not help but continue Kennedy-Johnson's "social" policy. The Tories of the fifties, sixties, and seventies were certainly not "progressives"—but it would have been inconceivable for them to have attacked social and fiscal legislation with the savagery of Thatcher, and, above all, it would have been inconceivable in such a case that the population would not have reacted. In short, if the economic policies applied since 1979-1980 have basically been responsible for prolonging recessions and deepening unemployment, the condition for such policies to have won out was a substantial modification in the social relation of forces, itself conditioned by a growing apathy on the part of the laboring populations. It is toward an elucidation of this apathy that we must now turn, if we want to understand the history of the past few decades.

This apathy could be linked to the decreasing quantitative importance of the (industrial) working class under the twofold impact of the decline of traditional industries (a result at once of modifications in the structure of final demand and of factory relocations) and of an

acceleration of technical changes. These are incontestable facts whose significance cannot be denied. They do not suffice, however, to make one understand why laboring people from the continually expanding "service" sector—who have for nearly a century seen their numbers grow, the industrialization and collectivization of their labor progress, and their status diminish—are far from developing the kind of solidarity and combativeness that was characteristic of the industrial proletariat for a century and a half.²

We are thus led to look beyond production and the economy. And first of all, we are led to look toward the evolution of the workers' movement itself, on the trade-union level as well as on the political level. The primary phenomenon here, evidently, is the bureaucratization of working-class organizations, both trade unions and political parties, and this from the beginning of the twentieth century.³ Here we have a long and very complex process, a circular one it can be said, inasmuch as the dwindling participation of the workers in the management of their organizations favored the latter's bureaucratization, which in turn distanced these organizations from laboring people.

²As early as 1951, C. Wright Mills was investigating the possibilities of such a development in *White Collar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951). These possibilities had been positively foreseen within the Socialisme ou Barbarie group. See R. Berthier (Henri Simon), "Une expérience d'organisation ouvrière: Le Conseil de personnel de AG Vie," *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 20 (décembre 1956-février 1957): 1-64.

³On the bureaucratization process, see my texts in *La Société bureaucratique* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1990) and *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*, 2 vols. (Paris: 10/18, 1979) [many of which have now been translated and printed in *PSW 1-3* —T/E].

To that must be added the great split between Communism and Social Democracy starting in 1917-1919, with its decisive impact at least on Continental Europe, and then the effects, too complex for us to do anything more than simply allude to them here, of the more and more frequent participation of socialist parties (and trade unions) in governments affording "loyal management" of the capitalist regime, as well as of Bolshevik power in Russia, which was perceived by some to be "building socialism," by others to be a dictatorship exercised over the population, all classes combined. While, in this last case, the effects were able in the short run to mystify people, they have been frighteningly demoralizing in the middle and long run as the truth about "real socialism" began to come to light. For a very long time, none of that prevented a large portion of the working class from adhering, at least formally, to these organizations, nor was the majority kept from following its orders most of the time, starting or stopping strikes according to the decisions of the trade-union federations [*centrales syndicales*]. In the end, however, these effects piled up and, starting at a certain moment—which, for France, despite the explosion in 1968, can be situated at the end of the fifties—everything happens as if the working class, inert and decollectivized, had ceased to exist as a social force. This observation is not invalidated, but rather corroborated, by the "spontaneous" apparition of sporadic forms of organization and/or of struggle, among which are in France, as matter of fact, the *coordinations*.

Before coming to them, however, it must be recalled, if only briefly, that there is another entirely central element to the evolution of the postwar period: the deep-seated changes in the effectively actual behavior of the capitalist system, which are expressed in the instauration of the

"Welfare State" as well as in the State's acceptance of responsibility for the evolution of the economy and of society, the regular annual rises in wages as a henceforth accepted integral part of the economic process as well as the reduction of overall labor time, and so on—in short, all the features that clearly distinguish and contrast the capitalist society of 1870 or of 1930 from that of 1970, and that, despite the "counteroffensive" described above, remain basically true still today. The way in which the regime maintains a grip over its populations has been modified; it now goes by way of the bait of consumption, the televisual numbing of minds, the withdrawal of each into his personal sphere—the set of features I characterized already {in 1959-1960} as the privatization of individuals in the societies of modern capitalism.⁴ This evolution certainly presupposes, among other things, the system's capacity to provide, year in, year out, satisfactory economic growth. And what might happen if this condition ceased to be fulfilled is a question that goes beyond our present purpose. Let us note only that the difference that appeared in this regard since 1980 consists in the fact that these conditions (regular employment, rises in wages or at least wage stability, etc.) no longer are fulfilled except for 80 percent of the population, the burden of the "crisis" having been shifted onto the "lower" 20 percent of society, who have, in the same stroke, become incapable of responding to this crisis except in explosive and ineffective fashion.

These remarks can also serve as a beginning of a response to the following question: And why then, in distancing itself from its bureaucratized organizations or in rejecting them, has the working class not been capable of

⁴See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," in *PSW 2*.

creating other forms of organization, except in marginal ways and sporadically? To put it summarily and brutally: During this period, the working class, the wage-earning population in general, has behaved as if it had been "integrated" into the system. It manifests no desire for a change of the social regime or of its own place within the latter. A society that had been, for a century and a half, a conflictual society is being transformed into a consensual society; betterment is sought through individual efforts within the framework of the existing rules (a prospect sustained by the considerable expansion of schooling and training during this period), and, for the rest it is assumed to be automatic. The pie is swelling up in all directions; "progress" ought to be assuring a homothetic (proportional) increase of all pertinent quantities, and therefore of material "well-being." This triumphant capitalist imaginary is once again {since the early- to mid-eighties} being shaken by reality. The sole result for the moment seems to be a generalized social and political case of aphasia.

As a counterpoint to the large-scale trends mentioned above, some large-scale and significant countermovements may be observed in all the major industrial countries over the entire period under consideration. Some elementary unofficial or informal organizations and struggles have come to embody the growing gap between the working class and "its" organizations, the official organizations whose job is to "represent" it or that speak in its name. Thus, there were the shop stewards in Great Britain as early as World War I, or in the United States starting in 1935-37, or in France after World War II, the Strike Committees [*Comités de lutte*], the one at the Renault factory responsible for the first large-scale postwar strike (April 1947) being the best known.

There also were innumerable wildcat strikes in these countries and in several other ones that punctuated the 1945-80 period. A few of us—Socialisme ou Barbarie in France, the Correspondence group in the United States, Solidarity in Great Britain—saw in these forms something more than a reaction to the bureaucratization of the trade unions and parties: the harbinger and the core of the coming forms of the social movement.⁵ The evolution of the most recent period, with the features sketched out above, has not confirmed this prospect—subject to what the analysis of the phenomenon of the *coordinations* of the 1986-1988 period, which is as a matter of fact the subject of the present work, might lead one to think. The question that cannot avoid being posed, and which Denis formulates very well, is whether the *coordinations* mark the beginning or the end of a stage. It is clear that, for the moment, this question admits of no answer.

It is more fruitful to draw the reader's attention to certain characteristics of the *coordinations* that link them up with the more general problematic of our era. To me, it seems incontestable that the *coordinations* movement expresses an aspiration, be it a confused one, toward autonomy. This aspiration is expressed by the rejection of the tutelage of the traditional organizations, the strong charge of direct democracy that characterizes the movement, the remarkable feature (well highlighted by Denis) of the delegates' subsidiarity, the importance "horizontal" and no longer "vertical" (hierarchical) relations take on in the conduct of actions. Yet the ambiguities that

⁵See the numerous texts on these new forms of organization and struggle in *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier* [many of which have now been translated and printed in *PSW*—T/E].

mark the movement must also be noted.

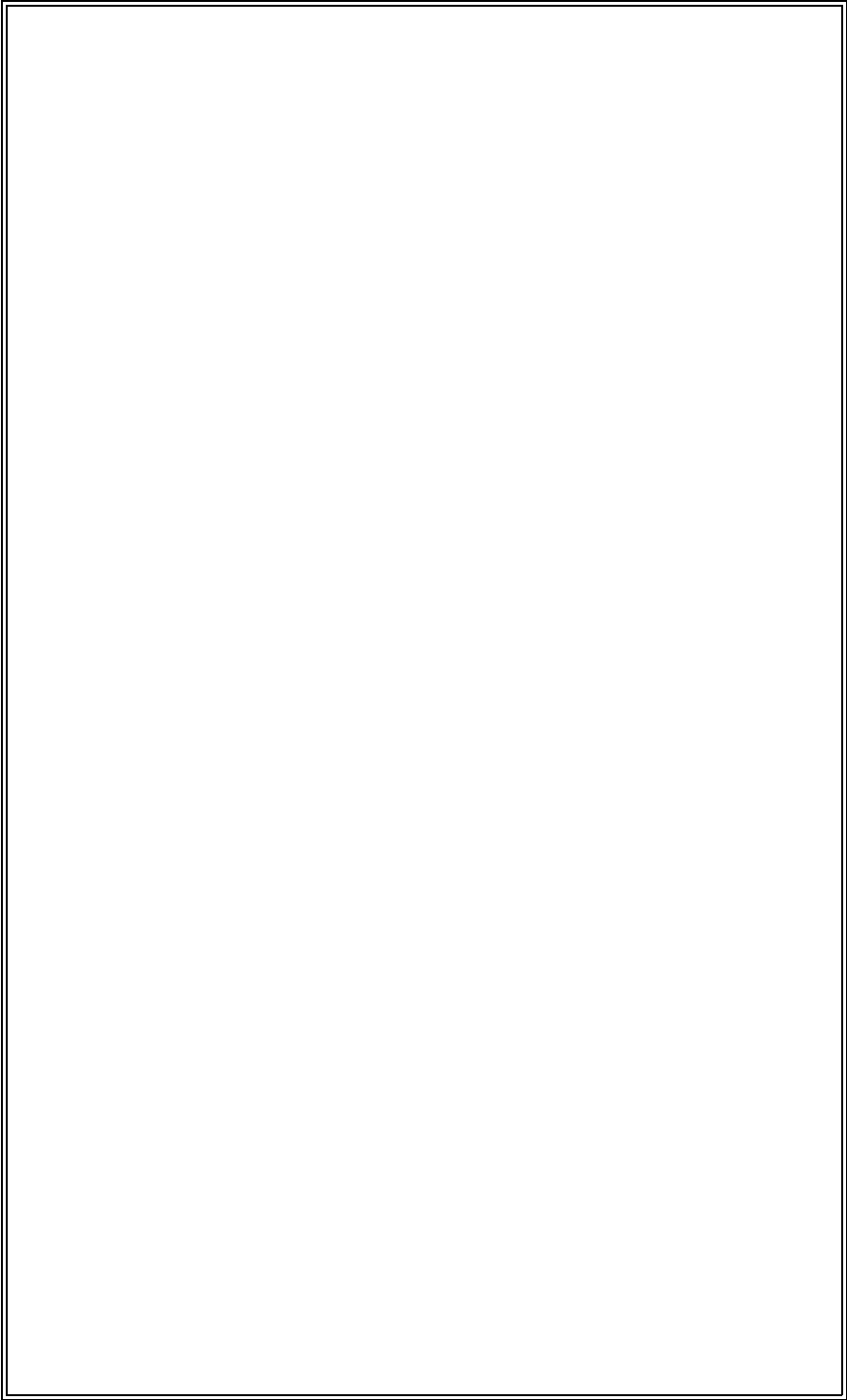
As Denis shows, the participants in the *coordinations* movement feel a "sense of involvement" and a "will to appropriate the movement for themselves." Much more than mistrust toward the traditional bureaucracies (which could have held these people at the level of mere inaction), the wish for autonomous action and the capacity to achieve it are thereby expressed. At the same time, however, the actions of the participants and the facts themselves show a refusal of any lasting engagement that exceeds the limits of the action undertaken. It can certainly be said that such an engagement (the attempt to instaurate permanent forms of organization) would fatally lead them back to the trade-union type of organization, precisely the kind from which the participants had begun to distance themselves. This objection would be valid, however, only on the presupposition that the "trade-union form" is unsurpassable, the only one available for the historical period now under way, outside of which there could at best be only these sporadic, ephemeral "*coordinations*": in other words, on the presupposition that every collective organization in the contemporary period is doomed to bureaucratization. Incontestable as a description of all that has happened until now, this proposition certainly cannot be extrapolated to include every foreseeable future.

Another way of formulating the question is as follows. One finds in Denis's "Conclusions" some formulations that may make one think that in his view autonomy and organization are irreducibly opposed to each other. In my view, such an idea would definitely be erroneous. It is nevertheless true that this idea powerfully exists in people's minds. In other words, whereas, by right, autonomy and institution are in no way opposed (even if the

question of the creation of institutions of autonomy in the modern world remains entirely open), Denis is right to oppose them in people's "consciousness" and their perception, since for them the sole conceivable institutions are the ones they encounter—State, parties, trade unions, businesses, and so on—and since the latter are rightly perceived as institutions of heteronomy. Here we stand before the knot of the contemporary historical situation. People draw from their experience the conclusion that institutions can only be institutions of heteronomy—concretely speaking, bureaucratic institutions—and that therefore it is futile to try to create other ones. They thereby reinforce and consolidate the existence of these institutions that their action might have been able to call into question, had they thought and behaved differently.

I have commented briefly upon the more directly political questions raised by the work of Jean-Michel Denis. The reader will glimpse that Denis broaches to great effect several other problems brought into play by the *coordinations* movement. For example, the present-day state of the trade unions and their reformability; the role of the State and the real or perceived crisis of the public and parapublic sector of the economy; and also the role of the media in amplifying the movement's resonance. He broaches these problems with the same rigor and with the same sense of balance that characterize all the rest of his work and that will make of that work a valuable tool for all those who are interested in the evolution of the social movement in the contemporary era.

PART TWO
KOINŌNIA



Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics*

I

The general title for this series of lectures I have been asked to introduce happens to be: "For a General Science of Man." I understand this title to mean not science in the contemporary and somewhat degraded sense of this term—algorithmic computation and experimental manipulation—or a "positive science" from which all traces of reflection would have carefully been wiped away but, rather, in its former meaning, referring to knowledge concerning man and including all the enigmas to which this simple word *knowledge* gives rise as soon as one begins to interrogate it. These enigmas but multiply when one recalls that this knowledge of man (in the objective genitive, knowledge about man) is also a knowledge of man (in the subjective and possessive genitive)—therefore, that man is at once the object and the subject of this knowledge.¹

That leads us straight away to a first well-known classical determination of man, since man is, of all the

"Anthropologie, philosophie, politique," a lecture given at the University of Lausanne on May 11, 1989, was first published in *Conférences et Travaux Alexandre-César Chavannes pour une "science générale de l'homme": Actes des colloques du Groupe d'Études Pratiques Sociales et Théories* (Lausanne: Institut d'anthropologie et de sociologie de l'Université de Lausanne, 1990), pp. 25-69. Reprinted in *MI*, pp. 105-24. The text was first translated into English for a special Cornelius Castoriadis issue of *Thesis Eleven*, 49 (May 1997): 99-116.

¹When the author makes mention of "man," he is referring to the generic *anthrōpos*—"the species, male as well as female," as Castoriadis has said elsewhere—not the exclusively male *anēr* (whose genitive in Greek is *andros*). —T/E

beings we know, the sole one that seeks knowledge in general and a knowledge of himself in particular. One can even say that here the particular precedes the general. The question *What about knowledge in general?* cannot be thought without asking the prior question *What about knowledge of man?* (here in both the objective and subjective genitive). For, it is man who knows or does not know, and this preliminary question is, in turn, only one part of the question: What do we know of man, and does that which we know of him allow us to state that he can know something in general and something of himself in particular? One will notice here how the question doubles back upon itself—which to some might appear to be a vicious circle or a hopeless situation. In fact, the circle is not vicious; it is the circle of reflection doubling back upon itself, leaning upon itself in order to call itself into question—the circle, that is, of genuine philosophical reflection.

Still, a brief commentary is needed on the term "a general science of man." I am sure that the organizers of this series of lectures did not intend thereby a mere gathering together of all the scattered disciplines concerning man—from physical anthropology to sociology, passing by way of psychology, linguistics, and history. They did not intend thereby an encyclopedia of the human sciences but a knowledge that aims at the "genericalness" of the human—I am intentionally avoiding the term *universality*—that is, that which appertains to the *genus homo* as such. Now, here we encounter another decisive particularity, also well known but not adequately explored: in the human domain, we do not have the same relationship, the same structure of relationship, as the one we find, or constitute, in other domains, between the singular—the concretely given

exemplar—and the universal or the abstract. Such and such a physical, or even biological, object is only one example, one particular instantiation, of the universal determinations of the class to which that object belongs; its singularities are at once accidental and statistical. In the human domain, by contrast, while there certainly are the accidental and the statistical without end, singularity here is not alien to the essence, nor is it added over and above the latter. Here, singularity is essential; each time, it is another side of the being of man that emerges, creates itself, through this or that individual or such and such a society.

How are we to think this original relationship—one unique to the human domain—that ensures that this or that man, such and such a society, by its very singularity and not in spite of that singularity, is able to modify the essence of man or of society—without, however, ceasing to belong to the one or the other (for, otherwise we would not even be able to label it *man* or *society*)? The solution to this apparent antinomy will be provided, I hope, by what follows. But first we must set aside a response that comes to mind immediately, one that is halfway satisfactory but still missing what matters most.

We could say, in effect, that this or that man, such and such a society, in their singularity (that is, there was only one Hebrew people, or one Roman society, not two, and there never again will be another one elsewhere; what they are or have been could not be fabricated from some elements, picked up left and right, among the Nambikwara, New Yorkers, or pre-Columbian Amerindians), teach us simply some of the *possibilities* of the being man that, without them, would remain unknown or would not have been realized. And in a sense, that is so. If Socrates existed, his existence shows that the possibility of "being

Socrates" appertains to human being. And if Reinhard Heydrich existed, the same thing may be said of him. Heydrich is one human possibility. If the Aztecs regularly practiced human sacrifices, that tells us something about the being of human societies; and likewise, if elsewhere societies proclaiming equality and liberty as human rights do exist.

This idea is important, and it should not simply be set aside. It should not be set aside without further ado first of all because it unsettles our tendency to confine ourselves to what we are given as the average and usual type of man and society—and, quite especially, to our own society and to the individuals we encounter therein. One of the paradoxes of the contemporary age is that it is in this age of television and global tourism that people can be so astonished at how {in Montesquieu's phrase} one can be Persian—that is to say, Iranian—believing that over there it is a matter of ways of doing and being that are completely aberrant, whereas, however criminal they may be in some of their actual manifestations, it is of such ways of being and doing (societies ruled by religion and religious fanaticism) that human history is above all made. In other words, people think that living in a society where everything can be challenged goes without saying, whereas this is the thing that goes without saying the least of all. This possibility therefore shakes up our banal and false sense of self-evident truths.

The other reason this idea is important and cannot simply be set aside is that it illustrates what I said about the specificity, at once ontological and gnoseological, of the question of man. Indeed, no horse will ever be born that would oblige us to reconsider our idea of the horse's essence, whereas, for example, the appearance of what was

called totalitarianism has obliged Westerners—right in the twentieth century, when one was celebrating the victory of the ideas of progress, freedom, and so on—to reconsider, at great pain, what they believed they knew about human societies, about the course of history, and about their own society.

Nevertheless, this idea is problematic, and decisively inadequate. Can we truly say that this gamut of singularities, of societies and individuals that succeed one another and that are juxtaposed to one another, does nothing more than realize some allegedly predetermined "possibilities of human being"? Would we truly dare say that Socrates (since I spoke of him a moment ago), or *Tristan und Isolde*, or Auschwitz, or the *Critique of Pure Reason*, or the Gulag "realize some of the possibilities of human being" in the sense that every triangle I might define is a concrete realization of the possibilities contained in the essence of the triangle? Can we for an instant think that there exists an unlimited catalog, an unending repertory, that holds all these types of individuals and societies in stock—or, perhaps, a general law that determines in advance the possibilities of being human, possibilities that would then, either randomly or systematically, be deployed in history?

As strange as this might appear, two major tendencies in modern European thought have supported this view: Structuralism and Hegelianism. The idea's absurdity is, it seems to me, easy to show. If the Structuralists were right—if, as Claude Lévi-Strauss said in *Race and History* for example, different human societies are only different combinations of a small number of invariable elements—the Structuralists would then have to be able to produce on the spot, here and now, all the possible types of human society,

as a geometrician exhibits the five regular polyhedrons and proves that there can be no others. That has never been done, and it cannot be done. And if the Hegelians were right, they would have to be capable both of revealing to us the rigorous systematicness of the historical succession of various types of society and of extending this systematic succession in such a way as to cover every conceivable future. We know that Hegel accomplished the first task only upon a monstrous bed of Procrustes, where entire chunks of the history of humanity were lopped off, others were stretched or compressed out of shape, and where Islam was placed "before" Christianity and the latter "truly" began only with its Germanization, Protestantism, and so forth. But the second task, that of deducing the future, is also completely senseless, since it necessarily and absurdly leads to the affirmation that the "end of history" is now already upon us. This "end of history" is neither a matter of Hegel's mood nor a personal opinion of his but at once the presupposition for and the conclusion to his entire system. The coup de grâce given to this idea comes in the form of a statement made by Hegel himself (in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*): Of course, he says, after the end of history there still remains some empirical work to be done. Thus, for example, the history of the twentieth century would no longer be anything but the object of some unfinished "empirical work" that just any underling student of Hegel's could complete without encountering, in principle, any real problems.

In truth, the term *possibility* can have, as such, only a purely negative meaning here. Indeed, nothing in the universe, nothing in the structure and laws of the universe, rendered impossible or prohibited the construction of the Cathedral at Reims or the institution of the Gulag. Yet the

forms of society, its works [*œuvres*], the types of individual that arise in history do not belong on a list, be it an infinite one, of posited and positive possibilities. They are *creations*, starting from which new possibilities—hitherto inexistent ones, because heretofore meaningless—appear. The expression *possible* has meaning only within a system of well-specified determinations. Is the *Fifth Symphony* possible at the moment of the Big Bang? Either the question has no meaning or, if it does, the sole response is: It is impossible. The possibility of the *Fifth Symphony* is posited starting from the moment men create music.

It has been stated over and over again for the past forty years that there is no human nature, no essence of man. This negative remark is completely inadequate. The nature, or essence, of man is precisely this "capacity," this "possibility" in the active, positive, not predetermined sense of *making be other forms* of social and individual existence, as a glance at the otherness [*alterité*] in institutions of society, in tongues, or in works makes abundantly clear. This does indeed mean that there really is a human nature or an essence of man, which may be defined by the following key specific property: creation, in the manner of and after the fashion according to which man creates and self-creates himself [*crée et s'autocrée*]. And this creation—an apparently banal, yet decisive, remark whose consequences we have not ceased to unravel—has not ended, in any sense of the term.

II

From this, some philosophical—and, more especially, ontological—consequences of capital importance follow already. I shall briefly explicate two of them.

Creation does not signify indetermination. Creation *presupposes*, certainly, a certain indetermination in being, in the sense that what is is never such that it excludes the surging forth of new forms, of new determinations. In other words, from the most essential standpoint, what is is not *closed*. What is is open; what is is always also *to-be*.

But creation also does not signify indetermination in another sense: creation is precisely the positing of new determinations. What would we have understood about music, or about the French Revolution, if we had limited ourselves to saying: *History is the domain of the indeterminate?* The creation of music as such, or of this or that particular musical work, or the French Revolution is the *positing of new determinations*; each one is a creation of *forms*. A form—an *eidos*, as Plato would have said—means a set of determinations, a set of possibilities and impossibilities that are defined starting from the moment the form is posited. Here we have the positing of new determinations, and of *other* determinations, ones not reducible to what was already there, not deducible and not producible starting from what was already there. Socrates is not Socrates because he is indeterminate but because he determines—through what he says, through what he does, through what he is, through what he makes himself be, and through the way in which he makes himself die—a type of individual that he embodies and that did not exist beforehand. The ontological import of this remark is immense: there exists at least one type of being that creates something else, that is a source of alterity, and that thereby itself alters itself [*s'altère lui-même*].

A general science of man, research bearing upon the *genus homo*, is therefore precisely this: research bearing upon the conditions and the forms of *human creation*. For

reasons previously stated, such research can only be a continual back and forth movement between singular creations and what we can think of the human as such. Without these singular creations, without a comprehension of them, we know nothing of man; to probe another singular creation is not to add a thousandth horse to the nine-hundred-ninety-ninth already studied by zoologists but, rather, to unveil another form created by human being. What extraterrestrial ethnologist visiting the Earth around 5000 B.C.E. could have predicted, or even suspected, that these shaggy beings might one day create democracy or philosophy? And had she thought or suspected that, had she simply posed the question to herself, she would have done so only because these forms, or very analogous ones, had already been created on her mysterious home planet.

Creation means the capacity to bring about the emergence of what is not given—not derivable, by means of a combinatory or in some other way—starting from the given. Right away, we think that it is this capacity that corresponds to the deep meaning of the terms *imagination* and *imaginary*, once we have abandoned the superficial ways these terms have been used. The imagination is not simply the capacity to combine some already given elements in order to produce therefrom another variant of an already given form; the imagination is the capacity to posit a new form. Certainly, this new form utilizes elements that are already there, but the *form* as such is new. More radically still, as was glimpsed by certain philosophers (Aristotle, Kant, Fichte) but always occulted anew, the imagination is what allows us to create for ourselves a *world*—or to present to ourselves something of which, without the imagination, we would know nothing and we could say nothing.

The imagination begins with the sensibility; it is manifest in the most elementary data of the sensibility. We can determine a physico-physiological correspondence between certain wavelengths of light and the color red or blue; we absolutely cannot "explain" either physically or physiologically the sensation red or blue as to its *quality*. We might have seen the red blue or the blue red, or other unprecedented colors; for the *quale* and the *tale* of the color, there is no "explanation." The imagination incorporated in our sensibility has brought into being this form of being that does not exist in nature (in nature, there are no colors; there are only instances of radiation), the red, the blue, color in general, which we "perceive"—though the term is certainly an abuse of language—and which other animals, because their sensorial imagination is *other*, "perceive" in another way. Imagination—*Einbildung* in German—signifies a *setting into images*, which of course is in certain regards common to us all, inasmuch as we belong to the *genus homo*, and always also each time absolutely singular. The same goes for what I call the social imaginary, the instituting imaginary, to which I shall return immediately.

But if that is true, then, contrary to the old commonplace, what makes of man a man is not that he is reasonable or rational. And this, quite evidently, is an aberration. There is no madder being than man, whether he is considered in the depths of his psychism or in his diurnal activities. Ants or wild animals have a functional "rationality" far superior to that of man: they do not stumble, nor do they eat poisonous mushrooms. Men have to learn what is nourishment and what is not. It therefore is not on the basis of "rationality," of "logic"—which, qua operant logic, is generally characteristic of *every living being*—that we can characterize man. It is our capacity for creation that

shows us why the essence of man could not be logic, not be rationality. With logic and rationality one can go as far as virtual infinity (after two billion there is still two billion to the two billionth power); one can draw out, *ad infinitum*, the consequences of *already posited* axioms; but neither logic nor rationality will ever allow one to imagine a new axiom. The highest form of our logic, mathematics, can receive a new impetus each time only if one imagines, only if one invents; and that is something mathematicians know very well, even if they are not always capable of elucidating it. They know of the central role the imagination plays not only in the solution to problems that already have been posed but also in the positing of new mathematical worlds. Such a positing is not reducible to mere logical operations, for otherwise it would be algorithmizable, and then one could simply mechanize the process.

Based on these remarks, we can posit the imagination and the social imaginary as essential characteristics of man. Man is *psuchē*, soul, psyche in its underlying strata, unconscious. And man is society; he *is* only in and through society, its institution, and the social imaginary significations that render the psyche fit for life. And society is always also history; there never is—even in a primitive, repetitive society—a frozen or congealed present. More exactly, even in the most archaic society the present is always also constituted by a past that inhabits it and by a future it anticipates. It is therefore always a historical present. Beyond biology, which in man both persists and finds itself put irremediably out of order [*déréglée*], man is a psychical being and a social-historical being.

Moreover, it is at these two levels that we rediscover the capacity for creation, which I have named the

imagination and the *imaginary*. There is the radical imagination of the psyche—namely, perpetual upsurge of a flux of representations, of affects, and of desires, all three indissociable each from the others. If we do not understand that, we do not understand anything about man.

Nevertheless, it is not the psyche, in the sense I give to this term, that can create institutions. It is not the Unconscious that creates the law or even the idea of the law. Rather, the Unconscious receives law as alien, hostile, oppressive. Furthermore, it is not the psyche that is able to create language; the psyche must receive language, and with language it receives the totality of the social imaginary significations that language bears, conveys, and renders possible.

But what will we say about language and laws? Are we to imagine a primitive legislator, one who does not yet possess language but who is still sufficiently "intelligent" to be able to invent it without having it and to persuade the other human beings, who still do not have it, that it would be useful to talk? A ridiculous idea. Language shows us the social imaginary at work, as instituting imaginary, positing at once a strictly logical dimension—what I call the *ensemblistic-identitarian* (every language has to be able to say one plus one equals two)—as well as a properly *imaginary* dimension, since in and through language are given the social imaginary significations that hold a society together: taboo, totem, God, the *polis*, the nation, wealth, the party, citizenship, virtue, or eternal life. Eternal life is quite evidently, even if it "exists," a social imaginary signification, since no one has ever shown or proved mathematically the existence of eternal life. And here we have a social imaginary signification that ruled, for seventeen centuries, the life of societies that considered

themselves to be the most civilized in Europe and the world.

The only way we can think this social imaginary that creates language, that creates institutions, that creates the very form of the institution—and the institution has no meaning from the perspective of the singular psyche—is as the creative capacity of the anonymous collective. This capacity is realized each time humans are assembled and it gives itself, each time, a singular instituted figure in order to exist.

Man's knowing and acting are therefore indissociably psychical and social-historical, two poles that cannot exist one without the other. And they are irreducible to each other. All that we find that is social within an individual, and the very idea of an individual, is socially fabricated or created in correspondence with the society's institutions. In order to find in the individual something that is not truly social, if that is possible—and it is not, since in any case what is not social has to pass by way of language—one would have to be able to reach into the ultimate core of the psyche, where the most primary desires, the most chaotic modes of representation, and the rawest and wildest affects are at work. We can do no more than reconstitute it.

Whether it is a matter of us "normal" people, the dream recounted by a patient in analysis, or the psychotic's unfolding delusion, we are always also confronted with the social: there is no dream as an analyzable object unless it is recounted (be it even by myself to myself) and every dream is populated with social objects. It sets on stage something of the psyche's primary desire, which has to be staged and is staged under *this* form only because it encounters opposition from the social institution as represented in the case of every individual by what Freud called the Superego

and the censor. Not "Thou shalt not do that," "Thou shalt not sleep with thy mother," but much more. The instance, or agency, of censorship and of repression is just as aberrant, and just as logical, as the great monotheistic religions are; not "Thou shalt not sleep with thy mother" but "Thou shalt not desire to sleep with thy mother."

As soon as it goes beyond its monadic primary phase, the Unconscious turns its desire toward someone who happens to be there—generally, the mother—and who is forbidden; and this conflict, when internalized by the individual, constitutes both the *raison d'être* of the dream as such and the *raison d'être* of its content and of its type of elaboration. This does not stop something of the psyche from always succeeding, somehow or other, in percolating through the successive strata of socialization to which the psyche of the being in question is subjected and in bubbling up to the surface.

The psychical, properly speaking, cannot be reduced to the social-historical; and, despite the attempts by Freud and others, the social-historical cannot be reduced to the psychical. One can interpret the "psychoanalytical" component of this or that particular institution by showing that it also corresponds to unconscious schemata and that it satisfies unconscious tendencies or needs—which is always true. The institution always also must answer to the quest for meaning that is characteristic of the psyche. Nevertheless, the fact of the institution is in itself completely alien to the psyche. This is why the socialization of the individual is so long and arduous a process; and this is also, no doubt, why babies cry without any reason, even when they are full.

III

The question *What about man?*—the question of philosophical anthropology—therefore becomes: What about the human psyche and what about society and history? One can see straight away that these questions are philosophical questions and that they precede all others. In particular, we have to draw out all the consequences from the well-known and basic fact (the consequences of which, once again, have apparently not yet been drawn) that, for example, philosophy is born in and through society and history. One need only inspect the societies and the historical periods with which we are familiar to see that almost all societies in almost all periods have been instituted not in the interrogatory mode but in the closure of meaning and signification. For them, what is already instituted and received—inherited—as instituted has always been true, valid, and legitimate. Man is a being that seeks meaning and that, for that purpose, creates it. But at first, and for a very long time, man creates meaning in closure and he creates the closure of meaning; he is always trying, even today, to return thereto. The rupture of this closure is inaugurated through the combined birth and rebirth [*renaissance*]*—in Greece and in Western Europe—of philosophy and politics. For, both philosophy and politics radically call into question at one and the same time the established social imaginary significations and the institutions embodying these significations.*

Philosophy begins, in effect, with the question: What am I to think? It is partial, of a second-order, and therefore false to define philosophy by the "question of being." Before there would be a question of being, the human being must be able to ask himself the question: What am I to

think? Now, generally, that is not what is done in history. The human being thinks what the Bible, the Koran, the General Secretary, the Party, the tribe's witch doctor, the ancestors, and so on tell him to think. Of course, the question *What am I to think?* is deployed immediately in a host of other questions, *What am I to think of being?* but also *What am I to think of myself?* and *What am I to think of thought itself?*—which brings about thought's own reflectiveness. But to ask *What am I to think?* is ipso facto to challenge and to call into question the collectivity's, the tribe's instituted and inherited representations and to open the way to unending interrogation.

Now, these representations, as well as institutions in general, not only form a part of the concrete being, the singular being, of the society under consideration but also determine it. If a society is *what* it is—is this-very-something (*ti*) distinct from the others—that is because it has itself created the world that it has itself created. If Hebraic society, such as we represent it to ourselves via the Old Testament, is Hebraic society and not any other one whatsoever, that is because it has created a world, the world described in the Old Testament. Being a "mythical" society, it recounts itself to itself by telling itself stories; it recounts to itself the story of God, of the world, and of the Hebrews—but at the same time this story lays out an entire structure of the world: God as creator, man both as master and possessor of nature (Genesis did not wait for Descartes) *and* as prone to sin even prior to birth, the Law, and so on. The Hebrews are Hebrews only to the extent that they think all that—just as the French, the Americans, and the Swiss of today are what they are only to the extent that they embody the imaginary significations of their respective societies, to the extent that, in a sense, they almost "are"

these walking, working, drinking, etc. imaginary significations.

To call these representations, these significations, and these institutions into question is therefore equivalent to calling into question the determinations, the very laws, of one's own being and doing so in a reflective and deliberate fashion. This is what happens with philosophy and politics. Here we can make a second major ontological conclusion arising from philosophical anthropology: being—being in general—is such that there are beings that of themselves alter themselves [*s'altèrent d'eux-mêmes*] and create, without knowing it, the determinations of their particular being. This holds for all societies. But, we can add, being is such that there are beings that can create reflection and deliberation, whereby they alter in a reflective and deliberate manner the laws, the determinations, of their own being. That exists, so far as we know, in no other region of being. Yet, we can make even further specifications.

Every society exists in creating social imaginary significations—or, the *immanent unperceived*. Some examples are the Hebraic, Christian, or Islamic God, or the commodity. No one has ever seen a commodity: one can see a car, a kilo of bananas, a meter of fabric. It is the social imaginary signification *commodity* that makes these objects function as they function in a commercial society. The unperceived is *immanent*, since obviously for a philosopher God is immanent to the society that believes in God, even if this society posits Him as transcendent; He is present therein more than any material entity, but at the same time He is unperceivable, at least in ordinary times. What of Him is "perceivable" are some very derivative consequences: a Temple at Jerusalem or elsewhere, some priests, some candelabra, and so forth.

