

A SOCIETY ADRIFT

MORE INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS ON

THE RISING TIDE OF INSIGNIFICANCY

INCLUDING

REVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES TODAY

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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Castoriadis, 1 rue de l’Alboni 75016 Paris FRANCE

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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.

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N.B.: Years in parentheses generally 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:**

- ASA(RTP) *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today* <http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: October 2010.
- 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.
- FT(P&K) *Figures of the Thinkable including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTP&K.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: February 2005.
- 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.
- PSW1 *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. 348pp.

PSW2 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. 363pp.

[PSW3 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. 405pp.

[RTI\(TBS\) The Rising Tide of Insignificancy \(The Big Sleep\).](#) <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf>. 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.

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

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

- CFG1 Ce qui fait la Grèce. Tome 1. D'Homère à Héraclite. Séminaires 1982-1983. La Création humaine II. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004. 355pp.*
- CFG2 Ce qui fait la Grèce. Tome 2. La Cité et le lois. Séminaires 1983-1984. La Création humaine III. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Castoriadis et l'héritage grec" par Philippe Raynaud. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008. 313pp.*
- [CL](#) *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978. 318pp.*
- CMR1 Capitalisme moderne et révolution. Tome 1. L'impérialisme et la guerre. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 443pp.*
- CMR2 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.*
- DR Démocratie et relativisme: Débats avec le MAUSS. Édition établie par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010. 142pp.*

- EMO1 L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier. Tome 1. Comment lutter.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.
- EMO2 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.
- FC Fenêtre sur le chaos.* Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007. 179pp.
- FP Figures du pensable. Les carrefours du labyrinthe VI.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 308pp.
- HC Histoire et création. Textes philosophiques inédits (1945-1967).* Réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Poirier. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009. 307pp.
- 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.
- SB1 La Société bureaucratique. Tome 1. Les rapports de production en Russie.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 317pp.
- SB2 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.

- SD* *Une société à la dérive. Entretiens et débats 1974-1997.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005. 307pp.
- 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.

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<http://www.agorainternational.org>

Foreword

The present collection of Cornelius Castoriadis writings, which came into being only quite fortuitously, has ultimately led a strange, multiple existence. A recounting of this unusual itinerary may prove a useful introduction to its current English-language version, which has been translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service.

The original French version, *Une société à la dérive* (*SD*, 2005), almost did not see the light of day. Even before publication of the final, posthumous volume in the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series in 1999,¹ Castoriadis's widow Zoe announced that no other collections of his quite considerable amount of occasional writings would appear in print. A main aim of the Castoriadis heirs and the "Association Cornelius Castoriadis" (ACC) they created would be to prepare and publish Castoriadis's École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) seminars.² This entailed a neglect not only of Castoriadis's occasional writings never collected in book form but also his *Socialisme ou Barbarie*-era writings anthologized in eight Éditions 10/18 volumes during the 1970s but now long out of print, the heirs and the ACC still today evincing no interest in reissuing these key early texts.³

¹In English: [*Figures of the Thinkable \(Including Passion and Knowledge\)*](#).

²Besides the 1999 volume translated by David Ames Curtis as [*On Plato's Statesman*](#) (2002), other EHESS seminar volumes published so far are: *SV*, *CFG1*, and *CFG2*. This emphasis fits with the heirs' and the ACC's general impetus to legitimize Castoriadis within the academy, at the expense of his political and social writings. Violating their principle that Castoriadis's work requires no introduction or explanation—a "principle" created to oppose continued publication of Curtis's Translator's Forewords, so appreciated by Castoriadis—the French Editors wrote a long Afterword to the *SV* seminars (2002) speculating on why Castoriadis has not received due recognition, especially regarding his later work.

³The heirs and the ACC have instead engaged in cannibalization of the Éditions 10/18 series, taking the 1978 text written especially for *CS* and reprinting it in *FC*. (*FC*, which also cannibalizes a section from *DG*, does include other occasional material. But that volume dates from 2007—two years *after* the policy shift signaled by the publication of *SD*; see below.)

All that changed with the December 2003 publication of *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*, the first Castoriadis volume translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service.⁴ An Appendix to that tome had listed “non-*Carrefours* texts considered for possible inclusion” in this unauthorized internet publication and announced that “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.” The heirs thus suddenly found themselves faced with the prospect of seeing significant Castoriadis texts published in English-language translation on the Web before the French originals could be collected in book form. Their old policy, centered mostly around publishing the seminars, was quickly overturned, and *Une société à la dérive* became available just a bit over a year after the *RTI(TBS)* Appendix appeared.

Striking resemblances exist between that provisional, prospective Appendix list and the Table of Contents of *SD*, whose publication the heirs felt obliged to carry out. Indeed, there is an overlap of nine major texts from the 22 listed in the Appendix with the 25 the French Editors included in *SD*. Three more listed in that Appendix had already appeared in English and thus are found neither there nor in the present translation.⁵ Another four Appendix texts were minor follow-up interviews about the first Gulf War that largely repeated Castoriadis’s piece “The Gulf War Laid Bare,” already included in *RTI(TBS)*. Surprisingly, *SD*’s French Editors completely neglected an additional seven political interviews generally fitting the “rising tide of insignificancy”/ “a society adrift” (RTI/ASA) theme, as well as two texts, an interview and a public talk on the major student/railworker strikes of 1986, to which he makes reference in the present tome.

⁴The two pre-*RTI(TBS)* exceptions are *P-SI* (1998) and *D* (1999). Both initiatives were undertaken outside the small circle of the heirs and the ACC; neither of the resulting volumes was published by Éditions du Seuil.

⁵“The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water: An Introductory Interview” (now in *CR*), along with “The Gulf War Laid Bare” and “The Revolutionary Force of Ecology” (both now in *RTI(TBS)*).

Of the 25 *SD* texts, besides the just mentioned nine overlapping texts and three texts already published in English—that is, nearly half its contents—two concern analyses of Russia that might have better fit into a volume containing other hard-to-find texts on that topic,⁶ and two others are “philosophical” texts⁷ even further removed from the RTI/ASA theme.⁸ Welcome *SD* additions, translated here, include interviews in *Le Monde* (1977) and *EspacesTemps* (1988), along with one from *Radical Philosophy* (1990) reprinted here in its entirety (the French Editors had retained only part of its second half) to make up for the absence of the 1974 introductory interview Castoriadis and David Ames Curtis had already included in the *Castoriadis Reader* (*CR*, 1997). Finally, the French Editors are to be commended for adding to *SD* six texts not widely available in print in French at the time the Appendix list was drawn up. These include four interviews⁹ and two transcribed talks.¹⁰ Curtis concluded his analysis of *RTI(TBS)*’s decisive influence on the appearance of *SD* by hailing publication of the latter tome:

⁶In order to retain some coherency between English- and French-language publication histories—which, with Castoriadis’s full consent, had long ago diverged—these two Russia-themed interviews—“When East Tips West” and “Gorbachev: No Reform, No Turning Back”—are included here.

⁷“Imaginary Significations” and “On Political Judgment.”

⁸“Interestingly, the text whose title served, in part, to justify the subtitle of *RTI(TBS)*, ‘Le grand sommeil des démocraties’ (The Big Sleep of the democracies), is among those the French Editors have chosen not to include in *SD*, either,” notes Curtis (“Statement of David Ames Curtis Concerning the Announcement of the PDF Electronic Publication of Cornelius Castoriadis/Paul Cardan’s *Figures of the Thinkable (Including Passion and Knowledge)*,” available at <http://www.kaloskaisophos.org/pagesperso-orange.fr/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdacftp&kblogstatement1.html>). Thus, material exists for a third RTI/ASA-themed set of translations.

⁹“The Project of Autonomy Is Not a Utopia,” “War, Religion, and Politics,” “Communism, Fascism, Emancipation,” and “A Unique Trajectory.”

¹⁰“Response to Richard Rorty” and “On Wars in Europe.”

I'm so pleased to see this new volume of Castoriadis's interviews, talks, and writings available in French, which helps to show how Castoriadis continued to intervene, where possible, on issues of a political and social nature and thus did not just go off to do disembodied philosophy and "pure ontology" for the rest of his life. It seems clear to me that [RTI\(TBS\)](#), and its Appendix list of significant non-*Carrefours du labyrinthe* [series] Castoriadis texts, served to catalyze this significant new publication (previously, Zoe had told me that there would be no further nonseminar collections of Castoriadis's writings and talks). I congratulate the family on its willingness to listen, albeit in so tardy and indirect a way.¹¹

Since, in *SD*'s "Chronologie et Bio-Bibliographie" (p. 281, n.1) there is a reference to the Castoriadis bibliographical project of [Agora International](#), which he cofounded, Curtis also expressed measured optimism that, after the publication of [RTI\(TBS\)](#) and [FT\(P&K\)](#) (the anonymous translator's 2005 English-language version of *Figures du pensable*)—projects which brought *SD* into existence—the Castoriadis heirs might reconsider their opposition to Curtis continuing the translation work Castoriadis himself had so highly prized and praised:¹²

¹¹See the above-cited "[Statement of David Ames Curtis Concerning the Announcement of the PDF Electronic Publication of Cornelius Castoriadis/ Paul Cardan's *Figures of the Thinkable \(Including Passion and Knowledge\)*](#)."

¹²"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" (translation of excerpt from Letter from Cornelius Castoriadis to Joyce MacDougall, July 19, 1997).

Perhaps there might be an indication here of the possibility of a resumption of communications that might lead to a search for common ground and an opportunity for me to once again publish Castoriadis translations with the family's authorization. At least, that is my hope.¹³

Unfortunately, the Castoriadis heirs never picked up this proffered olive branch. Indeed, immediately upon receiving confirmation that Curtis would be giving a talk in Athens on the tenth anniversary of Castoriadis's death, they scheduled their 2007 ACC General Assembly meeting for exactly the same date, in Paris,¹⁴ thus removing an opportunity, promised by ACC President Vincent Descombes,¹⁵ for Curtis to meet with the ACC about this ongoing labor dispute and to discuss how to resume negotiations that were cut off unilaterally by the heirs in 2003.¹⁶

¹³ Again: "[Statement of David Ames Curtis Concerning the Announcement of the PDF Electronic Publication of Cornelius Castoriadis/ Paul Cardan's Figures of the Thinkable \(Including Passion and Knowledge\).](#)"

¹⁴ Friends of the widow had gone so far as to berate the Athens conference organizers, telling them that Curtis should be prevented from speaking.

¹⁵ Descombes, a former S. ou B. member who was appointed President of the ACC in 2006 by secret decision of the ACC Council, had previously played a harmful editorial role by breaking a promise (made along with his Oxford University Press coeditor Josué V. Harari) to publish a three-volume collection of Castoriadis's writings in translation; only the first OUP volume, *PPA*, ever appeared; and Descombes and Harari allowed the addition of a subtitle to which Castoriadis had strongly objected as a betrayal of his thought. See Curtis's 2003 "[Preface to the Electronic Reprint of the 1989 Editor's Foreword.](#)" along with "[Soutien du travail jaune ?/Support of Scab Labor?](#)" (2006) and "[Open Letter to Vincent Descombes, President of the Association Cornelius Castoriadis, Who Fails to Honor His Word and Continues to Support Scab Labor](#)" (2010).

¹⁶ Strangely, it was not when negotiations would have broken down but when they had reached a successful conclusion (see "[8-Point Agreement Drafted by Zoe Castoriadis and David Ames Curtis](#)") that the heirs decided to break off all communications with Curtis (see "[August 5, 2003 Letter to Sparta Castoriadis from David Ames Curtis](#)") and hire a scab.

Instead, the Association Cornelius Castoriadis, which oversees publication of Castoriadis's writings,¹⁷ has continued its undemocratic practices, which dishonor the name of the person for whom this organization, created in 1999 by the heirs, is named. The identities of the elected members of the ACC Council were announced publicly for the first time in 2009¹⁸—only after Curtis forcefully raised the issue. And these biennial Council elections are conducted with the use of proxy votes held by Council members, rank-and-file members being denied access to the membership list from which proxy votes might be procured. As Curtis summarizes the situation:

For the past ten years, all meetings of the ACC Council have been held in secret. The agenda for such meetings is not announced in advance, and the Council solicits no input from the rank-and-file members concerning the agenda. Nor are rank-and-file members informed after each ACC Council meeting what was actually decided during those secret get-togethers (neither the time nor the date is known to us at the base).¹⁹

On all crucial issues, the ACC functions with *even less* transparency and democracy than the so-called representative democracies Castoriadis had so passionately criticized. Unsurprisingly, the ongoing labor dispute that had occasioned the publication of *RTI(TBS)*, *FT(P&K)* and *SD* in the first place has continued to fester for so long.

It was therefore a great surprise when Helen Arnold—who had already published in 2007 an embarrassingly poor

¹⁷Violating the organization's own statutes, the ACC Council never replaced its original Publication Committee, which had mysteriously resigned en masse at some unannounced point in the early 2000s.

¹⁸See <http://www.castoriadis.org/fr/readText.asp?textID=92>.

¹⁹See again the "[Open Letter to Vincent Descombes . . .](http://www.kaloskaisophos.org/pagesperso-orange.fr/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdacftp&kblogstatement1.html#undemocraticACC)" as well as <http://www.kaloskaisophos.org/pagesperso-orange.fr/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdacftp&kblogstatement1.html#undemocraticACC>.

translation, *Figures of the Thinkable*, for the same publisher, Stanford University Press (SUP), that had announced its intention not to honor its legal contract with Curtis for the translation of that very same book—agreed to meet with Curtis in October 2009, after having refused to do so for six years. Even more surprisingly, Arnold finally admitted in writing that she had been wrong all along not to have consulted Curtis before proceeding to replace him, and also wrong to have relied at the time solely on the word of SUP, whose “incompetence and disorganization” she now boldly denounced.²⁰ Yet when discussions turned to remedies for her past unethical behavior, Arnold abruptly cut off Curtis’s overtures.²¹ The reasons for her sudden new about-face, it turns out, relate directly to the translation of *Une Société à la dérive*, the collection of Castoriadis writings that was brought into the public sphere as part of this very same labor dispute.

Even though Arnold now recognizes that her actions violated the professional ethics of a translator, she balked not only at repudiating *Figures of the Thinkable* and at returning the translator’s fee SUP had illegitimately paid her, but also at “doing any further translation work regarding Castoriadis’s writings” until the continuing labor dispute she had exacerbated by agreeing to act as scab translator would be resolved.²² For, it turns out, Arnold was then completing what would become her even more embarrassingly poor translation, *A Society Adrift*, published in 2010 by Fordham University Press (FUP) and overseen by the very same editor who had formerly refused to honor Curtis’s original SUP contract.

²⁰See Helen Arnold’s “Texte provisoire” (in English) at <http://www.kaloskaisophos.org/pagesperso-orange.fr/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdac-ha-dac-texte-provisoire.html>.

²¹See Curtis’s “[Open Letter to Helen Arnold: Please Resume Good-Faith Negotiations](#)” (November 9, 2009).

²²See the “[Public Statement of Agreement and Resolution: Helen Arnold and David Ames Curtis \(Draft: 28 x 2009\)](#),” which Arnold refused to sign.

This new Arnold translation itself offers an instructive illustration of Castoriadis's "rising tide of insignificance"/"a society adrift" theme found in both [RTI\(TBS\)](#) and the present online tome (also entitled *A Society Adrift*). For, one cannot blithely separate out, in instrumental fashion, the form of present-day society from its actual contents or uncritically exempt from the general trend of established society its specific manifestations, including those relating to the Castoriadis estate. Curtis had already articulated this issue in 2004 when, regarding Arnold's then-forthcoming scab translation *Figures of the Thinkable*, he asked prospectively:

Is it possible to do a translation, even a formally correct one, while quite obviously understanding nothing about its content? What is such an effort worth? Helen Arnold and the Castoriadis family propose to undertake such an experiment in the near future, while the anonymous translator projects to publish the same volume, once again as an electro-Samizdat publication from *Not Bored!*²³

That is, could a former Socialisme ou Barbarie member like Arnold act as a scab translator, on the one hand, and yet, on the other, publish competent translations of the writings of the foremost revolutionary thinker of the second half of the twentieth century? The anonymous translator's [FT\(P&K\)](#) appeared in February 2005, Arnold's superfluous *Figures of the Thinkable* two years later. The comparison was not at all flattering for the latter tome.

²³See Curtis's 2004 Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis seminar talk, "[Effectivité et réflexivité dans l'expérience d'un traducteur de Cornelius Castoriadis.](#)" Brandishing the possibility of legal action from the Castoriadis family and stating that "the young" had to be protected from "controversy" (*sic*) in a seminar devoted to Castoriadis's work, seminar organizer Laurent Van Eynde censored publication of Curtis's talk for his *Cahiers Castoriadis*. Curtis wrote a [Postscript](#) that, along with the original talk, was translated into German by Michael Halfbrodt (*Archiv für die Geschichte des Widerstandes und der Arbeit*, 18 [2009]: 563-92). Arnold actually threatened a suit but never followed through, as she could not cite a single false statement in this nevertheless damning talk and postscript.

In the case of interest to us, Arnold's *A Society Adrift*, the results turned out to be even more uneven—and doubly embarrassing—for her, the heirs, the ACC, and FUP.²⁴ As Curtis detailed in his Amazon.com critique of the “astounding ignorance and incompetence” Arnold evinces as the book’s translator, every major aspect of Castoriadis’s work was severely mangled therein, from the usage of psychoanalytic terminology to knowledge of Marxist theory and Communist history, and the book—loaded with incorrect or incomplete citations, invented or inaccurate quotations, and haphazard and partial references—seemed not to have benefitted from the eye of even an average copy editor. Someone translating Castoriadis into another language for years spoke of this “list of unbelievable failures” Curtis had brought out regarding Arnold’s work as being both “impressive and very annoying,” adding that “a probable result will be that a reader relying on this version will blame the author for this sloppiness—and that’s the worst thing a translator can perpetrate. One wishes that those who are respons[i]ble will act.”²⁵

And that same former SUP editor, and now FUP Editorial Director, Helen Tartar did indeed act. Seeking to silence Curtis’s criticisms, Tartar sent him, via the online ACC discussion list, a February 8, 2010 e-missive: “Amazon has been directed to remove and block all [*sic*] posts from you.” ACC Secretary and Castoriadis heir Zoe Castoriadis immediately chimed in online to back up Tartar’s angrily censorious initial response. The publication of a collection of

²⁴Tied to a Catholic institution of higher learning, FUP had surprisingly agreed to take up publication of Castoriadis translations where Oxford University Press had left off (due to broken promises from Descombes and Harari; see n. 15 above), but a mid-1990s “Jesuit counterrevolution”—the phrase is that of a former FUP editor—led to the cancellation of this informal agreement between FUP and Castoriadis/Curtis. Significantly, though, FUP later went ahead with the publication of a scab translation.

²⁵See Curtis’s “The Astounding Ignorance and Incompetence of ‘Translator’ Helen Arnold,” first posted on Amazon.com and Powells.com and also available at: <http://www.kaloskaisophos.org/pagesperso-orange.fr/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtrdac-ha-dac-astounding-ignorance-and-incompetence-helen-arnold.html>.

Castoriadis's writings on the drift of present-day society toward the aimless destruction of meaning in all spheres of social life has thus led to a desultory effort, on the part of a highly respected academic press and an organization calling itself "Castoriadis," to exert pressure on the largest online retailer in America in order to censor criticism of their poorly prepared Castoriadis translations.²⁶ *It was not, however, this giant capitalist enterprise that drifted dishonorably into insignificance here, since it quite rightly ignored this comical demand, but rather those now officially publishing work in and under Castoriadis's name.*

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Arnold's *Figures of the Thinkable* was superfluous because a competent translation, [FT\(P&K\)](#), had already been available for two years and because, in their obsession to mimic the French edition even where the English-language publishing history had branched off in different directions, the heirs insisted on retranslations or reprints of existing texts.²⁷ One might inquire, then, whether the present tome—designated here as [ASA\(RPT\)](#)²⁸—is redundant with respect to Arnold's *A Society Adrift*—designated here as *ASA(HA!)*.

²⁶FU President Joseph M. McShane, S.J. refused to intervene when these issues of scholarly integrity and free speech were raised, and no public reprimand for Tartar's attempt at censorship was forthcoming from him. Curtis reported this incident to FU's supposedly independent watchdog group, Ethicspoint.com, which refused even to contact him and never made public the results of an ethics investigation, if there ever was one.

²⁷For *Figures of the Thinkable*, Arnold unnecessarily reprinted "The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge," which had already appeared in *PPA*, and created a new version of "First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions," changing "First" to "Primal," an option Castoriadis himself considered and rejected when Curtis first translated this piece in 1985. Moreover, [FT\(P&K\)](#) helpfully included the translation of a *Carrefours* text, "Passion and Knowledge," the Castoriadis heirs have neglected to include in any English-language volume.

²⁸Because it includes "Revolutionary Perspectives Today." See below.

While comparisons may be made between [ASA\(RPT\)](#) and *ASA(HA!)*, no competition exists between them. Provided that one has no objection to purchasing a book done by a scab translator, one can spend US\$28 (paperback) or US\$90 (hardback) to buy *ASA(HA!)*. It may be worth its weight in laughs or lessons, so rife are the errors, so instructive are its close links between professionally unethical action and professionally incompetent execution. Indeed, [ASA\(RPT\)](#) may be viewed as complementary to *ASA(HA!)*: anyone reading the latter may want to have the former in the other hand or on screen. In this sense, too, [ASA\(RPT\)](#) is “translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service.” Nor does [ASA\(RPT\)](#), unlike *ASA(HA!)*, waste time and paper translating a second time Castoriadis texts already available to the English-speaking reader in book form (*CR*’s “Introductory Interview,” [RTI\(TBS\)](#)’s Gulf War and ecology pieces). In two small but significant instances, though, it is instead *ASA(HA!)* that departs from the French original it otherwise mimics.

As much as one could ever glean any “reason” for the heirs and the ACC opposing Curtis’s continuing as translator of Castoriadis’s writings (his competence was never at issue), it seemed that their objection concerned Curtis’s Translator’s Forewords. That objection appeared to be twofold: (1) that Curtis, in offering introductory or explanatory material there, and in notes, was interfering with authorial intent (though the author himself never objected to this practice, and he deemed Curtis’s 1997 [World in Fragments](#) [*WIF*] Foreword one of the best pieces ever written on his work); and (2) that such supposedly superfluous additions departed from the French book publications, which they view as sacrosanct.²⁹ One might expect that this objection, so often expressed as a principle by the heirs and the ACC, as well as by Arnold, to justify Curtis’s exclusion and replacement, would be respected. That has not proved to be the case.

²⁹Bizarrely, as Arnold explains in the publication note for the truncated version of Castoriadis’s own *English-language* interview with *Radical Philosophy*, “The present text [she calls it “Market, Capitalism, and Democracy”] is a revised version taking the French translation into consideration.” So much for respecting authorial intent.

While she had duly limited herself in *Figures* to a four-line “Addendum” of thanks that mentions an Appendix, Arnold, fueled by a stronger self-image of legitimacy, composed for *ASA(HA!)* a so-called Translator’s Postscriptum (strangely placed in the front matter), where she opines about the current significance and relevance of Castoriadis’s work and explains that she has decided to add a text not included in *SD*: “A Rising Tide of Significancy?”—a 1996 interview that, she neglects to mention, had appeared for the first and, until then, only time in [RTI\(TBS\)](#) and that was conducted—though she does not admit this, either—by a personal friend of hers, *Drunken Boat* editor Max Blechman. That interview is interspersed with footnotes by Blechman to which the heirs would have objected, had they been written by Curtis (the first one of which inexplicably provides a different translation of a passage from the book’s immediately previous chapter—though sloppily not referenced as such). Why would members of present-day society, as Castoriadis himself asks repeatedly in the present tome, bother to follow their own enunciated principles when they believe no one is watching any longer? And once one has obtained employment in violation of one’s professional ethics, as Arnold herself later admitted, why not bring in a friend to do precisely what was ostensibly the practice one was hired to discontinue when one supplanted one’s predecessor? Arnold, moreover, now feels free to add a number of such footnotes on her own, not all of which are very informative.³⁰ *As these facts show, there never was a principled reason why Curtis was excluded from participation. That is why the heirs, the ACC, SUP, and FUP have never ventured to provide the public with the slightest explanation of their actions and have instead resorted repeatedly to censorship threats and secretive, undemocratic methods. Yet the upside of this moral fiasco is that the public now has greater and easier access to reliable Castoriadis translations in English than would otherwise be the case.*

³⁰For example, Arnold vaguely identifies *Esprit* as a “left-wing journal,” which in no way helps the reader understand the specific context of that journal’s support for a social-security reform plan proposed by the Right.



After an initial chapter selected by the French Editors —“The Project of Autonomy Is Not a Utopia”—[*ASA\(RPT\)*](#) continues with “Autonomy is an Ongoing Process,” which takes its title from a positive affirmation Castoriadis made near the end of the first half of his 1990 conversation with the British editors of *Radical Philosophy*. While the French Editors had decided not to include this first half in *SD*, “Ongoing” is included here since it in fact constitutes a quite precious piece, his only extended public discussion in English of the Socialisme ou Barbarie period. The body of the text has been edited with a light hand (mostly, an Americanization), so that English-speaking readers may hear Castoriadis’s voice with a minimum of editorial interference. This interview, replacing the one translated for *CR*, not only offers a good substitute for the latter but also serves as a useful complement to it for those who wish to benefit from both.³¹

The following chapter, “Revolutionary Perspectives Today” (RPT), is even more precious. Castoriadis’s hand-corrected transcription of this 1973 talk delivered to comrades from S. ou B.’s then-surviving sister organization, the British group Solidarity, has never before appeared in any language. Again, his more than competent, though still idiosyncratic, command of English is presented here with only minor editorial alterations. One can hear Castoriadis speaking plainly to a group of British militants inspired by his writings who were highly active in industrial struggles and rent strikes, as well as antiwar campaigns where they targeted Russia as well as Western governments. His extended critical discussion of Marx’s economic theory again serves as a replacement for, and a complement to, his discussion of this same topic in the *CR* introductory interview.

³¹Moreover, this 1990 discussion of S. ou B. speaks of the group’s relative “isolat[ion]” (see its n. 8) in a way that contradicts what Castoriadis said four years earlier (see “We are Going Through a Low Period . . .,” n. 6). Eschewing a false editorial harmonization, several notes in the present tome highlight errors and contradictions in Castoriadis’s writings, just as he himself was often prompt to admit mistakes and revise analyses.

But there is something more to this talk that gives [ASA\(RPT\)](#) a consistency and integrity *SD* and *ASA(HA!)* lack. The RTI/ASA theme is highly present in the French Editor's selection of texts. Yet, as noted, *SD* also includes additional material that fits less easily into a book entitled *A Society Adrift*, and both *SD* and *ASA(HA!)* entirely omit a set of seven interviews around the RTI/ASA theme that had been listed in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)'s Appendix. What RPT adds is a *missing element* for a new, broader, more coherent whole. By its inclusion here alongside RTI/ASA-themed pieces, a discussion of S. ou B. in English, two philosophical texts, and two analyzing Russia, [ASA\(RPT\)](#) becomes a more well-rounded introduction to Castoriadis's work that better sets the RTI/ASA theme within its overall context.

A *missing element*. Not a "missing piece" of a puzzle, as if Castoriadis's overall oeuvre were just a set of irregularly shaped but clear-cut parts to be reassembled in one ultimately canonical way. As Curtis has contended in his Athens talk and elsewhere, Castoriadis's work as a whole is *magmatic*³²—which prevents it from being reduced, for example, to a simplistic "early"/"late" or "political"/"philosophical" binary opposition. Castoriadis's writings from the period labeled "silent" by the person who first introduced this "early"/"late" hypothesis³³ provide the key to challenging precisely this distinction, Curtis argues, showing that this period—between the demise of S. ou B. (1967) and the appearance of [The Imaginary Institution of Society](#) (1975)—was not so "silent" after all. RPT, which lies at the heart of this period, turns out to be something like a missing link—or at least one could so argue, were one not concerned that, like *missing piece*, this term, too, could lend to confusion (as magmatic, Castoriadis's work would not follow a clear-cut linear evolution, either).

³²David Ames Curtis, "[Unities and Tensions in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis, With Some Considerations on the Question of Organization.](#)"

³³Brian Singer, "The Early Castoriadis: Socialism, Barbarism and the Bureaucratic Thread," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 3:3 (Fall/Autumn 1979): 35-56; "The Later Castoriadis: Institutions under Interrogation," *ibid.*, 4:1 (Winter 1980): 75-101. See [WIF](#), pp. 409-10, n.3.

A hitherto missing element, therefore. But also an enigmatic and incomplete one. Analyzing, in particular, the early 1970s, several-times-revised paper that became known as “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (now in *CL*), Curtis had shown in his *WIF* Foreword that an increasing concern with the philosophical, but also social and political, implications of the aporias of modern science and its far-from-linear history—a concern prefigured as early as 1962 in the failed internal S. ou B. programmatic document, “For a New Orientation,” and already articulated clearly (though perhaps, to some, somewhat incongruously) at the end of “The Anticipated Revolution,” his piece on the May ’68 student-worker rebellion (both now in *PSW3*)—not only led Castoriadis to deepen his thinking on all issues, social and political as well as philosophical, but also to alter significant portions thereof. For example, “The Question of the History of the Workers’ Movement” (also now in *PSW3*), composed just a few months after the RPT talk especially for the first of two *Éditions 10/18* volumes on “the experience of the workers’ movement,” broadened considerably, but also challenged strenuously, his previous assessments of the character and consequences of working-class struggle. In RPT, Castoriadis explicitly tries out on his militant British audience this unexpected link between a questioning of the traditional conception of scientific theory and an effort to go beyond traditional revolutionary—what Solidarity disdainfully called, for short, *trad rev*—views. Yet this is hardly a straightforwardly successful effort. Castoriadis admits, at the end of his talk, that what he has attempted to bring out is perhaps not clear to his listeners, even as he affirms—in a statement evocative of the Notice he would write years later for *World in Fragments*³⁴—that, despite a sensed lack of clarity and coherency, “all this hangs together . . . if you go to the deepest possible level, to the fundamental roots of the capitalist system and of capitalistic attitudes.”

³⁴“The world—not only ours—is fragmented. Yet it does not fall to pieces. To reflect upon this situation seems to me to be one of the primary tasks of philosophy today” (written in December 1989; now in *WIF*, p. vii).

Indeed, “Revolutionary Perspectives Today” seems a particularly errant presentation, one where Castoriadis goes far afield as he furnishes his audience some contextual meaning for his critique of Marx’s economic theory. His starting point is a criticism of the term *perspective*—which, as he notes, is a term he himself often employed.³⁵ In order to challenge the pretensions to omniscience of a scientific overview—Merleau-Ponty would say (in English translation) a “bird’s-eye view”—Castoriadis evokes the metaphors of the mountaintop and the landscape one would see from that vantage point, and he does so in order to affirm that there is no privileged theoretical position above or beyond society.³⁶

In stating that “there is no top of the mountain from which you can survey developments” and that “we are *in* the landscape,” Castoriadis evokes multiple *interpretative* features involved in any ambulatory experience of this landscape—of which, moreover, “we are a *part*.” One might begin to think that he was adopting a *hermeneutic* position. Some commentators on Castoriadis’s work have indeed put forth such an *interpretational* interpretation. They could then try to read in this way his statement from a later, “philosophical” [ASA\(RPT\)](#) text, “Imaginary Significations,” that “the old enters into the new with the signification the new confers upon it—and could not enter back into it otherwise.” But of course, for Castoriadis, the operative word in the latter statement is *new*, just as in RPT he challenges any “given-in-advance” view of “human history,” a view “we have to abandon,” for “we have to understand that human history is fundamentally a *creation* by people of their own collective, social and historical life,” not mere interpretations thereof.

³⁵ At least starting from the Presentation for the first *S. ou B.* issue (see *CR*, p. 36), where Curtis’s translation, perhaps unfortunate in retrospect, offers *revolutionary outlook* rather than *revolutionary perspective*.

³⁶ A similar argument is found in “First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions” (1986; now in [FT\(P&K\)](#)), where he challenged the very term *social theory*; in RPT, he concludes, “there cannot really be any talk about a *theory* of history in the traditional sense.”

The landscape metaphor can usefully be prolonged. Around the time of RPT, a young French urbanist was beginning his study of “everyday walks in an urban setting,” particularly through an analysis of inhabitants’ narratives in some new large-scale public housing projects (*grands ensembles*) in Grenoble. Just as S. ou B. had, through the examination of workers’ narratives, brought out the dual character of workers’ everyday gestures at the point of production—“each gesture of the worker has two sides to it, one that conforms to the imposed production norms, the other combating those norms,” as Castoriadis explained in the 1974 *CR* interview³⁷—this student of planned living spaces was able to reveal—especially by appealing to a conception of *the imaginary* similar to the one being developed by Castoriadis, though independently of him—the effectively actual, transformative resistance contained in quotidian inhabitant practices, which are said to express the “creative gait of lived space-time.”³⁸ Castoriadis, who would later often speak of the individual as a “walking and talking fragment” of society,

³⁷ P. 18. The classic example of this point-of-production gesture analysis is found in his 1958 text “On the Content of Socialism, III” (now in [PSW3](#)).

³⁸ Jean-François Augoyard, [*Step by Step: An Essay on Everyday Walks in an Urban Setting*](#) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 64. Augoyard adds, “The study of everyday walks indicates . . . that there really is much more creative movement, configuration, and dynamic tension going on in the humblest acts of inhabiting than in the very process that produces the contemporary built world. This points to an opening and to an investigative lead in which, on the basis of the lived experience of inhabiting, and not of conceptually designed housing, the imaginary functionally utilized in the production of laid-out and developed space might be confronted with an imaginary the inhabitant actually lives. A certain number of received values would then most likely be overturned, and this expressive power of an irreducible imaginary (one ignored for this reason by discourses on construction and housing) would appear as a cosmogenetic point” (ibid., p. 176). Augoyard’s dazzling statement may be compared to Castoriadis’s about “the revolutionary and cosmogenic character of . . . the creative activity of tens of millions of people as it will blossom during and after the revolution” (“Proletarian Leadership,” 1952; now in *PSWI*, p. 198). Curtis brings out additional parallels between Castoriadis and Augoyard in his Translator’s Afterword to [*Step by Step*](#).

tells us in RPT that the “big secret” to be brought out is that

there *is* no landscape fixed in front of us. What will be the future landscape is emerging, is created as we advance, by the fact that we advance, by what we ourselves and millions of other people do and don't do.

Interpretational activities, including their projective aspects³⁹ are a key feature of this ever self-emergent whole, for he adds: “And of course what they and we do or don't do is related to what they or we think the next part of the landscape is going to be.” But beyond any hermeneutic operation based on what is taken to be already given (including in the future), it is a not-fixed-in-advance creativity, this self-transformative advance itself, that makes the landscape be as it will be.

Here, Castoriadis surprisingly introduces his listeners to the same critique of “*scientific theory*, in the classical sense of the term” he was developing in what was originally called “Le Monde morcelé” (World in fragments, 1970) and would become “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (November 1973).⁴⁰ And he ties that critique, quite appositely, to a critique of traditional revolutionary conceptions—which, he says, have failed to take adequately into account the creative aspect of human history as “essentially indeterminate and indeterminable in advance” and have instead vainly sought “the privileged . . . vantage point of theory.”

³⁹ A year after his talk to Solidarity members, Castoriadis returned, in his “Author's Introduction to the 1974 English Edition” of his key 1960-1961 text “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (MCR), to the MCR themes found in RPT in order to update MCR (which had already appeared in successive Solidarity pamphlet versions in 1963 and 1965) in light of political and economic events from the intervening years. This “Author's Introduction” includes a fascinating “Digression on ‘Expectations’” (now in *PSW2*, pp. 335-36)—though “‘projections’ would be a better name,” he asserts (*ibid.*, p. 336). That Introduction ends with a discussion of “present prospects” (translated as *perspectives présentes* in *CMR2*, pp. 254-57).

⁴⁰ In RPT, he quickly passes in review Gödel and number theory, Newton, relativity, quantum theory, and the physics of elementary particles.

To illustrate his statement that “what matters for us is the link between an elucidation . . . and a transformation of the world,” he brings up two key historical events that, he feels, he accurately predicted: the postwar Stalinist takeover of Eastern Europe—which he had anticipated as early as December 1944 from his vantage point in Greece⁴¹—and the subsequent workers’ revolt there against Stalinism—foreseen in the 1949 inaugural issue of *S. ou B.* and borne out by the East German strikes of 1953 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Just as testable predictions remain possible in science even after removal of the classical scaffolding,⁴² in both his cases of political prediction the rejection of the tenets and expectations of established scientific socialism⁴³ led him neither to adopt an “anything goes” attitude nor to abdicate political responsibility (which involves a practical orientation toward a possible future).⁴⁴ Not only is there no need, as Laplace stated, for the hypothesis of God within the classical system, but there is also no need for the “God’s eye view”⁴⁵ the classical system itself had hitherto assumed—but which has been made obsolete in the nonabsolute frames of reference view of relativity theory—while indeterminacy becomes no longer just an observational limitation within the system but integral to it—as in quantum theory.⁴⁶

⁴¹Interestingly, at the end of “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983; now in *CR*), Castoriadis again connects December 1944 (the date of the “first Stalinist attempt at a coup d’État in Greece,” he says in his *Radical Philosophy* interview) with his critique of science.

⁴²In science, there are also laws and invariants; for Castoriadis, the realm of human creativity admits only of roughly defined, alterable regularities.

⁴³In both instances, he takes Trotskyism as its least unserious exponent.

⁴⁴*S. ou B.*’s subtitle was “Organ of critique and revolutionary orientation.”

⁴⁵Another translation for the Merleau-Ponty phrase cited above. A more literal translation of *pensée de survol* would be “overflight thinking.”

⁴⁶There remains the conflict between the two, as expressed in Albert Einstein’s objection that God “does not throw dice.”

The landscape metaphor, which poses a challenge to “mountaintop” theory,⁴⁷ as well as his subsequent critique of scientific theory are, though perhaps far afield, thus also quite far-reaching when articulated in terms of self-creative activity. It is, to be sure, a highly fragmented presentation Castoriadis makes to his militant British audience. Yet it is also one whose fragments hold together rather well. At the end of his self-admittedly “rather long” and ostensibly main discussion, he shows that Marxist economic theory has to treat labor as a commodity, just as capitalism tries to do in practice, “because otherwise you cannot use your ‘theoretical,’ ‘scientific’ approach.” It thus turns out that this version of his critique of Marxist economics was not the sole or primary goal of his talk. What seemed a mere introductory remark on misuse of the term *perspectives* and a subsequent critical examination of scientific theory are in fact central to the overall autonomy project. For, he explains that he “wanted to show that if you absolutely want to have this sort of theory, you have to treat classes, groups, and individuals in society like a set of objective, quantifiable variables.”⁴⁸

It is here that he asserts that “all this hangs together” even though things may not seem clear at first sight. Indeed, ultimately “it was as an illustration of *this* point” about the deep-seated connections between the “capitalist system and . . . capitalistic attitudes” that he “brought in the somewhat long discussions concerning the labor theory of value and the rate of exploitation,” and not the other way around. As in [his analysis of Plato’s *Statesman*](#), it is the seemingly incidental remarks and digressions that turn out to be the main point, with the bulk of the discussion instead serving that end. RPT is an imperfect and incomplete “missing element.” Yet it permits a rare glimpse into the fecund explorations from this so-called silent period of his life, thereby offering the reader a fuller introduction to his work as a whole.

⁴⁷Criticism of the term *perspectives* also serves as an implicit anti-phenomenological critique of Merleau-Pontean perspectival philosophy.

⁴⁸Moreover, “you can’t even seize [class struggle] or capture it for statistical purposes, or for scientific observation.”

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“Revolutionary Perspectives Today” thus offers *A Society Adrift* an overall coherency it would otherwise lack. Its addition is not meant as a “come-on” intended to supply an air of contemporary relevancy for a collection of texts written by an author who died almost 14 years ago. Reading Castoriadis cannot dispense us from the need to think on our own for our “today.” Indeed, Castoriadis’s “today” in RPT was approaching a particularly crucial historical juncture. About half a year later came the first catastrophic “September 11” event—Augusto Pinochet’s coup d’État in Chile—which, in putting an end to the workers’ self-management practices that had gone beyond CP control there, allowed the “Chicago Boys” to conduct their first live experiments on an imprisoned population. And the next month, the Yom Kippur War and then the first oil embargo heralded an end to the “long boom” of postwar Western prosperity and a shattering of official society’s external management of work/parties/unions consensus. As noted above (n. 39), Castoriadis deemed it worthwhile a year after his RPT talk to compose for Solidarity his “Author’s Introduction to the 1974 English Edition” of “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (MCR) in order to update MCR themes in light of intervening events. In reading this text again, after RPT, one may be struck by its repeated denigration of “‘exact,’ established, and safe scientific methods” as well as its affirmation that MCR testified to “a relation to actual events and trends [that] entailed not only a new interpretation of the ‘facts,’ but novel decisions as to which ‘facts’ were relevant.” For, MCR, first composed in 1959, “derived not so much from purely theoretical work as from a new conception of what socialism was about.”⁴⁹ Yet, despite the confirmations of MCR theses he saw the intervening years providing, critical changes were underway.

⁴⁹“Author’s Introduction . . . ,” *PSW2*, p. 326. In “On the Content of Socialism, II” (1957), Castoriadis had succinctly explained: “Socialism is autonomy, people’s conscious direction of their own lives” (*ibid.*, 92).

In the eponymous interview “A Society Adrift,” Castoriadis expresses a certain skepticism about the character, extent, and import of such changes when he refers to the early 1980s “counteroffensive that has imposed things that had previously seemed inconceivable” as merely “the so-called Neoliberal counteroffensive . . . symbolized by the policies of Thatcher-Reagan.” For, despite its anti-Keynesian rhetoric, Neoliberalism never succeeded in substantially reducing governmental spending.⁵⁰ Yet, as he frankly acknowledges in this 1993 interview, that counteroffensive “has imposed things that had previously seemed inconceivable: straightforward cuts in real wages, and sometimes even in nominal wages, for example, or else levels of unemployment that I myself had thought, and written, in 1960 [i.e., in MCR], had become impossible, for they would have provoked a social explosion.” No such explosion occurred. Again, his skepticism is both open and measured: “There are reasons for that, some related to the economic cycle—the threat, in large part a bluff, of ‘crisis’ tied to the ‘oil shock,’ and so on—but others much more deep-seated.” Beyond “superficial” aspects tied to “Neoliberalism,” it is in examining the deeper reasons for these changes that Castoriadis introduces the RTI/ASA theme—which is predicated on recognition of the “triumph of an imaginary, the ‘liberal’-capitalist imaginary, and the near-disappearance of the other great imaginary signification of modernity, the project of individual and collective autonomy,” but which is not seen as a complete refutation of MCR that would somehow return us to a status quo ante wherein classical Marxist economic theory could regain its explanatory prestige. Those “novel decisions as to which ‘facts’ [a]re relevant” again play a crucial role for his prospective analyses; it is the “retreat from autonomy,” as he calls it in his 1989 *WIF* talk on postmodernist conformism, that elucidates that triumph and the societal drift thus created.

⁵⁰“Half of the gross national product of our modern economies passes through the State budget, local authorities, social security,” and so on, he points out in the present tome’s “Response to Richard Rorty.” War Keynesianism was an option Castoriadis said Reagan employed in the 1980s, and Bush *fills* used it, to highly disastrous effect, in the 2000s.

There is no need to examine at length and in detail here the extension of the RTI theme in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), which we have subtitled *More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance*. For, the background for that theme has already been discussed in the Translator's Foreword for [RTI\(TBS\)](#). In the present tome, particular points and problems have instead been highlighted and addressed within footnotes offered to the interested reader, which she may consult whenever she wants and as need arises. Indeed, the purpose of a Translator's Foreword, or translator's notes, is not, *à l'Arnold*, to lecture the reader sanctimoniously on the contemporary importance of what one is about to read or has just read. As explained in the [first anonymous translator's foreword](#), each of Curtis's Forewords

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 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 [reader's] purview.

The public obligation of self-presentation must, of course, be partially curtailed when circumstances require an anonymous translation.⁵¹ But the present Foreword dutifully presents these peculiar circumstances of translation, as well as a reflection on them, in partial fulfillment of that obligation.

⁵¹In his [first statement concerning the RTI\(TBS\) Foreword](#), Curtis immediately confirmed its accuracy. And so that the necessary anonymity of the translator here might not prove a hindrance to public discussion of its contents, [his first statement concerning FT\(P&K\)](#) contained the promise that "I will gladly enter the public arena to defend what is stated therein, as well as what was stated in the [RTI\(TBS\) Foreword](#)."

Instead, one may look back once again to RPT, which has been included here to set the stage, albeit in an imperfect way, for the RTI/ASA theme. It has become a bit of a vogue of late to revive Marxist “value theory” in the hope that the current triumph of capitalism might be conjured away by a return to the critical challenge thereto allegedly afforded by the supposedly objective criteria and developments of Marxist economics.⁵² Among its other advantages for connecting the varied periods of Castoriadis’s oeuvre, RPT also offers an illustration of the choice Castoriadis formulated, in “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (MRT), between “remaining Marxist and remaining revolutionary” (*IIS*, p. 14). Castoriadis opted for the latter in 1964, and he still does so in his 1973 talk.⁵³ “Now, to say you are a revolutionary means you work for the disappearance of this society. According to Marx, a society never disappears before it has developed all the productive forces it is able to contain within its flanks.” If one held to the (paraphrased) letter of this famous formulation from Marx’s 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, one would have been wrong to think oneself a Marxist revolutionary, Castoriadis explains. “You were postulating that the development of capitalism had stopped, that capitalism was no longer capable of developing the productive forces”—which turned out *not* to be the case at every key juncture during the first three quarters of the twentieth century. “And in this I will risk a prediction, because this is my professional field [as an economist]. And this is that, save for revolution or for war, if you stick by that sentence, you will again be wrong in 1980, and in 1990.”

⁵²Bernard Pasobrola examines this trend in [“Fin du travail: version Postone ou Castoriadis?”](#) (October 2, 2009).

⁵³In fact, Castoriadis continued to define himself as a revolutionary until the very end of his life. In what was perhaps his last interview, he reaffirmed that “I am a revolutionary.” (See [“La dernière interview de Cornélius \[sic\] Castoriadis. ‘Pourquoi je suis révolutionnaire.’”](#) *L’Événement du jeudi*, January 8-14, 1998): 80-81. This interview was not included in the *RTI(TBS)* Appendix because the Castoriadis heirs had objected that the published version, which appeared two weeks after his death, was unauthorized.)

Not explicitly venturing into *our* new millennium, Castoriadis nevertheless foresaw that the discrepancy between a Marxist and a revolutionary stance would endure through to the end of his century. What mattered for him, in articulating the RTI/ASA theme, was instead the elucidatory power of the current and continuing conflict between autonomy and heteronomy—the “dual institution,” within modern societies, of the project of autonomy, on the one hand, and the competing capitalist project for the unlimited expansion of (pseudo)rational mastery over nature and humanity, on the other—with the latter project having gained the upper hand in a way that nevertheless was in no way fated and is in no way guaranteed to last. The goal Castoriadis set for himself in analyzing “a society adrift” was to maintain and expand the meaning of a revolutionary orientation while examining the ways in which such a society, which produces irrationality and insignificance, might still face serious challenges, specific to its imaginary institution, and not those theoretical ones tied to Marxism’s economic eschatology.

So, in “risk[ing]” a new prediction in RPT, Castoriadis would have again been proved right, as he had been regarding the Stalinist takeover of Eastern Europe and the subsequent workers’ revolt there against Stalinism. But what of such risky predictions? How do they relate to those supposedly scientific theories of society that, he argued, partake of the heteronomy that is to be combated? RPT again offers fragmented, imperfect answers, ones that both contrast with and complement his subsequent arguments in the “A Society Adrift” interview. “If you were interested in politics,” Castoriadis asserted in RPT, “you had to make a prediction as to what would . . . happen.” Yet, in transitioning from criticism of classical scientific theory to discussion of his early predictions, he already qualified that strong assertion: “And very often we can even—if we are clear enough and try to think in a possibly less muddled way—predict things.” Indeed, a decade earlier in MRT, he had placed this key word within quotation marks: “And, if we feel satisfied with ourselves for having ‘predicted’ the content of the Hungarian Revolution far in advance,” adding, to provide the appropriate contrast, “we did not, for all that, invent it” (*JIS*, p. 81).

Strangely, Castoriadis justifies his “risk” in making a new prediction by explaining “because this is my professional field.” This appeal to his own economic expertise contrasts with what he will say at the end of his talk, when we discover that the incidental critical remarks about classical and traditional theory partake of what is its real main point. If you have “this sort of theory [that] treat[s] classes, groups, and individuals in society like a set of objective, quantifiable variables”—and “economics is more or less about quantities,” he insisted earlier in RPT—you end up having “to treat them like things, with predictable properties, reactions, etc.” He leans even more heavily against prediction of social events in the “A Society Adrift” interview, strongly stating there, in apparent direct contradiction to what he said in RPT: “There can be no serious predictions in politics and in history.” Taking a page from his own MRT essay, he goes on to explain in that interview: “Human history is creation. The appearance of new social-historical forms isn’t predictable, for such an appearance is neither producible nor deducible on the basis of what preceded it.” Used without qualification, *prediction* becomes for Castoriadis an equivocal, a word with varying and contradictory meanings. Earlier in RPT, Castoriadis explained that in the case of early postwar Europe, where “the thing was even more important because a prediction was both possible and needed[. . .] the prediction was not just a theoretical prediction.” The qualifier “theoretical” before *prediction* provides needed contrast, just as its placement within quotation marks in MRT allowed him to explain that his brand of “prediction” deliberately leaves room for autonomous (*unpredictable?* or, in any case, *unforeseen*) action that one takes into account but does not “invent” in theoretical constructions.⁵⁴ Reminiscent of his statement that one must “link . . . an elucidation⁵⁵ . . . and a transformation of the world,” he adds helpfully here: “It was also a program.”

⁵⁴See, on this point, his critique of Weberian “methodological individualism” (“Individual, Society, Rationality, History,” now in *PPA*).

⁵⁵The elided phrase, “a comprehension (but I prefer the term elucidation),” is there to indicate the limitations of a merely interpretive understanding.

We must go somewhat far afield ourselves, or at least as far as the [FT\(P&K\)](#) Foreword, to assist the reader on this score. It was discovered there that, for Castoriadis, “theory,” too, contained alternative connotations, partially resolved by his advocacy of “a new attitude toward ideas and theory” (*CR*, p. 33). As early as the first part of “On the Content of Socialism” (1955), he was arguing that “Socialism can be neither the fated result of historical development, a violation of history by a party of supermen, *nor still the application of a program derived from a theory that is true in itself*” (*PSWI*, p. 297, emphasis added). It was in “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” that he outlined how one could have a theory that was not “true in itself”:

For speculative theory, the object does not exist if it is not complete and the theory itself does not exist if it cannot complete its object. Praxis, on the other hand, can exist only if its object, by its very nature, surpasses all completion; praxis is a perpetually transformed relation to the object. . . . Inasmuch as theory goes beyond [speculative] phantasy, it becomes a true theory, the praxis of truth. ([IIS](#), p. 89)

This “object” with which praxis has a “perpetually transformed relation” is thus not an inert one. For, as he explained a few pages earlier ([ibid.](#), p. 71): “We call praxis that making/doing in which the other or others are intended as autonomous beings and considered as the essential agents of the development of their own autonomy.” As opposed to being “true in itself,” theory in its “true” form is praxical. It is one form of activity and not that which (sovereignly) rules over or watches over (surveils or supervises) all activity from an absolutely removed and irremovable vantage point. Indeed, it is praxical, according to Castoriadis, inasmuch as it aims at some autonomous activity on the part of others that escapes absolute theorization. Yet, “true” as such nonspeculative, praxical theory may be, it is not, even when presented as “revolutionary theory,” possessed of any guaranteed-in-advance truths. And here we return to the promise, and the problems, of “predictions.”

For, predictions can prove wrong, as he grants in RPT when he states that his ones about Eastern Europe and those of the Trotskyists were “submitted to historical tests.” Moreover, he recognized there the “risk[y]” nature of his prediction about the continued capitalist expansion for the rest of the last millennium (in the absence of “revolution or war”). Indeed, S. ou B.’s early- and mid-1960s projections—if not predictions—that combined an elucidation with a program failed to come true, as he explained in the 1967 circular “The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*” (which is said to have announced his so-called silent period). “In this we were wrong,” he frankly acknowledged (*PSW3*, p. 119). MCR had shown that “modern capitalism” both occasioned and was predicated upon the population’s thoroughgoing “depoliticization,” as well as its underlying “privatization”—precisely the RTI/ASA themes analyzed in the present tome. “What appeared to be a compensating factor for this negative diagnosis . . . were struggles at the point of production [that] . . . put into question the work relations extant under the system of capitalism and express, in an embryonic form, the self-directing tendencies of working people” (*ibid.*). Nothing like the wildcat strikes in America and the shop steward’s movement in England, examined and heralded by the group, developed in France; and even in their countries of origin such struggles were unable “to go beyond the immediate sphere of work relations and to progress toward an attempt to put explicitly into question social relations in general” (*ibid.*).

Here one is tempted to say that Castoriadis was wrong to have said that he was wrong. Less than a year after that circular was distributed, the prediction that his and his group’s projections were not going to be borne out was itself at least partially contradicted by the creation of the March 22 movement⁵⁶ and then the outbreak of mass strikes and major student demonstrations in May ’68. Indeed, the title for the definitive version of his piece on May ’68, “The Anticipated

⁵⁶In a helpful translator’s footnote (*PSW3*, pp. 122-23n2), Curtis provides historical information about the four S. ou B. members who, opposed to suspension, maintained a “quite slender, but significant thread of historical continuity” that extended to the creation of the March 22 Movement.

Revolution” implies that the events were anticipated, i.e., foreseen.⁵⁷ And it hard to argue with that appreciation, given that, since MCR and his 1961 text on “The Signification of the Belgian Strikes,” Castoriadis had been elucidating how what were mere “accidents” for the system could open the way for far-reaching, nontraditional forms of contestation in which not only workers, but increasingly also women, youth, and minorities, would participate.

Castoriadis returns many times in the present tome to his appreciation of May ’68, which was in the end both a surprise for him—in its unforeseen advent and in its unpredictable inventiveness—and a (partial) fulfillment of those hoped-for countervailing trends he had long been probing. For him, it was also both a failure—in its inability “to instaurate lasting forms of collective action and collective existence”—and a success—in its ongoing and far-reaching consequences as well as in what it revealed, viz. that “the true site of politics is not where one thought it was. The site of politics is everywhere. The site of politics is society.” This dual estimation brings us back to MCR’s theses—“The failure of the movements of the Sixties has converged with the deep-seated tendencies of modern bureaucratic capitalism, driving people to apathy and privatization”⁵⁸—but also forward—for, from this return to MCR themes, now revised by the creative burst of the Sixties and its subsequent subsidence, he would come to develop the RTI/ASA themes centered around the waning of autonomous contestation and the aimless drift of the triumphant capitalist society thus engendered. If, henceforth, “the site of politics is society,” it is to society—to its established social imaginary significations, their wearing down, and the new and continuing challenges that may be posed thereto—that he turns in the aftermath of the collapse, though not total disappearance, of the project of autonomy.

⁵⁷Though they were also “anticipated” in the sense that they arrived *too soon* to constitute an enduring revolution capable of lastingly countering the trends described in MCR. See the publication note ([ibid.](#), p. 124).

⁵⁸The first two quotations come from “What Political Parties Cannot Do,” the third from “We Are Going Through a Low Period”

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The foregoing discussion of the missing element supplied by “Revolutionary Perspectives Today” and the examination of the seemingly incidental, but in fact central, issues broached therein that deal with science, theory, and prediction in relation to praxis and autonomy need not leave the reader with the impression that the so-called silent period of Castoriadis’s life in the late Sixties and early Seventies, as important as it may be in helping one to understand his work overall, is somehow to be privileged or otherwise given special consideration in comparison to other periods of his life. Indeed, Curtis’s groundbreaking work in his *WIF* Foreword, which highlighted that lesser-known aspect of Castoriadis’s oeuvre, was designed to place it within the broader context of the work as a whole—including especially, of course, the later texts appearing in *WIF* itself—while also affirming that chronologically earlier texts remain useful and relevant for an effort to understand the signification and import of those middle and later texts, all this being undertaken in such a way as to show that there is no clean break, no perfect linear development by which one could cut up his work into neat temporal or thematic units. Before embarking on the conclusion to the present Foreword, a brief reexamination of RPT in light of subsequent texts will occasion a fresh return to that fortuitous, strange, and multiple series of inventive events that has led to the present tome.

Castoriadis continued to reflect on the themes raised in RPT (which, it was seen, have antecedents dating back at least to the early 1960s). Challenging some of the very terms he employed in RPT as well as how he employed them there, Castoriadis asserted in one of his most profound texts, “Time and Creation” (1983-1991), that “The new is not the unforeseeable, unpredictable, nor [is it] the undetermined.” Explaining this assertion, he pursues his point:

Something can be unpredictable (for example, the next number in a roulette) and still be the trivial repetition of a form; or be undetermined, and again, a sheer repetition of a given form (for example,

quantum phenomena). Something is new when it is the positi[ng] of a form neither producible nor deducible from other forms. Something being new means, therefore: something is the positi[ng] of new determinations, of new laws ([WIF](#), p. 392).

In contrast to the RPT statement that human history “is essentially indeterminate and indeterminable in advance,” in the last chapter of [ASA\(RPT\)](#), he goes so far as to affirm, “Thinking in terms of indetermination cuts thinking short.”

Indeed, the Translator’s Foreword for [Figures of the Thinkable \(including Passion and Knowledge\)](#) offered evidence of a shift from *theory*—a term still regularly employed in RPT when qualified in one way or another, though at other times denigrated—to *thought*, its figures, and the problems and promises of their thinkability. Already a few months before RPT, in the November-December 1972 General Introduction to his Éditions 10/18 writings (translated in *PSWI*), Castoriadis started to bring out the Greek linguistic origin of “theory” in *theorein* (to see, to contemplate) in order to argue “that vision deludes itself about itself when it takes itself for a vision, since it is essentially a making/doing [*faire*]” (ibid., p. 29)—which, as was “seen” in the [FT\(P&K\)](#) Foreword, makes the Latin-Greek hybrid phrase *speculative theory* an eminent example of *redundancy* that, by rebound, calls into question the distinction he was trying to establish between it and a praxical theory, the latter defined in MRT as “true theory, the praxis of truth.” In the present tome, the phrase *only true theory* is dismissively placed within quotation marks in “Imaginary Significations,” just as *true theory* is, when qualified by “defined once and for all,” in “What Political Parties Cannot Do.”

The ground of “theory” gradually, imperceptibly shifted. By the time of the November 1977 Preface to *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, Castoriadis—who had already succeeded, or so he thought, in putting theory in its place—transported us to a new realm of thinking about theory and thought. His conception of thinking in the labyrinth could be summarized by us ([FT\(P&K\)](#), p. xlix) as a “constant forward and deepening motion, the action of digging further

into, and digging more, ‘galleries.’” Later in the same Preface, going beyond his own original labyrinth metaphor, which had itself become labyrinthine, he asserted that “original thought posits/creates other figures, brings about the existence of a figure of that which could not previously so exist; and this involves, inevitably, a tearing apart and a recreation of the existing ground, the given horizon” (*CL*, xxv, translation altered). Trying to think not just (Gestaltian/Merleau-Pontean) figure and ground but their very arising via simultaneous creation/destruction in sympathetic vibration with that unprecedented something it tries to elucidate, Castoriadis affirms that “A true relationship with such [original] thought strives to retrieve this moment of creative tearing apart, this new and different dawn in which at a single stroke things take up another configuration in an unknown landscape” (*ibid.*).

To be sure, Castoriadis was already asserting in RPT that “there *is* no landscape fixed in front of us. What will be the future landscape is emerging.” Yet his renewed, and even more radicalized, emphasis on creative innovation, explicitly conjoined here with destruction, problematizes his prior conceptions of theory and practice. In “First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions” (1986), he stated:

There is not, and cannot be, a theory of the institution, for theory is *theoria*: the gaze [*regard*] that puts us face to face with something and inspects it. We cannot put ourselves face to face with the institution and then inspect it, since the means one would use to do so form a part of the institution (*FT(P&K)*, p. 153).

The institution is the (self-altering) locus for the creation/destruction of social imaginary significations in the ever new, ever varying tension of the instituting/the instituted. Thus, in view of the widespread existence of heteronomy, “what is passionately cathected” by humanity “almost everywhere, almost always” is, as he explained in “Passion and Knowledge” (1992; *ibid.*, p. 272), “instituted, social ‘theory,’ namely, established beliefs.” In contrast to previous talk of *true theory*, “the true” now “becomes creation, always open and always capable of turning back upon itself, of forms of

the thinkable and of contents of thought capable of having an encounter with what is” ([ibid.](#), p. 275). A true encounter with the new entails that the landscape has become “unknown” and that we must invent new figures of the thinkable adequate to it, so that it might become known to us in a new way—provided that we cathect knowledge, for which there is no advance guarantee, and not just belief, whose perpetuation “instituted, social ‘theory’” is created to assure. “The site of politics is society,” he affirms in the present tome as the enduring lesson of the movements of the Sixties. If real societal changes have indeed come about, established social theory—including, especially, Marxism (which, S. ou B. demonstrated as early as the 1950s, fully partakes of what Castoriadis would later call the imaginary significations of capitalism)—is of no political avail; new figures of the thinkable have to be created (and old ways of thinking destroyed) so as to elucidate how the site that is society has altered itself and how we might respond thereto.

And yet in another of his key “transitional-period” texts, he anticipated what was at issue: the “revolutionary project” is an “open engendering of significations oriented toward a radical transformation of the social world, . . . and unified by the idea of the *autonomy* of man and of society” ([PSW3](#), p. 198). In order to shed light on this transformed site that was his contemporary society, he invented/elucidated—in continuity with prior critical work on the destruction of meaning in work, the mad drive for total rationalization, and the question, already raised in MCR, of whether society still wants itself qua society, but also by staking out new ground—such open-ended significations as *the rising tide of insignificance* and *a society adrift*, as well as *a world in fragments* that “does not fall to pieces” (the “ontological import” of which is shown in “the history of science”), and, in accounting for the instituting power of thought, to which the existence of theory testifies and of which theory is but an instance, also the *figures of the thinkable*, which firmly place philosophy itself in the fluctuating realm of the imaginary whereby all figures and forms, theories and thoughts come into existence within some newly invented realm, site, ground, or landscape.

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It was in fact Castoriadis himself who enunciated this need to rethink theory and praxis beyond what was laid out in “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” and he did so at the very start of this “middle” or “transitional” period. In the above-mentioned July 1967 text, he and the other members of the majority within S. ou B. announced that the group was going into hibernation and that publication of the review would be suspended *sine die*—that is, not necessarily permanently but without an announced date of resumption for the group’s political and editorial activities.⁵⁹ “Revolutionary activity will again become possible,” he wrote prospectively, “only when a radical ideological reconstruction will become capable of meeting up with a real social movement.” Given the lack of an active, creative response on the part of society to the group’s efforts and of the review’s readership to its writings, it no longer made sense to pursue the increasingly theoretical turn that was being expressed in the final issues—and especially in MRT itself—within an “organ of critique and revolutionary orientation.” That new reconstructive effort was to begin with the rethinking of theory and praxis:

the relationship of people to their theoretical and practical creations; the relation between knowledge, or better lucidity, and real activity; the possibility of constituting an autonomous society; the fate of the revolutionary project and its potential for laying down roots in an evolving society such as ours—these questions, and the many others they call forth, must thoroughly be rethought (*PSW3*, 121).

And as we saw, he explained at the end of this period, in his 1974 interview, that such rethinking entails the creation of “a new attitude toward ideas and theory” (*CR*, 33).

⁵⁹The first half of “The Anticipated Revolution,” which was penned by Castoriadis and distributed by old S. ou B. members as the May ’68 events were unfolding, testifies to the reality of this readiness to resume activity.

But does not this withdrawal from explicit, organized, collective political activity just mirror the depoliticization, privatization, and retreat from public life he first described in MCR and later saw regaining the upper hand in the aftermath of May '68? Castoriadis was just as aware of this potential danger as he was of the need for the all-round reconstruction he was proposing to undertake: "We would be the last to fail to appreciate the risks immanent in a theoretical enterprise separated from real activity" (*PSW3*, 121). Instead of silence and retreat, he promised "we will continue, each in our own area, to reflect and to act⁶⁰ in terms of the certainties and the interrogations that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* has permitted us to sift out," projecting in the last lines of "Suspension" that, "If we do it well, and if social conditions are propitious, we are certain that we will one day be able to recommence our enterprise upon more solid grounds and in a different relation to those who have followed our work" (*ibid.*). As noted at the end of the *RTI(TBS)* Foreword, "Castoriadis asked himself, at least every other day, whether he should re-form a revolutionary organization." And we ourselves concluded:

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.

Thus was the anonymous translator's project of "translat[ing Castoriadis] from the French and edit[ing him] anonymously as a public service" first conceived and implemented.

⁶⁰"Reflect, Act, Organize" is reportedly the (translation of the) title of the roneotyped and distributed text mentioned in the previous note.

To be sure, this modest public service is a far cry from reconstituting a revolutionary organization! But let us pay close attention to what Castoriadis was saying as he commenced what he hoped would be a successful, exemplary, anticipatory effort to rethink theory and practice. First of all, he notes the “risks” involved. “Risk,” indeed, was a term later to be thematized by Castoriadis, who is often cited as saying that “democracy is the regime of self-limitation” and “democracy is the only tragic political regime,” but who immediately added in these two instances: “therefore it is also the regime of historical risk” and “it is the sole regime that takes risks.” And as he says later, “our creation is thus generally ephemeral, sometimes durable, always risky” (*CR*, pp. 282, 316, 344). Democracy is to be understood along with Castoriadis not in terms of being “represented” by others or of unquestioningly following established procedures but as a possible regime in which each individual risks an autonomous life of independent thought and action in order to make a self-activating, self-directing, self-responsible, self-challenging, critical contribution to the evolution of the whole of society. Without thematizing *risk* as such in the [FT\(P&K\)](#) Foreword, we ourselves summarized his revised view (so to speak) of vision as a “creative and *risky* form of making/doing” (which we contrasted with “speculative theory—this reduplication of seeing in a theory that denies itself as *perilous* practice and defines itself as a pure vision”) and his take on thinking as “that *risky* enterprise where we *do not even know in advance* what thinking is.” Moreover, we spoke [there](#) of [RTI\(TBS\)](#) as “our first *risky* experiment in Castoriadis/Cardan internet publication for the third millennium,” noting that this dicey wager turned out to have “been an unmitigated success,” since it received positive critical attention⁶¹ and occasioned massive downloading in unprecedented numbers (as compared to

⁶¹[Scott McLemee, “The Strange Afterlife of Cornelius Castoriadis: The Story of a Revered European Thinker, a Literary Legacy, Family Squabbles, and Internet Bootlegging,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50:29 \(March 26, 2004\): A14-16.](#)

traditionally published Castoriadis books in print).⁶²

Risk is also a factor found in Castoriadis's RPT talk— at precisely the point that seemed most problematic: “I will risk a prediction,” he said, “because this is my professional field,” as if risktaking might be offset by expertise (as a retired economist). Yet that statement can be understood in another way. In lieu of a revolutionary organization, whose ongoing operation had at least temporarily become problematic, in 1967 it was promised that “we will continue, *each in our own area*, to reflect and to act,” endeavoring to rethink theory and practice as part of the effort to contribute to the conditions under which an autonomous society might emerge. Far from advocating quietism and withdrawal, Castoriadis was sketching out how the potential for contestation could become situated in a multiplicity of invested sites—indeed wherever people wanted to participate, critically and exemplarily, in the transformation of their society while making the transformation of the terms of that potentially omnipresent effort (what he would later call, in *IIS*, “thoughtful doing”) itself a theme for further reflections. “Without *development* of revolutionary theory, no development of revolutionary action,” Castoriadis had written in the very first issue of *S. ou B. (CR)*, p. 37) in order to update a traditional revolutionary adage. Anticipating what he would later describe as the lasting lesson of May '68—“The site of politics is everywhere. The site of politics is society”—Castoriadis was in effect saying, the previous year, that *without development of the critique of revolutionary theory and expansion of the potential sites for its creative application*, no meaningful enlargement and transformation of *revolutionary action*. The pursuance of such an undertaking in the face of a subsequent “rising tide of insignificance” amid “a society adrift” thus becomes all the more meaningful.

The very project of “translat[ing Castoriadis] from the French and edit[ing him] anonymously as a public service”

⁶²During its first four months after publication (December 2003-March 2004), [RTI\(TBS\)](#) received 4,000+ hits on the *Not Bored!* website; during the past twenty months, 3,000+ distinct *NB!* users downloaded [RTI\(TBS\)](#) or [FT\(P&K\)](#). (Comparable figures are unavailable for <http://costis.org>.)

may thereby be understood as participating in this risky “open engendering of significations oriented toward a radical transformation of the social world” of which Castoriadis later spoke, and which he advocated. Indeed, [RTI\(TBS\)](#) set off an unpredictable series of events—including the publication of the present tome, which became possible only after that earlier Appendix led the heirs to make these very texts available in French for the first time in book form. Moreover, this open engendering is “unified by the idea of the *autonomy* of man and of society” in that its creative, situated response was born of contestation, a refusal to conform, and, more positively speaking, because it has instituted an effectively actual form of self-reflective praxis that is offered not as a copyable model but as a potentially exemplary act designed to inspire others to undertake their own such acts in whatever societal sites they find or place themselves.

