

# CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH

## Volume 1

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).

# NOTICE

The present volume is offered to readers as a public service in the hopes of encouraging reflection and action aimed at deepening, and realizing, the project of individual and collective autonomy on a worldwide basis in all its manifestations.

Neither any website that would make the electronic version available nor any other distributor who may come forward in any medium is currently authorized to accept any financial remuneration for this service. “The anonymous Translator/Editor” (T/E) will thus not receive, nor will T/E accept, any monetary payment or other compensation for his labor as a result of this free circulation of ideas.

Anyone who downloads or otherwise makes use of this tome is suggested to make a free-will donation to those who have presented themselves as the legal heirs of Cornelius Castoriadis: Cybèle Castoriadis, Sparta Castoriadis, and Zoé Castoriadis. Either cash or checks in any currency made payable simply to “Castoriadis” may be sent to the following address:

Castoriadis, 1 rue de l’Alboni 75016 Paris FRANCE

A suggested contribution is five (5) dollars (US) or five (5) euros.

The aforesaid legal heirs are totally unaware of this undertaking, and so it will be completely for each individual user to decide, on his or her own responsibility (a word not to be taken lightly), whether or not to make such a contribution—which does not constitute any sort of legal acknowledgment. It is entirely unknown how these heirs will react, nor can it be guessed whether receipt of funds will affect their subsequent legal or moral decisions regarding similar undertakings in the future.\* Nevertheless, it is recommended that each user contact, by electronic mail or by other means, at least ten (10) persons or organizations, urging them to obtain a copy of the book in this way or offering these persons or organizations gift copies. It is further recommended that each of these persons or organizations in turn make ten (10) additional contacts under the same terms and circumstances, and so on and so forth, for the purpose of furthering this nonhierarchical and disinterested “pyramid scheme” designed to spread Castoriadis’s thought without further hindrance.

---

\* 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. So far, in addition to the present volume, five other Castoriadis/Cardan volumes (listed below with the electronic publication dates) have been translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service:

- *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*. <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf>. December 4, 2003.
  - *Figures of the Thinkable, Including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf>. February 2005.
  - *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today*. <http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>. October 2010.
  - *Postscript on Insignificance, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. March 2011. *Postscript on Insignificance, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance, followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. August 2017. <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>.
  - *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the “MAUSS” Group*. <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>. January 2013.
  - *Window on the Chaos, Including “How I Didn’t Become a Musician”* (Beta Version). <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf> July 21, 2015.
  - *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. With a Translator/Editor’s Introduction by David Ames Curtis (March–April 2016). London, Eris, 2018. 488pp. <http://notbored.org/SouBA.pdf> London, Eris, 2018.
- Plus two online videos with English-language subtitles:
- Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis (outtakes from Chris Marker’s 1989 film *L’Héritage de la chouette* [The Owl’s Legacy]). <http://vimeo.com/66587994> May 2013.
  - Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis for the Greek television network ET1, for the show *Paraskiniom*, 1984 (with English-language subtitles). Video in Greek from publicly available online source. English translation: Ioanna. <http://vimeo.com/kaloskaisophos/castoriadis-paraskiniom-english-subtitles> (EL/EN-subtitles).

The body of the present six translated and edited volumes and the apparatus for each volume are ©copyrighted by David Ames Curtis

# CONTENTS

<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in English, with Standard Abbreviations</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in French, with Standard Abbreviations</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>On the Texts</i>	<i>xli</i>
<i>Translator/Editor's Foreword</i>	<i>xlii</i>
<i>On the Translation</i>	<i>xciv</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>cxxi</i>

## PSYCHE

EPILEGOMENA TO A THEORY OF THE SOUL THAT HAS BEEN ABLE TO BE PRESENTED AS A SCIENCE	1
---	---

PSYCHOANALYSIS: PROJECT AND ELUCIDATION	57
--	----

## LOGOS

THE SAYABLE AND THE UNSAYABLE	149
-------------------------------	-----

MODERN SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHICAL INTERROGATION	182
---	-----

<i>The Crisis of Modern Science and Scientific Progressivism</i>	187
--	-----

<i>The Foundations of Mathematics and the Undecidable</i>	191
---	-----

<i>The Situation of Physics</i>	199
---------------------------------	-----

<i>The Problem of the History of Science</i>	208
--	-----

Inadequacy of the usual interpretations of the evolution of science. Impossibility of thinking a history of science within the framework of the inherited philosophy.

<i>Contemporary Biology: False and True Problems</i>	230
--	-----

The standpoint of information theory and its limits. Automaton as self-definition. The concept of conservation. The concept of thermodynamic fluctuation. The concept of stationary state.

<i>Anthropological Disciplines</i>	242
Economics. Law. Linguistics. Psychoanalysis. Sociology. Society and history.	
<i>The Problem of the Unification of Disciplines</i>	262
<i>Ensemblistic or Identitary Logic</i>	267
Ontological presuppositions of ensemblistic logic. Ensemblistic logic and social organization. Domain of validity of ensemblistic logic. The ensemblistic dimension of language. Ensemblistic logic and formalization. Limits of ensemblistic logic. Categories and regionality.	
<i>Social-Historical Situation of Contemporary Science</i>	283

## KOINŌNIA

TECHNIQUE	290
1. The Meaning of Technique	292
Greek "Technē"	
<i>The Western Conception of Technics</i>	297
Marx. Critics of Technics.	
<i>Technique, Creation, and Constitution of the Human World</i>	303
Technique as absolute creation. The constitution of the real. The indeterminacy of ends. Social organization. The neutrality of Technique.	
2. Technics and Social Organization	311
<i>The Marxist Thesis</i>	311
Technics and social life. The contemporary era. Nonunivocal relations.	
<i>Technics and Economics</i>	317
Continuity and discontinuity. Applied technics and social struggles in the business enterprise.	
3. Technics and Politics	324
<i>Technology in Question</i>	326
<i>Technics in Post-Revolutionary Society</i>	327
 VALUE, EQUALITY, JUSTICE, POLITICS: FROM MARX TO ARISTOTLE AND FROM ARISTOTLE TO US	 331
 <i>Appendix: Potential Errata</i>	 433

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

[ASA\(RPT\)](#) *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, 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*. Tr. Martin H. Ryle and Kate Soper. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1984. 345pp.

[CL1](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 1. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-1.pdf>

[CL2](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 2. *Human Domains*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-2-human-domains.pdf>

[CL3](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 3. *World in Fragments*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-3-world-in-fragments.pdf>

[CL4](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 4. *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-4-rising-tide-of-insignificance.pdf>

[CL5](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 5. *Done and To Be Done*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-5-done-and-to-be-done.pdf>

[CL6](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 6. *Figures of the Thinkable*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-6-figures-of-the-thinkable.pdf>

- [CR](#) *The Castoriadis Reader*. Ed. David Ames Curtis. Malden, MA and Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1997. 470pp.
- [DR](#) *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group*. <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: January 2013. 63pp.
- [FTPK](#) *Figures of the Thinkable including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf> and [http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures of the Thinkable.pdf](http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures_of_the_Thinkable.pdf). Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: February 2005. 428pp.
- [IIS](#) *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Tr. 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. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.
- [OPS](#) *On Plato's Statesman*. Tr. 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.
- [PSRTI](#) *Postscript on Insignificancy, Including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy. Followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits, and Two Book Reviews*. <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2011. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. August 2017.
- [PSW1](#) *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 1: 1946-1955. *From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*. Tr. 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*. Tr. 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*. Tr. 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> and [http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising\\_tide.pdf](http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf). Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: December 4, 2003.
- [SouBA](#) *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service, with a Translator/Editor's Introduction by David Ames Curtis. London: Eris, 2018. 488pp.
- [WIF](#) *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. Ed. and tr. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. 507pp.
- [WoC](#) *Window on the Chaos, Including "How I Didn't Become a Musician."* <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: July 21, 2015.

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

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

- CE* *La culture de l'égoïsme*. Avec Christopher Lasch. Traduit de l'anglais par Myrto Gondicas. Postface de Jean-Claude Michéa. Flammarion, Paris, 2012. 105pp.
- 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 les 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.
- CFG3* *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 3. *Thucydide, la force et le droit*. Séminaires 1984-1985. *La Création humaine IV*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Le germe et le *kratos*: réflexions sur la création politique à Athènes" par Claude Moatti. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011. 374pp.
- CL* *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978. 318pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2017. 432pp.
- 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. *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Paris: Éditions Le Bord de l'Eau, 2014. 107pp.
- DG* *Devant la guerre*. Tome 1: *Les Réalités*. 1<sup>er</sup> éd. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1981. 285pp. 2<sup>e</sup> éd. revue et corrigée, 1982. 317pp.
- DH* *Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. 460pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 576pp.
- DHIS* Cornelius Castoriadis, Paul Ricœur. *Dialogue sur l'histoire et*

- l'imaginaire social*. Édité par Johann Michel. Paris: Éditions de L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2016. 80pp.
- 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.
- EP1 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 1. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 422pp.
- EP2 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 2. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 578pp.
- EP3 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 3. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 694pp.
- EP4 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 4. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 660pp.
- EP5 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 5. *La Société bureaucratique*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2015. 638pp.
- EP6 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 6. *Guerre et théories de la guerre*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2016. 723pp.
- EP7 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 7. *Écologie et politique*, suivi de *Correspondances et compléments*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 448pp.
- EP8 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 8. *Sur la dynamique du capitalisme et autres textes*, suivi de *L'Impérialisme et la guerre*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 709pp.
- FAF *Fait et à faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe V*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997. 284pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2008. 352pp.
- 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. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2009. 364pp.
- 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. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 544pp. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.
- 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. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008. 296pp.
- MI* *La Montée de l'insignifiance. Les carrefours du labyrinthe IV.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996. 245pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2007. 304pp.
- MM* *Le Monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990. 281pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2000. 349pp.
- P-SI* *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance.* Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet (novembre 1996). La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 37pp.
- P-SID* *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance.* Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet suivi de *Dialogue.* La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2007. 51pp.
- 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. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2011. 40pp.
- 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. See <https://soubscan.org>.
- SouBA* *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Anthologie.* La Bussière: Acratie, 2007.

344pp.

*SPP* *Sur Le Politique de Platon*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 199pp.

*SV* *Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique*. Séminaires 1986-1987. *La Création humaine, 1*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002. 496pp.

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

## Preface\*

In the world of our lives [*le monde de la vie*], we can ask, and we do ask: “Why...?” or: “What is...?” The answer is often uncertain. What is that white object, over there? It is Cleon’s son, says Aristotle; “it happens that this white object would be the son of Cleon.”<sup>1</sup> But we do not ask what Aristotle asks: What is it to see; what is *what* one sees; what is *the one who* sees? Still less do we ask: What is this very question, and what is questioning?

As soon as we ask that, the country changes. We are no longer in the life-world [*le monde de la vie*], in the stable landscape at rest, albeit prey to the most violent movement, where we could allow our gaze to stroll about in a well-ordered, before/after sort of way. The light on the plain has disappeared, the mountains that bound it no longer are there, and the infinite laughter of the Greek sea has become inaudible. Nothing is simply juxtaposed, the nearest is the furthest, the forks do not follow in succession; they have become simultaneous, crossing each other’s path. The entrance to the Labyrinth is immediately one of its centers, or rather we no longer know whether it is a center or what a center is. Obscure galleries run off in every direction; they become entangled with other ones coming from who-knows-where and leading perhaps nowhere. One should not have

---

\*Préface, first published in the [French edition of CL](#), 7-24 (5-30 of the 1998 reprint).

<sup>1</sup>Aristotle *De Anima* 3.1.425a26-27. [Translator/Editor (hereafter: T/E): Translated here and elsewhere into English—while examining or using, when appropriate, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation One Volume Digital Edition*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984)—are the distinctive French translations from the Ancient Greek done by Castoriadis himself.]

crossed over; one should have stayed outside. Yet we are no longer even certain that we might not have forever crossed over, that the yellow and white splashes of asphodels that come back before us now and again to unsettle our vision have never existed anywhere but on the insides of our eyelids. The sole remaining choice is to disappear into this or that gallery rather than into another, without knowing where they might lead us or whether they will bring us back eternally to this same crossroads or to another one that would be exactly alike.

To think is not to exit the cave, nor is it to replace the uncertainty of shadows with the clear-cut contours of the things themselves, the flickering glow of a flame replaced by the light of the true Sun. It is to enter into the Labyrinth; more exactly, to make be and make appear a Labyrinth, when one might have remained “stretched out among the flowers, facing the sky.”<sup>2</sup> It is to become lost amid galleries that exist only because we tirelessly hollow them out, turning round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac, access to which has been closed off behind where we had stepped—until this rotation opens up, inexplicably, some cracks in the wall wide enough for us to pass through.

Undoubtedly, the myth was meant to signify something important when it made the Labyrinth the work of Daedalus, a man.

~

One more time, and after so many others, the texts brought together here are intended to take up and, if possible,

---

<sup>2</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke, *Immer Wieder* [T/E: translating the French presented, without further specification, by Castoriadis].

to renew these questions. What is the soul—and to what extent, under what conditions, does psychoanalysis force us to think the soul in another way? What is language—and how can one speak of it? What is a mathematical, physical, biological, or social-historical object—and how does it at once deliver itself up to and steal away from that extraordinary undertaking that is modern science? Starting from what, and by what means, can we speak of *economics*, *equality*, *justice*, and *politics*? Here we have an excessive, gratuitous, and obligatory ambition: to elucidate the strange fact of knowledge, to explore its current situation, and to seek therein some significations that go beyond it.

The circle is right there: immediate, banal, and well known for a very long time—in fact, as soon as theory begins to articulate itself. We will not cease our travels around it. The impatient reader will think: These texts are gauging up theory or criticizing it. Starting from what, in the name of what? Are they not, themselves, theoretical texts? Do they not lie within the scope of the theory of the theory-object? Do they not employ the resources of that which they criticize?

What is theory? The activity of theorists. And theorists are those who make theory. Science is the activity of scientists—of those who do science. A ridiculous circle. But what is to be put in its place? Of course, other definitions are possible. For example: The science of an object is the system of true (or correct, or unfalsified) statements bearing on this object. The flimsiest Positivism and the most absolute Idealism meet up here. “The systematic development of truth in scientific form can alone be the true shape in which truth

exists” (Hegel).<sup>3</sup> What object, and what is an object? What is a true (or correct, or unfalsified) statement? What does *system* mean, and up to what point does a system have to be systematic in order truly to be a system—and where has one ever seen a system?

None of the extant sciences is more conclusive, or more systematic, than mathematics. And Bertrand Russell, a man knowledgeable about mathematics, said: “Thus, mathematics may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what we are saying is true.”<sup>4</sup> One would have to be totally ignorant of mathematics to think that this is a mere quip. There, one never knows what one is talking about: one speaks there of everything and of nothing in particular, of just anything as such, of something in general. One tries to be specific, endowing this something with particular properties, condensed into a group of axioms. Sooner or later, one glimpses that one has done something other than what one thought one was doing. Giuseppe Peano formulated the axioms of natural numbers. Later, it was discovered that these axioms are not categorical and that other sets (for example, the series  $1/n$ ) satisfy them as well. It was long thought (and in a sense, it is still thought) that there is a radical difference between the uncountable set of real numbers and countably infinite sets (for example, that of natural numbers). Yet it has

---

<sup>3</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, Preface, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. and corr., tr. J. B. Baillie (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd and New York: Humanities Press, 1966), Preface, §5, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup>T/E: Bertrand Russell, “Recent Work on the Principles of Mathematics,” *The International Monthly*, 4 (July 1901); reprinted as “Mathematics and the Metaphysicians,” in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1918), p. 75.

been demonstrated that any consistent theory of the set of the reals has a countable model (Löwenheim-Skolem). One does not know whether what one is saying is true: what one says depends on the axioms posited, and these, save for a few conditions, are arbitrary—and it is unclear what meaning could be given to the question of the “truth” of the axioms, yet neither is it clear how one could deny all signification thereto. (For example: Why *these-here* axioms and not other ones? How far does the “arbitrariness,” or the freedom, of the mathematician go?) One fudges things when one says that the truth of a mathematical system is nothing more than its noncontradiction. Someone then comes along who demonstrates that the demonstration of this noncontradiction, if performed, would entail a contradiction.

And yet, another man knowledgeable about mathematics, Eugene Wigner, has expressed his more than justified astonishment at “the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics.”<sup>5</sup> This Daedalian, and uncertain, artifact apparently has a limitless grip over the real—in any case, over the observable (a term that is in turn more than mysterious). Would it be that the mathematical artifact reflects the real? Yet how would it reflect the real, since it actively and essentially participates in the construction thereof? Furthermore, how would that artifact reflect the real, since in half the cases, so to speak, the mathematical precedes the real. In the major cases—which are now legion—it is the theorist who enjoins the observer to seek, not some object, but some new and unknown type of object. Seeing James Clerk Maxwell’s four equations for the first time, Heinrich Hertz

---

<sup>5</sup>T/E: Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13:1 (February 1960).

exclaimed: *Ist es ein Gott, der diese Zeichen schrieb?* (Is it a God who traced these signs?).<sup>6</sup> In four lines, these equations condense a huge number of experimental facts—yet they also go well beyond that condensation; they entail hitherto unsuspected consequences, both real and theoretical. Among them? The existence of radio waves, which Hertz was to “discover” a few years later. But who, then, truly discovered them? In 1928, Paul Dirac constructed a relativistic version of quantum mechanics. A certain equation turned out to have two solutions that were identical apart from their (opposite) algebraic signs. One of those solutions corresponds to something known and observed: the electron, which has a negative electrical charge (considered by physicists to be the substantial particle of that entity known as negative electricity). The other seems to follow simply from the mathematical idiosyncrasies of the equation in question. Dirac decided in 1931 that it corresponds to a physical reality: the positive electron or positron. A year later, this was indeed experimentally observed. (Yet the bifurcations did not end there: it is not always so. In other cases, fully legitimate mathematical solutions correspond to nothing real.) Some fifteen years earlier, seated at his desk, Albert Einstein tried to forget all familiar physics and asked himself the “simple” question: How would a universe be were it bound, basically, only by one mathematical condition, namely, that the laws governing it would be invariant relative to any continuous transformation of coordinates? He ended up with a theory that, in a radically different form and spirit, rediscovers all the results of extant macrophysics, improves them on a few

---

<sup>6</sup>T/E: Heinrich Hertz was quoting Goethe’s *Faust* (Scene 1): “Was it a God, who traced these signs” (*War es ein Gott, der diese Zeichen schrieb?*).

observable (and observed) points, and that, were it not for Einstein's psychological hang-ups (in brief, the fact that he was not completely able to forget what he thought that he knew about physics), would have led him to predict the most incredible physical fact ever observed by man: the expansion of the universe. In this novelistic logic, moreover, such hang-ups matter little: they confirm, rather, what I am trying to say. That Einstein's equations included, among the solutions they offered, expanding universes was established by Willem de Sitter (1917) and Alexander Friedmann (1922) before the memorable observations of Vesto Slipher, Harlow Shapley, and Edwin Hubble or independently of those observations.

There is, certainly, the *factum* of experience or of knowledge. Yet equally, and just as importantly, there is the *factum* of error (I am not talking about errors in calculation) and especially of uncertainty. And there is the *factum* of the entanglement of the two. What a platitudinous illusion to believe in a simple, sharp, and clear-cut division between them. A platitudinous illusion, too, to believe that anything goes. These two illusions share nearly the whole contemporary stage: Positivism, Scientism, Rationalism, and Structuralism, on the one hand; Irrationalism, naive Relativism, hasty and superficial denunciations of "Science" and "Knowledge," on the other. Their common ground? The childish belief that we could ever escape the question of truth, by resolving it once and for all—or by declaring it meaningless.

There is also and above all the following banal, massive, and immediate fact upon which one never truly reflects, other than on the descriptive level or in absolute ("dialectical") rationalist reduction: there is *alteration* of experience; there is *history* in the weighty sense of the term.

No point in speaking of the domain of anthropology,

where it would be cruel to recall today the thunderous proclamations of not so long ago about how a rigorous discipline had finally been constituted and was going to furnish an answer to everything (“structural” economics, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and ethnology). Let us consider, rather, the questions this inextricable entanglement poses in the domain of the so-called exact sciences. For fifty years, as their results were accumulating at a fantastic pace, one has been speaking of their *crisis*—as if that were a radically new fact. True, since the beginning of the twentieth century, how these fundamental disciplines have evolved has created, or finally made appear, some antinomies or key flaws. Yet, when one looks closely, it is just as true that flaws or analogous antinomies have always existed. In truth, the crisis has consisted essentially in the following: the—rare—scientists who actually do reflect have understood that crisis is the permanent (more or less overt, more or less latent) state of science. And, more specifically, that the metaphysical postulates on which their activity was based in no way went without saying (which, furthermore, has always been evident). This crisis has thus sent them back directly to the philosophical questions their scientific activity raises: question of the nature of this activity, of its object, of the relation between the two.

Philosophical interrogation thus suddenly arises, anew and explicitly, from the very heart of scientific activity. Yet it also, and for the first time, is arising in another form: as an interrogation bearing on the history and the historicity of science. The illusions of “successive approximations,” of “cumulative results,” of the gradual and systematic conquest of a simple rational order preexisting within the world are dissipating. There is a philosophical (and not merely “epistemological”) question bearing on the *fact* of a history of

science. This question belongs to the philosophical question of history in general yet does not allow itself simply to be dissolved into the latter.

~

Let us formulate briefly one of the most acute moments of this question. Scientific theories come one after another. And in this succession we can see neither order nor mere disorder. Regularly, accepted theories are revealed to be “false” or are not “true” as they were intended when they were formulated. New theories are not better approximations: they have another logical structure and different metaphysical presuppositions; they do not add themselves to the earlier ones; they refute them or abolish them. (And it would be meaningless to say that they “dialectically overcome” them.) However, in the important cases, past theories are not purely and simply “false.” Everything happens as if they corresponded and correspond still, in a nontrivial way, to a part or stratum of the object, whether formal or real—which part or stratum does not allow itself to be integrated without difficulty into the larger parts to which the next theories have gained access. The ruptures are far deeper than is usually believed, yet there is a strange continuity, too. In a sense there has been *one* mathematics, and even *one* physics, for twenty-five centuries. (This statement will seem banal to those who are unfamiliar with contemporary science and scandalous to those who do know it.)

These facts pose a question as to the nature of scientific activity as well as to the nature of what is. The existence of a history of science says something about science itself. But since what has continued in succession for twenty-five centuries is not a band of clouds that then dissipate

without remainder, it just as much says something about its object. That object must very well be (be made) in a certain fashion in order for it to give itself over in this way and not another, in order for there to be a possibility of these successive grips upon it, so often fecund and ever partial—and whose succession forms neither a system nor a logical progression, though having its own kind of continuity that, furthermore, is indescribable. (And were one to say that all the foregoing concerns only some properties of the observer or of science, the question would remain in full: it is unclear through what strange negative privilege the former or the latter would be excluded from what is.)

A question of history, a question of truth, a question of their relation. A philosophical question (and a political one, in the true sense of the word), which is evacuated when science is made into a mere succession of “paradigms”—or when one limits oneself to describing what is called, by violating the meaning of the word, the “episteme” of each epoch.<sup>7</sup> What then are the relations these successive “paradigms” maintain between themselves and all of them together, in their intestine war, with what is being aimed at? Is there a relation between the “episteme” of the contemporary West and that of Ancient Greece, and which one would it be? Do they have a referent that, in a sense, remains common, which is, in another sense, independent of them? And can one speak, in the same manner, of an “episteme” among the Aranda people? These questions being tacitly disallowed, science is transformed into an ethnographic

---

<sup>7</sup>T/E: Reference here is to Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) on “paradigms” and Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, 1966) on “epistemes.”

variety or curiosity. The Caduveo paint their faces; for the Egyptians, cats were sacred; and Greco-Westerners do science. Let us conclude that those who talk this way themselves constitute an ethnological curiosity and that discussing their sayings is no more meaningful than approving and disapproving of the coifs of Breton women.

A question of history, of truth, and of error, of their entanglement, of the identity and alteration of experience where that experience displays the most extreme antinomies. A question that rekindles, revives, and renews philosophical interrogation. It is understood that Positivism and Structuralism had wanted to eliminate it. Yet it has to be noted that someone like Martin Heidegger strictly shares the same postulates, when he proclaims the “end of philosophy,” the “dissolution of philosophy in the technicized [*technisierten*] sciences.”<sup>8</sup> How then could the “technicization” of the sciences eliminate the philosophical interrogation they raise? Would there be a technique, or a technicization, that could close questions and questioning? What technicization? And where is technicization truly at?

The technicization—and the bureaucratization—of science are evident. Yet, far from closing off problems, they merely multiply them (save for the technicians and the bureaucrats themselves—but that is not what is at issue here). They raise questions concerning the things themselves—which is not the case of technics [*technique*] in the industrial and productive realms. And the set of modern industrial and productive techniques creates huge problems of vital importance—political problems and, taken globally, a

---

<sup>8</sup>T/E: Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” in *On Time and Being*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 59 (translation slightly altered).

question that is certainly philosophical: What is technique? Yet no technical means belonging to this set, taken in itself, raises any sort of question or leads to such a question. The airplane replaces the steamer, which had replaced the sailing ship. It is swifter and more (or less) comfortable, more “economical” (?), and so on—and the proliferation of this type of means creates the dramatic situations now largely known and discussed. Yet the airplane does not force me to ask myself: What then is...? Scientific techniques do. Technicization is an inexhaustible source of new questions—and these questions do not concern solely the “content” of science but its framework and its foundations.