This immanent unperceived {element} created by society does not exist in other regions of being; and with the immanent unperceived appears *ideality*. Ideality signifies that the signification is not rigidly attached to a support and that it goes beyond all its particular supports—without, of course, ever being able to do without any support whatsoever. Everyone can, referring to signs or symbols, talk with different means or expressions of God, of eternal life, of the *polis*, of the Party, of the commodity, of capital and interest: these are idealities. They are not *fetishes*. A good definition of an ordinary fetish could begin with this remark: a fetish is an object that necessarily bears and conveys a signification and is one from which this signification cannot be detached. This holds for certain primitive beliefs as well as, in certain regards, for ourselves (I am leaving aside here fetishism as a sexual perversion—which, moreover, perfectly well corresponds to this definition: the erotic signification is rigidly attached to this or that object, this or that type of object, the fetish-object).

These significations possess each time in society a *de facto*, positive validity. They are legitimate and incontestable within the society under consideration. The question of their legitimacy is not raised, and the very term *legitimacy* is anachronistic when applied to most traditional societies.

But, starting from the moment interrogation and philosophical and political activity arise, another dimension is created: the one defined by the idea, the exigency, and even the effective actuality [*l'effectivité*] of a kind of validity that no longer would be merely *de facto*, positive, but now is *de jure* or rightful [*de droit*]: we are speaking about *right* [*droit*] here not in the juridical sense but in the

philosophical sense. De jure validity, and not simply de facto validity, means that we no longer accept a representation, or an idea, simply because we have received it and that we do not have to accept it. We require [*exigons*] that one might render an account of and a reason for it, what the Greeks called *logon didonai* (the conativity of this idea with public political control in the *agora* and the *ekklēsia* is patently obvious). And the same thing holds for our institutions.

It is therefore in and through the social-historical that this demand [*exigence*] for de jure validity emerges and is created. Here again we have an ontological creation, the creation of an unprecedented form, just like mathematical proof, the quasi-proofs of physics, philosophical reasoning, or the political institution itself starting from the moment this institution is posited as always having to be validated in a reflective and deliberate manner by the collectivity it institutes.

At this point arises, nevertheless, a question that underlies the entire history of philosophy—one that is treated rather badly in, and is ill treated by, philosophy itself. If de jure validity, if the assertion that an idea is true and that it is true both today and yesterday, two million years ago or in four million years—if this sort of validity arises in and through the social-historical and with the synergy, the collaboration, of the psychical, how can that which presents itself with this pretension to de jure validity escape the psychical and social-historical conditioning by means of which it each time makes its appearance; how can it avoid the closure of the world within which it has been created? In other words—and this is the question that really matters to us in the highest degree (which is why philosophy always has to be anthropological)—how can the valid be

effectively actual [*l'effectif*] and the effectively actual be valid?

To underscore the importance of this manner of posing the question, let us recall, for example, that, in a philosophy as great, as important, and which has left its mark on the rest of the history of philosophy as much as Kantian philosophy, effective actuality and validity, separated by an abyss, cannot be thought together. Kant asks how we can have *de jure*, necessary and true knowledge, and he ends up constructing or assuming a transcendental subject (one could just as well call this subject *ideal*) that in effect possesses, by construction, certain a priori knowledge—true, nontrivial, and necessary knowledge. But what good does it do for us that a transcendental subject or consciousness might have this assured knowledge of which Kant speaks? I am not a transcendental subject; I am an effectively actual human being. To tell me that the transcendental subject is constructed in this way and can, due to this very fact, attain synthetic a priori judgments does not interest me. That would be of interest to me only to the extent that I, *too*, am a transcendental subject.

Here we have the perpetual oscillation in Kant. On the one hand, he speaks about what the subject is from the transcendental point of view. On the other, he refers to "our experience," "our mind" (*Gemüt*), "we men" (*wir Menschen*). Is it a question, then, of "our mind"—or of "the mind" from the transcendental perspective? This oscillation is settled, but tragically so, in Kant's practical philosophy, according to which I ultimately can never truly be moral since I am necessarily always moved by "empirical"—that is, effectively actual—determinations. It is upon this stake that philosophy has remained impaled since Plato precisely

because philosophy has not succeeded in facing up to the following question, the only genuine one in this regard: How can validity become effective actuality, and effective actuality validity? It is not possible to respond to this question here. I shall indicate merely a few benchmarks that enable us to elucidate it.

If we want to speak of *truth*, distinguishing it from mere correctness (*alētheia* as opposed to *orthotēs*; *Wahrheit* as opposed to *Richtigkeit*), and if we say that " $2 + 2 = 4$ " is correct but that the philosophy of Aristotle or of Kant is true or has to do with the truth, we have to reexamine the signification of this term and modify it. We must call *truth* not a property of statements, or any result whatsoever, but the very movement that breaks closure as it is each time established and that seeks, in an effort of coherency and of *logon didonai*, to have an encounter with what is. If we give this meaning to the truth, we have to say that it is the social-historical, the anthropological in the true sense, that is the site of the truth. For, not only is it in and through the social-historical that language, signification, ideality, and the requirement [*exigence*] of de jure validity are created, but it is also only in and through the social-historical that we can respond to this exigency so far as we possibly can. And above all, it is only in and through the social-historical that this rupture of closure and the movement that manifests it can *be*. Indeed, without that idea of the truth we would simply be torn between the "points of view" that are "true" within and for each "subject" of closure—therefore, absolute relativism—and the idea of a definitive and complete system, which would be the closure of all closures. Moreover, it is also in and through the social-historical and as a function of the second kind of creation of which I just spoke, that reflective subjectivity and the political subject,

inasmuch as these are opposed to the all and sundry of "prior" humanity—namely, to conformal, socially fabricated individuals, as respectable and worthy of honor and love as they might often be—appear.

It is also only in and through the social-historical that are created a public space and a public time for reflection—a synchronic and diachronic *agora*, which prevents each subjectivity from becoming shut within its own closure. It is, finally, to the extent that the social-historical is continued creation, and dense creation, that the results of philosophical reflection as they are each time attained can be called back into question. Without such a creation, philosophy would, once created, risk congealing or becoming merely a setting into logical order of the given once-and-for-all-achieved social world, as has indeed been the fate of philosophy in India, in China, in Byzantium, or in Islam; or, finally, it would risk remaining an immobile aporetic suspension of instituted certitudes for the benefit of some form of mysticism, as in the majority of Buddhist currents of thought.

Nonetheless, reflection certainly also finds in the radical imagination of the singular psyche the positive condition for its existence. It is this imagination that allows the creation of the new—that is to say, the emergence of forms, figures, original schemata of thought and of the thinkable. And it is also because there is radical imagination, and not simply reproduction or recombination of the already seen—noncongealed, unsettled imagination, imagination not limited to already given and known forms—that the human being is capable of receiving, of welcoming, of accepting another's original creation—for, without that, such creation would remain a delusion or an individual pastime. This holds for philosophy as well as for

art, and also for the sciences.

In both cases—that of the imagination that creates the original and that of the imagination that is capable of gathering it—a new type of individual is involved: reflective and deliberative subjectivity. Such subjectivity is critically and lucidly open to the new; it does not repress the works of the imagination (one's own or others') but is capable of receiving them critically, of accepting them or of rejecting them.

IV

Such an individual is itself a social-historical creation. This individual is both the result of and the condition for established institutions being called into question. These remarks lead us, by way of conclusion, to the question of politics.

I intend by *politics* the collective, reflective, and lucid activity that arises starting from the moment the question of the de jure validity of institutions is raised. Are our laws just? Is our Constitution just? Is it good? But good in relation to what? Just in relation to what? It is precisely through these interminable interrogations that the object of genuine politics is constituted, which therefore presupposes calling existing institutions into question—be it perhaps to reconfirm them in whole or in part. This amounts to saying that through politics thus conceived man calls into question, and might possibly alter, his mode of being and his being qua social man. The social-historical is therefore also the site where the question of the de jure validity of institutions, and therefore also of people's various *behaviors*, arises. This last point is very important, for it shows that the ethical question is created in and through

history, that it is not necessarily given *with* history (contrary to what is being said on this score), and that it is a part of the political question in the profound sense.

In a traditional society, in a heteronomous society, people's behaviors are themselves *instituted*. One does as one does; one marries him or her whom one is to marry; under such and such circumstances, one does this or that. There are more than six hundred commandments the young Jewish boy is supposed to know by heart by the time of his bar mitzvah. With such instituted behaviors and pre-given responses, the question *What am I to do?* is not raised.

Nor is it raised, moreover, if one is a Christian. The idea of a Christian ethics is an absurdity. Christian ethics knows no questions. The answer to every conceivable question is to be found in its entirety in the Gospel, and Christ clearly says there what must be done: One should abandon one's father, one's mother, one's spouse and follow Him. If there is a problem of Christian ethics, it is because the Christians have never been able to do what the Gospel commands them to do—in other words, it is because Christianity never was Christianity, save perhaps for a brief initial period; it is because Christianity very rapidly became an instituted Church, with the instituted duplicity that goes along with that, and because one therefore began to ask oneself the question of how one is to reconcile the prescriptions of the Gospel with one's effectively actual life, which is unrelated to these prescriptions. Whence the indelible mark of hypocrisy on all the injunctions of a historical Christian "ethics."

The question *What am I to do?* itself belongs to the set of interrogations that arise once the code of behaviors has been shattered.

But even taking up the matter from the purely ethical

end, we may ask: How can one, when faced with someone who wants to raise the question *What am I to do?* only in a very narrow sense, forget for an instant that the conditions and the ultimate norms of making and doing [*faire*] are fixed in place each time by the overall institution? The question *What am I to do?* becomes almost insignificant if it leaves out the question of what I am to do in relation to the conditions and norms of making and doing, therefore in relation to the institutions already in place. Some people have been talking a lot, lately, about *the other*. There is an entire philosophy that claims to be built upon the "gaze of the other," which is supposed to create for me some sort of exigency. But *what other?* These philosophers are thinking of the "others" they have met—or else, an other in general. The big problem is raised, however, by these real "others"—five and a half billion of them—whom one does not encounter but about whom one knows, quite pertinently, that they do exist and that they lead, for the most part, a heteronomous existence. The question *What am I to do?* is essentially political.

Politics is the lucid and reflective activity that interrogates itself about society's institutions and that, should the opportunity arise, aims at transforming them. This implies not that politics picks up the same old bits and pieces in order to combine them in a different way but, instead, that it creates new institutional forms—which also means: new significations. We have proof of this in the two creations from which our tradition proceeds, the Greek democracy and—under another, much vaster, but also, in certain regards, more problematic form—the modern democratic and revolutionary movement. New imaginary significations emerge therein that are borne by institutions, are embodied by them, and animate them.

Take, for example, the first democratic *poleis*, where the citizens thought of themselves as *homoioi*, similars, equals, even before the term *isoī* achieved a complete break with the Homeric poems (where there was no question of Ulysses being the *homoios* of Thersites). There the citizens were equals; there was *isonomia* for all. Of course, besides the male citizens there were also the women and the slaves: this is *not a model*. But we find therein some *germs*. In Modern Times, these significations are taken up again and carried much further. One speaks of equality, liberty, and fraternity for *all*. This "for all" is a social signification that arises in the West and that, politically speaking, is not Greek (I leave aside the Stoics, who were politically irrelevant).

Starting when? It is said that equality is already there in the Gospel. But the equality of the Gospel, like that of Paul, exists only on high; it is not down here. In the Christian churches, there were comfortable seats for the lords, chairs for the good burghers of the parish, and benches or nothing at all for the mere faithful, who are in other respects our brothers. And these Christian brethren—who no longer are Greeks or Jews, freemen or slave, men or women, but children of God and perfectly equal—are, in order to hear this very same discourse, seated differently, or divided between those sitting and those standing. Modern equality is not the equality of Christianity; it is the creation of a new historical movement that has put forward the demand for a kind of equality that is not in heaven but, rather, in the here and now. It is not surprising that, in and through this movement, Christian ideas might have been reinterpreted and recycled. Let us recall that during the French Revolution some could think of Jesus Christ as the first *sans-culotte*.

We live now in a world where these imaginary

significations—liberty, equality—are still present, though a closer look at them reveals at the same time an enormous contradiction. If one considers the significations of liberty and equality in their deepest rigor, one can see first of all that, far from being mutually exclusive (as a mystificatory discourse, in circulation for more than a century, would have it), each implies the other. But one can also see that they are far from realized, even in so-called democratic societies.

In fact, what these societies realize are regimes of liberal oligarchy. The "political philosophy" that has become respectable nowadays veils its eyes before this reality—at the same time, moreover, that it proves incapable of providing any genuine philosophical discussion of the foundations of this oligarchical system: nowhere have I seen a discussion worthy of the name on the metaphysics of "representation," for example, or on the metaphysics of parties, which are the true seats of power in modern societies. Let us dare to speak of reality and note that to speak of political equality between a street sweeper in France and {a huge multinational construction company magnate and owner of the first privatized French television network, the late} Francis Bouygues is a bit of a joke.

In France—and the situation is the same in all the liberal-oligarchic countries—the "sovereign people" is made up of approximately 37 million electors. How does it exercise this power? It is called upon every five or seven years to designate among 3,700 people, at most, those who will represent them for the next five years—or the President who will govern them for the next seven. The ratio is 1:10,000. Let us multiply this figure by ten, to take into account all the capitalists, state managers and technocrats, members of party apparatuses, media managers, and so on,

and we arrive, with a bit of generosity, at the figure of 37,000 persons out of 37 million. The dominant oligarchy is formed by one thousandth of the population—a percentage that would make the Roman oligarchy turn green with envy.

These regimes of liberal oligarchy represent the compromise our societies have reached between capitalism properly speaking and the emancipatory struggles that have attempted to transform or liberalize capitalism. This compromise guarantees, it cannot be denied, not only liberties but also certain possibilities for certain members of the dominated categories of the population.

Yet one talks of equality. One is talking, too, of the "rights of man." The rights of what man? There are around five and a half billion human beings on the Earth. This liberal oligarchy, plus certain creature comforts, exist only in the OECD countries, plus or minus one or two others—be it around seven hundred million persons. An eighth of the human population benefits from these human rights and from certain creature comforts. The great gimmick of Reaganism and Thatcherism was to concentrate the poverty onto 15 or 20 percent of the population, the underprivileged who no longer can say anything at all or who might, at the very most, explode in an ineffectual way. The others "never had it so good," as the saying goes in English, and are perhaps at this moment out buying a second color television set. As for the remaining seven-eighths of the world population, they are prey to poverty (obviously not everyone, for there, too, we find some rich and privileged people) and they live, generally, under some form of tyranny. What became, then, of the rights of man, equality, liberty? Should one say, as Burke said to the French revolutionaries, that there are no rights of man but

only rights of Englishmen, of the French, Americans, Swiss, and so on?

Can one exit from this situation? A change is possible if and only if a new awakening takes place, if and only if a new phase of dense political creativity on the part of humanity begins—which implies, in turn, that we exit from the state of apathy and privatization characteristic of today's industrialized societies. Otherwise, although historical novation certainly will not cease since any idea of an "end of history" is multiply absurd, the risk is that this novation, instead of producing freer individuals in freer societies, might give rise to a new human type, whom we may provisionally call zapanthropus² or reflexanthropus, a type of being that is kept on a leash and maintained in the illusion of its individuality and of its liberty by mechanisms that have become independent of all social control and that are managed by anonymous apparatuses already well on the way toward achieving dominance.

What political thought can do is pose in clear terms the dilemma that confronts us today. It obviously cannot resolve that dilemma all by itself. The dilemma can be resolved only by the human collectivity waking from its slumber and deploying its creative activity.

²"Zapanthropus" is formed from *zapping* (channel surfing) and *anthrōpos* (man in the generic sense). —T/E

The Crisis of the Identification Process *

The previous speakers at this colloquium have, if not exhausted the properly psychoanalytical and psychosociological processes involved in the question of identification—how could they have?—at least broached those subjects at length, so I shall not address these aspects. Moreover, I shall be adopting another point of view, what I call the *social-historical* point of view, which does not mean the same thing as "sociological" in the usual sense of this term.

Contrary to what was said by the speaker André Nicolai—if, at least, I understood him well—in my opinion there really is a *crisis* of contemporary society, this crisis produces the crisis of the identification process, and at the same time it is reproduced and aggravated by the crisis of identification. I therefore shall adopt an overall, comprehensive approach to the problem, taking the position that the identification process, in its each time singular specificity for each historically instituted society, and identification itself are moments of the totality of society and that these moments make no sense, either positively or negatively, when detached from this social totality. In order to justify this somewhat strong assertion, allow me to take

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a few examples from the topics already treated during this colloquium.

It is quite correct to say that we can elucidate (though not explain) the crisis of identification in contemporary society by making reference to the weakening or the dislocation of what the speaker Jacqueline Palmade calls the tendency of the identification process to lean on [*l'étayage*] a variety of socially instituted entities such as habitat, family, workplace, and so on. Nevertheless, as may be seen with the help of a very simple consideration, we cannot stop there.

Take the example of habitat. We know of peoples, great peoples or small tribes, that have always lived as nomads. Among these peoples, habitat has a completely different meaning. The tent that is carried across the steppes of Central Asia is, certainly, a reference site for the nomadic individual or family. As is immediately clear, however, in such a society things are instituted in an entirely other way, and the possibility of making sense of the site where one is depends on factors other than its "stability." The same goes for gypsies or for those, in societies with which we are familiar, who have been itinerant peddlers (for at least three thousand years), sailors, and so on.

The same may be said for the family's support network [*l'étayage familial*]. Far be it from me, fervent Freudian and psychoanalyst that I am, to underestimate the importance of the family setting and family ties—the capital, indeed decisive role they play in the hominization of the tiny newborn monster. Yet, it must not be forgotten that we should not become fixated on a half-real, half-idealized type of family that was able to exist in certain strata of Western society for, say, the past two centuries, and conclude thereby that the present crisis of identification had

to occur just because that particular type of family is incontestably in crisis today. Without going into a historical excursus on the topic, it may be recalled that, while the Spartans were not very likeable people, they were completely "normal" individuals; they functioned perfectly well, were victorious in battle for century upon century, and so on. The "family environment" in Sparta, however, was something entirely other than what we consider "normal." Apart from the initial nursing period, the upbringing of the child was conducted in a directly social—and, as our half-literate modern intellectuals would say, "totalitarian"—manner. Whatever one might call it, this was a *directly social* form of child-rearing.

In the third place, all these phenomena—the increasing fragility of the family, the increasing fragility of one's habitat as something to lean on, and so forth—appear to be neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for the onset of a crisis, since we see this same crisis taking place, and massively so, in individuals coming from milieux and living in milieux where there is neither a crisis of one's habitat nor even, properly speaking, a family crisis. If one looks at the middle classes in society today, one cannot speak of a "habitat crisis" as such. There are certainly other habitat-related phenomena: one's locality no longer has the same signification it might previously have had, for example, and so on. And yet, here we are seeing some individuals who clearly have lost their bearings as adults. This brings us back, certainly, to deeper problems that develop during the period when identification and even the identity of these people were being established—without, however, one being able to have recourse to an explanatory paradigm relating specifically to these networks of support.

In sum, we are speaking the way we are now

speaking because in our culture the identification process, the creation of an individual-social "self," used to pass by way of sites that no longer exist or that are now in crisis. But another reason for us to speak like this is because, in contrast to what prevailed among the Mongols, the Spartans, Phoenician merchants, gypsies, traveling salesmen, and so on, no existing totality of social imaginary significations is available, and no new one emerging, that would be capable of taking charge of and addressing this crisis of particular support networks.

We are thus led, via another path, to the idea that we—or, in any case, that I—already have formed. If the crisis is affecting so central an element of social hominization as the identification process, that really must mean that this crisis is an overall and ongoing one. Some have spoken of a "crisis of values" for a long time—in fact, for at least the past 150 years. Things have reached the point where such talk risks reminding one of the story of the boy who cried wolf. People have spoken about this crisis for so long that now, when it is finally arriving, one reacts as if its arrival were just some stale old joke. But I firmly believe that the wolf really has arrived. I agree with the speaker Jean Maisonneuve when he says that the term *values* remains vague; that, indeed, is the least that can be said on this score. For that reason, I speak about a crisis of *social imaginary significations* (henceforth, simply *significations*), that is, a crisis in the significations that hold this society, like any society, together—though later on we shall see how this crisis is expressed at the level of the identification process.

Every society creates its own world in creating the significations that are specific to it. Indeed, it creates a magma of significations, such as the Hebraic God and

everything He implies, all the significations that can be brought together under the term Greek *polis*, or the significations that go with the emergence of capitalist society (or, more exactly, of the capitalist component of modern society).

The role of these social imaginary significations, their "function"—I am using this term without any "functionalist" connotation—is threefold. They are what structure the *representations* of the world in general, without which there can be no human beings. These structures are each time specific: our world is not the ancient Greek world, and the trees we see beyond these windows do not each shelter a nymph; it's just wood, we say, which is a construction characteristic of the modern world. Secondly, these significations designate the *finalities* or ends of action; they dictate what is to be done and not to be done, what is good to do and not good to do. One should, for example, adore God or, perhaps, accumulate the forces of production—whereas no natural or biological law, nor even any psychical one, says that one must adore God or accumulate the forces of production. Thirdly, and it is this point that is undoubtedly the most difficult to grasp, these significations establish the types of *affects* that are characteristic of a society. For example, there clearly is an affect that is *created* by Christianity, which is *faith*. We know or believe we know what faith is, this nearly indescribable sentiment that establishes a relationship with an infinitely superior being whom one loves, who loves you, who can punish you, all of this steeped in a strange psychical humidity, and so on and so forth. This sort of faith would be absolutely incomprehensible to Aristotle. For, what can this idea really mean, that one might love the gods or be loved by the gods *in this fashion*, be possessed by

these affects, the undeniable expression of which can be seen on the faces of the true faithful in Bethlehem on any given Christmas Eve? This affect is social-historically instituted, and one can point to the person who created it: Paul. With the de-Christianization that has occurred in modern societies, it is no longer as present as it once was. But there really are affects that are characteristic of capitalist society, too. Without entering into a description that would risk taking a merely literary turn, allow me to recall that Marx described these capitalist affects very well when he spoke of a perpetual restlessness, constant change, a thirst for the new for the sake of the new and for more for the sake of more—in short, a set of socially instituted affects.

The instauration of these three dimensions—representations, finalities, affects—goes hand in hand, each time, with their concrete expression in all sorts of particular, mediating institutions—and, of course, in the first group surrounding the individual, the family, then a whole series of neighboring groups that are, topologically speaking, mutually inclusive or intersecting: other families, the clan or tribe, the local collectivity, the work collectivity, the nation, and so on and so forth. By means of all these forms, a particular type of individual—that is, a specific anthropological type—is, each time, instituted. The fifteenth-century Florentine is not the twentieth-century Parisian, and he is not so as a function of trivial differences but as a function of all that he is, thinks, wants, loves, or hates. And at the same time, a whole hive of social roles is established, each one of which is—paradoxically—both self-sufficient and complementary in relation to the others: slave/free, man/woman, and so on.

But, among the significations instituted by each

society, the most important is undoubtedly the one that concerns society itself. Every society we have known has had a representation of itself as *something* (which, parenthetically, very well goes to show that it is a matter here of *imaginary* significations): We are the Chosen People; we are the Greeks, as opposed to the Barbarians; we are the descendants of the Founding Fathers, or the subjects of the King of England. This representation is indissociably tied to a society's *wanting itself* as society and as *this* society and to its *loving itself* as society and as *this* society—that is to say, there is a cathexis both of the concrete collectivity and of the laws by means of which this collectivity is what it is. Here, at the social level, there is in the representation (or in the discourse that society maintains about itself) an external, social correlate to each individual's definitive identification that is always also an identification with a "We," with a *de jure* imperishable collectivity. With or without religion, this identification still has a fundamental function to perform, since it serves as a defense—and, no doubt, the social individual's principal defense—against Death, the unacceptable fact of one's own mortality. But the collectivity is, ideally speaking, imperishable only if the meaning, the significations that it institutes, are cathected as imperishable by the members of society. And I believe that the whole problematic in the contemporary crisis of identification processes can and should be broached from this angle, as well: Where, we may ask, is the meaning that is lived as imperishable by the men and women of today?

My response, it will have been understood by now, is that, socially speaking, this meaning is nowhere to be found. Such meaning concerns society's self-representation; it is a meaning in which individuals can participate, a meaning that allows them to coin for their own personal

accounts a meaning of the world, a meaning of life, and, ultimately, a meaning for their respective deaths. No need to recall here the more than central role that religion, in the broadest acceptance of the term, has played in this regard in all modern Western societies. But the rich liberal oligarchies, satiated and insatiable (a point to which we shall return below), are instituted precisely via their break with the religious universe, even if they sometimes (as in England) have maintained an "official" religion. They have put religion at a distance. That was done not as an end in itself but because modern societies have been formed in such a way that they *are* and are instituted via the emergence—and, up to a certain point, via the effective institution in society—of two central significations. Both of these significations are heterogeneous with respect to, not to say radically opposed to, the Christian religion that once dominated this social-historical area, and each one is, in principle, antinomical to the other.

On the one hand, there is the signification of the unlimited expansion of an allegedly rational alleged mastery over everything, nature as well as human beings. This signification corresponds to the capitalist dimension of modern societies. On the other hand, there is the signification of individual and social autonomy, of freedom, of the search for forms of collective freedom, which correspond to the democratic, emancipatory, revolutionary project. Why call them antinomical? Because the first signification, the capitalist one, leads to the Ford factories around Detroit circa 1920, that is, to straightforwardly micrototalitarian microsocieties where everything—including the workers' private lives *outside* the factory—is regulated by management down to the tiniest detail, this being one of the immanent tendencies of

capitalist society. And because the second signification, that of autonomy, leads to the idea of a participatory democracy—which, moreover, could not remain confined to the narrowly "political" sphere and halt before the gates of the factory or any other business enterprise. This antinomy between the two main significations of modern society has not prevented their multiple mutual contamination. And yet I think—as I believe I have previously shown at length, at least on the economic level—that if capitalism has been able to function and to develop, it is not *in spite of* but *thanks to* the conflict that existed in society and, concretely speaking, thanks to the fact that the workers don't just let things happen [*ne se laissent pas faire*]. More generally speaking, I believe that capitalism's survival can be attributed to the fact that, as the result of historical evolution, revolutions, and so on, society had to institute itself also as a society recognizing a minimum of liberties, of human rights, of legality, and so forth. I spoke of a mutual contamination between two central significations of modern society, but their mutual functionalities must also be underscored. Let us recall Max Weber and what he said about the importance of a legalistic State for the proper functioning of capitalism (foreseeability as to what can take place on a juridical level, therefore the possibility of rational calculation, and so on).

Grossly oversimplifying, it can be said that different anthropological types of individuals correspond to each of these two main significations. To the signification of the unlimited expansion of "rational mastery" many human types can be made to correspond, but, to get a handle on what we are talking about, let us think of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur. Obviously, this entrepreneur cannot exist all by himself: parachuted into the middle of the Tuareg, he

would no longer be a Schumpeterian entrepreneur. To be one, he requires a host of things—including, for example, both workers and consumers. There is, thus, a "complementary" anthropological type for this entrepreneur, a type required in order for this signification to be able to function; and, in accordance with the abstract logic of the thing, it is in this case the disciplined—and, ultimately, the completely reified—worker that is required.

To the other signification—autonomy—corresponds the critical, reflective, democratic individual. Now, what the twentieth century has bequeathed to us after the terrible adventures that the oldest among us here have gone through—and that, moreover, are not necessarily nearing an end—is that the signification of autonomy (not to be confused with pseudoindividualism) appears to be going through a period of eclipse or prolonged occultation at the same time that social and political conflict is, practically speaking, on the wane. I am still speaking here of the wealthy Western societies, where one will have to search with a magnifying glass for any genuine political conflict, whether in France or in the United States; one will also have to search with a magnifying glass for any genuine social conflict, since all the conflicts that we observe have become essentially corporatist in character and remain confined merely to this or that sector of the population or the work force. As I have written elsewhere, we are living the society of "hobbies and lobbies."¹

This evolution, already long underway, became manifest in the period beginning around 1980, that is to say, during the Thatcher-Reagan era and the period when the French Socialist Party discovered the virtues of "the

¹See "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982), now in *CR*. —T/E

market," free enterprise, and the profit motive. The sole signification truly present and dominant today is the capitalist one, that of the indefinite expansion of "mastery," which at the same time—and here we come to our central point—finds itself emptied of all the content that might endow it with the vitality it once enjoyed and that could, for better or for worse, allow the processes of identification to be carried out.

One essential part of this signification was its mythology of "progress," which gave a meaning both to history and to future-oriented aims and which also gave a meaning to society, such as it was, as supposedly the best support for this kind of "progress." We know that this mythology is now falling into ruin. But what, we may ask, is today the subjective expression, for individuals, of this signification and this reality that is the "expansion," apparently "unlimited," of "mastery"?

For a small number, it is, of course, a certain "power," whether real or illusory, and the increase thereof. For the overwhelming majority of people, however, it is not and cannot be anything but a continual increase in consumption, including alleged leisure, which has now become an end in itself. What is becoming, then, of the general model of identification that the institution offers to society and that it proposes to and imposes on individuals as social individuals? The model is now the individual who earns the most and enjoys the most. Things are as simple and banal as that. This is now even being said aloud more and more, which does not keep it from being true.

Well, let us take "earning." But earning, despite the "neoliberal" rhetoric, is now becoming almost totally disconnected from any social function and even from the system's internal legitimation. One does not earn because

one has some worth; one has some worth because one earns. (See Bernard Tapie in France, Donald Trump in the United States, Prince, Madonna, and so on.) No one can contest Madonna's talent; it is enormous *because* she gets paid so many hundreds of thousands of dollars per two-hour concert appearance.

Although the analysis remains to be done, we may say that to this change corresponds the ever more thoroughgoing transformation of the system, as to its economic dimension, into a vast financial casino. The amounts speculated each day on the exchange-rate market alone, not even on the stock-exchange market of "real assets," match France's GNP. And those sums speculated each week match the GNP of the United States. Even from the strictly capitalist point of view, success in this game serves no function and possesses no legitimacy. Business enterprises are themselves entering the game through such well-known schemes as hostile takeovers, leveraged buyouts, and so on.

The very slender tie that once might have existed or seemed to exist between labor or accomplished activity, on the one hand, and income or pay, on the other, has now been broken. In France, a brilliant mathematician, a college professor, will be paid 15,000 to 20,000 francs per month, maximum—and he will see his students, upon graduation, if they decide to give up math and go to work for a large computer company, start their career at 40,000 to 50,000 francs per month. In this example one can foresee the long-term ruination of the internal logic of the system: it needs these young people who will begin at these rates, but it equally needs those who will train them and whom it won't pay nearly so well. In short, the system is currently living on the sweet folly of mathematicians and their absent-

minded-professor side. (Thatcherism, which is now pushing for the destruction of research in British universities, is only the extreme logical consequence of this ruination of the system's own logic.)

Under these conditions, how can the system continue? It continues because it still benefits from models of identification that were produced *during previous eras*: the mathematician of whom I just spoke, the "upright" judge, the bureaucrat who is a stickler for rules, the conscientious worker, the parent who feels responsible for his children, the teacher who, without any reason, is still dedicated to her profession. But nothing in the system, such as it is, serves to justify the "values" that these characters embody, the ones that they cathect and are supposed to be pursuing in the fulfillment of their activity. Why ought a judge to be honest? Why should a teacher work up a sweat over his little urchins instead of just passing the time away in class, except on the day that the education inspector is scheduled to visit? Why should a worker exhaust herself screwing in the 150th bolt if she can fool quality control? There was never anything in capitalist significations from the outset—but there is, especially, nothing in them as they have now become—that could provide an answer to these questions. And once again, this state of affairs raises the long-term question of whether it is possible for such a system to reproduce itself—but that is not our topic today.

What is the connection between these evolutionary changes and the most subjective processes? It is that this whole world of continual consumption, casino speculation, appearances, and so forth, is insinuating itself into families and touching the individual at the earliest stages of the socialization process. The mother and the father are not just the "primal group"; they are, quite obviously, society in

person and history in person leaning over the newborn baby's crib—if only because they *speak*, for speaking is not "groupal"; it's *social*. One's tongue [*langue*] is not, as is stupidly said, a "communication tool"; it is first and foremost an instrument of socialization. In and through one's language [*langue*] are expressed, are said, are realized, are transferred a society's significations. Mother and father transmit what they are living; they transmit what they are; they provide the child with poles of identification—and they already do so simply by being what they are.

Leaving aside "marginal" people here, let us consider good mothers and fathers of the "middle classes," as one says. What are they transmitting to their children? They are transmitting this: Get the most, enjoy the most; everything else is secondary or nonexistent. Allow me to make an empirical observation in this regard. When I was a child, and again when I was raising my first child, birthdays were celebrated with gift-giving, and each of the birthday child's little friends came bearing a gift for that child. Today, such a thing has become inconceivable. The birthday child (in reality, her parents) distributes gifts to the other children—lesser gifts no doubt, but gifts nonetheless—because it is intolerable for these beings to accept the fantastic frustration that consists in receiving gifts only on their birthdays; each time a gift is distributed somewhere, they too must have gifts, though lesser ones. We need not emphasize what this implies about the child's relation to frustration, to reality, to the possibility of delaying gratification, as well as the consequence: the *nullification*, the becoming-insignificant, of the gift and of gratification.

The child enters an inane world. He is immediately inundated with an incredible flood of toys and gadgets (I am not talking about the projects and gang members, or about

the children of millionaires; I am talking about 70 percent of the population); and he is bored shitless, drowned like a dead rat beneath all this junk, as witness the fact that he drops these toys and gadgets at every opportunity to go watch television, abandoning one inanity for another. The entire contemporary world is, in a nutshell, already placed in that situation. What does it all mean, if we go beyond the level of mere description? It is once again, of course, a desperate flight from death and mortality—which, moreover, as one knows, have been banished from contemporary life. Death is not really known; mourning exists neither in public nor as a ritual. It is also this that the present-day accumulation of gadgets and the state of universal distraction aim to mask. Here again, moreover, as we already knew from neurotics, we see that these gadgets and this distraction do nothing more than represent death itself, distilled into tiny droplets and transformed into the small change of daily life. This is death by distraction, death by staring at a screen on which things one does not live and could never live pass by.

Both on the level of daily life and on that of culture, what characterizes the present age is not "individualism" but its opposite, generalized conformism and collage.² Conformism is possible only on the condition that there be no massive and solid core of identity. As a well-anchored social process, this conformism in turn ensures that no such core of identity can any longer be constituted. As one of the leading lights of contemporary architecture said in New York during an April 1986 colloquium, "At last,

²See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalized Conformism" (1989), now in *WIF*. —T/E

postmodernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style."³ In other words, architects are rid of the tyranny of having to be themselves. They can now do just anything, stick a Gothic tower alongside an Ionian column, and set the whole within a Thai pagoda. They are no longer tyrannized by style; these are true individualistic individualities: individuality henceforth consists of stealing various elements from left and right in order to "produce" something. But the same thing holds, on a more concrete level, for the everyday individual: he lives by making collages; his individuality is a patchwork of collages.

In conclusion, we may say that there cannot *not* be a *crisis* of the identification process, since there is no self-representation of society as the seat of meaning and of value, no self-representation of society as inserted in a history that is past and to come, itself endowed with meaning not "by itself" but by the society that is constantly reliving it and recreating it in this way. These are the pillars of an ultimate identification with a highly cathected "we," and it is this "we" that is today becoming dislocated. Society is now posited, by each individual, as a mere "constraint" imposed on the individual—a monstrous illusion, but one lived so vividly that it is becoming a material, tangible fact, the indicator of a process of desocialization—and yet, simultaneously and contradictorily, it is to this society, illusorily lived today as an external "constraint," that the individual also addresses uninterrupted demands for assistance. And with this contradictory attitude toward society comes the complementary illusion that history is, at best, a tourist attraction to be visited on vacation.

³This quotation also appears in *ibid.*, p. 415n1. —T/E

Discussion, Questions, Responses

■ On the current "renewal" of religion, religious fundamentalism today, etc.