In this respect, we have followed Curtis’s lead while extending his work in new ways onto an “unknown landscape” we have been helping to bring into existence and are still exploring. The continual creation and re-creation of the form that is the Translator’s Foreword has explicitly been a principal element of that work from the start, an open-ended signification-generating signification occasioned by nothing but contact with the work of translation and a will to reflect on and articulate that practical experience in a way that has a potential universality while remaining specific to the work itself and providing a service to the reader, whose own potential for autonomy is thereby respected. And Curtis was also able to anticipate the shape of things to come, a project in which we actively continue to participate. Speaking of Arnold’s then-forthcoming scab translation of *Figures du pensable*, he said in his [censored 2004 Brussels talk](#): “Helen Arnold and the Castoriadis family propose to undertake such an experiment in the near future, while the anonymous translator projects to publish the same volume, once again as an electro-Samizdat publication from *Not Bored!*” Curtis did not need to offer a “prediction” there; he simply formulated the coming choice in terms of autonomy, or the lack thereof, and the coherency, or incoherency, of the pursuit of one’s work activity in relation to one’s ostensible political

convictions. The atrocious quality of Arnold's subsequent translation work has abundantly confirmed what Curtis had projected would be the stakes involved when one scrambles to maintain professional standards while simultaneously violating professional ethics.

Furthermore, the exemplary signification of the anonymous translator's practice has given rise to other creative responses. For example, no longer just a single, anonymous individual, conversant in English and French, but now an entire collective of people from Europe as well as North, Central, and South America, who are fluent in Catalan, English, French, German, Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish, announced in March 2009 the formation of a project to scan and post on the internet in chronological order the forty issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* so as to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary of their original publication. This multilingual, international anonymous "Soubscan" collective has already made the first seven scanned *S. ou B.* issues available to all free of charge as a public service at: <http://soubscan.org>.⁶³

Finally, let it be recalled that Castoriadis also thematized the "rising tide of insignificancy" in "a society adrift" in terms of "the era of generalized conformism," which is said to be predicated on and to testify to a "retreat from autonomy." With the online publication of the present electro-Samizdat tome, the ongoing contestation of an editorial and

⁶³One need not search far or wide for the reason this additional underground project of editorial contestation had become necessary. Along with her partner and fellow former *S. ou B.* member Daniel Blanchard, Arnold sabotaged an offer made by the University of Michigan's Scholarly Publishing Office to scan all *S. ou B.* issues for free and make them available to the public online with no fee. Blanchard and Arnold—who have the distinction of being the only persons to protest to Bill Brown about *Not Bored!*'s electronic posting of [RTI\(TBS\)](#)—likewise sabotaged Curtis's project (first announced by him, with Castoriadis's backing, in [PSW3](#), pp. 87-88, n. 3) to translate a selection of *S. ou B.* texts. Even though Curtis had already found a publisher, this project has been stalled ever since; in both cases, Blanchard/Arnold's sabotage succeeded when they provided false information to fellow former *S. ou B.* members. (See again "[Public Statement of Agreement and Resolution: Helen Arnold and David Ames Curtis](#)," which Arnold refused to sign.)

translation project gone awry in the hands of the Castoriadis heirs, the Association Cornelius Castoriadis, and Helen Arnold now includes a new instantiation, one occasioned and made possible by a prior “novel decision” concerning how best to engage in autonomous acts of positive resistance to such conformism. It is unknown what landscape will emerge from this new act of nonconformity. Yet we can try to anticipate some of its contours, living a life of autonomy while respecting the autonomy of others.⁶⁴ Let us end this Translator’s Foreword, then, with our sense of surprise intact about the novel ways in which readers might creatively respond to this fortuitously summoned forth set of writings.

—August-September 2010

October 2010 Postscript

A first surprise: the present Foreword’s first reader—the anonymous copyeditor—points out that the Lettrist Patrick Straram published a *Cahier pour un paysage à inventer* (Quebec, 1960), whose title, which may be translated as “Notebook for a landscape to be invented,” is highly evocative of some themes broached in the present text.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Arnold began her “Translator’s Postscriptum,” a form she supposedly rejected on principle, with praise for those whose work is overseen by the very people who made her questionable employment possible: “Several years have gone by since this book first appeared in French, and the reader can only be struck by the relevance to the present situation of these comments by the editors.” More than the conformism and abjection to which such a statement testifies or the violation of a principle it may now be seen she did not intend to apply to herself but merely enunciated to win employment, contempt for the reader and the reader’s autonomy stands out here and yet conforms to the rest of her behavior, since such things are of a piece. What “the reader can only” do is not for the person who makes translations available in the International Republic of Letters to dictate.

⁶⁵See Straram’s [“Avertissements,” reprinted in Gérard Berréby’s *Textes et documents situationnistes, 1957-1960* \(Paris: Fayard, 1991\), pp. 190-91.](#) Let us also note that, in the final part of his Castoriadis trilogy, Bill Brown offers a serious alternative reading to ours about S. ou B.’s demise: [“Cornelius Castoriadis, 1922 to 1997,” *Not Bored!*, 29 \(July 1998\): 64-69.](#)

On the Translation

It is greatly fortunate that, under current circumstances, the present volume has been able to benefit from the eye of a professional copy editor, as had also been the case with Castoriadis volumes published by commercial and academic presses. The copy editor is to be thanked for his/her invaluable assistance in copyediting, in proofreading, and in making a considerable number of highly useful editorial suggestions. The reader's indulgence, and her suggestions for improvements in subsequent editions, would nevertheless be most appreciated, as some errors may of course still be extant. For questions of terminology, the reader is referred to David Ames Curtis's Appendix I: Glossary in *PSW1* and Appendix C: Glossary in *PSW3*, as well as to his "On the Translation" in *WIF*.¹

We note here simply a list of the various English-language words and phrases Castoriadis or his interviewers employed in the original French-language edition: out there, greed, piecemeal reforms, statement of fact, working to rule, unions, input, and time is money.

¹Curtis may be contacted at curtis@msh-paris.fr. It may be possible to persuade him to publish a list of errata, which could then form the basis for a second edition; the same procedure could be used for [RTI\(TBS\)](#) and [FT\(P&K\)](#).

French Editors' Preface*

{The French edition of this} volume brings together interviews and discussions from 1974 until 1997 in which Cornelius Castoriadis—a protean thinker who was, with equal passion, a political activist, an economist, a psychoanalyst, and a philosopher—participated. They belong to the second half of his career, which was basically devoted to philosophical reflection after the experience of the journal and group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Socialism or Barbarism, 1948-1967).¹ And yet, with the S. ou B. experience being studied in a detailed way in one of these texts,² it can be said that it is his entire intellectual itinerary that is being presented to the reader here.³ The present collection will be, we hope, useful

*Présentation, *SD*, pp. 7-13.

¹As per usual, within the texts explanatory clarifications by T/E are placed in braces {} while French words are placed in brackets []. Within authorial or French Editors' notes, any additions by T/E appear in brackets. —T/E

²The French Editors are referring to what is now known in English as “The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water: An Introductory Interview,” the 1974 Agence de Presse “Libération”/Analyse et Popularisation des Luttes (APL Basse Normandie) interview that had already appeared in English with the author’s approval as the first text in Blackwell’s 1997 *Castoriadis Reader* (a previous translation had appeared as “An Interview with C. Castoriadis,” trans. Bart Grahl and David Pugh, *Telos*, 23 [Spring 1975]: 131-55). So as to avoid repetition and to maintain a consistent and inclusive publication history, in the present English-language volume we have substituted the first part of Castoriadis’s interview with the British journal *Radical Philosophy*, which deals with the same subject (his S. ou B. period) and which the French Editors had not included in *SD*; its second part appears as “Market, Capitalism, Democracy” in the second half of the present volume. —T/E

³We have added here a chronology as well as a bibliography that is certainly not exhaustive but which, we hope, will be of help to those who would like to go further. [Since a complete Castoriadis bibliography is already available in 17 languages on the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website <http://www.agorainternational.org>, the present translation dispenses with this incomplete French Editors’ bibliography and presents, instead of their very general chronology, additional biographical, bibliographical, and historical footnotes at relevant points in

to those who are approaching the author for the first time, for it can offer a guiding thread for orienting oneself within a body of work that is sometimes dense and complex. Others will find here a clear and convenient summary of positions that, as he was himself well aware, are far from obvious to everyone.

In particular, one will be able to see in this book how two questions—that of the truth and that of life in society—were for him in the end inseparable, and how they blended together in his own history. These are, as is said in one of the texts, questions that are really “never ending”—an expression that, moreover, could have provided a title for this collection.

Even if it meant juggling the chronological order, we have preferred to begin with a 1992 interview in which Castoriadis succinctly presents what he meant at that time by *the project of autonomy* on the individual as well as collective levels (in this interview, one will find positions he maintained until the end of his life). Next, we reprint, in this first part, two more extensive, as well as more polished, interviews that were also, no doubt, very attentively “revised and corrected” by the author, as one says.⁴ The 1974 interview contains the most complete presentation he ever gave of the group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.⁵ It was done with sufficient

the text that should prove useful to the interested reader. —T/E]

⁴There are, likewise, some other major interviews, later reprinted in book form, that also summarize and update his political positions: “The Revolutionary Exigency” (1976; now in *PSW3*); “Unending Interrogation” (1979; now in *RTI(TBS)*); the 1993 interview “The Rising Tide of Insignificance,” which yielded the title for the *RTI(TBS)* collection; and “The Dilapidation of the West” (1991; now in *RTI(TBS)*). Three exceptions here are Castoriadis’s response to Richard Rorty, the 1992 talk on wars in Europe, and the final interview (1997) he gave to Lilia Moglia, which was put into final form by the French Editors.

⁵See, again, the first T/E footnote for this Preface. Another interview that extensively covers the S. ou B. period is the 1990 Cerisy Colloquium “Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview,” available in translation at: <http://www.agorainternational.org/enccaiint.pdf>. After the first part of the *Radical Philosophy* interview, Castoriadis’s unpublished 1973 talk “Revolutionary Perspectives Today” has been included. —T/E

hindsight (the group ended in 1967) but at a time when the questions under discussion were still highly present—in the, albeit limited, milieu that had been following or was just discovering the journal and in his own work. There, one will find in summary form (as in the 1977 interview from the second half of the present volume) Castoriadis's views on the major questions studied in the review: the economic and social nature of the countries of the former "Soviet" bloc, the experience of bureaucratization in society and in the workers' movement itself, the break with Marxism, and the chances for an autonomous society. In the interview on "Imaginary Significations" (1982), he presents ideas that have been at the center of his reflections since *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1965-1975),⁶ in particular the nature of the significations he called *imaginary* since they could not be reduced to the "real" or to a "rational-functional" dimension. These questions were equally the main object of his teaching work at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, 1980-1995), which was to provide the material for a multivolume work entitled *La Création humaine* (Human Creation)—a project he was not able to bring to a successful completion.⁷ Even though it does not include an overall presentation of the author's positions, the discussion with Richard Rorty broaches some questions that are broad enough for it to seem preferable to include it in this part. The same goes for the 1992 talk on wars in Europe, which, beyond the intrinsic interest of the topic, reminds one of how important

⁶The French Editors are referring to "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory," which first appeared in the last five issues (36-40) of *S. ou B.* (1964-1965) and which was published, along with a new and extended second half, "The Social Imaginary and the Institution," as *IIS* (1975 in French; [1987 in English](#)). —T/E

⁷The EHESS seminars are now being published under this title by Éditions du Seuil. Already, a 1999 volume has appeared in English translation as *On Plato's Statesman* (2002), along with two volumes in French: *Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique* (2002) and *Ce qui fait la Grèce, I. D'Homère à Héraclite* (2004; partial publication of the year 1982-1983). [A second *Ce qui fait la Grèce* volume entitled *La Cité et les lois*, made up of seminars from the years 1983-1984, appeared in 2008. —T/E]

the analysis of the psychological dimension of human beings was in his life and his work.

As we know, whether they were published as texts in *S. ou B.* or as updated commentaries written at the time of the republication of *S. ou B.* texts in the Éditions 10/18 series {and then partially translated as *PSW1-3*},⁸ the most extensive analyses Castoriadis devoted to economic and social reality concern the world of 1945-1975, whose leaders [*dirigeants*] had (partially) drawn lessons from the terrible experience of the interwar period. The developed part of this world was based on a relative equilibrium between the capitalist business enterprise, the State, and the various political and trade-union bureaucracies—the “representatives” of wage earners. While criticizing those who clung to the idea that there existed a dynamic for the objective contradictions of capitalism (basically as described in Marx’s *Capital*) and affirming at the same time that more than a century of social *struggles* had ended in the transformation of capitalism and in the appearance of a genuine capitalist *policy* that took into account the overall and long-term interests of the system, Castoriadis set out to demonstrate that this universe continues to be haunted by the contradictions and the irrationality specific to *bureaucratic organization*, to a

social structure in which the direction of collective

⁸In particular, “Sur la dynamique du capitalisme,” *S. ou B.*, 12 (August-September 1953) and 13 (January-March 1954), the “Sur le contenu du socialisme” texts (1957-1958, reprinted in *CS* [T/E: the French Editors have given the wrong dates; if they mean the first two parts of “On the Content of Socialism,” which were indeed reprinted in *CS* and which are now available in *PSW1* and *PSW2*, the correct dates are 1955 and 1957; part three (1958) was reprinted in *EMO2* and is now available in translation in *PSW3*]), “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961; now in *PSW2*), as well as the “Author’s Introduction to the 1974 English Edition” (also now in *PSW2*), where he offered his interpretation of the postwar inflationist episode of the 1960s and 1970s. But there is also “Technique” (1973; now in *CL*), “Reflections on ‘Rationality’ and ‘Development’” (1976; now in *PPA*), and “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle, from Aristotle to Us” (1975; now in *CL*). See also, for the subsequent phase, pages 128-212 of *Devant la guerre*, “The Crisis of Western Societies” (1982; now in *CR*), and, finally, “The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism” in the posthumous volume *FT(P&K)*.

activities is in the hands of an impersonal, hierarchically organized apparatus. This apparatus is supposed to act according to “rational” criteria and methods. It is economically privileged, and it gains recruits according to rules it actually proclaims and really applies.⁹

This universe was certainly not sheltered from crises, quite the contrary. But these crises did not stem from the factors and from the dynamic Marxist analysis thought it had discovered. The flip side—both condition and consequence—of this reality was the destruction of significations, mass irresponsibility, and, especially, what he called *privatization*, the withdrawal of the population from the political sphere: “everyone takes care of his own business, but the affairs of society as a whole seem to escape their control.”¹⁰ Now, this evolution—this absence of forces capable of opposing the destructive tendencies of the system—could not help in the long term but open the door to a kind of capitalism that has given in to its demons; and that is really what has ever more clearly been taking place since 1980. More and more preoccupied with his philosophical work, Castoriadis did not present an overall analysis¹¹ of this post-1980 society and of the “counteroffensive” of its ruling strata, of this phase characterized by the willing self-effacement of the State’s agents—which is, no doubt, in the end suicidal for the system. Whence the interest of the hints one will find in the texts brought together in the second part of the present volume.

What we have there are brief interviews, topical texts,

⁹“Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961; now in *PSW2*, p. 271).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹¹ And yet, knowing that he did not have the time, he abandoned only in his very last years his efforts to provide an analysis of the “world system of domination” and to publish the volume on “the dynamic of capitalism” that was to be included in the series of reprints of his *S. ou B.* writings for Éditions 10/18. One will nonetheless find in “The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism” (1997; now in *FT(P&K)*) some hints about what the orientation of that work would have been.

if you will, but ones that, as such, should suffice to destroy the legend of a Castoriadis who would have become, starting at a certain moment of his life, indifferent to political life. In them, he tirelessly goes back over the question of democracy, its unfinished character, as well as its past and its future in the Western world. He expresses himself with his usual vigor, not burdening himself with too many nuances (these are, let us not forget, texts in which he was intervening in a situation, not texts of analysis), and he does so in purposefully simple, though one should not think simplistic, terms. What in Castoriadis's words amounts to a brutal affirmation corresponds in general to a brutal fact whose features have quite often been brought out over time. The reader who might have some doubt about that will be able to examine side by side the dates of the interviews, the diagnosis formulated at that time, and what came afterward.

Two examples will suffice. What was said about citizens' withdrawal from public affairs might have seemed pessimistic in the 1970s and 1980s. Today in the large "democratic" countries and in the very ones where so-called representative democracy seemed most firmly rooted, those who govern sometimes "represent" only one voter in five, and the *majority* of members of the electoral body often refuses in actual fact to participate in the life of the system. True, since 1995, and especially since 1999, in developed countries the passivity is no longer complete. Movements are forming whose positive features Castoriadis would no doubt have hailed. But neither is there any doubt that he would have judged that the indispensable condition for their success, be it only partial, is that they would know how to draw all the lessons from the past century, and in particular from the experience of totalitarianism. For, the drying up of the Aral Sea, which is probably the greatest ecological catastrophe of the century, or the millions dead from famine who were the price paid for the failure of the "Great Leap Forward" in China, have not really been the products of the unadulterated reign of "commodity" relations. Nothing will be done, nothing will be gained if it is not clearly understood that the "Liberal" fraud {in the Continental European sense of conservative ideological advocacy of "free market" policies}

is not the only form of fraud and that the “Liberal” impasse is not the only impasse to be afraid of for the humanity of tomorrow.

Castoriadis also asked himself what the future might be for a society in which the only restraint is fear of incurring some penalty. Today, when, after Enron and so many other scandals, one sees the equivalent of the annual GNP of more than one moderately developed State disappear as if by magic, one would have to be terribly blind to believe that it was but a matter of some morally unpleasant aspects of social life, as old as the hills and unrelated to the very structure of our society, or to object that, in undeveloped countries, corruption is rife and has always existed; that is indisputable yet illustrates quite well what is at issue for us. Nothing, wrote Castoriadis, “nothing in ‘liberal’ discourse or in the ‘values’ of the age explains why—save for the threat of the penal code—a judge shouldn’t put his ruling up for auction or a president shouldn’t use his office to fill his pockets.”¹² That was {said as far back as 1988}.¹³ One would be tempted to say that he hadn’t seen anything yet (and yet the billions of dollars stolen during the Savings and Loan scandal in the United States or the Crédit Lyonnais black hole were not negligible affairs). No doubt about it today: We are there.

For more than thirty years, Castoriadis returned over and over again to the basic political problem of the existence of a “democracy” without “democrats,” which tends to destroy, on an ongoing basis, the human type that might allow for its survival, even under its own imperfect form. And from this he drew a conclusion that nearly everyone today is forced to grant: that we find ourselves faced with a “society adrift.” True, each person strives to draw strictly no conclusions from this observation. When the problem manifests itself in particularly acute forms, there is solemn talk of an

¹²See “Neither a Historical Necessity Nor Just a ‘Moral’ Exigency: A Political and Human Exigency” in the present volume.

¹³For two antecedents to this 1988 statement, see “The Crisis of Modern Society” (1966; now in [PSW3](#), p. 107), and “Social Transformation and Cultural Creation” (1978; now in [ibid.](#), p. 303). —T/E

earthquake, and it is stated that nothing will be as before; then, when the big scare is over, people hasten to forget. (May those who think that all this is but a caricature take another look at the press {since the early 2000s}.) Our information-saturated society is also an amnesic society—and even if that were not the case, the greatest efforts would be deployed, as one could see happening recently in France, to stifle all critical faculties and to erase any possible remaining memories. All those who are concerned with public affairs ought nevertheless to grant to these problems the attention they deserve, for sooner or later the problems in question will make their effects known in such a way that they will be difficult to avoid. The invocation *ad nauseam* of “socialism” and of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” did not keep from bursting forth one day for all to see what these words were hiding: to various degrees, terror, oppression, inequality, and economic inefficiency. The mechanical repetition of the terms *rule of law* and *market economy* will not be able to replace, indefinitely, consideration not of what these words could mean but of the concrete historical realities that, for the time being, they are covering over: accumulation without end (in all senses of the word *end*), destruction of the environment, withdrawal of the population from the public sphere, and decomposition of our society’s steering mechanisms [*mécanismes de direction*]. In this regard, Castoriadis’s positions—the project of autonomy—merit without a doubt being *truly* taken into account, something that, until now, has not to our knowledge been done.

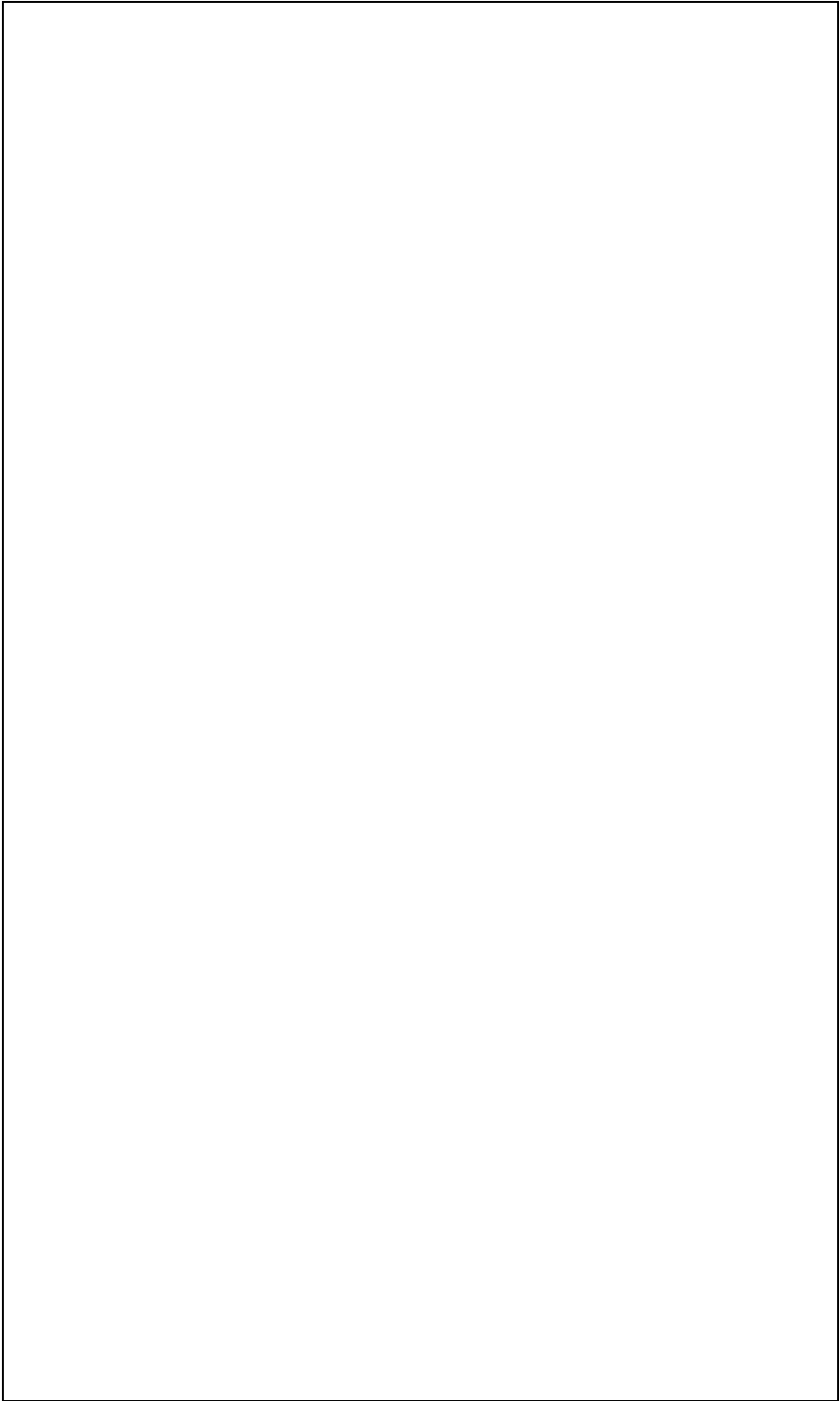
We have not hesitated to correct, here or there, obvious slips or errors in the published texts or to introduce minor stylistic modifications. We have also made cuts (with the appropriate indications) designed to avoid repetitions which were inevitable at the time, but which risked becoming tiresome in a text able to be read without stopping, while retaining, as circumstances dictated, some more compressed or more developed version of the same idea. It nevertheless goes without saying that those familiar with his work will rediscover here many, many formulations, since Castoriadis, like other good minds of the past, deemed that something that is right can be said twice, three times, or even one hundred

times. He barely worried, to say the least, about such repetitions or almost literal restatements; he would not have wanted to lose a minute in trying to avoid them. But beyond the fact that this collection has not been designed, first and foremost, for readers who have an in-depth knowledge of his work, reminders of things that go against the current of what is being read and heard every day may offer a healthy dose of exercise even for the latter group. In any case, may this work give to some the desire to go (or to return) to texts in which the author's positions are presented in a more expansive way.

Finally, we asked ourselves whether it was necessary, since everything is eventually forgotten, to add some notes—be it only to recall for example for the young that very Rimboldian French “Union of the Left” that wanted to “change life.” Upon reflection, we have preferred instead to offer a chronology that allows one to situate the various interviews in their historical context.¹⁴ With just a few exceptions duly noted in the text, the various titles have been chosen by the French Editors of this edition. The footnotes to these texts (basically citations or references to other texts by the author) have been {indicated by the addition of the phrase “—French Editors”}.

Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay

¹⁴As stated above, the French Editors' bio-bibliography and chronology are not included in the present volume. Targeted supplemental footnotes provide useful factual and contextual information geared specifically to English-speaking readers. The French Editors' chronology often omits specific information such readers might be lacking. —T/E



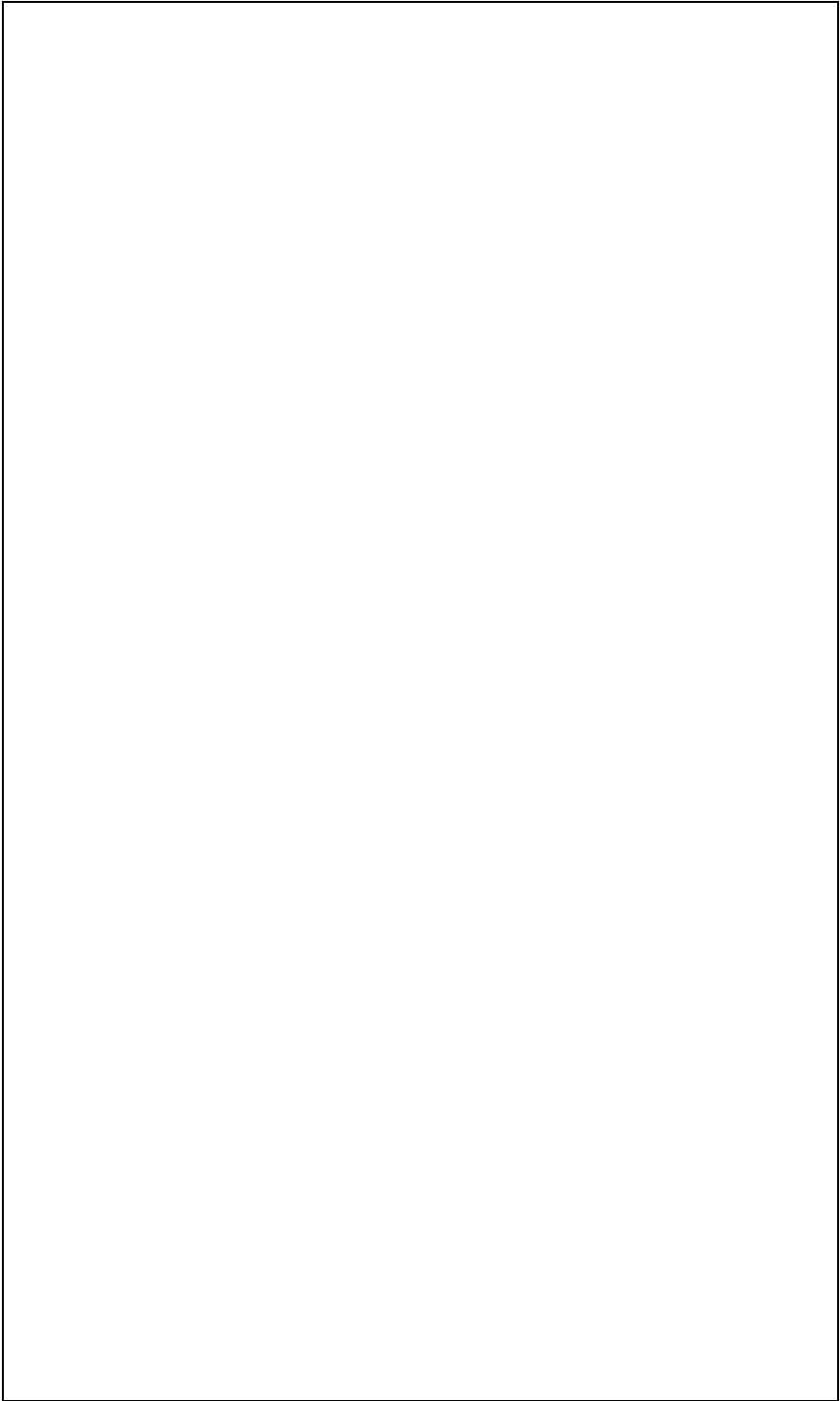
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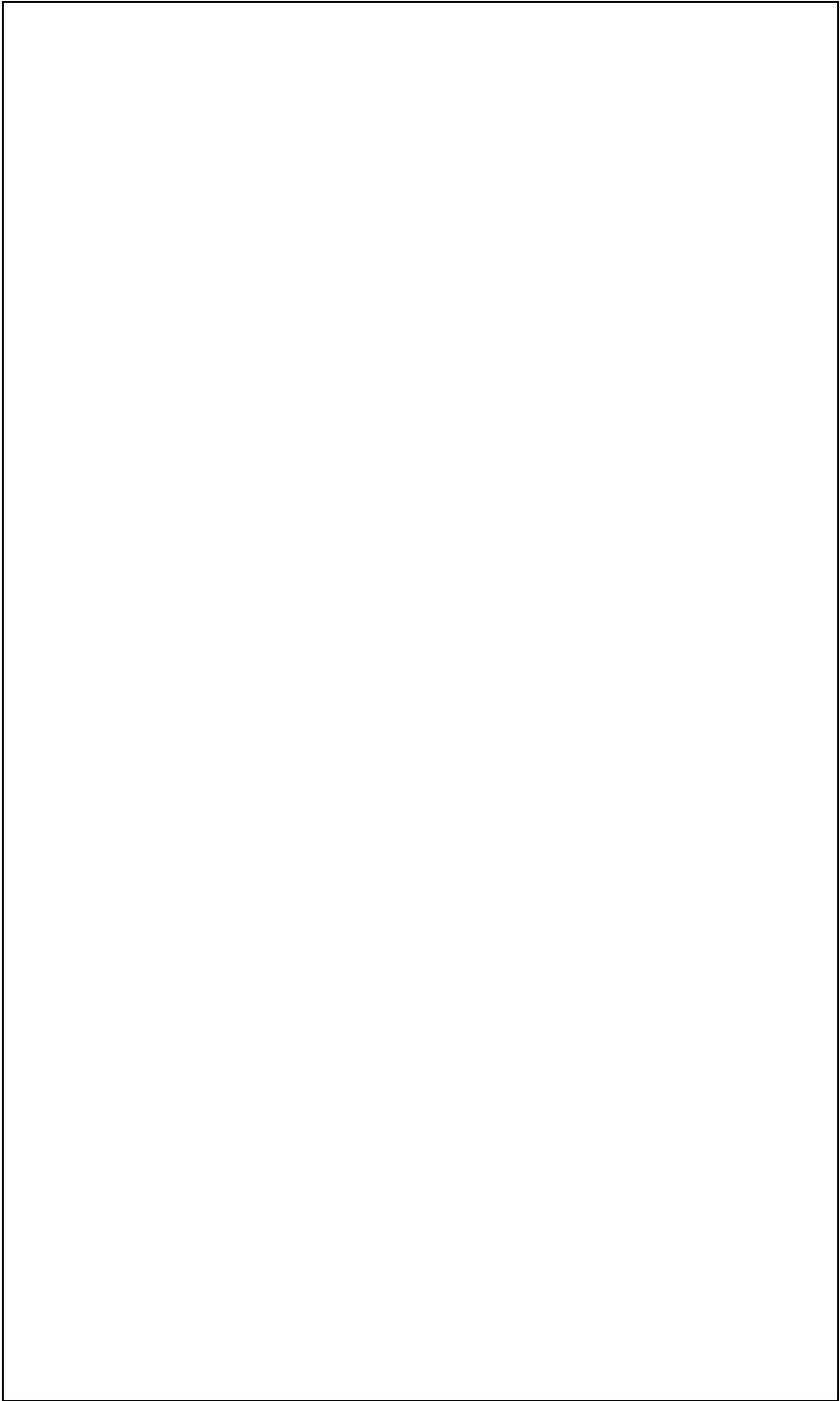
THE RISING TIDE OF INSIGNIFICANCY

Including

REVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES TODAY



**PART ONE
ITINERARY**



The Project of Autonomy Is Not a Utopia*

QUESTION: Why don't you like the term *utopia*?

C.C.: It's not that I don't like the term. It's that I stick to the exact and original meaning of words. Utopia is something that has not and cannot take place. What I call the revolutionary project, the project of individual as well as collective autonomy (the two being indissociable), is not a utopia but, rather, a social-historical project that can be achieved; nothing shows that it would be impossible. Its realization depends only upon the lucid activity of individuals and peoples, upon their understanding, their will, their imagination.

The term *utopia* has become fashionable again of late, a bit under the influence of Ernst Bloch, a Marxist who somehow or other accommodated himself to the regime of the German Democratic Republic and who never undertook a critique of Stalinism and of totalitarian bureaucratic regimes: in it, he found a sort of cover, a blanket, a word that allowed him to differentiate himself from "actually existing socialism." The term has been taken up more recently by Jürgen Habermas because, after the total bankruptcy of Marxism and of Marxism-Leninism, it seems to legitimize a vague critique of the present-day regime through the evocation of a utopian socialist transformation, with a "pre-Marxist" aroma. In fact, it's quite the opposite; no one (unless he's a neo-Kantian philosopher) is able to understand how one can criticize what is on the basis of what *cannot* be. The term *utopia* is mystificatory.

Q.: What is the project of individual and collective autonomy?

C.C.: It's the project of a society in which all citizens have an equal, effectively actual possibility of participating in legislation, in government, in jurisdiction, and, finally, in the

*December 28, 1992 interview with Jocelyn Wolff and Benjamin Quénelles that was published as "Le projet de l'autonomie n'est pas une utopie" in *Propos*, 10 (March 1993): 34-40. Reprinted in *SD*, pp. 17-25.

institution of society. This state of affairs presupposes radical changes in present-day institutions. It is in this respect that it can be called *the revolutionary project*, it being understood that *revolution* does not signify massacres, rivers of blood, the extermination of the Chouans {at the time of the French Revolution}, or the taking of the Winter Palace. It is clear that such a state of affairs is quite far removed from the present-day system, whose operation is basically nondemocratic. Our regimes are wrongly called *democratic*, whereas what they really are are *liberal oligarchies*.¹

Q.: How do these regimes function?

C.C.: These regimes are liberal: they don't of their essence call upon coercion but, rather, a sort of weak half-hearted support from the population. The capitalist imaginary has finally penetrated into the people: the goal of human life would be the unlimited expansion of production and consumption, so-called material well-being, etc., as a result of which the population is totally *privatized*. The subway-workday-sleep away [*métro-boulot-dodo*] triad criticized in 1968 has become car-job-TV. The population does not participate in political life: it's not participation to vote once every {four,} five, or seven years for a person you don't know, about problems you don't know, about which the system does everything to keep you from knowing. Yet for there to be a change, for there truly to be self-government, institutions certainly must be changed so that people might participate in the running [*direction*] of common affairs. But what also and especially is needed is a change in individuals' attitudes toward institutions and toward public affairs, toward the *res publica*, toward what the Greeks called *ta koina* (common affairs). For, today, domination by an oligarchy and passivity and privatization on the part of the people are but two sides of the same coin.

Let's open a slightly theoretical parenthesis. Taken from the political standpoint, there always are, abstractly

¹ The term *liberal* is intended here in the Continental sense of conservative ideological advocacy of a "free market"—with, as we shall see below, some allowance for certain residual freedoms that have been gained through popular struggles. —T/E

speaking, three spheres in social life: a *private sphere*, that of the narrowly personal life of people; a *public sphere*, in which decisions are made that necessarily apply to all and are publicly sanctioned; and a sphere that can be called *public/private*, open to all, but within which the established political power, even if it is exercised by the collectivity, doesn't have to intervene (this is the sphere in which people discuss, publish, and buy books, go to the theater, etc.). In contemporary parlance, the private sphere and the public/private sphere have been thrown together, especially since Hannah Arendt, and this confusion returns all the time among the intellectuals who talk about "civil society." Yet the civil society/State opposition (which dates from the late eighteenth century) doesn't suffice; it doesn't allow us to think through what a democratic society is. For that, we must use this articulation into three spheres. To take up again the ancient Greek terms, we have to distinguish among the *oikos* (the household, the private sphere), the *ekklēsia* (the people's assembly, the public sphere), and the *agora* (the "marketplace" and the meeting place, the public/private sphere). Under totalitarianism, the three spheres are totally merged. Under liberal oligarchy, there is both more or less clear-cut domination of the public sphere by a part of the public/private sphere (the "market," the economy) and elimination of the effectively public character of the public sphere (private and secretive character of the contemporary State). Democracy is the correct articulation of the three spheres as well as the becoming-truly-public of the public sphere. That requires the participation of all in the running of common affairs, and this in turn requires institutions that allow people to participate and urge them to do so. That in turn is impossible without *effectively actual* political equality. This is the true meaning of equality: a society cannot make people equal in the sense that it would make everyone capable of running the hundred-meter dash in ten seconds or of playing the *Appassionata* sonata superbly. But it can make them equal as concerns their effectively actual participation in all instituted power existing within society.

That's what the project of autonomy is. Its realization opens up, of course, some significant problems. No one can

provide the solution to these problems all alone and in advance; only society, if it sets itself in motion, will be able to resolve them. For example, it is clear that a democratic society is incompatible with the enormous concentration of power that exists today. It is just as clear that such a society is incompatible with bureaucratic pseudoplanning. There is also the question of freedom in work. Citizens cannot be slaves in their work five or six days a week and free on political Sundays: this is what I have called, for more than forty years, the management of production by the producers; of course, this also raises some problems, for example the participation of technicians and specialists. It also implies a market that would be a *genuine market*, not like today a market dominated by monopolies and oligopolies—or state interventions. All these transformations presuppose—and go hand in hand with—an anthropological transformation of contemporary individuals.

Q.: Individuals' culture, in short?

C.C.: One can, if one wants, call that *culture*. It's a matter of the close and deep-seated relationship that exists between the structure of individuals and the structure of the system. Today, individuals conform to the system and the system conforms to the individuals. In order for society to change, a radical change is needed in human beings' interests and attitudes. The passion for consumer objects has to be replaced by the passion for common affairs.

Q.: How is the passion for political affairs created? How is one to encourage it?

C.C.: I don't know. But I do know that it has existed before in history. There are moments, and even eras, when individuals have taken a passionate interest in common affairs. They went into the streets, they demanded things, and they imposed a certain number of them. If today we live under a liberal regime, that is not because this regime was granted by the ruling classes. The liberal elements in contemporary institutions are sediments of popular struggles in the West that have gone on for centuries, struggles that begin with the fights led since the tenth century by the communes in order to obtain a relative degree of self-government. If today we observe an atony, indeed an atrophy, of struggles, no one can

say that that's society's ultimate state. In any case, there is not and there never will be an ultimate state of society. The ink had hardly dried on Francis Fukuyama's writings when history noisily demonstrated their idiocy.

If the state of apathy, of depoliticization, and of present-day privatization were to persist, we would certainly witness some major crises. What would then resurface with an intensity unknown today would be the problem of the environment, for which nothing is being done, as well as the problem of what is called *the Third World*, which in fact comprises three quarters of humanity, and the problem of the decomposition of the wealthy societies of the world.² For, the withdrawal of peoples from the public sphere, the disappearance of political and social conflict, allows the economic, political, and media oligarchy to escape all control. And already now, this is producing regimes whose irrationality is pushed to the extreme and which are riddled with structural corruption.

Q.: Doesn't the project of autonomy, which is founded upon individuals' participation in the affairs of the community, run up against the lethargic effects of television and the media?

C.C.: Television today is a means for collective mind numbing. And in France we haven't seen anything yet. A film is sliced into two or three parts for commercials, whereas in the United States or in Australia, for example, commercial interruptions double or triple the length of a film.³ That, moreover, isn't an "American" curse. This is the capitalist mold: advertising and therefore sponsors dominate the media.

²See, among other texts by Castoriadis, "The Revolutionary Force of Ecology" (1993), "Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy" (1985), and "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991), now all in [RTI\(TBS\)](#). —T/E

³This is surely an exaggeration or a misstatement. In the United States, at least, commercials add "only" a third or so more time to the length of a film. Perhaps Castoriadis—who "never had a television at home" as he says in his reply to Rorty—felt, while viewing a televised movie during a visit to the United States or Australia, that any lengthening of a film by commercial interruptions made the experience seem interminable. —T/E

In the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Bruno Frappat and Daniel Schneidermann go on about this all week long: the more or less interesting programs are televised at one o'clock in the morning. If one wanted to place television, radio, and the other modern media in the service of democracy, that would require enormous changes, not only in the contents of the programs but also in the very structure of the media. The media, such as they are today, embody a society characterized by domination as much in their physical as in their social structure: one transmitter, an indefinite number of anonymous, isolated, and passive receivers. The role of the media conforms entirely to the *spirit of the system* and powerfully contributes to the general mind numbing. One need only recall, moreover, how the Gulf War was covered.

Q.: Do you believe that the system you are criticizing is a modern system? Are we living in a postmodern era, or do you challenge that notion?

C.C.: I have already criticized, in the French edition of *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy*, the term *postmodern*.⁴ Modernity lasted about two centuries, from 1750 to 1950. Afterward, we entered into what I call the *era of generalized conformism*. Modernity was the permanent calling back into question, in philosophy as well as in politics and in art, of what was established. This phenomenon has practically disappeared since around 1950—an arbitrary and schematic date, to be sure, but it's around that time that the immense creative blast of inspiration that had enlivened the West for two centuries began to weaken to the point of vanishing almost completely.

Q.: Do you think that the idea of progress no longer exists?

C.C.: The idea of progress certainly still exists—though it has become increasingly moth-eaten. This is an imaginary signification that has held up as much as it has held up and that will hold up as much as it will hold up. But as an *idea*, it's fallacious. You cannot talk about progress in

⁴See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1992; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

the history of humanity—save in one area, the domain of the *ensemblistic-identitarian* (which I call the *ensidic* for short), let us say: the logico-instrumental. There is progress, for example, in the H-bomb relative to flint, since the former can kill a lot more and better than the latter. But when it comes to fundamental things, one cannot talk about progress. There is neither progress nor regression between the Parthenon and Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral, between Plato and Kant, between Bach and Wagner, between Altamira and Picasso. But *there are* breaks: in ancient Greece, between the eighth and fifth centuries, with the creation of democracy and philosophy; or in Western Europe, beginning in the tenth-eleventh centuries, accompanied by a gigantic host of new creations and culminating in the modern period.

Q.: But in the notion of progress there really nevertheless is an idea that the lot of the following generation will be better than that of the preceding generation. Isn't that the very thing that aroused the proletariat's support during the period of industrialization?

C.C.: Things will get better in relation to what? It's capitalism that has based all of social life on the idea that economic "betterment" was the only thing that counted—or the thing that, once achieved, would yield the rest by addition. And Marx and Marxism followed capitalism down this path. For a long time, the proletariat, which was struggling all the while against its exploitation, didn't have as its sole objective the "betterment" of its standard of living. But obviously, in the long run, this basically capitalist imaginary, one shared by Marxism, also penetrated into the working class. Under capitalism there certainly was a fantastic amount of economic expansion (which, after the fact, would have been unimaginable even for Marx). But as we see today, it was purchased with irreparable destruction inflicted upon the biosphere. And its condition has also been the workers' struggle to win pay increases for their labor and reductions in labor time. That's the way constantly expanding domestic markets were created—without which capitalism would have collapsed amid crises of overproduction. That's the way, too, that the potential unemployment engendered by the rise in productivity was absorbed. Unemployment today is due to the

fact that the accelerated rise in labor productivity since 1940 has been accompanied by only very modest reductions in labor time—in contrast to what occurred from 1840 until 1940, when the work week was reduced from 72 hours to 40 hours. The obsession with increased production and increased consumption is practically absent from other phases of history. As Marshall Sahlins (in *Stone Age Economics*), among others, has shown, labor time in paleolithic societies was from two to three hours a day; and that cannot even be called *labor* in today's sense: hunting, for example, is also a collective festival. The rest of the time people played, talked on and on, and made love. What is called *economic progress* has been obtained by the transformation of human beings into producing and consuming machines.

Q.: Can one find pleasure in working?

C.C.: Certainly, on the condition that this labor would have a meaning for she who performs it. And that depends upon the objects produced as well as upon the organization of production and on the worker's role in it.

Q.: In France, there are three million unemployed. How does one explain that the social system isn't cracking up?

C.C.: A very good question. First of all, it's not certain that the status quo will last indefinitely. Next, the burden of unemployment is limited anyway, in part, by the existence of a social safety net whose protections are not negligible. Above all, such unemployment affects the various strata and sections of the population in an unequal way. The misery is placed especially on the back of certain (local, ethnic, etc.) categories of the population whose power to protest is reduced and whose marginalization often leads to transgression and deviance, their reactions not taking a collective form. We spoke above about the main condition for the growth of unemployment: the maintenance of labor time at a constant level, despite the rise in productivity. There's another one: the abandonment of Keynesian policies of support for overall demand—which had to a great extent conditioned the postwar “long boom,” or *Les Trentes Glorieuses*, the thirty glorious years, as is said in French—in favor of a moronic Neoliberalism: Margaret Thatcher, Ronald

Reagan, Milton Friedman, the Chicago Boys, and so on. We are witnessing some absolutely incredible things. For example, in Switzerland people are beginning to observe a certain increase in unemployment: in response, the federal government is reducing public spending! That was precisely the policy of Herbert Hoover in the United States at the start of the Great Depression of 1929-1933 and the policy of Pierre Laval (advised by Jacques Rueff) in France in 1932-1933.⁵ The answer to deflation is more deflation! The actual mental decomposition of the ruling strata goes beyond what theory might reasonably have foreseen.

Q.: Do you think that the ecologists or alternative parties might embody this renewal of which society is so much in need?

C.C.: The ecological current is certainly positive as such. But the existing ecologist parties are totally myopic from the political standpoint. They don't see the indissoluble connection between ecological problems and the general problems of society, and they tend to become an environmentalist lobby.

Q.: To conclude, can you give us your opinion about the "right of interference,"⁶ you who emphasize the importance of recognizing the alterity of the other at the individual level in your project of autonomy?

C.C.: The problem is very complex. You know of Robespierre's famous saying: "Peoples don't like armed

⁵Pierre Laval (1883-1945), twice President of the Council of Ministers under the Third French Republic (the correct dates are 1931-1932, not 1932-1933) and twice head of the Vichy government (1940; 1942-1944), was executed for high treason after the Liberation. As noted in [PSW3](#), p. 74n1, "Jacques Rueff (1896-1978) was a conservative political economist and President Charles de Gaulle's chief economic advisor." —T/E

⁶What is called in French *le droit d'ingérence* is generally known in English as *humanitarian intervention*. This "right" was championed by Bernard Kouchner, the cofounder of Doctors Without Borders (and later Doctors of the World) and a French Socialist Party member who has become the French Minister of Foreign and European Affairs in the government of Prime Minister François Fillon under President Nicolas Sarkozy. —T/E

missionaries.”⁷ No one is going to contest that the situation is terrible in many third-world countries, where attempts to implant either “socialism” or liberal capitalism have failed. In Somalia and in Ethiopia, there has been a return to unending tribal clashes; in India, mutual massacres between Hindus and Muslims; in the Sudan, an attempt by an Islamist government to impose Islamic law by force on the Christian and animist populations of the south; in Afghanistan, bloody chaos; in certain ex-USSR republics, a return to power of Communists after the massacre of opponents; merciless ethnic wars in the Caucasus and especially in the former Yugoslavia, and so on. No one can remain indifferent to these monstrosities. We think, and rightly so, that certain significations created in and through our societies and our history—respect for life and bodily integrity, human rights, separation of the political from the religious, etc.—have, de jure, a universal validity. But it is tragically clear that those significations are rejected by societies—or States—that correspond, perhaps, to four-fifths of the world’s population, and that Liberal and Marxist illusions about the “spontaneous” universal spread of such values are down and out. Can one, ought one to impose them by force? Who will impose them, and how? And who has the moral right to impose them? The hypocrisy of Western governments in this regard is flagrant. The United States intervened militarily in Panama or against Iraq because there were specific interests that were at stake—never mind their nature—but the US is opposed to any intervention in Haiti.⁸ The case of the former

⁷ Castoriadis had also paraphrased this statement in “The Nature and Value of Equality” (1982; now in *PPA*, p. 142); above, the plural in Castoriadis’s paraphrase is correctly restored). The apparent source, [*Sur la guerre \(L’ère intervention\)*](#) (a Jacobin Club speech delivered on January 2, 1792), states *Personne n’aime les missionnaires armés* (No one likes [or loves] armed missionaries)—though Robespierre himself does refer, in the previous sentence, specifically to *un peuple étranger* (a foreign people). Generally, others have quoted this phrase as Castoriadis has done here. —T/E

⁸ Under “Operation Uphold Democracy” (1994-1995), the United States did eventually intervene against the September 29, 1991 military coup that had overthrown Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. —T/E

Yugoslavia is horrible, and it's right at our doorstep; for more than a year, people have done nothing but talk on and on about it. And still, in this case, one talks on and on and one sends "humanitarian aid." But if a comparable crisis were to break out between Russia and the Ukraine, would one talk about interference? As we're speaking, a war continues in the Sudan led by an Islamist government of the north to impose *sharia* on the non-Muslim populations of the south. It's in large part financed by Iran, which also finances Egyptian and North African fundamentalists. Why isn't one interested in the atrocities of the Sudanese government? Because Islam is too big a job, because there is the powder keg of the Middle East and oil. Human rights are systematically and cynically violated by China, Vietnam, Indonesia (extermination of a good portion of the population of Timor), and Burma. Is one going to "interfere" there? What would this right be if it led to the punishment of some petty thieves and left the big gangsters in peace? I think that the "right of interference" is a typically Kouchnerian slogan.

Q.: In the good or bad sense of the term?

C.C.: In the Kouchnerian sense of the term.

Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process: An Introductory Interview*

QUESTION: What were the fundamental experiences that brought you to philosophy and politics, and to the exploration of the relation between the two?

C.C.: To begin with, there was always an intellectual curiosity for which I am indebted to my family. I came into contact with philosophy very early on, at a ridiculously early age in fact, at 13. I came to philosophy through classical manuals, to politics through Communist publications in Greece, around 1935, and then immediately afterwards, through the works of Marx. The two things have always been there—in parallel. What attracted me to Marxism, as I saw it at the time, was a very strong feeling about the absurdity and injustice of the existing state of affairs.

Q.: What was the political situation in Greece at that time?

C.C.: 1935 was the eve of the Metaxas dictatorship, which lasted throughout the war and the occupation. At that time, in the last year of my secondary education, I joined the Communist Youth, which was underground, of course. The cell I was in was dissolved because all my comrades were arrested. I was lucky enough not to be arrested. I started political activity again at the beginning of the occupation. First, with some comrades, in what now looks like an absurd attempt to change something in the policies of the Communist Party. Then I discovered that this was just a sheer illusion. I {joined} the Trotskyists, with whom I worked during the occupation. After I went to France in 1945-46, I went to the

*“Cornelius Castoriadis: An Interview” (Peter Dews and Peter Osborne, February 1990 at the University of Essex) was published in *Radical Philosophy*, 56 (Autumn 1990): 35-43, with a brief introduction. This interview was reprinted as “Institution and Autonomy” in *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, ed. Peter Osborne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 3-19. An excerpted French translation of part of the second half appeared as “Marché, capitalisme, socialisme” in *SD*, pp. 197-202, the original English-language version of which appears in full below as “Market, Capitalism, Democracy.” The first part appears in full here.
—T/E

Trotskyist party there and founded a tendency against the official Trotskyist line of Russia as a workers' State. We split in 1948-49 and started *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which went on until 1965 (the journal) and 1967 (the group).

Q.: Is it true to say that you never really accepted Trotsky's interpretation of the Soviet Union? Or did you accept it for a short time?

C.C.: For a very short time, yes. As soon as I moved out of Stalinism, the very first thing to grasp was the idea that the revolution had degenerated and that there was a bureaucracy that was just a parasitic stratum. But I soon started to reject this. You must realize that under the Metaxas dictatorship all left-wing books were burnt. And then there was the occupation. So one was not really in touch with the literature. Still, in 1942-43 in Greece, I had the good luck to find copies of Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, Victor Serge, Ante Ciliga's book, and Boris Souvarine's *Stalin*—a wonderful book which has been reissued now in France.¹ And it was already clear in *The Revolution Betrayed* that Trotsky was contradictory.²

Q.: In what way contradictory?

C.C.: Well, he says, for instance, that Russia is on socialist state groundings because all property belongs to the State. But he goes on to say that the State belongs to the bureaucracy. So therefore property belongs to the bureaucracy. If one is logical, one asks, "What has all of this to do with the workers' State?" The means of production belong to the bureaucracy. As I discovered afterwards, this idea had been around for some time already. One can see it among the inmates of the Russian concentration camps in 1926-27: the idea that the bureaucracy was becoming a new ruling stratum and exploiting class. What reinforced me in

¹On these influential books, see page 4 the Agora International interview with Castoriadis: <http://www.agorainternational.org/encaaiint.pdf>. —T/E

²See Claude Lefort's 1948 *Les Temps Modernes* piece, translated as "The Contradiction of Trotsky" in *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986); available now at: <http://libcom.org/library/contradiction-trotsky-claude-lefort>. —T/E

this conviction was the first Stalinist attempt at a coup d'État in Greece in December 1944. There really was something there, with the masses struggling under the leadership of the Communist Party; and for me it was crystal clear. If the Stalinists had gained power at that time, they would have installed a regime similar to that of Russia. I said so and wrote so at the time. It was the only time I was in disagreement with an elder militant, Spiros Stinas, with whom I had worked all this time, and who, in a certain sense, was my political teacher.

How could one account for this on the basis of the Trotskyist theory of the Russian regime, that is, a proletarian revolution that has degenerated? Bureaucracy was appearing as a quasi-autonomous historical force attempting to establish a regime for its own interest and outlook. The whole development of my political conceptions about bureaucracy—and in contradistinction to this, what is socialism?—started at this time. If socialism is not nationalized property, not just a bureaucratic method of central planning, then what is it? Immediately, the idea of autonomy arose. Socialism as self-government in production and political life, that is, collective organization and self-determination at all levels.

Q.: How did your move away from Trotskyism affect your understanding of the Russian Revolution? As I understand it, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was quite closely identified with the ideas of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union? Did you identify politically with the Left Opposition?

C.C.: In a certain sense, yes. But they didn't go far enough. Later on, I wrote a text about Alexandra Kollontai's paper on the Left Opposition of 1921, and its limitations.³ But this is not our problem now. The defects are obvious there: about the role of the party, the role of the trade unions, and so on. Of course, Kronstadt was the last mark of some

³See "The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy" (now in *PSW3*). This text appeared in *S. ou B.*, 35 (January-March 1964) as an introduction to Alain and Hélène Gérard's French translation of the British group Solidarity's reprint of Kollontai's 1921 work *The Workers' Opposition* (London: Solidarity, 1962). —T/E

independent activity of the masses, which was crushed by the Bolshevik party. But once I started the critique of bureaucracy, it evolved quite rapidly into a critique of lots of things: of the Leninist conception of the party, and then of Marxian economics. I had started working as an economist at this time and was working on *Das Kapital*. I couldn't make much sense of it in relation to actual developments. I couldn't make much sense of it theoretically, either. Here starts all my criticism of the theory of value, which finds its final form in the text about Marx and Aristotle (which appears in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*).⁴ Next came the critique of the Marxian conception of what socialism is all about, the bad utopian aspect of all this: the elimination of the idea of politics, the sort of paradisiac state depicted in the early manuscripts, where in the morning you are a fisherman, in the afternoon a poet, etc.—I don't know what you are after dark! There is also the idea, absolutely central to Marx, that labor is slavery and freedom is outside the field of labor. Freedom is leisure. This is written in so many words. Labor is the field of necessity {in Marx}.

Q.: That's more characteristic of the older Marx, isn't it?

C.C.: It is in *Das Kapital*. The realm of freedom can be built only through the reduction of the working day.⁵ During the working day, you are under necessity. This is diametrically opposed to any idea of self-management by producers, and of production itself—once it is radically changed, and once technology is also changed—as a field of exercise of human capabilities and human freedom.

Q.: There is also the idea of labor becoming “life's prime want.”

C.C.: That's in the early manuscripts. But this is

⁴“Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle, from Aristotle to Us” (1975; now in *CL*). —T/E

⁵See “The Trinity Formula,” chapter 48 of *Capital*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 820. —T/E

abandoned in the system.⁶ Next came the critique of what one can call Marxist economism. The imaginary signification of the centrality of production and economy throughout history. This is obviously a retrojection of capitalist imaginary significations throughout the whole of human history. Then there was the philosophical work, which is there in “Marxist Thought and Revolution,” the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, which was published in the last five issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1964-1965.⁷

Socialisme ou Barbarie

Q.: Could you say something about the experience of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*? What was the political context in which you operated? And how, given your critique of the

⁶Castoriadis is wrong on this point. In “The Critique of the Gotha Program,” Marx speaks of the “higher phase of communist society . . . after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want” in order to introduce, in this very *late* (1875) piece, the principle “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” Castoriadis made a similar dating error with regard to an early and a late Marx in “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-61). In the 1979 French version (now translated in *PSW2*; see p. 249), Castoriadis corrected “this error on my part” (pointed out by Yvon Bourdet, though without attribution by Castoriadis), which can be explained, he says, “only by referring to my tendency at the time to see in Marx an evolutionary movement that estranged him from the revolutionary aspirations of his youth so as to make him into a ‘systematic’ theoretician.” There, he cites “The Two Elements of Marxism and Their Historical Fate” (from “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” 1964-1965; now in *IIS*) to indicate his subsequent discovery that “what I called the two antinomic elements in Marx’s thought—the revolutionary, antispeculative germ and the theory-laden, systematic, objectivist, deterministic element—coexist in Marx’s work from his very first writings.” The (false) contrast in the present interview—between “the early manuscripts” and what would have later been “abandoned in the system”—curiously repeats the same old mistaken tendency Castoriadis had already surmounted and denounced. —T/E

⁷The correct title in English is, of course, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory.” It is unclear whether Castoriadis actually said this or whether the incorrect title is a transcription error on the part of the journal. —T/E

Leninist conception of the party, was the group organized, internally? How were its interventions made? What do you think are its enduring achievements?

C.C.: Well, the famous organizational problem was there all the time. After an initial period during which there were strong residual elements, including in myself, in favor of the Leninist conception of the party (which I gave up about 1950), there was still an internal divide concerning the problem of organization, between people who were saying that no organization is needed (the proletariat will do everything; we are just a group trying to work out some ideas) and others, like myself, who insisted, as I still would insist, that a political organization is necessary. Not a vanguard party, certainly, but some sort of political organization. Political activity is collective activity, and it ends up with concrete acts, be it a publication or whatever. You have to make decisions. And so you have to have some rules about how you make decisions. Say, majority rules. Obviously, you allow the minority to express themselves, even publicly. But there are some points at which decisions have to be made, and they have to be univocal. Some coordination of the general activities is necessary. But I said very early on that the only way to do this is on the basis of the idea of some sort of collective self-government. Also, the political organization could play the role, not of a model, but of a sort of exemplary activity, showing people that they can organize collectively, that they can rule their own affairs.

Q.: It sounds quite Luxemburgian.

C.C.: If you wish. In a certain sense, yes. From this point of view, certainly. This led to splits with Claude Lefort. He was against any formal organization—"We are an intellectual group; we publish a magazine, that's all." You must remember the circumstances at the time. The Cold War started about 1947 and in Europe, especially in France, the Stalinists were almost all-powerful, even if they did leave the government in 1947. All the Left was with them. Remember the stories of Jean-Paul Sartre and others, the fellow

travelers? We were absolutely isolated.⁸ There was a period when, after the outbreak of the Korean War, we were less than a dozen in the group. And the audience was extremely limited, residual ultraleftist groups. We cleared the ultraleft ground. Whatever was really of worth there came to Socialisme ou Barbarie—not the Trotskyists, of course. But the situation was extremely hard. Later, after 1953, with Stalin dead, the Berlin revolt, the Czechoslovakian strikes in 1954, then Hungary and Poland in 1956, the atmosphere started changing, and the review gained some audience—never very {large}. At the time we were selling about 1,000 copies of the magazine, which were read around. Then came the Algerian War, and the stand we took against the Algerian War. There was a kind of renaissance among the student youth at that time. People started coming and the group grew. Some time in 1958-59, in the whole of France, including the provinces, we were about 100. By 1962, 1963, 1964, we could hold public meetings in Paris with, say, 300 or 400 people. But all of this, as you see, was extremely limited. Of course, after 1968 lots of people said they were in Socialisme ou Barbarie. To which I have answered that if all these people who say that they were in Socialisme ou Barbarie had really been in Socialisme ou Barbarie, we probably would have grasped power in France some time around 1958.

Q.: So you disbanded as an organization just before that moment, in the later 1960s, when the Left began to open up and expand as a result of changes in the political and economic situation more generally?

C.C.: Yes. We had some people in the Renault

⁸In the 1986 interview “We are Going Through a Low Period . . .” (below, this volume; see n. 6), Castoriadis had said, “I am not in the minority; I am alone, which does not mean isolated. I was alone—we were alone—during the whole period of Socialisme ou Barbarie; what came afterward has shown that we were not isolated.” In the present interview from 1990, where he says S. ou B. was “absolutely isolated,” he is speaking primarily about the period at the very beginning of the Cold War, when the Chaulieu-Montal (Castoriadis-Lefort) Tendency was still part of the Trotskyist Parti Communiste Internationaliste, and the very early years of S. ou B. as an independent group. Still, the contrast regarding two different appreciations of the group’s “isolation” is of note. —T/E

factories who were producing a paper specifically for Renault workers.⁹ This was not a subsidiary of Socialisme ou Barbarie. It was produced by workers and so on. But all this was extremely limited. There was much more underground influence, unknown, anonymous; and it sprung out in 1968 in lots of people, including for example, Dany Cohn-Bendit.

Q.: Why did Socialisme ou Barbarie come to an end?

C.C.: This was a decision that I pushed very strongly. First of all, there had been a split, a second split, between 1960 and 1963. In 1960 I wrote a text called “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” which was the most thorough critique of the classical Marxist position at this time: of the idea that the proletariat has a privileged role to play, of the idea that economic problems are the main problems, and so on and so forth. It argued that the problem of the transformation of society is a much more general problem. There is the question of youth, the question of women, of the changing character of labor, of urbanism, and of technology—of changing technology. All this created a strong reaction from part of the group, for which the theoretical representative was Jean-François Lyotard, who at the time was playing the adamant Marxist. This led to a split in 1963 that weakened the group. We were the majority. We kept the magazine; they kept the monthly journal, *Workers’ Power*.¹⁰ It was the first paper of this name. Later, the Italians published *Potere Operaio*. This was part of the underground influence. In Italy, lots of these people had been reading *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. But the group was weakened.

Public influence was expanding, as I have said. We were selling more and more. People were coming to the meetings, but they would not actively participate. They were passive consumers of the ideas. And this was reflected in the review, because to produce a magazine the main problem is the collaborators—the people who write. It’s very funny. We

⁹ *Tribune Ouvrière*, a journal initiated by S. ou B. member Daniel Mothé along with other Renault workers. —T/E

¹⁰ *Pouvoir Ouvrier* was begun as a monthly supplement to *S. ou B.* in 1959. As a separate organization, it dissolved itself in 1969. —T/E

never had money, but publishing *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was never a financial problem. We always managed. The problem was the contents. Not enough people were coming into the group. Also, my own personal collaboration was beginning to take a different form. I was digging deeper and deeper into the theoretical underpinning, both of Marxist theory and of what we needed for a new conception. This was the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*.

Q.: You were still working as an economist at this time?

C.C.: Yes. I was working at the OECD. The review was taking the bizarre aspect of a theoretical-philosophical magazine that was also pretending to be a revolutionary organ. It was the first in France, and all over Europe, for instance, to produce an extensive account of the Berkeley events. The review anticipated the movements of the 1960s. It is there, about the students, the women, and so on. It is written down. But this was not enough. And so at some time in 1966, we said, "For the time being, the thing has become meaningless. We had better stop and begin again later."¹¹ And two years later, of course, came 1968. I don't know what would have happened if we had still been a group in 1968. But 1968 very quickly fell under the spell of Maoists and Trotskyists and so on—not at the beginning, I mean the great period, but very quickly. One can't rewrite history.

Q.: Did you have any relations with the *Arguments* group, the people who left the Communist Party in 1956?

C.C.: Yes. But the relations were bizarre. Edgar Morin published a paper in which he both recognized the role of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and criticized it very strongly, saying that we were obsessed with bureaucracy and making a sort of panacea or shibboleth out of self-management.¹² There were

¹¹See "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (June 1967 circular sent to subscribers and readers; now in *PSW3*). —T/E

¹²See Gérard Genette, "Notes sur Socialisme ou Barbarie," *Arguments*, 3 (April 1957): 8-13, and Edgar Morin, "Solécisme ou Barbarisme," *ibid.*: 13-19. —T/E

answers in *Arguments* on our part.¹³ But there was not very much contact, except on some personal levels. Later on, when *Arguments* had stopped, Morin participated in some of our public meetings. He wrote a paper in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.¹⁴ But there was never a close collaboration. From the beginning, *Arguments* took itself to be a review by intellectuals for intellectuals. We never abandoned the idea that we aim at the general public, and not at intellectuals.

Philosophy and Imagination

Q.: Perhaps we could switch the topic back to the issue of your intellectual formation. What were the main intellectual sources of your move away from Marxism? What did you draw upon to fuel your development away from an orthodox communist politics? You have defined your relationship to Marxism negatively, in terms of the things that you gradually gave up until finally more or less the whole thing had been given up and you embarked upon an independent intellectual project. Who inspired you in this second stage?

C.C.: It is quite difficult for me to answer your question in a modest way. I would say that the main source was the immanent critique. It does not work, this system that had fascinated me as a 13-year-old boy: the idea that you have a coherent picture of human history and the world—that that's how it works—and it's going to reach a happy final stage.

Q.: You mentioned Aristotle. . . .

C.C.: Yes, but that was 1975. In the whole of my writings for *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which have been published in paperback now in France, there is, I think, in all

¹³See Claude Lefort, "Sur l'article de Morin," *ibid.*: 19-21. — T/E

¹⁴Published in the penultimate issue as "L'homme révolutionné et l'homme révolutionnaire," *S. ou B.*, 39 (March-April 1965):1-15. — T/E

one mention of Plato and one mention of Thucydides.¹⁵ That's all. Before the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1964-65), there is no mention of any philosopher whatsoever. It's not that I didn't want to mention one. It was because this was an immanent critique. The main thing that fueled it was contemporary experience: the experience of working-class movements. The theme was the critique of capitalism, the critique of the development of capitalist economies—the nonsensical character of the aims proposed by the capitalist economy, which were more or less shared by Marxism: let's increase material wealth and so on. Then, after a point, the questions became for me: "What is history?" and "What is society?" The work about the institution began here, in 1959. There are already seeds in a 1953 article criticizing Marxist economics and speaking about creativity in history;¹⁶ and even before, in 1950-51, speaking about creativity and autonomy.¹⁷ The idea was there, but it was not elaborated.

Q.: It wasn't drawn from Merleau-Ponty?

C.C.: No. Merleau-Ponty had nothing to do with it. There is no idea of creation or creativity in Merleau-Ponty, as far as I can see. I had been interested in philosophy since my adolescence, but I kept the two things separate. This is perhaps a bizarre personal trait. I didn't want to mix political thinking and political activity with philosophy. Not for practical or pedagogical reasons—you don't go to the workers telling them to read the *Third Critique*—but this is a position I still have. I don't think you can draw directly from philosophy, as such, political conclusions.

¹⁵In "On the Content of Socialism, II" (1957; now in *PSW2*), Castoriadis cites Thucydides 1.86 (*PSW2*, p. 145) and includes a footnote quoting Lewis Mumford on Plato (*ibid.*, pp. 153-54n26). —T/E

¹⁶"Sur la dynamique du capitalisme," *S. ou B.*, 12 (August-September 1953) and 13 (January-March 1954). —T/E

¹⁷Perhaps Castoriadis is thinking of the first paragraph of "Proletarian Leadership," a text published in July 1952 in the tenth issue of *S. ou B.* (now in *PSWI*), which speaks of "the revolutionary and cosmogonic character of . . . the creative activity of tens of millions of people as it will blossom during and after the revolution" (p. 198). —T/E

Q.: Yet in your more recent writings you see philosophical reflection as quite central to the project of autonomy—not the whole of that project, but very central to it. . . .

C.C.: That’s true. But my ontology is an ontology of creation: creation and destruction. Creation can be democracy and the Parthenon and *Macbeth*, but it is also Auschwitz, the Gulag, and all that. These are fantastic creations. Politics has to do with political judgments and value choices.

Q.: For which you can’t find an ontological ground?

C.C.: No. I don’t think there is an ontological basis for value judgments. Once you enter the field of philosophy, you have already made a value judgment, Socrates’ value judgment: the unexamined life is not worth living (and the un-lived life is not worth examining, as you say in Essex—this is true as well). But this is already a stand you have taken. In this sense, the decision to enter the reflexive domain is already a sort of grounding decision, which can’t rationally ground itself. If you try to rationally ground it, you use what is the result of the decision. You are in a vicious circle.

Q.: So how do you draw people into the reflexive life? Through examples?