The construction of large telescopes during the 1920s, then radio astronomy and so on, leading to “ascertaining” an expansion of the universe, to discovering quasars, and to supposing that the theoretical possibility of “black holes” might end in some actually being observed have allowed the notions of space, time, matter-energy, and physical law to enter into an ever-more frenzied dance. Particle accelerators have, in the words of Werner Heisenberg, transformed physicists into zoologists: the “elementary” can now be counted in dozens of different species. What, then, is “elementary”? The quark tale directly raises the following questions: What, then, is a physical entity? What meaning can there be to the distinction between “properties” and a hypothetical “support” of these properties—just as it may be asked whether such a support is not, by nature, “unobservable”? And once again, what is intended by the phrases *physical “explanation”* and *scientific “theory”*?

Yet the philosopher—that philosopher—has already rationalized his deafness. All that, it’s the ontic. That concerns beings—and as for him, he thinks only Being. And when has one seen philosophy capable of speaking of Being

absolutely apart from beings? And is it not in himself being that this philosopher tries to speak of Being? Besides, is he not, in the world of beings, making a distinction that leads one to inquire about his good faith, or his lucidity? He speaks of the poem or the work of art; he thinks “the mountain that rises from the landscape.”<sup>9</sup> In his view, the activities of woodcutters in the Black Forest express a certain relation of man to Being.<sup>10</sup> But the mathematical theorem, the image of a spiral galaxy, the at-once efficacious and frustrating, fecund and disappointing labor of explaining the world do not interest him, do not astonish him.

To believe that the rise of the “technicized sciences” entails the “dissolution of philosophy” (this is no empirical acknowledgment, which in any case would be half wrong and in no way new) is simply to believe in “technics,” to believe that the latter can close upon itself. It is to believe that ensemblistic-identitary logic is watertight, that it does not bring forth any questions. Now, in fact it brings out some huge ones that concern its own content as well as its relation to what is. The elucidation of these questions has, from the outset, been one of the tasks of philosophy. It is so today more than ever.

There exists no theory as “view” of what is, nor as

---

<sup>9</sup>T/E: “The mountain range lies in the landscape. Its presence is the rising entry into what is unconcealed within unconcealment, even and especially when the mountain range keeps standing as it is, extending and jutting” (Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* [1954], tr. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray [New York: Harper & Row, 1968], p. 236).

<sup>10</sup>T/E: The “woodcutters” (*Holzmacher*) reference here is to the epigraph for Martin Heidegger’s *Holzwege* (1950; *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and tr. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes [Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002], p. v).

systematic and exhaustive constitution or construction of the thinkable, either once and for all or gradually and progressively deployed. There is no sudden crack in the walls surrounding us that would allow us to see at last the light of a Sun that was always there, any more than there is a harmonious edifice whose general layout we would discover as we go about constructing it.

There is a theoretical making/doing [*un faire théorique*], which emerges only at a given moment in history. This is an activity, a human enterprise, a social-historical *project*: the project of theory. Giving an account of and reason for—*logon didonai*—everything: of the world, of the objects that surround us, of their “laws,” of ourselves, of this very activity. And to say that is already to be within theory—within this project—and to pursue it. Asking oneself: What does “giving an account of and reason for” mean? Why must one give an account of and reason for?—this is still wanting to give an account of and reason for. That is a pure fact; we cannot do otherwise since the question was raised. And we know that it has not always been raised—but was so, rather, “at a given moment.”

If that is so, would this question, and this project, be something contingent? Yes, but for whom? For an Absolute Spectator. Yet in order to say or think that, this Absolute Spectator would himself be doing theory—and a theory that would lean on the categories of the necessary and the contingent. We are not this Absolute Spectator; we will never be so. And at the same time, and whatever might be said about it, we cannot refrain from taking his fictive point of view—would it only be to say that it does not exist or that it is not thinkable without contradiction. This alleged “contingent” something—which is neither contingent nor necessary—is our reality. Can we exit therefrom? Evidently,

no. Evidently, yes. Unless I am delirious, I cannot *not* think that thought is a social-historical creation—and that *that* thought is true. And unless I am delirious, I cannot think either that every thought is true or that, when a thought is so, it can give an account of why it is so; unless I am delirious, I can think neither that thought is grounded upon itself nor that it is transparent to itself.

~

We are thus sent back to philosophy, and, still more, to its historical character and to the riddle [*enigma*] it poses. Time is not for philosophy a mere external determination, still less a bearing for the orderly succession of philosophers' thoughts. If the philosopher believes that, by retiring into his study or simply by withdrawing into himself, he can remake the world in accordance with reasoned order and perform directly a lightning-quick opening within the thick integument of his particular language, of his era, of the solid and obscure articulations of the objective and subjective world created/instituted by his society in order to attain a vision—*theōria*—of being that would owe nothing to them, he is deluding himself [*s'illusionne*]. He deludes himself when he believes that he is able to make a *tabula rasa* of all that he has received, subjecting everything to methodical doubt, accepting only that which gives itself out as apodictically self-evident. It regularly proves to be the case that he has not doubted enough, or has doubted too much. He deludes himself when he believes that he has found, in the conditions under which something seems to him thinkable, the atemporal conditions whereby anything whatsoever will ever be able to appear to be to any subject whatsoever; believing that he has grasped forever the conditions of the

thinkable, he grants perhaps that one will be able to think something else but does not conceive that one could ever think *otherwise*. He deludes himself when he believes that a long sojourn near a thing, the patience, pain, and labor of the negative suffice to unveil ultimately a congruence, an identity, between the being of what is and the thought of he who thinks. He fails to recognize then that an ontological empiricism, be it stripped clean by the acids of the dialectic, nonetheless remains a kind of empiricism. He deludes himself even when he thinks that, by dint of a preparatory frictional contact with the thing, suddenly a flame will burst forth that, henceforth feeding upon itself, will make him *see* what is truly as it is truly.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps he will see something, but *what* exactly, that remains eternally to be seen.

And yet, this illusion is fecund and vital. More surprising still, it is not always so; it is so only among the great. This is not some anecdotal or literary remark. It brings into play some of the weightiest questions one might pose to oneself. By virtue of what and in what way is a great philosopher great? Kant offered a response to this question—but on account of the necessities of his philosophy, he restricted it to the work of art and explicitly excluded it from thought.

Genius is a *talent* for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given....the foremost property of genius must be *originality*. ...the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be *exemplary*; ...they must serve others...as a standard or rule by which to judge. ...Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about

---

<sup>11</sup>Plato *Seventh Letter* 341 c-d, 344b.

its products, and it is rather as nature that it gives the rule.<sup>12</sup>

Kant speaks of *production*, in order not to speak of *creation*; of *nature*, in order to designate a radical emergence; *originality* appears in the text as opposed to imitation, but quite evidently this is not a matter of originality in the journalistic sense: *exemplary* creation, creation of an exemplar, of an *eidos*, and which is not one “exemplar” among others—since it *posits* and *makes be* some rules, new and other norms, since it is *origo*.

The historical dimension of philosophy is also what is realized as *creation*. It is emergence of other figures of the thinkable. A great philosopher is a creator of such figures (of “forms” and of “contents” of thought: the distinction is of a second order and is secondary). Extreme humility or extreme arrogance, both at once: he never thinks of himself in this way; he believes that he has *discovered* these figures. And certainly—a new paradox—he is not entirely wrong. The figures he creates perforce have a relation, a *fecund* relation (another mysterious term), with what is: otherwise, they would not obsess us. (Will it be said that they obsess us because we are such as we are? One would be conceding the argument: they therefore deal with something that is, *what* we are, and that is something we did not know before they had been created.)

This relation, however, is historical. In the strange continuity/discontinuity of the figures thus created,

---

<sup>12</sup>*Kant's Critique of Judgment*, tr. and intro. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), §46 [T/E: Castoriadis also mentions §47 here, but the quotation comes only from §46].

philosophy itself is a social-historical project. This banal fact, whose signification is inexhaustible, goes unrecognized even when it is recognized and this occurs in one and the same movement. Thus do Hegel, as well as in another and the same sense Marx, situate themselves within history only in order to exit therefrom and to try to inspect themselves from the outside, believing that they can look behind their own backs. They think that all thought, and their own thought, belong to a moment of history and they mock those who would like to jump over their own shadow. And at the same time, in saying that and in the way in which they say it, they remain completely caught in the phantasy of exiting from history. They speak as if they could give a full account of and reason for their historical situation, as if the historical insertion of all thought were necessary and determined (no matter whether that occurs through the march of the Spirit or that of the forces of production), as if the appearance of their thought in some epoch, the revelation of the definitive truth at such and such a date through some contingent individual could be rendered exhaustively intelligible—which, were it feasible, would reach the height of unintelligibility.

I am thinking here, now: as a function of what has already been thought, said, worked out, and acted, of what I know about that explicitly (quite little) and implicitly (a bit more). Yet if “as a function” truly means *as a function*, if what I am thinking is determined in a univocal manner by what has already been thought, I think nothing; I am engaged in mere repetition and there is no point in going further. If history, and the history of thought, is truly determined, it is but a vast tautological system. The question then remains and always remains: Why does this tautology not appear immediately as such; why must one take such pains to decipher it (each new effort in this direction takes us still

further from it); and why has it disguised itself in this form and not another one, why has it even gone to such pains to disguise itself instead of simply writing itself out as:  $0 = 0$ ? And of course, that a question might remain has nothing scandalous about it, but that ought to be a scandal, and a monstrous one, for a tautological form of thought.

What tautological thinking is thus trying—and this is for it an inner necessity—to eliminate is what can be called *the gap between thought and what is thought*. It would not suffice to say that, without this gap, thought would come to a halt; it would, rather, cease to be. Yet misunderstandings about this term must be avoided. We are not dealing here with a gap given once and for all; the gap is created and recreated, transformed each time, transubstantiated in its mode of being and its being-thus.

All great thought at once narrows down [*réduit*] and hollows out anew and in another fashion this gap. It narrows down the already created gap: it is pointless (as Aristotle along with Hegel had recognized) to deny the large empirical or experiential dimension of philosophy. Historical making/doing (practical, theoretical, or poetic) has each time brought forth a host of aspects of what is, as (by the very fact that) it has created/posited new figures of the world. Great thought strives to take them into account. (What would Plato and Aristotle have been able to think about politics if the Greek people had not created the *polis*?) It succeeds in doing so—though never in full, and this for essential reasons. What is thinkable and is not exhaustively so. And thought is not transparent to itself. It most often certainly has the illusion of being so: it presupposes its absolute capacity for reflectiveness. Yet thought is, to itself, a *phenomenon*: appearing to itself and hiding from itself. This is not a question of the “unthought”: thought is not fully near to itself;

there is no *aseity* of thought.

Yet there is also, each time, a hollowing out of the gap. I have written elsewhere: A great thinker thinks beyond his means. These means are what he has received—and, by definition, he thinks something other than what had already been thought: another object, another aspect of the object.<sup>13</sup> That is true, but only half the truth—and the coexistence of these two opposed halves also creates a problem. Just as true is that a great philosopher creates his means, new “forms” of thought, as the most superficial as well as the most attentive reading of Plato or of Aristotle, of Kant or of Hegel, shows. This is not a matter of literary style, nor of a “style” of thought—any more than, simply, a matter of new “ideas.” The forms, the types, the figures/schemata/significations are *other*, just as are other the “problems,” what does and does not pose a problem. The *ti to on*—What is Being/being?—is “identical” only as philosophy’s *horizon*. The question *ti to on* is reawakened each time starting from something else, which does not remain external to it. If it is not a matter of mere repetition, if the question is truly thought, it is so by the positing/creating of other schemata/figures/significations. Now, it happens that the latter exceed, and by far, their initial “object”—that starting from which, apropos of which, at the instigation of which, be it muted or nonconscious, they had been posited/created. This amounts to saying that they thereby outstrip their epoch, go beyond the language and the social institution in and through which they were born.

---

<sup>13</sup>See *IIS*, 174 [T/E: “A great author, by definition, thinks beyond his means”].

~

The ascertainment, quite obvious, that every philosophy is a historical creation has nothing to do with relativism—which as a matter of fact eliminates the problem of creation. It is not only and not so much that relativism “contradicts itself.” It is that every form of relativism is always—if it does not limit itself to stammering and muttering—a form of absolutism. It claims to be able to exhaust that of which it speaks through the enumeration of the relationships in which it would be caught; it has to affirm that the set of these relationships is determinate and assignable. Yet the problem is established precisely by the fact that, in the case before us, the relationships do exist and they do not exhaust their object. Plato belongs to Greece in never-ending ways—and he makes us think, he belongs to us (or we belong to him, it matters not which).

We are thinking the history of thought (and of science) as a creation. And if we think it truly, our thought itself is creation, which has a relation to what is and its “object”—here: the thought of another time and its “object”—though in no way could it be called *reading* or *interpretation*, unless the meaning of those terms were to be totally subverted. Nor could we call our relation to historical thought *perception* of this thought.<sup>14</sup> We are said to perceive the other philosophers. Admittedly, we can “see” them only from here and now. And they, too, are said to have

---

<sup>14</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Working Notes,” in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), ed. Claude Lefort, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 198: “The history of philosophy as a *perception* of other philosophers.” On the figure-ground schema as ultimate, see *ibid.*, p. 192.

“perceived” or have “seen” something—from there and then. Here is the shared presupposition of the two affirmations: that something—what is, what they were trying to think—offers itself to an indefinite number of acts of perception, that they allow themselves to be grasped in and through the series of adumbrations (*Abschattungen*, traditionally translated into French by *silhouettes*). Those philosophers themselves, having been, offer themselves in turn to this indefinite number of perceptions and allow their shadows—the series of their adumbrations—to be laid out upon history.

Yet here again, we have an exportation or an illegitimate—though almost fated—transfer copy of the schemata of everyday life. It is not a matter of perception. Neither Being nor thought are like the steeples of Martinville, at which humanity would gaze from the succession of viewpoints that would be offered to it along its trajectory.<sup>15</sup> Granted, there are successive points of view, and it is by myself occupying such a viewpoint that I “see” at once what is seen and the trajectory in which are situated those who, till now, have tried to see. Yet the metaphor of vision, more generally of perception, which has from its origin dominated the history of philosophy, is itself—another crossroads—at once fecund and fallacious. When we speak of vision, or of perception, however enriched may be the terms and whatever the complexity of thought, however much we take into account the activity of the subject and the paradoxical character of the subject’s relation to the “perceived,” whatever care is taken to eliminate all idea of reflection, of mechanical or physiological determination, we nevertheless

---

<sup>15</sup>Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, *Swann’s Way*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), p. 249.

remain stuck [*englués*] within a stratum of what we are, of our relationship to ourselves and to what is. For example, dreaming (with eyes open or closed) is not perceiving. Neither is thinking, any more than thinking the thought of others is. Perceptual “equipment”—and I am obviously not thinking of neurosensory “equipment” alone—is undoubtedly not given once and for all: there is no eternal mode of perception belonging to an eternal man; the being-thus of perception is social-historically instituted in some of its components that are indissociable from the other ones. It is, however, given to us each time, precisely in and through its institution, in and through our fabrication as individuals of this society, of this epoch. Both the ungraspable receptacle—the space and time where we find ourselves situated and which make be for us the possibility of distance and succession, of identity and difference—and the world that makes this receptacle be while being in and through it, are each time posited, organized in a given, specific, immutable, even if ultimately indescribable, manner. And it is because they are thus, apparently indubitable, because the *Lebenswelt*, the life-world in which we live, which we bring to life, and which makes us live, is, for us, unshakable, that it is or seems the first and final ground for all pieces of evidence. (Not that it would be full evidence, but it is within this world that all evidence is to bear witness to itself.)

To think, however, is precisely to shake up the perceptual institution in which every site has its place and every moment has its hour—just as it is to shake up the given institution of the world and of society, the social imaginary significations this institution bears. What appertains here to perception is that, when one considers *already-made* thought, one finds there again the figure/ground schema, the necessity of such a schema. The perceptual institution is instauration

once and for all of what the ground is and of what, ever, *can be* figure, as well as of the mode, of the being-thus of their relation, of their distinction and solidarity.

Things proceed pretty much similarly when it comes to the institution of thought as *already made*, already accepted, already assimilated—in fact, already inert or dead. Original thought, however, posits/creates *other* figures, makes be as figure what till then could not be so—and that cannot happen without a tearing up of the existing ground, of the given horizon, and its recreation. It thereby, in its concrete consistency, in its being-thus, alters the figure/ground relationship that, in its generality, says nearly nothing, remaining “logical and empty.”<sup>16</sup> Our true relation to such a thought cannot but aim at finding again that moment of creative tearing, that different and fresh [*recommencée*] dawn where, in one go, things take on another figure in an unknown landscape. That in turn implies that, for us, this thought of the past is becoming a new being within a new horizon, that we *create* it as object of *our* thought, in another relation with its inexhaustible being. (That is why, ultimately, no “faithful” reading is ever important, and no important reading is ever truly “faithful”—which does not mean that it suffices that a reading not be faithful for it to be important.)

After the fact, there always are ground and figure (or difference and solidarity of Being and beings). Yet that is not how things come to be. History, and the history of thought, is ontological creation, in the full sense of the term. It is not just production (reproduction of exemplars of a given *eidos*)—nor it is mere ontological creation, emergence of another *eidos*. It is creation even of types of *eidos*, of another dehiscence of

---

<sup>16</sup>T/E: This is Castoriadis’s translation of Aristotle’s phrase *logikōs kai kenōs*, found in the *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b21.

figure/ground, of another solidarity/difference of its “components.”

When men create music, they do not produce anything, and it would not be enough to say that they create another *eidos* that simply comes to accommodate itself to and insert itself within what, already, is. They create a level of being, which is a world within this world and which, when one really reflects on it, is not truly there.

*Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!  
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!  
Und alles schwieg. Doch selbst in der Verschweigung  
ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor.*

(And then a tree rose up. O pure uprising!  
O song of Orpheus! O tall tree in our ears!  
And all falls silent. Yet, still in that silence  
A new beginning is fulfilled, a sign and a change.)<sup>17</sup>

In truth, the ground upon which the musical figure rises, its proper ground, is silence such as it does not exist without that figure, which it creates by being: for the first time, perhaps, in the history of the world, Nothingness. All that surrounds it, conditions it, all that it presupposes remains ridiculously external to it. Even if we never listen to it—as is almost inevitable—except in an “impure” manner, the musical figure arises suddenly while abolishing the world. It has as ground only Nothingness, silence—and it does not even make this silence exist as its ground. It annexes it

---

<sup>17</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1.1 [T/E: translation into English of Castoriadis’s modified version of the Joseph-François Angelloz French translation].

without violence and makes it be as its own part. And in listening to it, we can want but one thing, that it never end or that everything else end, that the world be forever nothing other or that it be that very Nothingness.

It is never but in thinking/positing/creating a type of being that the philosophers have, each time, thought something of being. It is in making a figure be that they have made a horizon be. And that again cuts both ways. In creating/positing another meaning of: to be, they have riveted it to the very figure they have just created/posited. Could it have been otherwise? Here is an illustration. Discussion over whether the “first philosophy” of Aristotle is a theory of being as such or else that of the Supreme Being (theology), a discussion that has lasted for twenty centuries, is pointless. It rests on a misunderstanding by studious students (a misunderstanding Heidegger has taken up again while amplifying it). Aristotle affirms both at once, and in a sense he is right. He could not give a nontrivial meaning to: to be, except by thinking what, in his view, *is par excellence*: thought thinking itself, which he calls *God*. This positing of Being/being *par excellence* is absolutely of a piece [*solidaire*] with what Aristotle posits at the same time as horizon, the meaning of: to be as pure act, *eidōs* without matter, thought thinking itself. How is one to speak of ontological difference, to divide pedantically into two Books, the “first philosophy,” if the meaning of: to be *is* and if being *is meaning*? If the being of Being is to be meaning, then Being signifies *God*—and therefore also a being. In all great philosophy, one finds again the solidarity between a new ground and a new figure. In an altered sky, other constellations rise up.

Creation happens as dehiscence, where figure and ground at the same time come to be, each by the other and in its own relationship with the other. The historical figure and

its horizon are created together.

Such creation always has a relation to what is already—a relation that depends on *what* is created. The creation of thought renders thinkable what was not so, or not thus. It makes be: to be as a thinkable *what*.... What? What without thought would not be thinkable? Or what without thought would not be? Each of these two paths leads back to the other.

And that is so in two manners rather than one. What, in thought, is lasting has to do with *what* is each time thought. Yet it also has to do with the *how* it is thought. It is impossible to confuse these two moments, and it is impossible to separate them in a rigorous way. Let us grant the apparent redundancy: a new thought is a new way of thinking a new object. The redundancy gives birth straightaway to its riddle: regularly, the manner exceeds the object—and the object exceeds the manner. Yet we would be mistaken if we believed that we hold here finally the indubitable index of a clear difference, of a mutual exteriority between thought and its object. The manner exceeds the object starting from which and apropos of which there was thought. There is, therefore, a power proper to thought—or else, rather, is there an immanent universality, a complex uniformity of all that we come to think? But why then is this universality not immediate and total? The object exceeds the manner. There is, therefore, a heterogeneity and inexhaustible irreducibility of the object—or else, will the latter deliver itself up in another manner? But why then has it already partially delivered itself up in that other manner?

~

In history, in *our* history, the aim of truth has risen up—as has risen up the aim of freedom, equality, and justice. They are indissociable. We—at least, some of us—are taken hold of by them without recourse. It is not a matter, however, of “grounding [*fonder*]” them—it is unclear what that could mean. One does not found the aim of truth, of freedom. One refutes some particular statement—not skepticism or sniggering. One refutes some political inconsistency; one does not refute Auschwitz or the Gulag, one combats them. We cannot do without Reason—while knowing its insufficiency, its limits. We explore these limits while also being in Reason—but of Reason we cannot give an account, nor can we give a reason for it. We are not, for all that, blind or lost. We can elucidate what we think, what we are. After having created it, we survey, piecewise, fragmentarily [*par morceaux*] our Labyrinth.

If the reader is convinced that he has been able to find here some not entirely pointless examples of such an elucidation, these texts will have attained their goal.

November 1977

## On the Texts

All the texts appearing in this volume are reprinted here in the form in which they were published, aside from the correction of misprints and of a few *lapsus calami*. [T/E: Relevant publication information for each text now appears in the corresponding publication note, called out by an asterisk (\*), while footnotes have been numbered consecutively, regardless of when they were added. Words and phrases placed within brackets, whether in the text or in notes, are the translator's additions, preceded by "T/E"—the exception being words of explanation the author himself originally added within brackets to a quotation from another author or French words added in italics for clarification purposes. Sentences and paragraphs appearing in brackets are either from myself, when preceded by "T/E"; from Castoriadis to mark his later additions to his original texts, when preceded by "Author's addition"; or from the French Editors in their capacity of updating the first five volumes in this series or of preparing the posthumous sixth volume, when preceded by "French Editors". Castoriadis, who had archived all extant drafts of his writings, was always very careful and conscientious about indicating in his published work exactly when he first stated an idea, modified a view, or rejected an earlier conviction. As he stated in "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986; now in [CLA](#)), "Not everybody, alas, enjoys the same freedom from yesterday's words and actions as some other people do." Finally, it is to be noted that we have dispensed with "p." and "pp." in the multitudinous instances where the book whose pagination is being cited is one of Castoriadis's own, in English or French. One may consult the lists of standard English and French book abbreviations, which are located in the front matter.]

## Translator/Editor's Foreword

“Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.”

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

Cornelius Castoriadis, who was born in Constantinople in 1922, grew up in Athens, and resided in Paris from 1946 until his death in 1997, was the cofounder of the highly influential postwar French revolutionary group and review *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1948-1967). He worked as an economist at OECD (1948-1970), a practicing psychoanalyst (1973-1997), and a Director of Studies at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (1980-1995). He is best known for his 1975 *magnum opus*, translated into English in 1987 as *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (*IIS*).<sup>1</sup>

Summarizing a suggestion offered in my Translator's Foreword to the first volume of Cornelius Castoriadis's *Political and Social Writings* (*PSWI*, 1988), I wrote in my Foreword for *PSW3* (1993) that “these [*PSWI*-3] writings,” which date from 1946 to 1979, might best “be read as open reflections on prospects for social change, to be developed

---

<sup>1</sup>There is no need to write another in-depth introduction to Castoriadis and his work. For the period before the publication of *IIS*, the interested reader is invited to consult Castoriadis's own 1972 General Introduction, translated in the first volume of his *Political and Social Writings* (*PSWI*), and his 1974 interview, “The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water” (now in *CR*). For Castoriadis's later work, this reader may also turn to another interview, from 1990, “Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process,” as well as to my Castoriadis obituary, available at <https://www.agorainternational.org/about.html>, and to the various Translator's Forewords for the second through sixth volumes of the present *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* translation, where a variety of themes Castoriadis broached across this series are examined and elucidated transversally.

and deepened into themes for improvisation, not as ultimate answers to be embraced (or rejected) as such.”<sup>2</sup> I went on to show there how Castoriadis himself, ever critical of his own prior work as well as that of others, did just that in relation to his earlier texts, extending, elaborating on, and refining these writings from [the revolutionary review \*Socialisme ou Barbarie\* \(1949-1965\)](#) while also, when he deemed it necessary, frankly and expressly recognizing where previous positions, arguments, and efforts, both theoretical and practical, had to be surpassed by himself in thought and in writing as well as by people themselves through their own reflection and action and/or had already been surpassed by the existing situation itself in its effective social reality.