CC: One must go beyond Durkheim's idea about religion as the sole possible pole of collective identification. This is why I speak of the *social imaginary* and of *imaginary significations*, which cover strictly religious societies as well as borderline cases. Take, for example, the role of religion in the Greek democratic city, which is surely not that of religion in regimes of Oriental despotism. While being everywhere, religion in the city was kept at a distance from politics; no one ever dreamed, for example, of asking a priest what law ought to be adopted. The same thing goes for modern society, which puts religion at a distance but does not, for all that, collapse, and which is in crisis not because it has put religion at a distance but because it is not capable of engendering another way for people to be together. As for the "return of the religious," I don't believe in it as far as our Western societies are concerned. The fundamentalist reaction in Islam, the persistence of the religious in India, and so forth, are phenomena of another order: those are societies that have never exited from a state of religious heteronomy. I think that, in our societies, the return of religion can only be marginal in character and that this phenomenon has been artificially inflated by intellectuals, journalists, and politicians who have so few ideas, so few themes to discuss, that they resort to old phantoms just to have something to say.

■ On the possibility of the emergence of new institutional forms.

CC: In Europe as well as in the United States, the movements of the Sixties were, in reality, the last large-

scale collective manifestation of the attempt to instaurate something new. These movements failed as far as their main aim was concerned, but at the same time they left a legacy of important results with regard to the situation both of young people and of Blacks and women, results that we should neither despise nor underestimate nor reject. Since then, we have witnessed an evolution that finds its perfect expression in the frightening ideological situation of today. Everywhere, universities pay "Professors of Economy" to recount a load of asinities that have been refuted a thousand times over—not by Marx and the Marxists but by the neoclassical economists themselves during the 1930s, by Piero Sraffa, by John Maynard Keynes, by Joan Violet Robinson, by Edward Hastings Chamberlin, by George Lennox Sharman Schackle, and so on. And then we have the journalists who write best sellers, piling up one false platitude on top of another in defense of a "market" that in reality doesn't even exist. The "market" that does exist has nothing in common with the one described in textbooks, either; it is essentially oligopolistic and, even in England and the United States, highly regulated by the State. One cannot have 50 percent of a country's GNP pass through a country's budget and not expect that budget to have a strong influence on the market. This ideological aberration is itself an important sign of the crisis. There is no new subversive or revolutionary discourse, but there is no conservative discourse either. The conservative discourse is summed up in Ronald Reagan's smile and in his gaffes.

■ On the connection between the capitalist project, the project of autonomy, and the idea of enterprise.

C.C.: What pushed the project of an unlimited expansion of a pseudorational pseudomastery the furthest were Communism and totalitarianism in general. One will

understand nothing about totalitarianism if one fails to see therein the extreme, the delirious form of this project of total mastery. Totalitarianism certainly failed in reality, but nothing guaranteed that it *had to* fail. This is undoubtedly what Orwell, too, had in mind when, at the end of 1984, totalitarianism's greatest triumph is achieved not through violence but through the fact that Winston Smith cries because he loves Big Brother—that is, he has internalized Big Brother completely. It happens that Hitler was beaten; it happens that Communism is collapsing on its own. But who will say that either event was fated? It is incontestable, as I said, that there have been multiple contaminations. It is true, moreover, that the workers' movement in general, and quite particularly Marxism and Marx himself, were from the beginning steeped in this atmosphere, in which the growth of the forces of production was made the universal criterion, production was considered the main locus of all social life, the idea that progress could and would go on indefinitely was taken for granted, and so on—all of it constituting the capitalist project's contamination of the project of autonomy. In its essence, the project of autonomy is completely incompatible with the idea of mastery; the project of autonomy is quite literally also a project of *self-limitation*, as can be seen today in the most concrete way: if people don't stop this race toward "mastery," soon they won't exist at all. As for enterprise—which ought to be the topic of a separate discussion, one that cannot be conducted here and now—it is unclear how there could be, in the business firm, a type of power, structure, hierarchy, and organization whose validity we reject for society as a whole.

■ On death, and its relationship to the ethical question.

C.C.: For every society, the unbridgeable abyss that

is the awareness of our own mortality has always been more or less covered over, in one way or another, without its ever being completely hidden from us. This is where religion comes into its own. Religion is a compromise formation in the grand sense of the term; it is the compromise formation from which all others derive. Religion has always said: You are going to die, but this death is not a true death. The denial of death can take a multitude of forms: the return of the ancestor in the child of the next generation, ancestor worship, the immortality of the soul, and so on. Thus—and the most stunning examples come from monotheism, and in particular from Christianity and Islam—in the end death succeeds in taking on a positive value. The mass for the Christian dead is fantastically striking in this regard, at once a lamentation and a glorification: alas, one is mortal; one is naught but dust—yet, *grâce à Dieu*, one is immortal and is returning to the bosom of God. In other cases, such as Buddhism, for example, the cover-up is of another sort. We shall not talk about the Greeks, for whom—alone, as far as I am aware—life after death was worse than life on earth, as is clear in the *Odyssey*: any eventually positive connotations for the immortality of the soul appear only with the onset of the period of decadence, the fourth century B.C.E. and Plato. Modern societies, which demolish the edifice of religious significations, have in most recent times proved incapable of setting up anything else in their stead.

I am talking about an ethics that would have an effective social actuality [*une effectivité sociale*], not about philosophers who might construct an ethics for their own account. And when, looking at it from this angle, one returns to the question of death in such a society, one notices that the most truly applicable descriptions are those of the theologians. We must summon Pascal to our aid

here: the modern individual lives in a headlong flight from the knowledge both that he is going to die and that nothing he does, strictly speaking, has the slightest meaning. So he runs, he jogs, he shops in supermarkets, he goes channel surfing, and so on—he *distracts* himself. Once again, we are not talking about people on the fringes of society but about the typical, the average individual. Is this the sole possible "solution" after the dissolution of religion? I think not. I believe that there are other ends whose emergence society can bring about while recognizing our mortality. I believe that there is another way of seeing the world and human mortality, another way of recognizing our obligation to future generations—who represent the flip side of our debt to past generations, since none among us is what she is except as a function of hundreds of thousands of years of labor and human effort. Such an emergence is possible, but it requires that historical evolution turn in another direction and that society cease its slumber upon a huge pile of gadgets of all sorts.

■ On the identification process from the psychoanalytic standpoint.

C.C.: As I said at the outset, I did not want to treat the psychoanalytical angle because I thought that it had already been broached adequately at this colloquium, nor did I want to touch any more closely upon the exact correlations between the psychoanalytic standpoint and the social-historical one. But what I have spoken about concerns not only the "late stages of identification." Something of the ways of being of those first adults whom one encounters—who, to be sure, are not just anyone—insinuates itself into the child's psychical and even psychocorporeal structuration. Without any doubt, one would have to take up again the question of those

identification processes that in psychoanalysis are called "primary" and not speak simply of "the Mother," such as she has been or will be in Polynesia, in France, in Florence. She is always "the Mother," to be sure. She has breasts; she produces milk and acts as a caregiver; she is both good object and bad object, and so on and so forth. But from the very outset, the mother is not and cannot be simply this generic mother; she is also the mother in *this* society—which entails a host of things. This would merit a very long discussion: in fact, it brings us back to the famous quarrel over the "intemporality," or the transhistoricity, of the Unconscious and over the precise meaning of this term.

■ On "traditional values" and the possible emergence of "new values."

C.C.: I do not see how a new historical creation could effectively and lucidly stand up to and oppose this bizarre formlessness in which we live unless it were to inaugurate a new and fecund relation to tradition. To be revolutionary does not mean to declare bluntly, as Abbé Sieyès did, that all the past is one big "gothic absurdity." First of all, the gothic is not absurd. And, above all, there is another relation with tradition that is to be inaugurated. That does not mean that we should restore traditional values as such or because they are traditional; rather, we should establish a critical attitude whereby we are capable of granting recognition to some values that have been lost. I do not see, for example, how one can avoid revalidating the idea of responsibility or—dare I say?—the value of a very attentive reading of a text, both of which are in the process of disappearing.

■ On the possibilities of action on the part of a subject today.

C.C.: In the present situation, a subject capable of

entering into the kind of discussion we are conducting here does indeed enjoy the enormous privilege of being able to inspect an extraordinary host of possibilities that are already there before her. And, to the extent that she finds within herself the necessary strength, she may be able to choose, to decide to be one way rather than another—which is a much more difficult thing, though not impossible, for the citizen who is simply caught in the glue of consumer society.

Freud, Society, History*

1. Psychoanalytic theory has entered sufficiently into our age's stock of intellectual knowledge for it to be possible for us to dispense with offering a summary account—which would be ridiculously inadequate, anyway. We shall limit ourselves here to sketching out the main lines of a discussion of the contributions psychoanalytic elucidation does or can make to thinking the political or politics,¹ as well as, at the same time, of the deficiencies that might be imputed to this elucidation or of the aporias to which it gives rise. The discussion will be centered on the work [œuvre] of Sigmund Freud itself. A few cursory hints will be provided in the bibliography about the directions post-Freudian psychoanalytically-inspired discussions have taken on these themes.

From the point of view of political thought, the interest of psychoanalysis lies in its potential contribution to a philosophical and political anthropology. This obvious point must be underscored in an age when, contrary to the grand political philosophy of the past, people seem to grant so little interest to the anthropological presuppositions of

"Freud, la société, l'histoire" was drafted for the *Dictionnaire de philosophie politique*, ed. Philippe Raynaud and Stéphane Rials (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), pp. 518-23. Reprinted in *MI*, pp. 140-55. [See the Bibliographical Orientation at the end of this article for full bibliographical information concerning the *GW* (*Gesammelte Werke*) and *SE* (*Standard Edition*) abbreviations of Freud's collected works in German and English. —T/E]

¹On this distinction, see my 1988 text "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988), now in *PPA*. [See now also the beginning of the first section of "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime" (1996), in the present volume. —T/E]

politics, as well as, more generally, to those of any sociology and history that do not remain merely descriptive in character.

In this regard, what really matters is to distinguish, within Freud's work, between two categories of writings. The properly psychoanalytic writings, which concern the psyche as such, contain a host of contributions that may be qualified as definitive: the discovery of the dynamic Unconscious and of repression, the interpretation of dreams, the theory of drives and of neuroses, the conception of narcissism or that of aggression, to mention merely the principal ones. People who labor to elucidate the human psyche—an effort that certainly remains open for an indefinite time to come—will no doubt be able to take up these notions again, modify them, or go further with them. Those engaged in such a labor will, in our opinion, be obliged in any case to start from them. The same does not hold when it comes to the second category of Freud's writings, those bearing on society: *Totem and Taboo* (1913a), "The Claims of Psycho-Analysis to Scientific Interest." (1913b), "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915b), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), "Why War?" (1933b), *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), as well as lecture thirty-five of the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933a), in addition to several texts of lesser importance and some allusions to social and political questions scattered here and there in his other works. Here, the situation is less clear-cut, which is not astonishing, since these were, for Freud himself, incursions into domains that were more or less eccentric to his main field of concern. Apropos of these texts, it is difficult to speak of any definitive contributions,

and yet that does not keep them from being extremely rich in ideas and in incitements to thinking.

The discussion that follows will be organized around four main themes. All of these themes concern psychoanalysis's potential contribution to the following questions:

- the question of the "origins" of society or, in fact, that of the process of the hominization of the species;
- the question of the structure and content of social and political institutions and, in particular, that of power and domination, of the instituted inequality of the sexes, of labor and knowledge, and, finally, of religion;
- the question of the historicity of institutions, in their structure and in their content;
- finally, the question of politics as such, namely, that of the content of a desirable or wished-for [*souhaitable*] transformation of institutions, of the meaning of this desirability, and of the possibilities and limits of such a transformation.

2. The question of the "origins" of society, that is to say, in fact, of the hominization of the human species, contains in truth two distinct interrogations: that of knowing in what consists the difference between animality and humanity and that of knowing "how" this difference came about. It is important to underscore here that Freud takes as given the obvious differences (language, technique, and so on)—but without failing to see that their emergence raises a problem—and basically concerns himself with the birth of institutions in the narrow sense, boiling them down to two: the incest taboo and the taboo against "intraclan" murder.

The existence of these taboos in humans and their absence in the animal species closest to man are for him the central questions, and the answer is to be sought first of all in an "event" that produced them.

This "event" is reconstituted in what Freud himself calls the *scientific myth*, a myth that was expounded for the first time in *Totem and Taboo*. Its broad outlines must be recalled here. Leaning on hypotheses formulated first by Charles Darwin (1871), then by W. Robertson Smith (1894) and J. J. Atkinson (1903), Freud took up the idea of the primal horde. In this primal horde, hominoids were said to live under the domination of a powerful male who possessed all the females and expelled (or castrated, or killed) the boys when they reached maturity. The excluded brothers were to have succeeded "one day" ("as a function, perhaps as well, of a technical invention") in forming a coalition highly tinged with homosexuality and in killing the father.² The murder, once accomplished, was to have been followed by the cannibalistic ingestion of the body of the murdered father, an imaginary incorporation of his strength, and then (perhaps after long periods of struggle among the brothers) by the taking of an oath, through which the brothers renounced possession of the females of the clan as well as intraclan murder. Yet the brothers, while still hating the despotic father, had also feared him, venerated him, and loved him. They therefore erected in his place an animal (or, more rarely, another object) as a totem of their clan, the murder and eating of which were prohibited—save in

²The English translation of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* reads: "Some cultural advance, perhaps, command over some new weapon . . ." (*SE*, vol. 13, p. 141; on this same page appears the phrase "one day," to which Freud later appended a mitigating footnote.) —T/E

special feast periods, during which this animal was killed and ritually consumed, in commemoration of the founding murder. Such would be the origin of the incest taboo and of the taboo against intraclan or intratribal murder, as well as of the first "religious" institutions (totemism, taboo), guarantors thenceforth of an already human social order. The memory traces of the originary situation as well as of the killing of the father, handed down from generation to generation (Freud insists upon the phylogenetic, that is to say, simply genetic, character of this transmission, but such a hypothesis is not needed), would constitute the foundation both for the horror of incest and for one's ambivalence toward the father figure.

It is not very useful to discuss and refute this "scientific myth" on the terrain of the positive forms of knowledge. The hypothesis of a universal primitive totemism has been abandoned, or in any case it is very highly contested by contemporary anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). Primate ethology finds a "primal horde" (polygamous dominant adult, with the expulsion of young males) in gorillas but not in chimpanzees, phylogenetically closer to hominoids, which live in groups practicing panmixia. On the other hand, it is important to underscore here that, in these fields of positive knowledge, no response is given to the question Freud quite rightly asked himself, the one about the origin of the two major taboos. A "neo-Darwinian" answer could be furnished, in a pinch, to the question of the origin of the taboo against intratribal murder: Among the groups of protohominoids, only those ones that, in one way or another, would have happened upon the invention of the taboo against murder could have preserved themselves, the others having eliminated themselves after a while on their own. Still, this answer has to leave us in the

dark about the question of uninhibited intraspecies aggression, which is absent from animal species yet characteristic of humans, and any discussion of this form of aggression cannot help but appeal to properly psychical factors. When it comes to the incest taboo and the horror of incest, however, no "neo-Darwinian" answer can be invoked. The assertion that, without such a taboo, there would be no human society is correct, yet tautological and implicitly teleological.

The main objections lodged against *Totem and Taboo's* "scientific myth"—a myth to which Freud remained faithful until the end of his life—stem from the fact that, like all origin myths, this one implicitly presupposes that of which it wants to explain the birth: here, the fact of the indelible alterity between human psychism and animal psychism and the fact of the institution. The coalition of the brothers for nonbiological ends is already a sort of institution, and in any case it presupposes this other institution that is language (even if one leaves aside the "new technical invention"). The ambivalence of the brothers toward the murdered father is an essentially human trait; hominization is therefore presupposed in what is to "explain" its advent. In addition, and above all, the (certainly justified) preoccupation with accounting for the taboos every society presupposes leaves us entirely in the dark about the huge "positive" component of every set of institutions and of the significations these institutions carry with them. This may be seen in Freud's having been reduced to finding himself obliged to consider language or technique (labor) implicitly as givens or as going without saying, as well as in the impossibility of reducing the immense variety and complexity of social edifices to the repetitive play of drives that, by definition, are everywhere

and always identical, and to the vagaries of an Oedipus complex that would have to account, all at once, for primitive beliefs, polytheism, monotheism, and Buddhism.

That does not keep Freud's views from shedding powerful light on the tendencies of the psyche, which constitute the prop [*l'étayage*] for the socialization of individuals. In this regard, primacy no doubt belongs on the side of the introjection of the parental imagos (though Freud insists only on the role of the paternal imago); the (successful or failed, it matters little) identification with this introjection; and the constitution, within the Unconscious of the singular human being, of an instance of authority or "agency" [*une instance*], the Superego and/or Ego-ideal, which prohibits and enjoins. In this sense, the "scientific myth" of *Totem and Taboo* acquires the signification it could (and should) have had from the outset: not that of an "explanation" of the genesis of society starting from an "event" but, rather, that of an elucidation of the psychical processes conditioning the singular human being's internalization, in its infantile situation, of social institutions and significations. Fundamental in this regard, if generalized and reworked out, is the analysis of leader identification furnished in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921).

We must also note that Freud implicitly furnishes us, at another level, with one of the elements that allows us to describe the radical alterity between humanity and animality at the level of the psychism. Though not exploited by Freud in this direction, his text on "Instincts [*sic*] and their Vicissitudes" (1915a) allows us in effect to posit this alterity as determined by the lability or "displaceability" [*la labilité*] of the psychical representatives of the drives in humans—as opposed to the rigidity of this connection in the animal psychism, for which each drive (instinct) possesses its

canonical and biologically functional representative or representatives.

This rapid overview would be incomplete were we not to indicate that, in his late nineteen-twenties' texts (*The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents*), Freud furnishes some answers to the question of hominization (or of the genesis of society) that are different from those of *Totem and Taboo* (although these two sets of responses are compatible). In *Future*, the main factor is the civilizing activity of "minorities," who impose taboos and institutions on human masses always dominated by their drives and always in masked [*larvée*] war against civilization—a war that, in Freud's view (and with accents in this text that are sometimes frankly anarchistic in character), is justified by the excessive price the masses pay for their belonging to civilized society, in terms of real deprivations and "instinctual" frustrations. At the same time, and particularly in *Civilization*, these drives are no longer only sexual (or libidinal) but also and especially aggressive; they are drives directed toward the destruction of the other as much as of their own subject. Here we obviously are hearing an echo of the major revision Freud undertook of his theory of the drives, and of the psychical apparatus, since the time of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920); he had replaced the oppositions of pleasure/reality and of libidinal drives/self-preservative drives with the duality of Eros/Thanatos, those "immortal adversaries" erected into cosmic forces whose struggle dominates and forms the history of civilization as well as that of humanity.³

³The phrase "equally immortal adversaries" appears, relative to Eros and Thanatos, at the very end of *Civilization and its Discontents*, *SE*, vol. 21, p. 145. —T/E

3. Clearly, the distinction between the question of the "origin" of society as such and that of the "origin" of particular, more or less transhistorical large-scale institutions does not correspond to anything real. Clearly, too, it would be too much to ask psychoanalysis for an "explanation" of the structure and content of these institutions. While for a moment at the outset of his career Freud thought that his method would allow for an elucidation of the birth of language, he quickly had to abandon that illusion, limiting himself to supporting until the end Karl Abel's unlikely theory about the universality of the "antithetical sense of primal words" (which thesis, it is true, finds an echo in some characteristics of the functioning of the Unconscious but could not apply to any diurnal social language). No more than other institutions, psychoanalysis could not produce language, which it has to presuppose. Likewise, it is not possible to reduce labor to the reality principle and to recognition of the necessity of deferring satisfaction of the drives (or of needs); as for its history (and for the history of technique), several of Freud's formulations show that he shared, with everyone else in the Western world of his time, the implicit and illusory postulate of there being an immanent "progressiveness" to human activities. The same goes for knowledge. Freud invokes a drive for knowledge (*Wisstrieb*) rooted in infantile sexual curiosity (and haunted by the questions "Where do children come from?" and "Where does the difference between the sexes come from?") that is tied to a drive for mastery. While the discovery and elucidation of infantile sexual theories are one of psychoanalysis's great contributions, nothing therein comes to shed any light, however, on the origin and specificity of these strange "drives," which clearly are without any biological or somatic support or function, and

still less on their history. Finally, the transition from the "primitive democracy" of the brothers (*Totem and Taboo*) to asymmetrically and antagonistically divided societies—in other words, the birth and persistence of domination—remains just as enigmatic in Freud as in all other authors who have treated this question.⁴

Much richer, though also debatable, are the contributions of the Freudian conception to the question of the difference and instituted inequality of genders (sexes), or to that of the patriarchal organization observed in practically all known societies. Anatomical sex organs can account for instituted gender difference, not for the domination of one gender over the other (even though this domination sometimes is, in certain regards and in part, only apparent). The institution of society must ensure settled relationships of sexual reproduction (though up to what point is another question) and must instaurate man and woman as indivisible and highly asymmetric polarities. But to go from the necessity of this asymmetry to a necessity of domination of one gender by the other is a sophism analogous to the one that claims to go from the necessity of an internal differentiation and articulation of society to the alleged necessity of antagonistic and asymmetrical division. Freud rightly insisted on humans' psychological bisexuality, and late in life he granted the relativity of the notions of "activity" and "passivity" in the psychological domain. These ideas render even more arduous the task of "explaining" patriarchy. He postulated, in a first phase of his work (which goes until 1925), a "precisely analogous" situation between the young boy and the young girl

⁴See *IIS*, pp. 151-56, on "the appearance of the antagonistic division of society into *classes*," which "continues to be shrouded in deep mystery."

—T/E

(Freud, 1900, 1916-17, 1921, 1923; see the Editor's Note to Freud, 1925, p. 244), both of them being caught in the Oedipus complex. The young boy has to abandon his mother as love-object as well as the corresponding wish to eliminate the father, faced as he is with what he lives as a threat of castration to be inflicted by the latter, and he takes refuge in the hope that one day he will in turn be able to become a father. Nothing more specific is said about the young girl. From this perspective, the patriarchal situation clearly has to be postulated as already being there (here, one can catch an echo of the state of the "primal horde") and simply doomed to reproduce itself over and over again. But, after numerous preparatory allusions beginning in 1915, Freud is led to reformulate completely his conception in "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Differences Between the Sexes" (1925). The innovations of this text are: firstly, the recognition of the role of the mother as first libidinal love-object for children of both sexes; and, secondly, the central place granted to their discovery that the little girl is "castrated" (*sic*) and, by way of consequence, the scorn she incurs on the part of the little boy as well as on her own part and the ineradicable envy of the penis that will dominate her life from then on. Yet to make of these psychological facts the foundation for the patriarchal institution is, here again, a *petitio principii*, a begging of the question. That the penis or the phallus might in children's view be cathected with this cardinal value (and not, for example, the full belly of a pregnant woman) already presupposes the ambient (social) value given to masculinity. Nor can the incontestably essential role of the father in the child's psychosocial maturation account for patriarchy. The decisive characteristic of patriarchy is the contraction into a single person of four roles: biological parent; object of the mother's desire, breaking up

the fusional state that tends to be established [*s'instaurer*] between the latter and the child (of either sex); identificatory model for boys and valued sexual object for girls; and, finally and especially, instance of power and representative of the law. It can be argued that this contraction is "economical" (but one would have to not neglect the costs). It could not be maintained that it is ineluctable. In any case, no doubt can exist about Freud's own patriarchal bias, as expressed in his judgment that women are much less capable of sublimating than men, in the myth from *Totem and Taboo* (where mothers and sisters play no role), and in the way in which he considers divine andro-cracy, notably in its monotheistic form, as going without saying.

Much clearer and, in several regards, more solid is the interpretation of religion Freud furnishes in *The Future of an Illusion*—but also, it is true, much less specifically psychoanalytical. Religion is an illusion, in the precise sense Freud defines on this occasion: not only erroneous belief, but belief sustained by a desire, a passionately cathected error.⁵ Socially speaking, it constitutes the keystone of the edifice of drive suppression [*l'édifice répressif des pulsions*] constructed by institutions. Psychically speaking, it works essentially through the "humanization of the world," so that *man fühlt sich heimlich in Unheimlichen*, one feels at home (familiar) in strange surroundings.⁶ Religion accomplishes this by the

⁵This definition appears at *SE*, 21: 30-31. —T/E

⁶The standard English translation of *The Future of an Illusion* has "the humanization of nature" and "can feel at home in the uncanny" (*ibid.*, pp. 16 and 17, respectively). —T/E

"replacement . . . of natural science by psychology":⁷ it anthropomorphizes the universe and relies on infantile projections, notably that of the all-powerful paternal imago. Whence its capacity to satisfy multiple psychical needs: it responds, somehow or other, to the "desire for knowledge"; it protects "man's self-regard," which is threatened by the wide world and one's feelings of terror before nature; it consoles some of the real miseries of life as well as some sufferings and deprivations imposed by culture; and it furnishes a semblance of a solution to the most anxiety-ridden enigma of all, mortality.⁸ Freud does not, for all that, despair of the possibility of going beyond religion: "Men cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into 'hostile life.'⁹"

4. Let us repeat: It would be asking too much and it would be unfair to require of psychoanalysis a "theory" of society and history. Nevertheless, it is Freud himself who legitimates such requirements—not through his incursions into these domains (which could be considered as some initial attempts, ones coming, moreover, from someone who

⁷Ibid., p. 17. —T/E

⁸Ibid., p. 16. The standard English translation has "curiosity" at this point in the text, instead of "desire for knowledge" (though the phrase "instinct for knowledge or research" certainly appears elsewhere, e.g., *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE, vol. 7, p. 194). And, if we have identified the correct passage to which Castoriadis is referring, Freud is talking about "civilization" generally, not religion in particular, but the context of a critique of religion is clear here in *The Future of an Illusion*. —T/E

⁹Ibid., p. 49.

recognizes and repeats that his main preoccupations and his knowledge are located elsewhere), but through his repeated affirmation that there is no room for any distinction between an "individual Unconscious" and a "collective Unconscious," that there is only one Unconscious of the human species. It then may be asked: What about the huge variety of societies and human cultures? A first, not very satisfactory response would consist in positing the differences among societies as being superficial or epiphenomenal (here belong the attempts, begun already in Freud's time, to rediscover the same unconscious "structures" in all ethnic groups and behind all social edifices). Another response, one much more faithful to the spirit of Freud's own contributions (notably *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*) would be to see therein the effect of history and of different stages of this history in which the societies we observe would find themselves placed. That response would send us back to another question: What makes there be history, in the strong sense of the term, whereas psychoanalysis would lead us (and, in the immense majority of cases, rightly so) to consider that repetition and reproduction of the existent, as guaranteed by the very nature of the process of the human being's socialization, are the prevailing traits of human societies? To this second question, Freud's writings furnish two responses that do not pertain to the same logic. The first one, to which we have already alluded, boils down to postulating the immanence of some sort of factor of progression—at any rate, in the mastery of natural reality and of scientific knowledge. By its nature, this first response makes it difficult to understand how moments of rupture can exist. Now, moments like this are, as we have seen, at the center of *Totem and Taboo*. Such founding

events are also central to *Moses and Monotheism*, a brief examination of which may serve to illuminate Freud's difficult relations with historicity.

This book, which is poignant as much on account of its content as by the historical circumstances of its composition (between 1934 and 1938), aims at explaining the birth of monotheism as well as the circumstances of its adoption by the Jewish people, the reasons for the latter's extraordinary attachment to its religion and its collective psychology, made up at once of feelings of pride and of the perpetuation of an unconscious sense of guilt. Full, as all Freud's writings are, of fascinating hints, it fails in its central purpose. That purpose is the elucidation of the origins of monotheism. Now, in a paradox that generally goes unnoticed, Freud explicitly postulates that when his story begins monotheism had *already* been invented (worship of the single "Sun," as introduced by Akhenaton—a historically certified fact) and that "Moses," an Egyptian prince in Akhenaton's entourage, transmitted it to the Hebrews after the defeat of the new religion in Egypt. Why had Akhenaton invented monotheism? According to Freud, because Egypt had become a "great world empire" reaching the frontiers of the then-known world, with absolute power concentrated in one person, the Pharaoh.¹⁰ This explanation is at once banal, logically untenable (the Chinese, the Romans, and many, many others should then have been monotheists), and unrelated to the idea, so often repeated, that the one God would be a projection of the infantile imago of the father. But the Hebrews (in the vein of "the masses' hostility to civilization" already posited in *The*

¹⁰*Civilization and its Discontents*, SE, 21, p. 65; see also *ibid.*, p. 21.

Future of an Illusion and in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) found intolerable both this "suppression of the drives" required by the new religion and their liberator, whom they killed.¹¹ The "return" of this repressed murder (centuries after its accomplishment) and the accompanying guilt are said to explain the firmness or rigidity of the Hebrews' attachment to their religion as well as several other "traits" of this people, notably its "spirituality." Yet it is difficult to grant that, had the Egyptians put Akhenaton to death (instead of just placing his son, after his death, in guardianship), they would have become quasi-Hebrews. Nor does anything render intelligible the continuation/alteration of monotheism among the Christians and Muslims. As in the "scientific myth" of *Totem and Taboo*, here too the massive fact of social-historical creation becomes the object of an attempt at occultation by means of some allegedly intelligible and in fact more than frail "reconstructions."

5. The question of whether psychoanalysis can contribute to political thought properly speaking can be coined in several other closely connected if not simple

¹¹The phrase "the hostility of the masses to civilization" can be found in *The Future of an Illusion*, SE, vol. 21, p. 39. In this work (as well as elsewhere), Freud speaks of a "suppression of the instincts" (ibid., p. 7) and a "renunciation of instinct" (ibid., pp. 7, 10, 15); the former has been chosen to translate *répression pulsionnelle*, "suppression" being the standard English translation of *répression*, while the word "repression" appears as *réfoulement* in French. As Castoriadis himself distinguishes, above in this text as well as elsewhere, between animal "instinct" and human "drives," *pulsion* is translated as "drive" and *instinct* as "instinct," thus necessitating, e.g., inclusion of a "[sic]" after "Instincts" in the title of Freud's 1915 article "Instincts and their Vicissitudes." —T/E

juxtaposed aspects of the same interrogatory investigation: Does psychoanalysis have something to say about desirable institutions (or reprehensible ones; but that boils down to the same thing, since in both cases the affirmation of a norm is assumed)? Does it have something to say about any other kind of normality for the human being than a "positive" one (that is, one defined in relation to the framework of a given society)? Does it know anything about its own ends, beyond relieving psychical suffering or helping subjects to adapt to the instituted social order? Does it bring out any boundaries to possible efforts at transforming society for the better? Because we are unable here to treat these different moments in a systematic way, we shall limit ourselves to a few observations that, we hope, are of the essence.

Freud never concealed his highly critical attitude toward the social institutions of his age (which, in substance, are identical to those of our age). He repeatedly condemned the hypocrisy of the official sexual morality, the "excess of drive suppression," civilization's tendency to oblige the individual to "live beyond his psychical means," and he unambiguously condemned great economic inequalities. He maintained this attitude until the end of his life. In *Future* and in *Civilization*, he evokes the possibility of offering a psychoanalytic examination of the "pathology of collective formations,"¹² hopes that "infantilism is destined to be surmounted"¹³ (with regard to the illusion of

¹²The standard English translation has "pathology of cultural communities" in *Civilization and its Discontents* (SE, vol. 21, p. 144); the German *Kultur* is translated as "civilization" when a noun and as "cultural" when an adjective. —T/E

¹³*The Future of an Illusion*, SE, vol. 21, p. 49. —T/E

religion), appeals to "our god Logos,"¹⁴ and awaits a new burst of Eros against Thanatos, against the aggressiveness and destructiveness that characterize intra- and intersocial relationships. The totemic myth is already resolved through instauration of an egalitarian institution, the "primitive democracy of the brothers" (the sisters remaining, of course, on the sidelines). This democracy is paid for, however, by the totemization of the murdered father—which can be generalized into totemization of any instituted imaginary artifact, an imaginary instance of authority serving as guarantor of the institution (the term *totemization* can be considered in this context as equivalent to those of *alienation* and *heteronomy*). The hopes expressed in *Future* and in *Civilization* imply that it is possible to go beyond such totemization.

Another factor comes to light in *Civilization*, however, as well as in the texts on war, giving them a highly "pessimistic" coloring: that is, the "death instinct," hetero- and self-destructiveness. All of historical experience, like that of Freud's age—and what is one to say about our own?—shows that this factor cannot be overestimated. And in no way is it necessary to accept Freud's cosmological metaphysics as regards Thanatos in order to recognize the importance of the following two manifestations, which history as well as clinical experience confirm on a daily basis: the unbounded aggression of human beings and their compulsion for repetition. The second of these is used by society in order to ensure the preservation of institutions, *whatever ones they may be*; the first is kept in check by being, among other things,

¹⁴The phrase "our God Logos" appears twice in *ibid.*, p. 54, with the word *Logos* printed in Greek. —T/E

channeled "outward," taking advantage, too, of the "narcissism of minor differences."

It is incontestable that an irreducible minimum of drive suppression is the requisite for all socialization—therefore a precondition every consideration of a political nature has to take into account. This theme is nothing new for political thought: Freud meets up here with Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Diderot, and even Kant. But to formulate the point in a more radical way, there is an unsurpassable hostility, on the part of the psychical core, to the socialization process itself, a process to which it has to be subjected under penalty of death, as well as an unsurmountable unconscious permanence to the constellation that is formed by originary ultra-"narcissism," egocentrism, omnipotence of thought, withdrawal into the universe of phantasmization, hatred, and a tendency toward the destruction of the other, which is turned against the subject herself. (This is what, under a crude and unsatisfying form, "the masses' hostility to civilization" expresses.) A boundary is thus set on the possible states of human society: the "nature" of the human soul forever excludes the realization of the "perfect society" (with the meaninglessness of this expression) and will always impose on humans a split in their psyches. Beyond some messianic and pastoral Marcusean promises,¹⁵ however, the true question is that of the possibility of a society that does not

¹⁵Castoriadis cites here "Marcuse (1964)," whereas the only two books by Herbert Marcuse cited in the Bibliographical Orientations at the end of his article are *Eros and Civilization*, from 1955, and *Five Lectures*, from 1970. In citing this date, he may have been thinking of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, which was first published in 1964 (Boston: Beacon Press). —T/E

totemize its institutions, that facilitates individuals in their accession to a state of lucidity and reflectiveness, and that succeeds in diverting the polymorphic pushes of the psychical chaos toward paths that are compatible with a civilized life on the scale of humanity as a whole (and it is explicitly to humanity as such that Freud is referring at the end of *Civilization and its Discontents*).¹⁶

Historical experience can easily be invoked in order to deny this possibility. But such an invocation would be fallacious. For Freud himself (*ibid.*), it would be a matter of a novation in the history of humanity (of a new stage in the struggle between Eros and Thanatos). It is by definition impossible to pronounce an opinion on the chances for success or failure of this novation on the basis of past experience or even on the basis of purely theoretical considerations (short of the boundaries recalled above). And this experience itself is not univocal. The detotemization of institutions was achieved in part in democratic Athens and still more so in the modern West. Diversions of the drives in the direction of socialization have been accomplished everywhere and always; without them, there would have been no societies. The question is: What might their limit be? Perhaps the most weighty interrogation is the one concerning the possibility of overcoming tribal narcissistic identifications. Freud's invocation of Logos overestimates the "rational" dimension of human existence and does not take into account the fragmentation of the social imaginary into multiple and rival

¹⁶In last chapter of the *SE* translation of *Civilization and its Discontents*, the reference is to "mankind," but "humanity" also appears throughout this text and *The Future of an Illusion*, and the two words are synonymous. —T/E

imaginaries. Freud explicitly postulates the possibility of a fusion of human cultures into a culture of humanity. An antinomy then arises: It seems impossible to conceive of any culture whatsoever that would not be marked by a high degree of particularity, whereas a culture of humanity can be thought of only as universal. This antinomy certainly is not absolute, and it could even be said that it is speculative in character. The flat and empty eclecticism of the "universal" culture of the contemporary West encourages us, however, to be more than circumspect.

Nevertheless, despite the political nihilism of the overwhelming majority of today's analysts, a psychoanalytic attitude could not remain in this balancing act of opposing discourses, for it cannot dodge the question of the end and of the ends of the activity of analysis. Freud returned to this question on several occasions. His most striking formulations ("restore the capacity to work and to love," "Where Id was, I shall come to be") clearly assign to psychoanalysis as its end a project of the subject's autonomy embodied in the capacity to elucidate unconscious drives and in the reinforcement of a reflective and deliberative instance, which Freud calls the Ego. But no subject is an island, and the subject's educational formation is highly dependent on its socialization by institutions. Once accepted, the psychoanalytic project introduces a norm by which institutions are to be gauged: whether they hinder or facilitate the accession of subjects to their autonomy and whether or not they are capable of reconciling that autonomy with the autonomy of the collectivity.