C.C.: Yes, through examples and through consequences. But you can’t force somebody rationally to be rational. There is no demonstration of the kind: if you don’t philosophize, you are absurd. Because the other says, “I don’t care about being absurd,” or “I have to be absurd, otherwise I am not a true Christian.” *Credo quia absurdum*. You can’t “refute” Tertullian.¹⁸

So, for a long time, I tried to keep politics and philosophy separate. They joined in the first part of my article

¹⁸This phrase, considered a common or traditional misquotation of Tertullian’s *De Carne Christi* 5.25-26, translates as “I believe because it is absurd.” Castoriadis may have been relying on Sigmund Freud’s repeated citations of this phrase in *Civilization and its Discontents*, *The Future of An Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*, though Castoriadis’s philosophical culture was broad enough that he may have picked up this widespread questionable paraphrase elsewhere, which has indeed been adopted by some Existentialists, among others. —T/E

of 1964-65, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory.” Once I had reached the idea of institution, of the imaginary creation of history, I started rereading philosophy with a different eye. And what I encountered there as forerunners in this field—but only at the level of the subjective individual imagination, of course—were Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Later, I took up Aristotle, much later. That is the first place you find an examination of the problem of *phantasia*: the genius discovering the thing, and the limitations and impossibilities the discovery of *phantasia* creates for the Aristotelian ontology.¹⁹ Then another development starts. I had never stopped busying myself with philosophy. I came to France to do a Ph.D. thesis in philosophy. (The theme of the thesis was that any attempt at a rationally constructed philosophical system leads to blind alleys, to aporias and to antinomies. Mostly, what I had in mind was Hegel, but not only.) This remains an unfinished manuscript.²⁰ So I was reading things and scribbling and jotting all the time, but not systematically. It was only after *Socialisme ou Barbarie* that I took this up again systematically. Even then my main sources of inspiration have never been, properly speaking, in the history of philosophy. They have been much more problems arising out of, say, psychoanalysis, out of the analysis of the social-historical, out of the state of contemporary sciences—the crisis of foundations in mathematics, the aporias of contemporary physics, or problems in biology—the emergence of living things: what is a living thing? What is the biological closure of an organism?

As far as the problem of imagination is concerned, the main difference is that for both Aristotle and Kant, as for all philosophers, imagination is looked at uniquely from the point of view of the subject: the transcendental imagination in Kant, the imagination of the Transcendental Ego in Fichte, etc. There is nothing corresponding to the social-historical. The

¹⁹See “The Discovery of the Imagination” (1978; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

²⁰See now Castoriadis’s *Histoire et création. Textes philosophiques inédits (1945-1967)*, collected, presented, and annotated by Nicolas Poirier (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009). —T/E

same is true of Martin Heidegger. There is no substantial relation of *Dasein* to history; to society, even less. If I have made a contribution, it is this: what I call *the radical imaginary, the instituting imaginary*, as a social-historical element.

I accuse all philosophers of ignoring the ontological status of, for instance, language. Language is institution. It is a fantastic paradigm of institution. The philosophers think—they think, therefore they talk, they use language, but they don't care to say what language is and how it came about. And when they do say, they say, like Heidegger: the gift of Being. Everything is a gift of Being—including death, of course. If one envisages the institution of language, one has to envisage a creative possibility that actualizes itself in the anonymous collective, which is the instituting imaginary, which posits language, which posits rules, and thereby enables the singular human being—who is unfit for life qua singular human being, a biological monstrosity—it enables it to survive. I am very much attracted by some philosophers. There is no problem about it. I'm very much attracted by the Great Four—Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. I always find food for thought there.

Q.: You've referred to your classical predecessors, but someone looking at French intellectual history in the twentieth century can see a very strong thematics of the imagination. For example, there is one of Sartre's first books, *L'Imaginaire*. When you arrived in Paris, you attended a course given by Gaston Bachelard, for whom the notion of the imagination is absolutely central. Then there is Jacques Lacan, of course, as well. You do seem to fit into a twentieth-century French tradition of reflection on the problem of the imagination. Are there really no influences here?

C.C.: I think I come from a completely different direction. Sartre's imaginary or imagination is purely negative. It is the possibility of envisaging that something could not be. It's a negativizing faculty of the ego. For me, it's just the opposite. It's the capacity to posit something which is not there.

Q.: Isn't the philosophical structure of that process actually the same, with one side rather than the other being

emphasized?

C.C.: But there is no given without imagination. In this respect, my view of imagination is much nearer to Kant. It's constitutive, absolutely constitutive. The difference from Kant is that my imagination is creative in a genuine sense. The Kantian imagination, the transcendental imagination, always has to imagine the same thing. If the Kantian imagination started really imagining, the world would collapse. It has to posit the same forms; otherwise it's just what he calls empirical imagination. We remain in the realm of the subject. Lacan's imagination is a very bizarre thing. Vulgarly speaking, it is the illusion. Nothing more than that: the reflection in the mirror; the image in the mirror; and the image the other sends to me of myself. Lacan's imaginary is the optical illusion.

Q.: Is it not also connected to the lack? Isn't it a more dynamic process—the filling of a lack? You make it sound very empirical, this notion of reflection. . . .

C.C.: The attempt at filling a lack is desire. Lacan doesn't link it to the imaginary as such, which, for him, has to do with what he calls "demand." It's another realm. You have the lack, you have desire, you have the Law—which imposes the lack in a certain sense. But the imaginary is not a result of the desire—or of "demand." It is exactly the other way round. Cows do not desire, for they have no imagination—not in the human sense. Bachelard is another thing. I followed Bachelard when I arrived in Paris, for half a year, because he was the only one worth following. Then he stopped. That year, he was engaged in discussing some aspects of science from the point of view of his own epistemological conception. It was interesting, but it didn't go very far. I read Bachelard much later, but if you know his work you'll see the differences. It's imagination in a very loose sense. It's not constitutive in character. And certainly, it's not a social element.

Q.: But there is that sense of creativity there?

C.C.: There is, in a certain sense, a sense of creativity in Bachelard. That's true. But I was never really attracted to his work.

Q.: What about Surrealism?

C.C.: I knew a bit about it because there were some Greek Surrealists, and I was very fascinated by them. Then, when I came to France, I learned much more. I was extremely fascinated by André Breton and everything he had to say. At that time, the interest of Breton for me was the poetic dimension. Twenty-five years later, I said “creation is poesis,” and I gave another meaning to poesis. It’s very difficult to make one’s own intellectual biography in a thorough and honest way. You are exposed to influences all the time that you don’t even know about; or you don’t know the way they are going to work through you, perhaps much later. But among the people who for me were the most important in France at that time was Breton. And then Benjamin Péret, who came later to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and published a text in the journal; and a younger Surrealist called Jean-Jacques Lebel who was in the group and very much in touch with us.²¹

Q.: We were thinking on a more theoretical plane, about your interpretation of the Freudian Unconscious. One can read Sigmund Freud in a very deterministic way, but the notion of the creativity of the Unconscious is obviously there, if you read between the lines. It seems that it was the Surrealists who picked up on that.

C.C.: They picked it up, yes; but they never theorized it. They used it. They interpreted it this way. It is the fantastic part of Freud, the Freud who is always talking about imagination but never names the thing. But what else are the phantasies? The positivistic streak in him is very strong. After all, this is Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century, and there are problems of scientific respectability. He was already creating havoc by saying that children are polymorphous-perverse people. If in addition he had said, “Whatever I tell you, it’s just the imagination of the subject . . . ,” he would have been even more laughed out of court than he was at the

²¹Péret’s 1945 pamphlet “Le déshonneur des poètes,” written in Mexico, was reprinted posthumously in *S. ou B.*, 29 (December 1959-February 1960): 95-101, preceded by an editorial, “À la mémoire de Benjamin Péret,” *ibid.*: 91-92, and by Lebel’s “Parti sans laisser d’adresse,” *ibid.*: 93-94. —T/E

beginning. Around 1911, he signed a manifesto calling for the establishment of a Society for the Diffusion of Positivistic Thinking with Joseph Petzoldt, David Hilbert, Albert Einstein, and some other people.²² He was a very contradictory character.

Autonomy

Q.: You have said that your notion of the imagination is not related back to the subject, at least not only to the subject—individuals are formed within the context of a particular institution of society; and you have written about the heteronomous institution of society as that which has obtained historically; and about autonomy as a political value. Yet if the process of institution is not in some sense the outcome of collective activity, but is the matrix within which all activity takes place, how could there be an autonomous institution of society? It seems as though institution always already precedes the empirical activity of human beings.

C.C.: This is the problem of the politics of autonomy, of the establishment of an autonomous society. I think that you can have, you can imagine, you can devise—and you do have, up to a certain point, you did have, in the Western world—institutions that are not just institutions of closure. If we have institutions that not only allow but further the creation of individuals who are capable of discussing, or putting into question, if we create a public space where discussion is genuinely made possible, where information is available, etc., this is already something completely different, completely other, from the state of classically heteronomous societies, where you have to think what the institution of society tells you to think.

Q.: But doesn't the philosophical structure of the concept of institution mean that, at an ontological level, it is tied up with heteronomy in a way that suggests that when one

²²The *Gesellschaft für positivistische Philosophie* was founded in 1912; other signatories included Ernst Mach, Georg Ferdinand Helm, and Felix Klein.—T/E

is speaking of autonomy and heteronomy politically one is actually talking about something else?

C.C.: We are working under the weight of inherited thought here. Behind what you say, there is a conception of autonomy that I would call metaphysical freedom, in the derogatory sense.

Q.: Some Kantian notion?

C.C.: Kantian, or perhaps even, to be obscene, Sartrean. That is, one would be autonomous if one were absolutely outside any external influence and fully spontaneous. Now, this is just nonsense. This is a philosophical phantasy. Philosophy has put up this phantasy, and it judges reality against this phantasy. It doesn't exist. Autonomy, as I understand it in the field of the individual, is not a watertight frontier against everything else, a well out of which spring, absolutely spontaneously, absolutely original contents. Autonomy is an ongoing process, whereby you always have contents that are given, borrowed—you are in the world, you are in society, you have inherited a language, you live in a certain history. You have been *geworfen* {thrown}, as Heidegger says. You have not chosen to be born in 1952, or whenever, neither have you chosen to be born in England. This just is the case. You will never know the great philosopher of the year 2100, who might have changed your way of thinking. It is in this world that we have to have a workable and effective concept of autonomy. Autonomy does not mean I am totally separated from everything external. And, in relation to my own contents, which are 99 percent borrowed, have come from the outside, I have a reflective, critical, deliberative activity, and I *can* to a significant degree say yes and no. I can also allow my own radical imagination, my flux of representations and ideas—we are talking about thinking now—to well up, and there to choose again, because my radical imagination may produce nonsense, or absurdities, or things that do not work. It is this ongoing process that I call an autonomous subjectivity.

Q.: So the radical imagination is a kind of pure source?

C.C.: It is the permanent welling of representations, desires, and affects that, in heteronomous societies, are

practically 100 percent repressed and appear only in Freudian slips, dreams, maladies, psychoses, and transgressions. It is always with us, and can be freed; not that we would accept all its products. But it could be free to supply contents, new contents, upon which our reflective and deliberative activity can work. So if we consider the relation to the collectivity, the idea that I'm not free because the others are there, or because the law is out there, only really makes sense against this traditional phantasy. Others, and the existence of the law, are not just constraints. They are also sources of freedom. They are sources of possibilities of action. They are sources of facilitation. They are riches.

Q.: So what you understand by the project of autonomy is the maximization of the possibilities of reflection, self-reflection, and deliberation? Is this an Idea in the Kantian sense?

C.C.: No, it's not an Idea in the Kantian sense.

Q.: So, it's realizable, then, your concept of autonomy? It's philosophically constituted in such a way that it is a possible object of historical realization. It must be materially possible?

C.C.: Yes. It must be materially possible. It's not a utopia. And it's not a Kantian Idea. It's not at an infinite distance. It's not the polar star.

Q.: And yet it's not already implicit within history, in the way that some people understand Marx to have thought.

C.C.: No. It's a historical creation, a historical creation that is up to now unfinished.

Q.: But if it's not implicit in history, if it is to be created in an open history, how do we know it's actually going to be realizable?

C.C.: We don't. We work for it, but we don't know in advance.

Revolutionary Perspectives Today*

I want to start by clearing up some ambiguity about the term *perspective* itself. The term, as all words, itself depends on how it is used. But the way it has been used in the movement, and I myself have used it many times in that way, carries with it a connotation. To put it in pictorial terms, the connotation is that you can sit up on the top of a mountain and see the whole landscape, have the perspective of the landscape and perhaps—even certainly—have a glimpse, a misty glimpse, of the promised land.

Well, the first thing I think that we should *really* understand is that there is no top of the mountain from which you can survey developments. We are *in* the landscape. We are a *part* of the landscape. At any given moment, we are in one of the innumerable valleys, canyons, mountain passes of history. We have our noses in there. We know, though very imperfectly, the part of the landscape we have personally crossed thus far, though this is very different for each one of us, because we have moved through different places at different periods of time, starting from different points of departure. And our memories are confused. And even what remains of them is again in need of interpretation. And at every point in time we interpret what we remember or know about our own past or the collective past according to what we see at the particular point in time where we find ourselves. The view you have today of the events in Russia in 1917 is not, and cannot be, the view you could have of the events had you been living in 1918. This is a platitude. But nobody quite

*Slightly edited, Americanized version of the 27-page, hand-corrected typescript transcription for Castoriadis's February 13, 1973 talk delivered to Solidarity comrades and supporters in England. Castoriadis's title is not to be confused with "The Revolutionary Perspective Today," a subsection title supplied for the London Solidarity translation, *Modern Capitalism and Revolution* (now in *PSW2*, pp. 301-303).

On the back of page 27, Castoriadis has scrawled in blue ink:

Signification	----->	experienced meaning
{ " }	----->	contemporary "
sense	----->	historical "
les signifiant{s}	=	meaning per se

—T/E

realizes the importance of this platitude.

We have some records about the landscape, about parts that were crossed by those who came before us. These are imperfect records that themselves are in need of deciphering and of interpretation. And though we necessarily try to take a view as to the parts of the landscape that lie ahead, the big secret—and the basic thing to understand—is not that we cannot perfectly know the landscape in front of us. It is that there *is* no landscape fixed in front of us. What will be the future landscape is emerging, is created as we advance, by the fact that we advance, by what we ourselves and millions of other people do and don't do. And of course what they and we do or don't do is related to what they or we think the next part of the landscape is going to be.

Human history has been considered up to now as somehow “given-in-advance.” “Up to now” is perhaps a strong formulation. There were formulations in the young Marx that go contrary to this tenet but the prevailing conception in the heads of people is that there *is* something given in advance, which is already more or less determined and which of course is difficult to know. And it is much more difficult to know if it is in the future than in the past. This is the view we have to abandon. We have to understand that human history in the development of society is fundamentally a *creation* by people of their own collective, social, and historical life, a creation inasmuch as we do not consider simply its physical or biological aspects, a creation that is not totally or even essentially arbitrary (it is not “out of the blue”—I will come back to that in a moment) but that is essentially indeterminate and indeterminable in advance.

Let us pursue the metaphor: what is this famous mountain top on which we could sit and have the perspective of both past and future? Of course the mountain top was theory. The mountain itself was theory. You were climbing up after properly reading 35 volumes of Hegel and Feuerbach, plus classical British political economy, plus the French utopian socialists, plus the volumes of *Das Kapital* and

“Theorien über den Mehrwert.”¹ You were able to climb and to gain access to the privileged point of view that allowed you first of all to see everything backwards, except for lack of information, and also the substance of the things ahead. There was this vantage point, the vantage point of theory.

Now this is out. If by “theory” we understand a sort of closed system, let’s call it a scientific system (and this is no invention of mine; after all, it was the founding fathers {of Marxism} who called their production “scientific socialism”), then there is no such thing in any field of human endeavor and knowledge. Not even in the exact sciences. There are no closed systems of theoretical truths, not even in mathematics, because it is a theorem of mathematics—proved mathematically in 1931 by a chap called Kurt Gödel—that of necessity, in any mathematical system that is rich enough to contain the theory of natural numbers (that is, to contain a contraption whereby you can say 1,2,3,4,5,6, and so on) there are, of necessity, undecidable propositions about which you cannot know if they are true or not. The situation is even less determinate in physics, where {since the early 1920s} a constant series of revolutions has made, so to speak, nonsense of the previous conceptions (as scientific theories, not as numerical predictions; as far as numerical predictions are concerned, you did have, and you do have, better and better approximations). The theoretical system of the concepts has been proved nonsense, and the theory of relativity starts by positing as nonsense what is the basis of Newtonian theory, namely, that you can have infinite speeds and instantaneous propagation of signals. Now, with Newtonian theory you forecast movements of planets and so on, within a certain percentage; with special relativity, within a slightly smaller percentage. But that’s not the point. This is not theory. And in the last half century you have the impossibility, practically, of bringing together the two main parts of modern theory (that is, relativity and quantum theory), not to speak about what has

¹This economic manuscript written by Karl Marx in 1862-1863 appears now as *Theories of Surplus-Value* in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 31 (New York: International Publishers, 1989). —T/E

been happening {since the early 1960s} with the whirling swarm of new elementary particles, discovered every one or two years, and so on and so forth. There is the practical impossibility of putting all this into a coherent picture.

If this is so in the so-called *exact* sciences, it is *a fortiori* even more so in the field of knowledge about society and history. And of this I will try later to give a specific example dealing with Marx's economic theory itself. Now I am speaking about the conception of theory as a closed system of truths, rigorously demonstrated and that correspond to a reality (whatever this may mean) that is in a certain sense determinate. I don't mean to say of course that we should adopt a totally agnostic or skeptical attitude, or that we don't know what is true and what is false. At every stage of our development, we know that, say, statement A is wrong and that statement B is true in a certain sense, that is, not only corresponds to facts according to a certain use of language but also elucidates the fact, that is, relates to the meaning of the fact, and we try to build a coherent conception. We do in fact build a coherent conception, but this coherent conception is not a *scientific theory*, in the classical sense of the term, for two main reasons as far as we are concerned. First, because it is always open. And secondly—which is more important perhaps—because in a certain sense its main prop is our own revolutionary project. This corresponds to another idea of Karl Marx himself, which is the idea of *praxis*. He put it in an extreme way in the famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach, saying that philosophers have up to now only interpreted the world, but the point is to change it. Of course, questions immediately arise, such as: How can you transform {something} if you don't understand what it is you are transforming? And why? But in contradistinction to what one may call the theoretical speculative attitude (in the philosophical sense of the term, in the sense in which Hegel was saying that philosophy is speculation—and this was not depreciative—or is contemplation; I mean the truth is there, and this is Plato already, and you see it, provided you have the right way of looking at it). As against this, our attitude is rooted in this idea of *praxis*. What matters for us is the link between an elucidation, a comprehension (but I prefer the term

elucidation) and a transformation of the world. The world we are speaking about, of course, is the human and social world. I'm not speaking about changing the chemical elements into one another: that has already been done, it's almost trivial now.

Let me elaborate a bit more the reasoning behind the attitude I am advocating. First of all, the reasoning is also philosophical and epistemological, but I don't want to go into that now. But it is also a reasoning of another type, which is perhaps more important. It is linked to our conception of the revolution in particular and of history in general. If we accept, as I think we do, that a revolution, such as we envisaged it, is possible and conceivable only as the unleashing of the creativity, of the autonomous creative activity of the masses, and if you understand what this autonomous creative activity means (that is, the bringing forward, in a certain sense, of the absolutely new, that is, of what is *not* deducible from the existing),² then we can be coherent with ourselves only if we accept (and after all if we look backwards to history, and try to understand what happened, we see that this in fact is what happened every time) that this creativity of the human collectivity, of society, is not something that is going to exist for the first time on the day of the revolution. In a certain sense, this has been there all the time. Every new form of society represents such a form of creation of new institutions, new tools, new ideas, new values, new human attitudes. Nothing of all this can go without all the rest. And in a certain sense, all this is somehow posited together. It cannot be deduced from what was there before. It is absolutely impossible, for instance, to deduce the Greek or Roman world from the Abyssinian world or the Egyptian world. It is

²Well before Castoriadis's formulated his "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (1964-1965) thesis that *history is creation*, this formulation about how the revolution cannot be deduced was clearly expressed in "Proletarian Leadership" from *S. ou B.*'s tenth issue (July 1952; now in *PSWI*); see p. 198: "the concrete content of the revolution already outstrips every advance analysis since it consists in the positing of new forms of historical rationality." See also n. 17 of "Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process," above. —T/E

impossible to deduce the Middle Ages from the Roman Empire. And it is impossible to deduce the Renaissance from the Middle Ages. You can find partial explanations, partial links, but there is always the fallacy of being wise after the event. Somehow or other, both historians and philosophers (neither of whom usually like to say, "I don't know") always present the thing as if they possessed the full set of necessary and sufficient conditions that, in period A, produced period B. And this is always, if you look closer, a fallacy.

If history is the field of human creation in this strong sense of the word, then there cannot really be any talk about a *theory* of history in the traditional sense. It is meaningless to want to have, or to think that you have, a system whereby you say, for instance, that tools (or machines) were invented at a certain moment, and that this altered in a particular way the relations of production, and that this of necessity altered in such and such a way the forms of property, and that this in turn entailed such and such a change in the State, in the superstructure, in ideas, and so on and so forth. This, in all particular instances, is a fallacy. One can prove it. And there is also a *logical* fallacy in it, in the sense that if you speak about a totally determined series of links, then of course the only thing you can do is to ascend³ from each point in the causation link to the previous point, and then to an earlier point, and there can't be any talk about first causes. There cannot, for instance, be any talk about the productive forces being the motive factor in history, or developments in technique being motive factors in history, or the superstructure being determined by the infrastructure, etc.

By all this I do not mean, of course, that anything is possible, or that anything can happen at any moment. For instance, we can be sure not only that at no point during this meeting will Karl Marx reappear in this room. He is dead and we know that this is a physical impossibility, although he held meetings here a hundred years ago. We are also fairly sure, for instance, that in his desperate efforts to bring about some

³Written in blue above "ascend" is the word "descend," but without "ascend" being crossed out. —T/E

balance in the British economy, Mr. Edward Heath and his advisers will not proceed to appoint a caste of Egyptian priests in Britain. (Knowing what they have done in the past, it is not absurd to suppose that they could have thought that this was a possible solution, because other things they have done are very often about as relevant.) Still, even if they had this idea, they could not do it. And we *can* know for sure that if someone proposes this or that or the other, we can say: “No, this cannot happen.” We can show that it can’t happen, and we can also show that most of the time there are very narrow ranges within which developments can take place. And very often we can even—if we are clear enough and try to think in a possibly less muddled way—predict things. Yes, we can even do that. For instance, in 1945-1946 the Russian Army was advancing into Europe. The Communist Parties had been more or less installed in power, except for Yugoslavia, by the Russian Army. In Yugoslavia, given the international context of forces, it was {done} by the forces of the partisan army. If you were interested in politics, you had to make a prediction as to what would then happen. And predictions were made. The classical Trotskyists made one. And we made another, at that time. It’s all written down. The classical Trotskyists said, “Because Russia is not a new class society, but just a degenerated workers’ State, and because the Communist Parties have become (see Trotsky and the *Transitional Program*)⁴ reformist parties and so on, these Communist Parties in the Government are nothing but the prisoners of the Czechoslovakian, the Polish, the Bulgarian, and the Romanian bourgeoisie, in a compromise with the parasitic bureaucracy of the Kremlin. Therefore, these countries remain bourgeois. The nationalizations that take place there are just a sort of veil: Nothing is changed. And there is not going to be anything similar to what exists already in Russia, if only for the reason that Russia being a degenerated workers’ State, and these countries having never been workers’ states, they

⁴The full title of this May 1938 text by Leon Trotsky is *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International: The Mobilization of the Masses around Transitional Demands to Prepare the Conquest of Power.* —T/E

can't become degenerated workers' states without having been workers' States, etc." *We* said (before the thing happened, which is a prediction): "No, Stalinism is not what you say. In Russia, the bureaucracy is the ruling class *qua* bureaucracy. They are exploiting the population. The Communist Parties are *not* just reformist parties, whatever you think. The criticism you can level at them, or the fact that they are criminals, or worse or equal to the Nazis and so on, has nothing to do with the matter. They are *not* reformists. They aim to take power. And they are going to take power in Europe. And once they take power, they will set up the same regime (more or less, given difference{s} in circumstances, etc.) as exists in Russia." That was a prediction. And it can be submitted to historical tests. No need to say what the test was. One unexpected part of the test, of course, was that the Trotskyists went on for 15 or 20 years, or perhaps go on now (some of them, at least), saying that in fact the bourgeoisie has not been abolished in these countries. I must confess that after a point I've stopped following. Another thing about which a prediction was possible was: What precisely would the workers in these countries *do*, if ever they had an opportunity to revolt against the bureaucracy? And there, the thing was even more important because a prediction was both possible and needed. The prediction was not just a theoretical prediction. It was also a program. The Trotskyists were saying what the program was, and what the workers should do, and what they would do: they would undertake a political revolution to restore Soviet democracy (Trotsky: *The Revolution Betrayed*, etc.). We were saying in 1948 that, as soon as the workers and the population in general had a chance to beat the regime and the bureaucracy, they should, and they would, try to establish workers' management of production. This was written in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* no. 1, in the Editorial.⁵ Well, Hungary '56 came. And there was again a test of what the workers really demanded.

Far from advocating any skepticism or agnosticism or

⁵See "Socialism or Barbarism," the inaugural *S. ou B.* editorial published in March 1949 and now available in *PSWI*. —T/E

obscurantism, I say that if you detach yourself from the traditional rigid concept of theory, you are, on the contrary, much more able, in a certain sense, to foresee what is foreseeable and to direct yourself, to have an orientation in the midst of this tremendously rapidly changing historical process. But this again is not theory in the traditional sense.

I want to add, at this point, the following remark, which to my mind goes very far. Western societies {today, since the early 1950s or even further back}, among all their other peculiar and historically unique features, have also exhibited an absolutely unique (if you stop to think, a quite fantastic) trait. In a sense, they are the first societies in the history of humanity without religion. I don't mean that priests are not there, or that the church is not part of the population, but if you know what history *was*, religion was not that. Religion was something that was followed by the vast majority of the population except for 2% lunatics, 1% criminals in league with the Devil, and one philosopher in his corner, who thought "All this is blah, blah, blah," but didn't say it though, because he would be burned at the stake. That is not at all the situation today. This is an absolutely unique historical phenomenon. But at the same time it is not quite unique. Because there *is* a religion in contemporary society. And this is the religion of science. It is the religion of rationality. It is the totally *irrational* belief that the world is fully rational, that human mental activity can (either at once or progressively) fully grasp this rationality, that the rational human activity doing this *is* science, that this science (little by little, or by leaps and bounds) can reclaim (like the Dutch did to the Zuiderzee, to take up Freud's metaphor in another field) parts of this world, which in this way of course falls into our mental possession, and also of course into our real possession because knowledge is power. This is Francis Bacon and Descartes. The whole program of modern times is there. It is not in the machines. Before the machines, it is in the philosophers. If we increase rational knowledge, we will become masters and possessors of nature. This is Descartes,

1630 (*Discours de la Méthode*).⁶ And this is what, 150 years later, the British capitalists tried to apply. This belief that the world is fully rational means that it is fully commensurate with an otherwise totally hypothetical and mythical state of the human mind. Because what does rationality mean, in this respect? It means that it is possible to apprehend the world if you are the mind of Plato, or the mind of Descartes, or the mind of Einstein, or the mind of a man 3,000 years hence. Rational according to what yardstick?

Not only is this belief totally irrational, of course, because you can neither prove it nor disprove it, any more than (if you go to the extreme subtleties of theology) you can disprove the existence of God. Any decent theologian will tell you of course God is beyond perception, is beyond thinking etc., etc. You can't disprove the existence of something that is neither an idea nor an object. In the same way, you can neither prove nor disprove this thing. What is even more irrational is the type of attitude {people have} in relation to this belief, namely, that this belief, in itself, cannot be discussed. And this you find all the way down. You find it in Jacques Monod (Prix Nobel of Biology, etc.),⁷ where you can clearly see that science is the religion. No problem. Well, there are some great scientific minds that are much more healthy in this respect (but not all of them). And then when you come, if I may say so without any contempt, down the ladder, down the ladder of the Nobel Prize hierarchy or the university diplomacy⁸ or whatever you want, sometimes the lower you go the bigger the superstition, the superstitious

⁶René Descartes's *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences* actually was first published a few years later than Castoriadis says, in 1637. —T/E

⁷Besides briefly lapsing into French here, Castoriadis incorrectly reports the field in which this French biologist officially received his award. In 1965, Monod won the "Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine" (along with François Jacob and André Lwoff). —T/E

⁸Since *diplomatie* in French has the same meanings as "diplomacy" in English, this may be more intentional humor, at the expense of the academy, than a simple misuse of an English-language term. —T/E

belief in science, in “theory” (in this previously defined sense), etc. This is also at the root of attitudes concerning, in the revolutionary movement, the whole problem of the relation with classical Marxism, in one form or the other. And here again you have the fact that Marxism tried to establish itself and to proclaim itself as a scientific system. People thought, and continue to think in some instances, that they will find in this theoretically established “truth” the guarantee that the whole historical landscape is surveyable, that revolution will happen, and that it will happen in a certain direction and not in any other.

There are lots of funny things in there, like in all religious attitudes. Lots of contradictory elements. First of all, what the hell is this science, which has not grown since 1865, and has remained for 100 years like that? This is not the case with any other field of rational knowledge. How can it be a science? Or at least a science in the modern sense of the word? But then you have the other contradiction.

If you really can have a system of theoretically established truths that correspond to a more or less predetermined reality, and if this allows you certitude, and makes you all the time seek verification, say, that there are objective factors at work (irrespective of the will, desires, whims, attitudes of men) that drive society more and more toward the socialist revolution, you are left with the famous question that has been with us for a long time but that is, in this context, still totally relevant: “What is revolutionary activity about *now*?” “And what is it *for*?” If theory could establish things in this way, the most you could say about revolutionary activity in relation to history would be what you could say about technique in relation to physical science. “You have a system of truths. Therefore, if you want result A, you do that. If you want result B, you do something else. In the same way, there is a scientifically established knowledge of history. Now, I want result A. So I do this particular thing. But then I am a technician of history. And that is just a euphemism for saying that we are bureaucrats manipulating {things and people}, according to certain knowledge, {in order} to arrive at certain results.”

If, on the contrary, you have about the revolution the

conception that it is really the unleashing of the creative activity of the masses, then it is absolutely obvious that we cannot *ask* for such a theory, that we cannot *ask* for objective guarantees that things will happen in a particular way. The only thing we can ask for is the elucidation of the relation of what we say, what we want, with what is really going on in society. In this respect, here again, there is an element of what Marx brought to the revolutionary movement, which to my mind remains precious, namely, that (though here again the thing is ambiguous) there is a sort of demarcation with {respect to} totally utopian thinking, or with {respect to} a totally philosophical or moralizing type of thinking. It is true that we are revolutionaries because we make a choice. And we make a choice according to a set of values. That's true, and in this respect the later Marxism tended to avoid a problem that you cannot avoid.⁹ It is no answer to somebody who asks, "And why should communism arrive?" to tell him, "Because this is the historical necessity." The historical necessity also is to say that the sun will disappear after four billion years. Now, we don't found a party to help the sun disappear after four billion years. This is neither good nor bad. (From our rather narrow point of view as human beings, it is rather bad, because it is the ultimate limit to the existence of the human race, unless intergalactic travel or interstellar travel has materialized by then, and relativity theory has been refuted in some way or other.)

The element we retain, it is true, is that we should constantly be searching to see if what we said and what we drive at bear some relation to what the mass of people in society are concerned with, and striving after. It is obvious that this is the only attitude we can have, precisely because what we say is that our objective is that the mass of people in society take their lives collectively into their own hands. Now, it is obvious that this aim would be just wishful thinking if everything we saw in society tended to prove that the last thing in the world people wanted (and were capable

⁹This sentence and the two previous ones were highlighted by a vertical blue line in the typescript's left-hand margin. —T/E

of doing) was to take collectively their own lives in their own hands. But this is a completely different way of looking at things. And here again the basic point of view of praxis intervenes, in the sense that we do not make sociological enquiries and send questionnaires, asking people: "If you want to take up your life, indicate it in box A, otherwise pass on to the following question." But we try, of course, in the meager measure we are capable of, to help people develop this desire and this ability. And this is what revolutionary politics is all about.

The idea of a scientific explanation of history is a delusion. I said that I would try to give a concrete example, drawn from Marxism. I will try to do so and to link it with what was the classical view concerning revolutionary perspectives and their famous "objective bases."

As you all know, the objective basis for the revolutionary perspective in classical Marxism was to be found in what were called the economic contradictions of capitalism. The basic contradiction was considered to be the fact that the development of the productive forces was no longer compatible with the established relations of production.

May I stop here to make a remark concerning the whole bloody methodology? There is a famous text by Marx called "The Preface to the Critique of Political Economy."¹⁰ It was written in 1859. Marx was then 41. He was neither a child, nor gaga. And he was never gaga. He died not all that old. He was in his full maturity and the whole theory is put down, in black on white. There are lots of things that are said in the most affirmative and peremptory way. It has been considered a classical text by generations of Marxists. There you find all the things about the social existence of men determining their consciousness and not the other way round, about the infrastructures and superstructures, and all the rest.

¹⁰The Preface for the 1977 Progress Publishers (Moscow) English-language edition of Marx's 1859 book, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, may be consulted online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>. —T/E

There is a sentence (I don't have the exact quote here, but you can correct me if you remember it, or we can get a copy of the book).¹¹ The sentence says that "A society never disappears before it has exhausted all the possibilities of developing the productive forces it contained." This was written in 1859. Now, to say you are a revolutionary means you work for the disappearance of this society. According to Marx, a society never disappears before it has developed all the productive forces it is able to contain within its flanks. So, assume you were a revolutionary in 1900. You were postulating that the development of capitalism had stopped, that capitalism was no longer capable of developing the productive forces. Well, you were wrong. You were wrong in 1910. You were wrong in 1920. You were wrong in 1929. You thought you were right in 1935 or 1936 and you wrote, with Trotsky, that the productive forces have stopped developing and that the proletariat was declining in numbers and in culture, and so on and so forth. And then you were wrong in 1945. And you were wrong in 1950 and in 1960 and 1970. And you are wrong today. And in this I will risk a prediction, because this is my professional field.¹² And this is that, save for revolution or for war, if you stick by that sentence, you will again be wrong in 1980, and in 1990. And so on, except perhaps at the ecological frontier, or if they succeed in killing all the fish, or consuming all the oxygen of the atmosphere. But that's another discussion and I don't want to enter into that. Marx did not use, and would of course be furious at anybody seeking to introduce Malthusian arguments: that capitalism

¹¹In the above-cited source, this passage reads as follows in English: "No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed." In the 1968 International Publishers edition of Marx/Engels's one-volume *Selected Works*, this phrase reads: "No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed" (p. 183). Castoriadis is probably citing this passage from memory, based on a French edition of this work; see, e.g., <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1135015.image.f12>. —T/E

¹²Castoriadis had worked for 22 years as a professional economist at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, retiring three years earlier, in 1970. —T/E

will collapse because the natural resources of the earth were limited. This has nothing to do with Marx. Alright? So anybody who says today, "I am a revolutionary and I am a Marxist" (in the fully fledged sense of the term) has, in my opinion, if he wants to be fair to himself (not with other people, because that is really secondary: you can cheat with others if you are fair with yourself) to try to explain to himself how he reconciles the idea that a society "never disappears before exhausting fully the possibilities of development of the productive forces" with the fact that he wants to be a revolutionary. What revolution is he talking about? Does he hang his being a revolutionary on his certainty that at 3:30 p.m. on February 10, 1973 the development of the productive forces under capitalism stopped, and that henceforth we can be both revolutionary and truthful Marxists according to Marx's idea? Or at any other point of time during the last two years, and during the coming two years? We get this sort of prediction every time. You had it in June 1971, when Nixon devalued. People said, "Ha, Ha! Ten years ago we were saying the crisis was coming. We were wrong. But this time we are right." But ten years ago they were saying the same sort of thing.

Now, what were these economic contradictions? They were, as I said, this alleged incompatibility between the development of productive forces and the existing relations of production and forms of property. And how did they work? Well, they manifested themselves in various forms. One was the rise in the rate of surplus value. The rise in the rate of exploitation would result in the impoverishment—absolute or relative—of the workers. (You have here lots of arguments about what Marx really meant, but never mind that.) You also had what Marx called an increase in organic composition of capital: more and more constant capital and less and less variable capital, relatively speaking. And, in connection with the other considerations, you had the growth of an industrial reserve army of unemployed. You had a general tendency toward overproduction in the system, that is, the system allegedly could not reabsorb its own products. This manifested itself in the form of ever-deepening crises of overproduction and depressions, like in 1929-1933. You also

had a conception that Marx inherited from British classical political economy (Adam Smith and especially David Ricardo) and to which, for reasons that are still beyond my comprehension, he attached a certain importance (and to which later Marxists attached an absolutely mythical importance), namely, the famous theory of the tendential fall in the rate of profit. The only relevance of this falling rate of profit, of course, would be that since accumulation of new capital takes place out of existing profits, in Marx's view, if you have a decline in the proportion of profit to existing capital (all other things being equal), you will have a decline in the rate (that is, the rhythm, the relative speed, say in percentage terms) of the accumulation of capital. Therefore, you could have a slower and slower accumulation. Even there, one might say: "So what?" That's another point.

Now let us take just that, the analysis by Marx as it is done in *Das Kapital*, which we can take as referring either to the whole of the world as capitalism or to a single country considered as a closed system. The system of *Das Kapital* is a closed capitalistic economic system. It does not need outside markets or fields for export of capital, or anything like that. Now what can we say about the facts? What happened to all these analyses of the economy from the point of view of the results?

Well, the first thing is that of course not only production went on developing, but in fact the postwar years from 1945 to 1972 have been years of extremely rapid capitalist development. If we look back at the curves of production, be these represented by industrial production, by gross national output statistics, inasmuch as they are available (and for the United States they are available for 120 years), production has been growing, year in year out, at a rate that (say, for the United States) is of the order of 4%. There have been ups and downs, cyclical swings that were extremely {large} in the nineteenth century, even {larger} in the 1930s, and trivial and {not major} in the postwar period. And that is the general picture if you take the advanced, developed capitalist countries as a whole. Insofar as this development of production is linked, and it *is* of course linked, to the accumulation of capital as well as to recruitment of labor, it

certainly cannot be true that in general (not of course in *this* particular industry, or in *that* particular country) the rate of profit has been falling. I mean accumulation has been sufficient to sustain this massive growth of production, which is rising at a constant rate (that is, by the same percentage, year in year out) in the long run, and certainly more rapidly in the postwar years than before the War. You also observe that there has been no growth of an industrial reserve army. On the contrary. On average, unemployment in the developed industrial countries has, in the postwar period, been significantly *lower* than the average in the prewar period. And not only that. These developed capitalist countries have been huge *importers* of new labor power from abroad, because, far from having huge industrial reserve armies, labor was scarce. There are two million immigrant workers in Germany. There are at least two or three million immigrant workers in France, where at the same time industry has drawn in a vast agricultural population since 1945. Italy entered the postwar period with something like two million unemployed. Now it is down to 500- or 600,000. Part went to Germany, but part ha[s] been absorbed within the country. In Japan, there was never significant unemployment. In the United States, it fluctuated, again within percentages that are much lower than prewar. In Britain, the same is true. Postwar unemployment has been lower than the historical average prewar, despite the fact that Britain is from the capitalistic point of view a particularly sick country. British capitalism has not succeeded in really managing its economic problems after the War. The same is true (the practical disappearance of unemployment) in Scandinavian countries, etc. So, no growth of an industrial reserve army. No slowing down of accumulation, on the contrary. And although this may open endless discussions, no general rise in the rate of exploitation. It is not true that the standard of living of the workers, taken in the narrow sense or in the broadest sense, has been declining, or even has been stagnant. Here again, you have a general point that unfortunately is most of the time messed up in what is written by traditional organizations, groups, sects, and individuals. It is that in historical comparisons you should always reflect on what you are talking about. Are you talking about what

happened in the long run? This was what Marx was talking about. He was talking about the *secular* tendencies within capitalism.¹³ Now, if you are interested to know what secularly happened to capitalism (and Marx says that, *secularly*, there must be a growth in the industrial reserve army), then it's utter nonsense to say that in December unemployment grew in relation to November, or that this year it is more than it was last year, or two years ago.¹⁴

All these considerations about the "objective developments of capitalist economy" were considered important because it was thought that the system would enter into some sort of impossibility to function, into a series of crises, etc. The developments were thought relevant because (as Marx says in a famous and very beautiful passage at the end of the chapter of *Das Kapital* called "Primitive Accumulation") you would have an ever growing mass of "proletarians"¹⁵ in the industrial sense of the term, opposed to

¹³Here and below, by *secular* Castoriadis intends not *worldly* or *lay* but *occurring only over a century or for an entire age*. —T/E

¹⁴At this point in the typescript (end of p. 18/beginning of p. 19), the typeface and line spacing change, no longer resembling those customarily found in Castoriadis's typescripts. Linking the two typescripts, however, is not only the continuous pagination but also his handwritten connecting phrase "All these considerations . . ." placed at the bottom of p. 18. —T/E

¹⁵The word is used here in the strict Marxist sense. There is a lot of literature, most of it theological, some of it serious, trying to define what exactly Marx meant by "productive labor," "industrial labor," "the proletariat," etc. Do postal workers produce surplus value when they carry a business letter but not when the manager of the firm writes a love letter to his girl because the carrying of the letter is then part of the unproductive consumption of the capitalist class? And what about transport workers? Is there a difference between whether they transport other workers to the factory or objects within the factory? Where does all this stop? [Castoriadis is probably thinking here of chapter 32, "Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation," the penultimate chapter of part 8 ("The So-Called Primitive Accumulation") in the first volume of *Capital*, where the following lines, which he often quoted, appear: "Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with

a very small stratum of capitalist owners of the means of production. Now, if you take the proletarianization of society to mean that small property owners have been increasingly eliminated by the process of concentration and centralization of capital, the prognosis was true. It was one of the great merits of Marx to have clearly seen and forecast this when it was extremely difficult to do so. Marx was this very daring man who saw three factories in Manchester and said: "Here is the future of the Earth," and was right. "Proletarianization" is true in the sense that the process of concentration of capital has more or less eliminated not only peasants in general but also most of the old middle classes. Practically the whole population has become, in a certain sense, wage and salary earners. But the statement is quite wrong if you take it in the sense that more and more people are becoming industrial, manual workers.

Let us look at what happened in the developed capitalist countries. Here again we might try to repeat the feat of Marx and say "What happened in the US and in Britain shows the future to other capitalist countries." It's a striking thing that as soon as a capitalist country enters a certain stage of its development, reaches a certain degree of maturity, the share of industrial production workers in the working population (which up till then was rising) reaches a plateau, stops rising, and then starts to decline.

In *Revolution Reaffirmed*, we produced some statistics about this concerning the USA.¹⁶ I did not have the time

this too grows the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labor at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. Th[i]s integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated" (New York: International Publishers, 1967, p. 763). —T/E]

¹⁶Castoriadis may be confusing here *Socialism Reaffirmed: An Analysis of the Crisis of Contemporary Society and An Outline of the Road to Working Class Power*—the 1960 English-language translation of the 1949

before coming to find exactly comparable statistics for the more recent period. I will just give you two sets of figures for the US and for the UK for the period 1959-1970.¹⁷

The US figures quoted refer to a long period. The decline in the proportion of industrial workers in the US goes as far back as the 1920s. Now, what do you have in the US between 1959 and 1970? The total civilian labor force, as they call it, grows from 68 to 83 million people. Total civilian employment grows from 64.6 to 78.6 million people. The total of wage and salaried employees (excluding agriculture) grows from 53.3 to 70.7 million people. There is therefore a 20% increase in this category of the population, a higher figure than the one for the increase in the total civilian employment. There are practically no peasants left in the US, but even among these “non-peasants” people are still entering the structure of firms where you are paid by wage or salary.¹⁸ Now, what happened, meanwhile, to the number of workers in production and to maintenance workers in manufacturing? To be fair, one should add “in construction and in mining,” but I did not have the statistics. Manufacture and maintenance

“Socialism or Barbarism” inaugural editorial (not to be confused with the pamphlet *Socialism or Barbarism*, which was a statement originally written in English for a May 1961 international “conference of revolutionary socialists” held in Paris) and published later that year by Socialism Reaffirmed (which later became London Solidarity and its federated organizations)—with the London Solidarity translation *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, which had indeed included added US and British statistical information in its 1963 and 1965 editions, the 1965 edition also adding a critical appendix on “the ‘falling rate of profit.’” Almost a year after the present talk, London Solidarity published *Modern Capitalism and Revolution: A Solidarity Book*, a further expanded version of Castoriadis’s classic 1960-1961 *S. ou B.* text that included an update of Castoriadis’s views on economic and political history during the intervening years (see his March 17, 1974 “Author’s Introduction to the 1974 English Edition”; now in *PSW2*). —T/E

¹⁷ Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Labour Force Statistics (1959-1970)* (Paris: OECD, 1972).

¹⁸ Of course, in a US context, one usually says *farmers, farm workers*, and *rural residents/rural workers*, not “peasants.” —T/E

is the biggest portion, anyhow, but the figures should be completed. Well, those employed in this way rose from 12.6 million (in 1959) to 14.1 million (in 1970). That means that whilst total waged and salaried employees (as a proportion of total civilian employment) rose from 82.5% (in 1959) to 90% (in 1970), the number of production and maintenance workers in manufacturing *fell* (as a proportion of total civilian employment) from only 19.5% (in 1959) to 17.9% (in 1970). The relative proportion diminished by almost 10%. To put it in a more graphic way, you have, in 1970, 83 million people at work in the US, 79 million of them are wage and salary earners. Fourteen million are production and maintenance workers in manufacturing (that is, the industrial proletariat, in the strict and narrow sense of the term). Now, if the revolution is “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” and if *this* is the proletariat you have in mind, you should say so. You should say, “We are for the power of 14 million people over the whole of the rest of the population.” Well, apart from personal sympathies, this is not very different from the present situation.

For the UK, the corresponding figures are as follows: the total civilian labor force increased from 24.8 million (in 1959) to 25.6 million (in 1970). Civilian employment rose from 23.8 million to 24.7 million. The total number of waged and salaried employees (excluding agriculture) rose from 21.4 million to 22.5 million. In Britain, you have reached the limit before the USA, in this respect. The figures have risen to 91% and you really can't go much further. You have 91% of the active civilian population as wage and salary earners. You also have—and I don't know which categories to mention—some lawyers, physicians who work for themselves, film stars, prostitutes, and so on and so forth. All this will make up 5 to 10% of the population. You can't go much further. Now, what happened, meanwhile, to the industrial proletariat in the strict sense (that is, to production and maintenance workers in manufacturing)? The figure *falls* from 6.8 million (in 1959) to 6.5 million (in 1970). It declines in *absolute* terms. This is not due to unemployment because between the years quoted you don't have a rise in unemployment. The proportion of industrial proletarians in the total population declines from

28.5% to 26.5%. Now, these are the facts.

After talking about the facts, I would like to say why I think the theory was wrong. The point is not only that the facts do not confirm it. We are not content with that. We want to understand *why* the theory was wrong, for there is a deep lesson in it.

The first question we are interested in is not whether there is or not a *surplus* in the economy, or even “surplus value,” as Marx called it. Whatever the words used, there is a surplus in *any* economy, either because you feed people who do not work (such as the privileged strata under capitalism) or because there is accumulation in the broadest sense of the term, or because of both. And there is certainly going to be a surplus in a socialist or communist economy. Nor is the question to know whether or not there is *exploitation* under capitalism. We know that there is. But there has also been exploitation under previous historical regimes. The question is to know whether or not the labor theory of value explains *in economic terms* the facts of the exploitation (as Marx pretends it does) and the rate of this exploitation (that is, the relative amounts of surplus extracted from the workers) and whether it explains how this develops over time. Now, I say it totally fails to do any of these three things. It is important to see why it fails and what is the root of this failure.

Marx starts by saying that labor power (as distinct from labor) is a commodity sold and bought on the market. Like any other commodity, it has an exchange value and a use value. Its exchange value is “like that of any other commodity.”¹⁹ I stress this “like that of any other commodity.” This exchange value consists of the cost of producing and reproducing the particular commodity. It is, so to speak, the sum total of all the inputs needed to produce labor power, each of which is multiplied by the unit value of the corresponding item, just as to produce a ton of steel you need so much coal and so much iron ore, each valued at so much. You take the quantities and the relative values, and this

¹⁹“Wages, Price, and Profit,” in Marx/Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 210. —T/E

gives you the production costs (or the value, in labor terms) of the commodity. By buying labor power at its cost, the capitalist gets hold of the use value of this commodity. Now, by definition, when you use this labor power for 8 hours a day (provided you use it according to “average socially necessary time,” etc., etc.), you extract from it the value of 8 hours of labor, the quantity of value equivalent to 8 hours of labor. Now, says Marx, “the value embodied in the exchange value of labor power, as a commodity, is of necessity much less.” But this we know. It is a tautology. We know it because there is a surplus, because there are people who live without working. And if there is accumulation of capital, that certainly implies that people who work do not consume everything they produce. Right? So this is no explanation. It is a tautology, a repetition of the fact that there is a surplus, nothing less and nothing more.

The second question is “By how much is the worker exploited?” Or, to put it differently, “What is it that determines the rate of surplus value, the rate of exploitation, the proportion between what Marx calls the ‘unpaid’ and the ‘paid’ parts of the labor day?” Marx, as you well know, distinguishes two aspects of surplus value: the absolute and the relative. Absolute surplus value comes from the lengthening of the working day or of the working week. There is no need to discuss this. In fact, if we speak in Marxist terms, what we should do is to reason as follows: in 1860, a worker started working at the age of 8, 9, 10, 12? He worked up to the age of 65, or perhaps a bit less, the mean life expectancy being shorter then. He worked 52 weeks a year. Sundays were excluded. I don’t know how many holidays there were in Britain then. Four? Perhaps less? The working day was 12 hours or more. In the middle of the nineteenth century, many worked at least 14 hours. So, you multiply 55 years of working life by 52 weeks of 6 days by 14 hours per day. That would give you an idea of the total labor supplied by a worker, during a lifetime, in the middle of the last century, to a British capitalist.

Now take today. At what age does a worker start working? Sixteen? He works until he is 65. That is already 4 or 5 years less than a century ago. What about average

holidays in Britain? Three weeks? So, we multiply by 49 instead of 52. How many days a week does he work? (Voice in audience: "He works on average a 45-hour week.") Alright, let's contract the two factors. Instead of taking days and hours, let's multiply by an average of 45 hours a week (as against 6 times 14, or 84 hours a week, a century ago). By this accounting—and it is not only Britain we are talking about, but all the advanced capitalist countries—*absolute surplus value has declined tremendously*.

But what about relative surplus value? What Marx saw here was true, and is still true. Capitalism always tries, and succeeds most of the time, in compressing the pauses in the working day, that is, in extracting more and more productive activity from the workers. This is part of what they call "increasing the productivity of labor." The material product which the capitalist gets from the worker for a day's wage, at the end of the labor day, therefore rises (in terms of material quantities). Now, how does this affect the value of labor power? In itself, it obviously does not. Let us assume, say, that there was, in the beginning, a certain division of the day between the necessary part (the part in which the worker works to reproduce his own kind) and the part in which he works to produce profit for an employer. The fact that by the end of the working day the worker has produced 100 pieces or 10,000 pieces would not make the slightest difference to the rate of surplus value since, basically, he has produced values to the equivalent of 8 hours of labor value. The value is now spread thinner: over 10,000 units, whereas before it was spread thicker over 100 units. So, this cannot affect the rate of exploitation. What affects it (and Marx says so in fact) is that of course among the commodities produced you have wage goods. You have the productivity of the sector producing wage goods, that is, goods consumed by the workers. This is also rising. Now, if the productivity is rising, the unit value of these goods must be falling. Now suppose that a worker needs per day, in order to produce and reproduce (and then to bring up his children, and so on and so forth, in all the Marxian conditions of the equation), a given quantity of a typical composite commodity. If this quantity is fixed then the fact that, with the increasing productivity of

labor, the unit value of the items entering into this consumption is falling means that the value (in terms of labor) of this basket of goods (or composite commodity) will decline. The worker will still work 8 hours or 14 hours per day. But the share he contributes to the value produced by the day of work will decline. Therefore, the rate of exploitation will rise. Well, a moment's reflection shows that this argument is a fallacy. What the value of the labor power is, is the value of the commodities necessary for the workers to produce and reproduce, etc., their own labor power. This value of the commodities is the product of two factors. It is the product of the quantity of the commodities consumed multiplied by the unit value of each of the commodities. Marx says that the unit value of each of these commodities falls with time (which is equivalent to saying that the productivity of labor is rising). It does not follow, however, that the *product* of the two things falls. Because what happens to the other factor? What happens to the quantity of commodities the workers consume (what we usually call the "standard of living")? The fact is that this quantity of commodities has been rising and that, by and large (and here the question is, statistically, extremely difficult to handle), there has been no significant change in the fraction of the total product that the working class gets out of the production process. In other words, the fall in unit values has been more or less compensated by the rise in the quantities consumed by the workers. In this respect, the exchange value of the commodity labor power, instead of declining, has remained—as a first very rough approximation—more or less constant.

But we are not only discussing the facts. We are discussing the logic of the theory. What is implied in this respect, in traditional theory, is that labor power is in effect a commodity and that it can fully be treated as such in the capitalist system of production. Now, we know that this is not so. We know, for instance, that machines do not have *industrial* stoppages. We know that coal or gas does not wage class struggle. And here you have this funny commodity, or alleged commodity (labor power), which wants to have a say about its own exchange value. And that is what the class struggle has been about in capitalist society. And it is this that

explains the fact that, over long periods of time, workers have succeeded in raising their standard of living. They have done so (but this is another matter) not only through “officially” negotiated salary and wage increases, etc., but even more, after a certain point, by what they effectively do (or rather don’t do) in production, that is, through a whole series of struggles concerning norms, piece rates, surveillance, etc. The workers ask how much they can get out of the capitalist in exchange for the least possible quantity of work. This is labor power (*unlike* any other commodity) determining its own exchange value. And it is this that has really determined the central variables of the system. But how can you quantify this factor, namely the class struggle in all its multifarious forms and all the factors that go into it? Quite simply, you cannot. You can’t even seize it or capture it for statistical purposes, or for scientific observation.

In relation to the evolution of the rate of exploitation, you can therefore only have a sort of social and historical elucidation, in which one sees how the working class (year in year out, and not only at the “official” level but at the shop-floor level, too) reacted to the technical changes introduced by capitalism, how it was able or not to respond in this way or that, and so on and so forth. That is the only possible explanation. If, on the other hand, you want to have a scientific, *economic* explanation of the development of the rate of exploitation over time, you must have the main variables quantifiable, because you are speaking about economics (and economics is more or less about quantities). You then have to build into the theory the postulate that labor power is a commodity like any other, that is, that the production of this commodity conforms (in modern parlance) to fixed technical input coefficients. You put into the worker so much cornflakes, etc., and you get out of him so many hours of labor per day. You have to treat labor power as a commodity like any other commodity, because otherwise you cannot use your “theoretical,” “scientific” approach. You have in fact, in your theory, to treat workers as things. Just things. Well, that is—effectively—what capitalism tried to do. Never quite succeeded, fortunately. In fact, never could succeed. But here you have this extraordinary coincidence (concerning

which, in my opinion, no reflection will ever be sufficient), namely, the fact that what was the practical aim of capitalism was (and still is) is also the theoretical postulate of all political economy from Adam Smith, through Marx, to Paul Samuelson and John Maynard Keynes. They all reasoned as if labor power and the worker are but things you buy and sell, like anything else. It is both immensely mysterious and immensely clear why this should be so. All economic theory (including Marx and Rosa Luxemburg) both shares and stands or falls by the very theoretical postulate that is the practical objective of capitalism: to transform the worker into a thing.

All political economy (including Marx) shares this approach. Imagine you are a capitalist. You have bought yourself a ton of coal. At any given moment in the development of the economy, there are certain techniques, which your engineers know about, which allow you (taking into account the Carnot cycle, and thermodynamics, and theorems about the efficiency of machines) to extract the maximum use value out of this coal, that is, to waste the fewest calories possible. The coal, of course, can do nothing about it. It “resists,” but as an inert object. I mean, if you haven’t the extraction techniques, alright, the coal won’t give you the calories. But it can do nothing about it, and if you find a better technique, then you extract more calories. Workers are seen in the same way. You are a capitalist and you hire, say, a hundred workers. From the moment they are in your factory, given the state of productivity or extracting techniques (for, extracting work from the workers is seen as like extracting calories from the coal), you can get out of them what the present state of technique allows. They are things, in this respect.

Capitalism, of course, never succeeds in this practical aim. The workers refuse to behave as the theory (which treats labor power as “just a commodity”)²⁰ says they should

²⁰ Castoriadis may be paraphrasing “Wage Labor and Capital,” where Marx says “Labor power, therefore, is a commodity, *neither more nor less* than sugar” (quoted in “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” *PSW2*, p. 310, n21, his emphasis; in the text itself [*ibid.*, p. 247], he paraphrases Marx as follows: “labor power is *completely* a commodity, like sugar”). —T/E

behave. And the crisis in production stems precisely from the fact that workers do not let themselves be treated like things. And (to mention it only in passing) *this* outlines the real contradiction in the productive aspects of the system. It is that if you ever succeeded in treating the workers like things, or if the workers behaved like things, or if they behaved precisely how they were supposed to behave, according to the theory, production would collapse. Today, we all know the fantastic fact (although to draw this conclusion was, I think, new ten years ago) that it is sufficient practically anywhere to start working to rule for work to stop.

For, what does working to rule mean, from the point of view we are discussing here? It means that workers say: "Alright, these are your techniques of production, your techniques for extracting surplus value. Go on, apply them. We are passive things. We will do exactly as we are told and nothing more." Well, production just stops. This is the fundamental contradiction built into the system. {It is t}his sort of split between the process of giving orders, or managing production from the outside, and carrying them out within production.

I think I had better stop here, only adding why I felt it necessary to have this rather long discussion about the labor theory of value. I wanted to show not only that you cannot have the sort of scientific theory and explanation that Marx thought you could have (and which Marxists think Marx produced in *Das Kapital*), but also that this sort of thing leads inevitably to results that are constantly belied by reality. But I also wanted to show that if you absolutely want to have this sort of theory, you have to treat classes, groups, and individuals in society like a set of objective, quantifiable variables. You have to treat them like things, with predictable properties, reactions, etc. Now, if you go to the deepest possible level, to the fundamental roots of the capitalist system and of capitalistic attitudes, all this hangs together. I don't know if I have made myself clear about this. It was as an illustration of *this* point that I brought in the somewhat long discussions concerning the labor theory of value and the rate of exploitation.

Imaginary Significations*

Q.: Two questions that orient your reflections are *What makes people stay together in order to constitute societies?* and *What makes these societies evolve, what makes new forms emerge?*

C.C.: It is not only that people “stay” in society. People can exist only in society and through society. What is not social in man, in what we usually call the human individual, is, on the one hand, the biological substrate, the human animal; on the other, infinitely more important, and what radically differentiates us from simple living beings, there is the psyche, that dark, unfathomable, essentially *a*-social core. This core is the source of a perpetual flux of representations that do not obey ordinary logic; it is the seat of boundless and unrealizable desires—and, for both these reasons, it is incapable, in itself and as such, of living. This core has to be made to listen to reason, in all senses of the term, via the violent imposition of what we usually think “belongs to us”: a language, a logic that is organized somehow or other, ways of making/doing, even ways of moving, norms, values, and so on. This violent imposition is not a physical imposition: it is violent because it does

* Interview with Michel Tréguer broadcast on the France-Culture radio network January 30, 1982 and published in *Création et désordre. Recherches et pensées contemporaines* (Paris: Éditions L’Originel, 1987), pp. 65-99. This volume presents interviews done on the occasion of the international “Disorder and Order” colloquium that was held at Stanford University September 14-16, 1981; Castoriadis’s talk, “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain,” was eventually published in *WIF*. Another colloquium, held at Cerisy in France and dealing with similar themes, preceded the Stanford one; the acts of that previous colloquium were published as *L’Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*, ed. Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983). “Les significations imaginaires” was reprinted in *SD*, pp. 65-92. [Castoriadis’s main talk from that earlier conference was translated as “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (now in *CR*); *L’Auto-organisation* also included (pp. 282-301) a debate between Castoriadis and René Girard on “contingency in human affairs.” The original France-Culture recording is now available online at: <http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/spip.php?article78>.—T/EJ

violence, it has to do violence, to the psyche's own immanent tendencies. Why can't we Europeans dance certain dances like Africans dance them? That isn't "racial": it's social. Usually, one says *cultural*: that means *social*.

Q.: Do you mean that making the psyche listen to reason is what is at issue when people constitute social communities?

C.C.: Yes. I think that what we call *the human species* is a monstrous accident of biological evolution. This evolution—the creation of new species—has culminated “at a certain moment,” as one says, in the creation of a being that is unfit for life. We are the sole living being that does not know what, for it, is food and what is not so, what is poison. A sick dog will go looking for grass that will make it better; we gather and eat poisonous mushrooms. A dog does not stumble—a man stumbles and breaks bones. A human being commits suicide; he kills his fellow creatures—for the fun of it or for no reason at all. This being, this radically unfit-for-life species would undoubtedly have disappeared had it not been able, we know not how, to create a new form, an unheard-of form on the scale of other beings, that is society: society as institution, embodying significations and capable of teaching single specimens of the species *Homo sapiens* how to behave in such a way that they might live, and live somehow or other together.

There is, therefore, the question I was posing: *What holds a society together?* But that question must not be taken in the sense of a “social contract” or of a “placing together” of “individuals” that would preexist it. The mythical and unreal view of human beings, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau described them, who would have lived alone and free in the woods, each quite far from the others, and who are led to “invent” language and a shared existence, is completely untenable. Such beings would quite simply not have survived for a single instant. The meaning of my question is rather the following: How is it that, through this extraordinary host of particular institutions, instruments, ways of making/doing, peculiarities of language, significations borne and conveyed by this language as well as by all the acts of socialized humans—how is it that, through all that, this fantastic unity

of various social worlds (whether we're talking about the contemporary French social world or else that of the Romans or the ancient Greeks, the Assyrians, the Arunta, or any other tribe) is fashioned in a coherent manner? When I say *institution*, I am taking the word in the deepest and broadest sense, that is to say, the entire set of tools, the whole language, all the procedures for making and doing things, every norm and value, and so on.

Q.: Everything that is coherent in society?

C.C.: Everything that, with or without formal sanction, imposes ways of acting and thinking. Thinking—that always has to be underscored. People believe that they have a “personal thought”; in truth, in the most original thinker there is but a minute part of what he says that does not come from society, from what he has learned, from what surrounds him, from opinions, from what's in the air or from some trivial elaboration on all that, that is to say, from conclusions that can be drawn therefrom or presuppositions that can be discovered therein. If one wants, metaphorically speaking, to quantify all that, the kernel of what is truly new in a Plato, an Aristotle, a Kant, a Hegel, a Marx, or a Freud represents perhaps one percent of what they said or wrote.

There is, therefore, this extraordinary assemblage of institutions that makes it that we speak one tongue and not another, that there are automobiles, that they are familiar to us and that we can learn to drive them, and so on. Why are there automobiles? In order for them to exist, there must be factories; for that, there must be capital, and workers—and so on and so forth. What holds all that together? How does it happen that all that has a unity—a unity that, let us note in passing, remains a unity even in conditions of crisis or revolution, even when two classes are struggling to the death within a society? In order to struggle to the death with someone, there must be a common ground—even if it is just the soil. In the case of classes, or social groups, we're not talking about physical soil, but there must be stakes that in a certain fashion would be common, and such stakes exist only in a common world constructed by the institution. What, then, is the origin of this unity? One cannot truly answer this question, but one can deepen it by observing that this unity

itself flows from the internal cohesiveness of a fabric of meaning, or of significations, that penetrate throughout the life of society, directing it and orienting it: these are what I call *social imaginary significations*. Such significations are embodied in particular institutions and animate them; I am, of course, using the terms *embody* and *animate* metaphorically, since social imaginary significations are not spirits, djinns. Let us take these very spirits as an example: for the peoples who believe in them, they're a social imaginary signification—as are gods, or God with a capital G, or the *polis* of the ancient Greeks, or the citizen, or the nation. No one has ever been able to put a nation under the microscope; it's something that exists only as an imaginary signification that holds together, for example, all French people, who say to themselves: "We are French." And beyond the fact that they say it explicitly, there is the fact that they participate in some respects in the same way of life, live under the same particular institutions, and so on. Likewise, the State, or the party—or commodity, capital, money, and rate of interest—or taboo, virtue, and sin are social imaginary significations. Likewise, too, man, woman, and child, when taken not as biological categories but as social beings, are social institutions. And they are each time, in their concrete content, specific to each society and formed in relation to the whole of its social imaginary significations. To take a commonplace example: the macho component of certain cultures doesn't fall from the sky, nor is it determined by geography or climate any more than by the state of the forces of production; it's a certain social imaginary way of positing being-a-man and being-a-woman (which are, of course, complementary). The same goes for the "child"—whose tremendous historical evolution we know about from the studies of Philippe Ariès.¹ A Polynesian child, an American child, a French child of today, these are entirely different beings, and it's not their genetic code that is responsible for those differences.

Why call these significations *imaginary*? Because

¹ Author of *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1960), trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). —T/E

they are neither rational (they cannot be “logically constructed”) nor real (they cannot be derived from things); they do not correspond to “rational ideas” any more than to natural objects. And because they proceed from what we all consider as having to do with creation, namely, the imagination, which of course is not here the individual imagination but, rather, what I call *the social imaginary*. That is also the reason why I call them *social*: as the social imaginary’s creation, they are nothing if not shared, participated in, by the anonymous, impersonal collective that, each time, society also is. And no one has formulated more forcefully and more clearly than Balzac what society is when, at the beginning of *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*, he says, speaking of Paris: “You are always acceptable to this world, you will never be missed by it.”² That’s society. You are a genius or a loser, a hero or a criminal: you always fit into society; it never misses you. A few seconds after the death of the most important man, the life of society resumes, imperturbable. As Georges Clemenceau said, “The graveyards are full of irreplaceable men.”³

Q.: And at the same time, each man, each individual, is almost the entire society, to the extent that he reflects this whole fabric of imaginary significations.

C.C.: Absolutely, he incorporates it. He is, as I say in using a mathematical metaphor, a *whole part* of society. That is to say that, if one were able to analyze fully, from this standpoint, you, me, a Polynesian, etc., one could in a way reconstitute the society in which each of us belongs: he carries it, so to speak, within him.

Q.: That connects up, I believe, with some of the ways in which biologists and neurophysiologists today view the brain as a hologram—that is to say, a structure in which a

²Honoré de Balzac, *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*, trans. Ernest Dowson (Chicago: Peacock, 1928), p. 6 (translation slightly altered); also cited in *WIF*, p. 155. —T/E

³This saying, generally attributed to Clemenceau, and which gained new currency after Charles de Gaulle repeated it, ends “and they all have been replaced.” —T/E

small part yields up the whole and the whole is to be found again in each part.

C.C.: Yes, there is some of that; one can see the individual as a social microcosm. Can one draw a correspondence between this organization of society and biological organization? Yes, there is one, and a very important one; it's closure: in both cases, there is organizational closure, an informational closure, a cognitive closure. The living being, the biological organism, is not, of course, closed in the sense of energy closure or physical closure; it is constantly in a state of exchange with its environment. But in another sense, it is closed upon itself: everything that "appears" always exists for the organism only if it is resumed, refabricated, reworked in its own manner. The organism can be seen as an entity that is subject to disturbances. One class among these disturbances is not "grasped" by the organism—is not interesting for it. Those that are grasped are transformed by the organism into information. The key point is that *there is not*, outside of the organism, any "information" in bulk that is waiting to be gathered; if certain disturbances become information, that is because the boundary of the organism is transformational: it does not "reflect"; it does not passively undergo influences; it is active; and it transforms these "movements" of the environment into information, into something that, one can say with a slight abuse of language, has a meaning for the organism.

Q.: That is to say that a message takes on its signification for the organism only by "passing under the yoke at the Caudine Forks," by fitting into its molds?

C.C.: Exactly. Here's a trivial example: radio waves don't exist for animals on earth, and they didn't exist for man until the moment when he manufactured a specific prosthetic device to capture them. Likewise, we create color. It will be said: But we don't create it from nothing. Certainly, there is something *out there*, as one says in English, "over there," "outside": radiation, electromagnetic waves. But those waves do not "have" color: the stimulus becomes color through the creative action of the organism—which action, moreover, is not truly localizable. We cannot see without an eye, certainly.

But in vision, it is the nervous system as a whole that cooperates. And at least in the case of the human being, it is not only the whole nervous system in an “electromechanical” sense; it is one’s entire psychism and all of one’s thought. When we see, we think, even if we aren’t thinking about it. That is why we can see incorrectly; see incorrectly, in the physical sense of the term—because thought intervenes. Whereas, our thought does not, generally speaking, disturb other functions, as with digestion, for example. Where is the analogy with society? Society, like every living species, each living being, establishes its own world, one in which a self-representation is also included. It is therefore society’s own organization—that is to say, its institutions and the imaginary significations these institutions bear and convey—that posits and defines, each time, what is for the society under consideration information, what is mere noise, and what is nothing at all, or what is the weight, pertinence, and value of some given information, or what are—if one wants to continue to use cybernetic language—the programs for elaborating information and responding to it. In short, it is the institution of society that determines, each time, what for that society is real and what is not so. An example I mentioned at the colloquium: in Salem, witchcraft was real three centuries ago; it is no longer so today. Or take this surprising phrase from Karl Marx: “The Delphic Apollo was in Greece a force as real as any other”⁴

It could therefore be said, to start out, that each society contains a system of interpretation of the world—but that would be insufficient: each society *is* a system of interpretation of the world. And even, more rigorously speaking, each society is a *constitution*, in fact a *creation*, of the world that is valid for it, of its own or proper world. And its identity is nothing other than this system of interpretation or, better, of meaning-giving. That’s why, if you attack this

⁴The passage—“Was not the Delphic Apollo a real power in the life of the Greeks?”—comes from the [Appendix](#) to Marx’s 1841 doctoral thesis *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. It was paraphrased in [WIF](#), p. 9 and is mentioned again below in the chapter “Is it Possible to Create a New Form of Society?” —T/E

system of interpretation, of meaning-giving, you're attacking it more fatally than if you were attacking its physical existence. And, in general, it will defend itself much more savagely.