Here, in the six volumes of translated and edited Castoriadis texts brought together for the first time in one place in the present *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* collection,<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>I thank Harald Wolf for reminding me of this “suggestion” of mine when he quoted my [PSW3](#) Foreword (composed in 1992) during a 2022 conference in Athens celebrating Castoriadis’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Extrapolating my thoughts, Wolf spoke of Castoriadis’s “reflections and their formulations, which can serve as inspirational themes for our own theoretical and practical improvisations. My contribution will consist of a few short improvisations on what at first glance might seem a rather inconspicuous theme in Castoriadis” (see Wolf’s “A ‘Long and Patient Work of Preparation’ in an Age of Catastrophe: Some Short Remarks on Castoriadis’ Political Legacy,” available in written form at: <http://www.aftoleksi.gr/2022/06/18/a-quot-long-and-patient-work-of-preparation-quot-in-an-age-of-catastrophe-remarks-on-castoriadis-political-legacy>).

<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-1-6.html>, where links are listed for all six English-language *Crossroads* volumes, along with links to electronic versions of the first three *Carrefours du labyrinthe* volumes that contain highlighted text indicating potential *errata* that the French publisher Le Seuil, the so-called “Association Cornelius

which extend, elaborate on, and refine “source ideas [*idées mères*]” presented in [IIS](#), we encounter writings that stretch from his initial *Carrefours du labyrinthe* chapter—a 1978 reprint of a text published in the psychoanalytic review *L’Inconscient* in October 1968, now nearly five-and-a-half decades ago—to posthumous ones that first appeared in print in the final *Carrefours* volume, in 1999, two years after his death, a quarter century ago, at age 75. Again, it would be absurd, or at least counterproductive and against their own spirit, to take such texts as being in any way “ultimate answers to be embraced (or rejected) as such.”<sup>4</sup> And once more, it may be suggested that it becomes incumbent upon us to bring to bear upon these various essays, public interventions, and interviews our own reflection and our and our society’s knowledge, such as they have been—and can further be—developed today through new, improvisatory efforts at elucidation both of Castoriadis’s thinking as well as of his writing and of our current situation as well as of how that situation may have changed in relation to a past that was also Castoriadis’s. Arguing against an illusory and impossible standard of Absolute Knowledge, in “Revolutionary Perspectives Today”—a 1973 talk delivered to members of

---

Castoriadis,” and the Castoriadis literary executors all refused to examine and to confirm or correct (each individual *Crossroads* volume also contains a running list of *errata* for that volume).

<sup>4</sup>Drawn from a warning Castoriadis himself delivers in his “General Introduction,” the epigraph I chose for the very first Castoriadis Foreword I composed (see [PSWI](#), vii) constituted what may be considered a *mise-en-abyme* call to continued critical self-reflection: “We do not have any Good News to proselytize concerning the Promised Land glimmering on the horizon, any Book to recommend whose reading would exempt one from having to seek the truth for oneself.”

Socialisme ou Barbarie's British sister group, Solidarity, where he developed at length a "landscape" metaphor as regards revolutionary perspectives or prospects or outlooks while also questioning there whether this visual metaphor of *perspectives révolutionnaires* (a term often found in his *S. ou B.* writings) is the most appropriate one<sup>5</sup>—he stated, in a double negative, that 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.<sup>6</sup>

What we think and what we do in relation to Castoriadis's work—including through the reading of and reflection on [these six volumes](#)—how we approach it, and why we do so will together constitute a crucial component of what we and others in the future will make of that work and how it will be greeted and, eventually, criticized, corrected, expanded, and/or transformed. Such *reception*, in the broadest sense, is

---

<sup>5</sup>In "Revolutionary Perspectives Today," Castoriadis explicitly criticizes taking a "mountaintop" point of view—perhaps his version of critiquing what Maurice Merleau-Ponty himself denigrated as *la pensée de survol*, bird's-eye thinking.

<sup>6</sup>The written version of this never-translated, previously unpublished English-language talk is now available in [ASA\(RPT\)](#); see p. 36. The meaning and implications of Castoriadis "landscape" metaphor are explored in the Foreword to this electro-Samizdat volume.

as creative an act as is the original output, a point Castoriadis himself often emphasized, including several times [in the present series](#).

In this endeavor, we can be assisted and, indeed, encouraged by Castoriadis himself. Throughout [the six \*Crossroads\* volumes](#), one encounters time and again such formulations as the following:

It is quite obviously impossible for these organizations—of things, of people, of acts, of thoughts—to be separated from and to be independent of each other; there is, for each society, cohesion, internal solidarity, reciprocal inherence—*which we shall have to explore*—of the positing and view of “natural things,” of people’s status, of the rules and references of making/doing and of saying ([CLS](#), 236, emphasis added).

Thus does Castoriadis, on repeated occasions, explicitly invite himself and implicitly summon us readers—the translator being the first reader in the new language into which these words and social imaginary significations have been transformed—to think further about what he has hitherto affirmed, sometimes, as here, even as he is making the affirmation in question. However—and once again, we may have a role to take on—he also at times points us to what is still lacking or remains as yet underdeveloped in his work, even as he endeavors to facilitate in even more concrete ways our task of going beyond it—for example in “Done and To Be Done,” his 1989 reply to the contributors to his Giovanni Busino-edited *Festschrift*, where he introduced his suggestions along these lines by posing some very broad, and equally profound, questions:

What is the relation between new and old forms? More generally, what are the *forms of relation* in general among forms, and among instances (particular exemplars) of each form? What are the relations among strata of Being/being, and among the beings [*étants*] within each stratum? ([CL5](#), 16)

He then provides an open-ended list of these “modes” of which a “theory of the effective types of connection ought at least to take account,” with Castoriadis modestly explaining that they are “indicated here only as examples and without any claim to being systematic or exhaustive” ([ibid.](#))—that is, ones eventually to be added to and explored in greater depth by others who might relate this nonexhaustive enumeration of “modes” to more specific, extant social-historical examples and, perhaps in turn, revise and supplement those aforementioned “modes” through such actual encounters.

~

Now, as Castoriadis quite firmly reminds readers as early as the third page of his December 1974 Preface to [IIS](#): “That which, since 1964, I have termed the social imaginary—a term which has since been used and misused in a number of different ways—and, more generally, that which I call the imaginary has nothing to do with the representations currently circulating under this heading.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, *the*

---

<sup>7</sup>The term *social imaginary* actually appears for the first time only in 1965, in the fifth and final installment of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (first published in [Socialisme ou Barbarie's last issue, of June-August 1965](#), and subsequently reprinted in the first part of [IIS](#); see: 131). In the previous four installments of this extended, serialized text, from issues 36-

*imaginary* itself as a term had already, and for many years, enjoyed a well-established usage in the Seminars of Jacques Lacan, seminars Castoriadis had personally attended—though Lacan's utilization was, as he later showed, tied to, and limited by, its impoverished association with the Lacanian “mirror stage.” And the term has been developed in different directions by others—notably, in a French context, by the philosopher Gilbert Durand, who was directly criticized by Castoriadis for seeing

in the imagination “a dynamic potential that deforms copies furnished by perception”—as if perception could ever furnish “copies”; as if the primary labor of the psyche's radical imagination were not precisely to make be a world of forms, whether connected or not to an “external” *X* ([CL5](#), 301).

as well as by Durand's former student, the sociologist Michel

---

39 ([April-June 1964](#), [July-September 1964](#), [October-December 1964](#), and [March-April 1965](#)), Castoriadis was still using the term “imaginary” in traditional, rather pejorative senses, contrasting the imaginary there with “the real,” treating the former as merely “compensatory” or “illusory,” and so on. However, a more positive use of “imaginary,” perhaps foreshadowing the aforementioned 1965 initial use of “social imaginary” in [issue 40](#), may be found in the as-yet-untranslated text from [S. ou B. issue 38](#), “La chute de Khrouchtchev” (The fall of Khrushchev), where he speaks several times of an “imaginary dimension of power” (we hope to translate this text, now in *EP5*, for the projected fifth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*). As I stated in [my Castoriadis obituary](#), “Castoriadis's most original and enduring contribution...is as the philosopher of the social imagination” (had I not been writing for a general audience, I would have instead written, more correctly: *the social imaginary*).

Maffesoli, whose work Castoriadis seems to have ignored.<sup>8</sup>

One does indeed find, as Castoriadis suggests, myriad uses and misuses of “representations,” “the imaginary,” and even “the social imaginary” in academic and sometimes even activist publications since Castoriadis’s invention, in the mid-Sixties, of this last term in “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory.” When not referencing instead Durand, Maffesoli, or other exponents of “the imaginary” explicitly, and often even while evoking Castoriadis expressly, such applications do not always take into account and comprehend what Castoriadis intends by those terms, let alone develop them beyond the extant meanings he concretely articulated for them during his lifetime. As early as the Preface to the [second volume in the](#)

---

<sup>8</sup>Unless, that is, I have missed a stray mention of Maffesoli here or there in Castoriadis’s work. Early on, soon after he moved to Paris, the young student Castoriadis “audited a few courses” given by Gaston Bachelard, who had developed philosophical and literary aspects of the imagination. But the main Bachelard course he followed was during Bachelard’s “last year of teaching, I think. He did a very specialized course, possibly on the birth of thermodynamics” ([Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview: Cerisy Colloquium \[1990\]](#), p. 4). As for Henri Bergson, Castoriadis criticizes him in this same 1985 Preface ([CL2](#), xvii-xviii) for his “radical misrecognition of social-historical creation.” Castoriadis summarily dismisses Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1940 book *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*: “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” (“Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process: An Introductory Interview” [1990], [ASA\(RPT\)](#), 29). [In the present series](#), Castoriadis’s most in-depth engagements with the imagination in the history of philosophy and beyond are found in “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” and “The Discovery of the Imagination” ([CL2](#)), “Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection” ([CL5](#)), and “Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads” ([CL6](#)).

[present series](#)—his most eccentric text, dated December 1, 1985, which defies even normal paragraphing—Castoriadis savagely attacks such ill-conceived cooptations of his origination of the term *the social imaginary*:

Idea discovered, formulated, rendered explicit  
in 1964-1965

“Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire,”  
*Socialisme ou Barbarie*, nos. 36-40

quickly taken up, used wrongly or askew,  
flattened, thrown into every pot. A comical  
era—an excremental one? No, excrement  
fertilizes the earth. The era's products pollute  
and sterilize it.

He then, after ridiculing the French historian of Rome Paul Veyne's derivative “constitutive imaginary” (1983), invokes with biting humor the following (not necessarily simply imaginary) academic situation, where:

a Parisian university creates a research  
center on the imaginary

or something like that,  
apparently well financed,

which lists

in lavishly printed form

among the research works it is  
supporting or has supported “The  
Consumption of Schnapps, Coffee,  
and Beer Among the Inhabitants of the  
Lower Rhine Region”

(I'm quoting from memory but  
guarantee the meaning)

More seriously, he goes on to characterize these misappropriations and distortions of his terminology as being inherently reliant on what he calls, a few lines later, “the inherited philosophy”:

Everything that circulates today beneath the heading of *imaginary* or even *social imaginary* refers, in the best of cases, to what I have called since 1964 the *second-order imaginary*,<sup>9</sup> some product or another of the instituting imaginary. Elsewhere, people try to make of the social imaginary a set of “social representations,” a new, more trendy term for *ideology*; at best (wretchedly), that which “dissimulates” from social actors what they are and what they do. But *what*, then, are they, these “social actors,” what do they do, and who has furnished them the conditions for being what they are and doing what they do?

The texts collected in [the \*Crossroads series\*](#) are devoted to elucidating these questions<sup>10</sup> as part of a project that remains

---

<sup>9</sup>While phrases like “second-order symbolism” do appear in earlier parts of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” the first instance of “second-order imaginary,” like that of “the social imaginary” (see n. 7, above), occurs only in its fifth and final installment ([June-August 1965](#); see now [IIS](#), 156).

<sup>10</sup>In the second part of [IIS](#) (170), composed between 1968 and 1974, these questions are formulated straight off as follows:

The question: what is the social-historical? joins together the two questions that tradition and convention generally separate, that of society and that of history. ...

What is society? In particular, what constitutes the unity

forever unfinished and now calls for future contributions from others.

As the aforementioned Castoriadis statements from his 1974 and 1985 Prefaces indicate, his ongoing effort at elucidation that takes its invented means as both incomplete and to be completed has not, however, always been received in this spirit. Indeed, an oft-repeated complaint I have heard coming from academics is that, in Castoriadis's work, *the social imaginary* is not an "operative" concept, not a ready-made tool for immediate application in historical, sociological, and other studies that would conveniently obviate the academic's need to engage in new thinking undertaken on his or her own responsibility. For example, after a first-day morning session presented by Geneviève Gendreau-Beauchamp and Thibault Tranchant—the main organizers of a monthly "Atelier Castoriadis à Montréal" (Montreal Castoriadis workshop),<sup>11</sup> begun in 2015—for a

---

and identity (*ecceity*) of a society, or what holds a society together?

What is history? In particular, how and why is there temporal alteration in a society; in what way is this an alteration; does something new emerge in history, and what does it signify?

<sup>11</sup>Full disclosure: Alex Gagnon, this Castoriadis colloquium's coorganizer, kindly invited my spouse, the dancer-choreographer Clara Gibson Maxwell, to screen her 2012 video, *Encuentro-Encuentro* (filmed a year earlier at a [Cátedra Interinstitucional Cornelius Castoriadis](#) colloquium that took place in Mexico City) at the [Cinémathèque québécoise](#) as part of this [UQAM international colloquium](#). Also, the [Atelier Castoriadis](#) invited me to present at the Centre internationaliste Ryerson—Fondation Aubin in Montreal on September 18, a few days after this colloquium came to a close, [the French version of my paper](#) on the theme of the "rising tide of insignificance" in Castoriadis's work, which included a "Petite introduction pour le public montréalais" and which now forms the bulk of the Translator/Editor's Foreword for [CLA](#).

September 14-16, 2017 international colloquium at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) on *L'Imaginaire social chez Cornelius Castoriadis* (The social imaginary in Castoriadis's work), the bulk of the subsequent speakers either made no mention of Castoriadis's initiation of the colloquium's titular term or merely invoked it while making no substantial new contributions in their presentations that would have, in contact with new material under their examination, extended and deepened its meaning—and this despite the fact that the subtitle of this international event had promised an exploration of “new avenues” while facing “new challenges” (*Nouvelles avenues et nouveaux défis*).

~

An expectation that such a promise might lead to some concrete advancements—building on, and criticizing, an original term while engaging with new material in a way that would have repercussions on how broadly and in what new directions one might reconceive the term at issue—is not some outlandish or unusual demand. A few minutes after drafting the previous paragraph, I happened to turn to Scott W. Stern's “Dire Straits” review of Josiah Rector's *Toxic Debt: An Environmental Justice History of Detroit* in the June 23, 2022 issue of *The New York Review of Books*. Stern explains that, “after interviewing activists and immersing himself in the region's archives, Rector concluded that the ‘existing literature on environmental justice did not give me the conceptual vocabulary I needed to make sense of what I was seeing in Detroit’”—*le détroit* being the original French name, meaning “the strait,” for the river/channel of water that flows from Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie—“both past and present. A decade later,” Stern continues, Rector

has written a book that advances two major interventions. First, it pushes back the environmental justice movement's genesis to midcentury union organizing. Second, and just as significantly, it firmly connects the effects of debt and austerity—that is to say, capitalism—to environmental racism.

Indeed, by engaging the material beyond today's sometimes separated if overlapping conceptual frameworks of “environmental justice” and “environmental racism,” Rector discovered that “racial, economic, and environmental inequalities were interrelated problems”; the usual dating and chronology had to be extended backward from the usual starting point in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, as regards these two terms,<sup>12</sup> to several decades earlier, while also taking into account unequal access to clean water, which was already an issue in the earlier periods of French and English colonization and then in nineteenth-century U.S. municipal expansion, as Stern summarizes.

A nostalgic “Liberal” or “Progressive” (in the American senses of these words) gesture toward “midcentury union organizing,” however, also betrays certain limitations with this conceptual broadening, at least as outlined in Stern's account of Rector's book. Here, an examination of a specific “social imaginary”—that of the “autonomy project” explored

---

<sup>12</sup>Here are two Wikipedia statements, now overtaken by Rector's investigations, which had already contradicted each other as regards their respective chronological assertions: “The environmental justice movement began in the United States in the 1980s and was heavily influenced by the American civil rights movement” ([English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)); “Environmental racism is a concept in the environmental justice movement, which developed in the United States and abroad throughout the 1970s and 1980s” ([English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)).

and elucidated throughout [the six \*Crossroads\* volumes](#) and in [the rest of Castoriadis's work](#)—would not unambiguously associate or directly confuse grassroots workers' and people's struggles with their deviated bureaucratized expressions in established, hierarchical labor unions, especially at “midcentury.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Stern admits as much—even if his first sentence below remains within the traditional outlook of what “labor unions” do, instead of emphasizing the institutive effort workers and others undertake (which may coalesce, for better or worse, at times in formal organizations), and the later sentences provide a chronology that substantially predates the 1950s:

The most sustained opposition to environmental injustice in Detroit came from the city's labor unions. In the 1920s the Communist-led Auto Workers Union decried “the present capitalist system” as responsible for polluted air and deadly fires. In the 1930s the less revolutionary United Auto Workers (UAW) organized against lead poisoning. In the 1940s and 1950s the UAW doggedly recruited Black autoworkers, who in turn challenged their consignment to dirtier, more dangerous jobs. Yet as Rector points out, the UAW initially shied away from bolder demands that its leaders deemed counterproductive. Its organizing efforts won higher wages and better benefits, but in exchange the union stopped seeking access to

---

<sup>13</sup>Moreover, Stern's vague and presentist view of “capitalism,” summarily identified with “debt and austerity,” could benefit, especially when dealing with ecological issues, from Castoriadis's association of capitalism with what he persistently calls, [in the present series](#), “the unlimited expansion of (pseudo-) rational (pseudo-) mastery” and with that central social imaginary signification's deleterious effects on the environment.

factories' medical files or toxicological research, dropped calls for worker participation in factory management, and purged its most radical members.

Clearly, Stern could have benefitted greatly here from a careful reading of Castoriadis's 1956 text "Wildcat Strikes in the American Automobile Industry" (*S. ou B.*, 18 [January-March 1956]; now in *PSW2* and reprinted in *SouBA*), where the latter describes the UAW's *purposeful* focus on the sharing of the (narrowly understood) benefits of "economic growth," within the bureaucratized framework of Big Business and Big Labor, to the detriment of a struggle over what Castoriadis described there as the "'local grievances' (safety, health, rest periods, wage inequities, etc.)" (*PSW2*, 8) of everyday life in the factory and beyond.<sup>14</sup>

Stern continues his narrative:

As the 1970s began, rank-and-file workers became more militant. "Conditions that in earlier years might have provoked a grievance filing [not to be confused with the radical, anonymous invention of 'local grievances' as a mobilizing theme, two decades

---

<sup>14</sup>As I point out in an endnote to my Foreword for *PSW1* (n. 21, p. xxiii), "We must remember, however, that the spontaneous actions that generated 'local grievances' as well as this phrase were, in Castoriadis's and [the Detroit-based workers' newspaper] *Correspondence*'s interpretation, an outcome of a mass nationwide struggle against *centralized bureaucracies* (the UAW and the Big Three auto companies) and not in themselves purely local and 'decentralized.'" And as Castoriadis himself points out, these June 1955 wildcat strikes in the automobile industry were "the first time this expression [*local grievances*] was used. GM workers were soon to send it ringing around the entire country" (*PSW2*, 8). We witness the heated creation of a new imaginary signification in the crucible of a struggle linking everyday life with world-historical conditions.

earlier, for unofficial labor unrest—DAC] now often became the basis for stopping production,” Rector writes. And those workers—radical Black workers, especially—were borrowing “the language of the environmental movement to critique their working conditions, particularly in foundries.” They decried the UAW’s insufficient progress in improving safety inside factories and the water and air outside, leading the union to belatedly embrace a push for “full employment” legislation—a legal guarantee that workers would not have to choose between economic and environmental justice.

Here we have, despite mention of (not-further-specified) “radical Black workers,” another instance where Stern fails to thematize the struggle for individual and collective autonomy—which, of course, cannot be reduced to “legal guarantee[s]” within a “representative” system of government that systematically excludes the ongoing self-responsibility and active engagement, characteristic of direct democracy, that is necessary for addressing economic and environmental issues, of which racial ones remain an integral component.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>I use the phrase *integral component* as an unsatisfactory, stopgap description for the rather preponderant role “race” plays in the United States and many other countries, today and historically. How does one articulate the social-imaginary practice of racism in these societies when “race” itself, it is now generally recognized, has no scientific basis (this is why racism can and should be characterized as a *social-imaginary* practice) and when racism is so prevalent that the phrase *systemic racism* has a certain plausibility (in certain societies, racism can be said to be, to use a mathematical phrase Castoriadis often employs [in the present series](#), nearly “everywhere dense”)? Yet this very inseparability of racism from other social phenomena challenges certain inherited conceptions formulated in causal terms, whether a causal primacy would be attributed

As Stern then admits, this “window of radical potential closed quickly.” Yet he attributes this waning of autonomous mass activity mainly to deindustrialization decimating union ranks, whereas Castoriadis had already explained, in the mid-Fifties: “Step by step, and as he was taking the union away from the workers, [UAW’s President Walter Reuther] set up an administrative and bureaucratic apparatus to rival that of industry and the State” ([PSW2](#), 7), while showing that this apparatus was *designed* to discourage direct autonomous action.<sup>16</sup> “Environmental justice” issues and their “environmental racism” facets are not to be separated. And they are inseparable, *not just* from often vaguely-conceived “economic justice” ones, *but also* from the democratic or despotic character of the workplace itself, where the struggle over real wages and also over concrete working conditions plays out via the action (or relative inaction) of “informal groups,” as was abundantly shown in the pages of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

---

to this term or to another one. And how can Castoriadis’s more specific “Reflections on Racism” ([CL3](#)) and his more general examination of “The Psychical and Social Roots of Hate” ([CL6](#)) be critically articulated along these lines, when these two talks are designed to show that, even when racism may appear systemic, outbursts of racism and racial hatred (or challenges thereto, like the recent George Floyd protests) are *not systematic* in some sort of guaranteed and foreordained sense? The same issues are present in Castoriadis’s critique of the determinism of Marxist economics and in his related accidents-*will*-happen (in-unpredictable-ways) analysis of the workings of “modern capitalism” (“the existence of accidents of this sort as well as their periodic [though not ‘regular’] repetition are absolutely necessary,” he explains in “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” [PSW2](#), 289).

<sup>16</sup>Castoriadis offers an updated take on “unions today” in his 1982 text “The Crisis of Western Societies” ([CL4](#), 9-10).

Castoriadis's "Wildcat Strikes" article was in large part an abridged translation of a 1955 article published in the U.S. workers' newspaper *Correspondence*, with some explanatory additions he provided for *S. ou B.*'s French audience. Castoriadis was thus dependent upon his American comrades for basic information supplied there as well as for some of the slant and viewpoint limitations of much of its subsequent analysis.<sup>17</sup> Yet the emphasis on health and safety issues in the workplace and on other "local grievances" as being more important, for independent-minded workers, than

---

<sup>17</sup>As I explained in its seventh note (*PSW2*, 13), the bulk of what became "Wildcat Strikes" first appeared in English in "*Correspondence*, 2 (August 1955); *News and Letters*, 1 (June 24, 1955). (The editor of *Correspondence*, Charles Denby, resigned and began publication of *News and Letters* with this issue.)" Racial elements Rector now emphasizes are wholly absent from Castoriadis's account, though racial issues were certainly being intensely explored elsewhere in C.L.R. James and Grace (Lee) Bogg's *Correspondence* newspaper. As the American historian of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group, Stephen Hastings-King, explains in *Looking for the Proletariat: Socialisme ou Barbarie and the Problem of Worker Writing* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014; paperback ed. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books: 2015), p. 120:

*Les métalllos* [metalworkers] were, for the most part, French, and were highly politicised and volatile. French heavy industry recruited and increasingly relied upon an immigrant workforce on the assembly-line. This policy set up political, cultural and professional fractures within the factory that Socialisme ou Barbarie member Daniel Mothé (Jacques Gautrat) wrote about candidly in 1956. For Socialisme ou Barbarie, it was in general more significant that assembly-line work was unskilled. The lack of skill and collective life in the context of production as well as the nature of line work itself were more important than the plurality of ethnicities, nationalities and languages in preventing these workers from acting collectively. Like most French Left organisations, Socialisme ou Barbarie did not focus on the unskilled OS [*ouvriers spécialisés*] workers on the line.

programmed economic gains (that would have to be paid for, they knew, with the assembly-line speedups characteristic of what has increasingly become known as “Fordism”) is already quite pronounced and highly significant. Within a year and a half, Castoriadis, in making a crucial distinction between a given society's existing set of “techniques”—its “technics,” as we have sometimes translated the French *technique*, since Castoriadis was influenced by Lewis Mumford's 1934 book *Technics and Civilization*—and the selected “spectrum” of techniques that go to form a particular historically-extant “technology,” was already extending this analysis to a critique of industrial technology from the workers' standpoint,<sup>18</sup> as he reminds readers in his 1973 *Encyclopaedia Universalis* entry on “Technique” (now in [CLI](#); see: 332, n. 33):

I first developed this idea—namely, that what exists at present is a capitalist technology and not a technology in general and that the way it evolves is determined essentially by the workers' struggle, at the point of production, against the business enterprise's management—and the parallel critique, of Marx's implicit conception of capitalist technics as “neutral,” in the second part of my text, “On the Content of Socialism” [“On the Content of Socialism, II” in [PSW2](#); excerpted in [CR](#) and [SouBA](#)].