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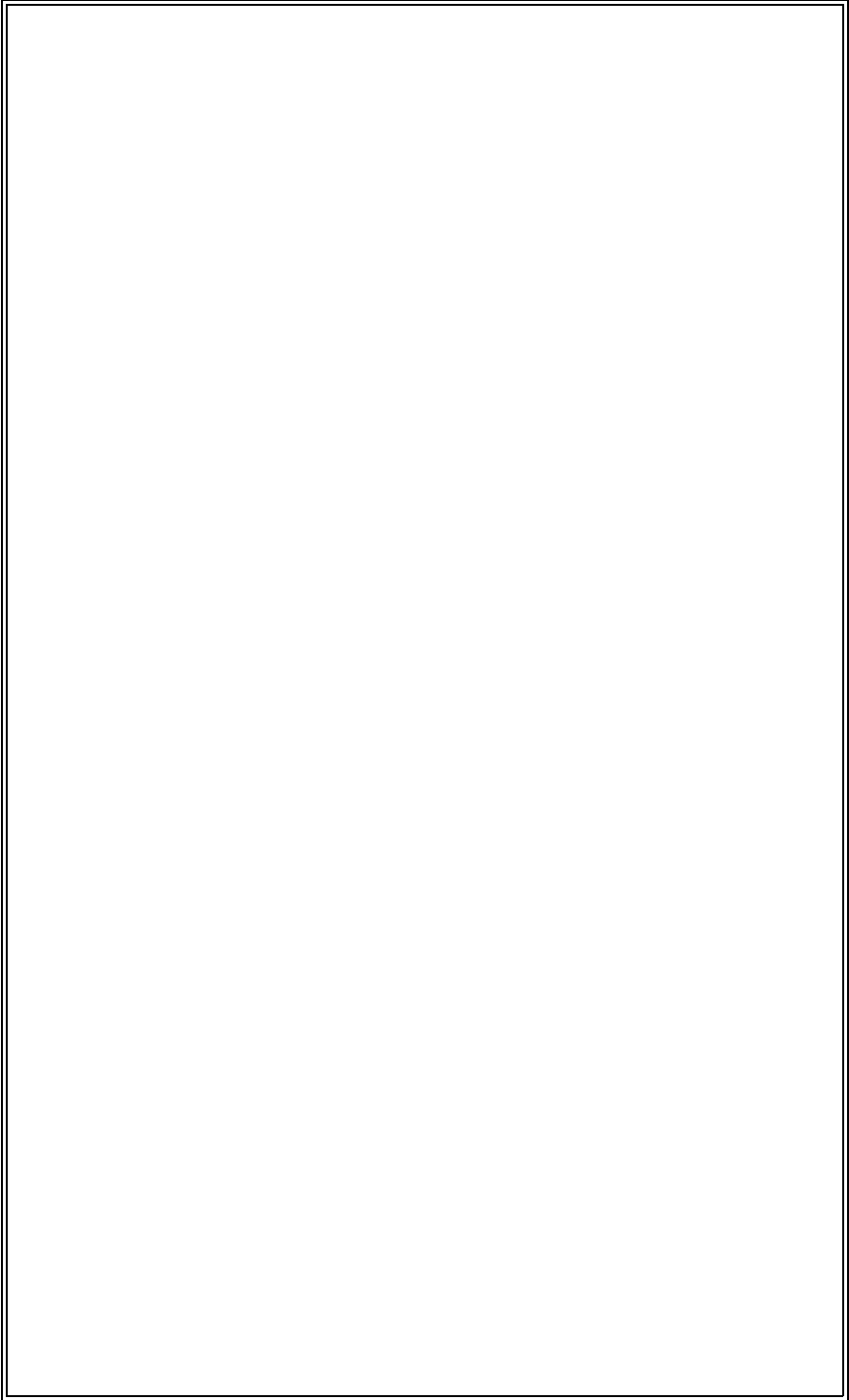
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PART THREE
POLIS



Unending Interrogation*

Emmanuel Terrée: A specter is haunting the Europe of intellectuals: the specter of totalitarianism. For Europeans who have experienced democracy, this results in a cautious withdrawal among themselves. That is to be contrasted with a Third World that, for a long time, seemed so promising but today is suspected of harboring all kinds of totalitarian temptations and deviations. So, after the engaged intellectual, full of certainties but also sometimes of generosity, comes an intellectual who is more reserved but also more ethically concerned. What do you think about this twofold movement of withdrawal?

Cornelius Castoriadis: You can't fall back upon Europe. That's an illusion. It's ostrich politics. It's not the "withdrawal" of a few intellectuals that will change anything at all in contemporary reality, which is basically worldwide. It is also an entirely "anti-European" attitude. There is one and only one qualitative singularity to Europe, to the Greco-Western world, that counts for us. It's the creation of universality, openness, critical self-questioning and critical questioning of one's own tradition.

"Left-wing intellectuals" have for a long time tried to dodge the genuine political problem. They have constantly sought somewhere a "real entity" that would play the role of the savior of humanity and the redeemer of history. They first believed that they had found it in an ideal and idealized proletariat, then in the Communist Party that would "represent" it. Next, without going into an analysis

*Interview with Emmanuel Terrée and Guillaume Malaurie, conducted on July 1, 1979, and published in *Esprit*, September-October 1979: 29-33, 131-33, and 242-48 as "Une interrogation sans fin." Reprinted in *DH*, pp. 241-60.

of the reasons why the revolutionary workers' movement failed in the capitalist countries, it mattering little whether that failure is temporary or definitive, they crossed those countries off their list and transferred their belief onto the countries of the Third World. Retaining the most mechanical aspects of Marx's schema, they tried to put African or Vietnamese peasants in the place of the industrial proletariat and to make them play the same role therein. Now some, in this yes to no movement of the pendulum that masks their absence of thought, spit on the Third World for reasons that are as stupid as those that made them adore it. They explained that democracy, freedom, and so on were Western or bourgeois mystifications the Chinese could do without; at present, they insinuate that these barbarians are not yet mature enough to receive these too precious goods. All that was needed, however, was a tiny opening in the totalitarian trap in Beijing a few months ago {in 1979} to see, wonder of wonders, that, despite Alain Peyrefitte, Philippe Sollers, and Julia Kristeva,¹ the Chinese were not so different from us in this regard and that they demanded democratic rights as soon as they had the possibility of doing so.

E.T.: It seems that the intellectuals have broken with their engagement and are more preoccupied with ethics. How do you think that the intellectuals can establish a tie

¹Alain Peyrefitte, author in 1973 of *Quand la Chine s'éveillera* . . . (When China Awakens), was, at the time of this interview, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's Minister of Justice. (It is assumed that Castoriadis—who did not supply any first names here—was not referring here to the novelist and historical writer Roger Peyrefitte.) The novelist Philippe Sollers and the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva founded in 1960 the *Tel Quel* review, which at one time held a "pro-Chinese" (i.e., Maoist) position. —T/E

between themselves and the movement of society?

C.C.: "Falling back upon ethics" is, at best, a "false conclusion" drawn from the experience of totalitarianism and today serves as a mystification. What does the experience of the Third World countries show—what, for a long time now, has it shown? That popular revolts, which, in these countries, provoke or accompany the collapse of traditional societies, have been, until now, channeled and coopted by a bureaucracy (most often of a "Marxist-Leninist" type, although now some might hope that there will also be monotheistic bureaucracies). This bureaucracy profits from the situation in order to come to power and to set up a totalitarian regime. Now, that raises the *political* problem of totalitarianism—just as this problem was posed in Europe on the basis of other evolutions. Quite obviously, when faced with this problem, all the inherited conceptions—Marxism as well as Liberalism—find themselves totally insolvent, over there as well as here. That is the problem we have to face, on the theoretical level as well as on the practical level. The "falling back upon ethics" is in this regard a dodge, and a mockery of ethics itself. There is no ethics that halts at the life of the individual. Starting from the moment the social and political question is posed, ethics communicates with politics. The "what I am to do" does not concern and cannot concern my individual existence alone, but also my existence qua individual who participates in a society in which there is no historical tranquillity, but where the problem of its organization, of its institution, is posed openly. And it is posed in the "democratic" countries as well as in the totalitarian countries. It is the very experience of totalitarianism, and its everpresent possibility, that shows the urgency of the political problem qua problem of the

overall institution of society. Dissolving this problem into allegedly ethical attitudes is tantamount, in fact, to a mystification.

Now, when one speaks of the role and of the function of intellectuals in contemporary society, distinctions must be made and the simplifications and superficialities that are beginning to spread must be avoided. At present, one tends to make intellectuals into a "class" apart and even to claim that they are in the process of coming to power. The hackneyed Marxist schema is taken up once again and is patched up by sticking "intellectuals" therein as the "rising class." This is a variant of the same platitude as "technocracy" or "technostructure." In both cases, one shrugs off the specificity of the modern fact par excellence in this regard: the emergence and the domination of the *bureaucratic Apparatus*, which invokes "technicality" or "theory" as a veil for its power, but which has nothing to do either with the one or the other.

This can be seen very clearly in the Western countries; it is not technicians who direct the White House, or the Élysée Palace, or the big capitalist firms, or States. When they rise to positions of power, it is not by means of their capacities as technicians, but rather their capacities for scheming and intrigue (French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing is hopeless as an "economist," but shrewder when it comes to tripping up political opponents).

This can also be seen in all "Marxist"- or "Marxist-Leninist"-influenced parties and countries. One of the multi-tiered farces of history—which shows how ridiculous it is to replace social and historical analysis by simple-minded searches for precursors of ideas—is the matter of the relations between "theory" and the effectively actual movement of the working class. We all know the Kautsky-

Lenin conception, according to which it is the petty-bourgeois intellectuals who, from the outside, introduce socialism into the working class. This has rightly been criticized, by myself among others. But what must be seen is that this conception is, paradoxically, at once false and true. False, because what there was of socialism was produced by the proletariat, and not by any sort of "theory," and that, if socialist conceptions are to be "introduced from the outside" into the proletariat, they would cease, *due to that very fact*, to have any relationship at all with socialism. But "true," too, if by "socialism" one means Marxism, for the latter really did have to inoculate it, introduce it from the outside, ultimately impose it almost by force on the proletariat. Now—another tier—in the name of this conception, the Marxist parties have always claimed to be *the* parties of the working class, representing it "essentially" or "exclusively," *but* in the name of their possession of a theory that, qua theory, can only be the possession of intellectuals. That's already rather funny. But the best part of the joke is that in these parties it was neither the workers *nor the intellectuals* who dominated and who dominate. This has been a kind of new man, the political *apparatchik*, who was not an intellectual but rather a semi-illiterate—like Maurice Thorez in France, or Nikos Zachariadis in Greece.² There existed in the Third International practically just one intellectual who remains readable today: that was Georg Lukács. He was nothing therein. Stalin, who wrote infantile and unreadable things, was everything therein.

²Maurice Thorez, who first became General Secretary of the French Communist Party in 1930, was succeeded by Waldeck-Rochet upon his death in 1964. Nikos Zachariadis was the General Secretary of the Greek Communist Party during the immediate postwar period. —T/E

Here we have the *effectively actual* relations between theory and practice through the multiple reversals they undergo in the *camera obscura* of history.

In contemporary society, where the "production" and the utilization of "knowledge" certainly have taken up an enormous place, there is a proliferation of "intellectuals." But, qua participants in this production and utilization, these intellectuals have only a very limited specificity. The great majority of them are integrated into the existing labor and pay structures, most of the time in bureaucratic-hierarchical structures. And they thereby cease to have, whether in fact or by right, a specific position, a specific role, a specific vocation. It isn't because someone is a computer scientist, a specialist in some branch of biology, algebraic topology, or the history of the Incas that he has something particular to say about society.

Confusion occurs because there is another, numerically very limited category of people who deal, be it on the basis of some specialization, with "general ideas" and, starting from there, lay a claim or can lay a claim to another role—a "universal" role. Here we have an enduring tradition, at least on the Continent. Obviously, this tradition began already in Antiquity, when the philosopher ceased to be a "philosopher-citizen" (Socrates) and, "removing himself" from society, talks *about* society (Plato). We know how this tradition was resumed in the West, and we know the apogee it attained during the Age of Enlightenment (but also afterward: Marx). In France, it became a sort of besetting sin of the nation, taking on some laughable forms: every *École normale supérieure* student or teacher candidate in philosophy starts out life with the idea that he has in his schoolbag a baton passed on to him from Voltaire or from Rousseau. {The years since the war} have offered

a more than hilarious list of examples.

That said, it is obvious that the problem of society and of history—of politics—cannot be broken down into a list of specialists, that therefore a few, on the basis or not of some specialization, make it the object of their concern and of their labor. If we are talking about those ones, we have to comprehend the strange, ambiguous, contradictory relation they entertain with social and historical reality, which is, moreover, their privileged object. What characterizes this relation is obviously the distance they necessarily have vis-à-vis the effectively actual movement of society. This distance keeps them from being submerged in things and enables them to try to make out some broad outlines, some tendencies. At the same time, however, it renders them more or less alien to what is effectively going on. And up till now, in this ambiguous, contradictory relation to two antinomic terms, one of the terms has been overloaded as a function of the entire theoreticist heritage that begins with Plato, that has been handed down over the centuries, and that was inherited by Marx himself, despite a few attempts he made to free himself therefrom. The intellectual who is occupied with general ideas is carried along by his whole tradition and by his entire training to privilege his own theoretical elaborations. He thinks that he can find the truth about society and history in Reason or in theory—not in the effectively actual movement of history itself, and in the living activity of humans. He occults in advance historical movement as creation. He thereby can be extremely dangerous to himself and to others. But I do not think that we have here an absolute impasse. For, he can also *participate* in this movement, on the condition that he understands what that means: not signing up with a party in order to follow docilely its orders, nor simply signing

petitions. Rather, *acting qua citizen*.

E.T.: You had said in *Esprit* in February 1977: There can be no rigorous knowledge [*savoir rigoureux*] about society.³ Since then we have been witnessing the massacre of globalizing forms of knowledge (Marxism, psychoanalysis, the philosophy of desire), which confirms your statement. There remains the question of thinking the present. This present is riddled with crises. Is it possible to think these crises in a nonglobalizing and yet still satisfactory manner? Or must one then accept to think in crisis, but then, in what fashion?

C.C.: Let's avoid misunderstandings. That there is no rigorous knowledge about society does not mean that there is not *any knowledge* of society, that one could say just anything, that anything goes. There exists a series of partial and "inexact" forms of knowledge (in the sense where "inexact" is opposed to "exact"), but these are far from negligible as to the contribution they can make to our attempt to elucidate the social-historical world.

There's another risk of misunderstanding. You clearly are using the term "globalizing" with a critical or pejorative connotation. We are in agreement to condemn the idea of a globalizing knowledge in the sense of an

³This interview with Olivier Mongin, Paul Thibaud, and Pierre Rosanvallon, conducted in July 1976 and published in *Esprit*, February 1977, was reprinted in *Le Contenu du socialisme* (Paris: 10/18, 1979): 323-66. [Note added by the author for the French reprint. On p. 228 of this interview, now translated as "The Revolutionary Exigency" in *PSW* 3, Castoriadis stated: "When I attempt to show not only that there is no rigorous knowledge about society and history, but that there *cannot* be any, it in no way follows that we are unable to understand anything about them, or that anything whatsoever can happen, that we are immersed in an random night in which all cows would be possible."—T/E]

absolute or total knowledge; that said, when we *think* society (I am no longer speaking about knowledge, but of thought), this movement of thought nevertheless intends the whole of society.

The situation is not different in philosophy. Philosophical thought is a kind of thought that necessarily intends the whole in its object. Giving up the illusion of the "system" does not signify giving up thinking being, or knowledge [*la connaissance*], for example. Now, here the idea of a "division of labor" is clearly absurd. Does one see philosophers deciding: You over there, you are going to think this or that aspect of being and I'll think some other one? Does one see a psychoanalyst saying to a patient: You shall talk to me about problems relating to anality—as for orality, I'm going to send you to my colleague X? The same goes for society and history: an effectively actual totality is there, already of itself, and that is what is intended. The first question regarding thought of the social—as I formulated it in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*—is: What holds a society together, what makes there be *one* society, and not scattering or dispersion?⁴ Even when there is scattering or dispersion, this is still a *social* scattering, a *social* dispersion, not that of the molecules of a gas in a container that has burst.

When one thinks society, it is inevitable that one intends the whole; this is *constitutive* of that sort of thought. And intending the whole is just as inevitable when one thinks society, not within a theoretical perspective, but within a political perspective. The political problem is that

⁴See chapter 4 of *IIS*, "The Social-Historical," partially reprinted in *CR* as "The Social Imaginary and the Institution (1975): Excerpt," pp. 198-217. —T/E

of the overall [*globale*] institution of society. If one situates oneself at that level, and not at that of the European elections for example, one is obliged to pose the questions of the institution, of instituting society, and of instituted society, of the relationship of the one with the other, of how all that is concretized during the present phase. One must go beyond the opposition between the illusion of an overall knowledge [*savoir global*] about society and the illusion that one could fall back on a series of specialized and fragmentary disciplines. It is the very terrain upon which this opposition exists that is to be destroyed.

Thinking the crisis, or thinking in crisis: certainly, we have to think the crisis of society and, certainly, our thought, not being external to this society, being rooted, can itself only be—if it is worth something—in crisis. It is up to us to *make* something of it.

E.T.: And French society? That is what preoccupies us. According to you, there exists a revolutionary project, two centuries old; and there is a homology of significations between all the revolts that refer back to this project. Where are these revolts at today? The example is always given of the struggle of women, immigrants, social experimentation, the antinuclear struggles. But don't these sites of tension, these terrains of confrontation, correspond to deficiencies in the social system that in the end are likely to be regulated and even to be eliminated?

C.C.: I shall begin with a more general remark. The main lesson we can draw from the experience of the past century, from the fate of Marxism, from the evolution of the workers' movement—which is, moreover, in no way original—is that history is the domain of risk and of tragedy. People have the illusion that they can get out of this, and they express it in the following demand: Produce for me an

institutional system that *will guarantee* that things will never go wrong; prove to me that a revolution will never degenerate, or that such and such a movement will never be coopted by the existing regime. To formulate this exigency, however, is to remain in the most complete state of mystification. It is to believe that there could be some provisions written down on paper that would be capable, independent of the effectively actual activity of men and women in society, of assuring a peaceful future, or freedom and justice. It's the same thing—this is the Marxian illusion—when one seeks in history a factor that would be *positive and nothing but positive*, that is to say, in the Marxian dialectic, *negative and nothing but negative*, therefore never cooptable, never able to be rendered positive by the instituted system. This position, which Marx assigned to the proletariat, often continues to dominate people's minds, either positively (thus, certain feminists seem to be saying that there is in the women's movement an untouchable and incorruptible radicality) or negatively (when one says: In order to believe in such and such a movement, we have to be shown that it is by nature uncooptable).

Not only do such movements not exist, but there is much more. Every partial movement not only can be coopted by the system but, so long as the system is not abolished, also contributes in some way to the continuation of the latter's operation. I was able to show this a long time ago, taking the example of workers' struggles.⁵ Under

⁵See "On the Content of Socialism, III" (1958), "Proletariat and Organization" (1958), and "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-61), all now in *PSW* 2, as well as "The Question of the History of the Workers' Movement" (1973), in *PSW* 3.

duress, capitalism was able to function, not *despite* workers' struggles but *thanks to* them. We cannot halt at this observation, however; without these struggles, we would not be living in the society in which we are living, but rather in a society founded upon the labor of industrial slaves. And these struggles have called into question the central social imaginary significations of capitalism: property, hierarchy, and so on.

One can say as much of the women's movement, the youth movement, and, despite its extreme confusion, the ecological movement. They challenge the central imaginary significations of instituted society, and, at the same time, they *create* something. The women's movement tends to destroy the idea of a hierarchical relationship between the sexes; it expresses the struggle of individuals of the female sex for their autonomy. As the relationships between the sexes are of core importance in every society, this movement affects all of social life, and its repercussions remain incalculable. Likewise for the change in intergenerational relationships. And at the same time, women and youth (and thereby, too, men and parents) are *obliged* to go on living, therefore to live *otherwise*, to make and to do, to seek, to create something else. Certainly, what they make and do necessarily remains integrated into the system, so long as the system exists: that's a tautology. (The pharmaceutical industry makes profits on contraceptives; so what?) At the same time, however, the basic props of the system are being undermined: in the concrete forms of domination, and in the very *idea* of domination.

I now come back to the first part of your question: Can these movements be unified? It is obvious, at the abstract level, that they should be unified. And the fact is, and it is a very important one, that they are not. And that is

not an accident. If the women's movement, or the ecological movement, chafe so much at what they would probably call their politicization, it's that there has been, in contemporary society, a far-reaching experience of the degeneration of political organizations. It's not just a matter of their organizational degeneration, of their bureaucratization; it's also a matter of their practice, of the fact that these "political" organizations have nothing to do with true politics, that their sole concern is to penetrate into or take over the State apparatus. The present-day impossibility of unifying these diverse movements expresses an infinitely more general and weightier problem: that of political activity in contemporary society and of its organization.

Guillaume Malaurie: This can be seen with what is happening on the French Far Left, or with the ecologists, who hesitate to constitute themselves as a party.

C.C.: The ecologists are not being asked to constitute themselves as a party; they are being asked to see clearly that their positions challenge, rightly, the whole of contemporary civilization and that what they hold close to their hearts is possible only at the price of a radical transformation of society. Do they see that or don't they? If they do see it, and they say, *For the moment, all that can be done is to fight against the construction of this or that nuclear-power station*, that's another matter. Very often, however, one has the impression that they don't see it. Moreover, even if it is a question of one nuclear-power station, the general problem is immediately apparent. Either one must also say that one is against electricity or one must put forward another energy policy, and that poses a challenge to the entire economy and the whole culture. Constantly increasing energy wastefulness is, moreover,

organically incorporated into contemporary capitalism, into its economy, up to and including the psychism of individuals. I know of ecologists who don't turn off the light when leaving a room. . . .

E.T.: You have written that modern society is a society of increasing *privatization* of individuals, who are no longer in solidarity but, rather, atomized. Do privatization and passage from a fecund and lively social sphere to a dull and lifeless [*atone*] one go hand in hand?

G.M.: Has French society not changed too deeply for a global upheaval to remain possible here?

C.C.: To say that a dull and lifeless social sphere has taken the place of a fecund one, that all radical change is henceforth inconceivable, would mean that a whole phase of history, begun, perhaps, in the twelfth century, is in the process of coming to an end, that one is entering into I know not what kind of new Middle Ages, characterized either by historical tranquillity (in view of the facts, the idea seems comic) or by violent conflicts and disintegrations, but without any historical productivity: in sum, a closed society that is stagnating or that knows only how to tear itself apart without creating anything. (Let it be said, parenthetically, that this is the meaning I have always given to the term "barbarism," in the expression "socialism or barbarism.")

There's no question of making prophecies. But I absolutely don't think that we are living in a society in which nothing is happening any longer. First, we must see the deeply antinomic character of the process. The regime is pushing individuals toward privatization, is favoring it, subsidizing it, assisting it. Individuals themselves, to the extent that they see no collective activity that offers them a way out or that simply *retains a meaning*, withdraw into a "private" sphere. But also, it's the system itself that, beyond

a certain limit, no longer can tolerate this privatization, for the complete molecularization of society would culminate in its collapse; thus, one sees the system giving itself over periodically to attempts to attract people anew toward collective and social activities. And individuals themselves, each time they want to struggle, "collectivize" themselves anew.

Next, questions of this order cannot be judged from a short-term perspective. It was in 1959 that I first formulated this analysis about privatization *and* the antinomy of which we have just spoken.⁶ Several "Marxists," at the time and since then, saw therein only the idea of privatization, and they hastened to declare that I was liquidating revolutionary positions, then that my analysis had been refuted by the events of the sixties. Of course, these events *confirmed* those analyses, by their "nonclassical" contents (and their bearers) as well as by the fact that they stumbled, as a matter of fact, over the *overall political problem*. The seventies—despite the big jolts suffered by the regime—have, once again, been years in which people have fallen back upon themselves and withdrawn into their "private" sphere.

G.M.: You define the self-institution to be achieved as desacralized. It's a provisional corpus that society can always redefine and transform as it pleases.

In fact, most great civilizations, like great revolts, do violence to history on the basis of a myth that reconciles contradictions. Peoples seem to become real and effective forces when an eschatological perspective is sketched out. That seems to render recourse to critical energies a particularly dicey proposition. Can men be mobilized upon

⁶See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," cited in the previous note.

the basis of an instituted imaginary that is provisional and brittle? Can a relationship to the institution be grounded solely upon reason?

C.C.: The desacralization of the institution was already achieved by capitalism as early as the nineteenth century. Capitalism is a regime that cuts off virtually every relationship between the institution and an extrasocial instance of authority. The sole instance of authority it invokes is Reason, to which it gives a quite peculiar content. From this point of view, there is a considerable ambiguity to the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the social law is posited as the work of society, *and* at the same time it is allegedly grounded upon a rational "nature" or a natural and transhistorical reason. That remains ultimately Marx's illusion, *too*. This illusion is still another of the masks and forms of heteronomy: whether the law would be dictated to us by God, by nature, or by the "laws of history," it is still *dictated* to us.

The idea that there is an extrasocial source and grounding of the law is an illusion. The law, the institution is creation of society; every society is self-instituted, but until now it has guaranteed its institution by *instituting* an extrasocial source of itself and of its institution. What I call *explicit* self-institution—the recognition by society that the institution is its work—in no way implies the institution or the significations the institution incarnates would have a "brittle" character. That I might recognize in *The Art of the Fugue* or in the *Duino Elegies* human works, social-historical creations, does not lead me to consider them as "brittle." Human works: simply human? The whole question is what one intends thereby. Is man "simply human"? If he were so, he would not be man; he would be nothing. Each of us is a *bottomless* pit, and this

bottomlessness [*sans-fond*] is, quite evidently, opened over the *groundlessness* [*sans-fond*] of the world. In normal times, we cling to the rim of the pit, over which we pass the greatest part of our lives. But Plato's *Symposium*, Mozart's *Requiem*, and Kafka's *Castle* come from this groundlessness and make us see it. I don't have a need for a particular myth in order to recognize this fact; the myths themselves, like religions, at once have to do with this *groundlessness* and aim at masking it: they give it a determinate and precise figure, which at the same time recognizes the *groundless* and, in truth, tends to occult it by *fixing it in place*. The sacred is the instituted simulacrum of the *groundless*. I don't need simulacra, and my modesty makes me think that, what I can do in this regard, everyone can do. Now, behind your questions, there is the idea that only a myth could ground society's adherence to its institutions. You know that this was already Plato's idea: the "divine lie." But it's a simple matter. As soon as one has spoken of a "divine lie," the lie has become a lie and the qualification *divine* changes nothing in it.

This may be seen today in the grotesque gesticulations of those who want to fabricate, on command, a renaissance of religiosity for allegedly "political" reasons. I presume that these commercial attempts must render nauseous those who truly remain believers. Some street vendors are trying to hawk this deep philosophy of a libertine police chief: *I know that Heaven is empty, but people have to believe that it is full; otherwise, they won't obey the law. What poverty! When religion existed, when it was able to exist, it was another sort of affair. I never have been a believer, but still today I cannot listen to Saint Matthew's Passion while remaining in a normal state. To bring back to life that by means of which Saint Matthew's*

Passion came into the world is beyond the powers of the Grasset publishing house or the Hachette publishing trust. I think that believers and nonbelievers will be in agreement to add: Happily so.

G.M.: But, apart from the Greek case, which you often take as an example, it is true that, within history, myths have often grounded society's adherence to its institutions.

C.C.: That's certain. And not often, but almost always. If I put forward the Greek case, it is because it was, so far as I know, the first break with this state of things, because it remains exemplary and was resumed in the West only in the eighteenth century, with the Enlightenment and the Revolution.

The important thing in ancient Greece is the effectively actual movement of instauration of the democracy, which is at the same time a philosophy in actuality, and which goes hand in hand with the birth of philosophy in the strict sense. When the *dēmos* instaured the democracy, it *was doing* philosophy: it opened the question of the origin and the ground of the law. And it opened a public, social, and historical space for thought in which there are philosophers who, over long periods of time (up to and including Socrates), remained *citizens*. And it is starting from the *failure* of democracy, of the Athenian democracy, that Plato became the first to work out a "political philosophy," which is wholly grounded upon the misrecognition and occultation of the historical creativity of the collectivity. (Pericles' *Funeral Oration* in Thucydides expresses this historical creativity of the collectivity with a depth that is unsurpassable.) That "political philosophy"—like all the "political philosophies" that followed—was already nothing more than a philosophy

about politics, *external* to politics, to the instituting activity of the collectivity.

In the eighteenth century, there was certainly movement on the part of the collectivity, and this movement took on fantastic proportions in the French Revolution. And there was the rebirth of a political philosophy, which is ambiguous: on the one hand, it was, as one knows, profoundly *critical* and liberating. But at the same time, it remained, as a whole, in the grip of a rationalist metaphysics, both as to its theses about *what is* and as to the grounding of the norm of *what is to be*. Generally, it posited a "substantial individual" with set determinations, and from this individual it tried to derive the social sphere. Moreover, it invoked a kind of reason, Reason with a capital R (it matters little that at times it was named *nature* or *God*), as ultimate, and extrasocial, ground of the social law.

The pursuit of the radically critical, democratic, revolutionary movement, first by the Revolutions of the eighteenth century and during the Age of Enlightenment, then by the socialist workers' movement, presents some considerable "pluses" and "minuses" in relation to sixth- and fifth-century Greece. The "pluses" are obvious: the contestation of the instituted social imaginary by the workers' movement goes much further, challenges the *effectively actual* conditions of social existence—economy, labor, and so on—and universalizes itself in intending, by right, all societies and peoples. But one cannot neglect the "minuses": the moments when the movement succeeded in disengaging itself fully from the grip of instituted society were rare and, above all, starting at a certain moment the movement fell, qua organized movement, under the exclusive or preponderant, even when indirect, influence of Marxism. Now, in its deepest strata, the latter did nothing

but resume, and carry to the limit, the social imaginary significations instituted *by capitalism*: centrality of production and of the economy, bland religion of "progress," social phantasm of the unlimited expansion of "rational" mastery. These significations, and the organizational models that correspond to them, were reintroduced into the workers' movement by means of Marxism. And behind all that, there was always the speculative-theoreticist illusion: every analysis and every perspective appeals to the "laws of history" the theory claims to have discovered once and for all.

But it is time to speak "positively," too. The prolongation of the emancipatory movements we know about—workers, women, youth, minorities of all sorts—subtends the project for the instauration of an autonomous—that is to say, self-managed, self-organized, self-governed, self-instituted—society. What I am expressing thus on the level of the institution and of the mode of instituting itself, I can also express in relation to the social imaginary significations this institution will incarnate. Social and individual autonomy; namely, liberty, equality, justice. Can one call these ideas "myths"? No. They are not *forms* or *figures* that are determinate or determinable once and for all. They do not close off questioning; on the contrary, they open it up. They do not aim at filling in the pit of which I was just speaking, while preserving at best a narrow shaft; they insistently remind society of the interminable *groundlessness* that is its ground. Consider, for example, the idea of justice. There is not, and there never will be, a society that would be just once and for all. A just society is a society in which the effectively actual question of justice is always effectively open. There is not, and there never will be, a "law" that settles the question of

justice once and for all, that would be forever just. There can be a society that *alienates* itself to its law, once posited; and there can be a society that, recognizing the constantly recreated gap between its "laws" and the exigency of justice, knows that it cannot live without laws, but also that these laws are its own creation and that it can always take them up again. One can say as much about the exigency of equality (which is *strictly equivalent* to that of liberty, once it is universalized).⁷ As soon as I exit from the purely "juridical" domain, as soon as I take an interest in *effectively actual* equality, *effectively actual* liberty, I am obliged to take note of the fact that they depend on the *whole* institution of society. How can one be *free* if there is *inequality* of *effectively actual* participation in *power*? And once that is recognized, how is one to leave aside all the dimensions of the institution of society in which *power* differences are rooted and produced? That is why, let it be said parenthetically, the "struggle for human rights," as important as it might be, not only *is not* a politics but risks, if it remains that, becoming a Sisyphean task, a {leaky} Danaid jar, Penelope's {ever re-unraveling woven} shroud.⁸

⁷Castoriadis's 1981 speech "The Nature and Value of Equality," *PPA*, pp. 124-42, originally appeared in a volume entitled *L'Exigence de l'égalité* (The Exigency of Equality), published by Éditions de la Baconnière (Neuchâtel) in 1982. —T/E

⁸I am summarizing here and in what follows some ideas I am presenting in a work on politics that is now being drafted. [It is unclear what projected work Castoriadis might have been referring to here, but the first version of what became Castoriadis's seminal 1983 text, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy," was delivered "during a lecture given on October 29, 1979, to a seminar at the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg led by Jürgen Habermas" (*PPA*, p. 81), i.e., just a few months

Liberty, equality, and justice are not myths. Neither are they "Kantian ideas," Pole Stars guiding our navigation that would, however, be impossible, in principle, to approach. They *can* be effectively realized in history; they *have been so*. There is a radical and real difference between the Athenian citizen and the subject of an Asiatic monarchy. To say that they have not been realized "completely" and that they could never be so is to show that one doesn't understand how the question is being posed, and this because one remains prisoner of the inherited philosophy and ontology, that is to say, of Platonism (in fact, there has never been any other). Is there ever "complete truth"? No. Does that mean that there is never *effectively actual* truth in history; does that abolish the distinction between true and false? Does the poverty of Western democracy abolish the difference between the effectively actual situation of a French, English, or American citizen—and the effectively actual situation of a serf under the Czars, of a German under Hitler, of a Russian or a Chinese under Communist totalitarianism?

Why are liberty, equality, and justice not ideas that are Kantian and therefore in principle unrealizable? When one has understood what's at issue philosophically, the answer is obvious and immediate: these ideas cannot be "elsewhere," "external" to history—*because these are*

after the present interview was conducted. —T/E] The interested reader will find more indications about the subject in "Socialism and Autonomous Society" (1979), *PSW* 3, pp. 314-31. [As noted in David Ames Curtis's Translator's Afterword to Castoriadis's transcribed seminar, *OPS*, both "On the Content of Socialism, II" (now in *PSW* 2) and "Socialism and Autonomous Society" can be read as precursor texts to *OPS*, which in turn develops in more detail many of the themes articulated in the present paragraph of the interview. —T/E]

social-historical creations. Here is an illustrative parallel: the *Well-Tempered Clavier* is not a phenomenal and imperfect approximation of an "idea of music." It *is* music, as much as it can be. And music is a social-historical creation. This parallel is approximate, certainly: art effectively realizes, in the masterpiece, that which lacks nothing and which, in a sense, resides within itself. The same doesn't go for our individual or collective existence. Nevertheless, the parallel is in the main valid: the exigency of truth, or of justice, is *our* creation, the recognition of the gap between this exigency and what we are is so, *too*. Now, of this gap, we would have no *perception*—we would be coral—if we were not *also* capable of responding *effectively* to this exigency to which we have given rise.