There are, obviously, also some radical differences between the closure of a society and that of the living being. And these differences are quite instructive. For the living being, its organization of the world has a physical, material basis we claim to more or less know today: I am talking about its genetic inheritance, which has to do with its genes, with DNA. In society, however, we observe that the transmission of traits that are retained occurs without any genetic basis. Neither French as a tongue nor the laws in force in France are transmitted from generation to generation via the DNA specific to the French. Another difference—one that is, in my view, very important—is that, for society, there is not what would be called *noise* in information theory. Everything that appears has to signify something. There is, for society, an imperialism of signification that brooks, so to speak, no exceptions. Or else the social setup must decide explicitly that such and such a thing has no signification. In addition, there is in the living being a considerable amount of redundancy in the processes that manufacture information: the fabrication or creation of information through and for the living being is never “economical”; there is a considerable overproduction thereof (which, moreover, also has, as such, a functionality: redundancy is a guarantee against errors and functional operations that may go awry). In society, however, it's something else entirely: here, fabrication and elaboration of information go quite far, beyond anything that could be characterized in terms of functionality, and seem to extend virtually without limit.

I shall not linger over the fact that one cannot attribute any finality whatsoever to society, beyond the preservation of its own institution—which each time is, as we have seen, correlative to imaginary significations that are *arbitrary* from the standpoint of “rationality” or “reality.” I come to one final major differentiating trait that relates to what is called in epistemology *the question of the metaobserver*. When we are speaking of the living being, who is talking? It is obviously

not the living being itself—nor its “environment.” It is a third party, the metaobserver, that sees—or tries to see—at once what is happening (or what exists) *for* the living being, from the standpoint of the living being, and “that to which this corresponds” in the environment of this being, beyond the boundary of the organism: this metaobserver tries, therefore, to establish a correlation between these two series, whereas the metaobserver is, strictly speaking, himself included in neither one. And this is quite independent of the fact that, as was said a moment ago, there is no experiential “determination” of what *is* for the living being, since the latter creates, on the basis of external disturbances, a world for itself. That doesn’t—ideally speaking, at least—prevent the metaobserver from being able to correlate each element of this world of the living being with an “external” element: to the sensation of color, for example, the metaobserver will make a correspondence with electromagnetic vibrations of this or that wavelength. Now, in the case of society we cannot speak of a metaobserver: society’s observers cannot “take themselves out of it”; they belong to society. Society—or, if you prefer, certain societies—produces its own metaobservers, and it produces them in its very own way. That is why we always make an attempt, as inevitable as it is impossible, to be in our society and to get out of it in order to ask ourselves, for example: What about reality *outside of* our institution of the world? How would a man not belonging to our society—or to any other one—see the world? This question is at once inevitable and insoluble. And on the other hand, to the extent that this effort on the part of the metaobserver can be accomplished, we observe that for every society there are some beings that overpoweringly exist for it without them possessing any external correlate—a society creates, on a gigantic scale, entities that are the most important ones for it, and yet for these entities there is no sense in looking for a physical correlate. To take a few examples: spirits, gods, God, norms, sin, virtues, human rights, and so on.

I now come to a point that in my view is quite central: the two dimensions of the institution of each society. Briefly speaking, there is no society without arithmetic; and there is

no society without myths. A parenthetical statement: In contemporary society, arithmetic has itself become a myth, since this society lives to a great extent within the purely fictional assumption that everything is calculable and that only what can be counted counts. Yet there is something more, and something much more important. There is no myth without arithmetic; every myth is obliged to call upon the same schemata that are at the basis of arithmetic and even, explicitly, upon numbers. God is One in Three Persons; there are twelve gods; the Buddha has a thousand and one faces, and so on. Conversely, there is no arithmetic without myth, since, at the basis of arithmetic, there is always an imaginary representation of what numbers are, of what the universe of quantity is, and so on.

Arithmetic and myth are clear illustrations of two dimensions in which the institution of society deploys itself: they are what I call *the ensemblistic-identitary dimension*, on the one hand, and the properly imaginary dimension, on the other. In the ensemblistic-identitary dimension, the institution of society operates (acts and thinks) according to the same schemata that are active in the logico-mathematic theory of sets [*ensembles*]: elements, classes, properties, relations, all that being posited as clearly distinct and well defined. The basic operative schema here is the schema of determinacy: in this domain, existence is determinacy; in order for something to exist, it must be well defined or determined. On the other hand, in the imaginary dimension, existence is signification. Significations can be spotted, but they cannot be determined. They are indefinitely linked to one another by means of the mode of relation that is *referral*. The signification *priest* refers me back to the signification *religion*, which refers me back to God, which refers back to I don't know what, but certainly also in any case to the world as His creation—therefore also, for example, to sin. Significations are not clearly distinct and well defined; they are not linked among themselves via necessary and sufficient conditions, and they cannot be reconstructed in an “analytical” way. It is pointless to try to discover the “atoms of signification” on the basis of which one could, via recombination, elaboration, etc., reconstitute the world of significations of our society or of a

primitive society: these edifices of signification cannot be reconstructed via logical operations. This is also the reason why social organization and social order are not reducible to mathematical, physical, or biological notions of order or organization. Yet what really matters is not this negative statement but, rather, the positive affirmation that the social-historical creates a new type of order. We're dealing here with an ontological creation.

Q.: We've thus come to our second question, that of the emergence of the new in the social field. You obviously recognize that, despite the principle of closure that posits the absolute specificity of each culture, some communication can nevertheless exist among them—allowing us, for example, to speak of our neighbors or of predecessors. But it doesn't seem to you that one might find an explanatory principle for the evolution of social things. You just said that each new state of a society is an ontological creation.

C.C.: The question is highly complex, and one must proceed in order. First of all, every attempt to derive the forms of society from physical conditions or from some permanent characteristics of the human being, for example from desire, whether one is talking about desire in the Freudian sense or other versions of desire . . .

Q.: . . . mimetic desire, for example?

C.C.: . . . for example, yes; these attempts are sterile and even meaningless. If one talks about a permanent desire in the human being, however it may be defined, and if one wants to turn it into an "explanation" of society and of history, one ends up with what is, scientifically speaking, a monstrosity: a constant cause producing variable effects. Desire was certainly there in central Australia or Polynesia as much as it is in Paris or in California. Why, then, is the Île de France region or California not inhabited by primitive societies?

Of course, the various historical creations that have occurred do not take place upon a *tabula rasa*—I'll return to this point in a moment. Before that, a few words relative to a remark by René Thom, who basically said that criticizing determinism is equivalent to advocating laziness. It seems obvious to me that, if ever there was a fundamentally lazy

attitude, it really is determinism. For, what is the program, and the wish, that sustains all the efforts of the determinist? Let us find the single equation of the universe (let us establish a theory of grand-grand unification), after which we will finally be able to sleep happily for eternity. If that doesn't express an irrepressible metaphysical laziness, I don't know what laziness is. On the contrary, from my perspective there is still very important research to be done into the conditions for social-historical creation that pertain to the ensemblistic-identitarian (therefore, to a certain kind of determinism), and that are in part, but always in a fragmentary and lacunary way, determinable, and such research cannot truly ever be exhausted, for these conditions are always immersed within something else that totally alters their way of operating. What, apparently, is more simple, clear, and transparent than a tool, in whichever society you like? And yet, this simplicity, the apparent naked "toolness" of the tool, is a very recent Western conception. For a savage or for a man from a traditional society, a tool is something that is fantastically loaded: recall Siegfried and his sword, Ulysses and his bow.

Q.: And once again, on the basis of the imaginary significations and representations attached to a tool, the way one makes use of it, its form, etc., one could reconstitute the entire social imaginary.

C.C.: Quite right. Let's take, for example, the history of Hephaistos' (Vulcan's) manufacture of Achilles' new arms in the *Iliad*. You pull at this tiny tip, the arms of Achilles, and the whole world of the *Iliad* comes along with them. Let us take another example, from another realm of ideas: the contemporary economy. It might have been thought that in this domain, a domain that is quantifiable and calculable par excellence, it would be easy to establish deterministic relationships among interlinking phenomena. Now, it is known that that is very far from being the case, that economists have never succeeded in constituting the "rigorous science" they had wanted to set up, and that they regularly are mistaken in their forecasts. If tomorrow the price of gas were to double, consumption would almost certainly fall, but by how much? And if workers' real wages were lowered by an appreciable amount because prices are increasing much faster

than wages, what would happen? Would there be strikes, something else, or nothing at all? Political economy cannot answer that question, which refers back directly to people's activity in society. But if it cannot respond to that question, everything it says about the determination of wage rates becomes secondary, and almost ridiculous. All those lovely equations appear for what they really are: a formal and empty edifice.

Q.: It seems to me that Kenneth Arrow, the Nobel Prize winner in Economics, says something rather similar: he is quite modest about economists' potential for making forecasts.

C.C.: Yes, Arrow has his feet on the ground, and he has clearly formulated this assessment by stating: We do not understand, because everything is immersed in social and political conditions. But it is also immersed in much more than that—in the magma of social imaginary significations. To return to the general problem, each time we reflect upon the creation of a new form of society, or simply upon a major alteration in our own society, we obviously have to ask ourselves: What in the old was preparing, one way or another, the new or was linked to it? But here again, the principle of closure must be recalled. In concrete terms, this signifies that the old enters into the new with the signification the new confers upon it—and could not enter back into it otherwise. One need merely recall, for example, how for centuries now elements and ideas, whether ancient Greek or Christian, have been constantly rediscovered, remodeled, reinterpreted in the Western world so that they might be adapted to what is usually, and stupidly, called the *needs* of the present—that is to say, in truth, the imaginary schemata of the present. Formerly, there were simply some disciplines that dealt with classical Antiquity, like history and philology; at present, a new, very important discipline is developing that is rather often called *historiography* and that involves research into the history of history and philology and its interpretation. People are asking, in other words, how and why such and such ideas were being imputed to the Greeks in the seventeenth century, other ones in the eighteenth (see, for example, how ancient democracy was represented during the French revolutionary

era),⁵ and still others in the nineteenth century, and then today. We have to, each time, understand the new in order to understand the view of the old that this new was fabricating (and vice versa, moreover: understanding Victorian England's view, for example, about classical Greece is especially enlightening about Victorian England).

I return to the question of the passage from one form of society to another. We can easily see the poor quality and the vacuity of everything that has been proposed in the way of truly "explanatory" schemata. For example, and since there has been talk about what help biological schemata might bring to the intelligibility of history, it is clearly impossible to apply, even roughly, a neo-Darwinian schema to societal evolution. What does one see in Western Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and Modern Times? One doesn't see a very large number of societal forms that would begin to appear, with all of them, save one, proving unfit to survive and leaving room for this sole fit one. What one sees being born is a new societal form—the society that will ultimately become capitalist society—without any "random variation" or any "selection" operating on the products of such random variations.

Likewise, the new principles discussed at this colloquium—order from noise or organization from noise, which are undoubtedly important for biology, and perhaps even for physics and cosmology, as Ilya Prigogine has alluded to—do not seem to me capable of elucidating the emergence of new social forms. Of course, here we must be prudent, for we are dealing there with modes of thought, ideas, and ways of tackling things that are quite recent, and we have not yet explored all of their potentialities—far from it. Perhaps they might furnish much more than we see at present; in any case, one has to hope so. But I think that there are nonetheless some reasons in principle why one could not go very far with these

⁵Castoriadis may be thinking, in part, of Pierre Vidal-Naquet's preface to the 1976 French translation of Moses I. Finley's *Democracy Ancient and Modern*; see now the English translation of this preface: "The Tradition of Greek Democracy," trans. David Ames Curtis, *Thesis Eleven*, 60 (2000): 61-86. —T/E

ideas toward an “explanation,” or even a greater intelligibility, of the emergence of new social forms. First of all, as I have already said, one cannot truly speak of *noise* in a society; I do not even believe that one might apply here the term *disorder*—in the sense, of course, that this term has in information theory and in these new conceptions. What appears, each time, as disorder in a society is disorder from the viewpoint of its own institution, but is not “disorder” in the sense of these new theories. It’s something that has its order—and that is negatively valued from the point of view of the existing institution. When, during the French Revolution, the famished crowds marched on Versailles or when, today, 10,000 young bikers meet on Bastille Square and then go off to crisscross Paris while making a lot of noise—well, that is not, as a matter of fact, noise; it’s not disorder. These are things that in themselves are ordered—and that are negative from the viewpoint of the existing order. Likewise, in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, when the original bourgeoisie, the protobourgeoisie, emerged and when it formed the first free towns—a Villefranche, a Freiburg, or Fribourg, and so on—cities that eluded in part the grasp of the existing order, in particular the seignorial or feudal order, this phenomenon cannot be treated as noise or disorder, either—except from the viewpoint of feudal society. But in order for it to acquire the consistency and the breadth that could make it into disorder for feudal society, it must have some order in and for itself; and indeed, what we observe here is a new order, new social imaginary significations. The bourgeoisie is the bourgeoisie inasmuch as, in the first towns it founds, it has already created another organization than the feudal one. This so-disparaged bourgeoisie, which I have no intention of praising or justifying, should nonetheless not be confused with capitalism. The protobourgeoisie is the social stratum that was the first in Western Europe to reconstitute a political commune, a political collectivity. It did so for the first time since the demise of the ancient cities. This political collectivity is something radically other than the Empire, monarchy, or the papacy, or the feudal order; this imaginary signification—the collectivity as political subject—had to be recreated, and it’s because it was created (re-created) that the

bourgeoisie can exist as the bourgeoisie.

The radical difference between the biological world and the social-historical world is that in the latter autonomy emerges. One can, like Francisco Varela, speak of the “autonomy” of the living being—but it is precisely here that we have what we have called, again along with Varela, *closure*: the living being has its own laws, and nothing can appear within its world that would not in one way or another conform to those laws from the cognitive standpoint. Closure implies, therefore, that the functioning of this living being, this subject, this self, and its correspondence with what there may be that is “outside,” are governed by rules, principles, laws that are given once and for all. Take the structure of a rabbit or a bacterium: everything is given once and for all for the species under consideration. This changes, of course, but in a way that can be conceived of by us only as random. But this phenomenon we have just described, and its basic characteristics, define quite precisely what we were calling, at least what I call, *heteronomy* in the social-historical domain. This is, for example, typically the case with primitive societies, or even traditional religious societies, where principles, rules, laws, and significations are posited as given once and for all, as intangible, unquestioned, and unquestionable. This unquestionable character is guaranteed by instituted representations that themselves partake of the institution of society: all the representations that ensure that this institution has an extrasocial source, a source that for it is its origin, foundation, and guarantee. For example, as God has given the Law to Moses, no one can, among the Hebrew people, rise up and say: *The Law is bad and unjust*. If he says that, he ceases to be Hebrew—never mind whether he is stoned to death or not, he exits from this society, he shatters something that is absolutely fundamental in Hebraic society. (Furthermore, this someone in fact does not appear.) This very situation is literally a heteronomous one. It’s someone else who gives us the Law; it is not society that creates its institution. That institution is given to us or is imposed upon us (it hardly matters which) from elsewhere: by our ancestors, by the gods, by God, by the Laws of History (see the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, by

this same Karl Marx whom we just quoted). Such heteronomy is incorporated into the heteronomous institutions of society and, in the first place, into the psychosocial structure of the individual himself, for whom the idea of calling the Law into question is an inconceivable idea. Quite obviously, this possesses a fantastic power to conserve, to preserve the institution, whence the discourse some are rediscovering today, and which in fact has been around here for at least twenty-five centuries, viz., that the best and ultimately the sole reliable anchorage for every institution of society is religion. Indeed, what one then has are sacred institutions, which boils down to nearly the same thing.

Such is the state of nearly all human societies in nearly all periods of history, as far as we are informed about it. There then arose an extraordinary historical creation that, again as far as we know, took place for the first time in ancient Greece and then was taken up again, with some completely new features, in Western Europe starting at the end of the Middle Ages. This is the historical creation that brings autonomy into existence not as closure but as opening. What does that mean? It means the emergence, within these societies (in ancient Greece as well as in modern Europe) of a new form of existing, of social-historical being, and even of being itself: these societies themselves call into question their institution, that is to say, the law of their existence. This is the first time that we see any being whatsoever call into question explicitly, and change through explicit action, the law of its existence. There can be alterations of the institution of society in any society, but not in that way: some absolute monarch has succeeded some other one, and he has changed a few laws; or, with time, society has slowly altered its ways and customs. But in both cases I mentioned, the situation is completely different. Here, the change of laws occurs consciously. The questions are raised in the open: Are our laws just? Are our gods real? Is our representation of the world true? In other words, radical political questions, as well as radical philosophical questions, are posed. The philosophical question—we can reformulate it in the language we were using a moment ago: Does our system of creating information from what we “receive”—and that also includes both the

“external filters,” so to speak, what happens “at the frontier,” and the internal procedures, the categories, and so on—give us the truth? The question can be posed in different ways: Is it effective? Does it correspond to what is, from the flattest sense possible to the deepest one?

Q.: I don’t understand very well how one can pose this question, since it was just said that even the notion of reality, and the notion of truth, existed within closure.

C.C.: Well, you are completely right to raise this question, for it’s the very question of truth and of reality that you are posing—as these societies pose it. Whereas, for a primitive, the reality and truth of his representation are not questioned; and whereas he can think, for example, that what is presented to him in his dreams really happens—that’s a very widespread idea—and therefore say, “Tonight, I was at such and such a place” or “Such and such a tree in the jungle is inhabited by this or that spirit,” and so something or other has to be done or is to be avoided, and so on—all these inherited representations correspond for him to what is true and real and are never questioned. The rupture that comes to light in Greece and later starts back up again in Western Europe consists in the following: the inherited representations, and ultimately the very ideas of truth and reality, are questioned. They begin by being questioned in a concrete way; for example, Thales asks himself: Is everything that is said in the myths, or in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, true?—or else: Might there be a single element on the basis of which the world would be formed? But also, this question is immediately reduplicated, it folds back upon itself, and—this is the true beginning of philosophy as reflectiveness—the other question arises: What, then, are truth and reality? Now, these questions did not exist, were not raised previously, not like that: in heteronomous societies, what is true is that which conforms to the established modes of representation.

Q.: Therefore these societies, including ours, are characterized by the breaking of such closure. But that which is external to closure being by definition outside the field of language, this becomes a face-off with something that can no longer be named.

C.C.: This becomes the opening for what can be called

infinite questioning, unlimited interrogation. There is, therefore, a calling into question of society's representations, and there is a calling into question of the law itself—that is to say, there is a sudden appearance of the question of justice. And this question is also one of those to which there can be no once-and-for-all answer. To say that we might find the system of laws that would make it such that we would never again have to inquire deeply into the political question would obviously be an illusion and a mystification.

I want to go back a bit to this never-ending question of the truth. Something quite simple needs to be understood. The question of what, in that which we think, comes from “us” and what comes from the “object” is, from an ultimate standpoint, undecidable. I say *from an ultimate standpoint*, because there obviously are an infinity of more or less trivial domains in which this question can be decided. I can say, for example, apropos of a color-blind person, that if he reverses green and red, or if he sees only gray, what is at issue is his peculiar “subjective” structure, his own structure, his retina or whatever, and that that is not due to what he sees. At a less elementary level, it can often rightly be stated that such and such a theoretical construction is due only to ideological prejudices or, more abstractly, to the mental frames of the person who is its constructor. All these cleanup operations are to be done, always. And this—make a note of it, since it is rather paradoxical—not only does not eliminate the question of truth but presupposes that it is soluble and resolved, and this twice over rather than once. First, of course, the assertion *Theory T is a pure product of ideology* claims to be true and not to be itself a product of ideology; next, in order for it to be true, it must proceed from a comparison between T and the “true state of affairs,” which is therefore assumed to be accessible *apart from all theory* or by virtue of the “only true theory.” But once this cleanup work has been done, there always remains a final question that cannot, in good faith, be evacuated: Are we in the process of imposing our schemata of thought—or new schemata of thought—on a new stratum of reality; or have we encountered something that shows that certain schemata of thought effectively correspond to something that goes beyond us? Both are always there. If that

were not so, either we would find ourselves in an endless solipsistic aporia—everything we say is, in the end, only an elaboration of our “subjective structures,” or a pure collective delirium that is coherent—or we would be claiming to be pure mirrors and even less than mirrors, for even a mirror, through its own structure, contributes to the appearing-thus of the image (for example, advocates of so-called reflection theory have never explained how they know that we are not spherical mirrors . . .). Therefore, the question of the ultimate origin of our knowledge is forever undecidable—this is the principle of the undecidability of origin.

Let us now resume the discussion of the creation of autonomy. Calling into question the institution of society, the representation of the world, and the social imaginary significations it conveys and bears within itself is equivalent to the creation of what we call *democracy* and *philosophy*. Once the absolute closure that had prevailed until that time has been broken, a society containing the seeds of autonomy—that is, of an *explicit* self-institution of society—makes its appearance. And this goes hand in hand with the creation of individuals who are capable, too, of a certain autonomy, that is to say, capable of questioning the social law but also of questioning themselves, questioning their own norms. This calling into question takes place in a struggle with and against the old order, the heteronomous order. And this is a struggle that is far from over today—though that’s another story. Nevertheless, it must be recalled that this is a historical creation—the emergence of societies and individuals containing those effectively actual seeds of autonomy—that for us conditions the possibility, for example, of the theoretical discussion we are in the processing of having here. Such a discussion is inconceivable in another historical universe. This historical creation also and especially conditions the possibility of genuine political action—action favoring the instauration of a society that self-institutes itself explicitly in a far more ample way than ancient Greek society or European societies. It would therefore represent a new rupture in history, a rupture as major as the two just mentioned.

Q.: A few questions to clarify things. Can it be said

that, in the emergence of new societal forms, creative mechanisms are at work that will always be beyond the reach of any explanation?

C.C.: Yes. If there is creation, that means that I can approach its conditions, make out some of the dimensions in which it has unfolded, but also that I cannot explain it in the traditional sense of the term. That would be a contradiction in terms.

Q.: Would that mean, ultimately, that there is an irreducibility of history, which makes a mockery of anything that might be said about laws of history?

C.C.: Quite right. Of course, there are some laws of history—or, certain things that are impossible for history: they are numerous, and trivial. Numerous examples can be furnished straight off: No society can ever be instituted in which all its participants would be required to fast for 365 days a year, or even two months straight. Or: No society can be instituted in such a way that heterosexual desire would completely be inhibited—were such a society instituted anyway, it would be unobservable a generation later. But these are truisms. If I want to go deeper, I note that certain regularities exist, but that these are not “laws” in the dignified and honest sense in which the term *law* is used in the sciences.

Q.: A second question. Let’s come back to what we were saying about Greece, about the origin of democracy, then about its rebirth in Europe. What made it the case that, in these two instances, societies were born that have not behaved just like the other ones and that have, in particular, devoured a good number of others in a very violent way, through Christianity and conversion, then colonial conquests, and finally everything we see today?

C.C.: First of all, let us not forget the response to the previous question: One can elucidate a good number of things, but we are not seeking an explanation for them. A second remark: Greek society is not to be distinguished especially from other societies we know on account of its violence, and even European society is far from having the monopoly on violence exercised over other societies (see, for example, Islam). But the new, and fascinating, fact is that this

society, this social-historical world, has succeeded in imposing itself upon the entire planet; that is to say, it has succeeded in creating the first effectively actual universalization of history—it has succeeded in creating history as effectively universal. Previously, there were peoples that more or less extended their empires—but never did they truly hold sway worldwide. The European universe, on the contrary, did. Why?

This is a huge question, and I don't claim to have the answer. There are some features, however, that allow one to see things more clearly. First, through this break with the inherited representations that took place in Greece—through, therefore, what we call *the birth of rational thought*—there was an enormous development, an unheard-of deployment, hitherto unknown in history, of the ensemblistic-identitary dimension, that is to say, of logic, mathematics, science, and the application of all this knowledge to technique. That has provided a powerful set of instruments that had never existed before. Second, modern Europe is Christian or passes through Christianity. With Christianity, the idea of an all-powerful being (subject) appears in history, as does the idea of this power as a pole. For the Greeks (and, in my opinion, this is one of the reasons why they were able to create what they created), human beings are mortal beings in a very profound sense: there is nothing to expect from another life (if it exists, it is worse than this one). On the other hand, the gods themselves are subject to impersonal laws and, in particular, to an absolutely insurmountable and ultimate being—thus of being. Even the God of Plato, for example in the *Timaeus*, does not create matter and can create a rational world *only* “insofar as possible”—insofar as the being—thus of matter allows. I don't want to discuss the God of the Hebrews, but it may be noted that He is not truly creative (or, what's nearly the same thing, all-powerful) but, rather, formative and that, in any case, He does not have at His disposal the rational instrument fabricated by the Greeks. When the Christian God was created (as social imaginary signification), He really did seem, theoretically speaking, to be all-powerful and creative (in any case, He was presented as such in the Nicene Creed). We therefore have here a subjective pole of absolute

(personal) power. And on paper at least (given the pillaging of Greek philosophy by the Greek and Latin Church Fathers), this pole was to have rationality at its disposal (which creates other problems that cannot detain us here). The fact is that from the point of view that matters to us, this God remained inactive for nearly ten centuries, and more. He was, in a sense, reactivated only at the moment He was going to be retired (definitively?)—when, not with the bourgeoisie, of which we were speaking earlier, but with capitalism, around, let's say, the seventeenth century, a new social imaginary signification emerged that is the basic feature and the soul of capitalism: the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery. This appeared at the outset as expansion or tendency toward unlimited expansion of the forces of production—that is what Marx saw so well—and quickly became “rationalization” of the whole of social life—which Max Weber also saw well. For, there are not only productive forces; “rational” mastery must also be established over the lives of citizens, family life, the education of children, communication and information, and so on. And it is *that* Europe, the Europe of capitalism, that truly seizes hold of the planet.

The desire or thirst for power—or the desire for an unlimited expansion of power—has certainly been around for a much longer time. There have also been conquerors who wanted to dominate the world and who actually succeeded in dominating a part of it for a certain time. But with capitalism, for the first time this tendency toward unlimited expansion of power or of mastery finds the instruments that are appropriate for and suitable to its purpose: “rational” ones. Capitalism finds available before itself, and develops in turn to a fantastic extent, this instrument of incalculable power that is the enormous development of ensemblistic-identitary logic as “rational reason,” as science, as the productive, manipulative, or military application of science (here we have what, in a certain way, it borrowed from the Greeks). And at the same time, it inherits some other phantasms (Christian ones, in this case): an all-powerful subject and a world that is wholly “rational” since that world is fabricated by an all-powerful rational subject, and therefore also capable, asymptotically, of being re-mastered by subjects who increase, also

asymptotically, their rationality and their power. And at the same time, too, it gives these significations some decisive twists—which illustrates what we were just saying, viz., that the old enters into the new, but with the signification the new gives to it. No need to insist upon the twist it gives to its Christian legacy. But let us consider the other wing, which is less obvious at first sight, the legacy of Greek reason. Take mathematics, for example: it is not just for Pythagoras that numbers express something about the sacred order of being; for all Greek mathematicians, mathematics corresponds, in a certain sense, to *phusis*, to some kind of “nature” of what is. Now, at the “noble” level, that aspect has been abolished in modern mathematical science. And at the “vulgar” level, numbers as well as geometric figures take on a highly instrumental character—see the quite valid statements of Marx about the reasoned application of science in industry.⁶ Thus was constituted an unprecedented sort of material power—and it’s not just material, which raises for us still another, and a still more difficult, problem. This power exerts a fascination even over peoples who have not been colonized or conquered, as has clearly been seen to be at work after World War II and even and especially after decolonization. We have seen more or less all the peoples of the Earth start to ape—and, the poor, to ape in their poverty—the capitalist way

⁶This brief paraphrase from “Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation,” the penultimate chapter of the first volume of *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1967, p. 763), was cited correctly in “On the Content of Socialism, I” (1955; now in *PSW1*, p. 302) and, unsourced, in both *IIS*, p. 60, and “Reflections on ‘Rationality’ and ‘Development’” (1976; *PPA*, pp. 184-85)—with “to industry”—as well as in “The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism,” in *FT(P&K)*, p. 91—but with “production process” instead of “industry”—ending his paraphrase. Castoriadis always uses *raisonnée* (though, in English translation, this has sometimes appeared as “rational,” sometimes as “reasoned”). That word does not appear in newer French editions of *Capital*—e.g., the Éditions sociales (Paris, 1976) and Éditions du progrès (Moscow, 1982) translations. It does appear, though, in older French editions (see, e.g., [Julien Borchardt’s 1919 “popular edition” of “summaries/excerpts” from *Le Capital*](#)). The passage correctly reads as follows in English: “the conscious technical application of science” (*die bewußte technische Anwendung der Wissenschaft*). —T/E

of life and the capitalist mode of organization. Capitalism has thus been able to exert a direct form of violence, based on technical and economic development—which offers relatively little mystery—but also another kind of violence, exerted through fascination, through the mere representation of this advanced capitalist society, which plays the role of universal model. The two of them, combined, have led, for the moment, to the all-round victory of capitalism—a Pyrrhic victory, in a sense, without even talking about people who are dying of hunger in the Third World, since this Third World is the Third World to the precise extent that it has not assimilated capitalism.

Before I finish, I would like to return to the political project of an autonomous society and say a few words about a question that is linked to the foregoing and that has preoccupied me for many long years. I do not think that people will ever mobilize to transform society, especially under the conditions of modern capitalism, and to establish an autonomous society solely with the goal of having an autonomous society. They will truly and effectively want autonomy when it will appear to them as the bearer, the condition, the accompaniment almost, yet an indispensable one, of something substantive they truly want to achieve, something that will have value for them and that they do not succeed in doing within the present-day world. But that means that new values will have to emerge in social-historical life.

Q.: Yes, otherwise one will always be fighting for values belonging to the previous state. There will be novelty only when something else appears.

C.C.: A quite good formulation. This is what happened with the Marxist warping of the workers' movement, which has come to mean: Let's fight so we can finally consume enough, either through higher wages in capitalist society or in future societies that would be societies of material abundance. Of course, it was said that such abundance would be there as a condition for something else, but ultimately what one remained fixed on was the central imaginary signification of capitalism, according to which the Good is more production, more objects, more programming, more "rational" mastery (which in reality, obviously, is

pseudorational).

Q.: There remains the question of political action. Indeed, if a nascent new society develops a new system of social imaginary significations that is irreducible to the previous one, we cannot, with the system of thought we have at our disposal today, think in terms of this future nascent society: and conversely, once it is born, we will no longer be able to think in terms of the state in which we were today, except with this new system of social imaginary significations. In *Devant la guerre*,⁷ you describe in particular the emergence of something new, of a new society in the process of being born before our very eyes in the Soviet Union, and you describe it in rather terrifying terms as the emergence of a system organized entirely around military force and the idea of conquest. In that case, should one give in to total pessimism or can one nonetheless sift out some principles for action?

C.C.: These are, of course, vast questions. I wrote *Devant la guerre* because I deeply believe that things are as I analyze them and also in order to mobilize people accordingly. You know, I was preoccupied for a very long time with the problem of Russia, with the bureaucratization that followed the 1917 Revolution, and with what has been called totalitarianism. It happened that, these questions being for me more or less settled, and having written about them rather copiously, I had resumed my philosophical, then psychoanalytical work, and I really was no longer occupied with them for ten or fifteen years. With the result that the invasion of Afghanistan, which in itself was not surprising to me—I had always been expecting actions of this kind on Russia's part—nonetheless played a catalyzing role; it precipitated a large number of elements that had silently been accumulating in my thought, and, to begin with, the following

⁷For publication information on *DG*, see Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in French, above. The basis for this book was an eponymous article published by Castoriadis in his journal *Libre*, 8 (1980): 217-50, which was translated by Joe Light as "Facing the War," *Telos*, 46 (Winter 1980-81): 43-61; "Facing War" also appeared in the second issue of *Solidarity Journal* in the early 1980s. —T/E

question: How is it possible for a society that is so dilapidated in all nonmilitary areas to be able to build up such a considerable amount of military power? That led me to the analyses you could read in *Devant la guerre*, especially in the fourth chapter of the book, and which can be summarized in the following observation: When it remains in power for sixty years, totalitarianism—or what I had called *total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism*—ceases to be classical totalitarianism as it had been described by Hannah Arendt in the case of the Nazism and the Stalinism of the—dare I say it—heroic, and more exactly, delirious period, the period of great massacres and large-scale purges. It has, quite evidently, evolved, and in Russia it has been transformed into something radically new, which I call *stratocracy*. People have some difficulty accepting this idea—I see it in criticisms of my book—because, once again, they cannot face up to the new and accept it. As soon as something new appears, they try to reduce it to known categories. If you say *stratocracy* to them, they ask you: But why don't the field marshals direct things then? They are thinking of Bonaparte, Latin-American generals, praetorians, and so on. Now, there is in fact a new type of regime that has been created over there, a new type of society that is, indeed, terrifying. I would say, for my part, that it is monstrous, for it is destructive of significations. That is its peak point and also the peg for its cohesiveness. This may seem paradoxical, but that's how it is.

Q.: As a matter of fact, you show in the last chapter of your book how language no longer functions and how even something like beauty is affected by it.⁸

C.C.: Yes, these are for me perhaps the most important points. Language is reduced to operating as a pure communicational code; it is reduced to transmitting orders, instructions, signals. And beauty—that is to say, art—offers a fantastic discriminating feature: here indeed we have the

⁸*DG*'s fourth and final chapter, "La Force brute pour la Force brute" (Brute Force for the sake of Brute Force), includes two sections whose titles may be translated as follows: "The Destruction of Significations and the Ruination of Language" and "Ugliness and the Affirmative Hatred of the Beautiful." The latter is reprinted in *FC*, pp. 43-49. —T/E

first society in history that not only does not create beauty but is dominated by what I call *the affirmative hatred of the beautiful*. For reasons I try to sketch out in the book's fourth chapter, to them beauty is unbearable. And that is true not only for Russia; it may be observed in the Communist parties of all countries in the world. What we have there is a monstrous creation—whereas we were expecting creations of another type to come out of the world society of this twentieth century. We were expecting things to evolve in a way that would take over from the revolutionary workers' movement—as was done, in a sense, by the women's movement, the youth movement, the ecology movement—in order to lead society's transformation toward what I call an *autonomous society*.

Take the political problem today: there is the general angle from which you, rightly, posed this problem a moment ago; and there is the specific angle from which we are obliged to confront it today. A new society cannot indeed be born unless, at the same time and in the movement, new significations appear—I mean new values, new norms, and new ways of giving meaning to things, to relationships among human beings, and to our life in general. Where are things at, in this regard, for contemporary society? Let us leave aside for a moment Russia and the nightmare of a third world war that is hanging over our heads, without forgetting about it during the discussion. The situation is contradictory. On the one hand, we are seeing a series of attempts aimed at setting up new forms of living. Such attempts have always begun by contesting what existed. That was the case with the workers' movement and it still is so: when the workers struggle against the pace of work, against working conditions on an assembly line or a production line in a factory, they are struggling against a capitalist logic of production for which man has to be simply a cog in the machine, an object that functions within the production process and that is of no other interest. But this is also the signification of the women's movement. That movement is much broader and deeper than the explicit and organized movements we have been witnessing {since the 1960s or 1970s}. The women's movement began during the last third of the nineteenth century, and through it women

have begun to enter into higher education, have altered a woman's relation to her husband and to her children, have acquired political rights, and so on. It is a collective movement, very large, very diffuse; the names that can be attached to it, the visible, localized, and dated names of persons and names of movements are a small part of the affair. The truly important part, the one that has truly changed the society in which we live, has been the anonymous part. The same goes for the young. What did, and what still do, all these movements express, whether we are talking about the workers' movement, the movement of women, of the young, or of ecologists? In my opinion, they can be grouped together under the same signification: movements toward and for autonomy. We're dealing here with attempts by different categories of people who aim at no longer being subjected to the institution of society as it is imposed upon them but, instead, at modifying it. Through the combined effect of the women's movement and the youth movement (which are closely connected, moreover, in a nonconscious and subterranean way), the institution of the family has already been modified in its very reality. Finally, a half century later, there were also some formal modifications in the written laws, in the civil law code, and so on. But that is an effect, and a secondary one at that. The effectively actual reality of the family institution, for example, if one compares it as it is today to what it was in 1880 in France or in Victorian England—with not much of a difference between the two cases, perhaps in France with a bit more adultery hidden away—this reality has been profoundly modified. And, moreover, this modification is far from complete. But in what direction is it heading? In the direction, obviously, of a greater autonomy for women, but also for the new generations, for children, even. Now, not only are such modifications not over, not finished, but also new problems are being created, and of course they could not help but create some and could never remain simply modifications in the family institution. And that may easily be seen, since these modifications of the family institution rapidly challenge a host of other aspects of the life of the institution of society; for example, women's work, education, habitat, and so forth. There is, therefore, this

movement that is creative of new norms or, in any case, a movement contesting and destroying old norms that tends at the same time toward a positive creation.

But we also observe, and this is the tragedy of the contemporary era, the opposite thing going on. This contrary movement is not, as one might have thought of it traditionally, a fascist movement. There is no fascism in Western societies (I mean no large-scale fascist movement, nor any historical chances for such a movement). There are not even any “reactionaries”: no one dares or wants to be called *reactionary*; everyone is in favor of progress, therefore progressive, and since such progress is always the same thing, it’s mere preservation, at the deepest level, of what is. The true negative side is what {since 1959-1960} I have called *the privatization of individuals*. All collective terrains are abandoned; people withdraw into their individual or immediate-family existence; they don’t worry about anything that goes beyond the very narrow circle of their personal interests. This movement is encouraged by the ruling strata—not that there would be, obviously, a conspiracy, but there is the whole dynamic of the system. That’s what consumer society is: Buy a new television set, and shut up; buy a late-model car, and shut up. Even the alleged liberation of sexuality is heading, in part, in this direction. You want sex? Well, here it is; you are given sex; you are given lots of porn, and that’s the end of it. That’s how it goes on the economic level, but that’s also how it goes on the political level: that is what the bureaucratization of all instances of authority in our collective life is expressing. Trust us, we’re the experts; we’re the technicians; we’re the party that defends your interests. We’re the President you’ve elected and the government you have brought to power, so trust us and let us do our business [*laissez-nous faire*]; you’ll see at the end of four or seven years. All that encourages individuals’ apathy; all that destroys the public space as a space for collective activity through which people try to take charge of their own destiny. This can be noticed in France, in the United States, in all Western countries (and other ones, moreover). Now, leaving aside the risk of war and constructing a sort of ideal type of a possible and even probable way in which things might evolve

if you take only this trend, what do you end up with? With a generalization of the bureaucratization of society, yet a soft bureaucratization, with no terror, no Gulag. Quite simply, people would be led to do what the regime, those in power, the ruling strata require that they do simply by being manipulated through the dynamic of self-preservation and consumption, through the media, through the bureaucratic organs that manage the various domains of social life, and so on.

There are, therefore, two contradictory tendencies. Faced with this situation, it is not a question of displaying optimism or pessimism; it is a matter of making things clear, of trying to help people to act, to struggle, to go beyond this apathy. Now, this apathy, or rather this loss of interest in genuine public affairs, political matters, is sometimes manifested in a very unexpected way, taking on the appearances of its opposite. For example, we are facing the prospect of a confrontation between two superpowers and the risk of nuclear war. This has sparked all those pacifist, neutralist movements, particularly in Germany. Now, most of the slogans, orientations, and underlying attitudes accompanying those movements seem to evince a total lack of awareness of the real stakes involved and end in politically untenable conclusions. Take the slogan: For a denuclearized Europe, from Poland to Portugal. Independent of the many other absurdities it implies, this slogan is a biological slogan, not a political slogan. Put clearly, it signifies: Long live our survival, for us Europeans, and if the Americans and the Russians want to nuke each other, a fat lot of good that will do them. In that, there's not a gram of politics—or, moreover, a gram of humanity or internationalism, or a milligram of realism. And this is obviously a slogan that serves, too, as a foil for the American population as well as for the Russian population. It is a slogan that, despite the grandiloquent rhetoric accompanying it, signifies: Me, little European, I want to survive—and may the others go croak if that amuses them. It is another slogan of “privatization on an international scale.”

What is certain, however, is that the threat of war creates a psychological and political jolt. People are becoming

aware that their fate—their fate in the most physical and direct sense, that is, their survival—is in the hands of bureaucratic apparatuses. In the Kremlin as well as in Washington, these apparatuses are deeply irrational, and each of them is pursuing its own interests and its plans for domination (or defense of existing domination)—plans that have nothing to do with the interests of humanity. This threat creates a jolt in Western societies. Might something other than some reactions in favor of mere survival be able to develop from this jolt? Might a genuine antiwar movement, *therefore also* a movement against the *conditions* for war, be able to find in this situation an incitement to action, a point of departure?

Response to Richard Rorty*

I'd like to begin by stating my embarrassment in having to respond to Richard Rorty's talk.¹ First of all, because I have a lot of affection for him while being in complete disagreement with what he says, which is not an easy position. On the other hand, I absolutely do not recognize myself in this royal "we" or this self-flagellating "we" he uses in his talk to describe intellectuals—and those who know a bit what I have written will understand what I mean.² Thirdly, and especially, because, behind an apparent good-naturedness, his talk challenges everything, raising a host of questions, with the help of some presuppositions about what philosophy or the history of humanity is that he obviously isn't going to argue seriously in favor of in just three quarters of an hour—there is, moreover, no possible foundation in this kind of discussion—yet that refer back to what he has written elsewhere. There would hardly be any interest if I responded to him with a symmetrical series of affirmations, backed up by what I have already said and written: the audience would find there only a bare opposition

*Talk delivered May 31, 199[1] at the Collège International de Philosophie in response to Richard Rorty's talk. Posthumously published as "Réponse à Richard Rorty" in *SD*, pp. 93-107. [The French Editors incorrectly date this talk as having taken place on May 31, 1995. —T/E]

¹Besides noting a bibliography of various works by Rorty in French translation, the French Editors cite here the French version of "Unger, Castoriadis, and the Romance of a National Future," Rorty's review essay first published in the *Northwestern University Law Review*, 82:2 (Winter 1988): 335-51, which was reprinted in *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, England and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 177-98, and is now available on Roberto Unger's website: <http://www.robertounger.com/rorty.htm>. Of further note, in response to Castoriadis's earlier talk "The 'End of Philosophy?'" (published in *Salmagundi*, 82/83 [Spring/Summer 1989]: 3-23; now in *PPA*, with an added final paragraph), Rorty had offered his "Comments on Castoriadis's 'The End of Philosophy?'" (*Salmagundi*, *ibid.*: 24-30, Rorty's title lacking the extra quotation marks Castoriadis had placed around "end of philosophy"). —T/E

²See, e.g., "Intellectuals and History" (1987; now in *PPA*). —T/E

of two series of theses. I have therefore decided to center my reply, rather, around a few points that seem to me, as is said, *strategic* or that, perhaps, have particularly irritated my politico-philosophical sensibilities.

The first of these is the conception of history against which Rorty—and also, according to what I have understood, for I have not read his book, Ernesto Laclau³—is fighting. This conception, which sees in the history of humanity a path toward salvation, was and remains an absurdity, little matter what form Hegel, Marx, the Church Fathers, or Augustine might have given to such salvation. Parenthetically, neither Plato nor Aristotle ever thought that a radiant future was promised to us—and I am not saying this to exclude them from the condemnation of philosophers. It is known where, when, and how that sort of history began—I mean, those positions against which one is now discovering that one has to fight. It is also well known that all this finds its most accomplished form in the Hegelian system. In the vulgar version of that system, history simply *has a meaning, a direction [a un sens]*. So, Jean-Paul Sartre accused Albert Camus of not seeing that history has a direction—that it goes . . . to Bagnolet, to Porte-des-Lilas, to I don't know what {outlying working-class Parisian} metro station. In the sole reading of the system that is, from my viewpoint, worthy of it, history *is meaning [est sens]*, history *is logos*, history is a moment in the self-realization of Mind, of Spirit. But—and I believe that, for some, this has been obvious for a very long time—such expressions are absurd: history has no more direction or is no more meaningful than the gravitational field weighs fourteen kilos. It's within the gravitational field that something can weigh fourteen kilos. Likewise, history is the field in and through which meaning emerges, in and through which it is created by humans. And it is absurd, linguistically absurd, to try to find a meaning for the field in and through which meaning emerges.

³Ernesto Laclau, a political-philosophy specialist of Argentinian origin, is a professor at the University of Essex. He has published, with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London/New York: Verso, 1985). — French Editors

Now, while this attempt, which actually begins with the Hebraic position and then is taken up again by the Christians, is certainly not Greek, it must nevertheless really be seen that it is only the realization, in the historical field, of a much more general philosophical proposition—namely, that *being is meaning*. And that very position was shared by the Greeks of the decadent era, that is to say, Plato and Aristotle. Beyond the Ideas, beyond the essences, for Plato there is the Good, which is Being's source. And even the Aristotelian hierarchy of *phusis*, despite its imperfection, has a meaning or is meaning and is in love with the supreme meaning that is self-reflecting meaning, the thought that thinks itself. So, philosophy itself, originally created to overthrow theology, the instituted religious imaginary, the idea that the truth comes from elsewhere, transforms itself on its own, by means of this postulate of being as meaning, into a sort of theology that claims to offer humans an overall meaning that guarantees satisfactory answers at the three levels of representation, affect, and practice or intention: what is true, what is good, what must be done. Here one may recognize the *agathon* of Plato: the good, the desirable, and, at the same time, what must be wanted. And this fallacy persists through to Martin Heidegger.

So, let us repeat forcefully: Being is not meaning, being has no meaning. Simply, there is a dimension of being [*l'être*], of total being [*l'étant total*], in which one will find a reduced meaning. This is what I call ensemblistic-identitary meaning: the "ensidic," for short. Add two goats and two goats or two tables and two tables, and you'll always get four goats or four tables. If you have ice cubes, at the end of half an hour you won't have four ice cubes but, rather, water; you'll then have to have recourse to a more complicated law of transformation in order to find an equivalence between ice cubes and water. Beyond this reduced meaning, no one has ever proved to us that overall being [*l'étant global*] has what we call a meaning or direction. And it is very amusing to see someone like Heidegger reproaching prior philosophy for not seeking out what the *Sinn des Seins* {meaning of Being} is without asking himself for a single second the question: What could the *Sinn des Seins* really be outside of the interpretation

of the term *Sein* in philosophical language (which begins with Aristotle)? And in what language will this *Sinn des Seins* ever be able to be said?

Let's finish with this first point. Rorty mentioned a remark by Laclau that the thesis of the end of history is true in the sense that history is beginning now. One can only rejoice that Laclau might, it seems, have understood what history has always been. What remains is the essential, and obvious, point: History has never been and never will be graspable. Nature itself is not graspable: how and why would history, which presupposes nature, be so? And if it has a complexity to it, the complexity of history cannot help but be infinitely greater. Why? Because what I call the *creativity of being* in general manifests itself in history through human beings' freedom, the psychical indeterminacy that is there at the outset and even the indeterminacy of the conscious individual.

I now come to some statements about philosophy that are, in my opinion, entirely erroneous. I absolutely do not share the idea that philosophy would be a succession of narratives. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is not a narrative any more than the *Critique of Pure Reason* would be. What we have here is a not very legitimate blend of what some philosophies of history have tried to be with what philosophy itself is in its attempt to elucidate what is given. Likewise, I do not see what Laclau has in mind when he tells us that we can now have a more materialistic conception than the materialism of Marx. Why would one have to have a materialist conception and one more or less materialist than Marx's? I don't know what the term *materialism* means; I don't know what the term *idealism* means. These are metaphysical statements totally devoid of meaning, and the discussion should have abandoned that terrain a long time ago. If by *materialist* one intends "rid of certain imaginary schemata, or psychological schemata," very good, OK. But why speak of materialism? Materialism as it is known in the history of philosophy, Marx included obviously, is only an imaginary schema for the substance or inmost depths of being, which would be *matter*. But what does that mean? Let us recall the desperate attempts of poor Lenin, in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*: matter is first of

all solid bits of objects, sawdust, for example. But what is to be made of electrons, all those elementary particles that render the concept of matter practically ungraspable? Lenin then settles for energy. So? What is energy? If what is meant by that is that the important thing in the *Passion According to Saint Matthew* is that its composition and its execution involve energy, thanks a lot, but that hardly gets us anywhere. Energy certainly is required, but in an entirely metaphorical sense: the essence of the *Passion* is not there.

Finally, I am completely opposed to the way in which Rorty reduces the history of humanity over the past twenty-five centuries to the narrative of the history of philosophy. The history of humanity is not the history of the mistakes of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Kant, and so on. And that's where we find the Hegelo-Heideggero-Habermasian vice—the three-H vice, if you will, or four with Husserl when he spoke of European humanity—which replaces effectively actual history with the history of ideas. One can then not help but recall poor old Marx. . . . Nor are ideas, moreover, the reflection of history, even if they are an active part thereof. Quite often, they dominate people's acts in our so-called evolved societies—a word I detest—because they take up a larger and larger place in the dominant social imaginary or in the critical social imaginary. The Greeks set up cities and began the democratic struggle not because a Greek Rousseau spoke up to tell them: “The general will . . .” They set themselves up in democratic collectivities, and it was in those democratic collectivities that philosophy became possible as the calling into question of the given institution of society.

Likewise, the West lived for two centuries under a relatively liberal regime not because this or that philosopher wrote something or other. In *that* history, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, for example, was but the expression—and not the reflection or the sublimation—of parts of a new imaginary that appeared in the effectively actual life of society and that would burst forth into reality with the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the English workers' movement as early as 1800, and so on. All those popular struggles disappear in the history of ideas as recounted to us by Hegel, Heidegger, and even Jürgen Habermas. And where

did those monstrous totalitarian regimes of our twentieth century come from? It can be said, of course, that Lenin is the creator of totalitarianism. And Lenin certainly appeared as a moment in the history of the Second International, that is to say, of the Marxist movement. But what was this movement? It was just one of the currents, and ultimately a sort of confiscation, of something much vaster: the workers' movement. The workers' movement was not invented by Plato, Aristotle, or Rousseau . . . but by the workers' themselves in their struggles, their demands, which can always be discussed and reviewed, but whose essential features were fundamentally just. Now, without those working-class victories, capitalism, contemporary "liberal" society, would not be what it is. What would it be? I have no idea. Perhaps a sort of Japanese-style capitalism. For, the recent nasty remarks of our Prime Minister, Edith Cresson, apropos of the Japanese won't make me renounce what I have been saying for years, ever since I have been familiar with Japan: beneath a barely transformed institutional veneer of American origin, it's still the same traditional feudal-imperial Japan that survives, except that the place of the old courtiers has been taken over by state-run and entrepreneurial bureaucracies as well as by the political oligarchy of the Liberal Democratic Party, the only party to have exercised power up till now.⁴ And Western society didn't become that because people didn't stop fighting, didn't stop going on strike, didn't stop getting themselves shot for more than a century, up to and including 1936 {in France} and even later. The workers' movement has allowed Marxism to exist in history, and not the other way around—even if today, this movement seems to be heading toward collapse, as I have thought and written since 1960.

In a project aimed at society's transformation, one can

⁴Among other gaffes, French Prime Minister Edith Cresson made the controversial statement that the Japanese were akin to "yellow ants trying to take over the world." Japan's Liberal Democratic Party had indeed been in power continuously since its creation in 1955; it lost power in 1993, two years after Castoriadis's talk, but returned to power in 1996 and then was defeated by the Democratic Party of Japan in 2009. —T/E

no longer grant to the proletarian Messiah the privileged and sovereign role Marx attributed to it in his historical theology. There is no Messiah and the proletariat holds no privilege. More generally speaking, the poor qua poor hold no political privilege. They can be a subversive class—but subversive toward what?—just as well as be the easiest prey for Stalinist or Nazi demagogues. For Marx, while the proletariat had a role, it was not only on account of pauperization or destitution but from the fact that new modes of socialization were being imposed by the capitalist factory: at the time, the proletariat made up a new class of men, with other reflexes, other social behaviors, who tended to organize themselves on their own in order to achieve their demands. This, let it be said in passing, shows us, as was his habit, how little Jean-Paul Sartre understood Marx and Marxism when he tried, along with Frantz Fanon, to transpose the role of the proletariat onto peasants from the Third World. Perhaps those peasants will save humanity. I don't know anything about that, and one doesn't see it coming. In any case, they cannot be forced into the Marxian schema of an at-once negative and positive anticapital socialization that, above all, posits new forms of social coexistence, of “being together,” as one says today—and it is this last feature that has constituted the importance of the workers' movement.

On the question of politics, I wish to dispute very firmly the idea that the object of politics would be poverty reduction and, ultimately, happiness. We even have here, may Rorty forgive me, a very dangerous idea. If indeed the goal of politics was to make people happy, it would suffice to vote in laws decreeing universal happiness through, I don't know, John Cage's music, the dogged reading of the *Upanishads*, this or that sexual practice, . . . But all that pertains to the private, personal sphere, and it is quite illegitimate to deal with that in the *agora*, the public/private sphere, and still more so in the *ekklēsia*, the public/public sphere. That would be an utterly totalitarian position. After all, the leaders of the Communist countries were ready to make people happy in spite of themselves. The object of politics is not happiness; the object of politics is freedom. From this standpoint, the dilemma Rorty poses—create a society without poverty or

create a society that is good for Socrates' existence or for that of the modern Socrateses whom we would be—is in my view a false dilemma. Perhaps no society would be good for Socrates. Nor, indeed, for me, if I dare put myself forward in this way. I don't know what a good society is. What I want is a *free* society. And Socrates did in fact live in a free city—for the free adult males—where he was able to discuss in the *agora*, refute the Sophists, shake up the young people who thought they knew everything and knew nothing. That lasted seventy years. And then, in 399, a political conjunction of circumstances forced him to drink the hemlock. But a society in which Socrates can appear is a free society.

Rorty proposes to introduce into our political vocabulary the word *greed* (*cupidité, avidité, envie* in French), for it covers a key social reality that cannot be crossed out with a stroke of the pen. I obviously have nothing against that proposition: a society without freedom, wherein the “greediest” reign, would in effect reduce all others to poverty. Of course, there is from this standpoint no dilemma between an ideal society for the intellectual and a society in which one can struggle against poverty. We therefore have to go further. Why reduce or eliminate poverty? I skip the purely emotional aspect of the matter, not that I have contempt for it, but it is hardly contestable—save, that is, in extreme cases of indifference to others (Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, for whom it is perfectly acceptable to massacre his fellow creatures if that expresses the will to power of a superior being . . .). There, discussion stops. Or else poverty must be eliminated quite simply because it reduces to slavery those whom it strikes, preventing them from truly becoming citizens of their city. This minimum amount of material well-being is obviously variable: it won't, of course, be fourteen television sets per household and as many cars, but, for example, three hectares, or thirty, to be cultivated by a farmer in a predominantly peasant society. . . . Without this material basis, people are obsessed by hunger and poverty, and they cannot get beyond them in order to reflect freely.

When one speaks of an overall political project, some contrast this with what the English call *piecemeal reforms*, partial reforms for ameliorating the system. But it is obvious

that any politician whatsoever, whether he be reformist or conservative, if he takes partial, local measures without having the overall system in view, will be able only to pile error upon error. That, indeed, is what has been happening for a good deal of time. The latest French example, which is the direct cause of my being late today, is the lowering of the age of retirement.⁵ Eight years ago, that appeared to be an obviously very socially-minded measure.⁶ And then today, there's a worry about the solvency of the retirement fund and there's talk about increasing the contributions, of pushing back the age that had been moved forward. . . . And wage earners, fearing that their established rights, or their privileges, whatever, might be challenged, go on strike. Another way of looking at this same problem of society considered as a totality in which everything for better or worse holds together is to emphasize its degree of flexibility or rigidity, knowing that this is, each time, a creation of the society in question. In a primitive tribe, the rigidity is very pronounced; in modern societies, the flexibility is, apparently at least, much greater. But even if one takes into account the degree of interdependence or rigidity of the elements involved, among themselves and in relation to the whole, it is still society that institutes itself as a totality. And it is not totalitarian thinkers that have decided that that is so, that have posited this totality. Society was first a whole and, at the end of one hundred thousand years, some philosophers, such as Plato in the second book of the *Republic*, noticed that these farmers, these merchants, these soldiers formed a collectivity, one that held together, and that education was a fundamental component for maintaining such coherency. Within this minimum amount of coherency, without which society could not exist, what becomes manifest is precisely the fact that society is a totality, a totality that has not been thought through or posited by anyone. But if one does not take this

⁵ A Paris *métro* strike had delayed Castoriadis's arrival that day. —T/E

⁶ Retirement at age 60 was the 82nd of the "110 Propositions for France" made by French presidential candidate François Mitterrand in 1981. It became law the next year. —T/E

totality into account, one cannot even reform it in a viable way.

Let us take the example of capitalism. Capitalism has nothing to do with the big bad wolf, nor—I'll come back to this—is it to be reduced to the reign of the market. Capitalism is an institution of society whose central imaginary signification is the unlimited expansion of rational mastery—pseudomastery, and pseudorationality. That is why it can very well accommodate itself to an absence of private property. What really matters is found in the “masters and possessors of nature”⁷—including, moreover, human nature, since one is beginning to tinker with the human genome. Now, it is quite clear that capitalism thus understood becomes less and less compatible with those shrunken liberties people's struggles had been able to impose upon the system. Whence the following, inevitable question: Can this system be reproduced indefinitely, be it only from an anthropological standpoint? And it is not at all a matter here of prophesying a catastrophe, *à la* Marx. But when Rorty teaches, does he behave as a good *Homo capitalisticus*? Certainly not, or else he would skip class as long and as often as he could without putting his salary in jeopardy. Now, not only do I postulate, but I know, that he does not behave like that; I know that he tries each day to do his best. And *that* attitude—always doing one's best without waiting for material reward—has no place in the imaginary scaffolding of capitalism. Whence, moreover, the present-day moral emptiness we were talking about. On this level, capitalism lives on by exhausting the anthropological reserves built up during the previous millennia, just as it lives on by exhausting our natural reserves.

There is, from this standpoint, an enormous regression taking place in the ideas of our time. When, for example, Habermas writes, with a cold-bloodedness that astonishes me, that “the revolutionary changes taking place before our very

⁷In part 6 of *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, by René Descartes. —T/E

eyes teach us an unambiguous lesson: complex societies are unable to reproduce themselves if they do not leave the logic of an economy that regulates itself through the market intact.”⁸ I do not have the time here to make an exhaustive list of the absurdities contained in that sentence. To proceed quickly: The market is not capitalism; capitalism is not the market. Read, with a bit of conceptual rigor, a good political-economy textbook, or indeed Marx. Before capitalism, plain commercial production occurred in, through, and for a market. So, it has been around for five thousand years, among the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, and then afterward among the Greeks, and so on. But that is not a capitalist market. And the capitalist market was not born spontaneously. It was imposed in that form in our modern societies—reread Karl Polanyi to convince yourself of that.⁹ As for the logic of a self-regulating market economy, either Habermas is living in a dream world or he is completely mystified by the German counterparts of Guy Sorman.¹⁰ Market self-regulation is a sham. That was demonstrated in a definitive way as early as the 1930s by John Maynard Keynes and some perfectly academic economists. Half of the gross national product of our modern economies passes through the State budget, local authorities, social security, taxing such and such an activity or subsidizing some other one, deciding on this or that kind of

⁸This passage comes from a text on the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe: “What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Revolution of Recuperation and the Need for New Thinking,” trans. Ben Morgan, in Robin Blackburn, ed., *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 40. —French Editors

⁹See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944; Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). —French Editors

¹⁰French journalist and essayist Guy Sorman had published, two years before Castoriadis’s talk, *Les Vrais Penseurs de notre temps* (Paris: Fayard, 1989). In that book, he interviewed “the true thinkers of our time,” including the economist Friedrich von Hayek, whose economic theories Castoriadis often criticized. More recently, Sorman has distinguished himself by campaigning in favor of the commercial exploitation of genetically-modified organisms. —T/E

spending, facilities of one sort or another—how could that not affect the “free” operation of the market? How could such a budget be economically neutral? That doesn’t mean that there must be no market at all: as I myself wrote in 1957 in “On the Content of Socialism,”¹¹ an autonomous society has need of a *true market*, that is to say, a market dominated by consumers. Nor does it mean that this capitalist pseudomarket does not function in an infinitely more effective way than the absurd totalitarian bureaucratic planning of Eastern European countries. That’s obvious.

I shall end with a few words about the role of “intellectuals”—to employ, after all, this somewhat dangerous generality. Intellectuals are traditionally criticized in two ways. First, they are criticized for exiting from society in order to judge it from the outside according to their knowledge, their philosophical system. That begins, of course, with Plato—he saw the Ideas; he is able to deduce therefrom the good society. But not all philosophers have had this attitude, not Descartes for example. A second reproach: adoration of reality. This attitude, which is not to be found in Plato or in Aristotle, becomes flagrant starting with the Stoics and intensifies enormously with the whole Christian period. Reality is holy and sacred; it cannot be challenged. This enormous privilege granted to what exists is to be found in Kant, and in Hegel obviously. And it is to be found in Marx, too: why—he would, of course, reject this way of formulating the question—is the proletarian revolution good? Because it is going to take place. And why the *Übermensch* of Nietzsche? Because he, too, is going to come about. And then, he adds, “becoming is innocent.”¹² But what does that mean, if not that reality is what it is and that it isn’t to be judged? What saddens me is that, behind Richard Rorty’s critical discourse, there’s the same attitude: “There you have it, liberal capitalism has won, therefore . . .” But therefore

¹¹This second part is now in *PSW2*. —French Editors

¹²Nietzsche defends the “innocence of becoming” in §7 of “The Four Great Errors,” in *The Twilight of the Idols* (1889). —T/E

what? Therefore nothing at all. Liberal capitalism has won, period. That's a simple statement of fact from which no political conclusion follows. But that obliges us to reflect on what has happened. Why did the Russian Revolution evolve the way we know it did? Why is the workers' movement in decline? What are the forces that are opposed to society as it now is? Why did Marx have his head in the clouds when he talked about the abolition of money, commodities, and so on? There is no other political conclusion to be drawn from the present-day triumph of capitalism. Unless, once again, one adheres to the religion of *credo in unam sanctam realitatem*.

I think that the genuine function of an intellectual is obviously not to be in the vanguard of society but to call what is instituted into question, to interrogate and to criticize what is. Not for the pure pleasure of criticizing but because, without such a setting of the instituted at a distance, there is quite simply no thought. There is repetition of what is instituted: commentary on the civil law code, on the *Summa Theologica*, on the Hegelian system, and so forth. For there to begin to be thought, properly speaking, with a minimum of originality, such a distancing is necessary. And one can take some distance only if one has, as one says in German, *einen kritischen Standpunkt gewonnen*, attained a critical standpoint in relation to what is. And this is a task incumbent not only on the philosopher, on she who writes and reflects, but also and especially on the great artist. The work of genius is so important in our societies—and already in ancient Greece, with tragedy—not only because the collectivity recognizes itself in the work or just because in its own way such a work creates new forms—Kant's correct but insufficient thesis in his third *Critique*—it's because in its own way it calls social existence, and ultimately human existence itself, into question. On that level, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Kafka meet up; beyond mere aesthetic pleasure, their works have a political and educative importance. For, tragedy tells the Athenian *dēmos*: You are mortal, and you risk falling into *hubris*, which will lead to your ruin. Or Shakespeare says to the Elizabethan public: We are but poor players who strut and fret upon the stage while waiting for our role to end, in this

life that is but a tale told by an idiot.¹³

Sometimes, the question is asked: What would you intellectuals do if power fell into your hands? To that, there is a twofold answer: No power will ever fall into our hands; and were, by some extraordinary twist of fate, a few shreds of power to come to us, we would quite simply no longer be intellectuals. We would be, I don't know, *philosophes*, ministers, imposters, whatever you like. The sole role of the intellectual, as I conceive it, is to put forward ideas, propositions, to support a project; as far as I am concerned, the heart of this project lies in the following: Power belongs to the people, to the *dēmos*, and it is up to them to show that they can—or cannot—take it, and exercise it, or have it confiscated.

One last remark. I wouldn't want to joke about serious matters, but I just heard Chantal Mouffe tell us that "one must struggle against the bureaucratization of the state apparatus." Well, one must also struggle then against the militarization of the Army and the medicalization of medicine. Struggling against the bureaucratization of the state apparatus is to struggle against the vegetal nature of plants. The State is necessarily always bureaucratic. If not, it's the Athenian *dēmos*, the town council of Boston in 1770, etc., and then it's no longer a State. Finally, I thank Heinz Wismann for reminding us that Habermas said, at the start of the events of 1989, that they confirmed what he had always written. It is very interesting to hear that when one knows that the distinctive trait of the Frankfurt School—which will remain its claim to fame—is that it carefully avoided all criticism of Marxism as it was actually realized, if not of Marxism altogether. It talked a lot about the West but, so to speak, not a word about the East.

¹³These lines from *Macbeth* (Act 5, scene 5, 24–27), paraphrased here, are discussed at length in "Notes on a Few Poetic Means" in [FT\(P&K\)](#). —T/E

Discussion

QUESTION: [Inaudible question.]

C.C.: You are telling me that happiness is what the individual can require of the State, and I do not even understand what that could really mean. What am I going to demand of the State? That Odette de Crécy love me?¹⁴ That some woman make me happy? How can I expect that kind of happiness from the State? And then you talk about freedom like some little thing within. Such freedom has nothing to do with effectively actual freedom, which I was talking about to you. That kind of freedom depends on the body politic and it allows an individual to accede to her own autonomy. And that implies not only the liberties we know, the ones from which we benefit thanks to the struggles of our ancestors, but also many other things. And first of all, education. I do not understand this sort of blindness toward what those damned Greeks already knew, viz., that the individual will become essentially what society will make of the individual, and that such “fabrication” goes, above all, by way of education. It is not because he was an education maniac that Plato devoted entire books to this subject, and likewise Aristotle, and all the great thinkers from John Locke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau; it was because it is *there* that one fabricates, manufactures the citizen of tomorrow. And upon that, democracy will be able to develop—or will, on the contrary, experience a new bureaucratic degeneration.

When I educate someone, I resolve the following paradox: in encroaching upon her potential autonomy, I allow her to achieve an effectively actual autonomy. Whatever system is providing it, including in the United States, education cannot but be a public affair in the broad sense—even if today, as must really be recognized, private capital plays a large part: I’ve never had a television at home, but after a year at school, my daughter was to a large extent as

¹⁴Odette de Crécy is a courtesan with whom Charles Swann is in love within the “Swann in Love” section of *Swann’s Way*, the first volume of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. —T/E

drenched in advertising and moronic programs as her friends who have been watching TV since they were born. Another *a contrario* example of the omnipotent importance of education in acceding to one's autonomy: in the academic works of certain Muslim students, quotation is as good as proof. One can thus read amazing theses in which the whole argument is but an accumulation of texts from this or that author. That is obviously not their fault, because that is what religion has always taught them, as religion taught Latin and Orthodox Greek thinkers, moreover, during the entire Middle Ages. One just has to quote; the more one quotes, the better one proves something. All traditional societies have in this way taught their children to think as their parents, their ancestors, and the whole tribe thought. And despite the breaches opened within Western societies since the eighteenth century, this is still true in our time. Whatever liberal hypocrisy has to say about it, the French public schools nevertheless instill in children a certain kind of educational training, which is not neutral—and, as such, that is in no way reprehensible: one isn't violating here the children's freedom, because, as soon as one raises, as soon as one educates, a child, in a certain way one is "violating" that child; and the whole question then is what one is doing it for. If it is done to aid the child in ridding himself of influences that hold him back, one is getting here into a squaring of the circle of education; it's a matter of a political task. This is an essential wing of a politics of freedom.

A second point where I am once again very opposed to what Rorty is telling us: philosophy is said to be an activity that would no longer have a *raison d'être*. We know that tune: it's the old Hegelo-Nietzscheo-Heideggerian song. But it still rings false, for it forgets that there remain enormous needs for elucidation concerning society, history, nature—an elucidation scientists cannot carry out qua scientists.

Apropos of intellectuals, I just noted that their role was to criticize what is instituted. That's *my* definition, but if one speaks of politics in the sense of the reinstitution of society and not of a mere art of the possible, I don't see what other role they might play. Now, it is neither Greece nor the West that invented intellectuals. There have been mandarins

in China for two thousand five hundred years, Brahmin priests and the great grammarians in India, and so on. All of those people are extraordinarily subtle and deep thinkers, but they all just fit within the scope of the system's preservation. And that is also the case with Thomas Aquinas. Never mind the conflicts, the variations among theologians over several centuries; Christian faith remained something absolutely unshakeable, and it was under that yoke that Thomas worked, trying to mix Aristotle in there, but that doesn't matter much. Free thought is a critical act. Now, for tens of thousands of years no one anywhere thought freely. We forget that because in our historical provincialism, now that we are settled down on the right side of that conquest, we think that it goes without saying. And such freedom of thought is exercised in essence with the aid of philosophy, by setting existing institutions at a distance and criticizing them. Yet this is but one aspect of philosophical reflection, the second one being the elucidation of what is. Why [*Pourquoi*] must one elucidate what is? I know in advance that my answer can only displease Rorty: *For no reason* [*pour rien*]. It's a purely gratuitous activity. It's not even for the honor of the human spirit, as one could say.¹⁵ Simply put, we want to understand. And that serves no purpose, as Mrs. Thatcher said when she cut university funding—and too bad for basic research; we'll pinch it from all the imbeciles who finance such research and we'll sell them our industrial applications. Why not? But basic research isn't done for possible industrial applications. And still less is philosophy done for its political or other implications. One does philosophy because, once shaken in the dull certainties of everyday life, one cannot do otherwise. And that goes well beyond politics. Likewise with great art, the works of genius I spoke to you about: *Macbeth*, *Oedipus Rex*, and so on, couldn't be exhausted in mere contestation of the established order. We would have to speak here at length about the imagination and the imaginary. The imaginary is not

¹⁵This phrase, which appeared in a July 2, 1830 letter from Carl Gustav Jacobi to Adrien-Marie Legendre, was borrowed for the title of a work by the mathematician Jean Dieudonné, *Pour l'honneur de l'esprit humain. Les mathématiques aujourd'hui* (Paris: Hachette, 1987). —French Editors

the production of images; it's the *creation of a human world*. And that is so not only at the level of the individual psyche but also at the level of the social-historical field. It's obvious that there is an imaginary of democracy; social and individual autonomy, likewise, is a social imaginary signification—what else could it be? A mathematical concept?