As Dominique Frager concludes, in his recent history of the

---

<sup>18</sup>Some of the basis for that critique of capitalist industrial technology from the workers' standpoint was already laid out by Socialisme ou Barbarie cofounder Claude Lefort in the unsigned Editorial for [S. ou B. issue 11 \(November-December 1952\)](#), now partially translated as “The Proletarian Experience” in [SouBA](#).

S. ou B. group: “The idea of reorienting the whole of technological development, its application in production and social life constitutes one of the most important contributions” of this [July 1957 S. ou B. article](#), and it preserves its relevance today, as very precocious and highly prescient, for its profound *ecological* implications.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, far from being ill-suited to the furtherance of practical analyses and thematic explorations, Castoriadis's work is quite amenable to such efforts and can even provide some of the means and some of the questions required to foster advancement along these lines, beyond traditional ways of thinking. Stern's review shows that, on economic, environmental, and racial issues, contact with source material may lead, as in Rector's case, to reexamination and reevaluation of existing terminology, conceptual frameworks, and chronological-historical understandings. And the concrete results of such an *open-ended feedback loop* between analysis and theory (there is no fully foreseeable and determinate “inner dialectic” that would simply need to be unwound) certainly do point, in Stern's account of Rector's work, to a wealth of worthy considerations extending well beyond those Castoriadis was able to articulate in “Wildcat Strikes,” and even in the more general three-part “On the Content of Socialism” series, while bringing in a racial factor we now clearly see was largely absent from Castoriadis's work at the

---

<sup>19</sup>Dominique Frager, *Socialisme ou Barbarie. L'aventure d'un groupe (1946-1969)* (Paris: Syllepse, 2021), p. 89. For Castoriadis's subsequent writings on ecology, see, in particular: “From Ecology to Autonomy” (1981, in [CR](#)), “The Revolutionary Force of Ecology” (in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)), and “Ecology Against the Merchants” ([ASA\(RPT\)](#)), as well as, more generally, “Dead End?” ([CL3](#)). We hope to translate, for the projected seventh volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*, other ecology-related texts that currently appear in *EP7*.

time.<sup>20</sup> But those *S. ou B.* writings as well as subsequent Castoriadis texts like the aforementioned “Technique” entry also challenge the limitations of *inherited ways* of thinking about the connections between workplace, community, and environment (making previously unconnected associations, we may recall, was Rector’s initial impetus):

At present, it is technology itself that is beginning to be called explicitly into question. This has been done first in the domain of labor.<sup>21</sup> People were indeed beginning to become aware of the impossibility of envisaging, in coherent fashion, a socialist transformation of society without a radical modification of the labor process itself, which in turn implied the conscious transformation of technology by laboring people under a regime of workers’ management. For a few years now, this kind of concern has taken on broader proportions, but the emphasis is placed especially on the ecological consequences of contemporary technology; moreover, the critics seem to be aiming much more at the consequences than the substance (“Technique,” [CLL](#), 326).

---

<sup>20</sup>Castoriadis attributes especially to C.L.R. James and to Grace (Lee) Boggs his subsequent greater understanding of racial (and some other) issues (see his 1992 talk, “C.L.R. James and the Fate of Marxism,” reprinted in [PSRTI](#)). James and Boggs, along with her husband James Boggs, continued *Correspondence*, while the other half of what had been the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Raya Dunayevskaya, joined with those who would create *News and Letters*.

<sup>21</sup>Here Castoriadis cites once again, in a footnote ([CLL](#), 326, n. 37), the second part of “On the Content of Socialism” but also Murray Bookchin’s *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*. Castoriadis presents his criticism and reservations concerning Bookchin a few pages later in this same text ([ibid.](#), 328).

A few pages later, Castoriadis specifies what, from an expanded outlook on one of the two central imaginary significations of modern society—that is, the project of autonomy—that substance would entail:

if a new human culture is created, after a radical transformation of the existing society, it will not only have to tackle the division of labor in all its known forms, in particular the separation of manual labor and intellectual labor; it will go hand in hand with an upheaval in established significations, in frames of rationality, in science as it has existed for the past several centuries, and in the technology that is in homogeneity therewith ([CLI](#), 329).

And obviously, were, for example, the “circular” economy many ecologists are calling for to be instituted to replace ours—which is based on endless unilateral extraction, planned obsolescence, programmed waste, and so on (as opposed to what is now chastely placed under the heading of *sustainability*)—that would require radical, indeed revolutionary social and psychical alterations involving mass democratic participation on all levels, including in the workplace.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>In “The Rising Tide of Insignificance” (1994; [CL4](#), 124), Castoriadis says that such “immense problems” as the question of “how could a genuine democracy, a direct democracy, be able to function” are “in my opinion soluble...—on the condition, precisely, that the majority of human beings and their capacities be mobilized to create the solutions instead of being preoccupied with knowing when one will be able to have a 3D television set.” In fact, 3D television technology was developed and then commercialized in the 2010s but has since been discontinued (see [English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)). Yet even if one were to grant that a “3D television set”

~

Now, I had warned, as early as my Foreword to [PSW1](#), that Castoriadis is “a less salable commodity” than the various products of what he termed, in the first *Crossroads* volume, the “French Ideology,”<sup>23</sup> and that, as a result, he is thus “less likely to become next year’s intellectual superstar” ([PSW1](#), p. xvi)—precisely because his work does not offer one general fixed *method* (seemingly) easily and indifferently applicable in advance to any and all content whatsoever. Those unimbued with the project of autonomy, those who thus lazily wish for Castoriadis to furnish immediately “operative” methodological keys to understanding and study, will, as they manifest their own conformist habits and conventional expectations, inevitably be disappointed.

But, some may ask, is there not still a telling gap

---

might eventually be introduced as a legitimate item in an autonomous society (without it inducing seizures, as these earlier, commercial models had done), would not, under these changed design, work, and consumer conditions, the new technical components be contrived in such a way that they could be plugged into an existing chassis whose technologically-surpassed innards would thereby be replaced, instead of continuing the current system where seemingly every technological innovation calls for a completely new overall technical object, the old one only being, in the very best of cases, partially “recycled”?

<sup>23</sup>Castoriadis introduced this phrase in “Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation” (1977; [CLI](#), p. 142). It reappears in two 1979 texts, “Social Transformation and Cultural Creation” ([PSW3](#), 304) and “The Vacuum Industry” ([CL2](#), 20). In “The Movements of the Sixties” (1986; [CL4](#), 31), he speaks of this “French Ideology” in relation to “a pseudoscientific ideology, Structuralism: in chronological order, ... Claude Levi-Strauss, [Jacques] Lacan, Roland Barthes, [Louis] Althusser,” as well as in relation to eventual so-called Post-Structuralists like Michel Foucault. See also his 1977 text, “The Diversionists,” in [PSW3](#).

between “theory and practice” in Castoriadis’s work, given that there are, admittedly, so few innovative extensions of that work?<sup>24</sup> When Castoriadis speaks, in “Done and To be Done,” of “the immense work that remains to be done,” he enumerates—for those potential readers of his who would like to go farther than he had been able to do at the time of his writing (December 1989) while benefitting from the same sort of indications he provided regarding those “modes” of which a “theory of the effective types of connection ought at least to take account”—“the directions that appear most urgent to me”:

First, the elucidation of the specific modes of socialization, as instaurated each time by particular societies. Next, discussion of the nontrivial constants in these modes, beyond the ones I have just mentioned. At the same time, the question of the unity/difference of psyche/soma still also remains obscure, and discussion thereof has to be resumed not only from the “traditional” (“psychosomatic,” etc.) point of view, but also from the point of view of contemporary developments (the neurosciences, the *negative* paradigm of “artificial intelligence,” etc.) Also to be treated from this angle is the question of the “concrete” articulation of society—for example, of intermediate bodies such as family, clan, caste, class, etc., the particular significations attached to them, and the corresponding

---

<sup>24</sup>One recent innovative extension of Castoriadis’s work, executed in an epistolary format, may be found in [Janet Sarbanes \*Letters on the Autonomy Project\* \(Earth, Milky Way: dead letter office, babel Working Group, an imprint of punctum books, 2022\).](#)

identifications on the part of individuals ([CL5](#), 34).<sup>25</sup>

Dripping with dry irony—if we may permit ourselves this paradoxical expression—Castoriadis's understated response to his *Festschrift* critics applies equally to others dissatisfied that the extant theory has not removed the need for continued praxis on the part of those who profess that they would like to explore this or that “social imaginary”:

I thank my friends who remind me of the existence of this question—and I permit myself to remind them in turn that it is not because I was unaware of it that I wrote, for thirty years, about classes, informal groups of workers, youths, etc. Would one reproach an algebraist who writes  $x + x = 2x$  for ignoring or forgetting that  $1 + 1 = 2$ ? ([ibid.](#))

A hint about what is at issue here may be found in a translation. The title *Solidarity* quite appositely chose for

---

<sup>25</sup>Castoriadis willingly and readily recognized when someone else, even if wholly unfamiliar with his work and terminology, was making independent contributions along these lines; see his discussion of Yves Barel's 1977 Presses Universitaires de Grenoble book *La Ville médiévale: système social, système urbain* in “Complexity, Magmas, History: The Example of the Medieval Town” (1993; now in [CL5](#))—though he also rightly pointed out there certain residual limitations of sticking within inherited ways of thinking: “Barel remains on the near side of his own intuition,” Castoriadis says, when “a whiff of Marxism” persists in talk about “system” and “production” ([ibid.](#), 300). I have tried to make a similar case for another book, one that grew out a 1976 Grenoble University dissertation about a *grand ensemble* (housing project), in the [“Afterword: Walking Together, Three Decades Later”](#) I composed for my 2007 University of Minnesota Press translation, [Jean-François Augoyard, \*Step by Step: Everyday Walks in a French Urban Housing Project\*](#).

Maurice Brinton's 1978 partial translation of the second part of "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" ([S. ou B., 37 \[July-September 1964\]](#)) was *History as Creation*,<sup>26</sup> a heading that was—since the exact expression "history as creation" does not itself appear in this translated excerpt—perhaps inspired by Castoriadis's retrospective evocation of "history as creation *ex nihilo*" on the second page of his 1974 [IIS](#) Preface.<sup>27</sup>

If, against all inherited conceptions, history is indeed creation, a creative rearticulation on our part is indeed required to comprehend and elucidate its creations in all its periods and features. No more than anyone else should Castoriadis be expected to provide the one true method that would resolve all theoretical issues in advance of any concrete engagement with (what one chooses to be and conceives as) one's source material, and it is indeed Castoriadis himself who, beyond relative platitudes like "every generation must rewrite history in its own way" (Robin Collingwood), signally elucidates this situation for us via his "history as creation" thesis.

---

<sup>26</sup>[History as Creation](#), trans. Maurice Brinton, [Solidarity Pamphlet 54 \(London: Solidarity, no date\)](#). Other Solidarity partial translations from "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" available before the publication in 1987 of the English-language [IIS](#) translation are: [The Fate of Marxism](#), an undated Solidarity pamphlet that first appeared in [Solidarity](#), 4:3 (August 1966): 15-19, and [History and Revolution: A Revolutionary Critique of Historical Materialism](#), [Solidarity Pamphlet, 38 \(introduction dated August 1971\)](#).

<sup>27</sup>Earlier in the five-part "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" text, Castoriadis had also stated: "History is just as much a conscious creation as it is an unconscious repetition" ([IIS](#), 21) and: "History cannot be thought in accordance with the determinist schema...because it is the domain of *creation*" ([ibid.](#), 44-45).

It is in “The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge,” a 1987 text Castoriadis wrote in English that first appeared in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* and is now reprinted in *CL6*, that he helps us to apprehend the imaginative recreation that is involved in understanding another society and its instituted imaginary significations. Such significations include, simultaneously, *representational* (not just “perceptual” presentation, but meaningful, articulated world-image creations, whether connected to an “internal” and “external” *X* or not), *intentional* (oriented), and *affective* (emotional) constituent elements that, together, must be teased out, for these are co-incident *creations*, not recombinations of prior components drawn from elsewhere. And he takes as his example an *affect*—perhaps the most difficult to grasp of these three simultaneously engendered, self-interconnected elements—that is at once most familiar and, in part for that very reason, one of the most difficult of all imaginary affects to grasp—*faith*—since “we can neither show nor demonstrate faith (neither exhibit nor define it)” (*ibid.*, 356). What Thomas Aquinas meant by faith “would be Chinese for Aristotle—or, indeed, any classical Greek. *Pistis* in classical Greek, *fides* in classical Latin, have only a homonymic relation to what *pistis* and *fides*, faith, became with Christianity” (*ibid.*, 355). Out of the same name, the very same word, a fresh feeling-form, associated with new representations and intentions and entailing huge lasting effects, has been socially fabricated by/within history.

Castoriadis had already ridiculed a rationalistic and scientific view of the history of science, which fails to grasp that, in general, the existence of the social imaginary entails and engenders the invention of *ever-other creations* (and ever-new repetitions) and which neglects to appreciate that, more specifically, the Western conception of science is itself

a historical creation, when he facetiously asked: "How then did the Neanderthals reconcile the general theory of relativity and quantum theory?" (*IIS*, 231) With similar tongue-in-cheek humor, he also took to task, in "Done and To Be Done," a rationalistic approach to ethics, politics, and autonomy, since such an approach is incapable of taking into account social-historical creation as ever-unprecedented meaning-making:

*Ought* democracy and autonomy *to be valid* for the Incas or for the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the tenth century? This statement is empty, meaningless, pointless. For something to become an exigency (an "ought-to-be"), it must first *make sense*, it must *be able* to make sense for the addressee. To say that the people of the Neolithic age *should have* aimed at individual and social autonomy is to say quite simply that they should not have been what they were and should have been what they were not and what no retrospective discourse can make them become (*CL5*, 63).

*Meaning-making*, "making sense," is creatively social-historical, as we already glimpsed when Castoriadis had shown how what he would later call a *new social imaginary signification*, that of "local grievances," rapidly arose, in the midst of unofficial struggle, as a collective, nationwide "wildcat" counter to a hierarchical, wage-and-benefits-focused union bureaucracy and to consumerist Fordism.

~

In the very first *Crossroads* passage quoted above in

the present Foreword, the one where the author promised “*we shall have to explore*” the fact that “there is, for each society, cohesion, internal solidarity, reciprocal inherence,” he stated emphatically: “It is quite obviously impossible for these organizations—of things, of people, of acts, of thoughts—to be separated from and to be independent of each other.” This complex question of *separation* and *what is inseparable* stretches like a hitherto-unacknowledged multicolored thread, full of knots, throughout the foregoing sections of the present Foreword and, indeed, runs across Castoriadis’s work as a whole as a not-yet-fully-explored enigma. Here again, we are invited to rethink his entire *oeuvre* in its constituted state while still appealing to it, where possible and warranted.

When I first read the Ryle/Soper translation of the first *Carrefours* volume, at the time it came out in 1984, I was struck, above all, by the *abyss of thought* opened up by the following long paragraph from Castoriadis’s 1973 *Encyclopaedia Universalis* entry, “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (now presented in its retranslated form; see: [CLI](#), 258-59): “[W]hen one considers the relationship between the organization, and overall life, of society and the ‘sectors’ or the ‘domains’ society includes[, t]here is,” Castoriadis asserts,

no available schema that allows us truly to grasp the relationships between economy, law, and religion on the one hand, and society on the other, any more, indeed, than the relationships among those sectors themselves. Nor is there a schema that would allow us to say in what fashion they *are* these particular entities that they are. It is not a matter, certainly, of “aspects,” in the sense in which one can speak of the thermal or chemical aspect of a reaction; nor can one speak of

coordinated “partial systems”—like the circulatory, respiratory, and nervous systems of an organism—since, for example, we may encounter, and we often do encounter, the automatization or the predominance of this or that of these alleged “partial systems” in given social organizations.

Thus contrasting the physical and the psychological with the social, Castoriadis asks: “What are they, then?”

The question becomes all the more complicated as we cannot even say that this articulation of the social into technics, economics, politics, law, religion, and art is given once and for all. It is precisely quite the opposite, since we know perfectly well that law and economics, for example, emerge as explicit moments, posited as such, of the organization of society only belatedly, that the religious and the artistic as relatively separated moments are, on the scale of human history, but quite recent creations, or that the *type* of relationship (and not only the content) between “productive labor” and other human activities has, throughout this history, exhibited some enormous variations. The overall organization of society itself redeploys itself each time in a different fashion and each time it itself not only posits the different “moments” in which it embodies itself but brings into existence a type of relationship between those “moments” and the “whole.”

Bearing witness to such rearticulated creations within historical creation, he concludes: “Neither of these [neither “different ‘moments’” nor their each-time-new “type of

relationship” within the changing “whole”] can be reduced *a priori* by theoretical reflection or inferred by a consideration, via induction, of the hitherto observed forms of social life or thought within a given once-and-for-all logical framework.”

Castoriadis makes a similar point, relative to the specific historical novelty of capitalism, in “The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism,” the last text published during his lifetime:

almost always, on a given technological level, social life unfolds with a wholly different set of preoccupations than that of improving the “productivity” of labor through technical inventions or through rearrangements of work methods and production relations. Those sectors of social activity were subordinated to and integrated within others that were considered, each time, to embody the main finalities of human life. And above all, they were not *separated qua* “production” or “economy.” Such separations were quite late in coming and, in the main, have been instituted at the same time as capitalism, through and for the latter ([CL6](#), 84).

Academics have been right to note (though *not* to complain) that Castoriadis offers no simple prefabricated and formulaic (“operative”) explanatory framework applicable to all cases!

Thus, things that Castoriadis affirms are “impossible...to be separated from and to be independent of each other” are immersed within what may (or may not) have previously been separated. What “tradition and convention generally separate”—that is, “society and...history”—is mistakenly so, since “the social-historical,” like “the psychical,” creates a magmatic, articulated unity-in-the-making within a “world in fragments” that “does not fall to

pieces.”<sup>28</sup> From the standpoint of overall workers' autonomy, the historically extant “separation of manual labor and intellectual labor” is to be overcome. There may be, nonetheless, “relatively separated moments,” like religion and art, that are “quite recent creations” as they were not always separated (but what, then, *were* they?). Moreover, from the standpoint of the autonomy project, as he explains in “The Revolution Before the Theologians: For a Critical/Political Reflection on Our History” (1989):

To reflect upon historical eras and processes critically, to *separate*/distinguish/judge, is to strive to find therein some germs of importance to us, as well as also limits and failures that, to begin with, put a halt to our thinking since they had served within reality itself as actual *stopping blocks* ([CL3](#), 232, emphases added).

---

<sup>28</sup>On this epigraphic phrase introducing *World in Fragments*, see p. xxxvi of my Translator's Foreword to [this third volume in the present series](#), where I compared it to an earlier, similar passage from “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973, [CL1](#), 228):

It is the absolute separation of regions that is at issue. Not because all of them would be but a single one but because an articulation of them exists that is wholly other than a partition, than a mere juxtaposition, than a gradual specification or a linear, logical, or real hierarchy. Explicitly restoring this articulation in another way than Plato or Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, or Hegel could do seems to me to be the present task of reflection.

An intermediate iteration of the same programmatic sentiment may be found in “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983):

To this extent, breaking the grip of the ensemblistic-identitary logic-ontology under its various disguises is at present a political task that is directly inscribed in our work toward achieving an autonomous society. What is, such as it is, permits us to act and to create. And yet it dictates nothing to us. We make our laws; this is also why we are *responsible* for them ([CL2](#), 406).

This play of what should be viewed as still “inseparable” within the historically separated or within what have become “*relatively* separated moments,” of reuniting what has already been separated (e.g., manual and intellectual labor), and of what needs to be separated, through continued critical thinking, in order to proceed further in the direction of the project of autonomy (the foregoing brief list is wholly nonexhaustive)<sup>29</sup> evolves within the context of history as creation. Whether or not Hegel would be right in declaring that “World history is the Last Judgment,” the world, its history, judgment about that history, the criteria for such judgment, and the will(ingness) to exercise judgment are all created, and there is no outside, fixed point by and from which to make sense of the unfolding of the world. As the *praxis*-minded Castoriadis declared in a 1974 interview: “The only way to find out if you can swim is to get into the water” ([CR](#), 32). But, as he explained in a 1987 interview where he

---

<sup>29</sup>In “Modern Science and Philosophical Investigation,” Castoriadis highlights some of the negative effects of unwarranted separations, relating such effects to anachronistic projections onto a past that did not admit of the sorts of separations we now take for granted:

Here, the effects of the separation between disciplines make themselves felt more heavily than anywhere else: of their separation from philosophy (which, truly speaking, never was effectively able to be achieved), since it leads one to forget the countless philosophical presuppositions and implications of every anthropological discourse; of their separation from the other great sets of disciplines, physical and especially biological, since it is impossible to see in man's physical and biological nature a mere abstract condition for his historical activity; finally, of the separation between anthropological disciplines, since the unity of the object immediately defies scientific dissection and since it may be asked whether the distinction we make between different disciplines has a meaning for societies other than our own ([CLL](#), 242).

offered us no sure external lifeline or even any temporary resting place for thought when we are cast on the waves of social change: "The history of knowledge has grabbed us by the scruff of the neck and thrown us in the middle of the Pacific Ocean of Being, telling us, 'Now, swim!'"<sup>30</sup>

A particularly salient example of the "abyss of thought" I glimpsed that Castoriadis had opened to our view and that may leave us flailing, with no sure foothold, concerns Castoriadis's historical and theoretical distinction between "politics" (*la politique* in French) and "the political" (*le politique*), terms elaborated in tandem several times [in the present series](#) (at times, as translator, I have italicized the "s" and either the "al" or the "the" to express Castoriadis's occasional italicizations of the contrasting masculine and feminine *le* and *la* forms of *politique* in the French). For Castoriadis, in "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988): "The Greeks did not invent 'the' political, in the sense of the dimension of explicit power always present in any society. They invented—or, better, created—politics, which is something entirely different" ([CL3](#), 160), as it is the "explicit calling into question of the established institution of society" via a conscious collective endeavor that took "aim at the explicit power and tried to reinstitute it" ([ibid.](#), 164). "There

---

<sup>30</sup>"L'histoire du savoir nous a pris par la peau du cou et nous a jetés au milieu de l'océan Pacifique de l'Être en nous disant: 'Maintenant nagez!'" (February 18, 1987 interview conducted by Dominique Bouchet), *Lettre Science Culture*, 28 (October 1987): 1-2. In the earlier use of the "swimming" metaphor, relating to the political "problematic" of "re-establish[ing]...revolutionary organizations," Castoriadis concedes: "Of course, you might drown, but you can also choose to start at a place where you have a footing" ([CR](#), 32). But the later version, relating to the "history of knowledge," places one immediately "in the middle of the Pacific Ocean of Being."

is,” Castoriadis asserts, “a dimension of the institution of society pertaining to *explicit power*, that is, to the existence of *instances capable of formulating explicitly sanctionable injunctions*” (CL3, 160). This power dimension—which, contrary to certain Liberal, Marxist, and Anarchist fantasies of a *society without power*, pertains to “any society” (“there always is...and there always will be, an *explicit power*” [CL3, 159]; “explicit power, the one we speak of in general when we speak of power” [CL4, 214])—“is to be called the dimension of ‘*the political*’” (CL3, 160). By way of contrast with “the political”—which belongs “among the ultrarare instances of social-historical universals” (CL4, 213)—“politics”—an “invent[ion],” a specifically Greek one, “not to be confused with court intrigues or the good management of instituted power, which exist everywhere” (*ibid.*, 217)—is conceived by him *historically* “as the lucid and deliberate activity whose object is the explicit institution of society (and thus, also, of any explicit power), and its working as *nomos, dikē, telos*—legislation, jurisdiction, government—in view of the *common ends* and the *public endeavors* the society deliberately proposes to itself” (CL3, 184). (Note here, for what follows, the curious reduplication: *politics would render the political's explicit power explicit.*)

In two previous Forewords,<sup>31</sup> I had, as a translator, explored in greater depth and specificity some issues surrounding various authors' varying conceptions of these two words that share a Greek cognate, especially the contrasting conceptions of Castoriadis and his Socialisme ou

---

<sup>31</sup>See my Forewords to [Claude Lefort's \*Writing: The Political Test\* \(Duke University Press, 2000\)](#) and to [Jean-Marc Coicaud's \*Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility\* \(Cambridge University Press, 2002\)](#).