Neither can there be a question of these ideas being "grounded rationally"—and this for nearly the same reason as there can be no question of "rationally grounding" the idea of truth: it is already presupposed in every attempt to "ground" it. And more important still, not only is the *idea* of truth presupposed, but also presupposed is an *attitude* toward truth. No more than you can ever, opposite a sophist, a liar, or an imposter, "force him to admit" the truth (to each argument, he will respond with ten new sophisms, lies, and impostures), can you "prove" to a Nazi or a Stalinist the preeminence of liberty, equality, or justice. The bond between the two may appear subtle, but it is solid; and it is quite other than the one supposed by the Kantian-Marxists who are at present reappearing. One cannot "deduce" socialism from the exigency of truth—or from the "ideal communicative situation"—not only because those who combat liberty and equality couldn't care less about the truth or about the "ideal communicative situation," but also because these two exigencies, of the truth, of open

questioning, on the one hand, and of liberty and equality, on the other, go hand in hand, are born—are *created*—together and *have no meaning*, ultimately, except together. This meaning exists only for us, we who are downstream from the first creation of this exigency and who want to take it to another level. It exists only in a tradition that is ours (and that has become, now, more or less universal), that has created these significations, these matrices of signification, at the same time, moreover, as the opposite significations. And here appears the whole problem of our relationship to tradition—which, despite appearances, is totally occulted today—a relationship we have to re-create almost completely: within this tradition, we choose, but we do not do only that. We question tradition, and we let ourselves be interrogated by it (which is in no way a passive attitude: letting oneself be interrogated by tradition and submitting to it are two diametrically opposite things). We choose for the *dēmos* and against the tyrants or the *oligoi*, for the workers regrouped in factory committees and against the Bolshevik Party, for the Chinese people and against the bureaucracy of the CCP.

Now, you ask me: Can humans *cathect* these significations, and the institutions that bear and convey them? An important and profound question, which meets up with the one {*Esprit* editor} Paul Thibaud was posing to me, in a similar discussion, two years ago: a society loves its institutions or detests them.⁹ Can men and women be *passionate* about the ideas of liberty, equality, and justice—autonomy? It could be said that today they are not very much so. But it is also incontestable that they have often been so in history—to the point of people sacrificing

⁹See "The Revolutionary Exigency," cited above in note 3.

their own lives. Nevertheless, I would like to take advantage of our discussion in order to deepen the problem somewhat.

If truth, liberty, equality, and justice could not be an object of "investment," could not be cathected, they would not have appeared (or would not have survived in history). The fact is, however, that they have always been tied *also* to something else: to the idea of a "good life" (Aristotle's *eu zein*) which is not exhausted in and through them. To put it another way: An autonomous society, a society that self-institutes itself explicitly, yes; but *for the sake of doing what?* For the sake of the autonomy of society and of individuals, certainly; because I want my autonomy and because there is autonomous life only in an autonomous society (here we have a proposition that is very easy to elucidate). But I want my autonomy *at once* for its own sake and for the sake of doing something (and for the sake of *making something of it*). We want an autonomous society because we want autonomous individuals and we want ourselves to be autonomous individuals. If we simply remain there, however, we run the risk of drifting toward a formalism that this time truly is Kantian: neither an individual nor a society can live simply by cultivating their autonomy for its own sake. In other words, there is the question of the "material values," of the "substantive values," of a new society; which amounts to saying, of a new cultural creation. It's obviously not up to us to resolve this question; but a few reflections upon it do not seem to me to be futile.

If a traditional society—let's say, Judaic society, or Christian society—is heteronomous, it does not posit itself as heteronomous *for the sake of* being heteronomous. Its heteronomy—which it obviously doesn't think as such, in

any case not like we do—is there for the sake of something else; it is, in its imaginary, only like an aspect of its central "material value" (and of its central imaginary signification), God. It is and claims to be the slave of God, by whose grace and for whose service it thinks it exists, because it gives limitless "value" to this projective point, external to itself, that it has created as the signification: God. Or, when democracy appeared in the Greek cities, the ideas of liberty and equality were indissociable from a set of "substantive values" that are "the good and beautiful" citizen (*Kalos kagathos*), renown (*kudos* and *kleos*), and especially *aretē* (virtue).

Closer to us, when one observes the long emergence and rise of the bourgeoisie in the West, one notices that it has not only instituted a new economic and political regime. Long before it gained domination over society, the bourgeoisie was the bearer of an immense cultural creation. Let us note in passing one of the points on which Marx remains the most paradoxically blind: Marx sang hymns to the bourgeoisie, because it developed the forces of production, and yet he didn't stop a second to see that the entire cultural world in which he was living, the ideas, the methods of thought, the monuments, the paintings, the music, the books, all that, with the exception of a few Greek and Latin authors, is exclusively a creation of the Western bourgeoisie (and the few hints he provides makes one think that he saw "communist society" only as an extension and enlargement of *this same* culture). The "bourgeoisie"—this society decisively codetermined by the emergence, the activity, the rise of the bourgeoisie since the twelfth century—created at once a "mode of production," capital, modern science, counterpoint, painting in perspective, the novel, profane theater, and so on and so forth. The *Ancien*

Régime was not only pregnant with a "new mode of production"; it was also pregnant, and more than pregnant—the bourgeoisie had already given it birth—with an immense cultural universe.

It is in this regard that one must, in my opinion, admit that things have been, and remain, different for one hundred and fifty years. No new culture, and no genuine popular culture, opposing the official culture—which seems to be dragging everything along with it into its decomposition. There are, certainly, some things that are still happening; but they are tenuous. There are enormous possibilities; very few of them are actualized. *Counterculture* is but a word. In my view, interrogation on this topic is just as critical as that concerning the willingness and capacity of humans to instaurate an autonomous society. At bottom, this is, in a sense, the same interrogation.¹⁰

That said, what is under way in contemporary society, both "positively" and "negatively"—searching for new human relations; smashing up against the wall of the finitude of the "available options" [*du "monde disponible"*]¹⁰—seems to me to offer support for what I have always thought about the "value" and the central aim of a new society. We must be done with "world transformations" and external works; we must envisage as our essential goal [*finalité*] our own transformation. We can envisage a society that gives itself as its goal neither the building of pyramids nor the adoration of God nor the mastery and possession of nature, but the human being herself (in the sense, certainly, in which I was saying before that the human would not be human if it were not more than human).

¹⁰See "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1978), *PSW* 3, pp. 300-11.

G.M.: Can you be specific?

C.C.: I am convinced that the human being has an immense potential, which until now has remained monstrously confined. The social fabrication of the individual, in all known societies, has consisted until now in a more than mutilating repression of the radical imagination of the psyche, by the forced and violent imposition of a structure of "understanding" that is itself fantastically unilateral and biased. Now, there is here no "intrinsic necessity," other than the being-thus of society's heteronomous institutions.

I was talking, in "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,"¹¹ about autonomy in the individual sense as instauration of another relation between the Conscious and the Unconscious. This relation is not the "domination" of the Conscious over the Unconscious. I was taking back up from Freud his formulation, "Where Id was, Ego shall come to be," saying that this formulation had to be completed by its symmetrical opposite: "Where Ego is, Id shall emerge." That has nothing to do with the impostures that have been thriving since then: the "philosophies of desire," the reign of the libido, and so on. The socialization of the psyche—and, quite simply, its very survival—requires that it be made to recognize and to accept that desire in the genuine sense, originary desire, is unrealizable. Now, that has always been done, in heteronomous societies, by prohibiting representation, by blocking the representational flux, the radical imagination. In sum, society has applied in reverse the same operational schema as that of the originary

¹¹"Marxism and Revolutionary Theory," first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1964-65, is now included in *IIS* (1975); see pp. 101-106 of the English-language edition (1987).

Unconscious: to the "omnipotence of (unconscious) thought," it has responded by trying to achieve the *impotence* of this thought, therefore *of thought altogether*, as the sole means of limiting *acts*. This goes much further than Freud's "severe and cruel Superego"; it has always been done through a *mutilation* of the psyche's radical imagination. I am certain that, from this point of view, very sizable modifications can be sought after and achieved. There is, within our grasp, infinitely more spontaneity, infinitely more lucidity, to be attained than that of which we are presently capable. And the two things are not only not incompatible; the one requires the other.

G.M.: Are you speaking as a psychoanalyst or on the basis of sociological and historical considerations?

C.C.: Both. Moreover, they're indissociable. But what I see in my experience as an analyst is pushing me more and more in this direction. I am immensely struck to see how little we make of what we are, as I am amazed to observe, in a psychoanalysis that is really done right, the prisoner gradually releasing the bonds in which she was caught in order finally to rid herself of them.

The Idea of Revolution*

Le Débat: How does one properly situate the French Revolution in the series of great revolutions—the English Revolution, the American Revolution—that mark the advent of political modernity? And how is one to understand that, in relation to its predecessors, the French Revolution has acquired the status of model-revolution, of revolution par excellence? What does it introduce that is genuinely new? And in the history of the very idea of revolution, what place does it occupy?

C.C.: It is important to begin by emphasizing the specificity of the historical creation represented by the French Revolution. It is the first revolution to posit clearly the idea of an explicit self-institution of society. In world history, one knew of bread riots, slave revolts, peasant wars; one knew of coups d'État, monarchies undertaking reforms; one knew, too, of a few more or less radical reinstitutions like that of Mohammed, for example, but in these cases some kind of revelation—that is, an extrasocial source and foundation—is invoked. In France, however, it is society itself, or an enormous portion of this society, that launches into an undertaking that becomes, very rapidly, one of explicit self-institution.

This radicality is not to be found in the English Revolution, certainly, but not even in the American Revolution. In North America, the institution of society, even if it is declared to proceed from the will of the people,

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remains anchored in the religious sphere, as it also remains anchored in the past by English Common Law. Above all, it is limited in its ambition. The Founding Fathers, and the movement they express, receive from the past a social state which they consider appropriate and which they do not think needs to be changed in any way. In their view, it remains only to institute the political complement of this social state.

In this regard, the parallel with the democratic movement in the ancient Greek world is interesting. It was the Greeks, certainly, who discovered that every institution of society is self-institution—that it pertains to *nomos*, not to *phusis*. They anticipated on a practical level the consequences of this discovery; in any case, they did so in the democratic cities, and notably at Athens. This was clear as early as the seventh century B.C.E., was confirmed with Solon, and culminated in the Cleisthenian revolution (508-506), which was characterized, as one knows, by its audaciously radical attitude toward the inherited ways of articulating sociopolitical arrangements—arrangements it threw into upheaval in order to make them conform to a democratic political way of functioning. Nevertheless, explicit self-institution never became for them the principle of political activity encompassing the social institution in its totality. Property was never really challenged, any more than was the status of women, not to mention slavery. Ancient democracy aimed at achieving, and it did achieve, the effective self-government of the community of free adult males, and it touched to the least extent possible the received social and economic structures. Only the philosophers (a few Sophists in the fifth century, Plato in the fourth) went any further.

Likewise, for the American Founding Fathers there

was a social (economic, moral, religious) given that was accepted, that even was to be actively preserved (Jefferson was against industrialization because he saw in the agrarian freehold the cornerstone of political liberty), and that was to be furnished with the corresponding political structure. The latter, of course, was "founded" elsewhere—on the "principles" of the Declaration, which express the universalist imaginary of "natural rights." But by a miraculous coincidence—which is decisive for American "exceptionalism"—the two structures, the social and the political, happened to correspond to each other for a few decades. What Marx called the socioeconomic basis of ancient democracy, the community of independent small producers, also happened to be in part the reality of North America in the age of Jefferson and the underlying support for his political vision.

Now, the grandeur and the originality of the French Revolution is to be found, in my judgment, in that very thing for which it is so often reproached, viz., that it tends to call into question, de jure, the existing institution of society in its totality. The French Revolution couldn't create politically if it didn't destroy socially. The members of the Constituent Assembly knew that and said that. The English Revolution and even the American Revolution could give themselves the representation of a restoration and recuperation of a supposed past. The few attempts, in France, to refer to a tradition rapidly aborted, and what Burke says about it is pure mythology. Hannah Arendt committed an enormous blunder when she reproached the French revolutionaries for having become involved with the social question, presenting the latter as amounting to philanthropic gestures and pity for the poor. A twofold blunder. First—and this remains eternally true—the social question *is* a political question. In

classical terms (in Aristotle, already): Is democracy compatible with the coexistence of extreme wealth and extreme poverty? In contemporary terms: Is not economic power ipso facto also political power? Second, in France the *Ancien Régime* was not simply a political structure; it was a total social structure. Royalty, nobility, the role and function of the Church in society, properties and privileges were woven into the innermost texture of the old society. It is the whole social edifice that was to be reconstructed, for without that a political transformation was *materially* impossible. The French Revolution *could not*, even if it wanted to, simply superimpose a democratic political organization onto a social regime that it would have left intact. As so often in Hannah Arendt, ideas prevent her from seeing the facts. But the great historical facts are ideas more weighty than the ideas of philosophers. The "thousand-year-old past," as opposed to the "virgin continent," necessarily carries with it the need to mount an attack on the social edifice as such. From this standpoint, the American Revolution could actually be but an "exception" in modern history, in no way the rule and still less the model. The members of the Constituent Assembly were fully conscious of that and said so. Where the American Revolution could build on the illusion of an "equality" already existing in its social state (an illusion that remained the foundation for Tocqueville's analyses fifty years later), the French Revolution found itself faced with the massive reality of a highly inegalitarian society, of an imaginary of royal rule by divine right, of a centralized Church whose role and social functions were omnipresent, geographical differences that in no way could be justified, and so on.

Le Débat: But is it not at this very point that it runs

afoul of Burke's criticism, and in its most profound aspect? Can a generation make a gap in history by acting in pure discontinuity with its past? Is a foundation for freedom, which no longer has as support either Providence or tradition but which rests, rather, entirely within itself, not evanescent?

C.C.: That is why the revolutionaries constantly invoked Reason in 1789—as they also went on to do throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries—which also had disastrous consequences.

Le Débat: You would grant, then, at least a part of the Burkean line of argument, which states that it is difficult to found freedom on Reason?

C.C.: Here there are several points. First, it is not a matter of founding freedom upon Reason, since Reason itself presupposes freedom—autonomy. Reason is not a mechanical device or a system of ready-made truths; it is the movement of a thought that doesn't recognize any authority other than its own activity. To accede to Reason, one must first want to think freely. Second, there is never pure discontinuity. When I say that history is creation *ex nihilo*, that does not signify in any way that it is creation *in nihilo*, or *cum nihilo*. The new form emerges; it takes up what it finds lying about. The rupture is in the new *meaning* it confers upon what it inherits or utilizes. In the third place, Burke himself is inconsistent. He is drawn onto the field of the revolutionaries and grants implicitly the cogency of their presuppositions since he tries to refute their conclusions "rationally." He feels himself obliged to give a foundation in reason to the value of tradition. Now, that is a betrayal of tradition: a true tradition isn't discussed. Burke, in other words, cannot escape from the reflectiveness whose effects in the Revolution he denounces.

Le Débat: Does this inconsistency take all pertinence away from his criticism?

C.C.: His criticism touches upon truth when it bears upon what should be called "mechanical rationalization," which begins rather early in the Revolution and which went on to enjoy a brilliant future. That leads us to the ambiguity of the idea of Reason, to which I just alluded. To phrase it in philosophical terms, the Reason of the *Lumières* is both an open process of criticism and elucidation—which implies, among other things, the clear-cut distinction between *fact* and *right*—and mechanical, standardizing understanding. Philosophical criticism, and then revolutionary practice destroy the mere fact—existing institutions—showing that they have no reason to be other than that they have already been. (Here too, Burke is caught in ambiguity, since he supports what is both because it has been *and* because it is intrinsically "good.") But then, after having destroyed, one must construct. Starting from what? It is here that the rationality of the understanding, mechanical rationality, quickly takes the upper hand. The solutions that appear to some as "rational" will have to be imposed upon everyone: people will be forced to be rational. The principle of all sovereignty resides in the Nation—but this Nation is replaced by the Reason of its "representatives," in the name of which it will be knocked down, forced upon, violated, and mutilated.

That, however, isn't a "philosophical" development. The imaginary of abstract and mechanical rationality is an integral part in a weighty social-historical process, which here again prefigures in exemplary fashion key characteristics of modern history. Power becomes absolutized, the "representatives" become autonomized. An "apparatus" (the Jacobins), overtaking the official

authorities and controlling them, was constituted; it was an embryo of what later we would call a specifically political bureaucracy. Now, this was possible—on this point, Michelet's interpretation is in my view the right one—only on the condition that the people withdraw from the scene, and in fact this retreat was, if not fomented, at least encouraged by the new power. In this way, every living mediation is suppressed: there was on the one hand the abstract entity of the "Nation," on the other hand those who "represent" it in Paris, and, between the two, nothing. The members of the Convention were neither willing nor able to see that the autonomy of individuals—freedom—cannot effectively become instrumented in "rights" and in periodic elections alone, that it is nothing without the self-governance of all intermediary collective formations, whether "natural" or "artificial." The old mediations were destroyed (which was deplored both by Burke and, fifty years later, by Tocqueville, while idealizing them fantastically), without permitting new ones to be created. The "Nation," a dust cloud of theoretically homogenized individuals, no longer had any political existence other than that of its "representatives." Jacobinism became delirious and the Terror was set up from the moment the people withdrew from the scene and the indivisibility of sovereignty was transformed into absoluteness of power, leaving the representatives in a sinister face-to-face with abstraction.

Le Débat: How do you appraise the role that the formation of the modern State has played in the genesis of the idea of revolution? Does not the French case lead one to think that it is considerable?

C.C.: Here again, I think that it is necessary to make distinctions. The central idea realized by the

Revolution—and in it I see its capital importance for us—is that of the explicit self-institution of society by collective, lucid, democratic activity. But at the same time the Revolution never freed itself from the grip of this key part of the modern political imaginary that is the State. I say expressly "the State"—a separate and centralized apparatus of domination—and not "power." For the Athenians, for example, there is no "State"—the very word doesn't exist; the power is "we," the "we" of the political collectivity. In the modern political imaginary, the State appears ineliminable. It remained so for the Revolution, as it remains so for modern political philosophy, which finds itself in this regard in a more than paradoxical situation: it has to justify the State even as it makes every effort to think freedom. What is happening here is that one bases freedom upon the negation of freedom, or that one entrusts it to the care of its principal enemy. This antinomy reached the point of paroxysm under the Terror.

Le Débat: If one grants that the modern State constitutes one of the absolute preconditions for the revolutionary idea, does that not limit the scope of the self-institution you have just invoked? Is a self-institution that carries with it a tradition all the stronger when it is denied?

C.C.: The imaginary of the State limited the French Revolution's labor of self-institution. It also limited, later on, the actual behavior of revolutionary movements (with the exception of anarchism). It makes the idea of revolution become identical with the idea that, if one wants to transform society, it is both necessary and sufficient to seize control of the State (the taking of the Winter Palace, etc.). It becomes amalgamated with another cardinal imaginary signification of Modern Times, the Nation, and finds therein

an all-powerful source of affective mobilization; it becomes the incarnation of the Nation, the Nation-State. Unless one challenges these two imaginaries, unless one breaks with this tradition, it is impossible to conceive a new historical movement of society's self-institution. What is certain is that the statist imaginary and the institutions in which it is embodied have for a long time channeled the imaginary of revolution and that it is the logic of the State that finally triumphed.

Le Débat: The nineteenth century adds an essential component to the idea of revolution, with the element of history.

C.C.: It effected—and this it did basically with and through Marx—a conflation, a chemical compound of Revolution and history. The old transcendencies were replaced by History with a capital H. The myth of History and of the Laws of History, the myth of the revolution as midwife of History—therefore, born and justified through an organic process—were put into operation as religious substitutes, within a millenarian mentality. Marx fetishized a fabricated representation of the revolution. The model of *Ancien Régime*/development of the forces of production/violent birth of new relations of production, which he constructed from the alleged example of the French Revolution, was erected into a schema-type of historical evolution and projected into the future. And what still remained ambiguous and complex in this regard under the brilliant pen of Marx became totally flat and transparent in the Marxist vulgate.

Le Débat: Here you are leading us right to the second paradigmatic revolution, that of 1917. What specific development, from your point of view, does it contribute?

C.C.: It contributes two entirely antinomic elements.

First, and this as early as 1905, a new form of democratic collective self-organization, the soviets, which went on to acquire a new scope in 1917 and were carried on in the factory committees, which were very active and important during the 1917-1919 period and even until 1921. But at the same time, it is in Russia that Lenin created the prototype of what all modern totalitarian organizations were to become: the Bolshevik party, which very rapidly after October 1917 came to dominate the soviets, to stifle them, and to transform them into instruments and appendages of its own power.

Le Débat: Are we not here fully within the domination of the revolutionary idea by the logic of the State?

C.C.: Certainly. The construction of this machine for seizing state power testifies to the dominance of the imaginary of the State. But it bears witness, as well, to the dominance of the capitalist imaginary: everything happens as if one did not know how to organize in any other way. It has not been pointed out enough that Lenin invented Taylorism four years before Taylor. Taylor's book dates from 1906. *What Is To Be Done?* dates from 1902-03. And Lenin speaks there of the strict division of tasks, with arguments based upon pure instrumental efficiency; one can, in reading between the lines of Lenin's book, find the Taylorist idea of the "one best way." He obviously couldn't time each operation. But he was striving to fabricate this monster that is a mixture of a party-army, a party-State, and a party-factory, which he actually succeeded in setting up starting in 1917. The statist imaginary, masked during the French Revolution, became explicit with the Bolshevik party, which was a budding army-State even before the "seizure of power." (Its twofold character became even

more manifest in the case of China.)

Le Débat: The mention of the soviet revolution inevitably raises the question of revolutions going astray, which seems to constitute their "iron law." Let us squarely formulate this question: Is not the slide toward totalitarianism of necessity inscribed in revolutionary ambitions when they become, as they do among the Moderns, the explicit project of reinstating society?

C.C.: First, let us reestablish the facts. There was a revolution in February 1917; there was no "October Revolution": in October 1917, there was a putsch, a military coup d'État. As has already been said, the authors of this putsch succeeded in achieving their ends only against the popular will as a whole—see the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918—and against the democratic organs created starting in February, the soviets and factory committees. It is not the revolution that, in Russia, produced totalitarianism, but the coup d'État of the Bolshevik party, which is something else entirely.

Le Débat: But can one so easily sever the ties between revolution and totalitarianism?

C.C.: Let us continue on the level of facts. There was an installation of totalitarianism in Germany in 1933, but no revolution (the "national-socialist revolution" is a pure slogan). Under completely different specific circumstances, the same thing goes for China in 1948-49. On the other hand, without the actual intervention or the virtual threat of Russian divisions, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as well as the movement in Poland in 1980-1981 would certainly have led to the overthrow of the existing regimes; it is absurd to think that they would have led to totalitarianism. And it also has to be pointed out that *revolution* does not at all necessarily mean barricades,

violence, bloodshed, and so on. If the King of England had listened to Burke in 1776, no blood would have been spilled in North America.

Le Débat: But perhaps there would have been no revolution either. Can one completely separate the idea of revolution from the idea of a rupture or of an overthrow of established legality?

C.C.: Surely not; but this rupture is not bound to take the form of murder. Without the War of Independence, the thirteen colonies would probably have adopted a republican constitution anyway, thereby breaking with monarchical legality.

On the level of ideas, now: *Revolution* does not signify only the attempt at explicit reinstitution of society. Revolution is this reinstitution by the collective and autonomous activity of the people, or of a large portion of society. Now, when this activity unfolds, in Modern Times, it always exhibits a democratic character, And every time a strong social movement has wanted to transform society radically but peacefully, it has run up against the violence of the established power. Why does one forget Poland in 1981 or China in 1989?

As for totalitarianism, it is an infinitely weighty and complex phenomenon. One will understand little about it by saying *Revolution produces totalitarianism* (which we have seen is empirically false at both ends: not all revolutions have produced forms of totalitarianism, and not all forms of totalitarianism have been tied to revolutions). But if one thinks of the germs of the totalitarian idea, it is impossible not to think, first of all, of the totalitarianism immanent in the capitalist imaginary—unlimited expansion of "rational mastery"—and of the capitalist organization of production—the "one best way," discipline made

mechanically obligatory (the Ford factories in Detroit in 1920 constitute totalitarian minisocieties)—and second, of the logic of the modern State which, if one allows it to reach its limits, tends to regulate everything,

Le Débat: You were speaking just a minute ago of the role of reason in the idea of revolution. Does not reason in particular take the form of the project of a rational mastery of history? And does not this project contain, despite everything, at least as one of its virtual components, the risk of totalitarian enslavement?

C.C.: We then arrive at an idea that is completely different from the current vulgate: if, and to the extent that, revolutionaries are caught up in the fantasy of a rational mastery of history, and of society, whose subjects they at that very moment evidently consider themselves to be, then there obviously is here one possible source for an evolution toward totalitarianism. For, they will then tend to replace the self-activity of society with their own activity: that of the members of the Convention and of the Republic's "representatives on mission," later that of the Party. But even in this case, society would have to give in [*se laisse faire*].

As was just said, one sees this process occur during the French Revolution (although it would be absurd to identify the Jacobin dictatorship and the Terror with totalitarianism). Reason tends to be reduced to the understanding; for autonomy (for freedom), the idea of rational mastery is substituted. In the same stroke, this "rationalism" reveals its unwise, imprudent character.

Le Débat: Is not one of the manifestations par excellence of this imprudence the valuing of the revolution as end in itself—a valuing which has been at the same time one of the most powerful motives for its ascendancy?

C.C.: There does indeed come a moment when one begins to encounter formulas whose spirit, pretty much, is this: "Revolution for the sake of revolution." Moreover, we know the echo this mind-set has had, in the nineteenth century and afterward, in the intellectual and spiritual world: rupture, the rejection of established canons, becomes value as such. To confine ourselves here to the properly political level, however, the problem of a revolution is to instaurate another relation with tradition—not to try to suppress tradition, or to declare it "Gothic nonsense" {Abbé Sieyès} from beginning to end.

Le Débat: We will be in agreement if we say that two centuries of history of the revolutionary project show us that this project is burdened with two major illusions: the illusion of rational mastery and the illusion of the end of history. If one removes these two illusions, does the idea of revolution still today have any content?

C.C.: You will not be surprised if I reply that it is precisely because today we are familiar with these two illusions and because we can combat them that we can give to the revolutionary project its true content. Once it is recognized that a full-scale constructivism is both impossible and undesirable; once it is recognized that there can be no repose for humanity in a "good society" defined once and for all, nor transparency of society to itself; once it is recognized that, contrary to what Saint-Just believed, the object of politics is not happiness, but liberty, then one can effectively think the question of a free society made up of free individuals. Is the present state of our societies that of democratic, effectively free societies? Certainly not. Could one reach that state by making incremental changes, and without the great majority of the population entering into activity? Again, no.

What is a free, or autonomous, society? It is a society that itself gives to itself, effectively and reflectively, its own laws, knowing that it is doing so. What is a free, or autonomous, individual, once we recognize that this individual is conceivable only in a society in which there are laws and power? It is an individual that recognizes in these laws and this power its own laws and its own power—which can happen without mystification only to the extent that this individual has the full and effective possibility of participating in the formation of the laws and in the exercise of power. We are very far from that—and who would imagine for an instant that the burning concern of the ruling oligarchies would be to bring us around to such a situation?

A second, more sociological consideration is added to this first, fundamental one. We are living—I am talking about the rich Western societies—under liberal-oligarchic regimes, which are no doubt preferable, both subjectively and politically, to what exists elsewhere on the planet. These regimes have not been engendered by some automatic and spontaneous process, or by the previous good will of ruling strata, but by means of much more radical social-historical movements—the French Revolution itself is one example—of which these regimes constitute the side effects or the byproducts. These movements themselves would have been impossible, had they not been accompanied by the emergence—as both "effect" and "cause"—of a new anthropological type of individual, let us say, to be brief, *the democratic individual*: that which distinguishes a peasant of the *Ancien Régime* from a French citizen today, or a subject of the Czar from an English or American citizen. Without this type of individual, more exactly without a constellation of such types—among

which, for example, is the honest and legalistic Weberian bureaucrat—liberal society cannot function. Now, it seems evident to me that society today is no longer capable of reproducing these types. It basically produces the greedy, the frustrated, and the conformist.

Le Débat: But liberal societies progress. Women, for example, have attained an equal status {since the sixties} without there being a revolution, but they have done so massively, irreversibly.

C.C.: Certainly. There are also important movements, over the long haul of history, that are not strictly political or condensed in a precise moment of time. The change in the status of young people offers another example. Liberal society has been able, not without long resistance—the feminist movement in fact began in the middle of the last century; women obtained the right to vote in France in 1945—to accommodate itself to such changes. But could it accommodate itself to a true democracy, to effective and active participation of citizens in public affairs? Do not present-day political institutions also have as their goal [*finalité*] to distance citizens from public affairs and to persuade them that they are incapable of concerning themselves with these matters? No serious analysis can contest that the regimes that proclaim themselves democratic are in reality what every classical political philosopher would have called oligarchical regimes. An ultrathin stratum of society dominates and governs. It coopts its successors. Of course, it is liberal: it is open (more or less . . .), and it gets itself ratified every {four,} five, or seven years by a popular vote. If the governing part of this oligarchy goes too far afield, it will get itself replaced—by the other part of the oligarchy, which has become more and more like it. Whence the disappearance

of any real content in the opposition of "Left" and "Right." The frightening emptiness of contemporary politicians' speeches is a reflection of this situation, not of genetic mutations.

Le Débat: Have not our societies, as a matter of fact, left behind participatory democracy such as you describe it? Have they not, as they have developed, privileged the private individual to the detriment of the citizen, as Constant had diagnosed the situation as early as the 1820s? Is not this the strongest impression it has produced?

C.C.: In no way would I challenge the diagnosis on the level of facts—quite the contrary, I have placed it at the center of my analyses since 1959:¹ it is what I have called *privatization*. But to note a state of fact does not mean that one approves of it. I am saying, on the one hand, that this state of fact is not tenable in the long run; on the other hand and especially, that we ought not to accommodate ourselves to it. This same society in which we live proclaims principles—liberty, equality, fraternity—that it violates or diverts and deforms every day. I am saying that humanity can do better, that it is capable of living in another state, the state of *self-government*. Under the conditions of the modern era, its forms certainly remain to be found; better: to be created. But the history of humanity in the West, from Athens to the modern democratic and revolutionary movements, shows that such a creation is conceivable. Beyond that, I too have noted for a long time the predominance of the process of privatization. Our societies

¹See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," written in 1959-60, first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 31-33 (December 1960—April 1961—December 1961), and now available in translation in *PSW* 2.
—T/E

are progressively sinking into apathy, depoliticization, domination by the media and celluloid politicians. We are arriving at the complete realization of Constant's formula, asking no more of the State than "the guarantee of our enjoyments [*jouissances*]"—the realization of which would probably have been a nightmare for Constant himself. But the question is: Why then would the State guarantee these enjoyments indefinitely, if citizens are less and less disposed and even capable of exerting control over the State and, if need be, of opposing it?

Le Débat: Are we not observing nevertheless over time an ongoing preponderance of the basic values of democracy? Over two centuries, from universal suffrage to the equality of women passing by way of the Welfare State, the reality of democracy has grown tremendously richer. Moreover, the style of both political and social authority, for instance, has been completely transformed under pressure from the governed or from executives. Before hastening to the diagnosis of privatization, should we not register the geological force of this movement that nevertheless irresistibly makes democratic demands into a reality?

C.C.: That the style of domination and authority has changed, no doubt; but what about their substance? I do not think that the phenomenon of privatization can be taken lightly, either, particularly in its most recent developments. To every institution corresponds an anthropological type, which is its concrete bearer—under other terms, this has been known since Plato and Montesquieu—and is both its product and the condition for its reproduction. Now, the type of person who has independent judgment and feels concerned by questions of general import, by the *res publicae*, is today under challenge. I am not saying that this type has completely disappeared. But it is gradually, and

rapidly, being replaced by another type of individual, centered on consumption and enjoyment, apathetic toward general matters, cynical in its relation to politics, most often stupidly approving and conformist. One does not seem to be aware of the fact that we are living in an era of generalized and thoroughgoing conformism;² true, the latter is masked by the acuteness of the tragico-heroic choice individuals have to make between a Citroën car and one from Renault, between the products of Estée Lauder and those of Helena Rubinstein. One must ask—as is not done by the crooners of the ambient pseudoindividualism—the following question: What type of society can contemporary man bear? In what way would his psychosocial structure allow *democratic* institutions to function? Democracy is the regime of political reflectiveness; where is the reflectiveness of the contemporary individual? Unless it is reduced to the barest management of current affairs—which, even in the short term, isn't possible, since our history is a series of intense perturbations—politics implies choices; starting from what will this individual, more and more deprived of any bearings, take a position? The media flood becomes all the more effective as it falls on receivers lacking their own criteria. And this is also what the empty speeches of the politicians are adapting themselves to. More generally speaking, we may ask: What does it mean for an individual today to live in society, to belong to a history; what is the contemporary individual's vision of the future of its society? All we have here is a perplexed mass, which lives from day to day and without any horizon—not a critical-reflective collectivity.

²See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalized Conformism" (1989), now in *WIF*. —T/E

Le Débat: Are you not underestimating the impact of two conjunctural phenomena, on the one hand the disarray provoked by the collapse of the eschatology of socialism, and on the other the aftershock of the thirty years of expansion (1945-1975). On the one hand, the figure that dominated the future, even for its adversaries, is vanishing, leaving a terrible void as to what might give an orientation to collective action. On the other hand, we are exiting from a period of unprecedented economic and social upheavals, under the effect of growth and redistribution. What gave an orientation to history is disappearing at the same time that, from a different angle, history is proving to have traveled much faster than anyone had foreseen—and, in addition, rather in the right direction from the standpoint of the well-being of all. How would citizens not be tempted to fold their arms and give in?

C.C.: Certainly. But to point out the causes or the conditions of a phenomenon does not exhaust its signification or circumscribe its effects. For the reasons you have cited, and for many others, we have entered into a situation that has its own direction and its own dynamic. But your allusion to growth and to well-being introduces quite rightly a key element of the problem, which until now we have left aside. We have spoken in terms of political and philosophical values. But there are economic values and, more exactly, the economy itself as central value, as central preoccupation of the modern world. Behind Constant's "enjoyments" there is the economy: these "enjoyments" are the subjective side of what the economy has become in the modern world, that is to say, the central "reality," the thing that truly counts. Now, it seems evident to me that a genuine democracy, a participatory democracy like the one I have evoked, is incompatible with the

dominance of this value. If the central obsession, the fundamental *push* of this society is the maximization of production and of consumption, autonomy disappears from the horizon and, at the very most, a few tiny liberties are tolerated as the instrumental complement of this maximization device. The unlimited expansion of production and of consumption becomes the dominant, and almost exclusive, imaginary signification of contemporary society. As long as it retains this place, as long as it remains the sole *passion* of the modern individual, there can be no question of a slow accretion of democratic contents and liberties. Democracy is impossible without a democratic passion, a passion for the freedom of each and of all, a passion for common affairs which become, as a matter of fact, the personal affairs of each. One is very far from that.

Le Débat: But one can understand the optical effect that can be attributed to public opinion since 1945, the idea that the economy is in the service of democracy.

C.C.: In reality it has been in the service of oligarchical liberalism. It has permitted the ruling oligarchy to provide bread, or cake [*la brioche*] if you prefer, and shows [*les spectacles*], and to govern in full tranquillity. There are no more citizens; there are consumers who are content to give a vote of approval or disapproval every few years.

Le Débat: Is not the pressing problem today above all to extend democracy to the rest of the world, with the enormous difficulties this implies?

C.C.: But could that be done without fundamental challenges? Let us consider, first of all, the economic dimension in particular. Prosperity has been purchased since 1945 (and already beforehand, certainly) at the price of an irreversible destruction of the environment. The

famous modern-day "economy" is in reality a fantastic waste of the capital accumulated by the biosphere in the course of three billion years, a wastefulness that is accelerating every day. If one wants to extend to the rest of the planet (its other four-fifths, from the standpoint of population) the liberal-oligarchic regime, one would also have to provide it with the economic level, if not of France, let us say of Portugal. Do you see the ecological nightmare that signifies, the destruction of nonrenewable resources, the multiplication by fivefold or tenfold of the annual emissions of pollutants, the acceleration of global warming? In reality, it is toward such a state that we are heading, and the totalitarianism we have got coming to us is not the kind that would arise from a revolution; it is the kind where a government (perhaps a world government), after an ecological catastrophe, would say: You've had your fun. The party is over. Here are your two liters of gas and your ten liters of clean air for the month of December, and those who protest are putting the survival of humanity in danger and are public enemies. There is an outside limit that the present unfettered growth of technical developments and of the economy is sooner or later going to run up against. The poor countries' exit from a life of misery could occur without catastrophe only if the rich part of humanity agrees to manage the resources of the planet as a *diligens pater familias*, to put a radical check on technology and production, to adopt a *frugal* life. That can be done, with arbitrariness and irrationality, by an authoritarian or totalitarian regime; it can also be done by a humanity organized democratically, on the condition that it abandons economic values and that it cathects other significations.