Q.: That depends on what one intends by *imaginary*. A regulative idea is not necessarily a social imaginary. . . .

C.C.: If you give it a Platonic-Kantian status, of course. But we are not concerned with what happens in the sky of Ideas or at the transcendental level. We are speaking about democracy as real movement within history, which leaves traces, institutions, significations through which we are or are to be free and equal. A social-historically effective regulative idea cannot but be a social imaginary signification.

A last word on Rorty's response: "If we took power, we wouldn't know what to do with it." First of all, therefore, the way the problem is being posed is wrong: we don't have to take power. It must especially be pointed out that intellectuals are obviously and above all citizens, who, like other citizens, can have ideas. If one gave me a platform to speak, I would propose to the people that they instaurate another type of democracy, one founded on about fifteen constitutional articles—without forgetting that a Constitution is nothing without citizens' active adherence thereto. And I would defend my positions, my *doxa*, with all the resources of argumentation, rhetoric included. But I would be acting there as a citizen, and not on the basis of a vision of the Ideas or of a conception of the essence of the political. Now, if the other citizens, once convinced, took power, and if they ended up committing atrocities, it would then be my duty, like Socrates during the trial of the Arginusae,¹⁶ like Émile Zola during the Dreyfus Affair, to stand up and tell them: You are monsters and cretins. And if I didn't do it, I would not be worthy of existing.

¹⁶The French Editors provide here no explanation of Socrates' fortuitous but key role in preventing an illegal trial of the victorious Athenian naval commanders after the Battle of Arginusae, but they provide an incorrect explanation later on (see n. 4 in "What a Revolution Is," below). —T/E

On Wars in Europe*

“Wars in Europe.” It is true that our continent—like the other ones, moreover—has known war for at least three thousand years—and no doubt for much longer, since prehistoric skeletons bearing traces of violent death, of deaths not easily attributable to “private” quarrels, continue to be discovered. But today we are facing the situation you know about in the Balkans, in the former Yugoslavia, and this situation is threatening to occur again elsewhere. The question therefore seems to have become once again extremely topical. Yet it must not be forgotten that this question is also an eternal one, for we are dealing with a trait that is encountered—unfortunately so, but that’s the way it is—in practically *all* human societies. And it is for precisely this reason, even if that might seem paradoxical, that it seems nearly impossible to offer a general theory of war or to have a general idea of the causes and processes leading to war that would not boil down to some trivialities or to statements so general—like those of Freud—that they leave us totally disarmed both on the theoretical level and on the practical level. When one inquires about war, one doesn’t simply want to know whether there is a death instinct that drives people to kill one another. People killed one another between 1914 and 1918, but they didn’t kill one another between 1918 and 1939—oh, they really were killing one another in Spain, for example, but not on the same scale. And then, there was, taking into account the technical means employed, the unprecedented outburst of 1939-1945. But since then—we are talking only of Europe, of course—we are, setting aside those

*Lecture and discussion organized on February 13, 1992 by the “Aimer à l’ULB” family planning center of the Free University of Brussels (ULB). The subtitle was “relations between unconscious processes, outbursts of nationalism, and new forms of political organization.” We have used the transcription of a recording made by Castoriadis, sometimes supplementing the text with the help of the recording or the author’s handwritten notes. This same theme was taken up again by the author during a lecture organized in Brussels on February 24, 1994 by the Personnel Commission of the European Communities. “Des guerres en Europe” was first published in *SD*, pp. 109-28.

unfortunate Balkans, in the process of beating the 1871-1914 record for a period without open warfare. Was the death instinct asleep during those periods? Why such explosions followed by periods of lull? There is, therefore, a universality of war throughout all periods of history, and independent of social or economic regimes, technologies, systems of kinship and the like, such that the problem seems almost more difficult than the problem, for example, of domination, within society, of one social stratum over the others—even if the two are undoubtedly connected. For, one can find societies, primitive tribes in which there is no such domination, and in which the “power” of the “chief” is reduced to a mere ritual,¹ whereas one cannot find any society that has not known war. That is the terrible reality. We shall return to it at the end of this brief talk.

The question can be subdivided into two sub-questions that, moreover, are coupled, closely interconnected. First, what are the social processes common to all these kinds of societies, to all these forms of regimes, that lead periodically, even if this periodicity is only relative, to wars? Secondly, what are the psychical—in the profound sense of the term, i.e., unconscious—mechanisms or processes that drive men who live in a society or under a given regime to kill one another? Let’s take the most flagrant case: 1914. The socialist parties were against the war, they declared in international congresses that the working class would respond to war with a general strike, and so on. One or two days before the war broke out, Jean Jaurès was assassinated in Paris. You can’t make the dead speak, and no one knows what Jaurès would have done. Let’s say that it is likely that he would have opposed the war. But a few days later, all the Socialist parties, with just a few exceptions, voted to fund the war and lined up in “national unions” in all countries. These

¹One might think that Castoriadis is speaking here of the anthropological work on South American tribes done by Pierre Clastres, a fellow member of the Editorial Board of the review *Libre* until his premature death in 1977, but as early as 1964 Castoriadis was talking about “the Zuni Indians, for whom making someone the leader of the tribe means beating him until he accepts” (*IIS*, p. 26). —T/E

same soldiers, half of whom—or a third, or a quarter, it doesn't matter much—belonged to unions and Socialist parties, were now shouting, *A Berlin* or *Nach Paris*. They knew that they were going to be killed, and for something that was not “personally” important to them. They were carried away by a crowd movement, or whatever, but this movement was not simply a passing fever: they were going to remain in the trenches for four years. There would be a few acts of mutiny. Of course, they were “forced” to remain, desertion was punished by death, discipline was meted out, and so on. But as has always been known, and as La Boétie, Thomas Hobbes, and Rosa Luxemburg have reiterated: No military law stands against an army in revolt. Moreover, that is indeed what happened in Russia—let's leave aside in this discussion what happened later on; after having been beaten for three years, and having put up with hundreds of thousands of deaths, soldiers refused to fight, the front collapsed, and the government in Petrograd followed. There is, therefore, a second question: Why the devil do people accept killing and getting themselves killed for things that, “personally”—at least at first sight—do not really matter to them? And then: How does one couple together those two things, that is to say, social processes that lead toward war with the processes in societies that fabricate individuals capable of killing and getting themselves killed in war? And, parenthetically, here again you see how enigmatic a contribution the idea of the death instinct is. For, regarding war, Freud speaks of a much more elaborate death instinct that has already become a tendency to destroy the other. But the soldier in every war knows that there is at least one chance in two that he will be killed himself, and yet he goes. And once again, discipline and the fear of punishment do not suffice to explain this. Therefore, there is the problem of coupling these subjective mechanisms with the processes, the social mechanisms, if you will, that trigger war. Now, I especially don't want to upset you, but *none* of the views that have been put forward, it seems to me, holds up.

One can quickly pass over “demographic” theories of war as a kind of bloodletting humankind administers to itself in order to combat overpopulation and the depletion of

resources. If that were the case, we would have already, today, exploded a few hundred nuclear bombs on the planet in order to absorb the surplus population that has appeared over the past fifty years. The same goes for economic “explanations.” It is impossible to see genuine “economic causes” at work in this interminable waging of war between ancient cities, and quite particularly Greek cities, where, in large part, the job of a citizen consists in making war against neighboring cities. The same goes for Rome and the Italic cities in general, or the feudal seignories of the Middle Ages: with just a few exceptions, what “economic” reasons would drive these lords—or, at the same time or later, kings—to make war almost uninterruptedly?

One can advance another element: power as such. A country, a monarch, an oligarchy—let’s say the Venetian aristocracy—made war or wars in order to extend its sphere of power and thereby its “profits” (although it is hard to think that Alexander went off in conquest of Asia with especially the treasures of Darius in mind). But whose power is this? The power of the monarch, or of the *stratēgos* {general with decision-making power}? Let’s take Napoleon, with his madness: one can understand Napoleon’s behavior until about 1808. But the Peninsular War is, from his own point of view, an aberration, and the Russian Campaign madness. Let’s say that Napoleon was war crazy and drunk with power. But there also were five hundred thousand Frenchmen who followed and got themselves killed shouting “Love live the Emperor!” What was *their* power? (It is, of course, a sort of imaginary participation, in the at-once banal and profound sense of the term.) If one wants at all cost to find a “rational explanation” for wars, the only ones that somehow or other lend themselves to such an explanation are those triggered by expeditions undertaken to seize women from another tribe: the “rape of the Sabine women.” A band of males who don’t have women attacks another band, a well-ensconced tribe, kills the men, and takes the women: so, a social objective is achieved (the society they form can reproduce and continue) at the same time that the sex drives of individuals are satisfied. But we have here but a very tiny proportion of known wars—and not the largest.

Let's try, therefore, to place the question in the more general context of what, for me, a society, a social unit, is. This is a human set defined by the fact—this is what makes of it *a* society—that there is *one* overall institution of society, a social imaginary that holds this society together and that makes it such that these individuals belong to it. There are several aspects to this. In the world of Hebraic society, the stars are luminaries placed there by God to embellish the heavens or to serve as a manifestation of His glory. For the ancient Greeks, these same stars are gods, while for us they are masses of hydrogen transformed into helium by thermonuclear reactions. And one could go on: the same goes for trees, rivers, individuals within society, and so on and so forth. There is, each time, a proper world of each society, that society's own world, characterized by three vectors (which have, moreover, their equivalent in the individual psyche): a representational vector (Yahweh created the world six thousand years ago and no longer ago than that, etc.), a cognitive component of the world of each society that accounts for the being-thus of the world in general and the social world, and an affective vector, a class or group of affects created by this society: for example, *faith* in the Christian sense of the term, which did not exist before Christianity [. . .]; finally, in connection with this representation of the world and with these affects, there is a *Trieb*, a “push” of society. What kind of push is that? Let us take the example of the society in which we live, Western society: it is a matter—as you well know; you're in it—of producing and consuming more and more, of attaining some power or a semblance thereof (and, possibly, of appearing on television). If one takes Roman society starting in a certain era, the push is that of territorial expansion: the *pomerium* does not suffice, Latium does not suffice, central Italy does not suffice, the Italian peninsula does not suffice, and so on and so forth. And if a true Christian society had existed—which has never truly been the case—there would have been a push relating to God and to His adoration. People in the Middle Ages did indeed believe that we are here to adore God as best we can, that cathedrals must be built still higher, that even more people must be evangelized, and so on.

Parallel to that, there is a *social fabrication* of individuals. Starting from the raw material of the psyche that each being, in being born, brings with it into the world, society has to fabricate beings that speak, that recognize the existence of other persons, that do not behave as if they were the center of the world—whereas each one is so for himself, as we all always are so—and as if others were but mere objects of their desires, and yet that yield to a social law, to norms and values. In other words, during the course of this long and painful process of the individual's socialization, they abandon—without knowing it, moreover—their impulses and their most deep-seated desires. What is more, they never totally abandon those impulses and desires, as is shown by the fact that they dream of transgression and sometimes actually do transgress social norms, though in the end they do indeed abandon them in the main, as far as their real behavior is concerned. For that to happen, society must offer them some substitutes. And first of all, it must also offer them social significations: God, the *polis*, the unlimited expansion of mastery, the building of socialism, etc. It must offer them signification, therefore, meaning, social objects of investment. They must be furnished social identities with which they might adorn themselves, as well as roles they would have to play. But they are not playing, they believe it; they believe that they are good civil servants, good educators, or good spouses. All such roles, with which the individual can and must identify, for otherwise this individual cannot exist socially, are offered to each one, in accordance with positions and according to circumstances, by society. Even today, in the almost infinite range of roles offered to individuals, there is always one offered to or imposed upon even those who reject the game: to be a dropout [*un marginal*] or a delinquent youth is still a social role. And it is necessary—this is no doubt one of the most mysterious aspects of the whole affair—that all this creates a bond of belonging to the concrete collectivity in question. There is a socially instituted name, a social response, to the question: Who are we? We are humans and not animals, civilized beings and not barbarians, maybe Christians and not Muslim infidels—or Muslims and not Christian infidels. But at the same time, beyond these abstract

determinations, there is an imaginary signification of this *we*, a signification that is indispensable for the collectivity's existence (disregard for this fact is one of the numerous aberrations of contemporary pseudoindividualism), and whose content, considered from the standpoint of the history of societies, is obviously *arbitrary*. Yet while the contents of this institution of a *we* are at once eminently variable and eminently arbitrary, what is not so is the need for a reference to this *we*. And this reference, at once as idea and as concrete collectivity, belongs to this type of being that can and should be called, in philosophical language, a *for-itself*. Like a living being, or like the human psyche, while society is certainly *not* an organism, it is nonetheless a being-for-itself. It creates, each time, its proper or own world, a mode of being affected and a push toward It defends itself by defending its being-thus, that is to say, its proper world. It has boundaries—not necessarily geographical boundaries, but imaginary ones that are even more important, for the latter ensure that ideas, representations, and behaviors coming from the outside will be either metabolized or rejected—or, in borderline cases, will ultimately prove fatal to the existing institution of society. And society therefore has pushes, the first of which is the push tending toward its self-preservation. Whether we're talking about an archaic institution or Athenian or Roman legislation or absolute monarchy or the alleged democracies of modernity, every institution tends to persist in being, to preserve itself. The preservation of an institution, as well as of the institution of a society as a whole, is the sole meaning that can be given to the idea of society's preservation, its self-preservation (which is incomparably more pertinent than that of the preservation of the effectively actual individuals who live therein).

There is here, therefore, something like a self-preserving system that also includes self-defense—with, obviously, defense against domestic disturbances. But this consideration does not suffice to furnish a “general explanation” of the fact of war. Self-preservation would perhaps explain why 50 percent of societies defend themselves, but not why the other 50 percent attack them. It would be accurate to say that in numerous cases, and among

those the most important ones, one no longer knows who “is attacking” and who “is defending”: already, Thucydides saw that when, during his discussion of the origins of the Peloponnesian War, he says that it was certainly started by the Lacedaemonians, but they did so because the latter had become increasingly afraid of the incessant expansion of the Athenian empire. A similar spiral can be described for the war of 1914-1918 as well as for the situation of the “Cold War” from 1947 to 1985. But a minute of reflection suffices for one to understand that the development of such situations already presupposes, “at the origin,” an expansionist push from one of the adversaries as well as a firm will on the part of the other party to resist that push, and that therefore “attack” and “defense” are equitably distributed, in general, between the two camps. Wars conducted because a society is, down to the last trench, defending its vital works presuppose the existence of another one that cannot bear the existence of the first. And in all other cases, which make up the overwhelming majority, war takes place because something entirely other than just the mere preservation of one of the two societies is at stake.

Let us insist a bit here on what may appear to be a self-nourishing dialectic of attack-defense. We certainly find, as far back as we go in history, various societies caught in a game of rivalry, suspicion, and possible attack: in short, we find them immersed in a world where war is an essential trait. That already suffices to challenge every “theory” that would explain war by this or that universal cause. But there is more. Periodically—but not “regularly”—this process feeds on itself and is renewed by factors that offer no homogeneity. Mesopotamian cities and kingdoms made war, grew, and then collapsed or were conquered by other ones. Pharaonic Egypt had entered into the game as soon as we heard of it. Then the Medes appeared, followed by the Persians, who established a huge empire; not content with that, under Cambyses they attacked Egypt. Why Egypt? Herodotus says that Cambyses was crazy. But he does not say the same thing about Darius, who attacked the Scythians, then the Greeks. Why did Darius want at all cost to expand westward? That ultimately turned around against him. But the Greeks, victors against the Persian Empire, immediately began fighting among

themselves again: that lasted one hundred and fifty years! I skip over Alexander, the Diadochi, the Romans and their empire, and the Byzantine Empire to arrive in the seventh century, when an extraordinary phenomenon occurred: Islamic expansion. This was a religious explosion, but one that was also a warlike explosion that brought about the conversion or the colonization of the conquered populations. In the sixth century, there were no Arabs in Egypt, in North Africa, or in Mesopotamia, not even in Palestine and Syria. In the eighth century, all these countries were “Islamized” and “Arabized.” Were there economic reasons for this, or even reasons having to do with power? No, it was a matter, above all, of “spreading the faith of the Prophet”—in other words, of spreading a new institution of society, centered around the new religion, which transformed the sixth-century society of Arab tribes and which instilled in it a conquering *push* (Muslims will say *a divine mission*; we don’t have to discuss that). That lasted for some time. Then, starting in the tenth century, it subsided, the huge Arabo-Islamic empire fell prey to internal divisions, and so on. But the Byzantines thought that they still had “rights” over the territories that had belonged to them a few centuries earlier. And we witness centuries of conflicts over the eastern border of the Byzantine Empire. Then, toward the end of the eleventh century, we see the appearance in the West of some monks, popes, and underemployed or marginal lords who discovered that the Holy Lands of Christianity must be liberated at all cost. The Crusades had begun, and for the next nine centuries (with the Turks, first Seljuk, later Ottoman, being substituted in the meantime for the Arabs, whom they had more or less subdued) the Mediterranean and the Balkans became the shifting frontier of a Christian-Islamic war (which, moreover, rather rapidly ceased being a purely “religious” war, as is shown both by François I’s alliance with the Turks and by the Crimean War).

Let us note the analogies with the {early 1990s} situation in Yugoslavia. The Serbs say: Without Kosovo, Serbia no longer is Serbia. Or: The Muslims of Bosnia have no right to be “in our homeland.” Now, Kosovo—which, it is true, is the historical cradle of the Serbian people—is

basically populated by Muslim Albanians. Never mind that! The Serbs were there *back in the day*. Throughout those centuries of war, each community has created its *we* in terms of what it considers to be its “history.” Most of the time, this history is imaginary in the most insipid sense: fictive, fabricated, a history that “is recounted” while wiping out everything that, in the national imaginary, would be deemed “offensive” to the nation. Victories are praised to the heavens, defeats are minimized, chalked up to various betrayals or unfortunate mishaps, and in any case they demonstrate one’s enemies’ barbarism and bestiality, and so on. It is considered normal that there is in Paris an Austerlitz rail station, avenues bearing the names of Wagram, Iéna {Jena in German}, and so on, while there is no Waterloo or Trafalgar Square. The latter exist, however, in London. Seen from France, the history of the Napoleonic Wars is basically a series of victories that ended badly on account of the betrayals of the Saxons in Leipzig and of the Marquis de Grouchy’s passivity at Waterloo. Seen from England, it is a history of heroic and dogged resistance to the tyrant Napoleon, with its rightful crowning achievement occurring on the Saint-Jean plateau.² Seen from Greece, the whole history of the Near East comes down to this: How were the Greeks, who should have ruled within the confines of Alexander’s Empire, if not beyond, reduced to their present-day borders—whereas for the Turks, the main enigma of history is: Why aren’t the Turks still in Vienna, in Algeria, and in Mesopotamia? Such is, inevitably, the attitude of a true nationalist. And that attitude is generally incomprehensible to a contemporary “Western” European, for it is true that in Western Europe this question has *more or less* (we all know the exceptions) been “settled” for decades and that people no longer think that way about the territorial boundaries of “their” nation. But if one heads toward Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans included, one sees that the borders have not stabilized; people have not been led to accept, whether they want to or not, that henceforth that is the

²Napoleon’s name for the Battle of Waterloo is the “Battle of Mont-Saint-Jean.” —T/E

way things are. That's precisely what one is seeing at present in Yugoslavia: We were here; therefore, we should be here now. We are the true owners of this land. And it is clear that if you transport yourself with this point of view to Palestine, there is no reason for that to come to an end some day. Who was there "beforehand"? "Before" what? The Turks, the Arabs, the Franks, the Byzantines, the Romans, the Greeks, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Hebrews, . . . ? Perhaps it would be necessary to find another land for the Israelis and for the Palestinians and give back Palestine to the descendants of the Neanderthals (one will surely end up finding some), since it has been proved that Neanderthals lived in the country one hundred thousand years ago. But of course, that would be a blasphemous idea in the view of both parties.

Clearly, the invocation of history can lead only to permanent war. An entirely respectable principle would, in theory, be able to bring us out of these impasses: the will of the population presently occupying a given territory. And yet that principle could be applied only if one agrees to freeze borders as they are found. But as they are found *when*? The Turks invaded Cyprus in 1974 and settled Turkish populations from Anatolia. If one held a referendum *today* in the part of the island occupied by the Turks, the "will of the population" would no doubt be the creation of an independent Turkish State or unification with Turkey.³ The same thing would happen in Yugoslavia, in the territories conquered by the Serbs since 1989.⁴

Why this repetitive recourse to history? Because one of the key dimensions that is constitutive of the collective, the

³ Actually, the Turkish Cypriot population voted in favor of the failed 2004 Annan Plan referendum to create a United Cyprus Republic; the Greek Cypriots, perceiving this plan as unbalanced, voted 75 percent against it. However, in an April 18, 2010 Turkish Cypriot presidential election, the pro-independence candidate won a narrow victory. —T/E

⁴ Following "Operation Deliberate Force," NATO's August-September 1995 bombing campaign against Serbia, the Dayton Accords were signed in Paris on December 14. Without a referendum, this agreement provided for the Serb entity, Republika Srpska, to join the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus forming the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina. —T/E

concrete society under consideration, is this alleged collective memory. It would be ridiculous to call this memory *selective*: it is *totally arbitrary*. Historical facts are already rather difficult to establish, their signification infinitely more so. Most of the time, “judgments” bearing on them have hardly any meaning, and these pseudojudgments reflect, in general, only prejudices (and are, gnosiologically speaking, possible only on the basis of a countless host of prejudices). A few years ago, Colonel Gaddafi stated in an interview that without that unfortunate historical accident involving Charles Martel at Poitiers, Islam would today be the religion of Europe. This is a perfectly plausible view, motivated in him by the wish that it be so, and one can find it laughable only on the basis of a symmetrical and just as “arbitrary” prejudice, namely, that European history is perfectly satisfactory as it has been, at least from this standpoint. In order to be able to laugh about it, it must be stated clearly that Islamic religion and civilization are “inferior” to Catholic Christianity.

Once again, those traits are not exclusive to or even characteristic of the modern period. This imaginary memory is necessarily constitutive of every collective identity—as much as a fabricated conscious pseudo-“memory” is, as psychoanalysis has shown, constitutive of what we call personal identity. This collective pseudo-“memory” will be found in various forms—and already in origin myths, legends of founding heroes, etc.—in all societies, however archaic they might be. Yet it is true that that specific creation of modern times, the Nation-State (I cannot enter here into the question of in what respect this form is original compared with other, at first sight analogous forms, like the Chinese Empire, etc.) makes it exasperating to an unprecedented degree. This form was created in Europe—France, England, Spain, etc.—and we have spread it to the rest of the world, giving rise to the creation of completely artificial “Nation-States,” as in Africa, where one can witness—a veritable *in vivo* experiment—the fabrication *ex nihilo* of a “national consciousness,” for example, in the Central African Republic. What is the national consciousness of the Central African Republic? There is, quite obviously, no value judgment involved in what I am saying. But it is not because there have

been some Nation-States in Europe that there must be or that it is good that there be some everywhere. That African peoples are independent is one thing; why should they be so in the form of the Nation-State? It will be said that, *in the contemporary world*, no collectivity can be “independent”—“sovereign,” if you prefer—unless it takes this form. But obviously, and even within the framework of the given institution of world society, that is not true: the Ottoman Sultan was sovereign and dealt with the Western powers, whereas his empire was a mosaic of ethnic groups that could despise or hate one another but that nevertheless cohabited for five centuries. It would therefore be false to try to derive from the “real necessities” of international life the inevitability of the Nation-State form. Yet it is also true that its necessity is of another order, and much deeper; it’s that the Nation-State has become one of the core imaginary significations of the modern Westernized world. Of course, this signification/institution fits the new local (African or other) bureaucracies and oligarchies like a glove, but one need only reflect briefly to glimpse that the *Nation-State* form is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for their constitution. It is solely on the imaginary (“ideological”) level that, within the context of the Westernization/“modernization” of the planet, “it was necessary” that the inhabitants of eastern New Guinea, for example, or Mali be a “nation” under penalty of feeling “inferior” to others. And it is as promoters, protagonists, and leaders of a “national struggle” or of “national independence” that these (“democratic” or “socialist”) bureaucrats-and-oligarchs have been able, with the support of Westerners or Russians, to hoist themselves up to power. The problem before us is that of the *surpassing* of this imaginary signification of the Nation-State toward another form of collective identification—and the difficulties such surpassing encounters.

I come back now to the second part of the question: the psychical aspect. Let me briefly summarize my view. A human being begins as a psychical monad, closed upon itself, that is unaware of reality and does not want to know anything about it. This monad has to be broken up, in part, in order for the singular human being to be able to survive. The condition

for such survival is its socialization, its transformation into a social individual. This process of socialization begins already the first time the mother turns her head away from the child; this is already an infliction of violence on the psyche. The individual's evolution—which leans, of course, on a process of neurophysiological maturation—involves the accretion of a series of strata of socialization that ultimately makes of someone a man, a woman, a president of the Republic, a worker, a professor, a soccer player, a sentimental young girl, etc. This process always unfolds in an *ambivalent* way: the love-object is necessarily at the same time the hated object; the breast is always at once good (present breast) and bad (absent breast), and these attributes are transferred onto the person with whom it comes to be connected. The survival of the human race shows that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the “positive” affect prevails over the “negative” affect—which in no way implies that this negative side would not always be present. This may be seen in the ambivalence of parent-child relationships, which is always present, as well as in the ambivalence of relationships between the sexes. Let us say in passing, against a certain kind of demagoguery in contemporary feminism, that nowhere is the ambivalence so great as between mother and daughter; no hatred between father and son attains the intensity, the destructiveness, the morbidity, and the cruelty of the hatred clinical experience shows us so often between mother and daughter. This observation leads to a certain amount of skepticism about the idea that it is always men who introduce hatred, violence, and evil into the history of humanity, women always having been on the side of love, angelic sweetness, and so on.

Hatred is therefore always there, even if it is buried, its most pregnant form being hatred of the other. Society has always known how to use this hatred of the other. In this regard, the entire organization of societies until now could be seen as an immense machine designed and built to divert hatred, the aggressiveness that exists within society, outward: toward “the others.” Such diversion never totally succeeds; the modes of diversion are quite diverse and highly complex. Let us take two cases that are more or less familiar to us, the ancient Greeks and modern Western societies.

The Greek cities spent their time, so to speak, making war on entirely frivolous pretexts. At the same time, the main characteristic of Greek man was what Jacob Burckhardt called the agonistic element. *Agōn*: struggle, combat. Today one speaks of the Olympic “Games.” At Olympia, it was not a question of “games” but of *agōnes*: people did not kill each other, but the Greeks saw this as a struggle, a combat. The tragedy “competition” in Athens was the *tragikos agōn*. Thus, within the city, the agonistic element was diverted toward “rivalries,” “competitions,” activities that at once were valued and contributed to the functioning of the city. Who will be the most valiant combatant in the war, the best orator before the people, the best tragic poet, the strongest arguer, etc.? The agonistic element is inserted into and used by city life. Let us note that things go wrong, at least in Athens, when, with the Peloponnesian War, the quest to prevail in the public arena is cut loose and freed from every other factor among some demagogues, Alcibiades, and so on. Something analogous exists, obviously, in modern capitalist societies in the form of economic competition, struggles among people within bureaucratic-hierarchical structures—at the same time that there is a major diversion outward. Let us note that, in both cases, and despite the “sweet commerce” of Montesquieu, the internal diversion of aggressiveness absolutely does not suffice for its full absorption and that sufficient quantities of it always remain that are turned outward.

For, there is a more difficult and somber side to the affair: self-hatred.⁵ In each individual, a deep-seated sense of self-hatred lies smouldering. Such hatred is turned toward, and against, what the psyche has been obliged to become as a social individual. When all is said and done, we never accept the being society has made us become, and the psychical core ever nourishes feelings of detestation toward all the strata of socialization that have little by little sedimented around it and that contradict, head on, what are its

⁵The reader may read more on “self-hatred” and “the hatred of the other” in “The Psychological and Social Roots of Hate,” in [FT\(P&K\)](#). —T/E

strongest aspirations: omnipotence, egocentrism, unlimited narcissism. Only rarely does such hatred manifest itself as such. But when one considers the most extreme manifestations of the hatred of the other, as in racism, it is impossible to understand them other than as a massive transfer of self-hatred onto something else (a category of others), that is to say, as a transference, within this complex, of the desire and the affect that are maintained while changing their object.⁶ I'm not the bastard; it's the Jew, it's the Black, it's the Arab: it is not I who is to be destroyed, it's the other guy. All that is, obviously, infinitely more elaborate in reality, and in particular it is dressed up in various rationalizations and so on. The other will be rigged up with this or that characteristic: the Jew is a usurer who sucks the blood of the people, the Arab gives off unpleasant odors and is overrunning the country, and so on. The horrible extremes to which racism will go are comprehensible only on the basis of such self-hatred. Were it otherwise, there would be no racism in its most virulent form, merely attempts at forced conversion—as there have indeed been in abundance in history. But the objective of Hitler was not to make Jews into good Nazis: neither World War I medals nor love of the German fatherland saved anyone. The very definition of racism in its extreme form, which no one seems to have seen till now, is that the other *cannot be converted*. This is quite the opposite, for example, of what happened during the Arab conquests or with Christian European expansion, which aimed at the conversion (or exploitation) of the others, and more or less succeeded.

[Let us summarize, and pardon me if my presentation seems a bit arid here. The hatred of self as manifest self (psychical or corporeal ego) is always there—but is mostly and usually contained (operating at a low-noise level). Combined with the negative component of the ambivalent cathexis of the other, or, what boils down to the same thing, with monadic egocentrism—ineradicable self-centeredness—it is converted into hatred of the other. Through this

⁶See “Reflections on Racism” (1987; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

conversion, affect and desire are preserved by means of a change of object. The conversion—this time in a religious sense—of the other corresponds to second-order narcissism: he has to become like me; the Ego is enlarged. The inconvertibility of the other corresponds to his elimination, independent of any real or reasonable considerations. The murder of King Duncan or Banquo is “rational in relation to a goal.” Auschwitz is not. And it is this inconvertibility that we encounter each time we are dealing with elimination for the sake of elimination.]⁷

In conclusion, I have no ready-made response to the huge questions all this raises. A major part of the answer depends on societal change: the socialization of individuals can be modified in the direction of their autonomy, of a greater knowledge of self and a greater control of unconscious urges. This aspect is fundamental. And such an education will have to give another response to the question *Who are we?* But here we are faced with a paradox. I have proposed before, and I still propose, as a motto of an autonomous society, this response to the question *Who are we?*: “We are those who give ourselves our own laws and who can change them when the need or desire makes itself felt.”⁸ Is that what we are; does this type of society have a value? We can raise human beings in such a society only by getting them to internalize the idea that this is the only way of living in society that is truly worthy of human beings. In any case, that is what I would say. But then, what is one to say of others—those who, for example, are ready to kill people who don’t think like they do? What about those who are ready to kill Salman Rushdie? Is it that they are “inferior”? Today it will be said that they are “different.” But we cannot maintain what we think about liberty, about justice, about autonomy, about equality if we are content to speak of “difference.” This is nevertheless what

⁷Preserved in Castoriadis’s transcription, this passage is not to be found on the recording. —French Editors.

⁸In “Socialism and Autonomous Society,” Castoriadis states: “An autonomous collectivity has for its motto and self-definition, ‘*We are those whose law is to give ourselves our own laws*’” (*PSW3*, p. 321). —T/E

the foul, pseudoleftist or pseudodemocratic contemporary hodgepodge does when it confines itself on this score to chattering about “difference.” There are people who believe in freedom and democracy, and then there are people who think that thieves should have their hands cut off. The Aztecs made human sacrifices. Is this a simple matter of difference? Suppose that a new belief might appear that would lead to the establishment of brotherhoods of headhunters in Brussels or in Paris. Would it then be for us a matter of a “difference” that will have to be respected?

We want to inaugurate an autonomous society. And if we want to do so, it’s obvious that we deem that society preferable to every other current or conceivable form of society and, therefore (since I do not believe that one would dare to claim that the same holds for political regimes as for culinary tastes), superior. But, knowing what autonomy is and what it presupposes, it would not occur to us to want to impose it on others by force: that would be a contradiction in terms. There is a fine line on which, both in the present and in a future less deplorable than this present, we must walk: to assert the value of autonomy, liberty, justice, equality, free thought, free discussion, respect for the opinion of the other—without, for all that, treating as subhuman those who do not share this view. We can only try to convince them in reasonable fashion. That obviously appears as an *almost* impossible task, for, from the moment that the other refers to a Sacred Book containing some kind of divine revelation, convincing him in reasonable fashion is *almost* meaningless, since for him the ultimate criterion is not the reasonableness of what is said but rather its conformity with the divine message. But what is at issue here is also the identity of this collectivity that defines itself through its reference to autonomy, for such autonomy will have existence and value only if we are, should this become indispensable, capable of defending it at the cost of our lives. [In any case, the reference point for this collective identity, without which human beings would not be socialized, won’t have to be a “territory” or an “imaginary,” pseudohistorical past, but rather the very project of individual and collective autonomy, which is certainly anchored in a history and in a tradition—but one which would

be the history and the tradition of this struggle for autonomy, for freedom.]⁹

Discussion

QUESTION: Isn't there also a mystery to peace? You haven't talked about peoples—the Nuer, the Trobrianders, the Muria¹⁰—that have not known war.

C.C.: To say that there is no general theory of war is to say that there is no general theory of peace, either. War and peace are in this regard two sides of the same coin. One can cast some light on certain aspects of the problem but not elucidate it totally. I have no problem accepting that, out of a few thousand known societies, there might be three or four that would not have known of this atrocious phenomenon we are trying to understand. This means that, within a millimeter, all societies know and have known war. But there are indeed periods of peace that pose a problem for every general theory. One can have a “Newtonian-Marxist” type of theory of war: you have “causes” that accumulate, an explosion, then a phase of detente; and then things start over again. But you should then have periodic intervals that would themselves be pretty much explicable. Every general theory of war would have to

⁹See n. 7 of the present chapter. —French Editors

¹⁰In fact, “Nuer warriors were noted as some of the most skilled in East Africa, and wielded weapons made of finely crafted iron” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuer> while in the case of Trobrianders “when inter-group warfare was forbidden by colonial rulers, the islanders developed a unique, aggressive form of cricket” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trobriand> as seen in the documentary *Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism* (1973), the controversial making of which itself reportedly led to “intense sociopolitical factionalism that generated hatred, violence and confusion” http://classes.yale.edu/03-04/anth500b/viewing_notes/VN_Trobriand-Cricket.htm. It has been argued, however, by Alfred Gell (“Exalting the King and Obstructing the State: A Political Interpretation of Royal Ritual in Bastar District, Central India,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 3 [1997]) “that the Muria and the other tribes were not organized for ‘war,’ did not recognize ‘warrior’ as a social role, and never did engage in ‘tribal warfare’ in any meaningful sense.” —T/E

offer in the same stroke an explanation of periods of peace. I have already spoken of the “death instinct” in Freud: what was it doing during periods of peace? True, the region where Freud lived had not known war between the Austro-Prussian conflict of 1866—when he was ten—and the thunderclap of 1914. Of course, this period of “peace” experienced numerous wars: but those were wars that happened over there, *in der Türkei*, in Turkey or elsewhere, as the bourgeois in *Faust* say. In Freud’s time, people were massacring each other all over the Earth, but he didn’t really become aware of that until 1914, when it affected him personally, and it is then that he wrote “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death.”¹¹ But what was this death instinct doing, on the collective scale, during this “period of peace”? Had it emigrated to Plevna, Khartoum, Port Arthur? The existence of periods of peace is really the greatest difficulty every general theory of war faces. And the same thing can be said, moreover, of explosions of racism, since there are long phases during which nothing happens—in any case, in certain parts of the world.

Q.: You spoke about a dozen years ago of the threat the Soviet military-industrial complex represented for peace in the world. What about it today?

C.C.: What is certain is that a fundamental change has taken place these last few years. I continue to believe that the description given in *Devant la guerre* (Facing war)¹² of the Russian regime as a metatotalitarian regime that had become a stratocratic one—not in the sense that the “colonels” had taken power, but because the whole society was oriented toward a kind of expansion that could no longer be but military in character since it could not be ideological, the ideology having died—this description of the situation was correct for the time. And this society was irreformable. There is one point on which I was mistaken: saying that it was unthinkable that a reform-oriented stratum might come from within this bureaucracy. And I was only half wrong, if I may

¹¹This 1915 text is available vol. 14 of the *Standard Edition*. —T/E

¹²See n. 7 of the chapter “Imaginary Significations,” above. —T/E

say so. What came out of it at the beginning was Mikhail Gorbachev and his group, which had some reformist illusions but which was incapable of seeing such reform through because the system was truly irreformable. And that led to the destruction of the system: the Russian bureaucracy is perhaps the sole historical example of a class that would have self-destructed. For, it was not an uprising or a popular movement that put an end to it, as in Poland, in Czechoslovakia, in Germany, and so on; moreover, the people in the streets of Moscow in August 1991 were not shouting "Democracy, democracy!" but "Russia, Russia!" or "Yeltsin, Yeltsin!"

Q.: I have some problems with your definition of peace. There was the Algerian War, the war in Indochina. For me, there were wars in Europe over the last twenty years.

C.C.: Let's at least be in good faith about this. I was talking of wars on the European continent, after 1945. I know very well that there have been dozens of wars during this period, more perhaps than before. There is no doubt that the European powers were mixed up in warlike conflicts in the world during this period. I am not saying that that is less important or that the lives of Algerians or Indochinese are worth less than the lives of the French, the Belgians, the Germans, and so on. But for various reasons, I was speaking of this continent: and furthermore, it is from there that two world cataclysms affecting the lives of all other peoples started.

Q.: In May 1968, one of our main motivations was the Vietnam War. We were certain that we could act and campaign effectively against a war—as earlier, against the Algerian War. What is happening now in Yugoslavia troubles us much more; we are puzzled and paralyzed. How is one to take a stand against this war, how is one to act in the face of it?

C.C.: I unfortunately can respond to your perplexity only by noting my own. We are asked to sign things and to participate in roundtable discussions; in short, we are asked to do everything that intellectuals do who do not know how to do anything else—at the moment people are killing each other over there. Yet we could have spoken much more about them this evening, because the Balkans shed a fantastic

amount of light on the complexity of the problem and on the difficulty of furnishing “simple” answers thereto. First of all, there is the weight of history. There is also the mixture of populations (beyond the fact that a considerable proportion of the population has a Serbian father and a Croat mother, or vice versa.). In a reasonable and pacified world, certainly nothing in all that is insoluble. One can say: We’re going to set up autonomous communes that will federate as they wish, etc. But we are not in such a world. There are, as a matter of fact, those identificatory passions, those mutual myths (all Croats were pro-Nazi, all Serbs Chetniks or “Communists,” and so on). Above all, this mixture of populations prevents one from saying that one is going to hold referenda (as in some regions of Europe after 1914-1918), since majorities of 55 percent will yield regions dominated by one ethnic group, and that is therefore to organize in the end civil war.

Q.: In view of what is happening today, what allows one to say that an autonomous society will exist one day?

C.C.: Nothing. But nothing allows one to say the opposite. There is no impossibility; there is certainly no necessity, no fatal inevitability. Everything depends on the activity, and the creativity, of human beings. And even if an autonomous society might one day exist, nothing allows one to say that it won’t fall back into heteronomy. And there is no guarantee; no one can prevent a democracy from committing suicide or sinking into I don’t know what kind of folly. But I do not believe that one can draw a line and say: This project of autonomy that had already arisen in Athens—even though in a very limited form—and that was resumed starting in the eleventh century in Western Europe—right here, in Flanders, in Italy, and elsewhere—this movement, the best it could yield, is Bush, Mitterrand, Kohl, and the society in which we live. I believe that that would be to take a—how to put it?—definitive view about a matter that remains open—even if the signs are indeed very somber in these times.

Q.: What are the conditions that have allowed the current rise of the Far Right in Europe? Why this rise now {1992} and not ten or twenty years ago?

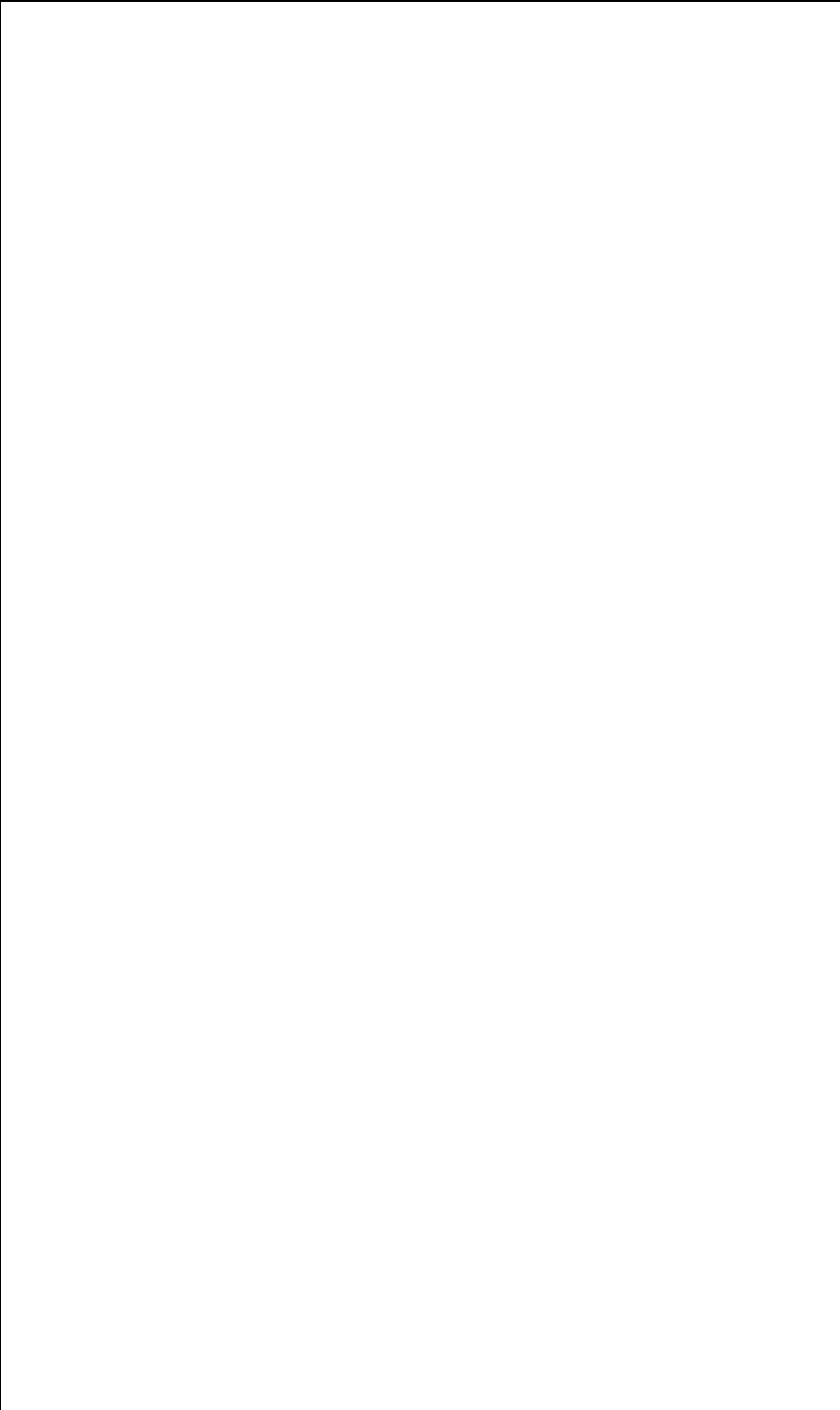
C.C.: I have already stated what I thought about that

in a December 10, 1991 interview in *Le Monde*.¹³ I am not very convinced by what I hear being said about anti-immigrant feelings, and so on, though, of course, such feelings do exist. They can be understood only in the more general framework of people's attitudes toward the system. That system does not even seem to keep its promises on the "material" level; there is no longer any endless horizon of "progress." Faced with this situation, people react in quite diverse ways. Some do so through political apathy. I think I can also perceive—and I don't think that I'm the victim of some kind of optimism that would distort my judgment—a, let us say, slight upturn among younger people, who more readily than ten years ago ask themselves questions, criticize things, and perhaps even do something. And then indeed, in another part of the population, where the terrain has undoubtedly been more favorable, one actually does observe expressions of far-right thinking: one finds there quite a mixture of "traditional" racism, a sense of disarray, resentment toward society, and so on. Yet neither should one underestimate the role of certain politically motivated electoral maneuvers designed by President Mitterrand to take votes away from the traditional Right—thanks to which the Socialists are, in my opinion, going to find themselves one of these days behind {French National Front leader Jean-Marie} Le Pen in the election results.¹⁴

¹³"Un entretien avec Cornélius [*sic*] Castoriadis. La renaissance démocratique passe par la création de nouvelles formes d'organisation politique," *Le Monde*, December 10, 1991: 2. —T/E

¹⁴This is precisely what happened in 2002, when far-right leader Le Pen, with 16.86 percent of the vote during the first round of the French presidential election, slightly beat out Socialist Party candidate and sitting Prime Minister Lionel Jospin for second place (with 16.18 percent) and thus was able to appear in the runoff against incumbent President Jacques Chirac, to whom Le Pen lost, 82 percent to 18 percent. —T/E

**PART TWO
INTERVENTIONS**



Is it Possible to Create A New Form of Society?*

QUESTION: Without going back over all the analyses you have developed {since the War} concerning Russia and Stalinism, and which you have extended to China, can you indicate some of the key points? For example, you reject the expression *State socialism* and you speak of *bureaucratic capitalism*. More generally, what can be said of the decisive phenomenon of bureaucracy?

C.C.: The expression *State socialism* (or the more recent, inadvertently humorous discovery, “dictatorial socialism”) is equivalent to the expressions *square circle*, *one-dimensional solid*, etc. Its only function is ideological, which is to make people forget that the Russian regime and other similar regimes have nothing to do with socialism. The existence of the State is inseparable from the existence of slavery, Marx rightly said. Socialism has always meant the abolition of exploitation and oppression, the elimination of domination by any particular social group, the destruction of the (economic, political, cultural) institutions that are instrumental in achieving such relations of domination. Now, all the institutions of Russia (as of China)—from machines and labor organization in the factories up to the newspapers and the official literature and passing by way of the Army, the State, and so on—are made to serve as vehicles for, to consolidate, and to reproduce the domination of a particular stratum, the bureaucracy and its Party, over society.

That said, the process of bureaucratization is universal. It concerns contemporary society as a whole. The social regime of all countries is bureaucratic capitalism: fragmented in the West, total in the countries of the East. A first striking observation: the bureaucracy first appeared as a

*Interview with E[dmund] A[mran] El Maleh published as “Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis” in *Le Monde*, December 13, 1977: 1-2 and December 14, 1977: 2. Typescript version prepared by Castoriadis, with various handwritten corrections and additions integrated into the text, published as “S’il est possible de créer une nouvelle forme de société” in *SD*, pp. 131-46.

supreme exploitative and dominant class in Russia after 1917 and, paradoxically, as the product of what has been called the *degeneration* of a socialist revolution. People have tried to explain the advent of the bureaucracy in Russia by appeal to local and accidental factors: Russia's backwardness, civil war, the revolution's isolation. That was Trotsky's thesis, impoverished, rehashed versions of which the historians of the French Communist Party offer today, this being another historical farce. But this rerun is itself not accidental. In both cases, it is a matter of evacuating the political questions raised by the fate of the Russian Revolution: the question of the content of socialism, the question of the role of the Leninist Bolshevik Party and its apparatus as kernel, agent, instrument, and beneficiary of the instauration of new relations of domination and exploitation.

Q.: Are these explanations worthless?

C.C.: They are beside the point; they do not explain what is to be explained. Backwardness, isolation, and so on could also have led to the restoration of private capitalism. But *why the bureaucracy?* We are told: The deliverer botched the birth, the stable was poorly lit, the mare already had congenital malformations. I ask: But what, then, is the nature of the animal that was born back then and that has continued to live for sixty years? The explanation in terms of degeneration is given in order to dodge this crucial question. And in any case, discussion in these terms is totally anachronistic. Russia has industrialized. It no longer is "isolated." Bureaucratic regimes today {1977} enslave one billion three hundred million individuals. None of that has led to the disappearance or the attenuation of the power of the bureaucracy. And this bureaucracy has acceded to a position of domination in East Germany, in Czechoslovakia, countries that are in no way "backward."

Q.: What is one to think, then, of the degeneration of the revolution of 1917?

C.C.: Ultimately, the very term *degeneration* is improper. From February to October 1917, there existed in Russia a "dual power," the Provisional Government, on the one hand, the Soviets, on the other. After October, another, attenuated "dual power" was instaured, between the

Bolshevik Party and what remained as autonomous activity of the masses and as organs of this autonomy (above all, the Factory Committees). It was attenuated because the workers believed in large part that the Bolshevik Party was “their” party. But this Party, led by Lenin and Trotsky, did but one thing, independent of whatever it might have said. It reconstituted a state apparatus that was separate from society and subject to its own control; it domesticated the Soviets, the unions, all collective organizations, working to subordinate all social activities to its own norms and to its own point of view; and it succeeded therein. This period came to a definitive end with the crushing, by Lenin and Trotsky, of the Kronstadt Commune (1921). Thenceforth, the Bolshevik Party constituted the dominant social group in Russia, and only a social revolution, a revolution of the people in their entirety, could have chased them from power—as it will no doubt someday do. One could speak, in a pinch, of *degeneration* only as regards the Bolshevik Party itself. There is certainly a considerable difference between Lenin and Stalin, between the Party of 1903-1921 and the Party of 1927-1977. But this “degeneration” is in truth an advent, a birth, the deployment, revelation, and realization of the totalitarian bureaucratic nature of the type of organization created by Lenin. Once in power, this Party reinstated or instigated hierarchy everywhere, which is definitively characteristic of its own kind of organization, and agglomerated around itself bureaucratic strata that manage production, the economy, the State, and culture. Thus was constituted a dominant and exploiting class, the bureaucracy, which, behind the juridical form of “nationalization,” has at its complete disposal the means and end results of production, people’s time, their very lives.

Q.: And China?

C.C.: The case of China sheds still more light on the problem of bureaucracy. It illustrates the relative historical independence of the latter, since one cannot speak here of the “degeneration” of a socialist workers’ revolution. During the 1920s, the Chinese CP constituted itself as a politico-military organization along the lines of the Bolshevik model. It took advantage of the collapse of traditional Chinese society and

the immense revolt of the peasant masses. When it came to power, it instaurated relations of domination that made of Chinese society, as regards the key points of interest to us here and despite some obvious and indisputable peculiarities, a society of the same type as Russian society. Still more clearly than in the case of Russia, one can see in this case that the constitution of a totalitarian bureaucracy is not necessarily the product of a somehow organic evolution of society. We don't have here a development of the forces of production bringing about new relations of production that engender a new class, which ultimately also seizes political power. There is the constitution of a political group that seizes power, on the basis of which new relations of production and the corresponding infrastructure are created. It is the industrialization of China that is the result of the bureaucracy's accession to a position of domination, and not the other way around. This is what obliges one, once again, to reject Marx's view that classes form in the realm of production and are defined by individuals' positions relative to the relations of production. And that view is but the arbitrary extrapolation to the whole of history of certain aspects of the advent of the bourgeoisie.

Q.: What can be said about the bureaucracy in other countries?

C.C.: In classical capitalist countries, the emergence of the bureaucracy may, up to a certain point, be interpreted within Marx's frame of reference. The concentration of capital, the increased size of business enterprises, and the tendency to subject the labor process to ever more detailed control and to direct it from the outside ensure that management of production can no longer be provided by a boss assisted by an engineer and an accountant. It can be provided only by a large-scale bureaucratic Apparatus whose Summit in fact holds the power in the business enterprise, independent of any formal title of ownership. An individual capitalist can truly be active in his business only on the condition that he be placed at the summit of the bureaucratic pyramid managing that business. Otherwise, he will have to limit himself to receiving dividends (the amount of which he will not even be able to set). Property is a title of access to the

summit of this pyramid. It is no longer the only one, or even the principal one, as is shown by the existence of self-coopting groups of directors who increasingly dominate large firms in the contemporary world.

But this Marxian interpretation is inadequate and incomplete. In Western capitalist countries, bureaucratization also finds another source in the enormous extension of the role and operations of the State, independent of all state takeovers of the means of production (as is shown in the case of the United States), and it goes far beyond mere regulation of the economy. The State increasingly tends to direct, to regulate, and to control all aspects and sectors of social activity, which goes hand in hand with the proliferation of a state and political bureaucracy. Finally, the workers' movement itself has been {since before the turn of the twentieth century} a powerful source of bureaucratization. Within workers' trade-union and political organizations, a bureaucracy has been constituted that has expropriated from those who participate their control over those organizations, and that dominates those organizations. This boils down to saying that the workers' movement has adopted an organizational model that is the capitalist model, along with capitalist significations: hierarchy, specialization, and the division between directors and executants, that is, between those who give orders and those who take orders.

Q.: How is one to explain this bureaucratization—a process that according to you would be universal and that, in Eastern countries, would culminate in totalitarian regimes, whereas in Western countries it allows democratic regimes to exist?

C.C.: Your question leads us to the heart of the deepest problems in the philosophy of history. There indisputably is a certain unity or uniformity to the modern world—that is why I speak of *bureaucratic capitalism*. There is at the same time a difference, from several major standpoints, between the fragmented bureaucratic capitalism of the Western countries and the total bureaucratic capitalism of Eastern countries. I hold that it is impossible to provide an “explanation” of this difference, if by *explanation* one means, as is usually the case, a theoretical form of reasoning that

reduces what comes about [*advient*] to causes that already were there. We can, certainly, elucidate a host of aspects of the birth of totalitarianism and sift out numerous factors that have played a major role. But it is impossible not to see in the advent of totalitarianism a historical break, a creation. That this creation would be monstrous does not prevent it from being a creation. Modern totalitarianism is an original historical figure that goes beyond all the “explanations” one would like to give of it. It is neither Asiatic despotism nor tyranny nor, as has superficially been said for some time now, the inevitable product of the mere existence of the State. The State has existed for six millennia, at least; totalitarianism appears only in the twentieth century. It is obvious that, in multiple ways, it is rooted in the evolution of capitalism. But it is just as obvious that the latter does not “explain” it, does not “determine” it—otherwise, capitalism would have engendered totalitarianism everywhere and always.

Q.: This failure of deterministic explanatory schemata also, according to you, affects Marx’s conception, and indeed you have devoted numerous texts for a long time now to criticizing his view. What are the main points of that critique?

C.C.: Every critique, and even every discussion of Marxism necessarily has to start—otherwise, it just remains at the level of some teacher-candidate’s exam paper, and a bad one at that—from the historical fate of Marxism, which may be summarized in the main by the following massive fact: Marxism has become the ideology, the official secular religion, of States that dominate, exploit, and oppress a third of the planet’s population. At that point arises the huge and brutal question: How could a theory claiming to be revolutionary and socialist have become the ideological cover for such regimes? It is just as superficial and laughable to say, as is the fashion today, that the Gulag is in Marx as it is to treat as completely unrelated a social and political theory, on the one hand, and, on the other, the effectively actual historical practice that has been inspired by that theory and that claims to be following it. In fact, there is a sturdy connection between the central features of Marx’s thought and what Marxism has become.

Q.: That indeed is what you showed in your 1964 text

“Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,”¹ which forms the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* and which seals your break with Marxism. This rupture had been broached when you called Marx’s economic theory into question.

C.C.: Indeed, this economic theory serves as a centerpiece that also shows us how the Marxist faithful adhere to their doctrine. It is not an accident that this man spent forty years of his life working on his economic Summa without succeeding in completing it. Nor is it an accident that the faithful abide in the belief that Marx had discovered the “laws” of economics that supposedly would guarantee capitalism’s collapse. These two aspects are intimately connected: “laws” had to be discovered; one must believe that those laws exist. And if one does not know them personally, there are Party specialists who “read *Capital*.”²

What is really the case about those “laws”? Let us consider an example—in truth one of central importance. Marx believed that he had discovered a law of the rising rate of exploitation under capitalism (briefly speaking, that the ratio of the mass of profits/mass of wages increases over time). Now, for anyone who hasn’t wilfully blinded himself, this “law” is controverted by the facts. Over two centuries of capitalism’s history, real wages have increased, in the long term, at least as much as labor productivity; in other words, the rate of exploitation has, at worst, remained constant. Why? Basically because the workers have struggled to obtain increases in real wages and they have obtained them.

¹Again (see n. 5 of the French Editors’ Preface), the correct dates for this five-part *S. ou B.* series of articles are 1964-1965. —T/E

²An obvious reference to French Communist Party (PCF) theoretician Louis Althusser and his famous 1965 book *Lire le Capital* (*Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster [London: New Left Books, 1970; London and New York: Verso, 1997]). In August-September of the following year, Castoriadis composed a scathing analysis of how the traditional “wooden-tongue” rhetoric of the PCF had been transformed into the “rubber tongue” arguments of Althusser: “Les crises d’Althusser. De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc,” *Libre*, 4 (November 1978): 239-54; reprinted as “De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc,” *SF*, pp. 295-314. —T/E

If one returns to the theory in order to seek the reason for the error, one notices the following amazing fact: class struggle is absent from *Capital*—more precisely, it exists only on the side of the capitalist, who always wins. And that is not an omission that could be corrected or filled in. This “absence” of class struggle is the strict equivalent of Marx’s explicit thesis, the central axiom of his analysis of capitalism: labor power is a commodity like others (for the aspects that interest us here). As such, it has a determinate and constant “production cost” in material terms—even while the output from a day of work continually increases, as a function of technical progress. (Or, in “value” terms: the value produced by a day of work is, by definition, constant, even while the unit value of the commodities that enter into the working class’s consumption, which is supposedly constant, falls over time.) Therefore, the difference between the two, which Marx calls *surplus value*, increases over time, and likewise does the working class’s rate of exploitation. That’s Marx’s argument; it is radically false, independent of any empirical falsification. It is false because it ignores, and has to ignore, the struggle of laboring people—in other words, because it posits that labor power is a commodity.

Q.: That’s a point of view you have emphasized since 1953, in those texts on the dynamic of capitalism to which you have often returned.³

C.C.: It is indeed decisive, and its ramifications are unending. Labor power is not a commodity as far as its “exchange value” is concerned. No commodity negotiates its value, struggling to increase it. Coal never has gone on strike to obtain an increase in its price. Neither is labor power a commodity as far as its “use value” is concerned in production. When a capitalist buys a ton of coal, he knows, for a given state of technical development, how many calories he will be able to extract therefrom. When he buys a day of work, he does not know how many efficient, productive

³“Sur la dynamique du capitalisme,” *S. ou B.*, 12 (August-September 1953) and 13 (January-March 1954). While often referred to, these two texts have never been reprinted. See n. 7 in the French Editors’ Preface.
—T/E

gestures he will be able to extract therefrom. That depends on what will happen in the factory; it depends on the resistance and the struggle of the workers. Neither labor power's "exchange value" nor its "use value" is or can be determined "objectively," independent of the activity of the workers and of their struggle. But Marx—like all economists—is obliged to ignore this aspect; he is obliged to posit labor power's exchange value and use value as *determinate*, independent of people's activity. How is one to construct a system of economic "laws" if the system's main variable is indeterminate? He therefore has to adopt, as a theoretical axiom, what is the supposedly fully achieved practical aim of capitalism: the transformation of the worker into a pure passive object.

Everything that is said in *Capital* presupposes that capitalism has eliminated all working-class resistance. But such a form of capitalism is a pure fiction of no interest; this is capital alone in the world, what I call the *solipsistic romantic novel of capital*. And that obviously affects all the outcomes. For example, the rate of accumulation depends on the rate of exploitation (investment depends on profits). Likewise, the equilibrium of the capitalist economy depends on domestic markets, which will evolve in a totally different way if real wages remain eternally constant or if they increase in line with labor productivity. Noting that the aim of capitalism, the transformation of the worker into a passive object, is unrealizable reveals a much more profound set of problems than that of the "economy." This set of problems allows one to understand what I have called *the fundamental contradiction of capitalism*.

Q.: What do you mean by that?

C.C.: Capitalist technology, and with it the whole allegedly rational organization of production that goes along with it, aims at transforming workers into passive objects, into pure executants of tasks that are circumscribed, controlled, checked, and determined from the outside—that is, by an Apparatus that directs production. But at the same time, production can function only to the extent that this transformation of workers into passive objects does not succeed. The system is obliged to call constantly upon the

initiative, the activity, of those very people whom it otherwise tries to transform into robots. A single hour of slowdown everywhere, of “working to rule” as the English say, and worldwide production will be laid low. The system operates only to the extent that, everywhere, people make it operate against its own rules. The system’s fundamental contradiction is that it is obliged simultaneously to exclude workers from all essential participation in the direction of their activity and to call constantly upon such participation. This antinomy is incorporated in the present-day technology and organization of production—which are not, as Marx (and Lenin and Trotsky) believed, neutral instruments, pure means of a productive and economic “rationality,” but rather consubstantial with the nature and aims of the system of domination in the West as in the East. Its overcoming therefore requires the overthrow of this technology and of this way of organizing production. That can be done only if the workers and their collectives fully take on the direction of their activities—what I have called *the collective management of production by the producers*. And as this antinomy is to be found again in all spheres of social activity—this is precisely the flip side of the growing bureaucratization of those spheres—its resolution implies the collective management of social activities by the autonomous and federated organs of those who participate—producers, students, etc.—what was later called, toning down a little or a lot its content, *self-management*. The genuine content of socialism—and what workers aimed at during the Paris Commune, in Russia in 1917, in Catalonia in 1936-1937, in Hungary in 1956, etc.—is the self-organization of society. But if such self-organization is not to be confined to trivial matters, it can know no social limits that would be instituted or given in advance. It signifies the explicit self-institution of society.

Q.: We will undoubtedly have to return to this idea. But to say that Marx transforms into a theoretical axiom the practical aim of capitalism, is that not to say that there is, from the start, a contamination of Marx’s thought by bourgeois ideology?

C.C.: Quite right. There is the Marx who wrote that it was no longer a matter merely of interpreting the world but of

transforming it, and that communism is not an ideal state but the effectively actual movement that abolishes the existing state of things.⁴ That Marx broaches a break with the capitalist universe and, beyond that, with the entire Greco-Western heritage. But there is also—and at the same time; this is not a matter of a chronological evolution—the other Marx, in whom the theoretical, rationalistic element, which is aimed at establishing a determinate and potentially complete system of truths, constantly gets the upper hand.

At the time Marx was beginning to write, English and French workers had already been putting forward for forty years revolutionary ideas and practices that were breaking with the instituted universe. Marx's greatness is that he understood the importance of these working-class creations and drew inspiration from them. But at the same time, he succeeds in thinking them only within the inherited framework (even if he enlarged that framework enormously). He does not manage to call into question either the traditional conception of "theory" or the presupposition, the ontological prejudice, that goes along with that conception and that has underlain it since Parmenides' time, viz.: being = being determined. He thinks that, by inspecting history and analyzing it, theoretical reason can discover its determinations, the laws that explain its becoming. In this way, he participates in the immense undertaking that was begun by the Greeks and was pursued by Westerners: the constitution of the Grand Theory, of the view of what is as it truly—therefore, within this conception, atemporally—is. Such an undertaking can unfold only through the occultation of what is unique to social-historical life: *making/doing* [*le faire*] as making-be, creation, the self-institution of society. For, to recognize that is equivalent to recognizing an essential, primordial dimension of indetermination in social-historical being (and, ultimately, in being itself, period); it is equivalent to giving up the inherited conception of Theory, to

⁴Paraphrases from the eleventh of the "Theses on Feuerbach" and *The German Ideology* (both texts, 1845). The French adjective *effectif* ("effectively actual," following David Ames Curtis's translations with Castoriadis's approval) is Castoriadis's translation of *wirklich*. —T/E

seeing that we never are dealing with anything but a *project of theory*, the meaning of which is to engage in a continual activity of elucidating the world and ourselves. Theory as something complete and finished is a phantasm. As with every phantasm, the idea of giving it up appears to be unbearable only so long as one remains its prisoner. Far from leaving us blind or dumb, such an abandonment on the contrary liberates our activity of elucidation.

Q.: And according to you, Marx remains prisoner of this phantasm?

C.C.: He remains its prisoner in the main and especially as regards the part of his thought that has a social and historical resonance. That is easily understood. Marx was addressing a world that was waiting—and that is still waiting—for it to be provided with the Grand Rational Theory. His enormous historical impact is due to this “wrong reason.” It is not as a function of the revolutionary element within it or on account of its depth and subtlety that Marx’s thought has been spread and has, at the same time, been effective. It is because, once reduced to a few elementary schemata to which it effectively, and in a sense faithfully, *allows itself* to be reduced, it offered to the dull-witted seminarian from Tiflis, to the little cadre from Yenan, and to the secretary of the Pas-de-Calais party cell an apparently clear, simple, and complete view of the world and of what is to be done and not to be done.⁵

Q.: The moment has come to speak of the ideas of creation, self-institution, and the imaginary which, at least since 1964, have run through all your public statements and all your works. Is this a leap into the irrational? The imaginary—is it a fiction, a phantasmatic vision? Or is this a resurgence of utopia?

C.C.: In ordinary language, the imaginary is contrasted

⁵After the relatively more obvious allusions to former Georgian Orthodox seminary student Joseph Stalin and to Chinese Communist Party leader at Yan’an Mao Zedong, Castoriadis is making reference here to Maurice Thorez, who was born in the Pas-de-Calais *commune* of Noyelles-Godault and who rose to serve as the French Communist Party’s General Secretary from 1930 until his death in 1964. —T/E

as fictional with what is not fictional: the real and the rational. This contrast is clear within a given social world, but it becomes obscure and enigmatic if one begins to ask questions about it. What is real? When one considers history, one notices that each society institutes *its* reality. What is and is not, what exists and does not exist vary from one society to another. Marx himself says somewhere that the Delphic Apollo was for the Greeks a power as real as any other.⁶ The same goes for spirits in an archaic society, God in a monotheistic society, and so on. Likewise, what is “logical” and what is not, the idea, too, of what *verification* is, differ from one society to another. There is, each time, an *institution* of reality and rationality by the society under consideration. The most immediate illustration is furnished by language. At once bearer of and basic instrument for the organization of the world—of the “natural” and social world, of the rational lineaments of all reality in general—language is historically instituted, and each time it is instituted as a different language. There exists no language in general, no pure language, no fundamental language of which historical languages would be isomorphic exemplars. What is common to all languages either is trivial or is unfathomably enigmatic: the power to *signify*, the making-be of a world of significations. Of these significations, the most important ones have no assignable referent, no real or rational correspondent; such significations, social imaginary significations, hold together all the other ones as well as the society under consideration. One such signification today is, for example, pseudo-“rationality.” Each society is institution of a world, of what is and is not, of what is valid and is not valid, of needs, individuals, their roles and identities, and so on. This institution is creation: it is not reducible to what was already there or to “real” or “rational” factors external to the society under consideration. It is the work of the radical social-historical imaginary—as an original work of art is the work of the radical imagination of the individual.

Q.: Would this creation then be arbitrary?

⁶See n. 4 of the chapter “Imaginary Significations.” —T/E

C.C.: I am saying that it is irreducible; I am not saying that it is absolutely arbitrary. For example, no society can ignore basic needs for nourishment or sexual difference. Yet people eat historically instituted foods, not calories. And the social sexes are something quite other than the biological sexes. There is a leaning [*étayage*] of society on nature, not a determination of society by nature. Each time, “nature” itself is posited, represented, and acted upon differently. For the ancient Greeks, it is animated by gods, dryads, and nereids. For modern society, it is inert material for human mastery. Each time, the relation between society and nature is posited and created by the society under consideration.

Q.: So are, in the end, the two terms of this relation.

C.C.: Quite right, and in the same movement and immediately. Modern man can posit his relation to nature as a relation of domination (René Descartes: “masters and possessors of nature”)⁷ only by positing nature as a set of inert objects and society as rational mastery’s subject. The imaginary, a-real, a-rational character of such a positing is quite obvious. To tell the truth, it’s a delirious position, but this delirious position is *the* reality of the contemporary world.

Q.: There is, therefore, a lot of work to be done to provide a critical evaluation of the powers of theoretical reason, therefore, also, of science itself. That is part of what you call *elucidation*. But it is also undoubtedly part of the political work to be accomplished, since knowledge has become increasingly identified with power.

C.C.: Let us really clarify one thing. If freed from theoretical absolutism, from the phantasm of the complete, finished Theory, what I call the *project of theory* is neither empty nor vain. One must rid oneself of the following twin, and complementary, naive views: science knows or will know all/science knows nothing. In one case as in the other, there would no longer be any problem. Now, there is effectively actual knowledge, *and* the object, nature, coherence, and

⁷In part 6 of *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, by René Descartes. —T/E

history of this knowledge are unendingly enigmatic.

As for the identification of knowledge with power, that's a mystification propagated by power itself—which is understandable—but also by certain people who claim to be fighting the power and who end up merely accrediting this mystification. Belief in the omnipotence and the omniscience of instituted States is, in the last analysis, the system's sole genuine foundation. Yet half the time, power is both blind and brainless, and that is so by basic necessity. And those who run things are not technicians and competent specialists (how could a specialist, by virtue of his specialization, have universal competency?) but, rather, are those who are competent in their particular speciality, that of climbing up the bureaucratic ladder. It is not the best Marxist who became General Secretary of the Russian CP but, rather, the one who knew best how to slit the others' throats. It is not the best engineers that run firms but, rather, those who know best how to take advantage for themselves of the struggle of cliques and clans.