Barbarie cofounder, Claude Lefort, but also those of Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt. Of most interest to us here is what Jean-Pierre Vernant has to say about the matter in “The Birth of the Political,” a French typescript by this distinguished historian and anthropologist I had the honor to translate.<sup>32</sup> “Vernant’s argument,” I explained in one of these Forewords,

could be summarized by saying that it makes no sense to speak of either “the political” or “politics” before the advent of the *polis* as an effective social-historical institution. That raises the question whether both of these terms might be datable (and thereby *historical* in character), instead of one or another or both being a “form” or “dimension” of *all* societies.<sup>33</sup>

Another question immediately arises, from this standpoint: “But what would one then call this element [“the political”], in pre-*polis* times, whereby a society gives itself its ‘form’ through social division (Lefort) or organizes its ‘explicit power’ (Castoriadis)?” From my vocational standpoint as a translator engaged in practical philosophical reflection upon my own labor and experience, I suggested:

One could also phrase the question in terms of whether the *polis* and politics/the political are *translatable* into prior languages, societies, and cultures—or whether, instead, such a translation effort

---

<sup>32</sup>[Jean-Pierre Vernant, “The Birth of the Political,” \*Thesis Eleven\*, 60 \(2000\): 87-91.](#)

<sup>33</sup>From p. xiv, n. 6 in my [Coicaud Foreword](#).

is futile because anachronistic, it being an unjustified reverse extrapolation of a social-historical form that had not yet been created as a distinctive realm.<sup>34</sup>

How, one might just as well ask, did Cro-Magnons distinguish “politics” from the “political” (if one accepts David Graeber’s expansive—and perhaps imprecise, wrong-headed, and exaggerated if not wholly false and dishonest—views on a pre-Greek “democracy”)<sup>35</sup> or even just talk about the latter term (if one accepts Castoriadis’s assertion that politics and democracy are *instituted* as Greek creations but that “the political” is somehow a transhistorical social dimension)?

Could one not, in keeping with Castoriadis’s parlance but in order to avoid potential anachronism, simply replace *the political* with *explicit power*, since he tends to treat them as practically interchangeable, near-synonyms for the same thing, and given the fact that, in choosing to speak of “the political,” Castoriadis seems in significant part to be motivated to find a meaning for the latter, already extant term that contrasts with what he considers its faulty formulations in Lefort (whose position on the matter, he says, “would win the approval of Charles Maurras as well as of Pol Pot,” [CL3](#), 163) and in others, including the Nazi-era legal theorist

---

<sup>34</sup>[Ibid.](#), n. 7.

<sup>35</sup>To further his views on the supposed existence of pre-*polis* democracy, Graeber, in his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 88, seems to have invented a Castoriadis quotation, complete with “self-constituted” (!) inserted where Castoriadis would surely have written or said “self-instituted.”

Schmitt, the originator of the phrase *das Politische*?<sup>36</sup> Provided that one does not confuse “explicit power” in general with the narrower, historically-created form known as “the State” and that one avoids a “second confusion” that “involves mixing up *the political*, the dimension of explicit power, with the overall institution of society” (CL3, 161; this is, Castoriadis believes, Lefort’s and Schmitt’s confusion), which is associated with an “infrapower” (CL4, 306-307), this might plausibly seem an only slightly deviated substitute path for someone who has followed Castoriadis so far. One would still need to sort out the historically intricate and fraught separation/(in)separability conundra of statements like: “in two and a half cases out of three, [the main forms of monotheism] explicitly called for or tried to *impose a nonseparation* of the religious and the political” (CL2, 22, emphasis added) and: “There have been centuries-old struggles to separate the religious from the political” (CL4, 62). But that person would also have to contend with his late, slight reformulation of the *le/la politique* distinction in “Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime,” a 1995 text first published the next year in *La Montée de l’insignifiance* (now in CL4).

This restatement starts out straightforwardly, reiterating previous formulations (while still ignoring the possible anachronism of talking about “the political” in *pre-polis* societies): “Now, politics—*la politique*—does not exist everywhere and always; genuine politics is the result of a rare and fragile social-historical creation. What does necessarily exist in every society is ‘*the political*’ [*le politique*].” And we also encounter again his now-familiar assertion that the latter

---

<sup>36</sup>See Castoriadis’s strongly stated arguments in “Power, Politics, Autonomy,” CL3, 159-63.

“deals with power, namely the instituted instance (or instances) that is (or are) capable of issuing sanction-bearing injunctions” (earlier, we saw, these were “*explicitly sanctionable injunctions*”...). Moreover, reiterating another point initially made in “Power, Politics, Autonomy,”<sup>37</sup> Castoriadis affirms that the political “must always, and explicitly, include at least what we call a judicial power and a governmental power” ([CL4](#), 304; note that he is careful here to specify: “what we call...”).

However, Castoriadis also describes in this late text what he has called *the political* as an “explicit, implicit,

---

<sup>37</sup>“‘Judicial’ power and ‘governmental’ power...must be explicitly present, under whatever form, as soon as there is society” ([CL3](#), 158). In his December 10, 1994 discussion with the MAUSS group, which is perhaps the text Graeber drew from to concoct a “quotation” that is instead probably just a highly misleading paraphrase (see n. 35 above), Castoriadis builds on this view. Of “the three functions of any established power: legislating, judging, and governing...two of them are exercised by the collectivity among the Iroquois: it judges, probably; and it governs, it decides to make or not to make war with neighboring tribes. But it does not legislate. It does not institute” ([DR](#), 34). Graeber also concocts something called “consensus-based democracy” (*Fragments*, 83), in order to extend democracy back in time before the creation of the Greek *polis* while denigrating Castoriadis. It is precisely in [DR](#) (see: 37) that Castoriadis anticipated just that objection and tore it to pieces:

What happens in a consensus democracy of the type...let’s put that in quotation marks, since no one went to look very closely at it, after all, among the Iroquois? Well, it’s consensus. But consensus as such, contrary to what one thinks, to what one seems to think today, has no value. There absolutely can be consensus in a completely hierarchical society. A good feudal system is a society based on consensus and is one in which each is in his place.

The anthropologist Alain Mahé, who wrote his thesis, under Castoriadis’s supervision, about village-level Berber social and political arrangements, is currently working on deepening reflection around these issues.

sometimes almost ungraspable dimension” (*ibid.*). How could *explicit power* serve as a less burdened synonym for *the political* if the former is not just “explicit” but also, contrarily it seems, “implicit”? Whether this additional clarification Castoriadis brought to his *le/la politique* distinction might have been developed consciously as a new departure or occurred through inadvertence and inattention to the fact that what he was talking about here was what he had elsewhere unambiguously called “explicit power,” we are faced with what may be a genuine aporia in his thought—one that is only reinforced as being aporetic by the further specification of this transhistorical “dimension” as “almost ungraspable.” When instances of authority (*instances* in French) may be “capable of issuing sanction-bearing injunctions” but pertain to an “explicit power” that is placed within a dimension that may also be not only inexplicit but near-incapable of being grasped, we find ourselves at or near an impasse.

Whether a temporary blockage or a permanent stalemate, this particular, currently impracticable or no longer practicable path toward the elucidation of transhistorical social dimensions and historical creations, as well as of their relations, can perhaps be seen to relate to the questions of (relative) separation and in-principle and/or desirable (in)separability/(lack of) separation discussed above (again, a nonexhaustive list). In the 1963 Introduction to Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s *Cleisthenes the Athenian*, these two authors give us a hint of what is at stake (both for us now and for those who lived in the past) when profound historical change alters altered people’s ability to comprehend that change: “the Cleisthenean μετάστασις...one of the eleven changes (μεταβολή or μετάστασις) in the history of Attica...was of such a capital importance that it in some sort of way formed a screen between the Athenians and their far-

off past, which thus became comprehensible for them only with difficulty.” They grant that this is a “banal remark, to be sure,” but “one that must be given nuance and made more precise”—which is precisely what these two classicists attempt to do in the body of their classic 1964 book subtitled “An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time...,” which investigates the Cleisthenean reforms that led to “the organization of a purely *civic space* and *time*” distinct from the traditional tribal setup and from the instituted religious calendar of the time.<sup>38</sup>

How might we exit from this cul-de-sac, blind alley, or dead end—a confrontation with a “stopping block” that has brought us, at least for a while, to a standstill? In the Preface to [CL2](#), Castoriadis does indeed speak of what he labels there “my method” when he evokes Aristotle’s observation, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, about the “awkward position [*l’embarras*]” Plato had found himself in:

This remark by Aristotle apropos of the right way, of the good path of inquiry—of the *hodos*, which yields *methodos*, method—can all the more so find its place here as this very “perplexing obstacle [*embarras*]” is,

---

<sup>38</sup> Authors’ 1963 Introduction to Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and of Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato*, trans. David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 6 and 7. In his March 27, 1992 talk delivered at a celebration I helped organize for the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of democracy, Vidal-Naquet, agreeing on at least one point with Castoriadis, who also participated in this event, titled his paper “Democracy: A Greek Invention” (see *ibid.*, 102-18). My translation of the transcription of Castoriadis’s speech now appears as “The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions” in [CL4](#).

as the reader will see, my method. It is in witting fashion that the stretches of road one is going to take along the way have been traced, sometimes from principles, sometimes leading toward principles ([CL2](#), xvi).

A droll “method,” indeed, that—instead of vainly searching for unshakeable foundations (i.e., ones that could never be disturbed by one’s own further questioning<sup>39</sup>) or of merrily skipping along from one “determinate negation” to the next or of glumly transforming a sunset into a grid pattern within a “sad tropical” setting or of simply taking apart artifacts and leaving the deconstructed remains lying about—works via or with the aporetic (literally, the no-way) but whose methodology cannot truly be said to be *methodical*, since no set criterion can be laid down for deciding when to proceed from principles and when to head toward them—an aporia, or at least a two-way or circular path without any clear starting point, within the aporetic!

What we might retrospectively—or, perhaps, prospectively—but also pompously and almost oxymoronically label *the Castoriadian aporetic method* will

---

<sup>39</sup>Another, late hint of what might constitute, if not his “method”—which in any case is not singular—at least the subtle ways in which Castoriadis proceeds, may be found in the following statement about the search for philosophical foundations:

The infinite objective of philosophical thought, that everything is to be elucidated, becomes: Everything has to be organized. That one has to account for and to provide a reason for what one is advancing becomes: Everything must be “grounded,” and must be so on the basis of a “unique” foundation. *Here we have some almost invincible tendencies of thought, but they have to be combated as much as possible by an internal critique* ([CL6](#), 143, emphasis added).

perhaps be better understood through a trilingual examination of the translation issues involved in the preceding passage. If I have correctly identified Aristotle's phrase—*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1095a31-32, which would then read in the original Greek: *Eu gar kai Platōn ēporei*—Castoriadis translated it into French as *avec raison...Platon restait dans l'embarras* and I translated his French, surely awkwardly and inadequately, as "Plato rightly remained in an awkward position." I then chose to translate his repetition of *embarras* as "perplexing obstacle," for an *embarras* is originally an "obstruction," an "obstacle" encountered along a path, an "encumbrance," and, subsidiarily, an "embarrassment," "confusion," or "discomfiture" (*Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary, s.v.*). A philosopher commenting two philosophers, Castoriadis does not want to come out on the cheap in translation. Though the following are options in Greek for the noun *aporia*'s verbal form, *aporeō* (*Liddell-Scott Greek English Lexicon, s.v.*), he does not simply say "Plato questions..." (and then maybe does or does not come up with answers) or "Plato doubts..." (as if he were engaged in the Cartesian discursive method) or just "Plato expressed puzzlement..." Nor is this *ēporei* act deemed to be a mere "impoverishment," a "lack" (in *Antigone* 360-361, Sophocles had already spoken of man as *pantoporos*—"capable of going everywhere, of going through everything," in Castoriadis' translation—and, in a double negative, as *aporos ep' ouden*, "never...without resources" [[CL6](#), 28 and n. 26]). No, Castoriadis, though employing a relatively unusual term, *embarras*, is speaking, in fully philosophical terms, of encountering an *aporia*, a path and the obstacle lying in the way that incidentally forecloses further forward movement along a hitherto blazed trail. And he says that his "method"—his *following after or along* a "road" in

pursuit—is to *go toward* the perplexing obstacle blocking the way, which is precisely what we have tried to do in reflecting further on Castoriadis's formulations of the *le/la politique* distinction until we ourselves reached an obstruction.

While I am not going to propose a solution—which would go well beyond the scope of the translator's task in a Foreword—it may be helpful, for the reader, to relate Castoriadis's extended “Labyrinth” metaphor in the Preface to [CL1](#) to this exposition of his paradoxically “aporetic method,” laid out in his *embarras*-ing encounter from the [CL2](#) Preface. The former metaphor was retrospectively explored at length in the Translator's Foreword to [the posthumous \(sixth\) Crossroads volume](#), *Figures of the Thinkable*, showing there how what Castoriadis originally conceived of as “theory” increasingly became formulated in terms of “thinking” as relates to what he has called the ever-other “dehiscence of the figure/ground.”<sup>40</sup> The key passage reads as follows:

To think is not to exit the cave.... It is to enter into the Labyrinth.... It is to become lost amid galleries that exist only because we tirelessly hollow them out, turning round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac, access to which has been closed off behind where we had stepped—until this rotation opens up, inexplicably, some cracks in the wall wide enough for

---

<sup>40</sup>[CL1](#), xxxvi (quoted in the Translator/Editor's Foreword, [CL6](#), lv). Castoriadis had also written, in the first *Crossroads* Preface: “Original thought, however, posits/creates *other* figures, makes be as figure what till then could not be so—and that cannot happen without a tearing up of the existing ground, of the given horizon, and its recreation. It thereby, in its concrete consistency, in its being-thus, alters the figure/ground relationship” ([CL1](#), xxxvi).

us to pass through ([CLI](#), xiv).<sup>41</sup>

To turn “round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac” already points to the self-lost experience of the aporetic. But, as I also pointed out, to do so may merely be to go around in circles, instead of “open[ing] up”—“inexplicably” or not—“some cracks in the wall” that would “hollow...out”/lead to other (hitherto nonexistent) “galleries” to be explored in the Labyrinth. To create something new and effective, one has to, as in a creative geometric proof (i.e., one not limited to existing, given points), posit an imaginary point that, in this case, may enable one to turn the circle into an ellipse (not fashionably “decentered” but multiply and creatively centered) and thus make the potential result of a rotational action not just a drilling down in place but an ec-centric gyration by which one might form “cracks in the wall” that, if vigorously enough pursued and well-enough targeted—but who knows in advance what is the right level of off-center rotational pressure, to be applied at what point(s) of weakness, and with what ultimate result(s), given the rest of the surrounding walls?—may be “wide enough for us to pass through” into another gallery, a gallery that one creates and that may lead us to new, *sought-after* aporias.

~

Despite the brief and, admittedly, paradoxical characterization Castoriadis provides for what he labels “my method,” some have wanted to flatten him out or otherwise limit him to being another exponent of this or that

---

<sup>41</sup>I thank Stephen Hastings-King for highlighting some of the implications of this passage.

historically-extant “method.” In “Done and To Be Done,” he speaks plainly, as regards Jürgen Habermas and Agnes Heller, of what he thinks of this tendency:

As it is out of the question that neither Habermas nor Heller has not read Aristotle, the only alternative is to assume that they cannot read a contemporary author except as if he had to be copying ancient ones. ... In short: For Habermas and Heller, if someone says, “I think,” this person can only be Cartesian ([CL5](#), 65).

In the Translator's Postscript to the *Postscript on Insignificance* Translation ([PSRTI](#), xlvii ff.)—whose drafting was occasioned by an addition, in the second edition of [PSRTI](#), of a sixth dialogue, a 1985 radio discussion with the Hermeneutic Phenomenologist Paul Ricœur—the Anonymous Translator discussed rather extensively one particularly egregious instance. In what could be called the Australian School of Castoriadis Studies, led by the Icelandic-born social philosopher Johann Arnason, quite persistently, if not very convincingly, Castoriadis has been treated as a Hermeneutical Phenomenologist and/or a Phenomenological Hermeneuticist—a “phenomenological-hermeneutical source” in Arnason's former PhD student Suzi Adams's succinct but inaccurate description.<sup>42</sup> There is no need to repeat here the reasons previously laid out in that Translator's Postscript as to why Castoriadis is neither a Hermeneuticist nor a Phenomenologist. But the citation of a few additional

---

<sup>42</sup>One Australian scholar who has *not* succumbed to this way of misreading Castoriadis's work is Jodie Lee Heap, the author of the 2021 Rowman & Littlefield volume *The Creative Imagination: Indeterminacy and Embodiment in the Writings of Kant, Fichte, and Castoriadis*.

quotations and arguments from Castoriadis may serve to reinforce this point regarding a particularly egregious example of attributing another “method” to Castoriadis than the “method” he actually, if puzzlingly, practiced.

As early as his 1964 *S. ou B.* text, “Recommencing the Revolution,” Castoriadis stated what could rightly be taken as an anti-Hermeneuticist position: “What there has been, and what there will continue to be, is a living theoretical process, from whose womb emerge moments of truth destined to be outstripped (*were it only through their integration into another whole within which they no longer have the same meaning*)” ([PSW3](#), 33, emphasis added; understood correctly, this is another, though prior, example of the “abyss of thought” we spoke of earlier). This statement is at the antipodes of a religiously originated and inspired effort to “interpret” extant texts and meanings, whether deemed sacred or not.<sup>43</sup> And in the 1989 “The Revolution Before the Theologians” essay quoted earlier about the importance of being able “to separate/distinguish/judge” and about the presence of “stopping blocks...within reality itself,” Castoriadis continued: “And as Aristotle’s texts are truly relevant only if they are taken as the point of departure for our thought, *not as an object of commentary or interpretation*, so the significations created by the Athenians acquire their full relevance only if we are willing and able to create new ones” ([CL3](#), 232-33, emphasis added)—a position that contrasts completely with Ricœur’s ultimate denial of human creation in the

---

<sup>43</sup>When asked by [Agora International](#), during an early 1990s discussion with him in Paris, why a practice that originated in theological exegesis should be considered of contemporary interest and, what is more, be treated as at all applicable to Castoriadis’s work, Arnason was simply dumbfounded by the (quite obvious and easily anticipatable) question.

dialogue Castoriadis had with his former PhD thesis advisor.

As for Phenomenology, it may be of interest to note that, *from the very first line of his Preface to [the first volume in the present series](#)*, Castoriadis, taking up again the landscape metaphor, questions the scope, import, and properly philosophical status of this philosophy that was initiated by Edmund Husserl:

In the world of our lives [*le monde de la vie*], we can ask, and we do ask: “Why...?” or: “What is...?” The answer is often uncertain. ...As soon as we ask... what Aristotle asks..., the country changes. We are no longer in the life-world [*le monde de la vie*], in the stable landscape at rest, albeit prey to the most violent movement ([CLI](#), xiii).

Indeed, in his 1971 text on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Sayable and the Unsayable”—which is billed in its subtitle as a “Homage” to this Phenomenologist who had once referred to Castoriadis, in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955), as a “Marxist friend”—Castoriadis nonetheless explains that this “life-world” (*Lebenswelt* in Husserl’s German) cannot reliably remain a coherent philosophical foundation:

Pure perception is never but the purest of abstractions; “natural” perception is never natural. In order to attempt to rediscover it as natural, the philosopher, even though he lays claims to the *Lebenswelt*, has to abandon the *Lebenswelt* and immerse himself in the artificial, paradoxical undertaking, foredoomed to failure, of wanting to rediscover a pure lived experience no one has ever lived and no one will ever be able to live ([ibid.](#), 163).

Or as he asserted along the same lines in a posthumously published 1993 text, “Remarks on Space and Number” ([CL6](#), 388): “As soon as reflection begins, the world of life, the life-world, appears problematic.”<sup>44</sup> One can well and truly conclude, as concerns these attempts to reduce Castoriadis’s ways of proceeding to a mere variation on existing academic methods: “The tendency to reduce what one does not understand to what one thinks one already knows is indicative of the sorry state of creative emancipatory thought today.”<sup>45</sup> I hope to have shown that Castoriadis’s ways of proceeding (of seeking out/encountering/attempting to creatively overcome obstacles) do indeed, “if they are taken as the point of departure for *our* thought, not as an object of commentary or interpretation,” offer us “some of the means and some of the questions required” to engage, on our own responsibility, in “open reflections on prospects for social change,” and on how to confront “the abyss of thought,” that may “be

---

<sup>44</sup>See also his 1989 text, “‘The End of Philosophy?’”, where he places the life-world in a larger philosophical context while also showing its limitations from a philosophical standpoint: “Now, the *Lebenswelt* (that is, the return of old Husserl to Aristotle’s starting point) is an indispensable common initial ground—but slippery and full of holes and quicksands” ([CL3](#), 322). In my aforementioned “[Afterword: Walking Together, Three Decades Later.](#)” I attempted to show why the entire Phenomenological project—summed up in its motto, *Zu die Sachen selbst* (To the things themselves)—is, as Castoriadis said, “foredoomed to failure” by quoting two passages from Merleau-Ponty: “To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945); “But the thing is not really observable—there is always a skipping over [*enjambement*] in every observation, one is never at the thing itself” (*The Visible and the Invisible*, posthumous).

<sup>45</sup>David Ames Curtis, “Understanding Castoriadis,” *Dissent*, Summer 1991: 446, my reply to Martin Jay’s “Unorthodox Leftist” review of [PSW1](#) and [PSW2](#), *Dissent*, Summer 1990: 400-402.

developed and deepened into themes for improvisation.”

~

By way of explaining how [the present electro-Samizdat six-volume publication](#) came into existence as such, we conclude here simply by referring the interested reader to a May 2022 [Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website “News” announcement](#), also available below as a footnote.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>Following the original announcement of the [new six-volume English-language electro-Samizdat translation, \*Crossroads in the Labyrinth\*](#) (see the sixth “News” item below the present one), Agora International received an e-mailed “Report of litigious content on your website” purporting to come from the “legal” department of Eris Press—a company that, from a report received, has only two people working there. Since (1) Eris Press’s unsupported claims of “breach of confidentiality, defamation, and copyright infringement” concerned the content of a received announcement and not Agora International and the [Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website](#) and (2) the whole matter in reality concerns an ongoing labor dispute in which neither AI nor the CC/AI Website is an involved party, I, [David Ames Curtis](#), responded from [my own personal e-address](#). The exchange with Eris Press, to be read from the bottom up, can be found here: <https://www.agorainternational.org/Eris-Press-Silly-Non-Legal-Threat.pdf>

Following my reply, Eris Press provided no *corroborating evidence* concerning its claim of “litigious content” to back up its shocking demand that the CC/AI Website censor one of its “News” items (which we receive from many sources). Indeed, *Eris Press sent no reply at all*, either from its “legal” department or from anyone else, owner, employee, or designated legal representative. However, Eris Press author [Noam Chomsky](#) did write to me to express his regret about this matter, wherein my three-quarters of a million translated and edited words of Castoriadis’s *Carrefours du labyrinthe* writings were prevented from being published by Eris Press because Eris Press suddenly and at the last minute demanded, contrary to earlier understandings (after it pushed back on

---

unreasonable demands being made by Castoriadis widow Zoe Castoriadis), that bibliographical information in the [six-volume set of Castoriadis translations](#) deliberately and systematically be *falsified* and that any and all mentions of the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website be *suppressed* without explanation (the same unreasonable demands the widow had made, that were previously rejected).\* Eris Press collaborator [Angus](#) “[I might add on a personal note, I am currently reading through the \[translation\] manuscript myself and I think it is excellent](#)” [Ledingham](#) first claimed that these demands for falsifications and suppressions somehow were “reasonable” requests. [Eris Press President Alex Stavrakas](#) then made Ledingham write back an hour later that it was “misleading” to characterize these changes as “reasonable,” i.e., subject to discussion with the Translator/Editor; they were not to be subject to any “discussions” at all.

This is not the first time AI has received this sort of threatening correspondence. In another case, it was also I who replied instead of AI, since in that earlier instance, too, the matter concerned an attempt at censorship through groundless “legal” threats, also later dropped, involving a dispute subsequent to the exposition of my conciliatory views on Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin.\*\*

Fortunately, Eris Press continues to advertise and sell at cost here: <http://eris.press/Socialisme-ou-Barbarie> my 2018 paperback translation, *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. An electronic version is available for free here: <http://soubtrans.org/SouBA.pdf>.

\*That Castoriadis's widow was unserious about supporting this translation project for English-language readers and unwilling to allow the publication of a scholarly respectable edition is shown by her repeated refusal to confirm or even to discuss the existence of *errata* in the six *Carrefours du labyrinthe* volumes. And after she refused to cooperate in ensuring that the translations would be based on the best possible corrected versions of the originals, publication for the reader of even lists of “potential *errata*” was to be vetoed. (Shockingly, for the posthumous, second *Carrefours* edition overseen by the Castoriadis heirs, the list of potential *errata* found in that series' first volume alone runs to over four single-spaced typed pages.)

\*\*For those particularly enamored of polemics, see the following, earlier series:

Castoriadis's widow and his other family literary executors, the prestigious publishing house Éditions du Seuil, the secretive and undemocratic Association Cornelius Castoriadis, and Eris Press worked together assiduously, though unsuccessfully, to forestall publication of the present series of Castoriadis writings in English-language translation. This series is now available to all, without censorship, despite the abovementioned parties' combined efforts to prevent these collected Castoriadis translations from appearing to the public in the most scholarly compelling, broadly inclusive, and comprehensively informative form. The particular petty obstacles thrown up along our path, at least, have been either circumvented, leapt over, or smashed.