But there is not only the material-economic dimension. The Third World is prey to considerable,

uncontrollable, and essentially antidemocratic forces of reaction—let us think of Islam, but that is not the only one. Does the West today have anything to offer the Third World, apart from an abundance of gadgets, to jolt it in its imaginary institution? Can one say to them that jogging and Madonna are more important than the Koran? If changes in these parts of the world are to go beyond the mere adoption of certain techniques, if they are to affect cultures in their deepest and most obscure recesses, so as to render them permeable to democratic significations, for which nothing in their history prepares them, a radical transformation is required on the part of that part of humanity that I do not hesitate to call the most advanced: Western humanity, the part of humanity that has tried to reflect on its fate and to change it, not to be the plaything of history or the plaything of the gods, to put a greater part of self-activity into its destiny. The weight of the responsibility that weighs on Western humanity makes me think that a radical transformation must take place first here.

I am not saying that it will take place. It is possible that the present-day situation will endure, until its effects become irreversible. I refuse for all that to make reality into a virtue and to conclude that something is right just because it is a fact. It behooves us to oppose this state of things in the name of the ideas and of the projects that have made this civilization and that, at this very moment, allow us to have a discussion.

The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions*

Rereading this ninth *Lettre de la montagne* for the nth time while I was reading Pierre Vidal-Naquet's text, I was regretting that Pierre did not have the time to do the history—which no doubt would fill volumes—of the Greek mirage and the Roman mirage, of the successive interpretations, and of the numerous 180-degree turns in these interpretations that have been performed over the centuries.¹

*Speech given at a colloquium held at the Centre Pompidou on March 27, 1992, in which Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Pierre Lévêque also participated. All three talks appeared in *Esprit*, December 1993. "La démocratie athénienne: fausses et vraies questions" was reprinted in *MI*, pp. 183-93. [The three speeches were translated and published in *On the Invention of Democracy*, an appendix to Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato* (1964), trans. David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996). This minicolloquium held to celebrate and critically examine the 2,500th anniversary of Cleisthenes' reforms was organized by David Ames Curtis and Clara Gibson Maxwell with the support of Pascal Vernay and Stéphane Barbery and chaired by former Socialisme ou Barbarie member Christian Descamps. Transcription of the speeches was by Olivier-Michel Pascault. —T/E]

¹In his presentation, Pierre Vidal-Naquet had recalled the well-known excerpt from the ninth of Rousseau's *Lettres de la montagne*, which I cite *in extenso*, for it applies to all modern "democratic" countries:

You especially, Genevans, keep your place and go not at all toward the elevated objectives which are presented to you in order to conceal the abyss opening before you. You are neither Romans nor Spartans; you are not even Athenians You

This began already in Athens itself, and no later than the fourth century B.C.E. There was Plato and his view of the democracy as the power of the *vulgum pecus*, the power of the illiterates who believe that they know better than those who know "truly," the power of those who assassinate generals, assassinate Socrates, and so on. Skipping over the next twenty-two centuries, let me note simply the near-reversal that was performed at the moment of the French Revolution, making reference here to Vidal-Naquet's beautiful text on "Bourgeois Athens."² Above all, let me

are Merchants, Artisans, Bourgeois ever preoccupied with their private interests, their labor, their dealing, their gain; people for whom liberty itself is only a means for acquiring without hindrance and for possessing in safe keeping" (in *Œuvres complètes* [Paris: Gallimard, 1964], vol. 3, p. 881).

From Rousseau to Adam Ferguson to Benjamin Constant, this brief anthropological glimpse of modern "democracy" was self-evident. It has become invisible for contemporary "political philosophers." [Note added by the author in 1996. Also of note, in light of Castoriadis's regret that Vidal-Naquet had not the time that evening to examine "the successive interpretations" of Rome and Greece, is the appearance in translation of a Vidal-Naquet text with which Castoriadis was familiar and which was originally written as the preface to a 1976 French translation of Moses I. Finley's *Democracy Ancient and Modern*: "The Tradition of Greek Democracy," trans. David Ames Curtis, *Thesis Eleven*, 60 (2000): 61-86. —T/E]

²"La Formation de l'Athènes bourgeoise" (Pierre Vidal-Naquet in collaboration with Nicole Loraux, 1979), in *La Démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), pp. 161-209. All the texts appearing in this book are to be consulted on this theme. [Portions of this volume, including "The Formation of Bourgeois Athens," appeared as *Politics Ancient and Modern*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, England and Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1995). Here "formation" also has the sense of "education." —T/E]

recall the great reversal that took place in England around 1860 with the work of the great George Grote, which was to be followed by Wilhelminian pastorals in Germany with Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, similar currents in France, and so on, not to forget the Nazis' attempts at appropriating a "Dorian" Greece. This is no doubt the richest object available (only the history of Christianity is, from this point of view, as rich) for a study on the social-historical imagination as source, not just for reinterpretation, but for *re-creation* of a founding era by succeeding eras, according to the imaginary proper to these later eras. The Athens/Rome opposition, moreover, still plays a role in France. As a child, I read the great *Histoire Romaine* of Victor Duruy, the preface of which ends with an appeal to the French, inviting them to study Roman history, for—this is the final phrase of the Preface and, sixty years later, it remains in my memory—"Even more than Athens, it is of Rome that we are the inheritors." Now, still recently, Claude Nicolet has in fact once again taken up this theme. Does there remain even a grain of truth to this assertion? Let me begin the few things I have to say here with a joke that brings us back to the *Lettres de la montagne*. If I were Rousseau, and if you were Genevans, I would say to you this evening—as well as to all Western peoples: You are not Athenians, you are not even Romans. Rome, certainly, was never a democracy; it always was an oligarchy. But at least until around 150 B.C.E., there remained a sort of devotion to the *res publica*, which today is something that is disappearing completely under the blows of {"free-market" economic} "liberalism."

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My response will bear, first, on a certain number of points I wish to make. I won't try to systematize these points, but the intimate connections between them will be, I believe, readily understood.

First, upstream from the creation of the *polis*, there is the enormous heritage of Greek mythology. It was going to be reworked, of course, but it was still to be found in the Greek democratic creation. The first known *political* drawing of lots took place between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades after their victory over the Titans; for them, it was a way of determining the division of their respective areas of domination. If Zeus is master of the universe, it is *by chance*: he drew the heavens.³ Likewise, the entire mythological conception of the relations between right and force remained alive, as will be seen again both in Aeschylus's *Prometheus* and in the Athenians' dialogue with the Melians, in Thucydides.⁴

Second, if one passes now to Homer, one already finds there the *agora*, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet has just recalled for us. Much more noteworthy, though, are the famous verses from the *Odyssey* about the Cyclopes, which Pierre did not mention, no doubt because they are much

³That none of the three principal gods held any prerogative over the *Earth* is also to be underscored. This aspect would require lengthy commentary.

⁴As was explained in *WIF*, p. 420n7: "The Melian Dialogue, as recounted by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, may be found at 5.84-116. The Athenians' reply appears at 105." References to the Melians may also be found in *WIF* on pp. 96 and 189. —T/E

better known. The Cyclopes have no *agora* and no laws. I am abridging a translation that certainly would open up some problems. I do not want to enter here into questions concerning either the dating or the content of the Homeric poems. Moses Finley has written a marvelous book on this topic,⁵ and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, in a Preface to the *Iliad*,⁶ reminds us that Homer was, above all, a poet and not a war correspondent or a reporter covering Ulysses's expeditions. Nevertheless, I attribute great importance to these phrases from Homer, for with current dating one cannot push him much further back than 750 B.C.E. Now, we positively know that the process of colonization—the great colonization drive, not the (much older) colonization process that took place on the coasts of Asia Minor—already had begun around this time: Pithecusae (Ischia) and Cumae, in Italy, attest to it. We must understand what this colonization was and what it presupposed. First, it already presupposed a certain prior history on the part of the *polis*: it would be absurd to suppose that a *polis* founded in 752 had sent out a colony already in 750—and this, from Euboea to central Italy! In itself, next, it differs greatly from other colonization efforts in Antiquity, or even in modern times. The colony was not a possession or an outpost of the metropolis; in fact, it *self-institutes itself*. With its veneration of the metropolis, a connection certainly remained in effect; most of the time the

⁵*The World of Odysseus* (1954; revised edition, London: Chatto and Windus, 1978).

⁶Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "L'*Iliad* sans travesti," preface to the republication of the Paul Mazon translation (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); reprinted in *La Démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs*, pp. 29-53.

latter certainly also furnished the models for the colony's institutions, but often, too, the laws of the colony were new, different. I think that it is in the colonies as much as if not more than in Greece proper that the politicohistorical germs of what later became the democracy are to be sought. In the colony there was certainly the *oikistes*, the "founder," the leader of the expedition, but it is characteristic of the process that no king or autocrat is to be found among these *oikistai*.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet said quite rightly a moment ago that in the history of ancient Greece there were two moments of rupture, what I would call two creations. There is the creation of the *polis qua polis*, which subsequently might turn out to be oligarchical or tyrannical; and later, especially at Athens (so as not to enter into a discussion about Chios), there is the creation of democracy properly speaking. We must underscore, however, an aspect of the history of Sparta that is forgotten in these discussions. For the little that can be said about it, and leaving aside the affair of the helots and "helotry," if I may label it so, Sparta began as a city in which power belonged to the *Damos* (people) and the citizens were *homoioi*. Pierre Vidal-Naquet translates this last term by "peers"; one could also propose "fellows or similars [*semblables*]" or "true similars," which would be the literal meaning. This occurred between 650 and 600, or a century before Cleisthenes. Sparta, however, also has a *history*: for reasons that remain very obscure to us, the dynamic of Spartan society is an oligarchic one which reached its term in the fourth century. This dynamic is completely the opposite of the one that unfolded at Athens, and probably also in a great number of other cities about which, alas, we have no information. Of the more than one-hundred-and-fifty

politeiai of Aristotle and his students, only one remains for us; of the others, only fragments, from which not very much can be drawn. Perhaps our image of the Greek world would be rather different if we had all these treatises on the constitutions-institutions of these various other cities.

We therefore must limit ourselves to Athens—and it is here that the evidence shows us a true *history* and a *creative* history. It is not simply that "things changed"; institutions were being created or renewed almost constantly through what Aristotle calls the thirteen *metabolai* or changes of regime. Of these changes of regime, some were major, others less significant. There were, moreover, not just changes of regime (one only has to think of the history of "the arts" or of tragedy), but one must insist on these, and the tables must be turned completely around so as to call white what until now the tradition has called black. The Athenians and their system of rule [*régime*] were constantly "accused" of "instability," and echoes of this conservative mentality are still to be found even in Hannah Arendt, with her lauding of Roman *auctoritas* and *traditio* as opposed to the Athenians' versatility. But precisely what is both characteristic of Athens and precious because of what it offers us is its continued explicit self-institution, namely, the creation, for the first time in recorded history, of a *strong historicity*. History in general exists everywhere, of course, and never will a Tupí Guaraní be like she was a second earlier. At the institutional level, however, such change remains imperceptible, and in savage or traditional societies the "seconds" are counted in millennia or centuries. Now, at Athens, as one can see in the sixth, fifth, and even still in the fourth century, change took place between generations or even within the same generation. Not only is Sophocles wholly other than Aeschylus, but the old Sophocles does not

write like the young Sophocles. This is not an "individual" phenomenon: the form of tragedy changes, architectural style changes, people change, institutions change. If you want *traditio* and *auctoritas*, you must want the Roman tragedian Ennius forever and not the history of tragedy. And then, starting at a certain moment, the people start to change for the very worst, with the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides's terrifying descriptions of how the war corrupted everything; almost speaking of "wooden language [*langue de bois*],"⁷ Thucydides says that the War made words come to signify the opposite of what they signified. This was no longer the same *dēmos*—and it was *that dēmos* that would condemn the Arginusae generals and that would condemn Socrates.

This leads us to another important conclusion: Democracy is not an institutional *model*; it is not even a "regime" in the traditional sense of the term. Democracy is the self-institution of the collectivity by the collectivity, and it is this self-institution as movement. Certainly, this movement is based on and is facilitated each time by determinate institutions, but also by the knowledge, spread out among the collectivity, that our laws have been made by us and that we can change them. I will say, in closing, two words on the limits of this self-institution.

One can shed light on one important aspect of the specificity of the history of Athens as a democratic history

⁷Literally a "wooden tongue," which may be described as the repetitive churning out of meaningless stock phrases, most often associated, in a French context, with the deadening rhetoric of the Communist Party. Castoriadis himself wrote a piece in 1989 critical of Louis Althusser and the French Communist Party, humorously entitled "De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc" (From wooden language to rubber language), *SF*, pp. 295-314. —T/E

by reexamining the idea (which results from a sort of "military materialism") that makes of the invention of the phalanx the condition for democracy. According to this conception, the invention of the phalanx as the warrior organization of the members of a city led—via an "extension" of the equality of conditions prevailing among the soldiers in the phalanx organization—to democracy. This conception sins at both ends. First, the phalanx itself could not have been "invented" if the imaginary of citizen equality were not already highly present. When one reads the *Iliad*, one sometimes stops to ask oneself what this "swarm" and these "droves [*troupeaux*]" of anonymous warriors, Achaeans or Trojans, did and what purpose they served, except perhaps simply to bear witness to the worthiness, the *kleos* and *kudos*, of the heroes whose duels alone are constantly being sung. Homer is describing here, quite evidently, the embodiment on the military level of the aristocratic imaginary (and in this regard, at least, he is referring to a world that was no doubt already bygone in his time). In the phalanx is achieved, nevertheless, an equality and solidarity among combatants. Achilles would never have thought of putting himself elbow-to-elbow with Thersites and of protecting the latter with his shield. For the phalanx to be conceivable, the combatants must think of themselves as equals, as being alike [*pareils*], ready to defend one another. The phalanx is a result, not a "cause," of the imaginary of equality. And, as a second aspect, the phalanx does not at all, in itself, suffice to steer the community toward the establishment of a democratic state. It exists just as much at Sparta. Moreover, under another form the Roman legion is similar to the phalanx: the organizational differences pertain to other sorts of considerations. But Rome was never a democracy in the

sense Athens was.

I now arrive at the question of slavery and Finley's famous phrase, which Pierre Vidal-Naquet makes his own: "In the ancient world, freedom advanced hand in hand with slavery."⁸ I will not discuss the question on the theoretical, abstract level. I will simply pose a few questions on the level of facts.

First, how many slaves were there at Athens around 510 B.C.E.? The number of slaves that we know, or rather that we suppose/calculate with difficulty, to have existed at Athens does not relate to the era of the instauration of the democracy, to its initial conditions, so to speak—and still less to the entire *previous* history of Athens, where one sees the proliferation of the germs of the democratic creation. This number was also undoubtedly quite inflated by the number of public slaves who worked in the mines of Laurium; and one knows that these mines were discovered, or at least put into operation, shortly before the second Persian War, that Themistocles convinced the *dēmos* to use their proceeds for the construction of the fleet, and so forth.

On this point, I am in agreement with two very different persons, Jefferson and Marx. Marx said that the genuine socioeconomic condition for the ancient democracy was the existence of a host of independent petty producers. And when one knows of Jefferson's attitude in opposition to the development of large-scale industry (therefore, of a proletariat) in the United States of his time, one can comprehend that behind this attitude lay the idea that

⁸At the end of "Was Greek Civilization Based on Slave Labour?" (*Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* [London, Chatto and Windus, 1985], p. 115), M. I. Finley states: "One aspect of Greek history, in short, is the advance, hand in hand, of freedom *and* slavery." —T/E

democracy had to be based on the small agrarian property, the extension of which actually was possible in the United States until the "closing of the frontier" in the West in the early years of the twentieth century.

Slavery is to be found everywhere in the ancient world, but democracy is to be found only in a few cities. It is there in Sparta—certainly under another form, but it is unclear in what way the fact that there were helots and not commercial slaves should affect the postulated connection. In the aristocratic Greek cities, too, slavery was of a commercial sort—just as was the case, obviously, at Rome, where one sees, on the contrary, that slavery advanced hand in hand with the power of the oligarchy.

There are, here, two points of fact that are decisive: The slavery present during the creation of the democracy was without any doubt very limited in extent; and in almost all the ancient cities one notes the existence of slavery but not in all of them of democracy.

The development of slavery at Athens advanced hand in hand, in my view, with another extremely important trait, the development of "imperialism." I cannot linger on this point here, but in my view it is clear that the failure of Athens from every point of view is due to the combination of this "imperialism" with the maintenance of the idea that only Athenian citizens can be political subjects. If Rome conquered the ancient world, if today we {French speakers} speak a language that, as Proust said, is an erroneous way of pronouncing Latin, it is due not to the warrior virtues of the Romans, nor to their frugality, but to the fantastic policy of gradual *assimilation* that Rome invented, or rather was obliged to invent, beginning no doubt already with the plebs. At the outset, the plebs was made up of foreigners, immigrants, metics. It struggled, it withdrew to the

Aventine, and so on; and after one or two centuries Rome was obliged to digest it—and this practice of digesting conquered populations was gradually extended, with the help of a host of institutions (Roman colonies, Latin colonies, the granting of *civitas romana* to portions of defeated populations, which thus served to divide these peoples internally), to the populations of Italy after the Social War (90 B.C.E.), and, finally, to all free inhabitants of the Empire, with the edict of Caracalla (212 C.E.)—at the same time that the emancipation and assimilation of slaves came to be practiced on a larger and larger scale.

Now, the Athenians never envisioned an extension of Athenian citizenship in normal times (the extensions that took place for the benefit of the Plataeans and the Samians were to come later, at the moment of catastrophe). Very few instances of naturalization were known, and also few emancipations of slaves. The Empire remained throughout its history the group of cities that were subject to the *polis* par excellence, Athens. The task of extending, and even of maintaining, the Empire therefore quickly became absurd—as also became absurd the task of modern European nations that wanted to dominate their colonies without even trying to assimilate them, which, in any case, they never really could have achieved.

I now arrive at one of the great apparent paradoxes: the greatest Athenian philosopher is Plato, and Plato is a sworn enemy of the democracy. More generally, one does not find in the Greek philosophers, apart from Aristotle, of whom I shall not speak, any thinking through of democracy. The sole notable exception is Protagoras, to whom I shall return. We also know, however, that Democritus, his junior, was a democrat (see Diels, B251 and B255). Now, contrary to Protagoras, Democritus was the object, on

Plato's part, of a *damnatio memoriae*; it is not unreasonable to think that this neglect corresponds to an intention on Plato's part to accord the least notice possible to Democritus's opinions in general and to his political opinions in particular. That Plato knew the work of Democritus may be seen in reading the *Timaeus*—and Aristotle, who speaks about it all the time, had to have known of this work during his years at the Academy.

One happens all the time upon authors who speak of "Greek political thought," meaning thereby Plato. This is as ridiculous as to want to discover the political thought of the French Revolution in Joseph de Maistre or Louis de Bonald. The basic Greek political creation is the democracy—which is the object of Plato's inextinguishable hatred. He heaps calumnies upon it, calumnies he succeeded, moreover, in imposing upon a great proportion of learned and vulgar opinion for more than two thousand years. The great statesmen of Athens—Themistocles, Pericles—are presented as demagogues who filled the town with useless things, like walls, naval works, and so on. The critical thinkers—Protagoras, Gorgias—are Sophists in the sense Plato succeeded in giving to this word. The poets are corrupters and presenters of false images (*idola*). Aeschylus and Sophocles as presenters of false images and corrupters? Plato is judged by his judgments.

The spirit of the democracy is to be sought, and to be found, in the tragic poets, in the historians, in Herodotus in the discussion among the three Persian satraps on the three regimes, in Thucydides (and not only in Pericles's *Oration*), and obviously, especially, and above all in the institutions and the practice of the democracy.

In tragedy, let me take up briefly the example of

*Antigone.*⁹ *Antigone* is in my view, more than all the others, the tragedy of the democracy. One knows the importance for Greek thought—clearly so in the fifth century and probably already beforehand—of the idea of *nomos* not simply as law but as human law, law posited by humans—pretty much what I call the self-institution of society. Now, in the famous *stasimon* of *Antigone* (332-75), "Many things are awesome, and nothing is more awesome than man,"¹⁰ Sophocles speaks of the fact that man himself has taught himself (*edidaxato*) his tongue, thought, and the *astunomous orgas*—the passions that give laws to (that institute) cities. *Orgē* is anger, affect, passion—this is where "orgasm" comes from. Humans are described as those who have taught themselves how to institute cities. Note here the idea of the democracy as the regime that institutes itself in full knowledge of the relevant facts [*en connaissance de cause*].

As for Protagoras, it suffices to turn to the celebrated speech he makes in Plato's dialogue of the same name. On the meaning of this speech, I am completely in agreement with what Pierre Vidal-Naquet has said about it, and I myself have written that, without any doubt, it contains the *topoi*, the commonplaces, of democratic reflection that were

⁹For a somewhat more extended discussion of *Antigone*, see my text, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), in *PPA* (slightly excerpted version in *CR*).

¹⁰In admiration for some recent youth lingo, I have chosen "awesome" as my translation for the impossible-to-translate Greek word *deinos*; in French, Castoriadis chooses "terrible." Castoriadis himself comments on the difficulties of translating this Greek term into a modern language in "Notes on A Few Poetic Means," forthcoming in *Figures of the Thinkable*. —T/E

to be found during that era at Athens—like, moreover, Socrates's speech (the "personification of the laws") in the *Crito*.¹¹ Now, Protagoras says exactly the opposite of what Plato will spend his whole life trying to show; Protagoras says that in politics there is no *epistēmē*, no certain and assured knowledge, nor any political *technē* that belongs to specialists. In politics, there is only *doxa*, opinion, and this *doxa* is equally and equitably shared by all. This is also, let it be said in passing, the sole possible justification, other than procedural, for majority rule.

But one must turn in particular toward the effectively actual institutions of the democracy in order to understand its spirit. First, there is direct democracy, that is to say, the idea of everyone participating politically in decisions concerning public affairs. There is the invention of the elective principle for posts requiring a specific sort of know-how, but also rotation and sortition for the other posts. There is the idea, appearing for the first time in history, of the responsibility of magistrates before the people, *euthunē*. There is the de facto revocability of all magistrates and also the extraordinary institution that is called *graphē paranomon*, by means of which one can haul before the popular courts someone who has convinced the people's Assembly to vote an "illegitimate" law—an appeal of the people against itself before itself, which opens an abyss for

¹¹Concerning Protagoras's speech in Plato's *Protagoras*, see "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary" (1991), in *WIF*, p. 88; concerning Socrates's personification (Castoriadis literally says "prosopopoeia") of the Laws in Plato's *Crito*, see "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988), in *PPA*, p. 168n29. In both these instances, Castoriadis refers to these speeches as expressing the "*topoi*" of ancient Greek "democratic thinking." —T/E

us to reflect upon. There is the separation of the judicial sphere from the legislative and governmental spheres. There is an understanding of the importance of the economic conditions for democracy, for participation (ecclesiastic wage, etc.). There is, finally, the fantastic clause, which Aristotle attests to in the *Politics*, that forbids inhabitants of a border area from participation when it comes to voting for or against war with a neighboring city, for to make them vote on this issue would be to place them in an inhuman double bind: either they vote as Athenian citizens, possibly for war, neglecting the fact that their homes risk being destroyed, their fields devastated, and so forth, or they vote as particular human beings who cannot forget their own skin, their family, their olive trees, and they vote against war, not because such was the interest of the *polis* but because such was their particular interest. To glimpse the gulf separating the Greek political imaginary from the modern political imaginary, let us try to imagine for an instant what would happen today if someone had the preposterous (and quite evidently *politically just*) idea of proposing that, in votes of the French National Assembly concerning winegrowing, the deputies from winegrowing districts should be forbidden from voting.

As I have said a thousand times, it is not a matter of making all this into a model, a paradigm, or the like. Nonetheless, it should be understood that what we have here are some fecund germs for all thinking about the project of autonomy, the project of an autonomous society.

We must also, of course, understand the limits. These limits are obviously slavery, the status of women—all that has been said and resaid—but much more than that, we should understand that these limits are the limitations of this self-institution and that these latter are, first of all, the

limitations of the *polis*; in other words, these limits are expressed by the city's inability to bring to the political level the signification of *universality*—which nevertheless was to be found in Greek philosophy from the outset, as early as the first pre-Socratic writings. Consubstantial with the birth of philosophy is the birth of the idea of a universal *logon didonai* {providing a reasoned account}, of a search for the truth and a questioning of what exists as a people's representations; this idea knows no geographical bounds, no limits of race, language, political community, or the like. Now, as it turned out, this idea proved incapable of penetrating into the field of politics. Political universality, even if it remains a mere idea, is a creation of modern Europe, not of Greece. Universality of thought is a Greek creation, the forms of democracy are a Greek creation, but not political universality. There were things that were not to be touched. The important thing about slavery is not that there were slaves; it's that the question was not and could not be raised. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet says, in a comedy by Aristophanes one can envision a gynecocracy {rule by women} in order to laugh about it, but it was out of the question to envision a doulocracy {rule by slaves}, even to laugh about it. This was an impassible boundary for one's field of vision (and its crossing in postclassical times by the Cynics or the Stoics was to remain purely theoretical). There was also, despite demands for a redistribution of lands and the famous communist experiment on the Lipari Islands, about which nothing is known except that it failed, another limit: private property was not put into question (except in order to laugh, as in the *Assembly of Women*).

In modern Europe, what we have is precisely the calling into question of both political inequality and economic inequality. What the final response to this

question will be is another story—*the* story, history. Yet, no one will dare say today that private property, for example, results from any sort of divine decree. Its defenders will line up their arguments, they will invoke various authorities, cite the bankruptcy of "communism" in Russia—but they will be obliged to discuss the matter.

This is the great novelty of the modern creation, its *alterity* with respect to the Greek creation. Nevertheless, it should not stop us—far from it—from reflecting upon the first germs of this autonomy that we want and that we will [*que nous voulons*].

Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime*

The very subject of our discussion is a translation and expression of the crisis the democratic movement is currently undergoing. And our choice of this subject is indeed conditioned by the appearance of a conception of "democracy" that, breaking with all previous political thought, makes of democracy a mere set of "procedures." Political thought saw in democracy a *regime* that was indissociable from a substantive conception of the ends of the political institution and from a view, and from an aim, of the type of human being that corresponds to it. It is easy to see that, whatever the philosophical window dressing, a purely procedural conception of "democracy" itself originates in the crisis of the imaginary significations that concern the ultimate goals [*finalités*] of collective life and aims at covering over this crisis by dissociating all discussion relative to these goals from the political "form of the regime," and, ultimately, even by eliminating the very idea of such goals. The deep-seated connection between this conception and what is rather ridiculously called contemporary "individualism" is quite manifest and I shall return to it. But we must begin at the beginning.

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I

To discuss democracy is to discuss politics. Now, *politics*—*la politique*—does not exist everywhere and always; true politics is the result of a rare and fragile social-historical creation. What does necessarily exist in every society is *the political sphere in a general or neutral sense, "the political"*—*le politique*—the explicit, implicit, sometimes almost ungraspable dimension that deals with power, namely the instituted instance (or instances) that is (or are) capable of issuing sanction-bearing injunctions and that must always, and explicitly, include at least what we call a judicial power and a governmental power.¹ There can be, there has been, and we hope that there will again be societies without a State, namely, without a hierarchically organized bureaucratic apparatus separate from society and dominating it. The State is a historical creation that can be dated and localized: Mesopotamia, East and Southeast Asia, pre-Columbian Meso-America. A society without such a State is possible, conceivable, and desirable. But a society without explicit institutions of power is an absurdity into which both Marx and anarchism lapsed.

There is no such thing as an extrasocial human being; nor is there, either as reality or as coherent fiction, any human "individual" as an a-, -extra-, or presocial "substance." We cannot conceive of an individual that does not have language, for example, and there is language only as creation and social institution. Unless one wants to look

¹See my text, "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988), first published in English in *Zwischenbetrachtungen Im Prozess der Aufklärung: Jürgen Habermas zum 60 Geburtstag* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989) and reprinted in *PPA*.

ridiculous, one cannot see this creation and this institution as resulting from some deliberate cooperation among "individuals"—or from an addition of "intersubjective" networks: for there to be intersubjectivity, there must be human subjects as well as the possibility for these subjects to communicate—in other words, there must be already socialized human beings and a language they could not produce by themselves qua individuals (one or several "intersubjective networks") since they must receive language through their socialization. The same considerations hold for a thousand other facets of what we call *the individual*. Contemporary "political philosophy"—as well as the basics of what passes for economic science—is founded upon this incoherent fiction of an individual-substance, which is supposedly well defined in its essential determinations outside or prior to all society, and it is upon this absurdity that both the idea of democracy as mere "procedure" and contemporary pseudo-"individualism" are necessarily based. Outside society, however, the human being is neither beast nor God (as Aristotle said) but quite simply *is not* and cannot exist either physically or, what is more, psychically. Radically unfit for life, the "hopeful and dreadful monster" that is the newborn human baby must be humanized; and this process of humanization is its socialization, the labor of society mediated and instrumented by the *infans's* immediate entourage. The being-society of society is the institutions and the social imaginary significations these institutions embody and make exist in effective social actuality. These are the significations that give a meaning—imaginary meaning, in the profound sense of the term, that is, spontaneous and unmotivated creation of humanity—to life, to activity, to choices, to the death of humans as well as to

the world they create and in which humans must live and die. The polarity is not that between individual and society, since the individual *is* society, a fragment at the same time as a miniature—or, better, a sort of hologram—of the social world. Rather, it is that between psyche and society. The psyche must somehow or other be tamed; it must accept a "reality" that is to begin with, and, in a sense, till the very end radically heterogeneous and foreign to it. This "reality" and its acceptance are the work of the institution. The Greeks knew it; the Moderns, in large part because of Christianity, have occulted this fact.

The institution—and the imaginary significations it bears and conveys—can exist only if it preserves itself, that is, only if it is fit enough to survive. The Darwinian tautology finds here another fertile ground of application. The institution preserves itself also by means of power—and this power exists, first of all, as a radical, always implicit, "infrapower." You were born in Italy in 1954, in France in 1930, in the United States in 1945, in Greece in 1922. You did not decide that, but this pure fact will decide the main part of your existence: your native tongue, your religion, 99% of your thought (in the best of cases), your reasons for living and for accepting (or not accepting) to die. This is much more, and indeed something quite other, than a mere "being in the world" that has not been chosen (Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*). That world is not one or *the* world; it is a social-historical world, fashioned by its institution and containing, in an indescribable fashion, innumerable transformed legacies [*transformés*] of previous history.

From birth, the human subject is caught in a social-historical field, is placed under the simultaneous grip of the collective instituting imaginary, instituted society, and history, whose provisional culmination is this institution

itself. In the first place, society can do nothing other than produce social individuals that conform to it and that in turn produce it. Even if one is born into a society riven by internal conflict, the terrain of such conflict, the stakes involved, and the options available are pregiven; even if one were to become a philosopher, it is *this* history of *this here* philosophy that will be the point of departure for one's reflection, and not another. Here one is very much on the far side, or the near side, of all intention, will, maneuver, conspiracy, or predisposition of any assignable institution, law, group, or class.

Alongside—or "above"—this implicit infrapower, there always has been and there always will be an explicit power, instituted as such, with its particular arrangements, its definite functioning, the legitimate sanctions it can put into application.² The necessary existence of this power is the result of at least four key factors:

- the "presocial" world, as such, always threatens the meaning already instaurated by society;
- the psyche of each singular human being is not and can never be completely socialized and rendered exhaustively conformal to what institutions demand of it;
- other societies exist, and they pose a danger to the meaning already instaurated by the society in question;
- in its institutions and its imaginary significations, society always contains a push toward the future, and the future excludes a prior and exhaustive codification (or mechanization) of the decisions that are to be made.

²Legitimate sanctions in relation to positive right, not in the absolute.

For these reasons, there is a need for explicitly instituted instances or agencies that can make sanction-bearing decisions about what is to be done and not to be done, that can legislate, "execute" decisions, settle points of litigation, and govern. The first two functions can be (and, in most archaic societies, have been) buried beneath customary regulations, but the last two cannot. Finally, and above all, this explicit power is itself the instituted guarantee for the monopoly over legitimate significations in the society under consideration.

The political may be defined as everything that concerns this explicit power. This includes the modes of access to explicit power, the appropriate ways of managing it, and so on.

This type of institution of society covers almost all of human history. Here we are talking about heteronomous societies, which certainly create their own institutions and significations, but they also occult this self-creation by imputing it to an extrasocial source—in any case, one that is external to the effectively actual activity of the effectively existing collectivity: the ancestors, the heroes, the gods, God, the laws of history or those of the market. In these heteronomous societies, the institution of society takes place within a closure of meaning. All questions the society under consideration is capable of formulating can find a response within its imaginary significations, and those that cannot be formulated are not so much forbidden as mentally and psychically impossible for the members of that society.

This situation, as we know, has been shattered but twice in history—in ancient Greece and in Western Europe—and we are the inheritors of this break. It is what allows us to speak as we are now speaking. The rupture that has occurred expresses itself through the creation of

politics and philosophy (or reflection). Politics puts into question the established institutions. Philosophy puts into question what Bacon called the *idola tribus*, the collectively accepted representations.

In these societies, the closure of meaning is broken or at least tends to be broken. This rupture—and the incessant activity of questioning that goes along with it—implies the rejection of any source of meaning other than the living activity of human beings. It therefore implies the rejection of all "authority" that would fail to render an account and provide reasons, that would not offer justifications for the *de jure* validity of its pronouncements. It follows from this, almost immediately, that there is:

- an obligation on the part of all to give an account of and reasons for their deeds and their words (this is what the Greeks called *logon didonai*);
- a rejection of preestablished "differences" or "alterities" (hierarchies) in individuals' respective positions, therefore a questioning of all power flowing therefrom;
- an opening up of the question of what are the good (or best) institutions, insofar as these institutions depend upon the conscious and explicit activity of the collectivity—therefore also an opening up of the question of justice.

It is easy to see that these consequences lead one to consider politics as a labor that concerns all members of the collectivity under consideration. This presupposes the equality of all, and it aims at making such equality effectively actual. Therefore, it is also a labor aimed at transforming institutions in a democratic direction. We thus can define politics as explicit and lucid activity that concerns the instauration of desirable institutions and

democracy as the regime of explicit and lucid self-institution, as far as is possible, of the social institutions that depend upon explicit collective activity.

It is hardly necessary to add that this self-institution is a movement that does not stop, that it does not aim at a "perfect society" (a perfectly meaningless expression) but, rather, at a society that is as free and as just as possible. It is this movement that I call the project of an autonomous society and that, if it is to succeed, has to establish a democratic society.

A prior question arises, one that actually has been posed in history: Why do we want, why ought we to want, a democratic regime? I shall not discuss this question but shall limit myself, instead, merely to observing that the raising of this question itself already implies that we have to (or ought to) be living in a regime in which all questions can be raised—and this is exactly what a democratic regime is.

But it is also immediately obvious that such an institution—one in which any question can be raised and in which no position, no status, is given or guaranteed in advance—defines democracy as a regime. I shall return to this point.

II

It has been objected that this view entails a substantive conception of citizens' happiness—and that, consequently, it inevitably leads to totalitarianism. This position is stated explicitly by Isaiah Berlin and implicitly by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas in their arguments.³

³For Habermas, see his recent "Three Normative Models of Democracy," *Constellations*, 1:1 (April 1994), pp. 1-10.

But nothing in what we have just said makes any allusion to citizens'"happiness." The historical motivations behind these objections—from Saint-Just's famous "Happiness is a new idea in Europe" to the monstrous farce of Stalinist regimes which claimed that they were working for, and achieving, people's happiness ("Life has become better, Comrades. Life has become merrier," Stalin declared at the height of misery and terror in Russia)—are understandable. Nonetheless, these motivations do not of themselves justify adoption of the theoretical position; the latter appears as an almost epidermal reaction to a historical situation of colossal dimensions—the emergence of totalitarianism—that would require a much deeper analysis of the political question. The objective of politics is not happiness but freedom. Effectively actual freedom (I am not discussing here "philosophical" freedom) is what I call *autonomy*. The autonomy of the collectivity, which can be achieved only through explicit self-institution and self-governance, is inconceivable without the effectively actual autonomy of the individuals who make it up. Concrete society, the living and functioning one, is nothing other than the concrete, effectively actual, "real" individuals of that society.