This identification of power with knowledge is an essential piece of the dominant ideology. No society can live without giving itself a self-representation. Such a representation belongs among the social imaginary significations that are correlative to its institution. Now, contrary to all previous societies, capitalist society does not give itself a mythical or religious self-representation; it tries to give itself a rationalistic representation that would be at the same time its "justification." Capitalist ideology is rationalistic: it invokes knowledge, competency, scientificness, and so on. Pseudorationality is the centerpiece of that society's imaginary. And this holds, too, for Marxist ideology, which has become a secular State religion. I really am saying *rationalistic*, not *rational*. It lays claim to an empty kind of rationality that is suspended in midair, and its whole reality contradicts that rationality. Here again, we have something historically new. In no other society does one observe this antinomy between the system of representations society gives itself and its effectively actual reality. The reality of an archaic, slave-owning, or feudal society conforms with its system of self-representations. But modern society

lives on a system of representations that posits rationality as at once the end and the universal means of social life—and that is refuted by each of its acts. It claims to be rational—and it massively produces what, from its very own standpoint, is irrationality.

Q.: After all this work of criticism and elucidation, can one still envision a socialist and revolutionary project?

C.C.: It is only by means of such work that we can understand what that project is, its origin, its content, and situate ourselves in relation to it. There is no socialism as a necessary stage of history any more than there would be a science of society that would guarantee its advent and that could, in the hands of its “specialists,” guide its construction. The socialist project is a project for the creation of a new form of society. And it is effectively born as a historical creation in and through the activity of a category of people. As early as the turn of the nineteenth century, workers contested the established institution of society—not only of capitalist society but of all societies called *historical*. They did not combat only economic exploitation but also domination as such; they wanted to instaurate a new order founded on equality, liberty, and cooperation. In and through the activity of these people new significations emerged—significations that were embodied in new forms of organization and that were opposed to the world as it had been instituted for millennia: the world of the State, of hierarchy, of inequality, of the domination of some by others.

As it evolved, this movement recurrently fell short of its aim, as we must admit. It became bureaucratized, adopting capitalist organizational models as well as the corresponding significations. Its encounter with Marxism—which became, in many countries, its confiscation by Marxism—was a crucial moment in this evolution. At the deepest level, Marxism in fact became, within the workers’ movement, a transmission belt for capitalist models and significations (rationalism, hierarchy, productivism, primacy of pseudotheory, and so on). But the movement continued on, and it continues on. It still takes the elementary form of the workers’ everyday resistance to the exploitation and the alienation to which the system subjects them. Still affirming

the same aim, that movement burst forth in broad daylight in Europe between 1917 and 1923, in Spain in 1936-1937, in Hungary in 1956. It was joined by other movements that have the same aim: the youth movement—which yielded May '68 in France—the women's movement, the ecology movement.

This aim can be formulated in a single word: the aim of *autonomy*. The latter implies the abolition of dominant groups and of the institutions that embody and instrument such domination—in the first place, the State—and genuine self-governance of collectivities, the self-organization of society. Taken in its full meaning, such autonomy signifies the explicit self-institution of society. Why explicit? Because society is always self-instituted yet does not know that it is so. This is a part of the institution of societies as they have existed until now as well as of the system of self-representations they give themselves, that of imputing this institution to another, external instance of authority: to a mythical hero, to God, to the laws of nature, or to the requirements of Reason. We have to understand that we cannot flee our responsibility regarding the institution of the society we want, not even by taking refuge behind "Reason." We want equality, liberty, justice: that is neither "rational" nor "irrational," it's beyond. To think that the laws of history guarantee the advent of a just society (or of a society from which the question of justice could be eliminated) is an absurdity. To think that one might define once and for all what a just society is, and demonstrate that a just society is more "rational" than an unjust society, is meaningless (in the best of cases, the reasoning is circular). And to think that such a "proof" would advance things one inch is childishness. One does not refute Auschwitz or the Gulag; one combats them.

There is a *historical war*, begun by the Greek *dēmos* and the first philosophers of Ionia, that has experienced long eclipses, has been revived periodically, and has, in our historical period, been taken up again by the Parisian *sections* of 1792 and 1793, the English workers who founded the first unions, the Communards, and the workers and intellectuals of Budapest. This is a war against enslavement to a dominant group, against myths, against every merely received idea, against the established institution of society as institution of

heteronomy. So long as society remains divided asymmetrically and antagonistically, this war will not end. It is up to each person to choose his camp.

Q.: But what are the chances of this project of autonomy in the face of the omnipotence of instituted States?

C.C.: There is no omnipotence of instituted States. Their power is only the flip side of people's belief in such power. As for the rest, I don't have the answer. Everything depends on the desire and capacity of men and women to change their social existence, to accept that they are responsible for their fate, and to assume this responsibility fully. If everything we have said has a political signification, it can be summarized in very simple terms. It is a matter of reminding people of the following elementary truth, which they know very well but forget regularly when it comes to public affairs: neither the expansion of the capitalist economy, nor the government, nor the laws of history, nor the Party will ever work *for them*. Their fate will be what they are willing and able to make of it.

What Political Parties Cannot Do*

QUESTION: What, in your opinion, is covered by the term *social experimentation*? Does that term seem to you suitable for characterizing new social movements?

C.C.: To me, the term seems ambiguous and hardly even innocent. It seems to present as new something that isn't, but whose importance has constantly been minimized or ignored by official "Left" organizations. In our cultural area—and this has become massively clear since the late nineteenth century—people have engaged in a whole series of attempts and activities aimed at changing in a concrete way their living conditions, including, of course, their working conditions. That began as early as the workers' movement: the latter has never been, and could never have been, just a movement contesting the established order; it was, at the same time, a self-organizing—or, to take up a term dear to me, self-instituting—movement, by which I mean positive self-institution, of course. This has been expressed through what must be called forms of social *creation*—and not "experimentation"—like the setting up of the first unions, mutual aid societies, cooperatives, and so on; in short, through all the self-organizational activities of the working class by means of which this class has constituted itself as a class in the full sense of the term. For, it does not suffice that there be capitalist machines for there to be a working class:

*April 20, 1979 interview with Joël Roman about "social experimentation" published as "Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis sur l'expérimentation sociale," *Critique Socialiste* (the theoretical review of the Parti Socialiste Unifié), 35 (June 1979): 65-71. We have used the transcription reread and corrected by Castoriadis in May 1979. Reprinted as "Ce que les partis politiques ne peuvent pas faire" in *SD*, pp. 147-54. [An earlier discussion with militants from the PSU (the Unified Socialist Party, 1960-1989), "Rencontre avec C. Castoriadis 12 janvier 1974," appeared in *Questions pour l'autogestion socialiste*, supplement no. 5 to *Critique Socialiste*, 17, 18, 19 (September-October 1974): 11-33 (reprinted as "Discussion avec des militants du P.S.U." in *CS*, pp. 261-99). There (*ibid.*, p. 273), Castoriadis pointed out that the PSU's adoption of the rhetoric of *autogestion* (self-management) did not even apply to its own internal democratic procedures, his target being Michel Rocard, who had just completed a six-year term as PSU National Secretary. —T/E]

these machines bring into existence only a category of people as passive objects of exploitation, a “class in itself.” The working class becomes a class “for itself” and constitutes itself as a historical class insofar as it itself organizes itself, to the extent that it *does and makes things* and *makes itself* [fait et . . . se fait]. This movement of the working class’s self-constitution, which fills up the nineteenth century in the “advanced” countries of that time, was later covered over by the bureaucratization of working-class organizations. It has not, for all that, abated.

Then came the women’s movement. In this case, too, isn’t it somewhat funny to speak of *social experimentation*? For nearly a century, through daily, anonymous, and in large part subterranean activity, women have gradually modified their situation—and, thereby, the situation of men, too. They have destroyed age-old taboos and shaken up attitudes and mores in a way that has had incalculable, and certainly still unforeseeable, consequences. And that has not been due to “political” organizations or to special-interest organizations—the French Women’s Liberation Movement [*Mouvement de libération des femmes*] and other such organizations made their appearance {in the mid- to late-Sixties}—but to a huge number of women who have changed their attitudes and more or less imposed this change on men, too. They have therefore positively *created* something and have altered the established institution of relations between the sexes. What meaning would there be in calling all that *experimentation*?

The same goes {from at least the mid-Fifties} for the youth movement—and more recently, for other movements that cannot be defined on the basis of a social “category” (like the working class, women, or the young). People in a given locality or brought together by shared interests and concerns get together and try to do something by themselves. Why does one name that *social experimentation*? One does so in order to cover the ideological and political nakedness of the “Left” today. People who act in these cases are not acting in order to “experiment”; they act in order to *do* something, in order to *create* something. Is it called *experimentation* because it doesn’t fit into the programmatic and ideological framework of the official political organizations? This was also the case

with the women's and youth movements, which were silently combated, scorned, or ignored by those organizations—before attempting to coopt them.

Why do people undertake such activities? Because they've understood that neither state-run institutions nor parties are responding to their aspirations and to their needs and that those institutions and parties are incapable of responding to them (otherwise, people would try to make use of them for such activities). For example, ecology movements have been set up not only because existing parties aren't concerned about the problem but also because people realize that parties, when they talk about ecology at all, do so only for demagogic reasons and because, with *those* parties, it will never be otherwise.

At the same time, people are beginning to understand more or less clearly that it is absurd to subordinate all activity to "the Revolution" or to the "seizure of power," after which all questions will allegedly be resolved. That is a huge mystification that guarantees, as a matter of fact, that *nothing* will be resolved after "the Revolution." Self-organizing and partially self-managed movements are, on the one hand, expressions of the conflict that is tearing present-day society apart and of people's struggle against the established order and they are also, on the other hand, preparing something else: even in an embryonic form, they express and embody people's will to take their fate into their own hands and to place it under their own control.

Q.: Yet can't it be thought, as some people do, that these movements serve as a backup for failing institutions or else as a class compromise with the upper middle class [*la grande bourgeoisie*], rather than as leading toward a political transformation of society?

C.C.: To say that so long as the regime lives on it coopts everything is a tautology. But are we going to say that, because the system coopts everything or has found a place for freedom of the press, for example, that we should fight against freedom of the press or even lose interest in it? And why then not maintain this same argument apropos of unions, where it would be infinitely more justified, since at present, and for a long time now, the unions have been cogs in the

operation of the system and since no “liberal” or even totalitarian modern-capitalist country can exist without unions that encircle the working class and take charge of it? That’s a short-term argument. It may be seen in the history and evolution of capitalist production and the way it’s organized. The system organizes production and exploitation in a certain way; the workers invent some means to parry this way of organizing production and to struggle against it; sooner or later, the system integrates them or coopts them; the field of battle shifts, the workers invent new means, and so on and so forth. That’s what history itself is.

Moreover, behind the argument you are mentioning one clearly finds a conception of “politics” that reduces the latter to the confrontation among parties seeking to seize control over the running of the State. That is not only a restrictive conception, it’s a *bureaucratic* conception of politics.

Q.: Political parties are therefore more of a brake on than a means for developing socially creative movements?

C.C.: Quite right. This conception of political activity is necessarily incorporated into what parties are: bureaucratic organizations that claim (in terms of a more or less shaky ideology) to have found the Archimedean point for society’s transformation, namely: One must seize the state apparatus and all the rest will follow. This is what explains parties’ blindness toward what is in the process of happening with the new movements as well as the fact that those “vanguard” organizations have appeared as rearguard organizations miserably trailing far behind events. Brilliant political leaders and illustrious theorists have discovered self-management with a five-, ten-, or twenty-year time lag (we have been talking about it since 1947), everyday life (we have been talking about it since 1955), women and youth (we have been talking about them since 1960), and so on. I was reading in *Le Monde* a few days ago that Monsieur Séguy very seriously declared at I forget what CGT meeting¹ that the problem of

¹ Georges Séguy was General Secretary of the Confédération générale du travail (CGT), the union closest to the French CP, 1967-1982. — T/E

working conditions was new and important, but difficult, and that it had to be studied in greater depth before one could take a stand on it. No kidding! This working-class “chief” and his union confederation are discovering today, in 1979, the “new” problem of working conditions, around which workers have been fighting ever since there were capitalist factories, for practically two centuries.

In relation to these movements, parties on the “Left” adopt two attitudes that are, moreover, not at all mutually exclusive. The first—which corresponds to what these parties are in reality—consists in saying: We need the government, nationalizations, etc. and the rest will follow. The second consists in transforming new demands into decorative feathers, mere cosmetics, through a series of demagogic verbal concessions. Women are making demands? Well, no problem, we decree that 30 percent of jobs in managerial positions will be occupied by women—as if that resolves anything at all. Likewise, people are engaged in some activities to change their living conditions? Well, we’re going to rename that *social experimentation* and declare it “interesting.” “Experimentation” in relation to what? In relation to “sure” truths, ones inscribed in party “programs.” Parties on the “Left,” such as they are, are organizations that, independent of the intentions and ideas of the individuals who make them up, are destined to direct, to manage from the outside and from above.

Q.: According to you, the solution doesn’t come at all from today’s political parties. But do you go so far as to challenge *in toto* the principle of political organization as such?

C.C.: The solution certainly does not come from political parties such as they are. More precisely, such parties are there for another solution—the bureaucratic solution, whether it be reformist or totalitarian. But that, of course, does not resolve our problem, except negatively. There will be no transformation of society without explicit, elucidated political activity. Political activity is necessarily collective. We therefore need a political collectivity that would struggle and act for the transformation of society, for the instauration of an autonomous society. Such a collective organization will

have a series of key tasks to accomplish: spreading and making known the true content of the struggles and the movements as they unfold, discussing their signification, their eventual weaknesses, the reasons for their success or their failure, and bringing out what is exemplary about them. Its universality will come about not from possession of a “true theory” defined once and for all—but, rather, from its effort to make explicit what implicitly already exists as immanently universal within people’s activity and as the signification of such activity beyond the particular circumstances in which it has become embodied.

Obviously, such a collectivity could be organized only in a way that embodies and makes visible the goals for which it is acting: it will therefore be self-managed, self-governed. And that, certainly, isn’t something given in advance. How might, let us say, a few thousand people spread across France be able to set up a nonbureaucratic political collectivity (one that isn’t a bloody mess, either), an effectively self-managed collectivity, and self-governed, too? (In *self-government*, there is not only *self*—; there is also *government*, which many forget.) That, in my view, is one of the most important problems today. It is, in any case, infinitely more important than discussions about the “Union of the Left” and the like.

Q.: But is not such a political organization—which fits pretty much with what we are attempting to do with the Parti Socialiste Unifié—condemned to marginalization merely by the interplay of today’s political institutions?

C.C.: Here again, one must rid oneself of received ideas, in particular the idea that the only kind of political action is that of the parties, which involves city councilors, members of parliament, and so on. What has been the most important political event in France {since the late Fifties}, if not longer? It’s May ’68. Now, who made May ’68? Which party made May ’68? None of them. And yet, ten years later France is more heavily marked by May ’68 than the France of 1881 was by the Commune.

Q.: Yet in a sense May ’68 failed; inasmuch as it didn’t lead to an actual political transformation, it remained just a huge social movement.

C.C.: Certainly, in a sense and in part it can be said

that May '68 was a "failure." As the events were taking place, for my part I circulated a text (reprinted right away in *La Brèche*, which Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, and I published in late June 1968)² where I tried to show that one had to get organized, to instaurate lasting forms of collective action and collective existence. Nothing of the sort was done, for reasons it would take too long to discuss now. Yet that does not diminish the immensely positive importance of May '68. May '68 revealed and made visible for all to see something fundamental: the true site of politics is not where one thought it was. The site of politics is everywhere. The site of politics is society.

Q.: But isn't there a contradiction between the observation that the failure of May '68 came from its inability to institute and, on the other hand, the critique of existing institutional forms, whether they be state institutions or instituted political parties?

C.C.: There is a contradiction only if one confuses these existing institutions with every possible institution. The failure of May '68—more precisely, its *limit*—was its inability to instaurate new institutions, other institutions: other ones certainly not in their names only but as regards their essence. To say that one cannot enter into a new phase of social life without the destruction of the state apparatus and without the dissolution of the dominant groups and the institutions that are consubstantial with those groups' domination does not mean that an autonomous society is a society without institutions. A society without institutions does not exist; the reign of pure desire is just as essentially, for example, the desire to murder others.

What can be said, here and now, about the institutions of a new society, an autonomous society? No matter what, the following can be said: that they will embody autonomy, namely, collective self-management, self-organization, self-governance in all areas of public life. This signifies, too, that

²The translation of the expanded *La Brèche* version of Castoriadis's piece (the first part of which was written May 20-25, 1968, with roneograph copies distributed as the events unfolded) now appears as "The Anticipated Revolution" in [PSW3](#). —T/E

such institutions will not be posited once and for all, that they will not be shielded from the institutive activity of society. That is why, in my view, the central—and, in the end, sole—political problem is that of the *explicit, conscious* self-institution of society. Its solution implies *new* institutions as well as a *new type of relation* between society and its institutions.

This is the standpoint where one has to place oneself in order to situate oneself with regard to the movements we are talking about: Do they represent new, autonomous forms of collective organization? Is *another type* of relation between people and their collective organization being instaurated there, one that would ensure that they have *effective* control over the latter? That is the key criterion. We are not condemning the Communist Party, or any other bureaucratic organization, because it is an institution, but rather because it is a *bureaucratic* organization, because that institution, in its form, structure, organization, and ideology is necessarily heteronomous, alienated and alienating, enslaving for its members and for others.

That said, there are still some distinctions to be made. It is certain that, so long as society overall remains what it is, it is impossible for fully autonomous organizations to exist in a particular sector or a particular place. For, no organization can be separated and isolated from overall society; it is immersed in the latter, is influenced thereby, and suffers the consequences thereof. But neither does that mean that it would have to necessarily, all the time, and 100 percent be coopted by the regime. Here again, we must denounce the absolutist pseudorevolutionary prejudice that either there would be a radical and total break or one would be 100 percent coopted by the system. That is not true.

Q.: There remains one problem. As a matter of fact, it's a problem that relates to these movements of partial self-management and localized social creation. If they cannot radically transform society without destroying a certain number of key institutions, how would they be allowed to converge in order to do so? What is the unifying logic of these movements?

C.C.: In order to see if there exists a unifying logic

and what it is, one must see how the true problem of society's transformation is posed. What is the root of social conflict in the present-day regime, beyond mere opposing interests? Whether we're talking about fragmented bureaucratic capitalism, as in the West, or total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism, as in the East, in the countries abusively named *socialist*, the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society is immanent to the very organization of this society, to the division between directors and executants, those who give orders and those who take orders. This division implies people's exclusion from their own individual and collective lives. I am speaking of a division between directors and executants [*dirigeants et exécutants*], not of the old opposition from political philosophy between leaders and led [*dirigeants et dirigés*]. It is possible to be directed or led; it is not possible to be *purely* an executant. Now, what the regime tries to do is reduce people to being pure executants—it is obliged to do so. It tries to exclude them from the direction of their own activities; and at the same time, that regime would not be able to survive if it succeeded in fully achieving that goal, in imposing on people total passivity. (This is clearly seen in the example of labor organization in contemporary business enterprises.)

Today, all the movements we are talking about aim in one way or another, to one degree or another, at surmounting and abolishing this division between directors and executants—between direction and execution. To the extent that they are not simply movements of explosion and expression but also movements of creation, of social institution, they express and embody people's aspirations to autonomy. They thereby herald and prepare the sole possible radical transformation of society: the advent of an autonomous society, a society that, for the first time, assumes responsibility for its self-governance and that itself lays down its laws. The unifying logic of these movements, and their connection with the project of society's radical transformation, are to be found in this, that they already embody, be it in a partial, fragmentary, and fledgling way, the following central political significations: self-management, self-organization, self-government, self-institution.

The Stakes Today for Democracy*

[. . .] Modern constitutions begin with declarations of rights whose first clause is either a theological credo or an analogy: “Nature has ordained that . . . ,” or “God has ordained that . . . ,” or “We believe that men have been created equal,” this last assertion being, moreover, false: equality is a creation of men acting politically. By comparison, the Athenian laws harbor an element of unsurpassable depth: they always begin by saying, “*Edoxe tē boulē kai tō dēmō*,” “It seemed good, this has been the carefully weighed opinion of the Council and the people that . . . ,” followed by the text of the law. This *edoxe* is fantastic; it’s truly the cornerstone of democracy. We have no science of what is truly good for humanity, and we never will. If there were one, it is not democracy that we would be seeking but, rather, the tyranny of he who would possess such a science. One would try to find him to tell him, “OK, you’re going to govern since you possess political science.” That, moreover, is what Plato and many others say explicitly and what Stalin’s flatterers said, too: “Since you know history, economics, music, linguistics . . . Long live the General Secretary!” Now, as for the Athenians, what they said was, “It is the carefully weighed opinion of the Council and the people to decree this” That means that democracy is the regime of *doxa*, that is to say, of carefully considered opinion, of that faculty we have to form an opinion of our own on questions that elude geometrical arguments.

Let us take, for example, the question: At what age should one grant citizens, male and female, the right to vote? Is there some science that might be able to answer that question? Is such a science even conceivable? Of course not. Starting from the moment a society has posed to itself this question, the answer presupposes a choice. And that is so whatever the political regime, even under the “dictatorship of the proletariat”: Who is proletarian, and at what age? Is it

*Excerpts from an April 9, 1986 lecture at the University of Montreal, partially published as “Les enjeux actuels de la démocratie,” in *Possibles*, 10:3-4 (Spring/Summer 1986): 313-29. Reprinted in *SD*, pp. 155-59.

necessary and sufficient to be exploited in order to have a say? The key point is that in democracy we do not have a science of political affairs and the common good. We have people's opinions. These opinions clash with one another, are discussed, argued about, and then finally the people, the collectivity, makes up its mind and settles things by its vote. So that's what we have in the way of a process of interrogation, of questioning posited by democracy. And that kind of questioning is not suspended in midair: we know that the people decide—rather even, we want and will it that the people decide. And we know or we should know that what the people have decided is not necessarily the ultimate truth, that the people can be mistaken, but that there is no other recourse. The people will never be able to be saved from itself; one can only, if people have made a mistake, give them the institutional means to correct it on its own, to go back over an erroneous decision or a bad law so as to change it.

There is, at the outset, a self-constitution of the body politic, and that occurs without the help of any kind of science. We ourselves have to draw and set the limits, and our decision will not be able to be proved either scientifically or mathematically. It will then be said, at least I hope so, that all those who are usually living in the territory and are concerned by what happens there participate in the political collectivity. That may seem a self-evident truth, but it isn't one at all in existing legislation, where only "nationals" of the State under consideration participate in voting (in America, naturalization is relatively easy, but not in Europe). We therefore ought to say: "those who participate in the life of the collectivity." And even in determining who those people are, the criteria retained will necessarily be a bit arbitrary. We will not say, I think, that a Japanese or a Frenchman who makes a stopover in Montreal on election day can go vote. Not if he is staying for three hours. But what if he remains three weeks? What if he rents an apartment? What I want to underscore with these perhaps minor examples is the necessity of the self-positing, the self-constitution, of the political collectivity, which has been forgotten in all the theologico-philosophical rhetoric of the last two centuries. What philosophy will ever be able to tell us at what age, and with what length of residency, do all

human rights become automatically valid?

But one can also dig deeply into the self-definition of the collectivity in relation to the definition of the people, power, and the equal participation of all in this power. Whatever its size, a democratic society is always formed from a plurality of individuals who all participate in power to the extent that each one has, as much as any other, the effectively actual possibility of influencing what happens. That is absolutely not the case in practice in our democratic societies, which are, rather, what I would call *elective liberal oligarchies*, with some social strata well barricaded in their positions of power. Certainly, those strata are not completely watertight. That's the celebrated argument of Liberals {in the Continental sense of conservative ideological belief in the "free market"}: "Mr. What's-His-Name began as a newspaper vendor and then, thanks to his abilities, ended up as president of General Motors." That proves simply that the dominant layers also know how to renew their ranks by recruiting, from within the lower strata, those individuals who are the most active players in the social game as the dominant layers have organized it. And the same goes for politics, which is dominated by the parties' bureaucracies: it matters little whether they are in the government or in the opposition, whether they are socialists or conservatives; they are, in a sense, accomplices as regards the fixed stakes of power. They do not change in response to any sort of popular will but instead according to the rules of the partisan apparatus's bureaucratic game, which are going to promote some new rulers. And what remains ever so slightly democratic in present-day society is only what survives as a relic from the results of struggles that have been conducted for centuries and centuries. None of that could make the people the effectively actual holder of power in our so-called democratic societies, the liberal-oligarchic societies. The people have, at the very most, a vague electoral veto once every {four,} five, or ten years—a veto, as you know, that is more fictive than real for the very simple reason that the game is rigged, not in the sense of electoral fraud, but because the choices offered to the voters are always predetermined.

Yet one mustn't think for all that that the dominant

capitalist or politician oligarchies are always and everywhere violating an innocent people that is being dragged kicking and screaming. Citizens allow themselves to be led around by the nose, letting themselves be fooled by clever or corrupt politicians and manipulated by the media, which is looking for scoops. But don't those citizens have any way of controlling politicians and the media? Why have citizens become amnesia cases? Why do they forget so easily that the same Ronald Reagan or the same François Mitterrand took a completely different line a year ago or four years ago? Have they been turned into zombies by evil spirits? And if they have been, what can one do? But I do not believe that they have been turned into zombies. I think simply that we are going through a very critical historical phase, during which the problem of political participation is indeed being posed. Everything happens as if people were taking with an extreme dose of cynicism what they are being told—"They're all rotten! All those politicians are part of the same mafia!"—which doesn't necessarily keep them from going to vote.

[. . .] Apropos of the equal participation of all in power, I would first like to eliminate the confusion between equality and identity. Giving to everyone the same effectively actual possibilities of participating in power in no way signifies making them identical. That obviously is an absurdity. The issue at the outset is as follows: There is an established power in society. The democratic thesis—which you can contest, both in the absolute and relatively speaking—is that this power is to be the power of everyone, of all those who want to participate therein. You may then say to me, "But perhaps not all citizens will participate; there will always remain an inequality between those who are active and those who are passive." I did not say that democracy achieves that sort of equality; such a quality does not belong intrinsically to the regime, though it may appertain to it in the long run, through education of people, because they will come to understand that the city is their affair. I said: *giving the effectively actual possibility*. If people don't want it, there's nothing to be done. Calm down. One will fall back under your liberal government, and what will happen is what has often happened, particularly in the unions. One cannot save

humanity from itself. And no one can protect it, either, from madness or suicide. My claim is that democracy implies active citizens who truly want to participate. But we cannot take them as if they were an absolute given, independent of the regime in which they live, what the regime makes of them, and what they may make of the regime.

On the other hand, the effectively actual possibility of everyone participating in power rules out, according to me, one individual or one group of individuals being the sole proprietor of factories that provide the bread of two hundred thousand workers. That seems to me to be incompatible. It is up to the collectivity to decide. For my part, I am opposed both to banning individual business enterprises and forced collectivizations, but starting from the moment, in a modern society, that you have large-scale business enterprises, these are sites of power that are political as much as they are economic.

What is to be done with the minority? It is obvious that the minority must be free to express itself, organize itself, and so on. Moreover, where the majority has truly been able to express itself, it has never oppressed minorities. Minorities have been oppressed and so have majorities, each time a given minority has taken power in order to exercise it in the name of . . . the proletariat, the German race, or what have you. There you don't have the oppression of minorities by the majority, even if in 1933 the Germans voted 43 percent for Hitler. The idea that the majority would tend to eliminate the minority is lacking in any concrete historical examples. Those who eliminate minorities are always minorities who have monopolized power. Lastly, I am obviously in complete agreement with you: in a democratic regime, people must be free to express their opinions without being prevented from doing so or persecuted for doing so. That's nonnegotiable. But that is but a consequence of a democratic regime. For, a democracy can operate only through discussion, openness, and conflicting opinions. And no one will engage in discussion while knowing that he is risking his life if the vote goes against him. That's obvious. That said, if you have a little sense of reality you know very well that what currently protects minorities is not essentially constitutional rules.

Constitutions are made; they can be unmade: fifteen sovereign nations in Western Europe have had one hundred and fifty constitutions over the last two centuries! What, in the United States Constitution, prohibits a qualified majority from deciding, I don't know, that all redheads will automatically be slaves of the State? Genuine protection of minorities in contemporary society—and the events of the 1960s have amply shown this as concern blacks—does not reside so much or only in the written rules of the Constitution but in the construction of a democratic type of individual who has incorporated into himself the democratic components of institutions. And such an individual, if he himself is white, does not tolerate blacks in the Southern states being prevented from being registered on the electoral rolls and mobilizes to obtain their right to vote. This is an individual who, while respecting the law shared by all, does not for all that treat authority as sacred and dares to step in when a policeman is abusing his authority, take his badge number, and so on. And that type of individual does not necessarily exist elsewhere—in any case, not in Iran today, perhaps not in Russia either, and undoubtedly less and less so in our contemporary societies.

“We Are Going Through A Low Period . . .”*

QUESTION: You never exited from the “silence of the intellectuals” period after {the victory of Socialist Party presidential candidate François Mitterrand in} 1981. Now that the Right is governing the country again, do you sense the urgency of a *kairos*, that critical moment when something is to be said or done?

C.C.: Several texts in *Domaines de l’homme* show that I have expressed myself each time I thought it useful. But there could be no question of participating in this shambles where the stakes, the actors, and the motivations were crudely transparent. For a long time now, the Left-Right split no longer corresponds, in France or elsewhere, either to the major problems of our time or to radically opposed choices. Where is the opposition between Mitterrand and {French Prime Minister Jacques} Chirac on military, nuclear, or African issues, on the structure and management of power, on education, and even on the economy? For five years, the so-called Socialists have had absolute power; they have used it to manage the system and—as during the Algerian War—to do what the Right wanted to do and dared not do. The policies of Pierre Bérégovoy and Jean-Pierre Chevènement are the most striking examples.¹ Since 1981, the “reforms” boil down

*Interview with Michel Contat first published in *Le Monde*, July 12, 1986: 15, as “Castoriadis, un déçu du gauche-droite” (Castoriadis, disappointed by the left-right split). [Castoriadis had expressed at the time his disappointment with this title supplied by the newspaper. —T/E] Reprinted as “Nous traversons une basse époque” in *SD*, pp. 161-65.

¹Bérégovoy, a Socialist politician who later became Prime Minister, was from 1981 to 1986 successively Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic, Minister of Social Affairs, and Minister of Economy and Finances. Before becoming Minister of National Education in 1984, Chevènement had been Mitterrand’s Minister of Research and Industry. Founder of the Centre d’études, de recherche et d’éducation socialistes (CERES, or the Center of Socialist Studies, Research and Education), Chevènement had been a key ally of Mitterrand in the latter’s takeover/reorganization of the French Socialist Party and in the 1981

to three types of measures: those that relate to the peculiarities and the backwardness of France (decentralization, the death penalty); those that usefully exploit dogmatic paleosocialist stands to the benefit of the party's bureaucracy (nationalization, replacement of the managers currently in place with "ours"); and those, finally, that are intended to facilitate greater penetration of the state apparatus by the Socialist apparatus. On the other hand, you have a "Right" that calls itself liberal {in the conservative sense of "free-market" policies} while accompanying each of its measures with fifteen interventionist or *dirigiste* clauses, that, naturally, goes on the attack against the least favored strata, immigrant populations, and other foreigners, and that irremediably suffers from the same total lack of ideas and political imagination.

A total misunderstanding, an aberrant age.

Q.: Would the cretinism you denounce without mincing your words therefore not be unique to these Liberals?

C.C.: It is well known that there have been some Liberals with deep and original minds. Among others, there were the American Founding Fathers, Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill. There is no relation with the kinds of rehashing found in contemporary "liberal" discourses where no new ideas are to be found and there is not a single effort to face up to the problems of the present. The question that arises in the face of such impoverishment is the following: Where does the strength of this pseudoliberalism of the past few years come from? I think that, in large part, it comes from this, that "liberal" demagoguery has known how to capture the profoundly antibureaucratic and antistatist movement and mood that has existed since the early 1960s (and that had escaped the shrewd notice of "socialist" leaders).

It is a great misunderstanding to see in May '68 and the other movements of the 1960s the origin of contemporary

election. Thus both politicians, ministers in the government of Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy (1981-1984), remained ministers in the austerity government of Mauroy's successor, Laurent Fabius (1984-1986). — T/E

“individualism.”² The latter results from the failure of May ’68, and this failure *was internal*. The movement—like its analogues in other countries—carried along with itself many absurdities. It was unable to go beyond the stage of subversive demonstrations. And it did not know how to face up in a positive way to the question of its own self-governance. Yet its deep-seated inspiration was the aspiration for *autonomy*, in its social as well as individual dimension. Today, as always, the political task is to take back up and carry further the great emancipatory tradition of the West, that is, to construct a democratic, self-governed society where individual autonomy and collective autonomy lean on and feed off each other. But that cannot be done apart from a large-scale democratic movement in which the population takes part—which is precisely what is absent. The failure of the movements of the Sixties has converged with the deep-seated tendencies of modern bureaucratic capitalism, driving people to apathy and privatization.

For the time being, therefore, the *kairos* is lacking as a political *kairos*. Nothing can be done about that, and it’s not a dead loss. It gives one time to think further, to question more deeply, as I try to do in the philosophical texts published in *Domaines de l’homme*.³

Q.: How do you explain this apathy?

C.C.: That’s a huge question, one of the core issues of the second volume of *Devant la guerre* (Facing war):⁴ Why and how does a culture die? This question is just as difficult

²See “The Movements of the Sixties” (1986; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

³Among the philosophical texts published in *DH*, the following ones appear in translation: “The Discovery of the Imagination,” “Institution of Society and Religion,” and “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” (all now in [WIF](#)) as well as “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (now in *CR*). —T/E

⁴Work not completed by the author. “The Crisis of Western Societies” (trans. David J. Parent, *Telos*, 53 [Fall 1982]: 17-28; new translation by David Ames Curtis in *CR*, with added Prefatory Paragraph [1985]) gives an idea of what its content would have been. We hope one day to be able to publish the chapters of this work Castoriadis drafted. —French Editors

as the other one: Why and how is a culture created? A culture creates itself by creating new imaginary significations and by embodying them in institutions. The world is populated by gods and nymphs. Or the world and humans have been created by an omniscient and omnipotent god. Or else the world is but inert matter by means of which we can achieve what gives meaning to human life—the unlimited expansion of the forces of production, or of mastery, or of might. Here we have the core imaginary significations of a few known societies—and one can see without difficulty the institutions that have actively embodied them. Such institutions often experience crises, but societies always also have an enormous capacity for self-repair. That capacity depends basically on the ongoing vitality of those imaginary significations, that is to say, also and especially on their capacity to form, enliven, inspire, and motivate individuals. Do Western societies still believe in an unlimited future filled with ever more “well-being,” wealth, and technical “prowess”? Do they truly believe that such a future is worth the trouble? Is that an idea for which one might be, for example, willing to die? Do those societies produce individuals capable of anything other than *living off* the system?

Q.: What you are saying is not, in general, very encouraging or very mobilizing.

C.C.: Before being in agreement with others, I want to be in agreement with myself. I am astounded, and at times distraught, to see the ravages of a pseudo-Hegelian realism—which in reality is a form of opportunism, with a very short-term outlook, moreover—even among nice and intelligent young people. With a tone of commiseration, one trots out the following argument: But that was being said ten years ago; it can no longer be said today! My poor friend, it is *because* something has currency today that it has every chance of being a howling blunder. Hegel said, “World history is the Last Judgment.”⁵ For our age, it’s: This evening’s television

⁵The phrase *Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht*, which is found in G. W. F. Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, §340, is often quoted by Castoriadis, e.g., in “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (1964-65; now in *IIS*, pp. 11 and 374n4) and in the 1972 General Introduction (now in *PSWI*, p. 27). —T/E

show is the Last Judgment. And as this show will, by the very way it is constructed and quite rightly, be forgotten tomorrow morning, there is a Last Judgment every evening—that is to say, there no longer is any judgment, last or first, nor is there any memory or any reflection. According to the good manners of the Parisian intellectual microcosm, it has become indecent to remind others (and even to recall for oneself) what so-and-so was telling us last year.

Q.: How long can one accept being in the minority?

C.C.: I am not in the minority; I am alone, which does not mean isolated. I was alone—we were alone—during the whole period of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*; what came afterward has shown that we were not isolated.⁶ It is possible that everything I am saying and writing is rubbish, of no value. There nonetheless also exists another, less optimistic hypothesis: that people today have no desire to listen to, and to make the effort demanded by, a discourse that calls for critical reflection, responsibility, and a rejection of the careless attitude of just letting things go.

Q.: Are you very pessimistic?

C.C.: This era is the one in which the supremely ridiculous term *postmodernism* has been invented in order to conceal its eclectic sterility, the reign of facileness, the inability to create, and the evacuation of thought to the benefit, at best, of commentary and most often plays on words and belching. This is an era of parasitism and universal pillaging. What passes today for the latest in “thought” and “political philosophy” will, I am convinced, be regarded with pity in one, two, or three decades. For what, at bottom, is being said? That history has stopped or, better, that it is finished. Since Greek Antiquity, Europe has also defined itself through philosophy, and we are being told: It’s the end of philosophy; all that remains is to “deconstruct.” For twenty-five centuries, Europe has defined itself through its struggles to modify the institution of society, its social and political struggles, its creation of politics, and we are being

⁶Cf., however, what Castoriadis said four years later in “Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process” (see n. 8 in that chapter, above). —T/E

told: Politics (true politics, great politics) has ended, it's over. The parliamentary or presidential republic (which is also called *democracy*, respect for words having long ago been lost), that's the finally found form of human society. Of course, a few reforms remain to be accomplished: revising, for example, family allocations for rural policemen [*gardes champêtres*]. But in the main, society's political task, its institutive task, is finished: we'll have Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, and Mitterrand/Chirac for centuries to come.

In conjuring up such a nightmare, one can only become irresistibly optimistic. For, from such perspective, there is almost an inner contradiction. Those people are the byproducts and parasites of contemporary regimes, and in no way could they *create* those regimes (as the "deconstructionists" of today can live only because philosophers have existed). And they could not even, in the long run, preserve such regimes. Regimes produced by peoples' struggles have otherwise radical objectives: objectives relating to genuine *autonomy*. Philosophy, true thinking, is not finished; one could even say that it is beginning. And great politics is to be recommenced. Autonomy is not simply a project; it is an effectively actual possibility of human being. One does not have to foresee or decree its advent or its erasure; one has to work for it. We are going through a low period, that's all.

Do Vanguards Exist?*

QUESTION: The word *avant-garde* or *vanguard* is associated with artistic and political movements. On another level of ideas, one speaks of *state-of-the-art scientific research* and *avant-garde* techniques. What connections are there between those different senses of the term? What is a vanguard or an *avant-garde*?

C.C.: First of all, let me make a historical remark. I do not think that Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Bach were the *avant-garde* artists of their eras. Not that their works were approved of by everyone: there certainly were differences of opinion and of taste, struggles among competing schools. But there was no question of an “*avant-garde*.” This idea, this military metaphor of a corps dispatched to the front of society that explores the terrain and is to have first contact with the enemy, is a relatively recent invention. It implies that history is and has to be “marching forward,” a “progression.” At best, the idea is based on huge presuppositions in the philosophy of history. At worst, the idea is downright absurd: the most recent thing would be the best, the most beautiful, and so on. It is this last idea, moreover, that prevails today.

Q.: Where and when was the *avant-garde* born?

C.C.: The first manifestations of the phenomenon probably took place in France at the end of the Restoration and especially under the Second Empire: Baudelaire with the banning of *The Flowers of Evil* for its supposed offense against public morals, in fact even more so for aesthetic reasons; the scandal created by Édouard Manet’s *Olympia*; Arthur Rimbaud, and so on. Almost immediately this spilled over into other European countries (Wagner proclaimed that

*Interview with Michel de Pracontal published as “Cette course absurde vers le nouveau pour le nouveau” (This absurd race for the new for the sake of the new), in *L’Événement du jeudi*, August 20-26, 1987: 80-82. [This was interview no. 5 in the series “La mort des avant-gardes?” (The death of vanguards?). —T/E] We have used Castoriadis’s typescript. Published as “Y a-t-il des avant-gardes?” in *SD*, pp. 167-76.

he was writing “the music of the future”).¹ In Russia before the Revolution, starting in 1900, one notices a fantastic ferment taking place in painting, sculpture, and poetry. Between 1860 and 1930, the great creators broke loose from society and clashed with it. What they were doing was deemed subversive and/or incomprehensible—and most of the time they themselves were enemies of the established order. This was also the era when the misunderstood genius and the *artiste maudit* appeared—as *type* and not as an individual case. Vincent van Gogh died destitute, and eighty years later one of his paintings broke the all-time record for the sale price of a picture.

Q.: How do you explain this marginalization of creative people?

C.C.: In bourgeois society after it reached maturity, a cultural dissociation took place for, as far as I know, the first time in history. The capitalist bourgeoisie lost its historical creativity. Its culture sank into repetition. Its great artists were then the *pompier*s, who have been rediscovered today at the Orsay Museum in Paris.² Official society, the wealthy, and the State that commissioned art accepted only art that was completely conventional. Almost necessarily, authentically creative artists were then marginal people who received only belated or posthumous recognition. After 1930—and, still more, after 1945—this history repeated itself, but in comic fashion: there was a race toward innovation for the sake of innovation. Yet this time it happened with the applause (and the money) of the “well-informed public,” who adopted the

¹Richard Wagner’s *Zukunftsmusik*, published in French in 1860 as “La musique de l’avenir,” was published in German the following year. —T/E

²When the Orsay Museum opened in Paris the previous year, many people derided the decision to show *l’art pompier*—literally and quite pejoratively, “fireman art,” the conventional state-sponsored academic art of the nineteenth century ridiculed for its historical-painting depictions of shiny helmets resembling those of French firemen—alongside the works of the great Impressionist and Realist artists. Castoriadis also mentions *pompier art* in his 1986 talk, “The Crisis of Culture and the State” (now in *PPA*, see p. 231), and in “The Dilapidation of the West” (1991; now in *RTI(TBS)*, see p. 100). —T/E

following stupid judgment: It has to be good since it's new; what comes after is necessarily better than what came before. Such "revolutions" and "subversions," which brought in a lot, quickly succeeded one another at an accelerated rate.

Ultimately, this absurd race for the new for the sake of the new wore itself out and became empty, culminating—beginning in the field of architecture—in the much-talked-about "postmodernist" style, with its ostentatious proclamation that nothing more is to be said, except by recombining what has already been said. As one of the spokesmen for postmodernism proudly declared in the United States, "At last, we are delivered from the tyranny of style."³ An admission of sterility—repetition of what has already been done as one's program—but also the declaration of a profound truth: Modernity was great and open (see the Japanese, African, and Amerindian "influences" on the Impressionists, on Picasso, and so on). "Postmodernism" is dull and lacking in backbone. Its main merit is to have made one understand, by way of contrast, how sublime the "modern" period was.

In short, the appearance, as well as the value, of an "avant-garde" in art and literature was a phenomenon linked to the specific and transient characteristics of one historical era.

Q.: While the artistic avant-garde ends up in an impasse, is not the opposite true in the area of science, where the race for novelty seems to be conjoined with the progress of knowledge?

C.C.: Since the time when we entered into scientific development—first of all with the Greeks, then and especially with the Renaissance—we have rightly thought that there is always something else to be found, that what we have seen so far is only provisionally correct and is so only within a certain framework, and so on. In science, there is always someplace further to go—whereas in the domain of art the idea of going

³In [WIF](#), p. 415n1, and [RTI\(TBS\)](#), p. 223, this quotation appears as "At last, postmodernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style." Without "At last," the same statement also appears in [FT\(P&K\)](#), p. 143. —T/E

further is meaningless. No one will ever go further than Aeschylus, Beethoven, or Rimbaud. No one will go further than Kafka's *Castle*. One will be able to go elsewhere. One will be able to go otherwise. One will not go further. In this sense, scientific development does indeed exist, whereas one cannot speak of development in the area of literature or the arts. Yet one must be careful: such development is not a mere accumulation of bits of knowledge, each adding to the others. It is wrought through some rather major revolutions. The relation between the new thing that is found and what was already granted is more than strange. From the standpoint of its philosophical significance, the transition from Newton's physics to Einstein's raises immense questions.

Q.: Can it not be said that the first "is contained" within the second?

C.C.: No. Serious questions result as a matter of fact from this lack of containment. The average scientist believes that Isaac Newton offered a first approximation and Albert Einstein a second, better approximation. But that isn't so; there's a problem of theoretical (and not simply numerical) compatibility between those two conceptions. In a sense, Newton is just plain wrong. In another sense, he isn't; he covers, as a first approximation, 99 percent of the phenomena. Therefore, there are scientific revolutions. At certain moments, there emerge great new imaginary schemata that better account for reality than the previous ones. That is the case with relativity or quantum physics. How is novelty received? Newtonian theory was not accepted right away; in France, for example, the Cartesians were opposed to it for decades. Einstein's theory—more precisely, the theory of special relativity—didn't raise a very great uproar; it could be said that it was classical in spirit—and yet, it wasn't for that theory that Einstein received the Nobel Prize. General relativity, which, for its part, destroyed the classical framework, long seemed to physicists a theoretical curiosity without really great import; and still today, one has the impression that they do not realize its very profound philosophical implications and the aporias those implications raise. On the contrary, quantum theory destroys something quite basic to classical physics, an idea physicists as well as common sense had imbibed with their

mother's milk: the idea of determinism, the category of causality. That is why Einstein himself, Louis de Broglie, and Erwin Schrödinger never accepted it. Today, quantum theory is almost universally accepted. Everything happens as if one had gotten used to major innovations. Despite the huge theoretical difficulties of contemporary physics—the situation there is quite chaotic—scientists advance the “craziest” theories and discuss them. It is understood that reality is less “logical,” in the sense of our familiar logic of two times two equal four, than it had until then been thought to be. A famous physicist could say of a new theory, “It's not crazy enough to be true.”⁴

Q.: But is not this tolerance of novelty connected to a narrowly pragmatic outlook? Don't physicists make use of quantum physics without truly seeking to know what it signifies?

C.C.: That is, generally speaking, quite true. Physicists have given up trying to make sense of what they say and connect it to the everyday world as well as to the great philosophical questions that lie at the origin of science. They do not even worry any more about being consistent at the level of the categories they employ. So, categories that are still more basic than causality, those of *locality* and *separability*, are challenged by quantum theory. It can no longer be said, in any of those cases, that one thing is “distinct” from another or that that thing is to be found in a precise place and not at the same time almost everywhere and almost nowhere. Well, physicists quietly go on working. They grant that at the deepest level—the deepest one reached at the present time!—things are not necessarily localizable or separable. What does that mean? It's a mystery. This disinterest in meaning and signification, which in my opinion is quite serious, leaves its mark on contemporary physics as it does on the present era in general. In the long term, this will perhaps have critical consequences.

Can one speak of a scientific vanguard? I don't think that that expression would have any meaning here. Some

⁴Niels Bohr, “Your theory is crazy, but it's not crazy enough to be true” (see other variations at: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Niels_Bohr). —T/E

scientists do work that is more original than what others do, but it's not a matter of a vanguard. The distinction would rather be between those who are working at the frontiers of problems and those who continue to plow an already marked-off field of science.

Q.: What about political vanguards?

C.C.: At the outset, what one comes across especially is the Leninist ideology of the Party as “vanguard” of the working class. The idea is still there in the vulgar or popularized view: there exists a political truth, as it happens an idea or theory about future society and about the path leading to it, and this truth is already in the possession of a particular category of people, the Party and its leaders, by virtue of their connection with revolutionary theory. Those people therefore have the duty to guide the working class, to lead it to the Promised Land. Lenin said that the Party always has to be ahead of the masses, but only by one step. One must understand what that means. If it were at the same level as the masses, it would no longer be a vanguard, and if it were three kilometers ahead, it would find itself completely isolated and would go belly up. The Party must not be isolated from the masses; it must therefore present its program as immediately achievable. It must show the masses that it is adopting their immediate demands and that it doesn't want to draw them too far—whereas in fact, those demands are the bait used to get them to swallow the entire Party line.

Q.: If one rejects the notion of a party, of a minoritarian group in possession of the truth, how is one to conceive the political role of the vanguard?

C.C.: For my part, I have long challenged the notion of a vanguard. But I still remain, and more than ever, deeply convinced that present-day society will not exit from its crisis unless it performs on itself a radical transformation: in this sense, I am still a revolutionary. And I think that this transformation can only be the work of the immense majority of men and women who live in this society. The question then arises: How is one to conceive the relation between a population—French or English or American—and those who think or believe that they are thinking through a bit further, and especially in an ongoing way, the great political questions and

who want to act on the basis of such thinking? This relation inevitably goes through entirely opposite phases. For example, in the present phase the population finds itself in a state of total political apathy, in the most complete sort of privatization (this is what is being glorified under the heading of “individualism”). Such a state is rarely disturbed by some tiny ripples on the surface (like the November-December 1986 student movement).⁵ If one thought that everything that is real is rational, that what happens is what has to happen—a truly monstrous idea—one would say that there is nothing to be done. Everyone attends to his own affairs, buys his videos, leaves on vacation, etc. I think that during a period like this one the role of those who think politics through and who have a political passion (a passion for common affairs) is to say out loud to the population, even if they are not heard very well, what they think: to criticize what is and also to remind the people that there are phases in its history where it has itself been otherwise, where it has acted in a historically creative way, where it has acted in an *institutive* way.

Let us suppose now that suddenly, when one thinks that nothing could happen any longer, a part of the population, on the basis of a minor incident, starts to invent some demands, some claims, some forms of action and organization. That is exactly what happened in May '68. [. . .] In that type of phase, genuine historical creation is in the process of being made, and it must be understood that what one has to learn from the movement currently in progress is probably much more important than what one could teach it, assuming that one

⁵ These 1986 student protests were directed against a reform of the French university system known under the name of the Deputy Minister of Research and Higher Education, Alain Devaquet, who officially proposed this reform under the government of Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. Widespread student protests, at the time the largest since May '68 in France, created a climate favorable to grassroots strikes that broke out in December among public-sector rail workers. In addition to his response to the penultimate question in the present chapter, see Castoriadis's contributions to a May 1987 Sorbonne University colloquium devoted to these protests: “La construction intellectuelle, médiatique et politique du mouvement étudiant de l'automne 1986,” *Politix*, 1 (Winter 1988): 8-31 (Castoriadis, *ibid.*: [16-18](#), [22-23](#), [24](#), and [27](#)). —T/E

might be able to teach it something. Consequently, those who, previously, tried to speak and to act while being very much in the minority—the “vanguard”—can no longer consider themselves as anything but one of the components of this whole movement.

Finally, therefore, neither can one say that an individual or a group forms a “vanguard,” but rather that they represent, should the occasion arise, a positive ferment in relation to the state of the mass of society during a certain period. But that is something that is never definitive. At the moment when history really sets itself back to work, when society again becomes institutive, these individuals or groups return to the ranks or, in the most fortunate of cases, become the spokespeople, the megaphone of the collective movement. That is a bit the role Dany Cohn-Bendit played during the first twenty days of May. But in history one will also find people who have been able to play this fortunate role of spokesperson of a collective movement in a more lasting way.

Q.: Is the notion of *leader* therefore not to be challenged?

C.C.: It is deemed good form in the leftist, or left-wing, tradition to condemn (though in words only) the notion of *leader*, which seems to be a “right-wing” idea. That is a false and hypocritical position. Under certain circumstances, and sometimes lastingly, some individuals have the capacity to express much more than others what everyone is feeling or even of inventing things in which others may recognize themselves. Those are leaders.

Q.: How do you see the role of leaders in present-day society?

C.C.: As long as we remain in a state of apathy, privatization, pseudoindividualism, there can be no question of creative movement on the part of the collectivity any more than there could be a question of a politically creative individual whose role would be to bring out questions for others. That is a truism, but at the same time, like most truisms, there’s a profound truth in it: a society has the leaders it deserves. What do you see today? A man I don’t know from boo, whose existence I discover one morning in my newspaper, comes in third or fourth place in the polls of favorable

opinions the French have about “political” people. This man is named François Léotard. Who is Monsieur Léotard?⁶ I don’t know. What has he done? I don’t know anything about that. Has he discovered America, invented a new mathematical theorem, won the Tour de France, presented some device at an inventor’s competition [*au concours Lépine*], founded a successful business, or climbed the Himalayas? No. Has he ever had the tiniest idea of his own? If so, he has carefully concealed it in his private dairy; he’s careful not to say anything but the most inoffensive banalities. Yet, from what I understand, he has been able to form a small machine [*appareil*] (an *apparat*, as one says in the East). He’s an apparatchik who has very well understood the media age and succeeded in persuading the television people to make him telegenic. And that is how Monsieur Léotard has become a political leader—and a leader who is entirely suited for the France of 1987 precisely because he doesn’t have an idea in his head—an idea, that is, that would be new, that would be his own. Monsieur Léotard is the fitting expression of France such as it is. From the Hegelian point of view, he should be elected President of the Republic in 1988. He won’t be, which proves once again, and fortunately so, that history is not entirely rational. Fortunately, the French people are not only what they are—as is the case, moreover, with each of us. What is

⁶François Léotard—not to be confused, of course, with former Socialisme ou Barbarie member Jean-François Lyotard—was the mayor of Fréjus (1977-1997) who became the president of the Parti républicain (PR), one component of former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s umbrella Union pour la démocratie française (UDF) and the champion in France of a Reagan-Thatcher Neoliberal line. Minister of Culture and Communication at the time of Castoriadis’s 1987 interview, Léotard was indeed considered a potential presidential candidate, but President François Mitterrand won a second term of office, beating candidate Jacques Chirac instead the following year. Léotard eventually withdrew from public life following charges of occult financing of the PR, for which he received a 10-month suspended sentence in 2004, and after undergoing triple bypass surgery. (See his French Wikipedia entry, at: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois_L%C3%A9otard.) Perhaps a contemporary, though fictional, rough American equivalent would be Reagan-era “Congressman Bob Forehead” from Mark Alan Stamaty’s comic *Washington*. —T/E

characteristic of man is not to be what he is and to be what he is not (Hegel, again). There is something more, and something else. It's just that, for the time being, this more, this something else, is asleep.

Q.: Is not this political apathy accompanied by an exaggerated confidence in the power of science and in technical prowess?

C.C.: It's a fact that the passivity of contemporary man rests on the following imaginary signification: technoscience as capable of resolving problems in his stead. Between 1950 and 1980, the main mystification was that of the technical competency [*technicité*] of politicians: *they* know—it's too complicated—how to comprehend nuclear matters, how many bombs the Russians have, etc. An individual picked off the heap, it seems, wouldn't be able to comprehend what it means for the Russians to have two thousand bombs and the Americans one thousand five hundred. That's beyond them; one needs a specialist—and not a nuclear specialist but a specialist in “politics”!—in order to understand it. Or this same individual couldn't understand why the French State has to throw away eight hundred millions dollars for planes that are said to “sniff” oil at an altitude of five kilometers; in order to understand the need for that, you have to have graduated from France's finest schools of engineering and administration [*être polytechnicien, énarque*] and be named Giscard.⁷ This farce about the technical competency of politicians prevailed for an entire period.

At present, the two elements coexist. Fabius,⁸ for

⁷ According to Wikipedia, “The Great Oil Sniffer Hoax was a 1979 scandal involving French oil company Elf Aquitaine. The company spent millions of dollars to develop a new gravity wave-based oil detection system, which was later revealed to be a scam. Elf lost over \$150 million to the hoax.” French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who was first “told of the devices in June 1976,” was subsequently accused of being involved in a coverup after the “sniffing planes” were publicly revealed in 1983 to be a hoax. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sniffing_Plane —T/E

⁸ Laurent Fabius, France's Socialist prime minister from 1984 until 1986, carried through the austerity policies adopted at the end of the term of his predecessor Pierre Mauroy. —T/E

example, still embodies the mystification of technical competency: he's the "expert." Léotard embodies the other pole, created by Ronald Reagan, even if he hasn't acted in Westerns, and . . .

Q.: . . . he runs the marathon.

C.C.: There you have it. We are a country with a classical culture; the marathon is Léotard's Western. People find him charming, pleasant to look at on the TV, reassuring, etc. Ultimately, people's attitude toward political leaders can be summed up in three points: (1) in any case, there's nothing to be done; (2) in any case, technoscience is resolving more and more problems; (3) meanwhile, we'll have a cocktail of technopoliticians and videopoliticians, the former for, allegedly, managing current affairs and the latter for telling stories that let us keep on sleeping. That may seem a little premature as a description of the situation in France; I don't think that's so. But in any case, this can be seen very clearly with Reagan in the USA. Videopolitics. The stories that let one go to sleep. "I am going to restore America's greatness." "I am going to eliminate the budget deficit, waste," etc. "I am going to restore morality in public affairs." Now, all the actions of Reagan's foreign policy have so far been failures or, at best, draws. The budget deficit has reached enormous proportions no Keynesian would have ever dared dream of. The trade deficit has become almost unbelievable, and the United States has been transformed, thanks to Reagan, into one of the principal debtor countries in the world. Half of Reagan's entourage is implicated, one way or another, in influence-peddling scandals. And Reagan remains very likeable, retaining a majority of favorable opinions. One had to wait for Irangate for that change a bit. And during this time, the autonomized march of technoscience continues to destroy the earth's environment and to create huge risks for a future that is fast approaching.

Q.: But what would have to be done for that to change? Stop everything?

C.C.: In the present context, there isn't much to be done. If one lives in order to have an ever greater number of objects, one must continue to do what is being done. If one lives to forget that one is mortal, one can always remain asleep

while awaiting the series of medical miracles that will raise life expectancy from 72.1 to 72.3 years. Another context—one resulting from a radical transformation of society—would be required. And in that context, it would be necessary first of all to become deeply aware of the fact that no technoscientific activity is guaranteed to be innocent. It's an innocent moment when a mathematician discovers a theory, but no one knows whether that theorem will one day be of crucial importance for the building of a bomb. A great and highly respectable English mathematician, G. H. Hardy, a pacifist during both world wars, said that he had chosen mathematics because it could never be used to kill human beings.⁹ That's an absurdity. One of the first equations one learns to resolve in differential calculus is called the *artillery equation*, since it is used to calculate the parabolic trajectories of projectiles.

There is no scientific innocence, not even in paradise. That is already clearly stated in Genesis. First of all, everyone must thoroughly make that conclusion their own. Furthermore, in sectors where research-related risks appear, effective moratoria would have to be instaurated, and not just on paper. Yet that would be but a weak, stopgap measure. What is to be changed are the attitudes of contemporary man, contemporary society, one's idea about the goals of life, what really matters, what we are and ought to be for one another. That's true politics—and in this sense, the true question of the age is the political question. And that is so to a degree that is all the more acute the more noisily one proclaims the opposite.¹⁰

⁹Castoriadis may be thinking of Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940). —T/E

¹⁰Some of the same general themes broached at the end of this 1987 interview may also be found in an essay Castoriadis published the same year: "Dead End?" (*PPA*). —T/E

What a Revolution Is*

QUESTION: In what way is an event that creates a rupture, a revolutionary one, the bearer of something new, something irreversible? In what way is it not, as some think today, the mere reprise of something inherited from the past?

C.C.: First of all, it is useful to dissipate the confusion surrounding the very term *revolution*. Revolution does not mean either civil war or the shedding of blood. Revolution is a change in certain central institutions of society through the activity of society itself: it's the explicit self-transformation of society, condensed into a brief period of time. Had the King of England received better counsel, the American Revolution would not have had any military or violent dimension to it; yet it would have been no less a revolution. Cleisthenes' "revolution" in Athens—of which we are still, in a sense, the heirs—was not violent. The revolution of February 1917 in Russia was hardly violent at all: on the second or third day, the Czar's regiments refused to fire on the crowd, and the *ancien régime* collapsed.

Revolution signifies the bulk of the community's entrance into a phase of *political*—that is to say *instituting*—activity. The instituting social imaginary sets itself to work and explicitly tackles the transformation of existing institutions. Insofar as it encounters resistance from the old institutions, therefore also from the established power, it is understandable that it attacks the institutions of power, that is to say, political institutions in the narrow sense. But it is in the nature of things that this awakening of the instituting social imaginary would call into question a host of other dimensions, whether formally instituted or not, of social life. And that, moreover, is required, since in society everything holds together. Of course—and as in *all* human action—there is a risk of blunders. We know to what sorts of monstrosities alleged revolutionaries have been able to be led when they are moved by the illusion of the

*November 24, 1987 interview with François Dosse published as "L'auto-constituante" in *EspacesTemps. Réfléchir les sciences sociales*, 38/39 (1988): 51-55. Dosse's transcription was reviewed by Castoriadis. Reprinted as "Ce qu'est une révolution" in *SD*, pp. 177-84.

tabula rasa and the will to master in reality all manifestations of social life. One does not transform the family, language, and people's religion through laws and decrees, still less by terror. The alteration of those institutions, if it is to come about, appertains to another type of labor society performs on itself; it is a process that has its own rhythms, its own temporality. Of this process, revolution is one node—at once its culmination and its mediation, so that society's self-transformation might continue.

As for the “mere reprise of something inherited from the past,” that discussion isn't really interesting. No revolution takes place on a *tabula rasa*, nor can it, should it want to, produce a *tabula rasa*. It is prepared social-historically; it happens under given conditions, often prolonging already existing tendencies—or it falls back upon them. None of all that allows us to erase the moment—the moments—of social-historical creation the revolution embodies in a brief and dense form. One can go on repeating that the French Revolution, for example, “did nothing but” prolong and bring to completion the process of centralization started long beforehand by the *Ancien Régime*.¹ Why then does one avoid posing the question: What would this process have yielded, what would it have led to, *without* the Revolution? Can we reduce such ideas—such social imaginary significations—as the sovereignty of the people, democracy, the rights of man, religious freedom, popular education, and so on, and the institutions in which they were, for better or worse, embodied to the process of centralization? It's clear that, by means of a, as it were, mechanical absolutization of the idea of universality, the process of centralization also fared well in the Revolution, especially during the period of Jacobin excess. But the Revolution is far from reducible to that.

Q.: Don't you think, then, that the events of 1789 could be said to inaugurate a period of historical excess that led to an inevitable onset of terror, thus negating the initial ideas?

¹ While this is the general thesis of Alexis de Tocqueville's 1856 work *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, the “nothing but” quotation remains unsourced. —T/E

C.C.: If I had the time to do it, I would very much like to do some work around a few lines of thought that, unless my information is seriously incomplete, seem to be neglected. In the first place, there is the preparation of 1789 within the depths of society. What was filtering through, what was being spread by the intellectual agitation taking place, by the ideas of the *philosophes*, and how was this reprised and reworked in the popular strata of French society, in the provinces, and so on? It does not suffice to know that Robespierre had read Rousseau. From this standpoint, one would have to go back through, for example, the registers of grievances [*les cahiers de doléances*] in their successive formulations, comparing what is found therein with what one now knows happened later on in the movement, and so on. A second line of inquiry would involve the study of the immense amount of institutional creation that began in 1789 and that, moreover, didn't even stop under the Jacobin dictatorship. The Napoleonic Code, as is known, is the product of all the legislative work prepared by the men of the Convention, but the same goes for the transformations that took place in administration, in education, in military organization, and so on. All that work was begun as early as the 1789-1792 period; here we have a fantastic labor of explicit self-institution by society, the equivalent of which I am unfamiliar with anywhere else. Within this process, the Federation seems to me to be of decisive importance: the country showed its will to reinstitute itself by putting itself back together on the basis of its "natural elements" or what seemed to be such, the local communities. The Federation is a magnificent symbol of the irruption of the instituting process and its self-symbolization. All that goes to constitute the Revolution's fecund period. Then, as is known, the people began—on account of a certain number of factors and not because this would be an internal inevitability inscribed within every revolution—to withdraw from the stage; even the people of Paris did so. Long before the 9th of Thermidor, the Jacobins were no longer able to mobilize the *sections*. Starting from that moment, and as a consequence of the people's withdrawal, an absolutist power was established, one that obviously, through its effects, further accentuated this very withdrawal.

Q.: But can it not be said that this process of mass

mobilization is necessarily followed, here as elsewhere, by a movement of withdrawal, slowdown, demobilization of the active forces of the revolutionary process?

C.C.: What is certain is that, apart from the American and English revolutions, and even then, what we are especially familiar with in modern times are revolutions that have been defeated or that—and the results have sometimes been worse—have gone wrong (which in no way settles the question of their signification or their effect, as was previously stated). And what is true is that, each time, there has been such a withdrawal on the part of the population; to say that it is not fated does not mean that it has no meaning or that it does not raise a huge question. This question—that of the “degeneration” of the revolution, or better its confiscation by groups that emerge during the revolutionary process and that aim at instaurating their own power—has preoccupied me for forty years {or since around 1947}, and for forty years I have been writing that to this question no *a priori* theoretical response can be given.² One can say only what, in general, has to be done: Struggle for institutions that enlarge the possibilities for collective self-governance; combat all tendencies that are opposed thereto. Starting at a certain moment, the French Revolution experienced a break between the Parisian assemblies—which themselves were, moreover, quickly altered through manipulation—and the rest of the country, which became increasingly absent from the process. Those were the conditions for the Jacobin dictatorship and the Terror.

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel, as is known, saw therein a necessary process of unfolding: the giddy intoxication [*vertige*] of freedom that claims to be absolute leads to the Terror as its supreme form, where freedom is turned into its opposite.³ A lovely philosophical schema—which is unrelated to effective historical actuality and the profound questions of

²Castoriadis may be thinking of his 1947 discussion paper for the Second Congress of the Fourth International: “The Problem of the USSR and the Possibility of a Third Historical Solution” (now in *PSWI*). —T/E

³See the chapter entitled “Absolute Freedom and Terror.” —T/E

democracy as individual and collective freedom. The idea of *absolute* freedom is obviously a phantasm. Yet it is true that freedom knows no limits that might be imposed on it from the outside; it cannot rest on a norm already given once and for all. As on the individual level, on the collective and political level, too, this means that freedom is inseparable from risk—and such risk cannot be warded off by the instauration of constitutional monarchy; it can only be warded off here by *self-limitation*. Democracy can exist only in and through self-limitation. And democracy is a tragic regime: it never has in advance the certainty of a “happy ending,” and it is always threatened by its own *hubris*: see the Athenians in 413 (Sicily) and in 406 (Arginusae).⁴ But I, too, am threatened by *hubris*—and I don’t for all that take refuge in slavery.

Q.: Apropos of 1789, what do you think of the idea that “the revolution is over”?

C.C.: Let’s avoid misunderstandings. I think that when François Furet writes, “the French Revolution is over,”⁵ the

⁴On these two defeats, which are examples of the *hubris* (transgressive excess) of Athenian imperialism, see book 6 of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* and book 1, chapters 6 and 7 of Xenophon’s *Hellenica*. —French Editors [Actually, the Battle of Arginusae was a major *victory* for the Athenian fleet—not a defeat, as the French Editors inexplicably claim while gratuitously mentioning “Athenian imperialism” (Castoriadis simply says “the Athenians” here.) When Castoriadis made reference to this naval battle, he was usually referring to Socrates’ role in attempting to prevent the unlawful condemnation without trial of the victorious Athenian naval commanders who were accused of failing to retrieve their dead and to rescue stranded sailors, subsequent to the Spartans’ defeat at sea, and who had thus incurred the fury of their fellow citizens back home in Athens. The six naval commanders who returned to Athens were eventually tried, convicted, and executed, but later the Athenian people decided to try, for “deception of the people,” those who had instigated this prosecution. (All members of the latter group who were held over for trial escaped, however, before any trial could be held.) Surprisingly, this blunder by the French Editors concerning classical history appeared in print in February 2005—that is, while “Association Cornelius Castoriadis” President and noted classicist Pierre Vidal-Naquet was still alive. —T/E]

⁵See part one of *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978 for the original French edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). —T/E

emphasis is placed on the word *French*. He meant—at least, this is what I think—that the historical cycle that began with 1789 has ended and that the French should stop acting their political battles in the clothing of 1789. But we have to consider the contemporary situation, and this on the world scale. Does one think that all the colossal questions that are posed to humanity today can be settled by the institutions currently in place? If we said that—and that is what the idea that the era of revolutions, that is to say, major institutional changes, is over boils down to—we would be saying in fact that the political history of humanity is over. And one does indeed see people who attack the metaphysics that is said to have led to totalitarianism, and who challenge every philosophy of history, professing, without being explicit about it, a metaphysics and a philosophy of history that posit that one now possesses, in present-day “democracy,” the finally found form of political community. Now, such “democracy” (in fact, the regime of liberal oligarchy), far from representing a final stage of history, is in the process of dying from privatization (gloriously named *individualism*), from people’s apathy, from the unimaginable debasement of political personnel. These “democratic” countries represent, moreover, just 12 percent of the world’s population—and will represent only 6 percent {soon after the turn of the millennium}. And we are noticing that even the “liberal” model {of ideologically conservative free marketeers} is incapable of spreading out spontaneously all over. The great European problematic—that of emancipation, of self-governance of political collectivities—is still around. Certainly some rights and freedoms have been gained—gained through long struggles—but such a gain is qualitatively insufficient. Greece and Europe are the historical sites where a project of social as much as individual autonomy was born. This project is far from fully achieved. And its conditions are once again threatened today by new forms of bureaucratic and manipulative domination, which produce an atomization of society and feed on it, and which, left to themselves, can, in the long run, slowly bring about the disappearance of even the gains made by previous struggles.

Q.: The unlocking of society, the advent of this creative autonomy, do they necessarily go by way of politics?