David Ames Curtis, June-July 2022<sup>47</sup>

---

<https://www.agorainternational.org/dnweb1.html> (with note 18a)  
<https://www.agorainternational.org/dnweb2.html>  
<https://www.agorainternational.org/dnweb3.html>  
<https://www.agorainternational.org/dnweb4.html>  
<https://www.agorainternational.org/dnweb5.html>  
<https://www.agorainternational.org/dnweb6.html>

<sup>47</sup>Curtis's draft of his Translator/Editor's Foreword first appeared at: [https://www.academia.edu/83949989/Draft\\_Translator\\_Editors\\_Foreword\\_for\\_Cornelius\\_Castoriadis\\_Crossroads\\_in\\_the\\_Labyrinth\\_volume\\_1](https://www.academia.edu/83949989/Draft_Translator_Editors_Foreword_for_Cornelius_Castoriadis_Crossroads_in_the_Labyrinth_volume_1)

## On the Translation\*

Although Castoriadis employs a number of distinctive terms and coins a few neologisms, he takes care to offer explanations of the terminology he uses as he is using it or else he refers the reader to where she can find such explanations. Each text can in this respect therefore generally stand on its own, merely with the addition of a few French words placed in brackets to indicate special words or phrases or to highlight subtleties in the original French that are not immediately evident in the English translation. It thus did not appear necessary to prepare a complete translation glossary beyond the more specialized one presented as “Appendix I: Glossary” in [the first volume of his \*Political and Social Writings\*](#). Here, I shall simply mention several terms that merit particular attention, especially for the reader new to Castoriadis and for those trained in the Anglo-American tradition of linguistic analysis who might otherwise be put off by his sometimes unusual vocabulary and phrasings.

The present text is organized topically, but the order in which the topics have been arranged was chosen merely to facilitate the flow of presentation. (Unless otherwise noted, all quotations used below appear in the present series.)

~

*Ontology.* Castoriadis’s philosophical work is primarily *ontological* in character—“not ‘epistemological,’ as contemporary prudery and pusillanimity would call it,” he notes in “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” (now in [CL2](#))—so much so, Castoriadis informed me, that his

---

\*The present text is an adaptation and expansion of “On the Translation,” [WIF](#), xxxi-xxxix.

French editor for *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (*IIS*), while generally enthusiastic about that work, wondered whether there was too much “is” in it. ...One encounters a number of formulations that forcefully emphasize his ontological claims, such as: “The dream *is* and it is dream, it is everything to begin with.” The first “is” obviously is not part of an incomplete copulative phrase; in this and other instances, the verb of being is employed “substantively,” as is said in grammar—without this implying, however, any traditional philosophical view that being itself is in any way a “substance.” (Castoriadis holds, rather, that Being is Chaos, Groundlessness, the Abyss.)<sup>1</sup>

Castoriadis’s distinct emphasis on ontology extends beyond this sometimes peculiar-sounding, though wholly justified, usage of the verb of being to a phrase I translate as “there is.” In Castoriadis, the statement “there is...” (*il y a...*) has a special, emphatic character, and one encounters it more often in his writings than one usually does in English. *Il y a* is the standard French translation of the *es gibt* (“it gives” or “is given,” the German equivalent of “there is”/“there are”), which is often employed by Martin Heidegger. In contrast to Heidegger, however, Castoriadis strongly contests the philosophical—and in Heidegger, almost theological—notion of the giving (“donation”) or “givenness” of Being. Nor does he adopt a blindly empiricist epistemological attitude that takes an impoverished interpretation of “the given” as its privileged and unique source.

---

<sup>1</sup>An alternative would be to write “the dream *exists*...” However, that option would, in diluting the forceful ontological claim being made here, push the reader toward thinking of Castoriadis as some sort of an Existentialist. He clearly writes *est* (is) and not *existe* (exists) in the sentence cited in the text and elsewhere.

Another important phrase is *l'être/l'étant*, which I have translated as “Being/being.” In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty’s translator Alphonso Lingis has sometimes rendered the latter term (*étant*) as “entity,” but I have preferred “being”—“beings” in the plural. The *être/étant* distinction stems most immediately from Heidegger’s contrast between the “ontological” and the “ontical,” although there are other antecedents, as Castoriadis himself notes. While still employing this terminology, Castoriadis contests Heidegger’s views on “ontological difference,” arguing that one can approach Being (*être*) only through beings (*étants*) and that each new exploration of a region of beings (*étants*) reveals another sense of “to be” (*être*).<sup>2</sup> As he points out in his chapter on “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition” (now in [CL5](#)), even though Merleau-Ponty at times spoke favorably in *The Visible and the Invisible* of “ontological difference,” the very results of Merleau-Ponty’s explorations of the being (*être*) of various regions of beings (*étants*) tend to discredit the absoluteness of Heidegger’s distinction. For my part, I have translated *être* as “being” or “to be”; it is only when *étant* (also “being”) begins to appear in a passage that I note in brackets which of the two French terms is being employed and capitalize the former.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Concerning Castoriadis’s distinctive take on the regionality of being, see my summary and examination of his elucidation of the “irregular stratification of what is, or else a radical incompleteness of every determination *between* strata of Being/being” in the Translator/Editor’s Foreword to [CL3](#): *World in Fragments*.

<sup>3</sup>On three occasions in [IIS](#), Kathleen Blamey translates *être-étant* as “being-a-being.” In my first Castoriadis translation, “The Nature and Value of Equality,” I had translated it as “existing beings,” which I retain now, for one time, in [CL2](#).

When discussing ontology, Castoriadis often speaks of “what is” (*ce qui est*) in general or overall terms. In one English-language text of his, he calls this the “what there is.” By this appellation, Castoriadis wishes to designate the totality of Being and beings—whether subjective or objective—whatever their region or mode of being, and including their region and mode of being.

To be contrasted here with “being” and “to be” (*être*) is the hyphenated form “to-be” (*à-être*), which Castoriadis uses to emphasize the prospective and, more generally and accurately, *temporal* character of being. “Being,” he says succinctly, “is essentially to-be” (*l’Être est essentiellement à-Être*). Following Castoriadis own English-language usage in, e.g., “Time and Creation” (completed typescript dated “September 1988”), I have preferred “to-be” to “having-to-be” (the formulation coined for *à-être* in the 1987 *IIS* translation, and which I had adopted as a matter of course in the *Political and Social Writings*). The latter translation seems to introduce a notion of *necessity* that, while not entirely foreign to Being (the ultimate *Anankē* of all Being, according to ancient Greek thought), tends to obscure what Castoriadis considers to be the *creative* dimension of Being as Chaos—which runs counter to the inherited philosophy’s questionable notion of Being as synonymous with “being determined.”

~

*Imagination and Logic.* “The imaginary” is employed as a substantive noun (again, without it being considered a “substance” in traditional ontological terms—much of Castoriadis’s philosophical work is an effort to challenge and to undo or to consider otherwise the apparent necessities of

inherited language and thought via an elucidation that does not halt before the purportedly “given” while creating the *newly thinkable*).<sup>4</sup> Castoriadis describes “the imaginary” at one point as “the unmotivated positing of new forms.” For the “radical imagination,” see, first of all, *IIS*, 146, 204, and 369-73. He defines the radical imagination as “the capacity to posit that which is not, to see in something that which is not there.” More specifically, in the realm of language the “*quid pro quo* relation” involves the imaginative faculty of seeing something where there is something else, for example the written double-digit Arabic numeral 10, and all that it entails via its “indefinite referrals,” in a line preceding and juxtaposed to an ellipse. Contrasted with this “radical imagination” of the singular psyche is the “social imaginary,” sometimes referred to, more expansively, as the “radical social instituting imaginary.” Both are expressions of the “radical imaginary,” which, as he explains in *IIS*, 369, “exists as the social-historical and as psyche/soma” (see below).

A series of phrases that employ the verb *mettre* should be noted here (in nonexhaustive fashion) because their connection in translation is unfortunately less evident than in the original French. Any image (visual, acoustical, etc.) necessarily involves a logical “bringing into relation” (*mise en relation*), and all such logical relations must always have an imaged support, a figure or representation, which is brought forth by a “setting into images” (*mise en image*). This mutual imbrication of “relating” (*le relier*) and “imaging” (*l’imager*) occurs on the biological as well as on the psychical and social levels. Beginning in the psychical realm, however, there is

---

<sup>4</sup>Concerning “the thinkable,” see my summary and examination of Castoriadis’s uses of this term, as well as antecedents and avatars, in the Translator/Editor’s Foreword to *CL6: Figures of the Thinkable*.

always also a bringing or putting or setting into meaning (*mise en sens*) that immediately implies, as well, a “staging” (*mise en scène*) of that meaning, and vice versa.

The term “ensemblistic-identitarian” (*ensembliste-identitaire*) has been developed by Castoriadis in *IIS* to designate the world of logical, ordered relations. To give an idea of what he is driving at, we may note that another translation of *ensembliste* (from *ensemble*, “set”) would be “set-theoretical”—that is, relating to set-theory (*la théorie des ensembles*), but the “set-theoretical/identitary” of Ryle/Soper’s 1984 *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* translation seems to me to be too heavy a phrase. In introducing this term to an English-speaking audience, I have decided to retain “ensemblistic,” as well as “identitarian” (with “identitary” as the adjectival form), so that Castoriadis neologisms, “ensidic” (*ensidique*), “ensidize,” and so forth, can gain currency. By itself, one should note, *ensidique* makes no more sense in French than “ensidic” does in English; they are merely useful composite forms.

Closely related to and in complementary contrast with the “ensemblistic-identitarian” are the “magmas.” Castoriadis has developed the term “magma” in *IIS*. He tersely states there that “a magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations” (343). The term “ensemblistic” (“ensemblist” as it appeared in Blamey’s just-quoted *IIS* translation), we noted, refers here to that which pertains to the operations that can be performed within the logic of set theory. What Castoriadis intends by “magma,” then, are those aspects of reality (and of ideality) that cannot be reduced to (or deduced from) a logic of wholes and parts. In a magma, something

more always remains, no matter how much one extracts (or constructs) seemingly distinct elements through the use of supposedly clear-cut procedures. The classic example he offers is that of a dream: How many “parts” were there to your dream last night; what were the exact processes by which you put these “parts” together to make up your dream; can you enumerate separately and describe exhaustively all its significations? On both the ensemblistic-identitarian and magmas, see now “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in [CL2](#).

~

*The Living Being, the Psyche, and Psychoanalysis.* In his philosophy of biology, Castoriadis speaks of the “living being” (*le vivant*). The usual phrase “living thing” seems quite inappropriate and inadequate from Castoriadis’s ontological point of view, but “life form” would be an acceptable and suggestive alternative—if it did not present a somewhat redundant aspect. All forms of *the self*—from the living being just mentioned to the psyche, the social individual, and society—imply the creation of a world that is a “world of one’s own,” or “proper world” (*monde propre, Eigenwelt*). The term “proper world” may easily be understood in English on analogy with “proper name.” Thus, also, “proper organization,” “proper time,” and so on.

Much of Castoriadis’s psychoanalytic vocabulary is taken directly, though certainly not uncritically, from Freud. I have employed standard Freudian terminology wherever appropriate. For the French *pulsion*, however, I have used “drive” rather than “instinct” (as in the Freud *Standard Edition* title “The Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”), which Castoriadis considers an inappropriate English translation of

*Trieb* (thus the recurrent insertion of “[sic]” after “Instincts” when this title is cited). More generally, Castoriadis usually speaks of a “push” (in French, *poussée*) proper to an individual and to that individual’s psyche—but also a “push” proper to any living being or to a society as a whole. To facilitate understanding of the text and of Castoriadis’s important polemic against the “French psycho-Heideggerians,” I always translate *représentation* as “representation,” a word he uses unabashedly in the psychoanalytic realm. (The *Standard Edition* sometimes translates Freud’s *Vorstellung* simply as “presentation.”)

One Freudian term in particular that Castoriadis has taken up and generalized is *Anlehnung*—*l’étayage* in French and “leaning on” in English. (*Anlehnung* is translated as *anaclisis* in the *Standard Edition*.) He employs this term to describe how one form—or “stratum”—of being, for example *the psychological*, can “lean on” another, in this case the “first natural stratum” of the biological living being and its natural world, without the former ever being the mere product of, or otherwise reducible to, the latter, supportive stratum. See also “The Leaning of Society on Nature” in [IIS](#), 229-37.

~

*Society and Politics*. Castoriadis uses the phrase “the institution” substantively—again without implying the existence of an underlying “substance.” Thus, this noun can appear alone with its definite article, and without necessitating an explanatory “of...” after it (as in the nevertheless oft-used and, for Castoriadis, iconic phrase “the institution of society,” where “institution” can function like a verbal noun). This substantive use of “the institution” should not cause surprise, especially if one accepts usage of the

substantive noun “the individual.” Indeed, it is Castoriadis’s contention that “the institution” is just as real (in the banal sense of “real”: that is, just as effective and just as imaginary) as the individual—and perhaps even more so, since “the individual” is a specific fabrication of the social institution as that institution each time is instituted. The almost *ad nauseam* recurrence of “each time” (*chaque fois*) as a qualification of the term “institution” shows that Castoriadis does not take “the institution” in general in a purely or flatly *realist* sense (not that his position should be described as simply *nominalist*, either). The institution is “taken here in the broadest and most radical sense: norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things, and, of course, the individual itself both in general and in the particular type and form (and their differentiations: e.g., man/woman) given to it by the society considered.”

(This phrase, “the individual itself...it” may shock some as cold or unfeeling. Besides avoiding in this way the in-fact-unnecessary “need” to gender “the individual” in general and from the start as “he” or “she,” *its* neuter designation here—practiced by Castoriadis in some English-language texts of his, though he was not always fully consistent on this score—serves to remind us that, for Castoriadis, *the individual is a social fabrication*. Its gendering and sex assignment are—highly varying—social imaginary institutions that each time “lean on” still-ambiguous—i.e., not wholly ensidic and clear-cut—features of “the first natural stratum,” not “natural” artifacts that go without saying, as we increasingly are learning on a variety of biological, psychological, and social levels and as we are currently witnessing in innovative naming practices among those who today resist binary gender designations—“their” preferences

generally and understandably being, at least for the time being, “they/theirs” over “it/its.” A number of feminist thinkers, it may be noted, have found Castoriadis’s thinking along these lines especially evocative and fecund for their own work. More on this issue below.)

Similarly, Castoriadis speaks of “the social” (*le social*, which I translate in certain contexts as “the social sphere” for clarity’s sake) and of “the social-historical.” The latter distinctive term serves to indicate that the sociohistorical form of being that is known as society is social and historical at the same time, its social aspect always being conditioned and achieved historically (whether the society in question knows that or not, and whatever might be the pace of societal change) and its historical aspect always *being* only *as* socially instituted by the society in question. (See “The Social-Historical,” chapter 4 of [IIS](#), and “The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge,” now in [CL6](#).)

Castoriadis explains that “the social-historical institution is that in and through which the social imaginary manifests itself and brings itself into being. This institution is the institution of a magma of significations, social imaginary significations” ([IIS](#), 237-38; translation slightly altered), with him sometimes abbreviating the last phrase as “S.I.S.” This magma has an action-oriented side, which is that of social “making/doing” (*le faire*; in French, *faire* can mean both “to make” and “to do”), and a language-oriented side, that of social representing and saying. There is, however, also an ensemblistic-identitary dimension to a society’s significations, which is expressed in its *teukhein*<sup>5</sup>—“practice in its

---

<sup>5</sup>As an exception to our transliterations of Greek words using standard English-language conventions, we write *teukhein* rather than *teuchein* because this is how it has come down to us via Blamey’s [The Imaginary](#)

functional-instrumental aspects”—and its *legein*—“language as pseudo-univocal code”—both these words being borrowed from the ancient Greek—though, as Castoriadis states in “Done and To Be Done” (1989; now in [CL5](#)), these are Greek *words* he has chosen to use and to elucidate after his own fashion, *not* “‘concepts’ from Greek philosophy” in their own right, as some have mistakenly thought. Contrasted with the ensemblistic-identitary aspect of language as a society’s *code* is the imaginary and magmatic aspect of language as a society’s *tongue* (*la langue*). (Another word for this imaginary or magmatic aspect in general is the *poietic*, from the Greek *poiēsis*, which means a “making,” “forming,” or “creating,” as well as, more specially, “the art of poetry.”) There are no making and no doing, beyond strict ensemblistic-identitary *teukhein*, without a representing or saying, and no representing or saying, beyond strict ensemblistic-identitary *legein*, without some making/doing, at minimum the making/doing involved in the social fashioning of the representation or the saying in question. All of these terms and their interconnections are discussed at length in chapter 5 of [The Imaginary Institution of Society](#).

One term in particular, *instauration*, should be highlighted at this point. In my translation of Castoriadis’s *Political and Social Writings*, I have revived (reinstaurated?) a formerly obsolete meaning for the seventeenth-century English word “instauration” as the translation of the French

---

[Institution of Society](#)—which mirrored the original French, with its different transliterational conventions. Normally, the Greek letter  $\chi$  is transliterated by “ch” in English (as in Aristotle’s phrase *zōon logon echon*), while “k” is reserved for  $\kappa$  and “x” for  $\xi$ . We have reviewed and, when need be, corrected Castoriadis’s transliterations of Greek words and phrases by consulting, wherever feasible, the Greek original, keeping in view the differing English- and French-language conventions.

*instauration*. In its original sense, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “instauration” meant the act of instituting or establishing something anew or for the first time. The more contemporary meaning in the *OED*, “the act of restoring” or “restoration”—with all of its political overtones—is exactly the opposite of what is intended here. Thus also, “to instaurate,” and so forth. (See Charles Whitney, “Bacon’s *Instauratio*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50:3 [July 1989], especially pp. 386-87, where Castoriadis’s use of this term is briefly discussed.) As I have noted in the glossary to [\*Political and Social Writings\*, volume 3](#):

For all the emphasis on originality, newness, and creativity...this term, as employed by Castoriadis, is not equivalent to autonomous activity, as may be seen when Castoriadis speaks of the instauration of the closure of signification in *heteronomous* societies. Originality, newness, and creativity are not themselves to be taken as wholly good and unambiguously positive, either. Monstrous creations, what we may judge as instaurations with negative consequences, are, Castoriadis points out, equally possible.

At the end of this list of translated terms, we note that Castoriadis makes a distinction between the political sphere in general or in the neutral sense (*le politique*)—which, Castoriadis asserts, exists in all societies, since there is always a need for some explicit form of governance—and politics (*la politique*), which was, in a “cobirth” of nonidentical twins, created, for the first time and at the same time as philosophy in ancient Greece (see, e.g., “Power, Politics, Autonomy” [1988], now in [CL3](#).) He has defined politics as “the lucid

activity whose object is the institution of an autonomous society and the decisions about collective endeavors”; “politics,” he explains elsewhere, “concerns the overall, explicit institution of society and the decisions that concern its future.” For Castoriadis, obviously, “politics” is not a dirty word, though he certainly recognizes and has written about the fact that “politics” (actually, the political sphere in general, especially in its various machinations and underhanded dealings) has become just that for most people.

~

We might also note, in conclusion, two “hot-button” terms. They no longer concern questions of translation proper but instead substantive issues that are currently raised, with varying degrees of lucidity, in concerns about “Eurocentrism” and “sexism.” The purpose here is to allay potentially misplaced worries and to address problems that may arise in the reception of these translations today, when “race/gender/class” considerations (often minimizing “class” and professing an “intersectional” outlook that in actual practice may be subordinated to identity politics instead of opening out onto the perspective of society’s self-transformation and reinstitution) are increasingly, and sometimes exclusively, advanced in ways that have not yet taken Castoriadis’s potential philosophical and political contributions into account.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Some, who believe that “identity politics” are a part of any “radical” stance today, may be surprised by this criticism of the term. A trenchant phrase from an October 1991 Castoriadis interview by Stéphane Barbery, available online (<http://libertaire.free.fr/Castoriadis49.html>), offers some pertinent perspective: “Permanency in identity is death.” Rafael Miranda

When the author mentions “Europe,” the term usually is meant not as an exclusively geographical expression but as a cultural (or, more properly, “social-historical”) one. In his usage, the term does not exclude non-Continental Europe (Great Britain or Iceland, for example), and it includes, for example, Europe’s former North American colonies (the United States and Canada), as well as antipodean ones (Australia and New Zealand), and he notes (in “Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy,” in [CL2](#)) new developments, in the non-Western world, such as the brief “Democracy Wall” movement in China. For him, Europe—and “the West” generally—do not reduce themselves to patriarchy, slavery, imperialism, fascism, and so on, as is sometimes fashionably claimed today. The project of autonomy itself, as the challenge to established institutions and as the calling into question (*mise en question*)<sup>7</sup> of already instituted representations and self-representations, was born in the *poleis* of ancient Greece and then reborn in the first *Bürger* towns of Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, which he dates as beginning “in the eleventh century, although already the tenth and perhaps even in certain cases the ninth centuries offer new elements in relation to the *true* Middle Ages.” He views his own work as the (of course,

---

Redondo highlights this saying for his Cátedra Interinstitucional Cornelius Castoriadis projects (see: <https://www.agorainternational.org/guia-modulo.html>).

<sup>7</sup>In English-language texts, Castoriadis had sometimes written the more literal “putting into question” when thinking of the French *mettre en question*. I find “calling into question” (a phrase used by Castoriadis himself in a text he composed in English in 1981) more, shall we say, *evocative* and have endeavored to standardize this phrasing throughout the *CL* series.

critical) inheritor of the Greco-Western tradition of democracy and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> But he also states that Europe and this Greco-Western tradition cannot claim, thereby, any special privilege beyond its distinctive instaurational contribution.<sup>9</sup> More generally, it can be pointed out that this “project of autonomy” he champions is but one side of a “dual institution of modernity” that also includes, as its other central social imaginary signification, the capitalist project of the “unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery.” Castoriadis’s thesis, then, is quite distinct from an uncritical, conservative or extreme-right celebration of “the West,” just as it is more sophisticated than the one-dimensional (Habermasian) advocacy of completing an “unfinished project” of the Enlightenment and more philosophically meaningful as well as more politically cogent than a nebulous transition to a “postmodern” era,<sup>10</sup> an era supposedly based on

---

<sup>8</sup>On Castoriadis’s occasional vacillation—speaking of this “cobirth” sometimes as being that of “democracy and philosophy,” sometimes as that of “politics and philosophy”—see Vasillis Lambropoulos, “Justice and Good Governance,” in a special Castoriadis *Festschrift* issue I edited for the Australian journal *Thesis Eleven* (49 [May 1997]: 1-30).

<sup>9</sup>See “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in [CL2](#).

<sup>10</sup>Concerning the “dual institution” of modernity, see Johann P. Arnason’s “The Imaginary Constitution of Modernity” in the Castoriadis *Festschrift* edited by Giovanni Busino, *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (December 1989), which was reprinted as *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis* (Geneva: Droz, 1989). For Castoriadis’s critique of Jürgen Habermas, see, for example, “Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime” (1996), now in [CL4](#). For Castoriadis’s critique of Postmodernism, see: “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1990), now in [CL3](#).

a “collapse of grand narratives” instead of on what I have called, partially summing up Castoriadis’s views of the issue, “the continuing and deepening destruction of meaning inherent in the capitalist rationalization project[, which] includes the irrationalities of a dissembling neoliberal ideology as well as the real consequences of the ‘reactionary counteroffensive.’”<sup>11</sup>

And when Castoriadis speaks of “man,” he intends, as he says at one point, “the species, male as well as female”—which in ancient Greek is spelled *anthrōpos*, not the exclusively male *anēr* (whose genitive is *andros*). In the present translations, I have, at his suggestion, sprinkled the text with at least as many “shes” as “hes,” “hers” as “hims.” (My previous attempts at nonsexist language in translation—“s/he,” “him/herself”—proved rather more unwieldy than emancipatory or enlightening.) In texts translated by me or written directly in English by Castoriadis that were composed before this issue was on his radar (see the texts from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, especially those in [CL1](#) and [CL2](#)), I have retained the original third-person singular pronouns and their genitive and objective cases and reflexive forms—often just “he,” “his,” “him,” “himself,”

---

<sup>11</sup>Concerning the contemporary “waning of the project of autonomy” and the increasingly apparent triumph of the capitalist project, see my summary and examination of Castoriadis’s theme of “the rising tide of insignificance” in the Translator/Editor’s Foreword to [CL4](#). See also the unexpurgated version of my Foreword for [Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy](#), now printed as part of my Translator/Editor’s Foreword for [CL2](#). Regarding not only “Europe” as a nongeographical entity but also the eventuality of its being outstripped in the future, see my thirty-year-old comments on the “emergence of a *world society*, a theme Castoriadis introduced in passing” in “Recommencing the Revolution” (1964), “but which,” I noted on the last page of my Foreword to the third volume of his *Political and Society Writings* (xx), “still lacks development.”

etc.—to designate human beings in their generic or *anthropological* status. For those who would retrospectively find the sin of sexism in these words, I remind the reader that Castoriadis was advocating what would later be called women’s “consciousness-raising” sessions within his revolutionary group Socialisme ou Barbarie as early as 1962 and that his explicit attack on the consequences for society of the “patriarchal regulation of sexual relations” began back in 1955.

~

Picking up on what was said above concerning contemporary contestations of binary gender designations, perhaps even more can, as an informative prelude to other people formulating their own responses, be teased out from Castoriadis’s reflections, in [IIS](#) and in the present series, on what “being-a-man” and “being-a-woman” may mean for what is *today* contemporary and future society. And the ensuing, hopefully thoughtful concatenations of words and phrases may also serve as a practical test for articulating the foregoing examination of our choices for Castoriadis expressions in the English language in a concrete and meaningful way.<sup>12</sup>

Reiterating a longstanding point, Castoriadis insists, in “Freud, Society, History” (now in [CL4](#)), that, almost tautologically (i.e., in order for it to survive), the “institution of society must ensure settled relationships of sexual reproduction,” immediately adding in parentheses, however,

---

<sup>12</sup>As Castoriadis, who liked the English-language proverb “the proof of the pudding is in the eating,” said: “The only way to find out if you can swim is to get into the water” ([CR](#), p. 32).