The inverse, however, is equally true: The autonomy of individuals is inconceivable and impossible without the autonomy of the collectivity. For, what does the autonomy of individuals signify, how is it possible, and what does it presuppose? How can one be free if one is placed of necessity under the law of society? Here is a first condition: One must have the effectively actual possibility to participate in the formation of the law (of the institution). I can be free under the law only if I can say that this law is mine, only if I had the effectively actual possibility to

participate in its formation and its positing (even if my preferences did not prevail). The law being necessarily universal in its content and, in a democracy, collective in its source (this is, in theory, not contested by the proceduralists), the result is that, in a democracy, the autonomy (the effectively actual freedom) of all is and has to be a fundamental concern of each. (The tendency to "forget" this self-evident fact is one of the innumerable ways in which contemporary "individualism" tries to stack the deck.) For, the quality of the collectivity that decides on our fate is of vital import to us—otherwise, our own freedom becomes politically irrelevant, Stoic, or ascetic. I have a basic positive (and even egotistical) interest to live in a society that is closer to that of the *Symposium* than to that of *The Godfather* or of *Dallas*. In its effectively actual realization, my own freedom is a function of the effectively actual freedom of others—though this idea is certainly incomprehensible to a Cartesian or a Kantian.

No doubt, the deployment and realization of this kind of freedom presuppose certain specific institutional arrangements—including, certainly, some "formal" and "procedural" ones: individual rights (a "bill of rights"), legal guarantees ("due process of law," *nullum crimen nulla poena sine lege*), the separation of powers, and so on. But the liberties that result therefrom are strictly defensive in character. All these arrangements presuppose—and this is the near-general tacit postulate in what passes for modern political philosophy—that there is, facing the collectivity, an alien power that is unmovable, impenetrable, and, in its very essence, hostile and dangerous, whose might must, to the extent that is possible, have limits set upon it. This is but the tacit philosophy the English House of Commons maintained vis-à-vis the King, and it is the position

explicitly articulated in the founding texts of the American Constitution. That, a few centuries later, the "political thinkers" of modernity still behave psychically and intellectually as "your Excellency's Most obedient Servant" (*Eu. Excellenz untertänig gehorsamster Diener*)⁴ will surprise only those who have never reflected upon the strange relationship that exists between most intellectuals and the established powers.⁵

Freedom under law—autonomy—signifies participation in the positing of the law. It is tautologous to state that such participation achieves freedom only if it is equally possible for all, not in the letter of the law but in effective social actuality. The absurdity of opposing equality and liberty, the supposed opposition some people have been trying to drub into our ears for decades now, follows immediately from this tautology. Unless their meanings are taken in a totally specious way, the two notions imply each other.⁶ The equal effectively actual possibility of participation requires that everyone has effectively been granted all the conditions for such participation. Clearly, the implications of this requirement are immense; they embrace a considerable portion of the overall institution of society, but the Archimedean point here is obviously *paideia*, in the deepest and most permanent sense of the term, to which I shall return.

⁴This phrase appears as the closing of Kant's dedication for his *Critique of Pure Reason*, dated at Königsberg March 29, 1781, and is addressed to the Royal Minister of the State of Prussia, Freiherr (Baron) Von Zedlitz.

⁵See my text, "Intellectuals and History" (1987), now in *PPA*.

⁶See my text, "The Nature and Value of Equality" (1981), now in *PPA*.

It is therefore not possible to achieve even a "procedural democracy" that is not a fraud unless one intervenes deeply in the substantive organization of social life.

III

The ancient Greek tongue and the political practice of the Athenians offer us a precious—and, in my opinion, universally valid—distinction among three spheres of human activities that the overall institution of society must both separate and articulate: the *oikos*, the *agora*, and the *ekklēsia*. A free translation would be: the private sphere, the private/public sphere, and the (formally and in the strong sense) public sphere, identical to what I above called explicit power. I note in passing that this fundamental distinction is there, on a factual level and in language, but was not rendered explicit as such during the classical era, not even, except partially, by the classical thinker of democracy, Aristotle.

These spheres are clearly distinguished (and properly articulated) only under a democratic regime. Under a totalitarian regime, for example, the public sphere in principle absorbs everything. At the same time, this public sphere is in reality not at all public, for it has become the private property of the totalitarian Apparatus that holds and exercises power. In principle, traditional absolute monarchies respected the independence of the private sphere—the *oikos*—and intervened only moderately in the private/public sphere—the *agora*. Paradoxically, today's pseudodemocracies in the West have in fact rendered the public sphere in large part private: the decisions that really count are those made in secret or behind the scenes (of the

Government, the parliamentary system, and the party Apparatuses). A definition of democracy as good as any other is: It is the regime in which the public sphere becomes truly and effectively public—belongs to everyone, is effectively open to the participation of all.

The *oikos*—the family household, the private sphere—is the domain in which, formally and in principle, the political power neither can nor should intervene. As with all subjects in this domain, even this cannot and should not be taken absolutely: penal law prohibits assaults on the life or bodily integrity of the members of one's family; even under the most conservative governments, the education of children is made mandatory; and so forth.

The *agora*—the marketplace and meeting point—is the domain in which individuals come together freely, discuss matters, contract with one another, publish and buy books, and so on. Here again, formally and in principle, the political power neither can nor should intervene—and here again, as in all cases, this cannot be taken as absolute. The law prescribes respect for private contracts, prohibits child labor, and so on. In fact, one could never stop enumerating the points on which and the arrangements by which the political power, even in the most "liberal" States (in the sense of {"free-market" or "laissez-faire"} capitalist liberalism), intervenes in this domain (for example, the formulation of governmental budgets, which will be mentioned again below).

The *ekklesia*, a term I use here metaphorically,⁷ is the site of the political power, the public/public domain. The

⁷I use this term symbolically (and not as an abuse of language). The Athenian Assembly did not exercise judicial power and only supervised the "executive" (in the sense I give here to this term, i.e., administration).

political power includes powers, and these powers must be both separate and articulated. I have explained my position on this elsewhere⁸ and I shall limit myself here to a few points that are of importance for the present discussion.

When the activity of the different branches of power is considered in the concrete, one can clearly see that in no domain can decisions be conceived and adopted without taking into account considerations of a substantive character. This holds both for legislation and for government, for the "execution" of decisions as well as for the judiciary.

Indeed, it is impossible to imagine a law—except, precisely, a procedural one, and even then . . . —that does not touch on substantive questions. Even the prohibition of murder does not go without saying—as is shown by the many restrictions, exceptions, and qualifications that everywhere and always surround it. The same goes for that which relates to the "application" of the laws, whether it is a matter of the judiciary or of the "executive."⁹ The judge cannot (and, in any case, should not) ever be a *Paraphenautomat*, not only because there are always "holes in the law" (*Rechtslücken*) but especially because there always is a question of interpretation of the law and,

⁸See my text, "Done and to Be Done" (1989), now in the *Castoriadis Reader*, in particular pp. 405-17.

⁹What is named the "executive" in modern philosophical and constitutional language is in fact divided in two: governmental power (or *function*) and administrative power (or *function*). The "Government," qua government, does not "execute" laws; in the main, it *acts* (governs) *within the framework* of the laws. To the extent that it cannot fully be "mechanized," administration, too, cannot escape questions of interpretation, such as those mentioned later in the text.

at a deeper level, a question of equity.¹⁰ Interpretation, like equity, is inconceivable without recourse to and invocation of the "mind of legislator," or his "intentions"¹¹ and the substantive values at which these intentions are supposed to aim. It is the same for that which relates to administration, to the extent that the latter cannot simply "apply" laws and decrees without interpreting them. And it is, par excellence, the same for the Government. The governmental function is "arbitrary." It takes place within the framework of the law, and it is bound by the law (obviously, I am speaking here of what is supposed to be the case in Western "democratic" regimes), but in general it neither applies nor executes laws. The law (in general, a country's Constitution) says that the Government must submit a budget proposal to the parliamentary branch every year and that the latter (which, in this case, shares a governmental and not a "legislative" function) must vote on it, as is or with amendments; but the law does not say, and could never say, what should be in this budget. Quite obviously, it is impossible to imagine a budget that would not be totally drenched, as much on the revenue side as on the expenditure side, in substantive decisions, that would not be inspired by objectives and "values" it aims at achieving. More generally, we can say that all nontrivial governmental decisions concern and commit the future in a sort of radical, and radically inevitable, obscurity. To the extent that

¹⁰See my analysis of Aristotle's ideas on this subject in "Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us" (1975), now in *CL*.

¹¹It is obviously not a matter of "historically documented" intentions but of the necessary—and problematic—insertion of every particular clause into the overall legal system, which in principle is continually evolving.

society depends upon them, these decisions tend to orient a society's evolution in one direction in preference to another. How could they be made without having recourse, be it only tacitly, to substantive options?

It might be objected: But all these explicit decisions (and notably legislative and governmental ones) could very well merely aim at preserving the present state of things—or at preserving society's (non-"political") freedom to give rise to and to deploy whatever "substantive lifestyles" it might wish to adopt. However, this argument itself contains, be it only implicitly, a positive evaluation of the already existing forms and contents of social life—be they the legacy of times immemorial or the product of society's present activity. To take the example most familiar to the present-day reader, extreme "liberalism" {in the Continental sense of a conservative "free-market" or "laissez-faire" ideology} boils down to a substantive affirmation that whatever the "mechanisms of the market," "free individual initiative," and so on produce is "good" or "the least bad thing possible," or else to the affirmation that no value judgment can be made on this matter. (The two affirmations, which are obviously contradictory, are simultaneously or successively maintained by such people as Friedrich von Hayek.) To say that no value judgment can be made about what society "spontaneously" produces leads to total historical nihilism and boils down, for example, to affirming that any regime (Stalinist, Nazi, or other) is as worthwhile as any other. Saying that what tradition or (this boils down to the same thing) society produces "spontaneously" is good or the least bad thing possible obviously obliges one to show, each time and with each specific example, in what respect and why this is so and therefore obliges one to enter into a substantive discussion.

As no one in his right mind would challenge these assertions, the duplicity of the procedural position becomes quite clear: it is not a matter of denying that decisions affecting questions of substance must in any case be made, whatever the type of regime under consideration, but of affirming that, in a "democratic" regime, the "form" or the "procedure" according to which these decisions are made alone really matters—or else that this "form" or "procedure" by itself identifies a regime as "democratic."

Let us grant that it is so. Still, every "procedure" must be applied—by human beings. And these humans have to be such that they could, should, and, as a strict rule, would apply this procedure according to its "spirit." What are these beings, and where do they come from? Only a metaphysical illusion—that of an individual-substance, preformed in its essential determinations, whose belonging to any definite social-historical environment would be as accidental as the color of its eyes—would enable one to duck this question. We are in the realm of effectively actual politics, not in Habermasian "counterfactual" fictions; therefore, one must postulate effectively actual existence, the existence of human atoms—ones already endowed not only with "rights," and so on, but with a perfect knowledge of legal arrangements (barring that, we would have to legitimate a division of labor, established once and for all, between "mere citizens" and judges, administrators, legislators, etc.)—that would tend on their own, ineluctably, and independently of all education or training, their singular histories, and so forth, to behave as juridico-political atoms. This fiction of *homo juridicus* is as ridiculous and inconsistent as that of *homo æconomicus*, and the anthropological metaphysics presupposed by both is the same.

For the "procedural" view, humans (or a sufficient proportion of them) would each have to be a pure legal Understanding. Effectively actual individuals, however, are something else entirely. And one is indeed obliged to take them as they are, always already fashioned by society, with their histories, their passions, their particular allegiances, commitments, and memberships of all sorts, such as the social-historical process and the given institution of society have already fabricated them. In order for these effectively actual individuals to be other than they are now, it would be necessary for this institution, too, to be other in substantial and substantive respects. Let us even suppose that a democracy, as complete, perfect, etc. as one might wish, might fall upon us from the heavens: this sort of democracy will not be able to endure for more than a few years if it does not engender individuals that correspond to it, ones that, first and foremost, are capable of making it function and reproducing it. There can be no democratic society without democratic *paideia*.

Short of lapsing into incoherency, the procedural conception of democracy is obliged to introduce surreptitiously—or culminate in—at least two de facto and simultaneous judgments of substance:

- that the effectively actual, given institutions of society are, such as they are, compatible with the functioning of "truly" democratic procedures;
- that the individuals of this society, such as they are fabricated by this society, can make the established procedures function in accordance with the "spirit" of those procedures and can defend them.

These judgments include multiple presuppositions and entail numerous consequences. I shall mention but two.

The first is that, here again, one encounters the

fundamental question of equity, not in the substantive sense but, first of all, in its strictly logical sense, as already laid down by Plato and Aristotle.¹² There is always an inadequation between the matter to be judged and the very form of the law—the former being necessarily concrete and singular, the latter abstract and universal. This inadequacy can be overcome only by the creative work of the judge who "puts herself in the place of the legislator"—which implies that she has recourse to considerations of a substantive nature. This necessarily goes beyond all proceduralism.

The second is that, for individuals to be capable of making democratic procedures function in accordance with their "spirit," a large part of the labor of society and of its institutions must be directed toward engendering individuals that correspond to this definition—that is, women and men who are democratic even in the strictly procedural sense of the term. But then one has to face up to a dilemma: Either this education of individuals is dogmatic, authoritarian, heteronomous—and the alleged democracy then becomes the political equivalent of a religious ritual—or the individuals who are to "apply the procedures" (e.g., voting, legislating, execution of laws, governance) have been educated in a critical manner. In the latter case, the institution of society must endow critical thinking as such with positive value—and then the Pandora's box of calling existing institutions into question is opened up and democracy again becomes society's movement of self-institution—that is to say, a new type of regime in the full sense of the term.

The journalists, as well as some political philosophers who seem completely unaware of the long

¹²See my "Value, Equality, Justice, Politics," cited in note 10 above.

disputes over the "philosophy of right" during the last two centuries, constantly talk to us about the "State of right." If, however, the "State of right" (*Rechtsstaat*) is something other than a "State of law" (*Gesetzstaat*),¹³ it is so only insofar as the former goes beyond mere conformity with "procedures"—that is, only insofar as the question of justice is posed and affects even the legal rules that have already been laid down. But the question of justice becomes the question of politics as soon as the institution of society has ceased to be sacred or based upon tradition. Appeals to the "rule of law" thenceforth can serve only to dodge the questions: Which law? Why this law and not another? Even the "formally democratic" response—the law is law because it is the decision of the greatest number (I leave aside here the question of whether it is really so)—cannot close off the question: And why, then, does it have to be so? If the justification for the rule of the majority is strictly procedural in character—for example, the fact that all discussions must at some point come to an end—then any old rule would enjoy the same amount of justification: we could decide by lot, for example. Majority rule can be justified only if one grants equal value, in the domain of the contingent and the probable, to the *doxai* of free individuals.¹⁴ But if this equality of value among opinions is not to remain a "counterfactual principle," some sort of pseudotranscendental gadget, then the permanent labor of

¹³For many long centuries before the French Revolution, the monarchy, whether absolute or "enlightened," had achieved a "State of law" in most countries of Western Europe. "There are judges in Potsdam," replied the Prussian miller to Frederick the Great.

¹⁴This is pretty much how Aristotle justified it in *The Constitution of the Athenians* 41.

the institution of society must be to render individuals such that one might reasonably postulate that their opinions all have the same weight in the political domain. Once again, the question of *paideia* proves ineliminable.

The idea that one might separate "positive right" and its procedures from substantive values is but a mirage. The idea that a democratic regime could receive history "ready made" from democratic individuals who would make it function is just as much so. Such individuals can be formed only in and through a democratic *paideia*, which does not grow up like a plant but instead has to be one of the main objects of a society's political concerns.

Democratic procedures comprise one—certainly important, but only one—part of a democratic regime. And these procedures must be truly democratic in their spirit. In the first regime that, despite everything, might be called democratic—that is, the Athenian regime—these procedures were instituted not as a mere "means" but as a moment in the embodiment and facilitation of the processes that brought that regime into being. Rotation in office, sortition, decision-making after deliberation by the entire body politic, elections, and popular courts did not rest solely on a postulate that everyone has an equal capacity to assume public responsibilities: these procedures were themselves pieces of a political educational process, of an active *paideia*, which aimed at exercising—and, therefore, at developing in all—the corresponding abilities and, thereby, at rendering the postulate of political equality as close to the effective reality of that society as possible.

IV

The roots of these confusions certainly are not solely

"ideal" in origin—in the sense that they should be sought essentially or exclusively in "false ideas"—any more than they are merely "material"—in the sense that they would express, consciously or not, interests, drives, social positions, and so on. Their roots plunge deep into the social-historical imaginary of the modern "political" period, already into its prehistory but especially into its basically antinomical character. It is not possible to undertake here an elucidation of these roots. I shall limit myself to picking out a few salient points among the constellation of ideas in and through which this imaginary has expressed itself in the political sphere.

I shall begin *in media res*. Marxism (and this goes back, whatever one might say, to Marx himself) judged "bourgeois" rights and liberties in light of the following standard of criticism: that they were merely "formal" and were established more or less in the interest of capitalism. This critical standard was faulty in multiple ways.

First of all, these rights and liberties did not arise with capitalism, nor were they granted by the latter. Demanded at the outset by the protobourgeoisie of what became the free towns, they began to be wrested, conquered, imposed as early as the tenth century through people's centuries-old struggles (in which an important role was played not only by underprivileged strata but also very often by the petite bourgeoisie). Where they were merely imported, for example, they have almost always been lackluster as well as fragile (as in the countries of Latin America or Japan). Next, it is not these rights and liberties that correspond to the "spirit" of capitalism: the latter demands, rather, the Taylorist "one best way" or the "iron cage" of Max Weber. The idea that they might be the political counterpart of and presupposition for competition

in the economic market is equally false; the latter is only one moment, neither spontaneous (see Karl Polanyi) nor permanent, of capitalism. When we consider the inner tendency of capitalism, we see that capitalism culminates in monopoly, oligopoly, or alliances among capitalists. Nor are they a presupposition for capitalism's development (see again Japan or the Asian "dragons").

Finally, and above all, they are in no way "formal" in character: they correspond to vitally necessary traits of every democratic regime. But they are partial and, as indicated at the beginning of this text, essentially defensive in character. Even Isaiah Berlin's qualification that they are "negative" is inadequate. The right to assemble, to seek redress of grievances, to publish a newspaper or a book is not "negative": the exercise of such rights comprises one component of social and political life and can have, and even necessarily does have, important effects on the latter. It is something else if their exercise might be hindered by effectively actual conditions or, as today in the rich countries, rendered more or less futile by the general process of political desertification. As a matter of fact, a major part of the struggle for democracy is aimed at instaurating real conditions that would permit everyone effectively to exercise these rights. Reciprocally, this fallacious Marxist denunciation of the so-called formal character of "bourgeois" rights and liberties has had catastrophic effects, serving as a springboard for the instauration of Leninist totalitarianism and as a cover for its continuation under Stalinism.

These liberties and these rights are therefore not "formal" in character: they are partial and, in effective social reality, essentially defensive. For the same reason, they are not "negative." Isaiah Berlin's expression belongs within

the context and social-historical legacy to which I alluded at the outset. It corresponds to the underlying, near-permanent attitude toward power European {in a broad, not completely geographical sense} societies and populations (and certainly not just them, but these are the ones we are talking about here). When the millennial imaginary of kingship by divine right was finally, at least partially, shattered (this imaginary was ratified and reinforced by Christianity, with Paul's "There is no power but of God"), the representation of power as something other than society, opposite it and opposed to it, nevertheless continued. Power is "them" ("us-and-them," as the English continue to say); it is in principle hostile; and it is a matter of keeping it within strict limits and of defending oneself against it. It was only during revolutionary periods, in the former Thirteen Colonies or in France, that phrases such as "We the people" or the term *Nation* acquired some political meaning, that sovereignty was declared to belong to the nation—in a phrase that was, moreover, rapidly emptied of its content by means of "representation." In this context, it is understandable that rights and liberties have come to be considered as a means of defense against an all-powerful and essentially alien State.

Isaiah Berlin contrasted these "negative" liberties, the sole ones acceptable to him, with an idea of "positive" liberty that is closely related to the ancient (Greek) democratic conception that all citizens are to participate in power. According to him, the latter kind of liberty is potentially totalitarian, since it would presuppose the imposition of a positive and collectively (politically) determined conception of the common good, or of what it is to live well. The fault lines in this argument are multiple. The effective (rather than "positive") liberty of all via

everyone's participation in power implies no more of a conception of the common good than any legislative, governmental, or even judicial decision made by "representatives," cabinet ministers, or professional judges. As was stated earlier, there can never be a system of right, for example, that would be completely (or even essentially) *Wertfrei*, neutral as to its values. The recognition of a free sphere of "private activity"—whatever its boundaries might be—itsself proceeds from the affirmation of a substantive value claiming universal validity: It is good for everyone that individuals move freely within spheres of private activity that are recognized and guaranteed by law. The delimitation of these spheres and the content of eventual sanctions against others who would transgress them must necessarily have recourse to something other than a formal conception of law, as could easily be shown with any system of positive right. (To take only one example, it is impossible to define a yardstick of seriousness for misdemeanors and criminal penalties without making "comparisons" among the values of life, liberty—e.g., prison—money, and so on.)

Implicit in Berlin's argument is another confusion: that between the common good and happiness. The end of politics is not happiness, which can only be a private matter;¹⁵ it is freedom, or individual and collective autonomy. Nevertheless, it cannot *solely* be autonomy, for then one would lapse into Kantian formalism and be open to all the justified criticisms leveled against Kantian formalism since it was first formulated. As I have already

¹⁵See the section entitled "Subjective Roots of the Revolutionary Project" in the first part (1964-65) of my book *IIS* (1975; English-language edition 1987), especially pp. 91-92.

written elsewhere,¹⁶ we want freedom both for itself and in order to make something of it, in order to be able to do things. Now, as for a vast portion of these things, either we cannot do them all alone or they depend to a high degree upon the overall institution of society—and, generally, both simultaneously. This necessarily implies a conception—be it only minimal—of the common good.

Certainly, as I recalled at the outset, Berlin did not create this confusion himself; he simply shared it. It comes from the distant past, and it is thus all the more necessary to dissipate it. The distinction to be reestablished is ancient in vintage (and for this reason it is all the more inexcusable that modern theorists have forgotten it). This is the distinction between happiness, a strictly private affair, and the common good (or the good life), which is unthinkable without recourse to the public domain and even the public/public domain (power). It is, in different terms—ones which, however, will enrich the discussion—that between *eudaimonia*, felicity, which is not *eph' hēmin*, not dependent upon us, and *eu zein*, living well, which in great part depends upon us, individually and collectively (for, it depends upon our acts as well as upon that which and those who surround us—and, at a more abstract and more profound level, upon the institutions of society). The two distinctions can be contracted into one by stating that the realization of the common good is the condition for living well.

And yet, who determines or defines what it is to live well? Perhaps one of the principal reasons for the confusion surrounding this question is that philosophy has claimed that

¹⁶See my text, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in *PPA*, in particular pp. 106-14.

it can provide this determination or definition. It has done so because the position of thinkers of politics has most often been held by philosophers, and they, by profession, would like to determine once and for all both "happiness" and a "common good," and also, if possible, to make them coincide. Within the framework of inherited thought, this determination could not help but, in effect, be universal, valid for everyone in all times and places, and, in the same stroke, established somehow or other a priori. This is the root of the "error" committed by most philosophers who have written on politics, and of the symmetrical error committed by others who, in order to avoid the absurd consequences of this solution (as when Plato, for example, legislates which musical modes are permissible or prohibited for every "good" society), have come to reject the question itself, abandoning it to the free will of each.

No philosophy can define for everyone what happiness is and, above all, try to impose it through political decisions. Happiness belongs to the private sphere and to the private/public sphere. It does not belong to the public/public sphere as such. Democracy, as regime of freedom, certainly excludes any sort of "happiness" that could be rendered, in itself or in its "means," politically obligatory. Yet, even more than this can be said: No philosophy can define at any moment a substantive "common good"—and no politics can wait for philosophy to define such a common good before acting.¹⁷

¹⁷It would be difficult, certainly, for a philosopher to maintain that a society in which philosophy would be impossible is, in his view, as worthy as another one in which it is practiced. But, barring an additional (and long) elucidation of the content of the term *philosophy*, this does not define for us a class of societies. There was (at least a certain kind of)

Nonetheless, the questions confronting the public/public sphere (confronting legislation and government) cannot even be discussed without a view about the common good. The common good both is a condition for individual happiness and, beyond that, pertains to the works [*les œuvres*] and the undertakings society wants to see achieved, happiness aside.

This does not concern the democratic regime alone. Ontological analysis shows that no society can exist without a more or less certain definition of shared substantive values, common social goods (the "public goods" of economists constitute only a portion thereof). These values make up an essential part of the social imaginary significations as they are each time instituted. They define the push of each society; they provide norms and criteria that are not formally instituted (for example, the Greeks distinguished in this way between *dikaion* {just} and *kalon* {beautiful}); finally, they underlie the explicit institutional labor of a society. A political regime cannot be totally agnostic when it comes to values (or morals, or ethics). For example, right [*le droit*] cannot help but express a common (or dominant and, somehow or other, socially accepted) conception about the "moral minimum" implied by life in society.

But these values and this morality are a collective-anonymous and "spontaneous" creation. They can be modified under the influence of reflective and deliberate action—but the latter must reach other strata of social-historical being than those concerned with explicit political

philosophy in India and in China—not to mention Islamic countries and medieval Europe. It does not follow from this that a caste society or one ruled by mandarins is as politically valid as a democratic society.

action. In any event, the question of the common good belongs to the domain of social-historical making/doing [*faire*], not to theory. The substantial conception of the common good is created, each time, social-historically—and it is this conception, obviously, that stands behind all law [*tout droit*] and all procedure. This does not lead us into mere "relativism" if we live in a democratic regime, where questioning effectively remains open on a permanent basis—which presupposes the social creation of individuals who are effectively capable of questioning themselves. We rediscover here at least one component of the democratic common good, which is both substantive and nonrelative: The city must do everything possible to aid citizens in becoming effectively autonomous. This is, first of all, a condition for its existence qua democratic city: a city is made up of citizens, and a citizen is someone who is "capable of governing and being governed," as Aristotle said.¹⁸ But this is also, as has already been said, a positive condition for each person to live well, this living well depending upon the "quality" of the others. And the achievement of this objective—aiding individuals to become autonomous, or *paideia* in the strongest and most profound meaning of the term—is impossible without substantive political decisions (which, moreover, must be made in every type of regime and in any event).

Democracy as a regime is therefore the regime that tries to achieve, as far as it possibly can, both individual and collective autonomy and the common good such as it is conceived by the collectivity concerned in each particular case.

¹⁸Aristotle *Politics* 1252a16. —T/E

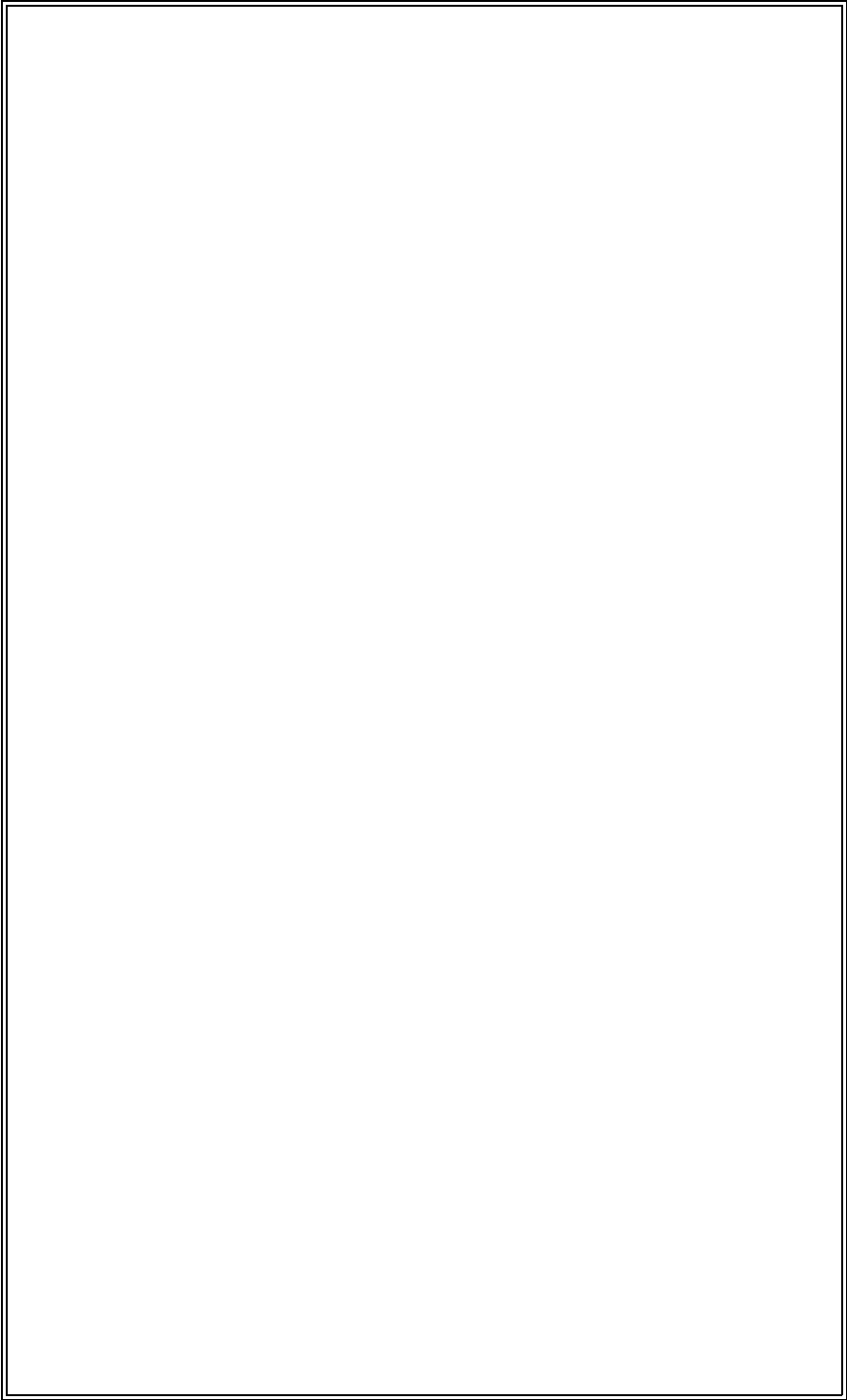
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The singular human being as absorbed in "its" collectivity—where, obviously, it finds itself only by chance (the chance of its birth in such and such a place at such and such a time)—and this same being as detached from every collectivity, contemplating society at a distance and trying in an illusory way to deal with society both as an artifact and as a necessary evil: these are but two outcomes of the same process of misrecognition, which occurs on two levels. It takes place:

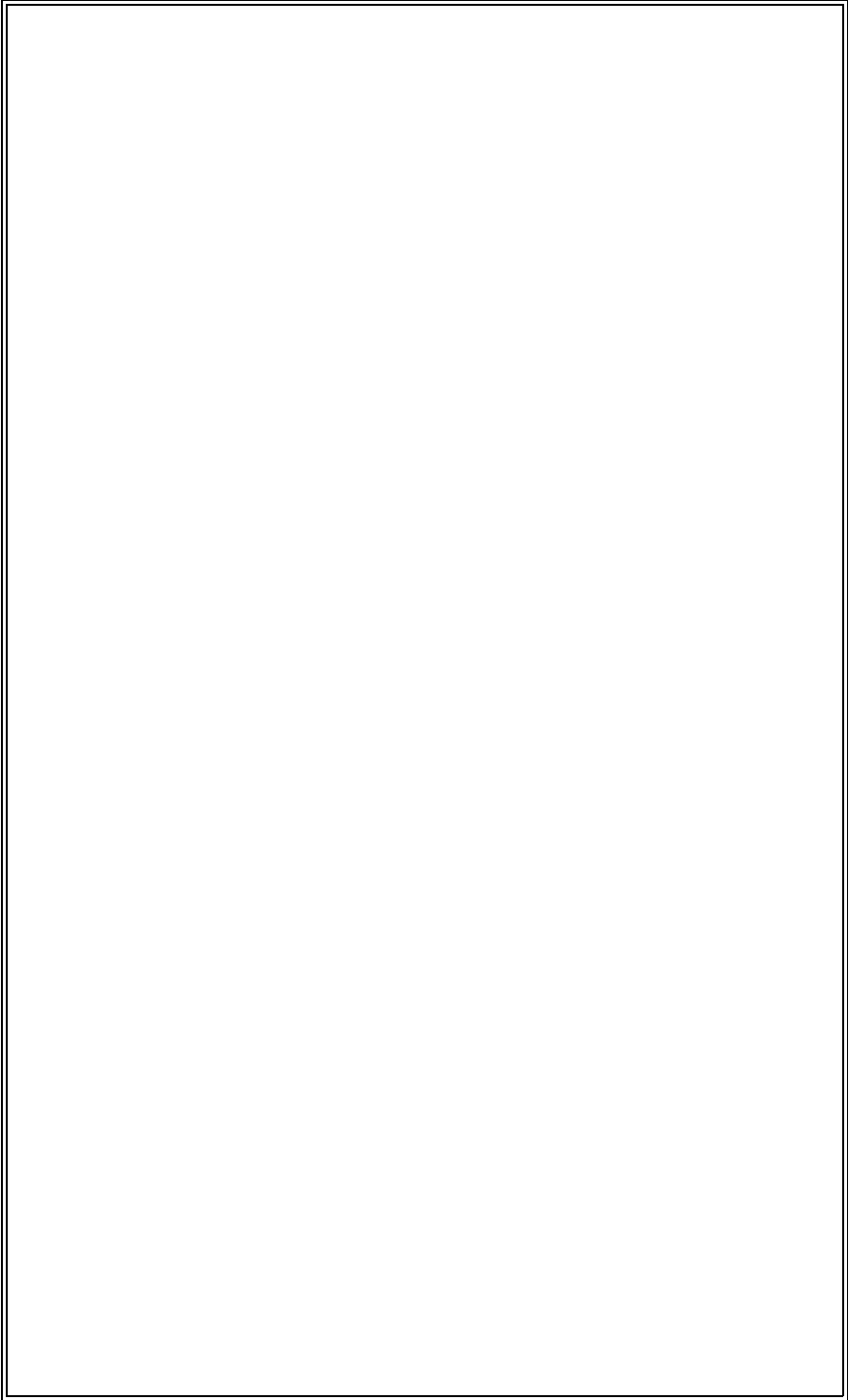
- as misrecognition of what both the singular human being and society are. This is what is shown by an analysis of the human being's humanization qua its socialization and of the "embodiment"-materialization of the social in the individual;
- as misrecognition of what politics is qua ontological creation in general—the creation of a type of being that, be it only in part, explicitly gives itself the laws of its own existence—and, at the same time, qua project of individual and collective autonomy.

Democratic politics is, on the factual level, the kind of activity that endeavors to reduce, as much as it possibly can, the contingent character of our social-historical existence as far as its substantive determinations are concerned. Obviously, neither democratic politics on the factual level nor philosophy on the ideal level can eliminate what, from the standpoint of the singular human being and even of humanity in general, appears as the radical accident (this is what Heidegger was aiming at in part, though he bizarrely confined it to the singular human being, with the term *Geworfenheit*, dereliction or thrownness) that makes

there be being, that makes this being manifest itself as a world, that makes there be life in this world, a human species in this life, such and such a social-historical formation in this species, and that within this formation, at such and such a moment and at such and such a place, emerging from one womb among millions of others, makes this tiny bit of screaming flesh, and not another one, appear. But both of these, democratic politics as well as philosophy, praxis as well as thought can aid us in limiting—or, better, in transforming—through free action the enormous portion of contingency that determines our life. It would be illusory to say that they aid us in "freely assuming" circumstances that we never have, and never could have, chosen. The very fact that a philosopher might think and write that freedom is the consciousness of necessity (independent of all substantive considerations as to the meaning of this statement) is conditioned by innumerable myriads of other contingent facts. The mere consciousness of the infinite mixture of contingency and necessity—of necessary contingency and of ultimately contingent necessity—that conditions what we are, what we do, and what we think is far from being what freedom truly is. But it is a condition for this freedom, a requisite condition for lucidly undertaking actions that are capable of leading us to effectively actual autonomy on the individual as well as on the collective level.