C.C.: Not only that way, but certainly they also go by way of politics. I know that {since the mid-1970s} some people have spread the idea that one had to pretty much leave the State alone and try to create, “alongside” the State, some “spaces for freedom” that would ignore the State (and which the State, no doubt, would ignore whatever happened there?). This is, once again, an attitude of resignation in the face of *the* problem of politics—the problem of power as collective—and it has deep roots at the core of Western political philosophy. A key postulate here is: Power can only be in the State-form; and as for the State, nothing can be done about it. An abyss separates this sort of thinking from Greek political philosophy.⁶ The latter philosophy is not to be found where, through a huge and truly ridiculous misunderstanding, one usually looks for it—in Plato and Aristotle—but it is expressed in the practice and the institutions of the democratic cities, in particular that of the Athenians. In such practice, one was unaware of the distinction between the citizens, the collective of citizens, and the “State.” There was no “State.” There was the *dēmos* or the *koinon* of the Athenians. Among the Greeks, in Thucydides for example, *Athens* was a geographical expression, not a political one. The political entity was always designated as *the Athenians*, *the Lacedaemonians*, *the Great King*. But among the Moderns, since at least the seventeenth century, the central postulate of political philosophy has been the unchallengeable existence of an untouchable monster, the Leviathan, the “tutelary power” as Tocqueville says.⁷ There is no question there of society itself being engaged in self-governance; it is condemned to be governed by a State that is separate from society. Of this State, of this Minotaur, one can at best limit its movements, surround it with (paper) fences, and periodically furnish it with young men and girls so that it might be satiated for a time—but that is all. Nothing is changed

⁶See, e.g., “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary” (now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

⁷Cf. the final chapter (chapter 35) of the second volume (1840) of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*: “Influence of Democratic Opinions and Sentiments Upon Political Society.” —T/E

about that when, once every four, five, or seven years, that mysterious alchemy occurs whereby, one Sunday {or the first Tuesday in November}, power “is dissolved” and, that evening, is reincarnated (the Holy Communion?), becoming again the “hypostasis” of the people in the person of its “representatives.” Politics does not give and cannot give an answer to everything—but there can be no basic transformation of society that does not encompass the dimension of power. The present-day structure of power is alienating, atomizing; it casts each person back into his private life and infantilizes him.

Q.: Where can an overall break come from, since it remains thinkable? Can one discern a motive force?

C.C.: Posing the question in terms of a motive force no longer has any meaning. For a long time now I have thought and written that there is no universal bearer of the project of autonomy, no “class” destined for hegemony. The problems our society is facing concern 90 or 95 percent of the population. Will that population enter again into a phase of political activity? I obviously don’t know, and it is certain that in this regard we are going through a very dark phase. [. . .]

Q.: What do you think of the views stating that the truth of the May ’68 movement would be found in the advent of individualism and hedonism?

C.C.: What is now called *individualism* is in the main what I have called, since 1959, *privatization*. It was present well before May ’68. The May ’68 movement was, on the contrary, a reaction against this evolution. After the May interlude, privatization flourished again even more beautifully. The ideologies of the death of the subject, of the death of meaning, which until then had been propagating only between the rue de Lille and the rue d’Ulm in Paris,⁸ then flooded the popular marketplace of ideas: that’s because they were forms of theorizing the failure of the movement.

Q.: What do you think of the student youth of 1986?

⁸Jacques Lacan received his psychoanalytic patients on rue de Lille and Louis Althusser taught at the École normale supérieure, which is located on rue d’Ulm. —T/E

Was it continuing what the student youth was doing in 1986?

C.C.: The movement of 1986 was entirely in the spirit of present-day society, whereas the May '68 movement was calling back into question the content of what was being taught, the relations between students and teachers, the relation between what was being taught and life in society. Nothing like that occurred in 1986. Quite to the contrary, the students had nothing to say about the curriculum, never mentioned their privileged situation, and claimed to know nothing about general and political problems. There certainly was, later on, some political consciousness-raising, about which one cannot but be pleased—but what has remained of it? And what has remained, all in all, of this movement? Nothing—whereas we are living in a society that, despite its failure, was nevertheless profoundly influenced by May '68. Luc Ferry and Alain Renault misread the order of the numbers: their book on “'68 thought”⁹ in fact concerns '86 thought.¹⁰ The attempt in '68 to raise the education issue is absent in '86; the effort to call social problems as a whole into question, which happened in '68, was absent in '86; the support from society in '68 is absent in '86, where the movement remained in the minority. May '68 is one of the last movements up till now that fits into the great tradition of the movements of emancipation in the West—the question was not even posed in '86.

Q.: And what do you think of the present self-commemoration trend?

C.C.: Every society commemorates itself—but today the commemoration of '89 is like the fake neoclassical Ricardo

⁹Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *La Pensée 68. Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (1985; *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990]). See Castoriadis's critique of Ferry/Renaut's argument in “The Movements of the Sixties” (now in *WIF*). —T/E

¹⁰See the Translator's Note to “The Movements of the Sixties” (*ibid.*, pp. 416-17), which provides information about Ferry/Renaut's subsequent book, *68-86. Itinéraires de l'individu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). This follow-up volume, expressly dedicated to Castoriadis, misquotes Castoriadis in order to make him into a champion of Ferry/Renaut-style “individualism.” —T/E

Bofill buildings behind the Montparnasse train station in Paris. This is postmodern commemoration—that is to say, cheap knock-offs. One would have to try to make use of the '89 commemoration to remind people what was the spirit and contribution of the Great Revolution. One would have to try to turn it into a paving stone thrown into the pond. But who will do that?

Neither a Historical Necessity Nor Just a “Moral” Exigency: A Political and Human Exigency*

QUESTION: In a recent interview, you say, “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.”¹ Isn’t that the ordinary state of every society?

C.C.: That has been so almost everywhere, almost always, in traditional societies. It hasn’t been the case in the societies belonging to *our* tradition, where the project of freedom, self-government, autonomy has emerged—in the Greek democratic cities and in modern Western Europe. Those societies have challenged their own order, their own institution, in the name of a project of individual and social autonomy. It is such challenging that is on the decline today. Of course, one can maintain that this state of apathy is desirable. That is what reactionary thinkers have always done. This also boils down to saying that the present state of things is perfect—or the least imperfect state humanly attainable. It is amusing, moreover, to hear such a thing today coming from Neoliberals {that is, ideologically conservative free marketeers}—sometimes from former revolutionaries—who maintain that the search for a better society leads to totalitarianism and that this here society is, in fact, the best one possible. Obviously, those among us who take responsibility for our history cannot cease the struggle for another society, for a free, autonomous society, one wherein people themselves govern themselves collectively and in which such self-governance is articulated along with individual autonomy. *Self-governance* obviously signifies self-management on the level

*Interview with Philippe Frémeaux and Pierre Volovitch published as “Une exigence politique et humaine” in *Alternatives Économiques*, 53 (January 1988): 26-28. Reprinted as “Ni nécessité historique, ni exigence seulement ‘morale’: une exigence politique et humaine” in *SD*, pp. 185-90.

¹ See “Psychoanalysis and Society II” (now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#), p. 38). —T/E

of production and labor.

Now, after the great movements of the 1960s and 1970s, there has been, with the one conditioning the other, at once a wave of depoliticization, of renewed and deepening privatization, and a return in force of the dominant strata that succeed in imposing what they couldn't have dreamed of doing twenty or thirty years earlier. They have been able to get the population to accept unemployment rates of 10 to 12 percent or more; there have been, in the United States, labor contracts where the unions have agreed to wage cuts. That is thanks, in part, to the "crisis" (thoroughly exploited to that end)—but this "crisis" itself expresses a regression within the dominant strata, which are incapable of managing the system. Beyond economic fluctuations, we are passing through an era of decomposition for Western societies, all classes combined, where what held those societies together is eroding at a rapid pace.

That said, the current state—of privatization and apathy—is untenable for this society in the long run. The "liberal republic"—that is to say, the regime of liberal oligarchy—cannot operate in an ongoing way on the basis of cynicism and "individualism." The people who are to make it operate cannot, as a whole, be totally cynical—or then the regime will collapse. Now, nothing in "liberal" discourse or in the "values" of the age explains why—save for the threat of the penal code—a judge shouldn't put his ruling up for auction or a president shouldn't use his office to fill his pockets. But the penal code itself needs *upstanding* judges in order to operate. The dominant strata, moreover, no longer have a "policy." There is permanent demagoguery (in the classical sense), as admirably illustrated by televised interviews with continuous simultaneous polling, which I don't remember what moron dared to call a fulfillment of direct democracy.

Q.: At its origins, the union movement maintained that it wanted to abolish the wage system. Aren't unions today about demanding the maintenance of the wage system? What place can there be for the union movement today in an approach oriented toward a society of autonomous and responsible individuals?

C.C.: The demand for abolition of the wage system,

which was indeed there at the origin, was quickly set aside. For a long time, unions have been a factor in the process of integrating the workforce into the system. For decades now, when workers in the United States, in England, and even in France or in Italy really want to struggle, they are obliged to leave aside trade-union structures and invent autonomous forms of organization. Another factor comes into play here regarding the role of the unions: the fantastic quantitative decrease in the “classical” proletariat as a proportion of the overall population and even, more generally, of the strata making wage demands such as we knew them. When they do occur, hikes in employment occur only in the area of services. For the other areas, we are witnessing the accelerated destruction, the deindustrialization, the wiping off of the map of large traditionally industrial regions, of entire countries. Even the United States is in fact heading down the path of deindustrialization. Yet the crisis of the union movement began long before that: the workers have in reality already experienced the bureaucratic and conservative transformation of unions.

Q.: What social forces currently bear within themselves the possibility of an alternative? Or is it the very idea of a connection between an alternative and specific social forces that is wrong?

C.C.: This idea is indeed false, in any case for modern societies. It is no longer a matter of saying that “the proletariat” is charged by history with the transformation of society, when this proletariat itself is becoming a small minority, or that the “wage-earning classes” are so charged, since today almost everyone is a wage earner. Society’s transformation today requires [*exige*] the participation of the whole population, and the whole population can be made aware of this exigency—apart, perhaps, from the 3 to 5 percent of individuals who cannot be converted. We must stress the falsity of another idea that is deeply anchored in the “left-wing” movement: the idea of a politico-historical privilege of the poor. This is a Christian legacy. Logic and historical experience show that the idea of such a privilege is absurd and that the truly “poor” would be inclined rather to bow down before those who dominate them.

Q.: There no longer is today any group capable of self-constitution . . .

C.C.: Indeed, today the question is posed in universal terms. The example of May '68 is quite striking in this regard. The most active students, imbued with an archaic ideology, thought that they were nothing, that they had to mobilize the working class, to march around the factories, and so on, whereas the majority of the working class remained shackled to the CP and the CGT.² At the same time, the students were showing, through their very movement, that the most radical, the most important demands were no longer being carried forth by the working class but, rather, by themselves and by other strata that were mobilizing at that time.

Q.: But if there no longer is any historical necessity, what defines the Left apart from a moral exigency?

C.C.: It isn't just a "moral" exigency; it's a political and human one: I want to be free, I want to be responsible, to participate in the decisions that affect me; I don't want my fate decided by others.

Q.: Liberalism {again in the Continental sense} and enterprise also can be positive values—of self-affirmation, of individuality—corresponding to the demand to be autonomous. Is perhaps the pessimism you are evincing unjustified?

C.C.: I am not pessimistic; I am trying to understand what is going on. What I am noticing is a disintegration of the social fabric and the values that held it together. The "individualistic values" of which you are speaking are illusory. Bernard Tapie "succeeds," but, by definition, there can be only one Tapie for fifty thousand people, since we are living and we will continue to live in an economy of large production units.³

²The Confédération générale du travail (CGT) is the union that has traditionally been closest to the French Communist Party. —T/E

³French businessman, politician, and sometime actor [Bernard Tapie](#) has been the owner of, among the many struggling businesses he has taken over, Adidas and a chain of health-product stores as well as the sponsor of a successful Tour de France racing team and president of a successful soccer club. A few months after the present interview, Tapie was elected as a member of parliament, and a few years later he was named Minister

Take the idea: I'll have my own little store and I could care less about society. But society isn't indifferent to you; it imposes upon you pollution, noise, taxes, perhaps war. "Individualism" is infantilism. In no society with which I am familiar have people been so immersed in the social sphere as they are today. Fifteen million households {in France} turn the same dials at the same hour to see the same thing. Make me laugh.

Q.: Don't we have here one of the forces that maintain the current mode of consumption?

C.C.: That's absolutely obvious. I am not pessimistic, as you were just saying, but the situation is really serious. Everything that happens does not happen with society in absentia: people want this mode of consumption, this type of life; they want to spend so many hours a day in front of their television sets and play on home computers. We have here something other than mere "manipulation" by the system and the industries that profit therefrom. There is a huge movement—a shift—where everything holds together: people become depoliticized, privatized, and turn toward their "private" little sphere—and the system furnishes them with the means to do so. And what they find there, in this "private" sphere, diverts them still further from responsibility and political participation.

Q.: The strength of liberalism {in the aforementioned sense} is that, in society as it is now, consuming is one of the forms of expressing freedom through the possibility of choice; in relation to that, the project of another society appears to be totalitarian. What kind of critique of consumerism is possible today that would really reject what is terrifying in the present-day mode of consumption and would not lead us back to an authoritarian regulation of consumption?

C.C.: An autonomous society is a society with genuine *sovereignty* for the consumer. The mere consumer "freedom" people tell us about involves the possibility of choosing among

of City Affairs in the Socialist government of French Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy, a position he held until he was forced to resign while under indictment. Among his many scandals and judicial affairs: match fixing, corruption, subornation of witnesses, and tax fraud. —T/E

products on offer (even that, moreover, is not true). But consumer sovereignty involves the possibility for the consumer to say (collectively, which is basically the only way for it to have any meaning today): Here are the products I would like to have. Just as on the political level, here too there is no true freedom without sovereignty. Sovereignty would consist in consumers being able to say, for example: “I don’t want a city that is constantly blocked with traffic, constantly made ugly by automobiles; I want mass transit to be developed or another type of car or a collective management of cars.”

Q.: Isn’t there, behind what you’re saying, the idea that the market is not bad in itself and that what is bad is a certain number of social conditions, inequalities, and so on?

C.C.: Quite right. Liberal theory presents the market as a “vote” by consumers. This vote is evidently rigged; the “vote” of some big financier who wants a personal jet is worth one million times more than the vote of an unemployed person or a starving immigrant. On the other hand, there is in Marxism the absurd idea that the market as such, commodities as such, “personify” alienation; this is absurd, for the relations among men, in an extended society, cannot be “personal,” as in a family. They always are, and always will be, socially mediated. Within the framework of an economy that is just a little bit developed, this mediation is called *the market* (exchange). If one creates certain presuppositions, which I talk about in “On the Content of Socialism,”⁴ the market can become a sort of permanent referendum, ratifying or invalidating decisions made regarding production. That’s what the liberal discourse claims the market is doing now—and it’s what doesn’t happen in reality.

⁴ *Sur le contenu du socialisme* (Paris: 10/18, 1979). [For the key, second part, most relevant here, see “On the Content of Socialism, II” (1957; now in *PSW2*). —T/E]

When East Tips West*

QUESTION: You have long maintained that there is no return from a Communist regime, once it has been established. Mikhail Gorbachev seems to be proving you wrong.

C.C.: Gorbachev's accession to power, his ability to maintain himself there and to introduce a certain number of modifications, has been, for me, a great surprise. Considering what bureaucracy is, I had ruled that out. But it happens that the extremely improbable may come true. In the second place, the event needs to be interpreted. I think that it appeared evident to a part of the ruling strata that one could no longer respond to Western pressure, to the United States' relative rearmament or its stockpiling of weapons, with such a dilapidated economy. The military had to be feeling more and more the need for civilian industry to operate with the same efficiency as the military-industrial complex. Indeed, everything that is being learned today more than confirms what I was saying in *Devant la guerre* (Facing war):¹ in an interview in *Le Monde*, Andrei Sakharov stated that the working-class population has at its disposal 30 percent of the national product. Where is the rest going? It cannot be invested completely in dachas and caviar for the bureaucracy. And military expenditures continue to increase by 3 percent a year—whereas American expenditures since 1985 have been leveling out or decreasing. In this regard, Gorbachev's foreign policy, which is very astute, not only affords considerable publicity hype but also allows him to win over his military-industrial establishment by preparing already for a redeployment of military expenditures—and by transitioning from quantity to quality.

There is not only that. There's also, as there always periodically has been in Russia, a desire on the part of these

*Interview with Jean-François Duval published as "Quand l'Est bascule vers l'Ouest," in *Construire*, 44 (November 1, 1989): 38-39. (*Construire* is published by a Swiss cooperative, Migros.) Reprinted in *SD*, pp. 191-95.

¹See n. 7 of the chapter "Imaginary Significations," above. —T/E

ruling strata to become more civilized, more Westernized. There is the huge lag that they know exists between life in Russia and what happens among us. From this standpoint, Gorbachev is a sort of civilizing czar. But does the path he has chosen have some chances of leading somewhere? People speak of *self*-reform, but look at what is happening in Hungary. If no external pressure is exerted in the coming years (besides membership in the Warsaw Pact), what will Hungary become? A capitalist parliamentary republic. Poland is a bit less clear. In both cases, however, this is not a reform, but rather a collapse, of the system. In the USSR, what one has is not reform but rather a continual retreat therefrom without one being able to detect clearly the physiognomy of a new system—despite huge changes like *glasnost*, elections, the new Supreme Soviet, the televising of parliamentary proceedings, and so on. It is clear that, for the moment, the regime—which has ceased to be a true form of totalitarianism since the death of Stalin—is evolving toward a sort of very temperate absolutism with an autocrat, Gorbachev, who does what he wants while accepting that a large portion of things is determined by the Supreme Soviet.

But what's going to happen? There's no point in going back over the huge problems that exist—the various nationalities, Eastern Europe, the political regime, etc. The black hole in the affair is of course the economy. And from this standpoint, the situation worsens from day to day without any solution in sight. When people are told that they will have to pass through two, three, or four difficult years, those are just empty words. One cannot see what will change in two or four years, if one follows the current line.

Q.: People speak of the end of Communism—but with what in its place? According to you, there is an inability to imagine the future, to endow oneself with genuinely new institutions.

C.C.: Here we have the crucial point. I have always thought that in Russia a revolution, in the true and strong sense of the term, not only was not to be ruled out but is one of the probable outcomes. I do not see a lasting return, in any case, to a Brezhnev-type regime. But in what sense might Gorbachev's reform be able to succeed, since on the toughest terrain, the

economy, one doesn't even see what he wants and in what that might consist? When a society finds itself faced with urgent, apparently insoluble problems, that's the definition of a prerevolutionary situation. No one sees the solution, everyone knows that one must be given, and things explode. For the moment, one doesn't have any signs of it, except the miners' strike, where people have shown remarkable capacities for organization and self-sacrifice.

In case society is revived, the question is whether there will be a reawakening of the political imagination. And what strikes me and grieves me in the way things are evolving in the Eastern countries, even though I would obviously rejoice at the collapse of Communism, is the total lack of political creation—even though one can admire the tactical genius of the people in Poland and Hungary as well as their success against regimes based on military dictatorship. But when one passes to the reconstruction of society, what does one see? A return to the allegedly time-tested recipes of liberal capitalism, the market, parliament, and so on. There are no new ideas. We see there the same impoverishment of thought as in the West. Now, institutions are a work of human creativity, a work of the radical imaginary that founds every society. The fact that the Hebrews lived to adore God, and that we ourselves live in order to increase the national product, follows neither from nature nor from the economy nor from sexuality. These are first and fundamental imaginary positions that give a meaning to life.

Q.: That is one of your key ideas.

C.C.: Quite right. At home, political speeches are of alarming vacuity. Neoliberal discourse is empty: it's a wretched flattening out of what the great Liberals of the past used to say. Socialist discourse is nonexistent. There is a political regime that is called *democracy*, but which is not democracy. Every classical political philosopher would have said that such regimes are oligarchies. It's the same personnel, not even 1 percent of the population, that leads, that is coopted, in almost hereditary fashion. The hereditary transmission of money, positions, and connections continues to play a huge role. We have a political system I call *liberal oligarchy*—with, as condition and effect, apathy on the part of the population as

regards political affairs and a fading of all genuine social or political conflict. Social conflicts have become purely corporatist. The population votes once every {four or} five years; it corrects things a bit if the leaders go too far afield. It can fire them and put others in power, but those others are alike. One sees that in France; one should be seeing it soon in England with the fall of Margaret Thatcher and the arrival of the Labour Party.²

Q.: As one knows, people are no longer invested in institutions, in systems, in political parties.

C.C.: There is a basically cynical attitude that goes along with what has so badly been called *individualism*, *hedonism*, *narcissism*, etc. But it is ridiculous to talk about individualism when, every evening at 8, twenty million households {in France} push the same button and see the same program. No! We have what I have called {since the late Fifties} a *privatization* that is unprecedented in our history. That is to say, the pursuit of little enjoyments in a world that for people is projectless, lacking any perspective, save for their tiny individual well-being—it's what I call *consumerist and televisual onanism*. It doesn't go any further than that.

In this situation, people's attitude toward institutions is hard to discern: it's at once an attitude of tolerance and perpetual demands. The State is not us, but as soon as there's a problem, that's where one turns—this going hand in hand with the corporatism I was talking about. We are living in a society of *lobbies* and *hobbies*. And it's as if society was a soup, a mayonnaise that has gone bad: what holds things together no longer depends on the activity of people who take an interest in the social whole. Stuff your pockets as much as you can and try to appear on the TV—that's the system's philosophy and morality. What type of individual, of human person, can that produce? It happens that things work like that, with a pseudomarket—one dominated by monopolies, with a fantastic amount of state intervention, since in all countries the

²British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was forced out of office by her own party a year later, in November 1990. New Labour was voted in to replace her successor, John Smith, in 1997. —T/E

State controls, directly or indirectly, 50 percent of the national product. Things work, but until when? It must not be forgotten that capitalism's huge success leans, among other things, on an irreversible destruction of the biological resources three billion years of time have accumulated on earth. There is here a sort of barrier against which one is being hurled at top speed.

Q.: At bottom, your wish would be a social body capable of a labor of self-analysis and elucidation analogous to that of the analysand lying on the couch of his psychoanalyst.

C.C.: That is correct enough, although I don't like that kind of parallel too much. But there are very deep-seated relations of kinship between the two. Genuine democracy was born in the West precisely as the attempt by people themselves to govern themselves, that is to say to make their own law. But in order for that to happen, society must incorporate within itself a huge dose of reflectiveness, of reflection on itself. True democracy is the regime of reflectiveness. That doesn't mean that it's the regime of absolute knowledge or transparency. It can be mistaken, as we can be mistaken, however reflective we might be. But we are not acting haphazardly; we are trying to be prudent. We deliberate with ourselves. And true democracy is the regime of reflection because it's a deliberative regime. It implies the liberation of collective activity, a passion for public affairs. And the instauration of a truly democratic regime would require the large-scale deployment of such activity and passion. Now, we have not been seeing the signs of that (except during the 1960s and 1970s). The phenomenon is all the more harrowing as, once again, we are running up against the granite block that is the ecological impasse. Unless humanity gets hold of itself, there is a strong risk of it finding itself back with a totalitarian regime.

Q.: And Europe?

C.C.: All steps toward overcoming the nation-State are welcome. But one cannot approve of the capitalist and bureaucratic path presently being taken.

Market, Capitalism, Democracy*

Market and Plan, System and Lifeworld

QUESTION: Perhaps we could turn more directly to politics. It has become prevalent on the Left to say, “If the plan doesn’t work, then we’ve got to go back to the market. In a complex modern society we have to have impersonal forms of mediation, impersonal forms of collective regulation”—in Jürgen Habermas’s terms, the distinction between system and lifeworld. Habermas argues that, although systems should ultimately be under the democratic control of the lifeworld, we can’t abolish the systems as such. The market and some forms of administrative-bureaucratic regulation of society must remain. This is the basis of his critique of Marx: that Marx has some notion of collapsing all social relations back into the immediacy of the lifeworld. It seems that a lot of your inspiration comes, albeit indirectly, from the early Marx. Where does your concept of autonomy place you in this debate?

C.C.: Marx was certainly wrong in thinking that all impersonal mediations have to be abolished. This appears in his critique of the commodity, and also of money. I repudiated this as early as 1957 in a text called “The Content of Socialism” which is in my *Political and Social Writings*.¹ For me, it’s quite obvious: you can’t have a complex society

“Cornelius Castoriadis: An Interview” (interview by Peter Dews and Peter Osborne, February 1990 at the University of Essex) was published in *Radical Philosophy*, 56 (Autumn 1990): 35-43, with a brief introduction. An excerpted French translation appeared as “Marché, capitalisme, socialisme” in *SD*, pp. 197-202. [This *Radical Philosophy* interview was reprinted as “Institution and Autonomy” in *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, ed. Peter Osborne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 3-19. We reprint here the portion of the English original translated by the French Editors, as well as the section entitled “Events in Eastern Europe,” which the French Editors had omitted. The first part, also not included by the French Editors, appears above as “Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process: An Introductory Interview.” —T/E]

¹“On the Content of Socialism, II” (now in *PSW2*). —T/E

without, for instance, impersonal means of exchange. Money has this function and is very important from this point of view. It's another thing to deprive money of one of its functions in capitalist and precapitalist economies as an instrument for the personal accumulation of wealth and the acquisition of means of production. As a unit of value and as a means of exchange, money is a great invention, a great creation of humanity. We are living in societies; there is an anonymous collectivity; we express our needs and preferences by being willing to spend that much on that item, and not on anything else. This doesn't, to my mind, create any problem. The real problem starts when you say "market." Again, in this text from 1957, I said that the socialist society is the first society where there's going to be a genuine market, because a capitalist market is not a market.² A capitalist market is not a market, not only if you compare it with the manuals of political economy, where the market is transparent and where capital is a jelly that moves from one field of production to another instantaneously because profits are bigger there—all that is nonsense—but because prices have nothing to do with costs. In an autonomous society you will have a genuine market in the sense of both the abolition of all monopolistic and oligopolistic positions and a correspondence of the prices of goods to actual social costs.

Q.: Will you have a market in labor power?

C.C.: This is a problem. My position is that you can't have a market in labor power in the sense that you can't have an autonomous society if you persist in the differentiation of salaries, wages, and incomes. If you do have this differentiation, then you keep all the motivations of capitalism, of *homo economicus*, and all the old hodgepodge starts again.

Q.: Won't this undermine the market?

C.C.: I don't see why. There are no economic or rational grounds on which I can say, "One hour of this man's work is worth three times that of some other man." This is the whole problem of the critique of value theory, and the critique of what underlies value theory, which is the idea that you can

²See the section of "On the Content of Socialism, II" entitled "The Market for Consumer Goods," *ibid.*, pp. 123-25. — T/E

impute the result of production to this or that other factor, in a definite way. But in truth, you cannot do this imputation. The product is always a social product and a historical product. You have to take into account that whatever imputation of costs you do, it's a relative imputation, geared to social needs and geared to the future—which has, of course, to have some relation to historical costs and reality. But you cannot have differential labor costs based on any rational or even reasonable justification. That's a very hard point to swallow.

Q.: So you don't think that there is any rationality to the capitalistic distribution of social labor through the wage relation, in terms of productivity? It's purely political?

C.C.: It's purely political. The present distribution of income, both between groups and between individuals, is the sheer outcome of a struggle of forces. Nothing more. This creates problems in relation to work discipline. If the work collective is not capable of establishing enough solidarity and discipline, in order to have everybody working according to some accepted collective rules, we reach the political hard core of the problem. Then there is nothing to do; no more than there is in the field of political democracy, if people are not willing to be responsible for the decisions of the collectivity, to participate actively, and so on. This doesn't mean that you have to maintain bureaucratic and hierarchical structures in production—on the contrary. The division of tasks is not the same as the division of power.

I spent a lot of my time trying to analyze the functioning of capitalist factories. I found that the capitalist planning of production in the factory is half of the time absurd. The factory works because the workers transgress the capitalist organization of production. They work against the rules, or at a distance from the rules, so production can go on. If they were to apply the rules, production would stop immediately. The proof is that “working to rule” is one of the most efficient ways of breaking everything down. So much for the capitalist organization of hierarchy. As soon as you have hierarchy, you have this fundamental opacity in the production sphere, because you have the division between executives and

directors: people who manage and people who execute.³ By virtue of their position, the workers have to hide what's going on from the eyes of the directors. This reaches delirious proportions in a fully bureaucratic society, but {it} is the case practically everywhere. The collective has to take the basic decisions. It can delegate, but it elects and it can revoke.

Q.: This will entail very high levels of political culture and activism.

C.C.: Yes, high levels of responsibility between people. That's certain. You cannot have a truly democratic collectivity, not only self-management and production, but on the sheer political level, unless people are really active. But we shouldn't fetishize this: one can think of institutions that facilitate this participation. Today, to be responsible, to attempt to participate, you would have to be heroic twenty-four hours a day. We have to create a situation whereby you can participate without being heroic twenty-four hours a day.

Q.: This would mean a reduction of working time.

C.C.: Certainly. But there are other considerations. What is working time spent on? During the War, in America production doubled between 1939 and 1942.⁴ And the workers were actually working for only about four hours in the factory. They were playing the numbers, or they were playing cards, or they were "working for the government," as the Americans say—"Leave me alone, I'm working for the government." That meant he was doing something that he would take home. What is the English expression?—moonlighting. In France,

³It is unclear whether this use of *executives* is Castoriadis's or a mistake in the transcription. The usual contrast, following the French, is between "executants" and "directors," or, in the London Solidarity translations done by Maurice Brinton, "order-takers" and "order-givers." —T/E

⁴For America, World War II did not start of course until December 1941, and Lend-Lease became law only that March, but the "Cash and Carry" program, which replaced the Neutrality Acts, had been in effect since September 21, 1939. Castoriadis is nearly correct for the period mentioned. US Gross Domestic Product rose from \$92.2 \$161.9 billion (see: <http://www.economics-charts.com/gdp/gdp-1929-2004.html>). —T/E

they call it *la perruque*.⁵ And in Russia, you know the tremendous extent of it. I would argue that present output under different conditions of participation of the workers could take place in four hours or six hours instead of eight.

Q.: Would it be true to say that you are in favor of what is sometimes called *indicative planning*, via some general democratic framework at a social level?

C.C.: More than indicative. I don't think there is {a} contradiction between market and planning in this respect. In an autonomous society one must have a true market, not just with consumer freedom, but with consumer sovereignty: which specific items are produced for consumption must be decided by consumers in the day-to-day vote of their purchases *where everybody has {an} equal vote*. Today, the vote of Mr. Trump is worth one million votes of the average American. That's not what I mean by a true market. But you have to have general decisions about at least two things: the partition of national product, or national income, between consumption in general and investment in general; and the share of the mass of consumption between private consumption and public consumption—how much society decides to devote to education, to roads, to erect{ing} monuments, to all public endeavors; and how much it decides that individuals are free to spend as they want. You need a collective decision about this. You have to have proposals and discussions, and bring forward the implications of decisions before the eyes of the people.

In this sense, you have to have planning, because the implications of the decision about investment and consumption have to be foreseen. If you decide that you will have so much

⁵Michel de Certeau explains in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (vol. 1 [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984], p. 25) that “what in France is called *la perruque*, ‘the wig’ . . . is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary’s writing a love letter on ‘company time’ or as complex as a cabinetmaker’s ‘borrowing’ a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room.” “Moonlighting,” by way of contrast, usually means taking a second job. See also “Gorbachev: No Reform, No Turning Back” below and its n. 3 for another use of *la perruque*. —T/E

investment, these are more or less the consumption levels you can count upon in the coming years. If you want more investment, then you will have to consume less. But maybe you will be able to consume more in five years' time. If you want more education, you can't have it for nothing. You will have to devote resources to education, and you have to decide where you take these resources from. Do you take them from private consumption? Or do you take them from investment, that is, from the future growth of productive facilities? Do you care about any future growth of productive facilities, or do you just want to renew the existing capital? All this has to be brought forward, and it cannot reasonably be decided by market forces.

Q.: This sounds like the kind of debate currently taking place in the Soviet Union.

C.C.: In a sense, yes. But I don't accept this idea of Habermas's that because you have to have the system you have to accept a degree of alienation or heteronomy. I don't say that you can be master of everything. You can't control everything. That's not the problem. The point is that you can always look back, always change things, and establish mechanisms whereby the function {ing} of society is made controllable by people, though certainly not fully transparent.

Events in Eastern Europe

Q.: You draw a contrast between *fragmented* bureaucratic capitalism and *totalitarian* bureaucratic capitalism that makes it look as though the Eastern European societies were a more closed, more extreme form of the same sort of society we have in the West. Yet they have revealed a fragility that was quite unexpected. Do you think that your interpretation of bureaucracy and capitalism needs to be revised in the light of recent events? And, given that what perhaps the majority of Eastern Europeans seem to want at the moment is simply to exchange the plan for the market, in what sense was 1989's "Springtime of Nations" a manifestation of autonomy?

C.C.: Eastern Europe is different from Russia. It had an imposed and imported regime, which never had the same roots

and the same strength as it had in Russia. I don't think the events in Eastern Europe, or even in Russia, have changed the characterization of the regime as it was. The regime was a form of bureaucratic totalitarian capitalism. But it was subject to deep internal antinomies, which I have analyzed for a long time. From the time of the Hungarian Revolution, and even before, people were resisting passively, but they were resisting fantastically, even in Russia. In Russian factories they were resisting fantastically. But this totalitarian regime, this bureaucratic totalitarian capitalism, is not a timeless essence. It has a history. Already after Stalin's death, it was obvious that it couldn't go on as it had before. You had Khrushchev, and the period under Brezhnev, which I characterized as *stratocracy*, in the sense that the regime had become totally cynical. Nobody believed in any ideas in this regime. The only objective was sheer force. Brute force for the sake of brute force. The maximum possible social resources were put into the military sector. What we know now about what was going on proves that, if anything, my analysis fell short of the reality. The degree of the suppression of the civilian economy for the sake of the military was even bigger than I had originally reckoned at the time, in 1981.⁶

The Polish and Afghan events played a very big role in the change, in the sense that the leading Russian groups realized that they were confronted with an impasse. They didn't intervene militarily in Poland; they intervened in an indirect way through Jaruzelski. And in Afghanistan they failed. What nobody had foreseen, me as little as anybody else, was the emergence of Gorbachev and the reforming group. This was totally unforeseeable. A big part of the thing is Gorbachev's role as a civilizing autocrat. But it's not just that. He also happened to be a very clever and able politician. And he certainly could not have risen to power without the support of the army and the KGB. That's quite clear. They realized that there was an overextension of Russia's attempts to be a world power. This unleashed a series of events that culminated in

⁶Castoriadis is referring to his 1981 volume *Devant la guerre*. See n. 7 of the chapter "Imaginary Significations," above. —T/E

Eastern Europe. There, people hated the regime and were ready to act, as soon as they were sure that the Russian tanks would not enter.

I gave an interview to *Esprit* in 1982 called “The Hardest and Most Fragile of All Regimes” in which I argued that, as long as the thing holds, it appears to be like steel, but in fact it is extremely fragile—like glass—and could be pulverized from one day to the other.⁷ This is what happened. This amazed people, because all these organizations, these steely Stalinist people—“We are the vanguard of humanity”—became sand from one day to the next. But the same thing is not happening in Russia. Which proves that there the thing has much {deeper} roots. Up to now, the process has been much slower. You have ethnic strife, and you had this fantastic miners’ strike in the Summer of 1989, with demands that were not just economic but also political, but demonstrations by the people are only beginning. But Gorbachev is overrun by events, both in the ethnic field and the general field—that’s why he retreats constantly in {foreign affairs}. I wrote in 1977 that of all the industrialized countries Russia is the first candidate for a social revolution.⁸ Up to now, the social revolution hasn’t appeared, but . . .

Q.: Are you hopeful?

C.C.: No. If the social revolution happens . . . that’s another point. We will probably have to pay {for} the legacy of Marxism-Leninism for years from now. It’s true that in

⁷“Le plus dur et le plus fragile des régimes” first appeared in *Esprit*, March 1982: 140-46. This February 3, 1982 interview with Paul Thibaud (translated as “The Toughest and Most Fragile of Regimes” by David Berger (*Telos*, 51 [Spring 1982]: 186-90) was reprinted in *DH*, pp. 56-64. A few months after the present interview, Castoriadis was to publish, in *Le Monde*, a text that would eventually appear in translation as “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism” (now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

⁸Castoriadis said in a 1977 talk (now available in English as “The Social Regime in Russia,” CR; see p. 227): “Among industrialized countries, Russia remains the prime candidate for a social revolution.” Eleven years later, he gave an interview published in *Iztok: Revue libertaire sur les pays de l’Est*, 16 (September 1988): 29-34, which was entitled “La Russie, premier candidat à la révolution sociale.” —T/E

Eastern Europe at the moment, people can't think of anything else except a liberal-capitalist society. Almost everything else has disappeared from the horizon. As a Hungarian friend of mine was telling me some months ago: in Hungary you can't even pronounce a word that starts with "S"—enough of it. Any word. This is the negative side of it. They are under the understandable delusion that the West is a utopia, a cornucopia. In actual fact, they are not even going to have that. They are going to have a very miserable situation. Even in the political field it's not clear that anything resembling a parliamentary regime in the West will be easy to establish; except perhaps in Czechoslovakia or Hungary. We are confronted with history in the process of creation.

Q.: Are there no grounds for hope, then?

C.C.: I don't much like to talk about "grounds of hope." I think that you have to do what you have to do—and hope for the best. If you take the rich, ripe capitalist countries, we certainly should not renew the discourse about insurmountable internal contradictions. Yet there are at least two facts that make it extremely difficult to believe in an indefinite reproduction of the present state of affairs. The first is the ecological limit, which we are nearer and nearer to. The second concerns the present state of capitalist society but is somewhat analogous to the ecological question. Everybody is lauding the extraordinary efficiency of capitalism in the field of economic production. This is true. But up till now this has been achieved through the irreversible destruction of a capital of natural resources that had been accumulating for three billion years (or at least 700 million years). This has been thrown away, destroyed, over fifty years or a hundred years. There were sediments of forests, land, oxygen, ozone, a variety of living species, etc. But the same is true on the anthropological level. Capitalism can function—could function—because there was a capitalist entrepreneur who was fascinated and impassioned by producing things and setting up new machines. Very often he was, if not an inventor, at least a quite clever design engineer—Edison and Ford, for example. This type is disappearing. More and more, you make money by playing in the {financial} casino, not by setting up production facilities. Capitalism also presupposes anthropological types—

the bureaucrat, the judge, the educator—which are precapitalist products. If the prevailing philosophy and system of values {say} that you try to earn as much money as you can, and to hell with the rest—one doesn't see why you should have judges, or university professors, or even schoolteachers. You will have them, but they will do their job in the worst possible way: trying to get away with as much as they can; being corrupt, if corruption is materially feasible, and so on. In this respect, capitalism is living by exhausting sediments of previous norms and values, which become meaningless in the present system. Absolutely meaningless. But this is not a “ground” for hope. An ecological catastrophe, for instance, could very well lead to a series of quasi-fascist dictatorships—“The holiday is over. This is your ration for the coming month: ten liters of oxygen, two gallons of petrol, etc. That's all.”

A “Democracy” Without Citizens’ Participation*

QUESTION: When the question of democracy is posed today, it’s always about representative democracy, so as to praise it or to criticize it. We have made hardly any headway. Can we, along with you, carry the questioning further, for example toward the form of participatory democracy?

C.C.: For my part, I prefer to speak of *direct democracy*. For, if citizens don’t participate in public life, nothing’s possible. That’s obvious. But it does not suffice to go on repeating: *participation, participation*. The question is: And why the devil would citizens participate? If they are not participating today, there undoubtedly are some reasons for that.

Q.: It’s that in representative democracy no one asks them to. In addition, for the most part, they do not think that they are free to do so.

C.C.: As Jean-Jacques Rousseau said of the English, they are free only on election day.¹ But are they free even that day? The deck is stacked, the pseudo-options are predetermined by parties—and, what’s more, they’re empty. What are the “programs” of political parties today, in France, in England, or elsewhere?

Q.: Perhaps their differences are indeed not very clear. So, as for contemporary democracy . . .

C.C.: The latter is organized, designed in such a way that citizens’ participation would *in fact be impossible*—after which the politicians come in to lament about their crisis of

* Interview with Anne-Brigitte Kern published as “Où en sommes-nous de la démocratie? (suite). Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis” (Where are we at with democracy? Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis) in *Transversales Sciences/Culture*, 7 (January-February 1991): 18-19. Reprinted as “Une ‘démocratie’ sans la participation des citoyens” in *SD*, pp. 203-207.

¹ *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (Book 3, chapter 15). —T/E

representativeness. You now have Monsieur Fabius² moaning around, discovering new Americas: people's privatization, loss of interest on the part of citizens, the vacuity of his party's "program." Or you have those Socialist deputies who, after having described the void of contemporary "politics," including that of their own party, conclude by urging us to stand firm on the "President's line."³ For a long time in this country, being ridiculous hasn't gotten anyone killed.

Q.: Citizens believe they can't do anything against this state of affairs.

C.C.: Within the framework of the present-day regime, they can indeed do nothing. In order that people might participate, they must be certain, in a constantly verified way, that their participation or their abstention will make a difference. And that is possible only if it's a matter of participating in the making of effective decisions that affect their lives.

Q.: But that cannot come from the acts of isolated individuals. Only collectivities are in a position to support actions that lead to decisions.

C.C.: Quite right. Participation has to be rooted, first of all, in sites where people are led to associate with one another whether they want to or not. Such sites exist, at least formally: they are business firms, public services, local municipalities [*communes*], and the neighborhoods of large cities, for example.

Q.: You say "formally." What is meant is that that doesn't go without saying.

C.C.: Yes. Bureaucratic capitalism, which rules both business firms and social life as a whole, as well as the overall

²Laurent Fabius, who was France's prime minister from 1984 until 1986 under François Mitterrand, implemented an austerity program with greater reliance on "market" mechanisms, after the initial Socialist-Communist reforms of 1981 encountered difficulties. At the time of the present interview, he was President of the National Assembly and was engaged in a struggle to become First Secretary of the Socialist Party. —T/E

³See the "Manifesto" of twelve Socialist deputies published in the December 11, 1990 issue of *Le Monde*.

way in which our culture evolves (which I call the *instituted social imaginary*), tend to destroy the traditional sites of socialization and association or else turn them into empty shells. Bureaucratic-hierarchical structures destroy forms of solidarity. The culture frenetically pushes toward a privatization of individuals, who not only lose interest in common affairs but see others as objects or potential enemies who prevent them from getting ahead amid the general gridlock. That said, the instauration of a true democracy requires a great deal from everyone.

Q.: Because it brings individual autonomy into play.

C.C.: It presupposes the autonomy of the individual—that is to say, the individual’s lucidity, reflectiveness, and responsibility. It presupposes, too, that the individual comprehends that, contrary to the mystifications being spread by Liberalism {in the sense of a conservative “free-market” ideology}, his destiny is radically of a piece [*solidaire*] with that of all others, that he belongs to the same planet as his fellows, and that he and his fellows are currently in the process of destroying it.

Q.: But many of the questions that are being posed to the collectivity appear abstract to the citizen. Not understanding them, the individual thinks that it is inevitable that he is excluded from decision-making.

C.C.: That is the technician illusion, the *illusion of expertise*. Yet no one any longer adds up the number of absurd decisions that have been made {since the early Sixties} by experts or upon their advice, from the slaughterhouse at La Villette⁴ to Électricité de France’s oversupply of nuclear

⁴See the brief discussion of governmental cost overruns during the effort in the 1960s to renovate the La Villette slaughterhouse. “Excessive overspending [*sic*]” during the attempt to modernize this 1867 Parisian slaughterhouse became a national scandal in the early 1970s; the entire complex was abandoned after orders fell, failing to meet projections for the renovated facility, and eventually the area was transformed instead into a city park. It is probably this scandal to which Castoriadis is referring, not the controversial decision of the park architect to call in Jacques Derrida as a consultant. <http://www.philharmoniedeparis.com/le-projet/historique-de-la-villette> —T/E

facilities.⁵ We now or will before long have experts capable of modifying the human genome. Should they be left alone to decide about this? The experts are almost always divided. They aren’t the ones who decide. When leaders want some “expertise” heading in a certain direction, they always find some experts to produce a report that fits the bill. I do not believe that, in a referendum, the French people would have voted to build “sniffing planes.”⁶ One had to have someone who graduated from a prestigious engineering school [*polytechnicien*] and a great economic expert, like Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, to believe that.

Technological developments would allow one to place expertise in the service of democracy. It would allow the organization of vast public discussions, to which experts, under democratic control, would submit, for example, possible options, the basic arguments for each one, as well as their respective implications and consequences. In this way, people would be able to decide in full knowledge of the relevant facts—instead of seeing themselves bombarded, as they are today, by the effects of decisions made in their absence with the greatest opacity. But all that presupposes a radical change in a great number of this society’s structures.

Q.: Beginning with the system of education, where one still learns only to obey.

C.C.: Obedience *and* anarchy, one *or* the other, one *and* the other, and that brings us back to the basic traits of the crisis of Western culture. Each minister {of education} produces a

⁵Due to faulty projections compounded by the long lead-time required for construction of nuclear facilities, France’s national power-generation company, Électricité de France, which invested heavily in nuclear power following the 1973-1974 oil shock, created an oversupply of nuclear power that peaked in 1988 and lasted until the millennium. See, e.g., http://www.cgm.org/rapports/cd-rom/CD-Yves-Martin/b-Effet_de_serre/documents/3.2.doc —T/E

⁶In 1976, on the strength of fanciful reports, the Elf oil company signed a several hundred million franc contract to buy the patent for a process that was supposed to allow airplanes to detect oil deposits at a distance. —French Editors [See n.7 of “Do Vanguards Exist?”, above in the present volume. —T/E]

“reform” of the educational system; one fiddles endlessly—and very superficially—with the curricula, and all that adds up to zero. Why is the educational system breaking down? There are three basic elements no one ever talks about. First of all, no education can take place if the pupils are not interested in the act of learning and in what is to be learned. At present, one is incapable of furnishing an answer to this question; the only real answer given, which is pathetic, is the following: With your piece of paper, you will be able to get a job—and that is not even true. School thus becomes a factory for manufacturing certificates of occupational aptitude. In the second place, there is the question of the teachers. Teaching is not a trade like other ones; it’s not a skill for “earning a living.” To teach is to get children to learn to love the act of learning, and to do that one must love to teach and love children. One cannot transmit anything if one is not possessed by those two loves and if one is incapable of inspiring love.

Q.: A human being, a citizen, is fabricated as early as one’s school years. That’s where one learns to understand, to choose, . . .

C.C.: Quite right, and that leads me to the third point. Choosing requires that one be capable of orienting oneself and having a hierarchy of values. *Where are these values in today’s society?* In a society, that is, that in fact affirms money as its sole value—and which, even on this level, is incoherent, since society has need of computer scientists, whom it pays, when they leave school, thirty or forty thousand francs a month, whereas it gives fifteen thousand to their teachers. Who will become a teacher of mathematics tomorrow? And why will a judge, who may have to decide cases involving hundreds of millions of francs, remain upstanding?

Q.: If we follow the American model in every way
. . .

C.C.: But we are following it: as Marx said of the England in his time, this is the mirror into which we can gaze to see our future. The pitiful situation of American primary- and secondary-school education is well known. Its university system has made up for that, but only in very small part. And now statistics show that these universities, with their marvelous libraries, their dream labs, and so on, have to recruit

almost the majority of their professors, doctoral students, and postdoctoral students from abroad. The United States does not even succeed in reproducing its own cultural elite.

All this is to say that democracy is a question that goes beyond politics. It is a total question. Society is dominated by a mad race, which may be defined in three terms: *technoscience*, *bureaucracy*, and *money*. If nothing stops that race, there will be less and less a question of democracy. Privatization, a loss of interest, and egoism will be everywhere—accompanied by a few wild explosions from those who are excluded, minorities incapable of expressing themselves politically.

Q.: But the dream of control, of overall mastery of the system by bureaucrats and capitalists, is not coming true!

C.C.: That's clear. The further one extends partial forms of know-how and partial abilities to get things done, the more a generalized *inability to get things done* comes to the fore. The situation isn't dominated or controlled by anyone.

Q.: This is perhaps humanity's chance, our chance to attain more wisdom. . . .

C.C.: Wisdom is needed, and will is needed.

Gorbachev: No Reform, No Turning Back*

QUESTION: In 1987, you wrote a text entitled “The Gorbachev Interval,”¹ where you showed very well that the reforms from above in the Soviet Union were at an impasse. Today, that has been revealed to be rather accurate.

C.C.: Let’s be fair; at the time I was thinking that Gorbachev wasn’t going to abandon the empire abroad. Now, he has been obliged to do so. The attempts at little reforms in countries like East Germany or Hungary failed completely: he ultimately was forced to withdraw and the Red Army had to accept that. Why? Because the Russian ruling strata saw that they had, as one says in English, “bitten off more than they could chew.” They therefore were driven out. On the other hand, I was right about the impossibility of carrying out in-depth economic reform in Russia. What does one see arising in the present chaos, after the total collapse of the totalitarian imaginary, of Marxist-Leninist ideology?² The sole thing that

* Interview with Philippe Thureau-Dangin published as “En Russie, réformer l’économie d’en haut est impossible. Revenir en arrière également” (In Russia, reforming the economy from above is impossible; so is turning back), in *Dynasteurs*, 7 (March 1991): 78-81. Reprinted as “Gorbachev: ni réforme, ni retour en arrière” in *SD*, pp. 215-22.

¹ Actually, this 1987 piece was originally published in three parts as “L’improbable Gorbatchev et ses impossibles réformes” (The improbable Gorbachev and his impossible reforms), in *Libération*, December 9, 1987: 7; *ibid.*, December 10, 1987: 5; and *ibid.*, December 11, 1987: 4. The expanded version, “L’interlude Gorbatchev” (and not “L’intervalle Gorbatchev,” a mistaken title the French Editors do not correct), appeared in *SB(n.é.)*, pp. 467-90, with two added notes, a and b. “The Gorbachev Interlude” was first published in *New Politics*, New Series 1 (Winter 1988): 60-79, and then in *Thesis Eleven*, 20 (1988): 5-29. A reedited version appeared in *Gorbachev: The Debate*, Andrew Arato and Ferenc Fehér, eds (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), pp. 61-83. — T/E

² See “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism” (1990; now in [WIF](#)). Castoriadis had been analyzing the trend toward such a collapse at least since the time of the Khrushchev Report: see “Khrouchtchev et la décomposition de l’idéologie bureaucratique,” *S. ou B.*, 19 (July-September 1956): 131-38; now in *SB(n.é.)*, pp. 333-42. — T/E

is still holding up is what the newspapers call *the military-industrial complex*, that is to say, what I called the *stratocratic* elements of Soviet society: the army, the KGB, the steel eaters.

Since last January's governmental reshuffling, four very important new posts are occupied by high officials from the military industry. The KGB and the privileged members of the stratocracy, who are present a bit all over, are obviously not going to give up their privileges or gamble away their social existence. Therefore, it's a completely chaotic situation, and the three forecasts I formulated at the end of my text are all being borne out at the same time: Gorbachev has been brushed aside because he didn't have power; what's more, he's watering down his reforms; finally, various populations are entering onto the stage and the army is intervening.

Q.: One wonders why Gorbachev never tried to reform either the KGB or the army and why, anyhow, those forces have allowed things to go on for almost four years.

C.C.: One must rid oneself of the illusion that real history is the result of people's rational and planned decisions. None of all that was foreseen or foreseeable. Gorbachev undoubtedly took power *with* the support of the KGB and the army. And he did so with the idea of reforming the system in order to make it viable. At the beginning, he thought of nothing else and wanted nothing else. In the Spring of 1988, still, in his statements to the Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Gorbachev explained that Marxist-Leninist ideology was "the touchstone" of the system. During this period, an attempt at reform launched from above was revealed to be impossible and went belly up. What was set off at that time were national reactions inside the "prison of peoples," as Russia was called under the czars. And things are accelerating.

Putting oneself in Gorbachev's place, the big question mark in this story is the following: Why was *glasnost* necessary? Why were the windows opened? Why did one let all those things be published about the Stalinist period? Why did one allow some freedom of the press? That was done, first of all, in order to discredit all reactionary tendencies. On the other hand, the will of Gorbachev and his entourage was to civilize Russia, to Westernize it a bit. But at a certain moment, an uncontrollable dynamic began to develop which Gorbachev

and his close advisors are now attempting to halt. It's undoubtedly a bit late.

Q.: Does this dynamic lead, as many think, to a logic of dictatorship?

C.C.: Current developments may go so far as a military dictatorship, yet irreversible changes have taken place. In particular, there's the definitive pulverization of Marxist-Leninist ideology, of the totalitarian imaginary, which already was no longer really functioning, but which was nevertheless a sort of corpse playing a theatrical role. Irreversible, too, is the assertiveness of various nationalities.

Q.: In order for the regime to survive, it has to be obeyed by the republics. Is the present balance between the central power and Russia, the Ukraine, and the other republics tenable?

C.C.: No. For, the currently established power isn't mastering the situation. Usually when you gave an order in a factory or a ministry, there were what Carl von Clausewitz called *frictions*, that is to say, delays, diversions. But roughly speaking, the order was executed. At present, the levers of command are not even made of rubber; they are made of jelly. Gorbachev can very well go on making his gesticulations at the Kremlin, sign decrees, and make statements, but nothing happens. What are the only operable levers of command? They are the KGB and the army, but both have become increasingly autonomous. If the Ukraine had just declared independence and Gorbachev told the army "Don't intervene," would he be obeyed?

Q.: But what do the KGB and the army want today? To return to the *status quo ante*? Keep the USSR as is?

C.C.: I don't like the term USSR much, for it's neither a union, nor soviets, nor republics, nor socialism. The present situation is chaotic, for none of the players seem to have any project. What is Gorbachev seeking? Does he want a half-liberalized system, a planned economy with small injections of liberalism? That can't work. The army can take power; there's no doubt about that. To do what? Can one keep the factories running while machine-gunning the workers? Returning to the system of 1980 from the economic standpoint—I don't think that would be possible. This system functioned somehow or

other because, for decades, each person hollowed out his little niche, cheated on production standards, but nonetheless spent half of his time producing (the other half being devoted to what the French call *la perruque*).³ In short, each person works things out for himself while nevertheless pretending to work. One wonders how there can still be any electricity in Russia, trains that run, and planes that take off from airports.

Q.: If privatizations increase, can one rule out the outbreak of a social movement?

C.C.: The most amazing thing is that in the USSR and in the satellite countries, there still is no social movement. It's been five years since the lid has been lifted a bit—a lid that one sees is in a thousand pieces, held together by band-aids. The great miners' strike of 1989, a few small strikes, and that's it. The big movements one observes are national, not social. Even in Russia, you see Boris Yeltsin explaining that Russia is, within the Union, the most exploited nation of all. But you don't notice any social movement or indeed any political movement. Reform-minded members of Parliament want the established power to be reformed, but they have no program or perspective. It must be said that civil society, commercial society, and rural society were annihilated, pulverized, by seventy years of the Leninist-Stalinist regime. Stalin physically destroyed the Russian peasantry. Still today, the amount of livestock is lower than it was in 1930. What is missing in Russia is the anthropological base of habits, behaviors, mentalities, and small bodies of knowledge on which reforms can find support. On the other hand, the Czechs, the Slovaks, and the Polish can say to themselves, "We're going to suffer for two, three, or four years, but we'll nevertheless have had something. We've rid ourselves of the Russians and our nation is independent." What can the peoples of Russia tell themselves to go on tightening their belts? Nothing.

Q.: The Hungarian historian Janos Szucs distinguished

³Castoriadis provides what he mistakenly considers an English-language equivalent—"moonlighting"—in "Market, Capitalism, Democracy," above. See n. 5 to that chapter for an explanation of the term. —T/E

in fact “three Europes”:⁴ Western Europe, a somewhat hybrid East-Central Europe, and Eastern Europe (Russia, Romania). Will the latter ever experience anything other than the tyranny of the boyars, the czars, and the party?

C.C.: I would not speak of three but of two Europes. It’s obvious that there is a difference between France, Holland, Germany, and Poland. But Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Baltic countries have more or less been a part of the European movement. There were elements of backwardness, but these countries have played a role in the great European emancipatory movement. On the other hand, the second Europe, which includes Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, most of Yugoslavia, Albania, and even Greece, *that* Europe has never entered into the European emancipatory movement. If you look at the contours of this whole set, you will see that it corresponds to the zone of expansion of the Orthodox religion as this religion was constituted by Byzantium, then by Russia, and as it has endured within this zone. The Orthodox religion is the true Christian religion in the sense that it is theocratic—that is to say, in the sense that nothing is to be said against the emperor, since the emperor is Christ’s incarnation on Earth.

In Caesaropapism, it was not the pope who exercised power but Caesar who named and deposed the patriarch at Constantinople. Then, in Russia, as the Czar feared that the patriarch of Moscow had too much power, he replaced him with a Holy Synod kept beneath his boot. In all countries, what I call the dominant social imaginary has always been a national religious imaginary.

Q.: Do you subscribe, then, to the idea of a continuity between the power of the czars and Communist power?

C.C.: The Stalinist period of glaciation has replaced the religious imaginary with the totalitarian imaginary. From then on, Caesar was no longer the representative of God on Earth but, rather, he who represents the laws of history. In a sense, Gorbachev’s actions fit into the attempts at reform from above conducted by Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander

⁴*Les Trois Europes* (Paris: Harmattan, 1985).

II, Pyotr Stolypin, and so on. Those reforms never really succeeded, but they created an academy, universities, and especially some heavy industry that was essentially military in nature. They never thoroughly transformed Russian society. What remains, therefore, is this very deep-rooted tradition, anchored in people's souls, of obedience to the authority of the czar or his successor.

Q.: Is the Western model of emancipation as strong as it was a century ago? Is what Western societies show of themselves today strong enough to incite Russians to change?

C.C.: The question is indeed raised both in relation to Russia and in relation to the Orthodox world, but also in the face of Islam and the Hindu religion. What is the West proposing? Gadgets, objects made of plastic. One cannot erode the influence of the Koran by hawking Madonna! Western democracy has become a shell—I am not saying an empty shell. Human rights have a defensive, negative character; it's *habeas corpus* and *habeas opinionem*. The population has become completely passive. Each person is concerned with his narrow private circle, and let the Earth perish!⁵ That is what I call *privatization*. According to a recent poll, 70 or 80 percent of the French state that no cause—however just it might be—justifies a war. That's alarming. These people don't realize that if that were so, they would still be serfs. In order to obtain the liberties that are theirs in the West, there were mountains of cadavers, torrents of blood, people burned during the Inquisition, then thrown into the Bastille, workers shot during strikes, and so on.

Q.: Is there not, in Russia as in the West, an abdication on the part of the intellectuals, an inability to think otherwise, to continue the emancipatory movement?

C.C.: Since the 1920s, almost all Western intellectuals have lent their support, be it only for a time, to Communism:

⁵This may be a play on Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I's motto, *Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus* (Let there be justice, though the world may perish), to which Immanuel Kant subscribed as "a true, albeit somewhat boastful proverb" in the first Appendix to *Perpetual Peace*. The ecologically minded Castoriadis has "Terre" (Earth) instead of the usual "monde" for *mundus*. —T/E

Romain Rolland, H. G. Wells, Jean-Paul Sartre, and so on. In the East, on the other hand, intellectuals have played an oppositional role, a critical one: the best among them have opposed a sinister regime. Once this phase ended, everything has happened as if they no longer had anything to say. That is not to be imputed to them. We are living in a period when Marxism, Liberalism, and the ideology of progress are worn out. That said, it's obvious that capitalism as we know it in the West is infinitely preferable to Soviet "non-planning," which was in reality total anarchy.

Q.: You were speaking of the bankruptcy of Liberalism. What do you mean by that?

C.C.: No one truly believes in progress any longer. Everyone wants to have something more for next year, but no one believes that the happiness of humanity is in the 3 percent per annum increase in the level of consumption. The imaginary of growth is certainly still there: it's even the sole imaginary that remains in the Western world. Western man no longer believes in anything, except that he will soon be able to have HDTV.

It's not a question of minimizing the importance of the market as regulator of demand and therefore of supply, but the present-day glorification of the market by the Neoliberals is insane. People seem to have forgotten that the liberal {"free-market"} ideology had already been demolished by some academic economists in the 1930s: John Maynard Keynes, Joan Robinson, Edward Chamberlin, and so on. People pretend to forget that the present-day economy is an economy of oligopolies, not a competitive economy. Market logic would require, for example, that one might best be able to find a rational basis for the price of capital, or its true value. Now, that's impossible; there is no "objective value" of capital. The price of oil, for example—what does that correspond to? To the balance between supply and demand? To the true scarcity of oil? In 1991, or in 2050 when there will no longer be any oil? Does the price of oil therefore reflect the cost for humanity of the exhaustion of reserves? It's absurd to think so. It reflects only oligopolistic revenues. Now, this price intervenes as an input in the formation of all commodity prices. Therefore, if the price of oil isn't linked to any kind of rationality, the same

goes for other prices—something the Neoliberals merrily pass over in silence! In reality, we are sawing off the branch on which we are living. What would be needed is a frugal management of the planet's resources on a worldwide scale and not individuals obsessed solely with the extension of their alleged enjoyments.

Q.: Opposite this ideology of growth, the only thing that seems to resist, in the East as in the West, is the idea of the *nation*. Can anything be seen therein other than a nostalgic recollection of the times before the big market?

C.C.: Here again may be seen the bankruptcy of the classical interpretations, both Marxist and Liberal. For those two ideologies, there is no room for the nation. It was going to be dissolved, moreover, by the progress of the Enlightenment and the market. For Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Benjamin Constant, "sweet commerce" was to replace war. The same thing goes for the Marxists, for whom capitalism was going to unify the world and lead proletarians to fraternize. Now, things didn't happen like that: the nation has remained an indigestible lump. The national imaginary is all the more resistant as all other beliefs collapse. The nation is the last pole of identification. Still, it seems quite fragile. In the early Eighties, when the Russian threat was still present, a majority of French people thought that it was necessary to negotiate in case of invasion. With growing impotence, "true" nationalists watch the consequences of the worldwide spread of capitalism. First of all, the centers of decision-making are less and less able to remain national. Next, national cultures are dissolving into a world soup which, for the moment, is quite foul-tasting, but which could and should be something else. National identities are being diluted more and more without anything coming to replace them. They survive therefore in an awkward affirmation that "We are French," "We are Germans," etc. The nation is a form that, *de jure*, is historically outmoded, but that, *de facto*, isn't so at all. That is the great antinomy of the age.

War, Religion, and Politics*

QUESTION: Is the Gulf War a mere episode or a major event in North-South relations?

C.C.: The Gulf War is most certainly not a mere episode. It brings out in a striking way certain fundamental factors of the contemporary world situation. On the one hand, there is the way things are evolving—or not evolving—in the Third World. Saddam Hussein and his regime are extreme cases yet also typical ones. Petty tyrants and military regimes exist by the dozens in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. On the other hand, for the first time since Vietnam, Westerners—that is to say, the United States—are imposing their conception of the (“new”) “world order” by force. This is not a matter of right, or humanism, but the constellation of forces across the planet. Thus, no one worries about the innumerable other violations of human rights or about UN resolutions, and the Ethiopians can continue to massacre one another and die of hunger without fearing a Russian or American landing intended to restore order. The object of the Gulf operation was not so much oil as to show who’s boss. And that, in a region that is of very great importance under a number of headings. This doesn’t prevent American foreign policy from remaining blind, beyond the short term. While there was an important psychological effect in crushing Iraq, the region’s problems have been exacerbated (the Kurds, Lebanon, the Palestinians), and the policy of the Israeli government has become even more intolerable.

Q.: “Colonialism was the major sin of the West. However, with respect to the vitality and plurality of cultures, I don’t see that we have made a great leap forward since its disappearance,” said Claude Lévi-Strauss in *De près et de*

*May 1, 1991 interview with Pierre Ysmal first published as “Péripéties et illumination . . .” (Episodes and illumination) in *Humanisme. Revue des francs-maçons du Grand Orient de France*, 199/200 (September 1991): 98-104. We have used the typescript version reviewed by the author for its publication as “Guerre, religion et politique” in *SD*, pp. 223-29. [The Grand Orient de France is France’s largest masonic organization. —T/E]

loin.¹ Your take?

C.C.: The assertion is historically false. The Greeks, the Romans, and the Arabs have all undertaken huge colonization efforts and succeeded therein. More than that, the peoples they conquered have been—willingly or unwillingly—assimilated or converted by them. The Arabs now present themselves as the eternal victims of the West. That’s a grotesque myth. The Arabs have been, since Mohammed’s time, a conquering nation, which expanded into Asia, Africa, and Europe (Spain, Sicily, Crete) through the Arabization of the conquered populations. How many “Arabs” were there in Egypt in the early seventh century? The current extent of Arab (and Islamic) expansion is the product of the conquest and the more or less forced conversion to Islam of the subject populations. They were then dominated in turn by the Turks for more than four centuries. Western semicolonization lasted, in the worst of cases (Algeria), only one hundred and thirty years, in other cases for much less time. And those who first introduced the Black slave trade in Africa, three centuries before the Europeans, were the Arabs.

All that does not lessen the weight of the Westerners’ colonial crimes. But one shouldn’t conjure away an essential difference. Very early on, since Montaigne, an internal critique of colonialism began in the West, and it culminated, already in the nineteenth century, in the abolition of slavery (which in fact continues to exist in certain Muslim countries) and, in the twentieth century, in the popular refusal of Europeans and Americans (Vietnam) to fight to preserve the colonies. I have never seen an Arab or any Muslim perform his “self-criticism,” the critique of his culture from this standpoint. On the contrary, look at Sudan today, or Mauritania.

Q.: What’s the use of the UN? Is it a place for decision-making or a place to chatter?

C.C.: The UN is a place where the superpowers endeavor, when it suits them, to settle their differences without

¹Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* (1988), trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 154.

violence. As long as the Russian-American conflict was in the foreground, the UN was the forum for chattering or demagoguery. Now, with the retreat of Russian might, it is heading toward a role similar to that of the Holy Alliance from 1815 to 1848 or the Concert of Europe after the 1878 Congress of Berlin.

Q.: Does the military-industrial complex you have often denounced still have some bright days ahead of it?

C.C.: Certainly so. In Russia, after a relative eclipse since 1985, it raised its head back up and began once more to influence events. Despite the huge change in the international situation these past few years, one has not seen a significant reduction in military expenses in the United States. Not in France, either—and the French are readying a new fighter plane. Against whom? The Algerians have nothing to eat, but they are demanding that the Chinese aid them to build a plutonium treatment plant so that they might manufacture their own nuclear bomb. Against whom? Who's threatening them?

Q.: Can the Islamic imaginary and, more generally, the religious imaginary, accept the idea of progress?

C.C.: If it's a matter of progress in the manufacture of weapons or consumer objects, certainly so. What they cannot accept is human emancipation, individual and social autonomy. The emancipatory movement, the project of autonomy—born in Greece and resumed much more amply in Western Europe—liberated the creativity of individuals and of the collectivity and thus rendered possible their reflective self-alteration. Now, in this regard religions have always constituted a tremendous factor of conservation and reaction. That is understandable, on the philosophical level, since they always are invoking a source of the law and the institution that is *external* to society, therefore escaping and *having to* escape human action (the Greek religion is, to my knowledge, the sole and unique exception from this standpoint). And that may easily be illustrated on the historical level. Today one sees clearly to what extent the closure of Islamic societies is tied to their religion, which still wants to rule over political and civil society in the name of a revealed law. But it's no different with Christianity. Where Christian theocracy was not called into question—Byzantium as well as all its descendants (Russia,

the Balkans, modern Greece included)—societies are still paying the consequences. In Western Europe, things have evolved in such a different way only because the emperor, kings, and most cities fiercely resisted the papacy's claim to exert temporal power. But true Western Christianity is that of the true Middle Ages—and the society of the Western Middle Ages (the fifth century to the eleventh century) was a closed society. There, history was seen as a process of decline; newness and innovation—*novum*, *novatio*—were terms of denigration. When an author wanted to advance a new idea, he hastened to attribute it, falsely, to an author from the past.

Still today, the old ecclesiastic demons raise their heads back up as soon as the pressure slackens. The Archbishop of Paris makes various noises about secularism [*la laïcité*] and denounces Martin Scorsese's film about Christ. In Poland, religious education is being reintroduced into the classroom, and the Church is demanding that abortion be banned.

Q.: In sum, what do you think about religions?

C.C.: Vast question! Religions have been a central component in the institution of all heteronomous societies—that is, nearly *all* societies. They have provided institutions with a source that is external to society, an imaginary and sacred one, thereby making them incontestable; they have been at once the foundation of the validity of institutions and the origin of the meaning of human life, of the world, of being. But religions would not have been able to persist for so long and, especially, to give rise to and dwell in the magnificent cultural creations they have nurtured had they not, at the same time, also played another role: presenting to human beings, beneath various guises and disguises, the Abyss, the Chaos, the Bottomlessness that being is. They at once show this Abyss and cover it up with their simulacra. The sacred is the instituted simulacrum of the Abyss. In this sense, religion is always a compromise formation—and, certainly, ultimately also a form of idolatry. But without this second element of religion, there would have been no Romanesque or Gothic cathedral, no Giotto, no El Greco, no Bach, no Mozart's *Requiem*.

From the moment philosophy and politics emerged, the illusory dimension of religion became clearly apparent. It

becomes obvious that society and its institution have no transcendent foundation; rather, society is itself the source of its own law. The self-institution of society (which of course has always been taking place) becomes explicit: we make our own laws. From then on, the central problem of democracy, that of its self-limitation, also becomes apparent. There is no divine law; there is no extrasocial norm. We therefore have to impose upon ourselves our own limits, which nowhere are traced out in advance. Strictly speaking, autonomy means self-limitation. In the West today, there is certainly a huge decline of religion, but there is also a crisis of the project of autonomy. Capitalism has succeeded in instituting, as the sole and unique meaning of life, consumption (which is illusory in many regards), and it has succeeded in almost entirely depoliticizing and privatizing individuals.

Q.: What is an autonomous society?

C.C.: A society whose institutions, once internalized by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all explicit power existing in society.²

Q.: Does Communism still exist?

C.C.: The Communist ideology (Marxism-Leninism) has been pulverized.³ But Communist apparatuses continue to exist, sometimes in power (China, North Korea, Cuba), sometimes in Communist parties whose strange survival is to be noted. Strangely, too, a vague ideological influence persists—in Latin America, for example. {As recently as the mid-Seventies}, in Europe itself, Jürgen Habermas was proposing the reconstruction of historical materialism as an objective.⁴

Q.: Has the springtime of the peoples of Eastern

²For the original phrasing of this statement, see “Power, Politics, Autonomy” (1988), *PPA*, p. 173. —T/E

³See “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism” (1990; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

⁴See Jürgen Habermas, “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism” (1976), in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp.130-77. —T/E

Europe been just a flash in the pan?