“(though up to what point is another question).” He affirms, moreover, that any institution of society “must instaurate man and woman as indivisible and highly asymmetric polarities.” Already on the psychical level, he nevertheless also recognized—in a statement reminiscent of Freud’s thoughts on a basic bisexuality (today, one might say *gender fluidity*) of all human beings—that the psyche entertains “contradictory representations: I am man and woman, here and elsewhere, etc.” (see “Psychoanalysis and Society II,” now in [CL2](#)). Thus, on the societal level, which necessarily must take into account not only a society’s genetic and material reproduction but also this imaginatively ambivalent psychical level, “man and woman... clearly are institutions...: the noninstituted facets of man and woman are their biological underpinnings, their leaning on... the existence of a sexed, anatomicophysiological bodily constitution.” (“But,” he adds, quickly switching back again from the biological to the social, “being-a-man and being-a-woman are defined one way in our society, were defined another way in ancient Greece, and are defined otherwise in some African or Amerindian tribe.”) We are nevertheless now learning more and more about, or learning better to acknowledge, how puzzlingly complex this supposedly straightforward (no pun intended) “sexed, anatomicophysiological bodily constitution” can be as regards any social attempt to create “settled relationships” and to establish “indivisible and highly asymmetric polarities” (the existence of intersex individuals, and the question of how they have been treated, medically and otherwise, are but one example). And this was not completely new news to him; he had written, in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), that “it is obvious that even the masculine/feminine opposition is socially instituted, *qua* social opposition, and not a biological difference, and that

it is so each time differently,” while noting, a few pages later, that the first natural stratum “is in fact always...lacunary and not totally coherent.”

Castoriadis himself had already seen, as early as “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (1964-1965), that homosexuality was ceasing to fulfill a clear-cut social function (generally a positive or negative one, depending on the social imaginary significations of the specific society in question) while becoming more of a question mark interrogating society itself as to its institution, just as he also affirmed, right afterward, that “current society is the first in which there is no definite role for women—and, as a direct and immediate result, none for men either” (*IIS*, 97; *CR*, 172). Thus, looking prospectively, in his 1985 lecture “First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions” (now in *CL6*), Castoriadis states that it “is by no means sure...that, with the dislocation of the traditional significations and roles of man and woman in contemporary Western society, the rest of the system will be able simply to continue to function as if nothing had happened.” In this way, Castoriadis both sketches out the prospect of further societal disintegration, with no lasting institutive response, *and* envisages how—by leading, perhaps, to new socially invented, shared, and articulated significations based on principles of individual and collective autonomy—questions of gender and sexuality may, in tandem with other creative self-institutional endeavors, have consequential effects on “the rest of the system” in such a way that contemporary society would no longer be able—hopefully and happily, this time—to “continue to function as if nothing had happened.”

Castoriadis was not, for all that, uncritically open to all challenges to established gender and sex roles, whether infeasible or feasible. In “Dead End?” (now in *CL3*), he railed

against “a book that insanely advocates, with its dime-store ideas, things like male ‘pregnancy’”—this being one of many instances of what may be labeled technoscientific phantasies for the overmedicalization of our lives.<sup>13</sup> As for the now-extant and quite widespread practice of “assisted procreation,” he regretted that the perverse “choice has already been made: Mr. and Mrs. Smith will have *their own child*—at a cost in dollars and labor time that could have kept perhaps fifty African children alive.”

Some may wonder how Castoriadis would today view these and similar issues, in light of the continued “dislocation of the traditional significations and roles of man and woman,” the recent and relatively rapid legalization of “gay marriage” in many Western as well as other countries, and other such developments, where “Mr. and Mrs. Smith” are no longer the only ones deemed to be concerned. His early, open-minded views on contemporary Western homosexuality as a sort of interrogative social analyzer might give us a clue, as does his denunciation, in “Done and To Be Done” (1989; now in [CL5](#)), of the state of Georgia’s antisodomy law (since struck down by the US Supreme Court). Another text, not by Castoriadis, introduces one further, personal indication. In a four-page “parenthesis of hate” opened in his 1974 book, *Économie libidinale*, fellow former S. ou B. member Jean-François Lyotard, I have pointed out elsewhere, accused “Castoriadis of wanting to be both the creative God of Revolution and its passive ‘valet,’ adding that Castoriadis, being a ‘pimp,’ is unable to admit an otherwise ‘noble’ desire

---

<sup>13</sup>Similarly, he viewed quite dimly efforts to displace us from our increasingly threatened terrestrial environment and to have us live, through elaborate technical means, in outer space or on other planets—these having become today billionaires’ private technoscientific phantasies.

to dress as a transvestite!”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Castoriadis acknowledged that the possible underlying “basis” for this crazy critique, laid out in what Lyotard later called “my evil book,” may have been Castoriadis’s appreciation back then of nightclub performances by those who would now popularly be called “drag queens” (*travestis* in French), Castoriadis telling me that his greatest pleasure came from seeing the look on the face of some unsuspecting “American Midwesterner” in the Parisian audience at the time of the final “reveal.”

But, of course, it is not for us to say what Castoriadis would or should think under changed (indeed, *postmortem*!) circumstances but to think for ourselves. A young left-libertarian activist from Lille, France, concerned with contemporary instrumental overreach, did just that, challenging, for example, the technoscientific medicalization involved in assisted procreation. For his efforts, he was immediately, continually, and persistently attacked in certain “radical” circles as “transphobic,” “masculinist,” and whatever other identity-politics-based epithets such “radicals” could think up, even though he had taken care to distinguish expressly the technomedical industry’s encroachment upon procreation from perfectly legitimate low-tech (“artisanal”), home-based practices, (e.g., among lesbians with an empty “yoghurt container,” a baster, and some donated sperm).<sup>15</sup> Continuing this effort to question technoscience, the same

---

<sup>14</sup>On Lyotard, see my long Translator/Editor’s n. 1 in [PSW3](#), 85.

<sup>15</sup>I am referring to a November 2019 written-and-oral account of relentless, often anonymous persecution against a certain “Tomjo,” as presented by the author himself to a meeting of “SouBis,” the monthly Parisian gathering of some remaining former members of Socialisme ou Barbarie, others, still alive, who were sympathetic to the group, and “younger” persons like myself (age 65 at the time of this writing).

individual saw additional anathemas rain down upon him, from the same identity-politics-based sources, as well as from certain technophilic “transhumanists,” for having raised publicly the issue of possible overmedicalization in the treatment of gender dysphoria in children: as a “white,” “male,” “cisgender” individual, he was said to have no “right” to advance any criticisms at all (on an issue that nevertheless—also—concerns the possible *hubris* of instrumental rationality in the medical field!).

What may perhaps be missing in these debates and disputes, where such questions intersect with technoscientific phantasies or even current medical or other practices, is what—not Castoriadis himself, but—his philosophical and political elucidations of newly thinkable regions and interregional relationships might offer for us to explore through ongoing efforts we ourselves would undertake upon our own responsibility. Certainly, certain biological, psychical, and social phenomena may at times present seemingly separable, “ensidic” features. Thus, for example, some have sought, in a supposed “gay gene” that would seal an incontrovertible *naturality* to homosexuality, an adequate (because exclusively biology-based) riposte to Christian or other attacks thereon that regard same-sex intimate relations as nothing more than an immoral (“unnatural”) “choice”—not noticing that a path is thus opened for a technoreligious and/or techochauvinist program aimed at eradicating or at least minimizing such “sinfulness” or deviancy through genetic engineering and/or intrauterine interventions.<sup>16</sup> Such

---

<sup>16</sup>Interestingly, while Russia and some Eastern-European countries, often with Orthodox or Catholic histories, have, in their recent post-“Communist” authoritarian incarnations, sought to target homosexuality and other non-gender-conforming behavior as part of a thematic anti-

ostensibly or hypothetically severable phenomena nonetheless become *effectively actual* only to the extent that they are instituted together, though in ever-varying, historical ways, via magmas of imaginary significations that are embodied differently according to the types of individuals each society fabricates from the highly malleable “raw material” of the psyche, which demands only to be supplied with some sort of meaning that can somehow or other be made compatible with the first natural stratum upon which each psyche leans in a nondeterministic way. And here meaningful responses may be sought, created, and instituted as part of an autonomous and permanent self-transformation of society to the extent that simultaneously biological-psychical-social phenomena such as ones involving transsexual, transgender, and nonbinary individuals (as well as those now designated “heteronormative”) are taken up *as such*, are *not* reduced simply to identity-politics issues formulated on the basis of inherited (basically ensidic) ways of (avoiding) thinking, are examined and tackled *in conjunction with* all those concerned (a *desideratum* not to be confused with some sort of necessity of preclearance for anyone’s views, which would be subject to “cancellation”), and are recognized as integral parts of people’s actively participatory, self-transformational

---

“Western” campaign, Cuba (which had expelled Allen Ginsberg in the 1960s for raising gay-rights issues) and China have in recent years shown themselves somewhat porous to the public pressure of dissident or semidissident campaigns around these issues (led in Cuba by, *inter alia*, Raúl Castro’s daughter Mariela). China’s quite recent concerted propaganda campaign against “sissy men,” which has been endorsed by right-wing nativist Fox television personality Tucker Carlson, and a new, wholly authoritarian Chinese governmental effort to erase all LGBTQ+ presence from the public sphere show, however, the severe limits to any such opening.

processes of renaming and redefinition that are to be understood, in their effective actuality, as themselves capable in turn of having newly creative rebound effects on the course of society as a whole and thereby of contributing to the formation of other social imaginary significations than the ones currently in full-blown crisis and already in a state of advanced decay.

Such an undertaking can be approached through what Castoriadis called, in the last lines of *IIS* (of which the present series is the prolongation), individual and collective “thoughtful doing [*le faire pensant*], and political thinking—society’s thinking as making *itself*.” So as not to leave the impression that these last terms should be given an exclusively intellectualist slant, it may be informed by taking into consideration what, as early as 1968 (in “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science,” now in *CLI*), Castoriadis was elucidating as properly human: “embodied meaning, materialized signification—*logoi enuloi*; more than that: *logoi embioi*, living significations.” For, gender expressions, not devoid of meaning for oneself and others, are indissociably lived by all corporeally as well as psychically and socially. And, finally, it may be advanced by exploring and further elucidating what, in one of his last published interviews on psychoanalytic matters,<sup>17</sup> Castoriadis calls, almost in passing, the “human

---

<sup>17</sup>“I do not know if I will have the capacity, the forces, and the time to work out this idea truly and, especially, to give to it, beyond a theoretical interest, some practical relevance,” Castoriadis stated in his 1991 interview “From the Monad to Autonomy,” now in *CL5* (though he did provide some brief hints about this “Nonconscious” in “Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection,” also in *CL5*). That same year, “Cornelius Castoriadis Interviewed by Paul Gordon” appeared in English in *Free Associations*, 24, which, working with Castoriadis, I have prepared to

Nonconscious, of which the Freudian Unconscious...constitutes only a part," in order to grasp the full breadth of "the unity/difference" of psyche/soma, which is/are "at once inseparable and separable" once the psychical apparatus undergoes a "defunctionalization," and thus gives rise to a human body along with it, via the inordinate and irrevocable growth of the radical imagination as well as an overtaking of organ pleasure by representational pleasure. The extent to which "new gender identities" are expressions of a current drive for autonomous self-definition and the extent to which they are recombinatory repetitions of fragments of extant ones that may make sense (as conformist and/or contestatory) within the present, still in part patriarchal world but not necessarily in a desired future one would be a question, without any easy or unilateral answer, for a rising world society to confront.

---

reprint as "Psychoanalysis and Society III" (reference being here to two 1980s "Psychoanalysis and Society" interviews that are now in [CL2](#)) but never had the opportunity to republish anywhere. (Castoriadis student Fernando Urribarri's 1996 interview with Castoriadis now appears posthumously in translation as "Psyche and Society Revisited" in [CL6](#), along with a 1993 interview, "Psyche and Education," but neither of these, the Gordon interview, nor the 1991 one cited in n. 6, above, develops the "human Nonconscious" theme.) What have not appeared yet, despite some hints from the Castoriadis heirs, are various unpublished psychoanalytic writings by Castoriadis, starting with two texts that were mentioned in the Preface for [CL2](#) but that "ultimately had to be held back, for lack of space" at that time and were not included, either, in subsequent volumes in the present series: "'Les apories du plaisir [The aporias of pleasure],' presented in 1971 at Piera Aulagnier's seminar at the Sainte-Anne psychiatric hospital center, and 'Plaisir et représentation [Pleasure and representation],' a 1976 lecture delivered to the Fourth Group" were to "form the core of a properly psychoanalytic book" that, however, was not published during Castoriadis's lifetime.

N.B.: In preparing this six-volume *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* series in translation, I have used the posthumous Éditions du Seuil paperback editions of *Carrefours du labyrinthe* (1998, 1999, 2000, 2007, 2008, 2009). I was provided with a list of *errata* found by the French Editors since republication, but the publisher, Le Seuil, as well as the Castoriadis literary heirs, and the “Association Cornelius Castoriadis,” a French nonprofit whose very statutes oblige it to deal with Castoriadis publishing issues, have all refused to confirm or clarify additional potential *errata* I myself discovered in the course of reexamining the reprinted French texts. Because of the complicated publication history of this series, I have regularly relied, for translation and editing, on the *latest* version of each text, which may sometimes be French, sometimes English, Castoriadis having published texts he wrote in French, others he wrote in English, and sometimes ones he or others translated into French or into English from the other language at various dates, with, on a number of occasions, a time lag or overlap between composition or translation and publication in various tomes. In the case of one [CLI](#) text, “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” we have included three footnotes Castoriadis had added to the Ryle/Soper translation published in 1984, as well as an “Author’s addition” for another text—notes added, that is, *after* the original first volume of *Carrefours* appeared in 1978—even though these additions, written by Castoriadis in English, had not been incorporated into the 1998 French reprint. Significant discrepancies between the two languages’ versions of the same text are mentioned in T/E footnotes. For, sometimes words or lines have been omitted in translation, with it not always clear whether this was done on purpose or inadvertently. However, mild departures in emphasis or alternative ways of saying the same or similar things in different languages have not always been highlighted as significant differences, as that would soon become a rather arbitrary or at least now-unverifiable as well as near-endless endeavor.

We note here simply a list of the various English-language words and phrases Castoriadis employed in the original French-language texts for this first volume: the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics, talking cure, time is money, trade-marks [*sic*], insight, there is the rub, scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours, red shift, big bang, output (twice), fuzzy sets, to make...to do, working to rule, worth, value, unity, unit.

Having now translated and edited more than one and a half million words of Castoriadis’s prolific writings (a significant dent in his overall work, but not yet the overwhelming majority thereof), I have not bothered systematically to point out in the publication notes each time a

cxx

## On the Translation

translation or editing of a full text was performed by me. One can assume, unless otherwise indicated, that the original translation or followup editing occurred under my pen.

## Acknowledgments

We thank Étienne Balibar, Bill Brown, Olivier Fressard, Alexandros Gezerlis, Nicos Iliopoulos, François Loget, Clara Gibson Maxwell, Alice Pechriggl, Marco Ridolfi, Tomjo, and Harald Wolf for their assistance in the preparation of this six-volume translation project.

# PSYCHE

# Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science<sup>\*</sup>

## I

So, might we know today, through psychoanalysis, what the soul is about? We find ourselves, rather, in a more paradoxical situation than ever. Aporias that have been chiding us since the *Timaeus* and *Peri Psuchēs*, eponyms for the three longest tractates of the *Fourth Ennead*, and condensed in the psychological paralogism of the Transcendental Dialectic, have in no sense been eliminated by Freud's work. They happen, instead, to have multiplied and grown exacerbated. And yet, we are right to see in his work a radical innovation, for we can no longer reflect on the soul except within the space where Freud swept it up, where the inherited problems regain their meaning only on the condition that they switch bodies.

To what is this innovation to be attributed and how is this new space to be defined? Let us pay to today's fashions their inevitable minimum of tribute, by recognizing them for what they are: no more here than elsewhere would an imaginary "scientificity" on the part of psychoanalysis or an alleged epistemological break account for anything at all. The mirage of "science" certainly served Freud well as a vital and even fecund illusion. The hydraulics of the 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology* underpinned the entirety of his work.

---

<sup>\*</sup>"Epilégomènes à une théorie de l'âme que l'on a pu présenter comme science" was published in *L'Inconscient*, 8 (October 1968). Reprinted in the [French edition of CL](#), 29-64 (33-80 of the 1998 reprint). [T/E: For the book reprint, Castoriadis has added some additional words and phrases in brackets.]

He believed as much as he could in Science, and in this regard his formulations, which at first glance are fairly simplistic,<sup>1</sup> would not sound too good to the ears of the least naive upholders of contemporary scientism. Moreover, such formulations are never quoted, and many would be surprised to learn that, in 1911, Freud signed a manifesto in favor of the creation of a society for the spread of positivistic philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Had he had any doubt or unease on this score, it would have been due, rather, to someone saying that psychoanalysis might not be completely scientific, in the sense of the positive sciences. Also, Freud often expressed his hope that one day some major sciences with a potential for positivity and exactitude—atomy, physiology, and pathology of the nervous system—might furnish an explanation for the psychism and therapies for its disorders.<sup>3</sup> Over these

---

<sup>1</sup>Entire pages of *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents*, and the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* could be quoted on this score.

<sup>2</sup>See Gerald Holton, “Where Is Reality? The Answers of Einstein,” in *Science and Synthesis: An International Colloquium organized by Unesco on the Tenth Anniversary of the Death of Albert Einstein and Teilhard de Chardin* (Berlin, Heidelberg, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1971), p. 48, n. 4. The manifesto was signed by, among others, Joseph Petzoldt, David Hilbert, Felix Klein, Georg Ferdinand Helm, and Albert Einstein. [T/E: A *Gesellschaft für positivistische Philosophie* was subsequently founded in 1912. The abovementioned UNESCO colloquium was held in 1967 and published in French by Gallimard the same year.]

<sup>3</sup>Quotations abound; they are to be found in texts as late as *The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis* (1925), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*) 19: 214, where, as regards the discovery of the “hypothetical substance or substances concerned in neuroses,” Freud says that “for the present (*vorläufig noch*) ...no such avenue of approach to the problem is open.”

formulations, too, the Patriarch's sons have, less by piety than for self-preservation, cast a veil; ought they to proclaim from the rooftops that their science has been in delayed labor for seventy-five years? Granted, in parallel he continued to call for and practice a psychological explanation of psychological phenomena.<sup>4</sup> However, one had to wait until 1939 and the *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, which was interrupted by his death, to read from the pen of the greatest psychologist of all time that a direct relationship between psychical life and the nervous system, "if it existed...would at the most afford an exact localization of the processes of consciousness and would give us no help towards understanding them."<sup>5</sup>

The problems posed by such a localization—as imprecise as it may be—nonetheless remain, and I shall return thereto. At least in this way is it recognized that one should

---

According to Ernest Jones (*Sigmund Freud Life and Work*, vol. 1 [London: The Hogarth Press, 1972], p. 285), a few years after 1925, Freud had ventured the "half-serious prediction that 'in time to come it should be possible to cure hysteria (*sic*) by administering a chemical drug without any psychological treatment.'" Also, in *The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person* (1926): "In view of the intimate connection between the things that we distinguish as physical and mental, we may look forward to a day when paths of knowledge and, let us hope, of influence will be opened up, leading from organic biology and chemistry to the field of neurotic phenomena. That day still seems a distant one" (*SE* 20: 231).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example his criticism against the old school of psychology in *A Question of Lay Analysis*, *SE* 20: 52 and 191-93. See also *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*) 14: 101-103 [T/E: *The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis*, *SE* 19: 214-16].

<sup>5</sup>*Abriss*, *GW* 17: 67. [T/E: *SE* 23: 143-44. *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* first appeared in English the following year, in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 21 (1940): 27-84.]

not await an incomprehensible reduction of psychology to physiology and a coming birth of positive-science psychoanalysis accompanied by its death as psychoanalysis. But whence would it receive its scientific status? And to what science is one referring here?

For centuries, in the West, science has not been an idea but an instituted reality, describable as such. It may be defined as the production and reproduction of phenomena through experimentation and observation, as formalizable (if only partially so) inference from statements, as univocal correspondence of some of those statements with the others; its results are constituted as verifiable and accessible to all those who want to go to the trouble of studying them. How, then, would a discourse be scientific that evades the common rules of verification and communicability, that can be instaurated only by sheltering itself from those rules and can make progress only by remaining sheltered from them? Granted, the object of psychoanalysis is, in a sense, observable; dreams, lapsus and parapraxes or slips, obsessions, anxiety, [and madness] are and always have been in the public domain. Here, the observable is everywhere; it is so even literally, for all that will ever be given to men will also pertain to psychoanalysis. It would rather be the observer that would be nowhere. For, he belongs, himself, to the observable, as do, moreover, his observations. How will he wriggle out from that; how will he set himself up opposite the object in order to render scientific *theōria* possible? In what mirror will he see the other side of his eye, in what apparatus will he capture his act of vision?

Also, he can see only if he has already seen. Communicability and verifiability presuppose here prior acceptance of the end result of psychoanalytic research—the codetermination of every psychical phenomenon by

unconscious meaning. The novice must accept that he has seen what he has not yet seen in order to, perhaps one day, be able to see it. No more than “our scientific critics” can the patient “believe” in the “intellectual content of our explanations”; he can believe it only as a function of the transference.<sup>6</sup> How, then, could there be verification, since the latter can take place only within the field of analysis and since that field can be constituted only through the transference, which is in turn essentially nontruth? It is only in and through this nontruth that psychoanalysis fully proves itself; it is this conversion, not of the gaze but of being, occurring as a function of a relationship that is not what it believes itself to be, that allows at once the existence of someone to see—and of something to be seen. For, while the observable object of psychoanalysis is in a sense everywhere, in another sense it is, as such and in person, nowhere; it is only as the other side of what apparently is self-sufficient that the cracks in this self-sufficiency possibly allow one to suspect but not to see. Also, Freud frankly declared that only those who have had a personal experience of psychoanalysis can discuss it. Nothing comparable is to be found in science, where it suffices to grant that  $1 \neq 0$  and to open one’s eyes when something is shown. Moreover, it does not suffice to affirm once and for all this “belief,” which is perhaps not an act of faith but in any case is radically distinct from scientific and generally theoretical *prohairesis*. It is to be minted over the years, and legally in perpetuity, since what is at issue is not to affirm in an empty way that unconscious meaning is the hidden truth of every psychical manifestation but to shatter each time the fallacious self-evidence of the datum of consciousness in the name of and in the search for an absent and enigmatic

---

<sup>6</sup>Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, SE 20: 224.

truth—a certain indication of which, be it negative, be it recessed, really has to be present to this consciousness as an indication of a truth to be sought, without which it is clear neither what nor why it would be seeking. For the scientist, evidence is at the center; the questions are at the boundaries [*frontières*]. For the man of psychoanalysis, it is the opposite; rather, everything becomes a frontier on account of the very fact that resistance to psychoanalysis changes place and form (we now have the proof thereof on a societywide scale). The most well-anchored certainties, those that go the most without saying, are those that are to be questioned most relentlessly and are the surest to be suspect; their self-evidence testifies against them, and acceptance thereof does not remove from them the presumption that they are carrying out some unknown function; rather, such acceptance would reinforce that presumption. And this questioning falls back upon itself and covers over itself, for nothing guarantees that it would not pertain, in each concrete case, to obsessional doubt or to a return of some form of resistance.

Who, without being aberrant, would impute this strange discourse, strangely suspended between Gorgias and Hegel, to the offspring of Galileo and Newton? That Freud sometimes wished to do so brings us back to that other paradox of history, namely, that it is not the same thing to discover the truth and to recognize it for what it is.

And what is psychoanalysis's relation to time? Diametrically opposed to that of science, and that is the case with the two ways in which psychoanalysis manifests itself. As effectively actual analysis, it undergoes unbounded development: one has never finished talking about this determinate object, the this-or-that whatever of the analytic field, one will always be able to return to it because something else is, in one go, foretold within it, and to that no

limit can be set (the end of the treatment pertains to quite other considerations). Instead, when science moves on to another stratum of its object, the prior one has, in a certain fashion, been completed. Yet as analytic theory, it undergoes no development, and here the contrast with all existing science is vividly apparent.

When applied to modern science, the term *progress* is admittedly problematic—save in the sense of technical can-do power [*pouvoir-faire technique*]—but its overwhelming—and self-overwhelming—development is manifest. But what about the theoretical (and technical) development of psychoanalysis? More than elsewhere, here comparisons are liable to criticism. May one reflect, nevertheless, on what the seventy years separating us from *The Interpretation of Dreams*—which rendered the new conception public—and the fifty years separating us from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—which basically perfected it—have brought to the development of scientific disciplines. The historical data, too massive to ignore, need not be evoked. The names, as symbols of these major contributions, could be cited by the dozens. That is why they need not be cited and cannot be cited; for the most part, they are no longer evocative of anything at all, so much has contemporary science proliferated, becoming collectivized and anonymous.

Were one to say that the first millennia are always the most difficult, one would thereby be admitting that one would have to await the next ones before talking about psychoanalysis as a science.

Might it be said, more seriously, that psychoanalysis's absorption by the social system and its takeover by the historical field has sterilized it? The question then is posed: Why have this absorption and this takeover—necessarily, tautologically corroborated for all activity, scientific or

otherwise—been so effective here, and with this result; why have they been able to sterilize psychoanalysis and not cosmology, molecular biology, or even what now passes for political economy? Why, if psychoanalysis is a science, does it not undergo the same fate [*destin*]: the autonomization of its development, an irrepressible *impetus* that neither the ideological implantation and utilization of this knowledge nor its near-complete institutionalization succeeds in hampering? Would there not be, in psychoanalysis itself, something—object, method, certainly both—that could account for its unique destiny?