PART FOUR
LOGOS



Complexity, Magmas, History: The Example of the Medieval Town*

Perplexities of Complexity

Current discussions about complexity often produce perplexity. That is the case when one encounters definitions of complexity (or "explanations" of its provenance) that appeal to a "very large number of elementary processes" giving rise to complex phenomena. But, as such, "very large numbers" certainly do not suffice to take us out of the frames of ensemblistic-identitary logic. This logic, on the contrary, finds therein a highly fertile breeding ground. Neither the set [*ensemble*] of natural integers \mathbb{N} , a countable infinity, nor the set of real numbers \mathbb{R} , an uncountable infinity, nor the set of the applications of \mathbb{R} in \mathbb{R} , $\mathcal{F}(\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{R})$, of a still higher cardinality, nor the truly monstrous set of applications of vector spaces upon \mathbb{R} of infinite dimension within themselves $\mathcal{F}(\mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}}, \mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}})$ creates in principle any problems for mathematicians. It is something else if "foundational questions," which David Hilbert hoped "to exile from the world once and for all," remain ever open; or if the work (of Kurt Gödel-Paul Cohen) on Georg Cantor's continuum hypothesis has shown that the usual axiomatic systems of set theory (which lie at the basis of all mathematics) are incomplete, thereby opening, by right, the way to an infinity of such "non-Euclidean" (that is to say,

*"Complexité, magmas, histoire. L'exemple de la ville médiévale" was first published in a commemorative volume for Yves Barel, *Système et paradoxe. Autour de la pensée d'Yves Barel*, ed. Michel Amiot, Isabelle Billiard, and Lucien Brams (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), pp. 55-73. Reprinted in *FAF*, pp. 209-25.

non-Cantorian) systems; or if, finally, the quite venerable continuum paradoxes (of Zeno) are, in spite of what is commonly believed, still with us—along with many others. All that, and many other things in mathematics, can and should still (or more than ever) arouse our *thaumazein*, our wonderment/admiration/dread and thereby lead us back to a philosophical reflection that is more indispensable than ever but that introduces no problematic of "complexity." Nothing changes, obviously, if one speaks of *interactions* rather than of *elements*. Rigorously speaking, the very distinction between "elements" and "interactions" is meaningless:¹ interactions are only elements of sets of a higher type, functional spaces; and mathematicians play around, morning, noon, and night, with functional spaces of infinite dimension.

Now, every collection of *effectively actual* objects necessarily has a *finite* cardinal, and this is independent of the finite or infinite "ultimate reality" of the Universe. For, the part of the Universe accessible to observation will always be finite, and finite, too, will be all the observable or *even conceivable* interactions *upon an observable universe*. These interactions will never be, in effect, but a combinatory among the sets of parts of *finite* sets. It is not *because* the central nervous system includes 10^9 or more neurons and because the possible connections among these neurons correspond to numbers it would be pointless to try to write down that this central nervous system is different

¹Just as meaningless are the distinctions, in their usual acceptance, between substance and process, concept and function, which are to be taken up again in a critical way at another level by a philosophical reflection that would take account both of Heraclitus and of contemporary mathematics and physics.

from a group of billiard balls. Let it be said in passing that this is also the reason why the ill-named theories of "chaos" do not, philosophically speaking, offer anything new; they are *intrinsically* deterministic—as is shown by the fact that the processes called, absurdly, *chaotic* can be calculated by, and shown on the screen of, that deterministic machine that is a computer.²

In all these cases, the difficulties are not ones of principle but rather are *de facto*.

Some have also tried to define complexity by the entanglement [*enchevêtrement*] of hierarchical levels. However, this jumble [*enchevêtrement*] creates no unusual problem when the levels are of identical "nature." The gravitational interactions of a few molecules, a planet, a star cluster, and a galaxy are infinitely complicated—they are not "complex": the molecules act upon the galaxy, which acts upon the molecules. For a new question to arise, these levels must quite obviously be *irreducible*, or essentially *other*. But whence come these other levels? Let us formulate the question in a way that might be sufficiently irritating for our contemporaries: Can the Same produce the Other?

Often this question is answered by a word: *emergence*. The combination of elements of a given level would be able, under certain conditions, to make an emergent level appear. And one does not seem to worry overmuch about the question of the interactions between this emergent level and the "prior" (or "inferior") levels.

Nevertheless, the aporias surge forth right away.

If the logic that presides over this emergence is

²See "False and True Chaos" (1993), forthcoming in *Figures of the Thinkable*. —T/E

ensemblistic-identitary (for brevity's sake, *ensidic*) logic, one can understand neither how nor why there would be emergence—namely, something *new*. (By ensidic logic, I am intending the logic that knows only the relationships of belonging, inclusion, implication among propositions, and the logic of first-order predicates.)

Let us take a simple and abusive example. Consider the set of three elements (*e*, *n*, *s*) and the fourfold permutations, with repetition, of these elements. There are 81 of them—and, qua words in French, none exists or makes sense, save one: *sens* {*meaning* or *sense* in English}, as a matter of fact. The example is abusive, for it does not pay heed to the intermediate levels; but it would be easy, though long drawn out, to render this example rigorous. What I want to illustrate here is that *sens*, in its full *sense*, as *word* (at once signifier, signified, and referent), makes be (appertains to) *another ontological* level.

In the second place, let us suppose that a second level emerges. Why would there be *interaction* and therefore also new modes of (inter)*action*? If *A* is a set, U_c an operator (or a family of operators) operating upon *A*, and *B* the set "resulting" from these operations, $B = U_c(A)$ and then U_c (and *A*) "act" upon *B*, and never the reverse. There ought then to be action uniquely from "bottom" to "top," and never from "top" to "bottom." Here we have, as one knows, the essence of reductionism. But obviously, there is action from "top" to "bottom": you insult me and I slap you; an idea comes to me and I write it down.

The "top," the "emergent" level, the new form (*eidōs*) is seat, origin, and cause or condition of processes that are not even describable in terms of the prior levels—or whose description in these terms have no meaning or interest (for example, the description of a war or of a

revolution in terms of the circulation of electrical charges along the participants' neurons, in terms of biological metabolisms, or in terms of quantum interactions). In this sense, the new form is, in turn, *substance*, because origin of processes. Life, for example, is substance, and the quarrel between vitalism and antivitalism is a false dispute: there certainly is not any physically noticeable vital "fluid" or any physicochemical effects of life that would escape the laws of physics and chemistry. There are, however, processes and interactions that exist, that make sense, only in and through life (for example, homeostasis or reproduction). Likewise, the psyche is substance; and so is the social-historical.

To speak of *emergence* serves only to mask the fundamental ontological datum: that there is *creation* in being, or, more exactly, that being is creation, *vis formandi*: not creation of "matter-energy," but creation of forms. For this creation, there are each time some necessary but not sufficient conditions. As for its form, its *eidos*, creation is *ex nihilo*, but it is not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*.

Why adopt this historically charged term? On the one hand, in order to have done with the subterfuges and sophisms concerning the question of the *new*: either there is creation or else the history of being (therefore also of humanity) is interminable repetition (or eternal return). On the other hand, we choose this term *creation* in order to bring to light the "intrinsically circular" character of the new form's apparition, and therefore the impossibility of "producing" it or "deducing" it from already given elements—for, the "elements" presuppose the form, which presupposes the "elements." The now classic example of the DNA-protein "circle" illustrates this fact: the cell's "program" presupposes the products of its operation—which

are such as they are only because there is the "program."³ In social-historical creation, the situation is just as clear. In the eighth century B.C.E., probably, a new social-historical form, the *polis*, appeared in Greece. But the *polis*—the city—is impossible without *politai*—citizens—who, however, can be fabricated only in and through the *polis*; they are inconceivable outside it. The same thing—although in a much more complex sense—happened in the West around the year one thousand, with the creation of new cities (or a change in character of those that already existed): the free borough or market town [*le bourg libre*] is inconceivable without the protobourgeois, who are inconceivable outside the borough or market town.

The idea of creation is certainly opposed to the postulate of a *full* and *exhaustive* determinism. In no way—quite the contrary—does it signify that there would not be any local or sectoral forms of determinism. In a more general sense, local determinism is implied by the idea of creation—since this creation is not creation of just anything whatsoever but rather, each time, creation of a form, of a determinate *eidos*, that has to persist in existence as such, which requires a determinate relationship (though, each time, determinate in its own way) among the successive "states" of this form, and, also, since each form is a multiplicity with determinate relationships (determinate, each time, in their own way) among its components. In other words, the determinate relationship, an eminent form of the ensidic, is, like the ensidic itself, everywhere dense in being.

³Here I am passing over the abusive use of this term {since the early Sixties}, as well as passing over the questions that have been raised for some time as to the absolute validity of the "central dogma" of molecular biology.

It may appear irritating, or amusing, still to have to discuss with the "positive" scientists of today the postulate of a full determinism—at the moment when these same scientists, or their brethren, are solemnly affirming that the whole universe surged forth from a "quantum fluctuation of the void." It is worthwhile noting, however, one more point. In his recent work on the self-organization of elementary automata, Henri Atlan takes up again, with new and quite pertinent arguments, the thesis of the underdetermination of theories by the "facts," that is to say, by available observations (Duhem-Quine). What this thesis—and Atlan's arguments—also shows, however, is *just as much*, and for the same reasons, the underdetermination of the "facts" (of the "real states") by the underlying "structures"—in other terms, the underdetermination of "real phenomena" by the *hupokeimenon*, the substrate (or a substrate: by definition, no one knows how many of them there are, save in the case of artifacts and within the limited field under consideration in these cases). Now, this obviously contradicts full determinism not only on the epistemological plane but also on the ontological one. Indeed, the argument for the underdetermination of theories by the observed facts boils down to this: each theory assumes a structure subjacent to the observed facts and attempts to reconstitute that structure. One can show, however, by simple arguments and upon simple models, that the number of observable states is much smaller than the number of structures that can have produced them (in other words, a whole class of subjacent structures corresponds to the same observable state). Nevertheless, in the one-to-one [*terme à terme*] relationships full determinism postulates, it can be only *one single* structure that, "in reality," has produced the observed fact—let us say, the structure S_i .

Why is this the structure S_i and not the structure S_j ? If one introduces hidden (or provisionally unknown) parameters that determine this selection of the efficient structure, one only pushes the question back a notch, increasing at the same time the order of magnitude of the gap between what is observed and the substrate (whose characteristics then become more numerous). Thus, the one-to-one relationship postulated by determinism is shattered in the things themselves, and not only in our knowledge of them (a term obviously being capable of being a set, as complicated a one as you please, of terms).

Heterogeneity and Creation

So far, I have attempted to say why certain current attempts at specifying the meaning of "complexity" do not to me seem to be satisfying. I now must state what seems to me to be the reason for this state of affairs. It is to be found, I think, in this, that the phenomena (or objects) considered as "complex" are such because they stem from a more deep-seated and more general characteristic of every object, and of being in general: their *magmatic* character. We shall say that an object is magmatic when it is not exhaustively and systematically *ensidizable*—in other words, reducible to elements and relationships that pertain exclusively and in homogeneous fashion to ensidic (ensemblistic-identitary) logic.

It is easy to convince oneself that every effectively actual object (whether it is a galaxy, a town, or a dream) has this character, with only two apparent exceptions: (1) artifacts considered in their instrumental, and not ontological, aspect alone (a car's motor) and (2) the various branches of mathematics *cut off* from their axioms, rules for

deduction, and so on. (If axioms were ensidizable, they would be deducible, therefore they would no longer be axioms; if rules for deduction were deducible, there would be an infinite regression, etc.)

Why is it so? Why does not being exhaust itself in the ensidic; why does it always have a poietic dimension, an *imaginary* dimension in the strong sense of the term? Why cannot one calculate by how much *Saint Matthew's Passion* is superior to *La Traviata*? This is not the place to discuss that question—which, moreover, is not liable to an answer but only to an elucidation. But let us take into account a first consideration that can guide us in this elucidation.

I said a moment ago that even mathematics is ensidic only when cut off from its axioms, rules of deduction, and so forth. Let us consider mathematics as a whole (including these axioms, etc.). Mathematics includes a multiplicity of branches (Nicolas Bourbaki distinguishes, for example, algebraic structures, topological structures, and ordered structures). These branches are in a sense heterogeneous (one can go quite far in algebra without having need of topology)—which does not mean that they would not be "combinable." But also, within each of these branches, one can make progress only by positing new axioms; and these, by definition, are not deducible from those that "preceded" them. Whence do these axioms come? Leaving aside here some very profound questions (notably that of the existence "in itself" of a mathematical domain we would be recreating by fragments), we can say that these axioms are, under certain constraints (consistency, independence, possibly completeness), *freely posited* by mathematicians (at least, that is the way things happen in the history of mathematics). In short, the history of mathematics is the history of the creative imagination of mathematicians. And it is this

history that appears to us as the proximate cause for the heterogeneity of mathematical axioms.

Now, when we attempt to reflect upon an effectively actual object, one of the aspects, and one of the most important, of its irreducibility to an ensidic analysis is the *heterogeneity of axioms* at which such an analysis arrives. And the latter refers to a *historical creation*, and in particular to a temporal difference in the surging forth, or the constitution, of the object's strata. It is because there is history in the strong sense—temporality within which consecution and rupture coexist, where there is creation in the strong sense of something new that does not "digest," nor can fully be "digested" by, what was already there—that the effectively actual object is magmatic. It is because heterogeneous axioms, principles of alterity, coexist in "the same" that ensidic reduction loses its rights.

History is temporality, and true temporality is the surging forth of other principles. Otherwise, temporality would be mere difference, namely spatiality provided with a supplementary dimension.

Effectively actual objects are magmatic, because they are historical. Being is magmatic, because it is creation and temporality. Was it so at the outset? There is no outset. Being is time (and not "within the horizon" of time).

Heritage, Heterogeneity, and Creation in European History

An initial example is furnished by evolved living organisms. It is more than likely that, as we know them in man, the immune, endocrine, and nervous systems date back to different times in the biological evolution of multi-

cellular organisms. Of course, they now coexist and are coupled with one another in multiple ways. This coexistence leads to what very well seems to be a tangled hierarchy: but this coupling—a source of genuine complexity—is *also*, in man in any case, a source of *disorder*. Thus, a psychical event (therefore in principle, at least, one whose seat is in the central nervous system) can upset the endocrine (or immune) system, or the reverse. This also shows, let it be said parenthetically, that the psychism can be "cause"—in other terms, this shows its "substantiality."

A second example is furnished by the psychism as such. There is, with the appearance of humans, creation of a biologically monstrous neof ormation: the radical imagination of the singular individual. This radical imagination is essentially defunctionalized. It totally disrupts its simply biological "basis," cohabiting uneasily with the latter. And it is at the center of the singular human being's entire history. If, however, this being is to survive, the radical imagination has to be coupled, somehow or other, with what socialization imposes upon it—"logic," "reality," and so on—without this socialization ever arriving at fully resorbing the core of the singular psyche's radical imagination. Throughout the history of the individual (and in psychoanalysis), we are constantly rediscovering the magmatic character of this existent thing. Thus, somehow or other coupled together and culminating in a "normal" or "pathological" sort of behavior, the psychical monad and the enveloping strata its socialization impose upon it—or the oral, anal, and genital dimensions; or libido and destructive drive—coexist and remain ever inextricably intricat ed.

Yet, undoubtedly nowhere else can we notice so strikingly the magmatic character of effectively actual objects than in the social-historical domain. The examples

I shall offer are drawn from *strongly* historical societies—both because, in these cases, our ignorance is lesser and because the phenomenon in question is much more clearly apparent there. (It is not an accident if "Structuralism," an illegitimate attempt to reduce the social sphere to trivial ensidic relationships, tackled almost exclusively savage societies—which, on account of both our ignorance of their history and the ultraslow rhythm of their historicity, give Structuralism, at first sight, a certain amount of plausibility.)

Let us consider the modern "European" world. "Analysis" of the imaginary institution of this world detects therein several diverse and basically heterogeneous principles of historical origin, which survive therein and are, somehow or other, "coupled" with one another. It is practically impossible, and in any case futile, to place them in "chronological" or "logical" order. This world was born with the collapse of the Roman Empire and the establishment of the "barbarian" Germanic kingdoms. The small Germanic tribes contributed to this world their own "principles,"⁴ in particular the social imaginary significations of the "corporation" and of the tie between "subjective law" and "obligation." But these principles came to be introduced into a world at once Romanized and

⁴As is known, Otto von Gierke insisted upon this contribution in his monumental work, *Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, published in four volumes from 1868 to 1913—which was a main source of inspiration and material for Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies*. A part of the third volume of Gierke's work, *Die publicistischen Lehren des Mittelalters*, translated into English by the great historian of law F. W. Maitland and published in 1900, also appeared in French in 1914, with a long introduction by Maitland, in a translation by Jean de Pange (*Le Théories politiques du Moyen Age* [Paris: Sirey]).

Christianized. Obviously, neither Rome nor Christianity is "simple." In Christianity, one can distinguish at least four sources: the Hebraic source, the proper creation of "Jesus" and of Paul, Greek philosophy of the decadent period (Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, neo-Platonism), which itself has its roots in the great era of Greek creation, and Roman institutions, administration and law, upon which the Church very early on modeled its own administrative and juridical organization, as well as its imperial imaginary (the papacy, whether or not the latter would have had pretensions to temporal power). It is rather clear, I think, that these four principles (and the multiplicity of underlying principles to which they refer) are totally heterogeneous, each from the others—which happily provided theologians with employment for eighteen centuries. "Rome" is certainly not simple, either; when Christianity arose within the Empire, the latter had behind it several centuries of history of the *Urbs*, within which there were the Roman people's own creations and an already heavily reinterpreted and in fact "Romanized" Greek heritage.⁵ Finally, when the European

⁵These proper creations of the Roman people include, of course, in the first place, public and private law, whose "resurrection" starting in the eleventh century was to play a decisive role in the formation of modern Europe. But this sort of law includes *both* the idea that the law is applicable to all *and*, as product of the Empire, the *lex regia*, through which the "Roman people" (and its Senate) irrevocably transmit its powers to the Emperor and of which abundant and contradictory use was to be made throughout the Middle Ages, since it implies both that the source of its powers is the "Roman people" *and* that these powers are inalienably held by the emperor (or the king), who thus becomes, according to the very expression of the *Pandectes*, *lex animata*: the law is *quod placuit Caesari* (or *regi*). It is doubtful whether the modern political imaginary (and contemporary constitutional law as it is effectively practiced) has truly exited from this contradiction.

world truly began to get moving (starting, to get a fix on the ideas, in the eleventh century, although already the tenth and perhaps even in certain cases the ninth centuries offer new elements in relation to the *true* Middle Ages), it in turn went on to create new principles, ones that were, for a very long time to come, going to be presented as, and covered back over by, continuous "reinterpretations" of Christian "dogma," of Roman law (preceding and, for a long time and perhaps still today, carrying much more weight than what was inherited from the Greeks, in any case on the political level), and, finally, of Hellenic culture.⁶

Central among these creations of the European world is no doubt the creation of the "medieval" town, which is certainly not an "absolute historical novelty" from the outward point of view, but which, through its modes of institution as well as through the social imaginary significations it bears and conveys, constitutes a new historical form. Before coming to the "medieval" town, however, let us say a few words about the provisional culmination of this European history.

As it freed itself from its properly medieval heritage—both through its own creations and by means of the continuous "reinterpretations" of its heritage that are a function of the former—the European world gave rise to two social imaginary significations and ultimately came to be organized under the form we know it today as a function of two principles. These two principles *seem* to stem from the same root—the calling into question of established institutions, in other words, their revolutionary

⁶Yet it must be remarked that the same Greek "heritage"—the German component excepted—culminated in something entirely else in the Orthodox East, from Byzantium to Russia.

character—and, sociologically speaking, they do indeed stem from the same root, the protobourgeoisie, but they are not only heterogeneous but profoundly antinomical and yet mutually contaminating throughout this history.

On the one hand, the project of social and individual autonomy, which had first seen the light of day in ancient Greece and at a very early hour, arose again in Western Europe. Even leaving aside the innumerable revolts of the "little people" that blaze the history of the new towns, as well as the peasant movements (insofar as in them could be seen mere "struggles against exploitation," and so as to avoid a discussion thereupon), already communal movements and the aspirations of the protobourgeoisie to self-government express a political social imaginary that is radically new in relation to those of the Empire, of kingship, or of feudalism: the demand that a collectivity might govern itself, that it might designate its magistrates, that it might decide what rules govern its life. (In this regard, the "provenance" of the social components of this bourgeoisie and in particular the feudal elements, upon which Yves Barel insists, are of minor importance; the basic thing is that those elements were no longer behaving as feudal landowners do as regards their power and as regards their activities.) At the same time, an essential difference appeared relative to the ancient Greek democratic imaginary: almost as soon as they were born, the new towns evolved toward oligarchic forms (the power of the "patriarchate," as Barel calls it), in any case toward forms of irrevocable delegation of power, or of "representation"—and never, to my knowledge (leaving aside, once again, the uprisings of the "little people" and, for example, the Ciompi in Florence toward the end of the fourteenth century), toward forms of *direct democracy*. In order to find such

forms, one must descend all the way to the Parliamentary army in seventeenth-century England—or toward the American and French Revolutions, then toward the workers' movement. The fact that this happens in towns of a few thousand, at the most a few tens of thousands of inhabitants, shows how fallacious is the argument that direct democracy would be impossible in the modern world and yet would have been possible in the Greek world *because* of the size of the collectivities involved. From the outset, the Western world grounds its political structures upon representation—and one had to wait centuries in order for, in the course of some always very brief episodes, some forms of direct democracy to be created. Now, whether one deplors this or is pleased about it, political representation is a social imaginary signification that is *creation* of the European world. It certainly finds its origin in the existence of nonrevocable political magistrates, which as such was known in the ancient world (Rome, Sparta, and so on), was reproduced in and through medieval towns, was connected almost immediately in several cases with an idea of *r e p r e s e n t a t i o n i n t h e s t r i c t* sense—representation/embassy/delegation *to . . .* , and obviously to another power that is posited straight off as eminent or superior, that of the king (English Parliament, Estates-General in France, and so forth), so as to end up as "absolute" representation and as representation in the absolute since the time of the American and French Revolutions—"representation of the people" *to no one*, which, from that moment on, tends to become "representation to itself," namely, anew, the in fact autonomized and practically uncontrollable power of the "representatives" as we know it today in Western "democracies."

On the other hand, a radically new social imaginary signification is created in Western Europe: that of the unlimited expansion of rational mastery. Karl Marx and Max Weber notwithstanding, its history remains to be written. Clearly and visibly embodied in the initial forms of "capitalism," programmatically expressed in the rationalist philosophies of the seventeenth century (Descartes, Leibniz, etc.), it undoubtedly finds its roots not simply in the rage for acquisition felt by certain elements of the protobourgeoisie (such a rage has also existed elsewhere) but also in the fact that this rage was turned very rapidly toward the *transformation of the very conditions of its satisfaction*, technical conditions in the broad sense (navigation, commerce, banks, etc.) as well as social ones (organization of the immediate producers, expansion of intercity economic relationships, etc.). At the end of a few centuries, this yielded industrial capitalism properly speaking, then the invasion of "rationalization" into all domains of social activity, and finally the mad race of autonomized technoscience we know today.

These two core imaginary significations—project of autonomy, project of universal rational mastery—have been contaminating each other starting, at least, from the Age of Enlightenment and the revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. (Their confluence is already manifest in the instituting work of the French Revolution, for example, as well as in a host of aspects of the work of the "utopian" socialists and, obviously, of Marx himself.) And it is impossible to understand the Western capitalist society of the past two centuries without recognizing therein the coexistence and the—at once parallel and intertwined—labor of these two heterogeneous and, in all rigor, incompatible principles: the unlimited expansion of

"rational mastery" cannot but do away with autonomy, which, in turn, qua self-limitation, could not coexist with unlimited expansion of anything, be it of an alleged rationality.

Those are the core and original components of the magma of social imaginary significations that has constituted the modern world—with the addition, certainly, of other significations more or less inherited from the past, notably those of the Nation-State and of religion. It is not pointless to note that, in the evolution of the Western capitalist world over the past few decades, the project of social and individual autonomy seems to be constantly receding, whereas the expansion of (pseudo)rational (pseudo)mastery is becoming the dominant factor. Here is not the place to examine the question of the long-term or even medium-term stability of the resulting situation. Nor is it pointless to observe that the totalitarian imaginary represented, under its Russian/Communist form, a magma whose principle components can be spotted: the emancipatory principle, which therein undergoes a monstrous reversal; the "rationalist"-capitalist principle, pushed to the limit where it becomes delirious; the religious principle under its orthodox/theocratic form, religious dogma being replaced therein by "ideology" while the mode of adherence remains the same. That does not signify, of course, that Russian/Communist totalitarianism consisted in a mere "addition" or "combination" of those principles; the modifications (reaching the point of a total reversal: Freedom is slavery, etc.) this form of totalitarianism imposed upon those principles while bringing about a fusion thereof, as well as the "style" and the unique and utterly recognizable "spirit" (*sit venia verbo*) it brought into being, suffice to show that there was a historical creation—a

monstrous one, certainly (like so many others), but a creation nonetheless.

La Ville médiévale

The reflections summarily presented above sum up developments from numerous texts I have published since 1964.⁷ It appears that, in writing *La Ville médiévale* (The Medieval town; published in 1977),⁸ Yves Barel was not familiar with these texts. I do not know to what extent knowledge of them would have aided him in extricating himself more quickly from Marxist residues, and from the anachronistic struggle with these residues, which are visible at several places in *La Ville médiévale*. In any case, when we met for the first time in June 1981 (at the Cerisy Colloquium on "Self-Organization") we immediately felt a mutual sympathy on a personal level, and we noticed at the same time a kinship in the problematics we were pursuing.⁹

⁷"Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire," *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 36-40 (April 1964 — June 1965), now available as "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" in *IIS* (see also the second half of this 1975 book, *passim*); "General Introduction" (1973), now in *PSW I*; the texts now in *CL* and first published in *L'Inconscient* (1968), *L'Arc* (1971), *Encyclopaedia universalis*, volumes 15 and 17 (1973), *Textures* (1975), and *Topique* (1977).

⁸Yves Barel, *La Ville médiévale: système social, système urbain* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1977). —T/E

⁹This kinship is also to be found in relation to our respective attitudes toward the Greek city. I began devoting my École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) seminars to this topic in 1982 (see the teaching report summaries in the EHESS *Annuaire*s). Barel cites my text, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983; now in

I would like to note here briefly, apropos of *La Ville médiévale*, what seem to me to be the most significant points of kinship and convergence, terminology left aside.

First, there are a kinship and convergence in our investigations. Underlying and upholding the work in this book, which is teeming with a wealth of details, are two major questions: What holds a society together, and what makes of it *one* society; and how and why is there emergence of the new in history?¹⁰

The responses Barel offers in the case he examines seem to me to be in the main true. The rise [*surgissement*] of the medieval town is recognized to be a "major discontinuity" (pp. 74 and 165ff), wherein is discerned the "emergence of new elements" (p. 169). This discontinuity is woven together with a "continuity" (*ibid.*, and pp. 505 and 574), since it contains (necessarily, it might be added) inherited elements whose origin can (though not always) be retraced. These different elements do not maintain simple relationships with one another, neither from the standpoint of "causality"—since here "causality" is "circular" (p. 76; an expression that is "nearly a contradiction in terms," he rightly writes, p. 164; the chicken and the egg, p. 165) and since this circularity is at the same time a "genesis" (p.

PPA with a partial reprint in *CR*), in *La Quête du sens* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), a book devoted to the birth of democracy in the Greek city. [Regarding the Cerisy Colloquium on "Self-Organization," see now the acts of this conference: *L'Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*, ed. Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983). Castoriadis's paper on "The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy," which was subsequently translated in *CR*, originally appeared in that volume. —T/E]

¹⁰See *IIS*, p. 170 (reprinted in *CR*, p. 199).

77)—nor from the standpoint of signification—since there is an "undecidability" (*passim*; I'd add: undecidability from the ensidic standpoint—the reason for this being the magmatic character of significations). There is a "coengendering" (pp. 304 and 322).

In other words—and this is not a truism—temporality is here *historical* in the proper and strong sense; creation has always taken place *within* the already-there and *through*, too, the means the latter offers. That does not stop it from being creation qua form, and qua *this-here* form; that is what Barel calls (employing a word that, to me, seems improper in this field, but which for him is key) "system" (pp. 143ff.). The irreducibility of this form and the vacuousness of every "analysis" that would believe itself capable of separating, decomposing, and offering to us on a platter the atoms whose com-position would have "produced" the medieval town are illustrated by a passage (p. 187 and n.) taken from the preface of the English translators of Weber's text on the city:

One may find anything and everything in the city texts except the informing principle that creates the city itself. . . . Everything is present except the one precise essential that gives life to the whole. When all is said and done the question remains, What is the city?¹¹

¹¹This quotation, cited by Barel, comes from Don Martindale's "Prefatory Remarks: The Theory of the City," in *The City*, trans. and ed. Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (New York: Free Press, 1958; first paperback edition, 1966), p. 11. Castoriadis provides in brackets the original English phrase "the one precise essential." —T/E

Why does the analysis fail? Because the medieval town is a social-historical form that can be understood on the basis (also) of itself—not "explained" on the basis of something else. It is creation—which is intelligible, with difficulty, downstream, not producible or deducible upstream. It is positing of a new social imaginary signification—the "medieval town," as we call it, which is neither Babylon nor Thebes nor Tyre nor Sidon nor Athens nor Rome—and of a magma of significations that goes along with it. This may be seen, too, in the "circular causality"—which, for my part, I prefer to call the *circle of creation*; see above—that confers another content upon the elements already there, another content by means of which they can be "elements" of what exists only thanks to them and thanks to which they exist. A "new logic," like the one Barel rightly detects in the "patriarchate," can be "logical" only in and through a *total new form*; otherwise, it is absurdity pure and simple (switch around the "logics" of Wall Street and the court of Darius and you tell me what the results will be). On one point, I find that Barel remains on the near side of his own intuition. That is, when he seems to be saying that in the town money lies at the base of power (no doubt there is a whiff of Marxism here) and does not see that a new type of power has been instituted in creating for itself precisely a new "base," money, which promptly takes on an entirely other character than the one it was able to possess in the ninth century, for example.

Qua social-historical form, the town is evidently constrained by a minimum of preservation, namely, its reproduction (p. 49) which is self-reproduction (pp. 145ff.). This reproduction—we are, once again, in the social-historical—is never identical reproduction. There is no "immortality of the structure" (p. 51). "Regulations" and

"feedback" (p. 171) reproduce the town while altering it. The devices for achieving this self-reproduction (which is "production of the unexpected," p. 49), including and above all the "logics" and the "strategies" of the actors, whether individual or collective, always have a "twofold and ambiguous character" (p. 75); every removal of one indetermination is positing of another indetermination (pp. 71-72).

This self-reproduction (pp. 70-71) is in fact self-production—and it is clear that what he is talking about is a self-creation: "The system creates itself because it exists and exists because it creates itself" (p. 77). Here and elsewhere, the term *production* serves (still today) only to mask a heavy ontological question beneath a fallaciously transparent vocabulary (one of Marxian provenance, but in fact it is of Kantian origin and Heideggerian outcome): one produces cars in factories, so where's the mystery?

Is there something behind this self-creation? What Barel says about "nonintentional," "nonconscious" activities (pp. 56-59 and elsewhere) and about "quasi-intentionality" (p. 102 and elsewhere) leads him very close to the idea of the instituting radical imaginary, of the anonymous collective as ultimate source of social-historical creation. He speaks of an "urban imaginary" (p. 182). He goes no further. It would be pointless to ask why, but a few of the obstacles along this path are discernible: Marxist and Athusserian residues, the catchall use of the term "symbolic" (throughout the "anticonclusion," pp. 583-92), which, released from its strict meaning, refers to anything and everything, perhaps ultimately a traditional idea of the imagination (he cites, on page 584, Gilbert Durand, who sees in the imagination "a dynamic potential that deforms copies furnished by perception"—as if perception could ever

furnish "copies"; as if the primary labor of the psyche's radical imagination were not precisely to make be a world of forms, whether connected or not to an "external" X).

What really matters does not lie there. With *La Ville médiévale*, Barel has furnished us with a pioneering work, a model of social-historical research that, staying quite close to the "empirical material," confronts some of the most difficult and most decisive questions there are: the being-thus and the being-this of social-historical forms, their "genesis" and their "disintegration"—their creation and their destruction—thus bursting apart the inherited conceptual frameworks and advancing audaciously (though not recklessly) upon a terrain that is no longer just that of the sociologist or of the historian but that of the philosopher of society and of history. That a book as important as this one should have remained, in its time, without much of a response, that it should have been for a long time out of print speaks volumes about the sad state of the intellectual life of France {since the mid-seventies}, absorbed as France has been in its imbecilic danse around the former Structuralists and the New non-Philosophers.

APPENDIX

Among the non-*Carrefours* texts considered for possible inclusion in *RTI* were:

"Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis sur l'expérimentation sociale." *Critique socialiste. Revue théorique du PSU*, 35 (June 1979): 65-71.

"Les enjeux actuels de la démocratie." *Possibles*, 10:3/4 (Spring/Summer 1986): 313-29.

"Castoriadis, un déçu du gauche-droite." *Le Monde*, 12 July 1986: 15.

"Les ambiguïtés de l'apolitisme" (partial publication of an interview, with title provided by the newspaper). *Libération*, 11 December 1986: 14.

"Cette course absurde vers le nouveau pour le nouveau." *L'Événement du jeudi*, 20-26 August 1987: 80-82.

Remarks delivered at a Sorbonne colloquium on the Fall 1986 student protest movement, which were printed in "La construction intellectuelle, médiatique et politique du mouvement étudiant de l'automne 1986." *Politix*, 1 (Winter 1988): 8-31.

"Une exigence politique et humaine." *Alternatives Economiques*, 53 (January 1988): 26-28.

"Le grand sommeil des démocraties." *L'Express international*, 1970 (14 April 1989): 54-55.

"Castoriadis: périsse le consensus." *L'Express*, 27 May 1988: 112 and 114.

"Donner une signification à nos vies." *Le Monde*, 30 November 1990: 28.

- "La politique en crise." *Politis*, 6 December 1990: 64-66.
- "Où en sommes-nous de la démocratie? (suite). Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis." *Transversales Science/Culture*, 7 (January-February 1991): 18-19.
- "L'invité de *Vendredi*." *Vendredi. L'hebdomadaire des socialistes*, 85 (11 January 1991): 23.
- "Entretien. La tragique supériorité de l'Occident." *L'Hebdo* (Lausanne), 10 January 1991: 44-45.
- "De toute façon, l'Occident est piégé!", *Télérama*, 2140 (19-25 January 1990): 8-10.
- "Les Occidentaux sont piégés." *Ouest-France*, 29 January 1991: 3.
- "Trois intellectuels face à la guerre" (with Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Alain Touraine). *Politis*, 14 February 1991: 32-33.
- "Un entretien avec Cornélius [*sic*] Castoriadis. La renaissance démocratique passe par la création de nouvelles formes d'organisation politique." *Le Monde*, 10 December 1991: 2.
- "Depuis quarante ans, la société tourne à vide." *L'Événement du jeudi*, (26 March-1 April 1992): 128.
- "Le capitalisme est-il soluble dans l'écologie?" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Collection Dossiers (*Demain la terre*), 11 (June 1992): 16.
- "Une société à la dérive." *L'Autre Journal*, 2 (1993): 10-17.
- "Ni 'Esprit' ni Bourdieu. Les intellos entre l'archaïsme et la fuite" (interview). *L'Événement du jeudi*, 581 (21-27 December 1995): 32-33.

Translations of some of these texts may be prepared at a later date for publication in an electronic volume devoted to Castoriadis's post-S. ou B. public interventions.