C.C.: There was a victorious revolt against totalitarian tyranny. Through peaceful demonstrations, spontaneous movements were able to topple regimes that were armed to the teeth. These movements were magnificent in their audacity as well as their strategic and tactical intelligence. But they went no further than the overthrow of totalitarian tyranny. No new organization, no institutional form, no new step toward autonomy appeared. As soon as the tyranny was overthrown, the movement vanished into thin air, leaving room for a blind adoption of the institutions of liberal capitalism—the dream of a consumer society . . . without actual consumption. It was like a local sign of the worldwide depoliticization that is characteristic of the age.

Q.: Is immigration going to become the explosive problem of France and of Europe?

C.C.: It may become so. The problem is obviously not economic: immigration couldn't create problems in countries with a declining demography like the European countries—quite the contrary. The problem is profoundly political and cultural. I do not believe in the current chatter about the coexistence of just any cultures whatsoever in their diversity. That was possible—to a rather small extent, moreover—in the past within an entirely different political context, basically where the rights of those who didn't belong to the dominant culture—Jews and Christians in Islamic lands—were limited. But we proclaim equal rights for all (though where things are at in reality is something else). This implies that the body politic shares a common ground of basic convictions: that the faithful and the unfaithful are on the same footing, that no Revelation and no Sacred Book determine the norm for society, that human bodily integrity is inviolable, and so on. How could that be “reconciled” with a theocratic faith, with the penal rules of Koranic law, and so on? We must leave behind the widespread hypocrisy that is characteristic of contemporary discourses. Muslims can live in France only to the extent that, in actual fact, they agree not to be Muslims on a series of points (family law, criminal law). On this level, a minimum amount of assimilation is indispensable and inevitable—and, moreover, it is taking place in actual fact.

Q.: Is secularism a lost value?

C.C.: Secularism is in no way a lost value; it's more important than ever. It belongs to the philosophical foundations of democracy (the human and not divine origin of the law) and is one of the guarantors of individual autonomy: the body politic forbids interventions in people's private beliefs. As we have already said, it is endangered by the renewal of political pretensions on the part of the Church.

Q.: Isn't racism the real plague today?

C.C.: Racism has existed for a very long time, if not forever. But one must understand what is reviving it in its virulent form today. There is a general crisis of civilization, a crisis of significations, something the void of consumer society obviously cannot surmount. In a confused way, people are searching for meaning. Some turn again toward religion, others head in a racist direction. The nonsense of racism has an apparent sense to it: when one cannot define oneself in positive terms, one defines oneself via hatred of the other.⁵ That holds in the public sphere as well as in the private one.

Q.: Voltaire remarked in his *Essai* . . . , "The only way to prevent men from being absurd and mean is to enlighten them."⁶ In 1991, are men better enlightened than they were in the eighteenth century?

C.C.: They may be better informed, not necessarily more enlightened. For, being enlightened is not a passive state. One must will to be enlightened. Enlightenment cannot be dispensed from a few leading lights to a passive humanity. The reception of Enlightenment is just as creative as its creation. The receiver must shake herself up enough to be able to be enlightened. Today, in the face of the overaccumulation of information of all kinds, the public remains passive most of the time—and it cannot be treated as totally innocent on this score.

⁵See "Reflections on Racism" (1987; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

⁶This passage is found in section 15, "[Des querelles de religion](#)," of Voltaire's *Remarques pour servir de supplément à l'Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire, depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à la mort de Louis XIII* (1763). —T/E

Q.: Who embodies contemporary culture? Cornelius Castoriadis, Michel Serres, Bernard-Henri Lévy?

C.C.: From the sociological standpoint, contemporary culture is fittingly embodied by Bernard-Henri Lévy, Jean-Edern Hallier, Sulitzer, Séguéla,⁷ and Madonna.

Q.: “Everything has already been said. Everything remains to be said. This massive fact might, by itself, bring us to despair.” Has this observation of yours turned you into a despairing person?

C.C.: Certainly not, as is shown by the fact that this passage serves to introduce a text that calls on people to react against the mad race of autonomized technoscience.⁸

⁷See Castoriadis’s articles on “BHL,” as he is known in France: “The Diversionists” (1977; now in *PSW3*), and “The Vacuum Industry” (1979; in *RTI(TBS)*). The novelist, writer, and editor Jean-Edern Hallier went from being a Maoist to having close connections with François Mitterrand, with whom then he had a falling out, to flirting with far-right positions. At the time of the present interview, he had just gone to Iraq to cover the first Gulf War for his paper, *L’Idiot international*. He was to be convicted for anti-Semitic statements written there at that time. Paul-Loup Sulitzer, a successful French financier, is also a best-selling author of “financial Westerns” or “business thrillers” that, it was revealed, others wrote for him. On December 30, 2008, he was convicted for his role in the French Angolagate scandal. French advertising executive Jacques Séguéla designed the rather vacuous but effective ad campaigns for Mitterrand’s two successful presidential campaigns. Michel Serres, mentioned above by the interviewer, is a contemporary philosopher. —T/E

⁸“Dead End?” (1987). For the quotation, see *PPA*, p. 243. —T/E

Communism, Fascism, Emancipation *

QUESTION: Communism and Fascism seem to be two ways of resolving the problems of the modern age and mass societies. What do you think about that? And what do you think of the commonly-held opinion that makes no distinction between Communism and Fascism?

C.C.: Communism and Fascism *are not* as a matter of fact two ways, as monstrous as they are, of resolving the problems of the modern age. Both destroy the societies they seize hold of and can endure only so long as their combination of lies and terror can hold up. The facts show that the perpetuation of such regimes is quite improbable: these are regimes that do not succeed in reproducing themselves and in preserving themselves.

The commonly-held opinion that one is not to distinguish between Fascism (or, better, Nazism) and Communism is not entirely false. From the standpoint of the average citizen, the result of the two regimes is identical: slavery. They are also profoundly similar in their totalitarian nature. In both cases, the distinction between the public and the private is abolished, the private sphere of each citizen is absorbed by the established power, and the public sphere itself become the secret and “private property” of the dominant group. Human beings’ thinking and their souls have to be molded in such a way that they might conform to the Party’s views; in society, there can be no other truth than the official “truth.”

Nevertheless, there are major differences between the two regimes, differences pointing in opposite directions. On the one hand, Nazism is, from the cosmo-historical standpoint, less dangerous than Communism: Communism’s calling is universalistic; it might have seized hold of all countries, whereas Nazism, in proclaiming the domineering mission of a single race, was quickly doomed to failure. Eighty million Germans could not have dominated five billion individuals.

*This interview was first published in *l’Unità* on September 28, 1991. Castoriadis’s French typescript was used for its publication as “Communisme, fascisme, émancipation” in *SD*, pp. 231-35.

On the other hand, the Nazi imaginary, which is certainly monstrous and absurd, had no internal contradictions. Nazism pretty much says what it does and does what it says. Communism is condemned to saying one thing and doing the opposite: it speaks of democracy and instaurates tyranny; it proclaims equality and achieves inequality; it invokes science and truth and practices lying and absurdity. That is why it very quickly loses its hold over the populations it dominates. But that is also why the partisans of Communism, at least before its arrival in power, are moved by very different motivations than those of the Nazis. They are possessed by a “revolutionary illusion”; they believe in general that the Communist Party is truly aiming at instaurating a democratic and egalitarian society. That is why a Communist who discovers the monstrousness of Communism in its realized state may fall apart psychologically or become a Social Democrat or support a project of radical social transformation rid of Marxo-Bolshevik messianism. A Fascist or a Nazi can find, in his earlier beliefs, nothing that would prompt him to change them.

Q.: In view of the results, has Communism represented for our age a progressive or reactionary utopia? What is its legacy?

C.C.: Communism in its realized state represented a monstrous hijacking of the revolutionary workers’ movement. It placed in power a new dominant class, the bureaucracy of the Party-State, which exploited and oppressed the population as no other regime known in history has done. For, no other regime had at its disposal comparable technical and ideological means of terror, intervention in people’s everyday lives, and ideological manipulation. It destroyed the workers’ movement of other countries by subordinating that movement to Russia’s imperialist policy. It corrupted and prostituted, in an irreversible manner, the ideas and vocabulary of the revolutionary movement; it discredited the idea of a social transformation; and it made the capitalist regime seem to whole populations to be paradise on earth. When, today, in a former Communist country, one tries to criticize capitalism, people leave the room. (I experienced this last June in Hungary.) Its sole legacy is to have shown on all points, absolutely all of them, what is not to be done and in what the

absolute opposite of an emancipatory politics consists.

Q.: In an interview in our newspaper last year,¹ you remarked that to each political regime there corresponds an anthropological type, a type of public spirit. What was this type in the “socialist” countries of Eastern Europe?

C.C.: The Communist regime tried to create a new anthropological type that would correspond to that regime: the disciplined individual—or Party member—as a kind of cadaver, both enthusiastic and passive. That effort rapidly failed when faced with the reality of the system. From then on, it created for itself two different human types: the cynical, lying, manipulative bureaucrat obsessed with power and the regular citizen, apathetic and fearful, who flees all responsibility and who cheats as much as he can in order to preserve for himself a miserable niche in which to live. In both cases, the germs of democratic attitudes, which had been able to exist beforehand, were destroyed, and it is unknown when and how they might be recreated. That, too, is one of the weightiest legacies of Communist regimes. It’s also one of the reasons why nationalism and chauvinism are emerging again with such great force in all those countries. For, amid the general collapse they appear to be the sole marker of identity to which people can still cling.

Q.: Do you think that the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe are going to change the idea of revolution, and if so, in what direction?

C.C.: The democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe have shown once again what was always known: when a radical movement embraces the great majority of the population, there is no need to have recourse to violence. The identification of the revolution with violence, terror, and so on is a mystificatory specter manufactured by conservative propaganda, which has been able to find arguments in Communist putschs, beginning with the Bolshevik putsch of October 1917. But another aspect of the revolutions of Eastern Europe must also be underscored. As much as the population showed itself to be decisive, heroic, and capable of self-

¹April 1990. — French Editors

organization with tremendous effectiveness in order to overthrow the Communist tyranny, once this tyranny collapsed, just as much did it practically abandon all political activity, go home, and leave the fate of society in the hands of professionals, old and new. Certainly, this attitude can be explained by the huge disillusionment of the population in the face of what it had been led to consider to be “politics,” but what we have here is a factor that is already weighing very heavily on the social and political situation of these countries.

Q.: After the end of Communism, what remains of a theory of social change? How best is one to use the great legacy of struggles led by Communists and Left Socialists, who contributed to the constitution of Western democracies?

C.C.: The emancipatory movement has no need of a “theory of social change.” Such a theory cannot exist; society and history are not subject to laws out of which one might make a theory. History is the domain of human creation. Such creation is subject to certain conditions. But those conditions sketch out a framework for it, they do not determine it. The idea that a “theory” of social change might exist is one of Marx’s catastrophic illusions; it led to the monstrous idea of *orthodoxy*, which Marxism was the first to introduce into the workers’ movement. But if there’s orthodoxy, there is dogma; if there’s dogma, there are guardians of the dogma, namely the Church, namely the Party. And if there are guardians of dogmas, there’s the Inquisition, namely the KGB.

That does not signify that just anything whatsoever can happen or that we are blind to events. We can and must elucidate what is happening and what is impossible. But each human action creates new possibilities and, if that action is of major importance, new forms of social-historical being.

We don’t want social change for the sake of social change. We want a radical transformation of society because we want an autonomous society made up of autonomous individuals, and because contemporary capitalist society, even in its pseudodemocratic form, is a society dominated by an economic, political, statist, and cultural oligarchy that condemns citizens to passivity, these citizens having only negative or defensive liberties. That is what I call *the project of individual and social autonomy*.

This project comes from very far off (from the democratic cities of ancient Greece), and it reemerged in multiple forms in modern Western Europe. The democratic elements that remain in the wealthy Western societies of today are not the product of capitalism but rather the residues of the democratic struggles of peoples, and quite particularly of the workers' movement. But starting from a certain moment, this movement was led astray by Marxism, then by Marxism-Leninism, which introduced therein the idea of orthodoxy, the idea of the leading role (in fact, that of the dictatorship) of the Party, a mystificatory and pseudoreligious messianism, contempt for the creative activity of the people, and the typically capitalist imaginary of the centrality of the economy and production. If all that is of interest to us is to increase production and consumption, you can keep capitalism; it succeeds rather well at that. If what interests you is freedom, you have to change society.

In this regard, the legacy of the workers' movement is of precious value, both positively and negatively. Workers' struggles have shown the immense self-organizational capacities the people possess, and these struggles have created forms that retain for us an exemplary value. Take, for example, workers' councils. But they have also shown what is not to be done: alienating one's sovereignty and one's initiative to a Party, believing that there might exist selfless official functionaries of humanity.

Ecology Against the Merchants*

The idea that ecology would be reactionary rests either on a crass ignorance of the data surrounding this issue or on residues of the “progressive” ideology: raise the standard of living and . . . come what may! Of course, no idea is, in and of itself, shielded against being perverted or hijacked. As is known, themes that only in appearance are connected with ecology (the land, the village, etc.) have been and continue to be used by reactionary movements (Nazism, or Pamiat in today’s Russia). The invocation of this fact by antiecologists reminds me rather of the amalgamations that are characteristic of Stalinism.

Ecology is subversive, for it calls into question the capitalist imaginary that dominates the planet. It objects to that imaginary’s central motive, viz., that our destiny is to increase nonstop both production and consumption. It brings out the catastrophic impact capitalist logic has on the natural environment and on the lives of human beings. This logic is absurd in itself and leads to a physical impossibility on a planetary scale since it ends up destroying its own presuppositions. There is not only the irreversible ruination of one’s surroundings and the squandering of irreplaceable resources. There is also the anthropological destruction of human beings who are transformed into producing and

*A text by Castoriadis for a special section of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, May 7-13, 1992: 102, appeared as “L’écologie est-elle réactionnaire? Sauvons les zappeurs abrutis” (Is ecology reactionary? Let’s rescue the stupefied channel surfers). It appeared as “L’écologie contre les marchands” in *SD*, pp. 237-39. [We have retained this title with its reference to Western-style commercialism and capitalistic “merchants,” though it seems partial at best, Castoriadis concentrating here also on the issue of technoscience. Unnoted by the French Editors, Castoriadis’s text was also reprinted as “Le capitalisme est-il soluble dans l’écologie?” (Can you mix capitalism and ecology?) in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Collection Dossiers (Demain la terre), 11 (June 1992): 16. Of note, Luc Ferry had just published *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* (1992; *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995]), an essay criticizing certain forms of ecological thinking as forms of romantic antihumanism akin to Nazi themes about nature. —T/E]

consuming beasts, stupefied channel surfers. There is the destruction of their living environments. For example, cities, a marvelous creation of the late Neolithic, are being destroyed at the same pace as the Amazon forest, broken up into ghettos, residential suburbs, and office districts that are dead after 8 p.m. It is therefore not a matter of a bucolic defense of “nature” but, rather, of a struggle to safeguard human beings and their habitats. In my view, it is clear that such safeguarding is incompatible with the maintenance of the existing system and that it depends on a political reconstruction of society, which would make it into a democracy in reality and not in words. It is, moreover, on this score that, in my view, existing ecology movements most of the time falter.

But behind these self-evident statements more difficult and profound questions arise. The dominant thing today is the autonomization of technoscience. One no longer asks oneself whether there are needs to be satisfied but whether this or that scientific or technical feat is achievable. If it is, it will indeed be carried out and the corresponding “need” will then be manufactured. One rarely takes into account the side effects or negative fallout. That, too, has to be stopped, and it is here that the difficult questions begin. We all want—in any case, I want—to see scientific knowledge be developed. We therefore want, for example, high-performance observation satellites. But they imply the totality of contemporary technoscience. Do we therefore have to want that, too? There can be no question of restricting free scientific research. But the boundaries between pure research and its possibly lethal applications are extremely fuzzy, if not nonexistent. The great English mathematician G. H. Hardy, who was opposed to both world wars, said that he had devoted his life to mathematics because mathematics could never be used to kill a human being—which proves that one can be a great mathematician and not know how to reason outside one’s own field.¹ The atomic bomb would have been impossible without the assistance of several great “pure” mathematicians, and as soon as differential calculus was invented, people used it to

¹ See n. 9 in “Do Vandards Exist?” above for a possible reference. —T/E

calculate the parabolic trajectories of cannon projectiles.

How is one to draw the boundary? For the first time in a nonreligious society, we have to face the question: Do we need to control the expansion of knowledge itself? And how is that to be done without ending up with a dictatorship over people's minds? I think that one can lay down a few simple principles: (1) We do not want an unlimited and unreflective expansion of production; we want an economy that would be a means and not the end of human life. (2) We want a free expansion of knowledge, but we can no longer pretend to ignore that such expansion contains, within itself, dangers that cannot be defined in advance. In order to face up to such dangers, we need what Aristotle called *phronēsis*, "prudence" (following the poor Latin translation of the term). Experience shows that the present-day (economic as well as scientific) technobureaucracy is organically and structurally incapable of possessing such prudence, for it exists and is moved only by the delirium of unlimited expansion. What we need, therefore, is a genuine democracy, one that instaurates the broadest possible processes of reflection and deliberation wherein citizens as a whole participate. That, in turn, is possible only if these citizens have at their disposal genuine information, a genuinely formative educational training [*une véritable formation*], and opportunities to exercise their judgment in practice. A democratic society is an autonomous society, but autonomy means also and especially being *self-limited*—not only in the face of possible political excesses (the majority not respecting the rights of minorities, for example), but also in the works and the acts of the collectivity. Such limits, such boundaries, cannot be set out in advance—that is why *phronēsis*, prudence, is required. Boundaries exist, and when they are crossed it will be, by definition, too late—as with the heroes of ancient tragedy, who learn that they are in *hubris*, excess, only once the catastrophe has occurred. Contemporary society is fundamentally imprudent.

A Society Adrift*

QUESTION: As early as 1979, apropos of the “New Philosophers,” you were denouncing the rising tide of shamelessness, the absence of a critical mind-set and genuine political reflection.¹ Well, today such tendencies are omnipresent. . . .

C.C.: What happens in the “intellectual” sphere is deeply connected with overall changes in Western societies. What is most striking, when one compares the present phase to preceding ones in the history of those societies, is the near-total disappearance of conflict, whether it be socioeconomic, political, or “ideological.” We are witnessing a triumph of an imaginary, the “liberal”-capitalist imaginary, and the near-disappearance of the other great imaginary signification of modernity, the project of individual and collective autonomy. Superficially speaking, that was expressed, as early as the beginning of the 1980s, by the victory of the so-called Neoliberal counteroffensive—as symbolized by the policies of Thatcher-Reagan—a counteroffensive that has imposed things that had previously seemed inconceivable: straightforward cuts in real wages, and sometimes even in nominal wages, for example, or else levels of unemployment that I myself had thought, and written, in 1960, had become impossible, for they would have provoked a social explosion.² Well, nothing happened. There are reasons for that, some related to the economic cycle—the threat, in large part a bluff, of “crisis” tied to the “oil shock,” and so on—but others much more deep-seated, about which we are going to speak later on. Basically, we are witnessing the full-fledged domination of the capitalist imaginary: the centrality of the economic, the unending and

*Interview with Marc Weitzmann first published as “Une société à la dérive” in *L’Autre Journal*, 2 (March 1993): 10-17. Reprinted in *SD*, pp. 251-61.

¹See “The Diversionists” (1977; now in [PSW3](#)). —T/E

²See points 3 and 4 at the beginning of “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-61; now in *PSW2*, pp. 235-37). —T/E

allegedly rational expansion of production, consumption, and more or less planned and manipulated “leisure time.”

This evolution does not express only the victory of the dominant strata, who would like to increase their power. Almost all of the population participates therein. Cautiously withdrawn into its private sphere, the population settles for bread and spectacles. The spectacles are provided especially by television (and “sports”), the bread by all the gadgets available at various income levels. In one way or another, all social strata have access to this minimum amount of comfort; only minorities who have no weight are excluded therefrom. Everything happens as if one had found the means to compress the general quantity of misery engendered by society onto 15 or 20 percent of the “lower” parts of the population (Blacks and Hispanics in the United States, the unemployed and immigrants in European countries). The great majority of the population seems to settle for leisure time and gadgets, with a few occasional corporatist reactions that are unlikely to have repercussions. This majority harbors no collective desire, no project apart from safeguarding the status quo.

In this atmosphere, the traditional safeguards of the capitalist republic are coming down, one after the other. There no longer are any checks on political life, no sanctions beyond those of the penal code, which, as various “affairs” have shown, functions less and less. At any rate, in such a situation the question is posed, as it always has been: “And why the devil would judges themselves, or their ‘overseers,’ be exempt from the general corruption, and for how long? Who will guard the guardians?” The absence of safeguards leads to an intensification of the irrationality inherent in the system. The leaders think that they are allowed to do anything, or nearly so, provided that the political Nielsen ratings [*l’Audimat politique*] don’t fall too far into negative territory. Moreover, they no longer truly govern, their sole preoccupation being to remain in power or to accede to power. The traditional ideologies of “Right” and “Left” have become completely empty: nothing essential separates the programs of the respective parties. In this regard, “taking stock” of the “Left” isn’t even necessary (where are the much-touted “propositions” Monsieur François

Mitterrand made, one after the other?).³ Yet the same goes for the “Right”: when the latter declares a catastrophe, one cannot see, even with a microscope, what these people are proposing that would be up to the task of addressing such a catastrophe. There isn’t even a “reactionary” or conservative program; there’s nothing. It’s only their names and their initials that differentiate them from one another.

Q.: Cannot it be objected, against this declaration of bankruptcy, that what one is witnessing is the emergence of ethics, humanitarianism, and human rights?

C.C.: Those phenomena do not constitute an objection thereto, but rather the confirmation thereof. Such ideas are used to cover over the impoverishment [*des cache-misère*] of the political void.⁴ One mustn’t mix up the substance of the ideas themselves with the form in which they have been circulated. Who would be “against” human rights? Very few people. But when did one begin talking about that? Human rights have been invoked especially against the totalitarian regimes of the East. Very good. But one has tried to make them the substance of all politics, which is an aberration. Once human rights are guaranteed, what remains is the question of what is done in society and what is to be made of society. There is, of course, the ultraliberal response, which consists in saying: Here we have a question that is not legitimate or even sensible; each person has only to do what he wants. But that answer completely ignores the deep-seated nature of every society. A society cannot live if each person just does what he wants within a few minimal limits imposed by the penal code—and not even a penal code can be drafted while completely ignoring a few substantive values that go far beyond “the rights of the individual.”

Or take ethics. Here again, the point of departure has

³A summary of Mitterrand’s “110 Propositions for France” from 1981 appears at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/110_Propositions_for_France. In 1988, the Socialist Party put forward a series of “Propositions of the Socialists” for Mitterrand’s reelection. —T/E

⁴See “The Ethicists’ New Clothes” (“Le cache-misère de l’éthique,” 1993; now in *WIF*). —T/E

especially been (there have been others) the action of the dissidents from the East: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov, the Poles, Václav Havel, and so on. For them, this was a minimal guide: “The situation we’re in—that of the USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe over the last thirty years—we don’t know what to do on the political level, but there are ethical safeguards that are there to allow people to behave decently and, at the same time, to undermine the regime.” For example, “Don’t lie,” Solzhenitsyn said. That may be understood not only in their situation but in general: no politics worthy of the name can be based on lying. But as a matter of fact, it is clear that one cannot, as one increasingly does, treat ethics and politics as opposites. More than that, and too bad if this is going to make some howl: Ultimately, politics in the great sense takes precedence over ethics; it is, as Aristotle would say, the most architectonic.⁵ “Never lie,” for example, isn’t tenable in every situation: Solzhenitsyn couldn’t and in any case shouldn’t have had to tell the truth to the KGB when he was being interrogated about the place where his book *The Oak and the Calf* was hidden or about those who had helped him to smuggle *The Gulag Archipelago* to the West. The writing and publication of those texts were political acts, and not everything that led to their completion could be measured by the yardstick of “Thou shalt not lie.” The same goes for “Thou shalt not kill.” Can one erect that into an absolute norm for behavior? Obviously not. If a terrorist is threatening to kill a few dozen hostages, should you absolutely rule out his being shot, if you can do so? Likewise, when one is now supporting armed intervention in Bosnia in order to stop the massacres, can that be accomplished without, if need be, any killing? All these decisions are political decisions, of which the ethical is but one component, though certainly a very weighty one. The ethic of the Gospels is an a-cosmic ethic. If it has never truly been applied in social life, apart from hypocritical applications by the established Churches, that is also because it couldn’t be.

Q.: Apropos of Bosnia, which you’ve just mentioned,

⁵Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a26-27. —T/E

the advocates of intervention want to make an ethical and not a political war.

C.C.: That's another absurdity. I won't discuss the question of whether or not to intervene militarily in Bosnia. But if one were to do so, how would one be able to avoid the question of the political objectives of such an intervention? The slaughter must be stopped, OK. And afterward? Does one camp out there for eternity? Does one place the country under a trusteeship? The problem is still more flagrant when it comes to Somalia. For, in Yugoslavia, it isn't absolutely impossible to imagine that, once the slaughter has been stopped (and, alas, a good proportion of the ethnic cleansing has been carried out; it's almost over already), three or four political entities could be set up that would at least respect the minimal principle of every society, the prohibition of murder *ad libitum*. But in Somalia? People absolutely don't know what to do. Humanitarian aid is very good; one must somehow or other prevent human beings from dying of hunger. But what is to be done if humanitarian aid is systematically looted and hijacked by armed bands? It would be necessary to instaurate—to impose?—a political society, but what kind of one, and by what means? What ethics has the answer to those questions? Without a political conception, without an answer to the questions, “Why and how do we live in society; for what purpose; what is really important to us in life?” well, there isn't even a genuine response to ethical questions—except for someone like Saint Francis of Assisi.

Q.: Paradoxically, those questions are being posed a dozen years after the Left arrived in power {in France} with a program that embodied political reason.

C.C.: I never thought that the French Socialists were socialists. Their program in 1981 was already an archeological monument. Take for example the “nationalizations.” For decades, people like me spent their time showing that “nationalizations” had nothing to do with socialism. In any event, the French State had always influenced—and even, in fact, directed—the economy, and it always had the means to do so, be it only through its command of credit and the banking system. This point in their program, like almost all the measures they took beyond the everyday management of

affairs, was purely demagogic. The sole exception, as things stand at present, is the establishment of the RMI.⁶ In a society that remains capitalist, one has to have a social safety net. Here again, it's not a question of philanthropy: someone who is starving—and that we have seen in the United States—cannot be a citizen, even in the current meaning of the term. In 1981-1982, the Socialists tried to “reflate” the economy, and they failed miserably. Why? Because—and this observation has a more general validity—they were ignorant of the rules of the game of the society they were expecting to reform. One can neither reform nor preserve a social system if one does not keep the whole in view; one cannot get one part of this immensely complex mechanism moving without taking into account the repercussions on other parts of the system. The Socialists somehow or other learned the rules of the game of the capitalist economy, and they applied them with unbounded enthusiasm—so that their sole claim to fame is to have introduced and applied the program of Neoliberalism in France. What the population might perhaps have accepted from the Right with difficulty, it has accepted from the Socialists while grumbling. It is under this heading alone that they will be remembered in history, which is the height of ridiculousness.

Q.: Does the very idea of a political program still have meaning?

C.C.: One can—I can—formulate a political program. But such a program will not be worth anything if the great majority of the population isn't ready, not to vote for this program, but to participate actively not only in its realization but in its unfolding, in its development, and, if necessary, in its alteration. Such a program could today not be anything but the project of a society that is self-governed at all levels—and it is tautologically clear that such a project has no meaning if people do not themselves have the desire and will to engage in self-government and do not do what has to be done for that.

⁶The *Revenu minimum d'insertion*, or RMI, was a welfare program created in 1988 by the government of Socialist Prime Minister Michel Rocard. It provided minimum income support to help people, under certain circumstances and with certain requirements, to find work. —T/E

Now, that's not what we're observing today. Does that mean that it should just be written off? I do not think so. There can be no serious predictions in politics and in history. On the eve of May '68, Pierre Vianson-Ponté wrote his famous article "France is bored."⁷ Well, it was so bored that it exploded a few weeks later. I certainly don't mean that we are on the eve of a new May '68 but simply that no poll and no empirical induction can foresee a population's behavior in the short run, and still less in the medium or long term.

Q.: But the desire to participate presupposes that one believes in the possibility of participating.

C.C.: Quite right. It's a question of belief; it's also a question of will. And the two are inseparable in the political domain. Human history is creation. The appearance of new social-historical forms isn't predictable, for such an appearance is neither producible nor deducible on the basis of what preceded it. A Martian sociologist-ethnologist-psychoanalyst who would have landed in Greece circa 850 B.C.E. certainly could not have predicted Athenian democracy. Nor, in 1730, could he have predicted the French Revolution. Now, to say that these forms result from an undetermined creation by human beings signifies that their creation appears, from the standpoint of the usual logic, to be a vicious circle. It wasn't the peasant who venerated his lord who was going to participate in the movements that preceded and followed the night of August 4 {in 1789}. At the same time that there is a collective movement, individuals transform themselves, and at the same time that individuals change, a collective movement emerges. There is no sense in asking which one preceded the other: the two presuppositions depend on each other and are created at the same time. It's like the chicken and the egg or, better, like the emergence of the first living cell: the operation of cellular DNA presupposes the existence of the products of this operation. It's like a ring whose parts hold together, and the new creation can be posited only in the totality of its complexity. True, people today do not believe in the possibility

⁷"La France s'ennuie" appeared in the March 15, 1968 issue of *Le Monde*. Pierre Vianson-Ponté was *Le Monde*'s chief political editor. —T/E

of a self-governed society, and that is what today makes such a society impossible. They do not believe because they do not want to believe it; they do not want to believe it because they don't believe. But if ever they start to want it, they will believe and they will be capable.

Q.: The disappearance of political Promised Lands ought to allow for a greater autonomy and a greater capacity for political creation. But what is happening is rather the opposite. Theoretically, the era should be a fantastic one.

C.C.: And in fact it's nil. Yes. And there's no genuine "explanation." One can produce several factors that render the fact somewhat comprehensible, or elucidatable, but that won't be a genuine explanation. The phases of a society's decomposition are as inexplicable as their phases of creation. At Athens, in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., one had the creation of democracy, the great tragic poets, and a host of other extraordinary creations. In the fourth century, things were already over and, for example, there no longer was a single great Athenian poet. Why? Certainly, the Peloponnesian War and the Athenian defeat played a role therein. Thucydides wrote some immortal pages about the general corruption brought about by the war (but why not by the previous ones?), including the corruption of language, where words began to signify the opposite of what they signified at the outset and began to be used in contradictory senses by different parties. (Doesn't that remind you of anything today? "Democracy," for example.) But defeat does not suffice as an "explanation." Why is the *dēmos*, the people, no longer the same people? Why do individuals, like societies, lose their power of creation? One can in part elucidate the fact, not explain it.

The same goes for the contemporary period. There have been all these huge emancipatory movements for centuries. There was the workers' movement, which has increasingly been confiscated by Marxism. Marxism itself evolved by giving birth to two opposite currents, Social Democracy and Bolshevism. The first yielded what we know about it; the second gave us the Gulag. The result of this was that the passion and energy of the working class and those who wanted to march with it have been wasted.

In addition, those ideologies were not only miserabilist

—the French CP maintained the thesis of the “absolute pauperization” of the working class until a rather recent date—but centered around the thesis that capitalism couldn’t “resolve the problem of the development of the forces of production”—that is to say, that socialism must be instaurated so that the masses might consume. Now, obviously, developing production and consumption—capitalism does nothing but that: there is no relation, in the wealthy countries, between the “standard of living”—that is to say, of consumption, in the capitalist sense of the term—of a worker from 1840 and one from 1990. If that is what you really want and nothing else, there’s no point in changing governments, as the song goes.⁸

And at the same time, the result of this development is to make the population increasingly value money and commodities, power, people like Bernard Tapie, and so on.⁹ In other words, there was a sort of depolarization of values, and the negative pole, the subversive pole, has been swallowed up by the capitalist imaginary. All that doesn’t offer an “explanation,” but it does allow one to elucidate certain aspects of the decline, the vanishing of conflict and of social and political activity, and to point out some of the things that support [*certain étayages*] this decline.

Q.: What about the need for belief? Isn’t it unbearable to think that our laws, our beliefs, the fact of being in society rest on nothing, that there’s no absolute foundation for any kind of reality?

C.C.: I don’t think so, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. But that is indeed the question. Contrary to what Aristotle said, what humans desire above all is not knowledge, it’s belief.¹⁰

⁸From Act I of Charles Lecocq’s 1873 three-act comic opera *La fille de Madame Angot* (The Daughter of Madame Angot). —T/E

⁹On the French businessman, politician, and actor Bernard Tapie see n. 3 of “A Political and Human Exigency,” above in the present volume. —T/E

¹⁰Aristotle *Metaphysics* 980a21: “All human beings, by their nature, desire knowledge.” See Castoriadis’s “Passion and Knowledge” (1992; now in *FT(P&K)*, esp. pp. 255 and 270 for his mentions of Aristotle). —T/E

In wealthy societies—which represent, moreover, at the very most one seventh of the world’s population—with the end of political beliefs and the vanishing of society’s capacity to create new values that could signify something, there reigns what Blaise Pascal would have called *diversion* or *distraction*, oblivion.¹¹ People don’t want to know that they are mortal, that they are going to die, that there is no afterlife nor any recompense or reward. After the subway and the workday, and so on, they forget while watching Bernard Tapie or Madonna on television.¹² And that signifies that we are living not in a society of the spectacle¹³ but in a society of oblivion: forgetting of death, forgetting of the fact that life has no meaning other than the one one is capable of giving to it. The spectacle is there to facilitate and cover over this oblivion. We don’t have the courage or the capacity to admit that the meaning of our individual and collective lives can no longer be furnished by a religion or an ideology, and can no longer be given to us as a present, and that we consequently have to create it ourselves.

Q.: Does not this lack of courage seal the failure of your project of autonomy?

C.C.: I don’t think so. The project of autonomy has been put forward in a few societies, Athenian society, Western societies during the great period of modernity. Now, each time, it has been borne along by movements that, subject to a few footnotes, have been deeply conscious of what the meaning of our life is here below and deeply conscious that no form of transcendence can endow with meaning a life in which we ourselves have no investment. All transcendence in the religious sense is an imaginary creation of human beings. Ancient and modern emancipatory movements have all begun

¹¹Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 2.139. —T/E

¹²On the French businessman, politician, and actor Bernard Tapie see n. 3 of “A Political and Human Exigency,” above in the present volume. —T/E

¹³A reference to the title of a book Guy Debord published in 1967. For a brief period in 1960-1961, Debord, a member of the Situationist International, joined Socialisme ou Barbarie and attended meetings. —T/E

by a distancing, if not of transcendence itself, at least of the idea that such transcendence could act within immanence and, for example, resolve the question of society and of its just institution. And what they basically believed in is that if there is a meaning in our lives that isn't mystified, it's the meaning that we ourselves can create.

Q.: You yourself have written that one of the causes of the pervading gloom was the feeling that all values, all norms were purely contingent.¹⁴ In the act of creating meaning oneself, it seems that one is confronted with a radical form of absurdity. If there is no absolute meaning, how is one not to tell oneself that nothing has any meaning?

C.C.: First of all, there is a fact that one day or another will have to be digested: we are mortal. Not only us, not only civilizations, but humanity as such and all its creations, its entire memory are mortal. Life expectancy for an animal species is, on average, two million years. Even if, mysteriously, we go indefinitely beyond that mark, the day the Sun attains its final phase and becomes a red giant, its edge will be somewhere between Earth and Mars; the Parthenon, Notre Dame, the paintings of Rembrandt and Picasso, and the books in which the *Symposium* and the *Duino Elegies* are recorded will be reduced to the state of protons that furnish this star with energy.

Faced with that, two responses are possible. First, there's Pascal's, there's Søren Kierkegaard's response: I cannot accept that; I cannot or will not see it. Somewhere there has to be a meaning I am incapable of formulating, yet I believe in it. The "content" may be different—it being furnished by the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Koran, the Vedas, whichever. The other attitude is to refuse to close one's eyes and, at the same time, to understand that if one wants to live, one cannot live without meaning, without signification. In this sense, socially and historically created significations are neither contingent nor necessary; they are, as I have written,

¹⁴ "[T]he idea that social significations are simply *contingent* very much seems to be the basis for the progressive decomposition of the social fabric in the contemporary world." ("Institution of Society and Religion," 1982; now in *WIF*, p. 330). —T/E

metacontingent.¹⁵ Without them, there is no human life, either individually or socially. It is this life itself that allows us, at a given moment, to understand that these significations have no “absolute” source, that their source is our own meaning-creating activity. The task of a free man is to know that he is mortal and to stand up at the edge of this abyss, in this chaos that is devoid of meaning and in which we make signification emerge. Now, we know that such a man and such a community can exist. I am not even talking about great artists, thinkers, scientists, and so forth. Even the craftsperson worthy of the name who fashions not statues of gods but tables, vases, and so on was absolutely invested in her work; the fact that the vase was beautiful, that the house stood up, was an accomplishment. Such investment in form-giving, therefore meaning-giving, activity has existed in all civilizations, without exception. It exists less and less so today, because the way capitalism has evolved has led to the destruction of all meaning in work.

Not everyone can be Ludwig van Beethoven or Immanuel Kant. But everyone has to have a job he might invest in or be involved in. That presupposes a radical modification of the notions of labor, contemporary technology, the organization of such labor, and so on—a modification that is incompatible with the maintenance of the contemporary institution of society and of the imaginary it embodies. This huge side of the question—the ecologists themselves don’t see it; they see only the consumption and pollution side. But human life also takes place within work. Therefore, we have to give meaning back to the acts of working, producing, creating, and also participating in collective projects with others, engaging in individual and collective self-directing activities, and deciding on social orientations.

That is difficult, of course. But to a certain extent it has existed. It existed among the Greeks until the end of the fifth century B.C.E. who did not believe in immortality, in any case not in a “positive” immortality (life after death was infinitely worse than life on Earth, as the shade of Achilles teaches

¹⁵See *ibid.*, pp. 315, 318. —T/E

Ulysses in the *Odyssey*). For the moderns, it's more complicated. For, among them, there has always been some more or less hidden leftovers from belief in a religious type of transcendence. That hasn't kept them from going quite far. But it has also occurred in terms of another shift: an earthly paradise has been posited at the "end of history" (Marxism) or as history's asymptotic direction (Liberalism). We have paid the price today to know that it was a matter of two forms of the same illusion, that there is, as a matter of fact, no "immanent meaning" in history and that there will be only the meaning [*le sens*] (or the non-sense) we will be capable of creating. And that's something people who got killed on the barricades knew: it's the fact that I fight that has a meaning, not the fact that two centuries hence there will be a perfect society. And today's gloom no doubt also represents, in part, mourning over the death of this illusion of a paradisiacal future.

Q.: The present sacralization of ethics looks like a way of staging the absence of meaning; one brings sacks of rice, denounces massacres and rapes—and ultimately, if one goes no further than that, one knows that it's never-ending. At the same time, does not the boom in the media and advertising system sanction this absence of meaning by instaurating a time that no longer passes, a sort of immense present?

C.C.: Yes. More precisely, there is currently an imaginary time that consists in denial of the genuine past and the genuine future, a time without genuine memory and without a genuine project. Television does indeed constitute a very powerful and symbolic image of that: Somalia was a scoop yesterday; it no longer is one today. Were Russia to explode, as it seems to be on the way to doing, one would talk for two days about Russia and then forget about it. There no longer is any genuine scansion, just what you call a perpetual present, which is rather like molasses, a truly homogenous soup where everything is flattened out and everything is placed on the same level of signification and importance. Everything is caught in this formless flow of images. And that is of a piece with the loss of the historical future, the loss of a project, and the loss of tradition, the fact that the past has become either an object of erudition for the excellent historians we have or a touristy past: one visits the Acropolis like one visits Niagara

Falls; one does Italy as one does the Seychelles. The past is physically part of a tourist package; one day in Athens, one day on Mykonos, one day in Delphi, etc. Here, the most trivial things merge with the most profound. In this sense, too, the spirit of the age is one of triviality.

On Political Judgment*

I feel that I am in agreement with Vincent Descombes on most of the points he raises. There are nevertheless some questions that must, in my opinion, be radicalized. I shall briefly mention four of them.

1. First of all, what do we call *political judgment*? Certainly, as Descombes recalls, political judgment, like every practical judgment, intends not what is “true” but what is “good”; it is not of the form “I think *a* because *b*,” but “I want *x* because *y*.” The questions bear on the *domain* of *x* and *y*, which appertains to the *prakton* [to the domain of action] but do not exhaust it, and on the specificity of this *because*.

There is a need to distinguish political judgment within a regime and the kind of political judgment that bears on the regime as such. Let’s say we’re in 1788: in everyday language, one will qualify as *political* a judgment like “Necker has to do *x* in order to save the monarchy” as well as another, of the type, “The monarchy has to be abolished and replaced by a republic.” It will be agreed that, taken in the absolute, the first one poses no philosophical question. It expresses, even if only implicitly, an “axiom” (the monarchy is to be saved), on the basis of which some consequences may unfold in a rational manner as regards the means (*zweckrational*), consequences that may certainly be awfully complicated in reality, but that, as such, do not concern principles (save if other clauses come into play, for example “. . . by all means”).

The ambiguity, which is considerable, can be removed

*“Sur le jugement politique” appeared under this title in *La Pensée politique*, 3 (1995): 209-12, an issue concerning “the Nation.” This text, along with several other contributions from a variety of authors, was a response to Vincent Descombes’s essay “Philosophie du jugement politique,” which had appeared in *La Pensée politique*, 2 (June 1994): 131-57. Reprinted in *SD*, pp. 263-69. [See now *Philosophie du jugement politique. Débat avec Vincent Descombes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008), which reprints the discussion from *La Pensée politique*, including Descombes’s original text, pp. 7-48, and Castoriadis’s contribution, pp. 81-85, and includes Descombes’s response to critics, “Universalisme, égalité, singularité. Réponse aux critiques,” pp. 192-276, with mentions of Castoriadis, pp. 194-95, 200-203, 228, and 250-57. —T/E]

if one accepts the distinction between *the political* [*le politique*]¹—which concerns the dimension of power in a society, its exercise and accession thereto—and *politics* [*la politique*], which has to do with the institution *in toto* of society, including obviously the dimension of power.¹ The political does not call ends and principles into question, and it is something one necessarily encounters in every society. As activity that raises the question of the best regime or the good society, politics is essentially a Greco-European creation.

2. This clarification, it seems to me, is indispensable for answering the question posed by Descombes: Is everything political? Certainly not, if *political* means having to do with power. But certainly yes, by definition it can be said, if one considers politics in the sense defined above. Still, one must avoid misunderstandings. We, or at least most of us, would certainly like to set limits on all explicit instituting (legislating) activity: but *that* is *itself* a political position and a political decision. The idea that everything *does not have* to be political (or subjected to “divine law,” etc.) is a very recent social-historical creation (more or less equivalent to the creation of democracy). Still, these limits pertain, too, to a political decision. One must make a political—instituting—decision in order to declare and ensure that what unfolds in the *oikos* or the *agora* is exempt from the decisions and power of the *ekklēsia*, within the limits drawn by this very decision.²

That it would be a matter here of a political (instituting) decision is shown by the fact that the opposite decision not only can be made (as with Communist or Nazi totalitarianism) but has actually always been made by almost every society in history. Such has been, as one knows, the case with all “religious” societies (whether primitive or historical), which

¹ See my 1988 text “Power, Politics, Autonomy” (abridged translation of “Pouvoir, politique, autonomie,” trans. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Zwischenbetrachtungen im Prozess der Aufklärung. Jürgen Habermas zum 60* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989], pp. 453-81; the full, reedited version, based on the original typescript translation with footnotes restored, appears in *PPA*).

² See pp. 405-13 of my 1989 text “Done and To Be Done” in *CR*.

have always regulated, according to “divine” injunctions and principles, an enormous portion of both “private” activities (in the *oikos*) and private/public ones (in the *agora*), as hardline Islamic societies still want to do. The fact that both kinds have not been able (or, understanding this impossibility, have not been willing) to do so 100 percent pertains to other factors and, in particular to the impossibility of totally controlling people and circumstances—although the complete internalization of the institution has often led to almost attaining this limit.

3. The case of the “good Nazi,”³ it seems to me, does not offer a good example—and, far from being “constructed in order to be difficult,” it contains several *ad hominen* features: people’s shared horror of Nazism and, especially, its defeat. It is at once “politically correct” and historically opportunistic. What if one were to ask: What “good” (in any instrumental or ultimate sense) is there in the President of the University of Teheran being a good Islamist or, while we’re at it, the Chancellor of the University of Salamanca in the sixteenth century being a good Christian? “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (I Corinthians 10.31). Now, it is known that the interpretation of what the glory of God requires has varied enormously from age to age, and it would be risky to claim that the most extreme interpretations were incompatible with the survival or even the expansion of societies that maintained such interpretations. After all, there were few expansions in history as massive and as rapid as that of Islam starting in the seventh century.

4. What can the *because . . .* of political judgment be? How can one justify wanting such and such a type of society and not some other one? It is assumed that no one will accept a statement such as “. . . because it is written in Leviticus 20.13⁴ that . . .” or the invocation of Bossuet’s *Politics Drawn*

³Example given by Elizabeth Anscombe and discussed by Descombes in the article cited in the present chapter’s publication note. —French Editors

⁴“If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them” (again using the King James Version). —T/E

from the Very Words of Holy Scripture⁵ as valid justification. That already separates us from the huge majority of humans down through the ages, for whom that kind of justification was not only legitimate but the sole one conceivable. We situate ourselves in a social-historical *camp*, the camp of *logon didonai*: giving an account of and a reason for. But how is one to give a reason?

Descombes is right to denounce what I had myself called the confusion between universal history and a Frankfurt philosophy seminar⁶ and to reject what he calls *foundational philosophy*. What one is to want in politics does not have to follow from a reasoned argument discursively deduced from an indisputable foundation. Such a foundation does not even exist in “pure” philosophy (and certainly neither the principle of contradiction nor the conditions for “communication” could fulfill that role). A simple form of decisionism is likewise unacceptable, for it merely repeats what is: the Nazis are Nazis because they decided to be so; likewise with Christians and the supporters of the Islamic Salvation Front. Each person has “always already” decided to be something (be this only a cynical, apathetic, and spineless citizen), and if one goes no further than this simple tautological presentation of the facts, there is no room for any political judgment.

But why *must* there be political judgment, why does one *have to* issue such judgments? Why not just cultivate one’s garden or leave things up to [*laissez faire*] “those in the know.” One cannot escape here two inaugural decisions or position-

⁵Jacques Bénigne Bossuet’s posthumously published work, trans. Patrick Riley (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶“Everything that does not come under this heading [*sc.* “rationality” and “logic”], everything that cannot be rationally reconstructed—not much really, just the totality of human history—is scoria, a gap to be filled in progressively, a learning stage, a passing failure in the ‘problem-solving’ exercises assigned to humanity (by whom and for what purpose?) or—why not?—‘primitive nonsense,’ as old Engels said” (“Individual, Society, Rationality, History,” 1988: now in *PPA*, p. 59). Castoriadis had just criticized there Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s attempted “reconstruction of historical materialism”; cf. n. 4 in “War, Religion, and Politics,” above this volume. —T/E

takings, which one can defend with all sorts or more or less reasonable, but not logically compelling, arguments. There is the decision to do something, and not to accept things or just undergo them. And there is the decision to do this rather than that, the choice for such and such a type of regime rather than some other one. These two decisions as well as every argument that tries to justify them presuppose the social-historical creation of a space and a time in which *politics*, in the sense defined above—as explicit aim and will concerning the institution of society and as agreement to give an account of and a reason for them both—has already been posited and in which, therefore, Revelation, the word of the ancestors, and so on have ceased to be admissible as motives for doing or not doing something, for doing this rather than that.

Downstream from this position, but downstream only, discussion, argumentation, and various reasonings are possible and, indeed, required. Still it must be seen that, if one exits the instrumental domain—the domain of rationality as to the means (where the hypothetico-deductive method retains its validity)—these reasonings will be, as I said, reasonable, not compelling. They will be, most of the time, enthymematic: *ex consequentibus vel repugnantibus*, as Quintilian would say.⁷ I can defend my political positions before someone who accepts that certain consequences are superlatively desirable and others horribly detestable. But who, in his right mind, would undertake to prove the excellence of democracy to a confirmed Nietzschean?

⁷Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 5.10.2; the third meaning of *enthymeme* is *quo certam quandam argumenti conclusionem vel ex consequentibus vel ex repugnantibus, quanquam de hoc parum convenit*, or “a conclusion of an argument drawn either from denial of consequents or from incompatibles” (H. E. Butler translation in the 1921 Loeb edition). —T/E

No to Resignation, No to Archaism*

QUESTION: You didn't sign either of the two texts that circulated about the Juppé Plan.¹ Why?

C.C.: The first (that of *Esprit*)² approved of the Juppé Plan, despite some theoretical reservations, and was unacceptable to me. The second (known as the “Bourdieu list”)³ was permeated with the wooden language of the traditional Left and invoked “the Republic”—which one?—as if there were a simply “republican” solution to the immense problems posed today. A mixture of archaism and flight.

Q.: How then do you judge the positions of the traditional Left toward this social movement?

C.C.: The political Left as well as the trade-union organizations have once again displayed their vacuousness. They had nothing to say about the substance of the questions.

* Interview with Alexis Libaert and Philippe Petit published as “Ni ‘Esprit’ ni Bourdieu. Les intellos entre l’archaïsme et la fuite” (Neither *Esprit* nor Pierre Bourdieu: Intellectuals between archaism and flight) in *L’Événement du jeudi*, 581 (December 21-27, 1995): 32-33. Reprinted as “Ni résignation, ni archaïsme” in *SD*, pp. 267-79.

¹ The “Juppé Plan,” announced on November 15, 1995 by French Prime Minister Alain Juppé as a reform of France’s social security system, aroused mass opposition, leading to the largest social movement since May ’68. Castoriadis answers questions about these November-December 1995 protests in Max Blechman’s April 1996 interview, “A Rising Tide of Significance? A Follow-Up Interview with *Drunken Boat*” ([RTI\(TBS\)](#)). —T/E

² Under the impetus of the French review *Esprit*, a petition entitled “Pour une réforme de fond de la sécurité sociale” (For a thoroughgoing reform of social security) was published as an advertisement in *Le Monde*’s issue dated December 3-4, 1995. This pro-Juppé Plan petition was signed by more than one hundred activists and intellectuals, including Pierre Rosanvallon, Alain Touraine, and former Socialisme ou Barbarie member Claude Lefort. —T/E

³ French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was the author of the definitive version of the counterpetition, “L’appel de soutien aux grévistes” (Call to support the strikers), which was first launched immediately after the publication of the *Esprit*-led petition in *Le Monde*. —T/E

The Socialist Party, loyal manager of the established system, demanded some vague negotiations. The leadership of two trade-union confederations, the CGT and the FO,⁴ jumped on the movement's bandwagon after it had started in an attempt to refurbish their image. In this regard, there's nothing new. What is new, on the other hand, and what is very important, is the social reawakening that has just been witnessed.

Q.: A reawakening, or a return to the old forms of struggle?

C.C.: On the surface, the demands were special-interest-based [*catégorielles*], and the movement seemed to take no further interest in the general situation of society. Yet it was obvious, considering the reactions of the strikers as well as the attitude of the majority of the population, that at the heart of this struggle there was something else: a thoroughgoing rejection of the existing state of things in general. The strikers were able to express this rejection only through particular demands. Since such demands, by their very nature, do not take the general situation into account, one necessarily ends in an impasse. On the other hand, the strikers—apart from the students, and even then—were unable to create forms of self-organization that would have allowed them to escape from beneath the union umbrella. I have been talking for a long time about the privatization of individuals, about their retreat into the private sphere, about their loss of interest in public affairs. This is the dominant trend of contemporary societies. It's not the only one; we're not yet living in a dead or zombified society. The movements of November-December 1995 show that. Men and women are still ready to act to defend their conditions. But two enormous obstacles are opposed to that. On the one hand, the effects of the twofold fraudulent bankruptcy of the Communist and Socialist "Left": deep demoralization and disorientation, which won't be overcome right away. On the other hand, there's the fact that the survival of a reformed capitalism is becoming more and more improbable. A bit all over, the system is attacking the partial reforms it had to concede over the

⁴The Confédération générale du travail and Force ouvrière. —T/E

previous century, and the way it has evolved (with wild globalization under the banner of “Liberalism” {in the sense of a conservative “free-market” ideology}) makes it less and less possible to maintain very different situations from one nation to the next. The immensity, the interdependency, and the complexity of the resulting questions make partial demands appear unrealistic and most often doom them to failure. Discouragement is increased and privatization is reinforced.

Q.: How do you explain that wage earners in the private sector didn’t join those in the public sector?

C.C.: They were sympathetic, but there’s the enormous fear of unemployment and layoffs. Growing unemployment is now built into the logic of the globalization of capitalism, and some minuscule and ridiculous measures from the French government are not going to change something about that. It is, moreover, favorably welcomed by the ruling strata, which, during the current phase, prefer a large margin of unemployment to “discipline” wage earners. But the basic thing is that a well-managed business has no reason to invest in France when it can do so in China or elsewhere at wage levels that represent, in general, a twentieth or a fortieth of French and European wages. Now, as soon as capital movements were freed—thanks, in particular, too, to the European Union—there no longer was any brake on this process. Apart from two or three exceptions, one might be heading toward desertification in the old industrialized countries—similar, though on an infinitely vaster scale, to what has happened since 1960 in the mining and steel-manufacturing regions of Western Europe.⁵

Q.: Don’t you think that the Maastricht Treaty might be a factor favoring social progress?

C.C.: As you know, I have always been an internationalist and, as such, also a supporter of a meeting up of the European peoples. But that has nothing to do with what is happening in the case of the European Community. Such a meeting would truly be meaningful, and would, moreover, be possible from a realistic point of view, only if it were first of

⁵See “The Signification of the Belgian Strikes” (in [PSW3](#)). —T/E

all political. Now, what is clear is that, at present, hardly anyone desires a political union, neither the peoples involved nor the ruling hierarchies. Faced with this reality, a false good idea, a subaltern technocrat's contrivance, has been invented: monetary union. But how could a monetary union operate without a common economic policy? And who would be able to impose a common economic policy if not a political authority? In fact, that is what is in the process of happening on the sly. The German will to achieve long-term economic and political hegemony is gradually making its way. Europe has in fact been a Deutsche Mark zone since 1980, and this situation is being consolidated with the Maastricht provisions. Monsieur Jean-Claude Trichet brags about the independence of the Banque de France⁶—which doesn't dare blow its nose without looking to the Bundesbank. And the latter steadfastly follows a policy oriented solely toward maintaining the "stability of monetary value": in short, a deflationary policy. Now, while there is a form of capitalism that can run with zero inflation, it can do so only by producing unemployment.

Q.: And what, according to you, would be the solution?

C.C.: There can be no solution without radical changes in the way society is organized. But we can talk about that another time, if you want.

⁶Trichet was, at the time, in his first term as the Governor of the Banque de France. In 2003, he would become President of the European Central Bank. —T/E

A Unique Trajectory*

QUESTION: Your trajectory, which is unique, combines three dimensions: the will to act in the world, through political and militant activity, thought, through philosophical activity, and the soul, as expressed in psychoanalytic activity. How do you reconcile these three forms of activity?

C.C.: I do not find that there would be any antinomy among those three forms of activity. I am not saying that they would be the same thing, or that one leads to the other, but they are nonetheless of a piece [*solidaires*]. Psychoanalysis allows philosophy to see new fields, and philosophy is ultimately necessary for reflection on the foundations of psychoanalysis. The connection between psychoanalysis and politics is also very important.¹ It's not a matter of transforming patients—analysands—into militants, but the objective of psychoanalysis is to render individuals autonomous as much as possible, just as the objective of politics is to render individuals and collectivities autonomous. And psychoanalysis allows one to shed light on certain aspects of politics and on the difficulty the effort and struggle for the collective project of an autonomous society, made up of autonomous individuals, may face.

Q.: How are these three dimensions of the mind—the soul, thought, and the will to act in the world—integrated or articulated? Is it a matter of separate levels? How does the transition—should it occur—take place from one to the next?

C.C.: All three—like, moreover, judgment, about which we could also speak—are powers, capacities of human beings: while the Unconscious and the Conscious, conscious

*March 1, 1997 interview with Lilia Moglia. A Spanish version appeared in *Radars*, a 1997 supplement to the Buenos Aires newspaper *Página 12*. Published in French as “Une trajectoire singulière” in *SD*, pp. 271-79. [In an online Spanish-language “reelaboración” of her interview with Castoriadis http://www.ecocomunidad.org.uy/ecocom/avance_insignificancia.htm, the interviewer is listed as “Lilia Moglia Mizrahi.” —T/E]

¹See “Psychoanalysis and Politics” (1989; now in *CR*). —T/E

thought, and the will to act in the world are distinct, it cannot be said that they aren't intimately related. The root of the will is to be found in desire—a desire that has become conscious, reflective, deliberate, accepted as will. On the other hand, thought depends, in a sense, on will, because one has to *will* thought. Thinking is neither mechanical nor passive. There is a will to elucidate the world of our experience. And this will is the condition for philosophy.

Q.: [. . .] Could you imagine what is or are the desirable anthropological type or types? Can one, through anticipation, sketch out some anthropological types meant to act in this world and, as in self-fulfilling prophecies, thus help to bring them about?

C.C.: Can I imagine a desirable anthropological type, one capable of acting in the world? Of course I can imagine it. But what use would that be?

Q.: The contemporary imaginary is capable, via its institutions, of inventing representations of the worst thing possible and, in doing so, often succeeds in bringing it into existence. Conversely, imagining the best possible thing and stating it, thus creating a representation, might be able to reverse the process. Imagining a possible subject, a possible agent. . . .

C.C.: One can, today, imagine this agent, but I don't believe that that'd be of much use. This would be a responsible and lucid individual who feels she is responsible for what she says and for what she does, who tries to reflect on what she does and to act only *after* such reflection and deliberation. Such an anthropological type could also, were it to exist, bring about a transformation of society toward an autonomous society. The question is whether humanity today can still produce that anthropological type.

Q.: If that meant autonomous individuals in sufficient numbers to be able to bring about a transformation of society, should that transformation therefore begin with the individual transforming herself?

C.C.: When I am speaking of society's transformation, what I intend is the passage, the radical change of present-day society, toward a society that would itself be an autonomous collectivity, and that can be conceived of only as a collectivity

formed by autonomous individuals. An autonomous collectivity is a collectivity that has a lucid, reflective, and free attitude toward its own institutions and that is not enslaved to those institutions. Therefore, it is one that feels it is able, and gives itself the right, to change its institutions when it feels the need or desire to do so—changing them in full knowledge of the relevant facts. But such a society is possible only if the individuals who give it life are also autonomous. Of course, one can always make up some prophetic psychoanthropological portraits; that's the work of the novelist, perhaps. But I wouldn't know if that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. . . . In any case, I myself am not a prophet.

Q.: [. . .] Two questions. First, concerning the project of autonomy, and in relation to the different dimensions of the mind of which we have already spoken—the soul, thought, and will—do you think that the point of departure for some possibility of freedom would be found, as a matter of priority, in one of these three dimensions? Second, how do you think that the project of autonomy—as concerns, on the one hand, individual values, and, on the other hand, collective values—might be seen from the standpoint of that other dimension of the mind, the faculty of judgment?

C.C.: That question is quite complex. What is certain is that a free individual always belongs to a social-historical context. And it is obvious that, within that social-historical context, the individual is born at a given moment in history, in a given place, with given parents, a given language. That draws, of course, a frame around the individual's autonomy. But when I speak of freedom, of the autonomy of the individual, I do not intend thereby an absolute or metaphysical freedom. I do not think that one might be able, just because one has decided to do so, to think or do just anything whatsoever. One will always be, among other things, also the child of this age; one will also be the man who speaks such and such a language and not some other one, who has such and such a past history and not another one. But in relation to these givens, an autonomous individual is capable of distancing himself somewhat. Let us take, for example, Socrates and the Athenian who simply follows the ideas of the crowd: they

speak the same tongue and have had the same lived experience in the same age, but Socrates is something other than simply an Athenian in the crowd. Today, too, individuals exist who are able to distance themselves from their own heritage—that's autonomy. It's subjecting what one has received to a lucid examination, to a reflective examination, and saying to oneself: This I keep; that I don't keep.

Q.: And freedom would be in this choice?

C.C.: Yes, and this examination can never be total; it can never alter everything one thinks and cannot alter it all at once. It's a perpetual effort, and this effort is for me what defines autonomy.

Q.: [. . .] Let's talk about the psychoanalytic work: there, one finds schools, orthodoxies, some sects almost, each advocating an approach, a technique, a method or a way, sometimes fanatically so. . . .

C.C.: Yes, but one can situate oneself in relation to all that. For example, in my psychoanalytic work, the framework remains classical, but I have reflected on the question at length and I continue to reflect on it. I think that no better solution has been found thus far. On the other hand, although I consider myself faithful to the spirit of Freud, when it comes to interpretation, I am far from following to the letter everything he might have said on some thing or another. I think that the theory needs a major overhaul, which has not been carried out by psychoanalysts, and I am trying to work on that, too. I am a psychoanalyst because I found myself in this particular society, where there already was psychoanalysis, where there was Freud and his work. But I didn't become, or I try not to be, a mere copy in the crowd of psychoanalysts. I try to reflect on my own and, if necessary, transform this legacy. Furthermore, I do not believe that one can separate things out when speaking of the soul, thought, and will, and ask oneself what the point of departure is. There is certainly always a point of departure, but it is not situated, as a matter of priority, in one of these three dimensions. The human being is, despite all, a sort of totality, even if he is divided and conflicted. As a consequence, all three come into play, the Unconscious and the radical imagination as well as thought, lucid reflection, and will.

Q.: You said before that one must will to work on one's

soul, that one must will to think: would it then be the will that is at the start of this quest for freedom?

C.C.: Of course, but this will is also motivated by reflection, and by desire. One must desire to be free; if one does not desire to be free one cannot be so. But it does not suffice to desire it; one must do it, that is to say, put forward a will and implement a praxis—a reflective and deliberative praxis that allows one to achieve this freedom qua possibility that becomes embodied insofar as one desires it.

Q.: And what would be the nature or substance of this desire?

C.C.: Desire is a deep psychological force that is directed toward something, but which, as such, cannot give an account of and a reason for that at which it aims. For me, will is sublimated desire. It's desire that has gone through elucidation, through reflection. Furthermore, I don't separate the role of judgment from that of thought. Judgment is a determining moment in thought. If, in the individual's thought, one leaves aside the legacy of her history, her language, the family into which she is born, the society in which she finds himself, and so on, so as to consider what's at the core, that is to say, the radical imagination, the creative imagination, philosophizing is the creation, by the individual, of significations, but it's also judgment. The radical imagination puts forward a certain number of things that have to be passed through a sieve, a filter. That filter is judgment. Reflection plays a role, too—as does an ability to reason that is not completely acquired (it isn't learned through exercise, but it can be refined thereby), and that is also of capital importance for articulating thought in coherent fashion. Creation can sometimes arise in a lacunary form, or fragmentarily, or through a spurt of ideas. But reasoned philosophical argument requires reflection and judgment.

Q.: Would judgment be the site for a conflict between antagonistic wills?

C.C.: No. Among other things, it's what allows one to adjudicate between antagonistic ideas. It's a faculty that, without mechanical labor of thought, without mechanical labor of reasoning, allows one to “gauge” things, to judge whether this holds or doesn't hold, whether that can be true or whether

it is false straight off the bat. There is a capacity to judge that is a primordial and irreducible faculty.

Q.: After the death of God and for a certain while now, some so-called thinkers keep on holding funeral ceremonies for a good many things, in particular history, man, the subject, philosophy, ideologies, the political sphere, labor, art, and probably, if one follows the logical series, one will soon be able to bury money, too. On this rather somber backdrop, what do you think of this paradox of the ethnocentric West, which I would describe as *ethnocidal* and *suicidal* at the same time? Might one find oneself in a paradoxically dizzying and privileged situation of freedom when faced with the possibility of rethinking and refounding the world while reinstating values and significations?

C.C.: [. . .] The West is ethnocentric, ethnocidal, and suicidal at the same time—and that's not a paradox. It's the basic antinomy of contemporary capitalism. The latter aims at the unlimited expansion of an allegedly rational, alleged mastery but constitutes in fact a delusion of potency that is in the process of destroying the imaginary significations on the basis of which it was able to develop and the natural ground that provided it with the conditions for its expansion. And this imaginary signification ends in impotence, which is also the very impotence of present-day society, where no one is running things. While one is proclaiming all over that globalization requires this or that, no government is capable of saying no or even of trying to stand in the way of it; it's like a huge torrent that carries everything away. There's no mastery here. What is of urgent importance, now, is to succeed in mastering the blind forces the system has unleashed, like, to take a few examples, technoscience, the destruction of the environment, the rage for enrichment and acquisition.

[. . .] As for the "free" situation in which one finds oneself, yes, there is a void upstream, because one is not encumbered by strong social imaginary significations. Of course, there remain a few that are still potent: wealth, power, hierarchy, stardom, and so on. Nevertheless, they are pretty much worn out. From this standpoint, one is certainly in a—dizzying, if you like—situation of abstract freedom where there is the possibility of rethinking and refounding the world.

But the reinstatement of values and significations can be the work only of collectivities; it cannot be the work of an individual. It's all of society that has to begin to act in the direction of its transformation. And if it begins to act in this direction, it will also create the significations and the values that will accompany its transformation.

Q.: [. . .] Can one think in terms of a world in which there would be worlds? Can one think in terms of a plural whole, a multiple whole, a whole in permanent change? And in relation to the anthropological derivative formations that would exist in a plural world, can one think in terms of plural man or multiple man? [. . .] What about "human rights," then? And also, in relation to the psychological derivative formations. Within the soul, within an individual consciousness, how can one imagine the psychism? What would be the nature of the unifying principal for the imaginary significations and the affects of a plural subject?

C.C.: [. . .] I don't know what "plural man" means. I would speak, rather, of an "open man." As for human rights, if one takes the question from a general standpoint, it's an expression that is a bit abstract; one doesn't truly know what it covers. Certainly, there is a Declaration {of the Rights of Man}, but it isn't exhaustive; one doesn't now whether one should enlarge it and establish other rights. And on the other hand, most of the rights that figure therein are either formal or partial. For example, no declaration of human rights says that human beings have the right to participate in the decisions that concern them. But for me, one of the principle political watchwords has to be: "No execution of decisions without participation in the making of decisions."² That isn't what happens. So-called representation is a joke, the representatives not representing the people but an oligarchy. Therefore, the question of human rights has to be rethought. I don't know what you mean when you ask what would be the unifying

²This statement appears in "Socialism and Autonomous Society" (1979), *PSW3*, p. 321, as the first of "two fundamental laws" of "freedom in an autonomous society," but with the adjective "egalitarian" modifying "participation." The second such law is, according to Castoriadis, "No law without egalitarian participation in the positing of the law." —T/E

principle of the imaginary significations of a plural subject. If we replace “plural subject” by “open subject,” the answer is to be found in everything that has already been said.

Q.: Yes, of course. But if one doesn’t specify it, one might think that an open subject is an indeterminate individual.

C.C.: No, just as an open form of thinking is not an indeterminate form of thinking. Thinking in terms of indetermination cuts thinking short. An open subject is someone who is capable of self-determination and who remains open to new determinations she herself creates or ones she receives from others, whether they be her friends or her adversaries. That’s the open subject.

Q.: A subject who would have the capacity to call herself into question?

C.C.: Absolutely. But in order to call oneself into question, one must be someone. And in some way, one must be rather sure of oneself—not being sure of the ideas one has but having the courage and the conviction that one will be able to face up to their being called into question. There must be a sort of will and bravura, psychical and intellectual bravura.

Q. [. . .] On the reign of money, I’d have some questions to ask you as an absolute layperson. The globalization people are talking about is only a globalization of the financial markets—and you have rightly called it a “planetary casino.”³ It has been made possible by the end of the bipolar world and by the revolution in techniques of telecommunication. But it seems to me that it also corresponds to the culmination of a process, which has been accelerating {since the early Eighties}, that of the dematerialization of money and the advent of temporal money, future-money, credit-money. Might the English-language saying “time is money” have become inverted into “money is time”? What do

³“The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism” (1997; now in [FT\(P&K\)](#), p. 82). In 1982, Castoriadis had already spoken of “an explosion of speculation which is each day transforming the capitalist economy more and more into a casino” (“The Crisis of Western Societies”; now in *CR*, p. 256). And in 1989, he spoke of “the ever more thoroughgoing transformation of the system, as to its economic dimension, into a vast financial casino” (“The Crisis of the Identification Process”; now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#), p. 219). —T/E

you think about that?

C.C.: Globalization is due not only to the revolution in the techniques of telecommunications. It is also and especially due to changes at the level of the techniques of production, which have allowed the immense manpower reserves of Southeast Asia, East Asia, and a few other countries, including some Latin American countries, to be put to work at ridiculously low wages. We are all familiar with the purely conventional, instituted character of monetary signs. The dematerialization of money manifested itself as money's conventionality in the modern world as soon as there were banknotes. Those banknotes were in principle convertible into gold, but never would the central banks have had sufficient amounts of gold to reimburse all the notes that were circulating in the country if all the holders of notes had simultaneously presented themselves at the banks to demand gold. Money has always been conventional. True, today a new stage in this process has been reached. But that is especially important for speculation, which has indeed today become totally unbridled. Big companies can send one hundred billion dollars across the Atlantic in a second. The transactions are instantaneous. From this standpoint, the planet has become a virtually unified territory that has nothing to do with the real territory. It's a planetary territory in which speculative activity goes on nonstop. It begins in Tokyo at night—during what for us {in France} is night—passes on to Hong Kong, Bombay, Paris, and London, and ends in New York and Chicago. The value of the dollar, the pound, the franc, commodities, stocks, derivative financial products, and so on—everything fluctuates over that time.

Q.: Might one become able to master this territory of financial flows, could democracy happen there?

C.C.: No, it's inseparable from capitalism, and the latter is incompatible with true democracy.