Truly unique? Other cases are known where everything happens as if an initial instauration had suddenly reached an impassable point, had succeeded in removing the object created from the pace of cultural time, or rather in instituting simultaneously a time that is proper to it. The historical temporality of psychoanalysis is much more reminiscent of that of a religion, or a philosophy, or a major political current than that of topology or quantum physics. The Academy, the Lyceum, the Stoa—or else Marxism—offer analogies. After the great instauration, of which the founder, surrounded by a few comrades in arms, is the outstanding artisan, and a few dissidences that rapidly turn into sects, there come a unique Rosa, whom the orthodox regard with a frown, and a broad dissemination of the letter accompanied by a forgetting of the spirit. Closer to us, some strange talk proclaims the discovery of Freud by Jacques Lacan. If this new variant of the Epimenides Paradox did not cancel itself out—the act of assertion *ipso facto* contradicting the content—it would confirm what is being advanced here. Martin Luther perhaps discovered Christ, but Dirac did not discover and did not have to discover Max Planck but, rather, the positive electron.

Science does not discover scientists but, rather, things. Scientists are of interest only to the history of science—which is not a science. But one does indeed discover and has need of discovering periodically such well-known texts as the *Republic*, the *Metaphysics*, the Bible, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Capital*—and certainly also *The Interpretation of Dreams*. And this strange relation to time prevails within the work itself under consideration, as may be seen in the way one treats the successive writings of Freud. The drafts that might have preceded [Newton's] *Principia* or [Einstein's] *Zur Elektrodynamik der bewegten Körper* hold no interest for the physicist (any more, indeed, than the texts themselves); the same has not gone for [Marx's] *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* or for [Freud's] correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess. No one treats the first topology as if it had been erased by the second one (and if one does so, one is wrong), and the death drive has neither eliminated, completed, nor integrated narcissism. Had the *Outline of Psychoanalysis* been completed, and made ten times more voluminous than it was destined to be, one would no less return to the prior works, and one would do so not in order to find there some further details. Would that be because one would have forgotten, in the case of psychoanalysis, the distinction between system and *Problemggeschichte*? No, it is that here—as in philosophy—the history of problems and the system, even if they are not identical—which, in a sense, Hegel thought—cannot be distinguished absolutely. The way in which the problem was posed, its successive approaches, its attempts at a solution retain value and truth, whatever might be the subsequent developments. The solutions do not have the meaning they possess in other domains; they are not conditionally categorical, correct solutions, ones capable, therefore, of being surpassed or rescinded if the underlying set

of conditions is modified. They are solutions inasmuch as they allow one to think what cannot be boiled down to a definite set of conditions.

This is because here the conditions are conditions of meaning—which is not the case with scientific statements, except at the edges where they cease to be properly scientific. Not that, as many scientists and, in their wake, a few philosophers naively think, such statements cut short all ambiguity, display but a single transparent layer of meaning, or include only consequences and implications they know and possess at the moment they are formulated through the act of formulating them. Two centuries were required to disimplicate the conceptual presuppositions of the Galilean-Newtonian view and to catch a glimpse of their incoherency; for fifty years, people have been working without success to unify conceptually relativity and quantum physics. Yet science raises this question of meaning only at its periphery; it is only at the points where the physicist's activity and the being of its object become indiscernible—at the limits of submicroscopic experimentation and cosmological construction, or else at the level of fundamental categorization—that science sees itself obliged to confront this question. Yet psychoanalysis encounters it from one end to the other. This itself rules out any cumulative process such as it appears when it comes to concatenations of formal elements or rigorously definable materials.

Thereby the two moments that serve to describe modern science—verifiability and communicability, on the one hand, cumulative temporality, on the other—are knotted together at the same time that their common condition in the distancing, bracketing, or suspension of meaning is revealed. It is modern science that allows the instauration of public operational procedures of verification and falsification, which

in turn is the condition for the creation of a cumulative temporality in the domain of knowledge. The great Greco-Western invention here was to posit as epistemological conditions of knowledge that which was at the same time a condition for its socialization and historicization. For, verifiability and communicability, transcendently pure definitions of scientific discourse (more exactly, undefinable notions that, axiomatically, constitute it by defining it) have at the same time another mode of existence: they ensure, in the effectively actual social-historical world, not only that the land of knowledge belongs to those who work it but that each can have as much of it as he is capable of cultivating between his sunrise and his sundown. In thus allowing a boundless enlargement of the human base of science, this invention also made it possible for science to apply the division of labor in a reasoned way<sup>7</sup> and to enter into a process of accumulating not truths but effectively actual results and knowledge. What we have is an immense anonymous body, socialized, organized by its very object, its labor supported by an immense mass of results, universal accessibility to which is in no way hampered other than by its monstrous proliferation, and the most explosive revolutions in this mass presuppose its continuity and would not exist without it. Nothing comparable in psychoanalysis, where it suffices to formulate the idea of a division of labor to talk nonsense. Adopting a specific practical or theoretical preoccupation can consist here only in privileging one point of view (and even that, as such,

---

<sup>7</sup>T/E: The phrase *application raisonnée*, or variants thereof, appears in various forms, relating to “industry” or “science,” in Castoriadis’s writings and is sometimes attributed to Marx. Perhaps the source is a passage from chapter 32 of the first volume of *Capital*, which he often quoted. There, one finds the phrase “the conscious technical application of science [*die bewußte technische Anwendung der Wissenschaft*].”

is criticizable, as can be glimpsed in reading certain works), not in carving out a portion of the domain. Here, to divide the object is to kill it—without even being able to preserve its *caput mortuum*.

That is so because this object is embodied meaning, materialized signification—*logoi enuloi*,<sup>8</sup> more than that: *logoi embioi*, living significations. To have grasped that—such is the real meaning of Freud’s work, the definition of his deep break with the psychological and psychopathological science of his era.

## II

Psychoanalysis shares this object, however, with all disciplines that have to do with the social-historical world. What has constituted its specificity and especially its immense fecundity? Why has psychoanalysis not been simply a form of *verstehende Psychologie* before the term was coined and as sterile as the latter?

It is because analysis is not a mere theory of its object but, essentially and first of all, activity that makes that object speak in person. This essence is more difficult to grasp today, when one might believe that analytic activity flows from a theory; it becomes clearly apparent when one considers analysis’s origin. For, here genesis is foundation; here the real is transcendental. The facts are well known and repeated all over; their signification is but further occulted. It is in the impasses one experiences when treating hysterical patients, through their sayings and their doings, in their discoveries (Anna O. inventing the “talking cure,” Emmy von N.

---

<sup>8</sup>Aristotle *De Anima*. 1.1.403a25: *ta pathē logoi enuloi eisin*, the passions or affections of the soul are discourses in matter.

demanding that she finally be allowed to speak without interruption), and in the content of their speech (scenes of infantile seduction) that psychoanalysis finds its origin and its principles. Of course, that did not suffice: where doctors of the time saw only the waste products of psychological functioning produced by the illness, the genius of Freud was to see meaning, and he saw that this meaning had been intended by a subject (who was the patient and yet who was not identical to the patient). What does that boil down to, if not to treating subjects as subjects, even and especially when they do not appear and do not appear to themselves as such, to imputing their words and their symptoms to them instead of attributing them to external causal chains, to questioning seriously the content of their sayings and their doings instead of dissolving it into the abstract universal of abnormality? The Copernican reversal consisted here in no longer positing all reason being on the side of the doctor and all unreason on the side of the sick person, seeing, rather, in unreason the manifestation of another reason of which that of the doctor would be, in certain regards, only an offspring. That the offspring might understand that within which he is understood is but one of the paradoxes of the dialectic thus unveiled.

This reversal, which is of immense theoretical import, does not originate in a theory. It does not proceed from a heuristic decision made by Freud who would have suddenly chosen to go in the opposite direction from the hitherto accepted hypothesis—like Planck for black-body radiation or Michael Ventris for the presumed language of Linear B. Silently prepared by his relations with patients, this reversal was fully carried out only when Freud began the project of his own self-analysis, a project that consisted in understanding himself in order to transform himself.

It is this project that has founded and continues to

found analysis and that defines it as activity. Activity of a subject as subject on a subject as subject (their coincidence, as in Freud's self-analysis, is an instance of *sumbebēkos*—here, a foundational accident), not on a subject as object (as with the object of medicine, as the latter has become technicized). The implication of the two subjects in the project is essential and not accidental; there is a feedback effect of the process on the agents, even on the one who apparently masters and directs that process. The analyst is implicated in the analysis in quite another way than the scientist, engineer, or judge is in their reciprocal activities, not only insofar as his knowledge is modified but also, with this knowledge bearing virtually just as much on himself, inasmuch as he never brings an end to the self-transformation begun with his own analysis. This concerns, of course, the analyst strictly speaking and not just someone called the analyst.<sup>9</sup>

Such activity is defined by a transformational aim and not, despite some recent interpretations, an aim of attaining knowledge. To define psychoanalysis on the basis of a desire for knowledge on the part of the analyst is to invert completely the logical and real relationships. *De facto* as well as *de jure*, the analyst's desire to know presupposes the analytic situation and analytic activity; outside them, that desire would exist in no other mode than the desire of Immanuel Kant or Wilhelm Wundt, of Hippocrates or Aristotle, to know something about the soul. It is not the analyst's desire to know that renders the analytic situation possible but, rather, it is that situation that renders possible

---

<sup>9</sup>Freud continued his self-analysis until the end of his life, devoting a half-hour thereto every day (Jones, *Sigmund Freud Life and Work*, vol. 1, p. 327).

the existence of a specific object of knowledge, and starting from a desire that can aim at it. This does not remain pure desire because it turns into a project by being taken into the transformational project that defines the analytic situation. Were that not so, were the analyst's desire to know the foundation for analysis, analysis would be universally indicated: the Unconscious is everywhere, and everywhere different. In reality, however, the foundation for analysis being indicated is the (certainly fallible) judgment on the part of the analyst that an essential transformation on the part of the subject is possible.

No more than it would proceed from the analyst's desire for knowledge does analytic activity consist in applications of this knowledge. It is not only that a familiarity with the theory does not suffice for one to be an analyst; it is also that the way in which such activity intervenes in the analytic process has no model or equivalent elsewhere, and no simple formula allows one to define its function. It can be approached by saying that the analyst above all has need of his knowledge in order not to make use of it, or rather in order to know what is not to be done, in order to grant it the role of Socrates' *daimon*: a negative injunction. As with differential equations, no general model here allows one to find the solution, which is to be discovered in each instance (with no guarantee that a solution even exists). Theory orients and defines infinite classes of possibilities and impossibilities, but theory can neither predict nor produce the solution.

The aim of this transformation was defined by Freud himself: "Where Id was, Ego shall come to be." That this would really be a transformation and not knowledge is rather well indicated by the fact that it does not suffice that Ego would know where Id was in order to come to be there. Yet Freud's formula above all allows one to see analytic activity's

*sui generis* relation to the transformation's "toward what." Indefinable without being indeterminate, the *hou heneka* [the *in view of which*] does not allow itself to be grasped here through the distinction between the finality immanent to the activity and the external result thereof.<sup>10</sup> The analysis does not have analytic *energeia* [activity] as its end any more than an *ergon* [œuvre] external to the agent. The analysis's *ergon*—like the *ergon* of pedagogy or politics—is an *energeia* that is nonexistent beforehand and this *ergon* is one of those "that nature is unable to accomplish."<sup>11</sup> Not some mere implementation of the individual's faculties, an actualization of a potentiality that would in actuality preexist, but an actualization of a potentiality to the second degree, of a power to be able to be, analysis, like self-transformation, is a *practicopoietic activity*.

### III

Such activity is *practicopoietic*—yet it is born and is developed under the internal constraint of a *logon didonai*, of giving an account of and reason for. Its transformational project, which can be carried out only through a process of elucidation, has gone hand in hand, from the outset, with a project of elucidating its object and itself in universal terms—namely, with the project of constituting a theory. Thenceforth, while radically renewing the discourse on the soul, it also finds again its *aporias*.

This theory would like to be scientific. How, indeed, could it be anything else? Its object is real: that part, that

---

<sup>10</sup>Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1.1094a3-4.

<sup>11</sup>Aristotle *Physics* 2.8.199a15-16.

segment of the world made up of the acts of men and what, among them, they presuppose (up to and including the material organization to which they correspond). Yet this principle immediately appears to be empty: this real object, capable of being grasped here and now, differs radically from every other real thing, for its specific moment, the one that constitutes it as its own or proper order of reality, is that it is meaning, embodied meaning, meaning that each time is singular.<sup>12</sup> And it is not a science of meaning: of knowledge bearing on meaning there is no possible formalization. On the contrary, all formalization presupposes that the domain under consideration has been carefully purged of any meaning it could have contained. That such a purge might never be exhaustive, that it never consists in anything but relegating meaning to the point of origin and compressing it there in the form of indefinable notions and axiomatic statements, is certain and confirms, at an ultimate level, what is being advanced here. That does not prevent this draining of meaning from being performed over immense areas and from being shown to be effective in what, since Kurt Gödel, we have known to be but provisionally indefinite. This *Schichtung*, this layering [*feuilletage*], this mode of being stratified of total being [*l'étant total*] through which it presents itself to us as decomposable, laminable, formalizable—that in virtue of which order and multiplicity, for example, flesh of the flesh of what is, can effectively be treated as films that are diaphanous for themselves and can even lead us back into its

---

<sup>12</sup>Behaviorism “is a theory which is naive enough to boast that it has put the whole problem of psychology completely out of court” (*An Autobiographical Study*, SE 20: 52). The question of whether it falls to the physicist or the philosopher to speak of the soul, a question raised by Aristotle from the start of *De Anima* (1.1.403a27-b16), is left open there.

body—this same key property of total being, which ensures that, at a certain level, it presents itself as stripped of all mystery, is just as enigmatic and brings us back yet again to the question of its meaning. Things do not proceed otherwise for that other support that has always been offered to the terrible power of understanding, the imminent universal, that possibility of treating that which exists only as an absolute *this qua* pure instance or exemplar of a generality that would exhaust its essence. And here again, while physics could enter into its childhood phase only by forgetting its object—*phusis*—it could mature only by finding it again in the form of the aporias and paradoxes that, for fifty years now, have pulverized its conceptual foundations. It remains the case, however, that formalizing separation is possible and effective there.

That is not so in psychoanalysis. To formalize meaning, why not empty the sea with a bailer? If by *formalization* what one intends is Euclid and Hilbert, and not those rectangular tables with which the Structuralists mesmerize themselves and mesmerize their audience, or the laborious hilarities of “structural semantics,” signification does not allow itself to be formalized except in its irrelevant features. Below one will see the essential reasons for that. The best path for approaching the subject is the most direct one, and the steepest one, the one where analysis encounters the subject immediately: the question of the singular individual.

Contrary to what Politzer believed,<sup>13</sup> it is both legitimate and necessary for analysis to try to find again, in

---

<sup>13</sup>T/E: Castoriadis is referring to [Georges Politzer](#) (1903-1942), “a French philosopher and Marxist theoretician of Hungarian Jewish origin” who “took a lively interest in nascent Freudian theory and its uses before eventually distancing himself from it.”

the individual *this*, that which goes beyond the individual and represents therein the universal—whether on the level of content, like the participable aspect of representation and the linguistic term, or on the level of a generic organization, like the “psychical apparatus” and its laws of operation. How could analysis speak, if not in the universal? Yet to treat the *this* as pure exemplar of generality, to consider the individual as mere combinatory of substitutable and permutable elements is to eliminate the real object of analysis in the name of a pseudotheoretical daydream. In any case, analysis cannot do so while it is in operation: this individual, this patient, is an irreducible *this*. However, analysis can—and it has to—hold a discourse on this irreducible *this* that is not only universal through its linguistic form, that tries to be universal in a deep way by boiling the individual *this* down to universal elements, by finding again there that which—either as term or as organization—is valid for all. The temptation is then great—and, it seems, more and more irresistible—to identify the individual in an exhaustive way with the set of those elements, to see therein only a designative *this*, since everything that makes it up is a generic element, since what differentiates it from the rest is but arrangement—like that which differentiates 01 from 10 or from 101—and since one can thus produce an unlimited number of *thises*.

What nevertheless remains to be known is why this—here arrangement, and not one of the innumerable other possible ones, presents itself at this—here place. Formal reasoning, the Understanding, responds: In principle, that, too, is reducible. Yet the Understanding is laboring here under an illusion, and it does so on its own terrain. For—were it a matter even of a mere physical thing—this principle could never be achieved except through the immediate totalization, here and now, of all the determinations of the world in

extension and in intension. It is the same thing to say that the Understanding cannot know the totality and to say that it cannot know the individual: in a sense, the psychological paralogue is but the flip side of the cosmological antinomies, or rather both are grounded in the same impossibility. That does not signify that the individual would be absolutely unknowable. Yet “of the first terms and the last, there is direct comprehension and not discursive knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> What also remains to be known is why these arrangements never seem to produce the same results and why we never meet our psychical doubles. These arguments may seem abstract. They are simply expressing in general terms questions as obvious, and as frequent, as, for example, the following one: Why has this child alone, among his brothers and sisters, become psychotic? Granted, in the abstract one can always invoke different conditions, but such an invocation is empty; it is like the promise: “Tomorrow, we’ll give you the explanation for free.” The allusion to unspecified and permanently unspecifiable conditions cannot eliminate the problem posed by the much greater distance between two brothers, one of whom is psychotic and the other not, than between two normal people from different countries and eras. The term *choice of neurosis* expresses well what Freud meant to say, as much as the fact that he repeatedly returned to the problem that term denotes.

More generally speaking, if the individual is but the combination of permutable and substitutable elements, either

---

<sup>14</sup>*Kai gar tōn prōton horōn kai tōn eschatōn nous estin kai ou logos* (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.12.1143a35ff.). [T/E: In *IIS* (350), Castoriadis had translated the same phrase as follows (using here Blamey’s translation from Castoriadis’s French): “for both the first terms and the last are objects of intuitive reason (*nous*) and not of argument (*logos*).”]

one of two things follows. Either those elements are truly universal, and then the fact of having a history becomes absolutely unintelligible: there would indeed be no point in saying that history is merely apparent, that nothing essentially separates Apollo VIII from a boomerang, the Fifth Republic from Egypt under Ramesses III, and psychoanalysts from shamans; one would still need to make it comprehensible why this same appears each time as other, and as this-here other. Or else, they are simply social and cultural, therefore historical, and psychoanalysis (allowing itself then to be resorbed by certain sociological conceptions) would have merely displaced the site of the individual toward the irreducible specificity of this era, this society, this culture (a specificity that is just as incontestable and just as problematic).

In any case, it is unclear how, under such conditions, one could eliminate what would appear as an equivocation and even a radical duplicity on the part of psychoanalysis, which would, depending on the circumstances, be speaking in two languages. If, in its activity, it continued to aim at lifting the patient's mental alienation, it could not refrain from positing the patient as a singular individual: You are not what you think you are, and you are what is not you, and it is up to you to be what you would like to be and could be. This *you*, which is at once affirmative and interrogative, past and to come, effectively actual and left hanging, tying together a real illusion and a truth to be made through an indefinable present, this *you*, were it a pure nonplace, would still, in its illocality, ground all analysis that exists in order that, in the saying of its founder, it might become. In its theoretical discourse, however, it would have to explain the patients' idea that they are themselves and not just anyone as a tenacious and in fact inexpungible illusion (no analysis ever having been able to

put an end to it), about which one would be left only to interpret its origin: the individual can live his life only as object of the other, and language forces him to designate by Ego [*Je*] (or the grammatical inflection that takes its place) this real-imaginary quasi-substance. The emergence of the I [*Je*] in language flows in turn from the need to mark the utterance's point of departure (one cannot say *the subject*, since the latter is nothing and does not speak but is spoken). Let it be said in passing that, under those conditions, speaking of *mental alienation* becomes a linguistic tic (which, as apparent lack of meaning, would require an interpretation): the alienation of *outis* is a bit of nonsense. If the subject is nothing but the discourse of the other, the subject is neither alienated nor nonalienated; the subject is this nonbeing that the subject is (or that the subject is not). Nor does one have to ask why one treats some persons and not others, thus and not otherwise, and so on. To whom would one indeed ask that? He who would treat or not treat, thus or otherwise, and ultimately would state this theory is of course, in turn, nothing other than this particular product of the universal combinatory; were he to partake of the shared illusion and take himself for someone, well, that is *kata sumbebēkos*, [accidental,] for the content of the discourse. It suffices to understand what is said. He who says it, far from him speaking, is obviously spoken and is there for nothing in what he says: How could one a-be [*anêtre*] in a particular place? So, one can truly no longer even speak of equivocation: everything is merely mere absence of meaning and there is but one modest price to pay: accepting the elimination of discourse as significant discourse. A banal *curiosum*, well known for twenty-five centuries: the Sophists have always been the last to agree to pay this price.

Finally, were this reduction of the individual possible,

it is unclear why in analysis there are no and cannot be any predictions in the proper sense of the term. This is not a matter of some fallibility on the part of analysts or of some temporary imperfection in their knowledge (and still less, obviously, of the fact that predictions do not have to be formulated in analysis). All that can be said about the future of an analysis—and of an individual in general—is, by an essential necessity, contingent. For, here Aristotle's argument, rediscovering its root, reaches its full potential: If every statement were necessarily true or false even when it comes to the future, there would no longer be anything contingent, and no more truth, since we would no longer be able to (think of another discourse and therefore to) think ourselves as *archē tōn esomenōn*, origin of what will be.<sup>15</sup> Man cannot be taken out of what has made [*fait*] him as he is, nor out of what, such as he is, he does [*fait*]. Yet neither can he be reduced thereto. An effect that goes beyond its causes, a cause that its effects do not exhaust, that is what psychoanalysis is constantly obliged to rediscover in its activity as well as in its theory.

What we have here are not answers, but aporias, which do not allow themselves to be eliminated. What has just been said does not refute, for example, the reductive discourse that can be, that is even necessarily, that of psychoanalytic theory. While that theory does indeed have to account for its object, it cannot limit itself to saying of that object that that object is each time singular, a “drama,” or a “first-person process”; the singular immediately becomes an abstract universal again, and no account is given of anything. Nor can psychoanalytic theory speak of *personal history*. The word *history* is understood in multiple ways, and in this context it refers only to a concatenation of events or incidents

---

<sup>15</sup>Aristotle *De Interpretatione* 9.18b31-19a8.

that have nothing specific about them but the place they each time occupy in a configuration—a combinatory singularity, a false singularity. What the singular individual truly is is this constant here-now perpetually transported into a variable here-now, mobile origin of every coordinate system that might have a meaning, particular connection to this body and to this world of something that is neither them nor without them, way of living self, other, desire, making/doing, its own obscurity and its own lucidity, way of holding onto its childhood while marching toward death, this gimlet that drills into the continuum and creates there the light, certain that in the end, broken, it will fall back into darkness—all that, which, in being said, has already been overturned in language, since, if this is true, each can recognize himself therein and therefore he has missed his essential truth, of all that, what can psychoanalysis really do about it? Everything and nothing. Everything in its activity, since there is no analytic treatment worthy of the name that would have, as presupposition, even if ignored, the absolute primacy of the point of view of the patient about his own life (a point of view which—another paradox—resists, in addition, all definition and cannot in any case be confused simply with the manifest opinion the patient has of himself). Nothing in its theory, since the individual, far from being able to explain anything whatsoever, is what is to be explained, and the individual is not explained by referring to his individuality. To what, then? To some universal elements? The individual then will, properly speaking, be irreducible, the residue every explanation of this type leaves. The difficulty stems from the fact that, *de jure*, the theory cannot recognize the existence of such a residue as truly irreducible; its work is meaningful only through the opposite postulate, as perpetual reduction, and were it not so, the theory could have listened to Cineas and

rested from the outset. Apparently, everything is played out on the last millimeter. When the theory transforms the necessary hypothesis of its work into a necessarily arbitrary and empty thesis, it will end up with mythological conceptions (like Freud's "organic" and "constitutional" hypotheses, or the "first signifying chains" of some contemporaries)<sup>16</sup> along with the above-described equivocation. In reality, however, much more is at stake; the theorist's tact and good manners will not suffice to bring him out of the impasse. The practical postulate of the singularity of the individual in the cure is accompanied by the tiresome evidence of the individual's nonsingularity, at the same time that the hypothesis of the individual's theoretical reducibility constantly encounters the ironic evidence of the individual's irreducibility.

#### IV

If psychoanalysis has as its object the *logoi embioi*, the significations materialized in the life of an individual, and if this object is fully given only in the analytic situation, it follows already that it is assignable but not properly observable. Beyond trivialities, observation of this object can take place only inside the analytic situation; such observation is not fungible and it therefore is not the same as scientific observation. That is why all communication is necessarily truncated.

Yet that is still, in part, empirical (in part—for, the fictive experience of parallel analyses runs up not only against practical and deontological impossibilities but especially

---

<sup>16</sup>T/E: The phrase "signifying chain [*chaîne signifiante*]" appears in Lacan's work.

against the limits of what can be seen by he who is not in the role and in the activity of the analyst engaged in an analysis). The key thing is the inexhaustibility and unsegmentability of signification. Significations do not have the structure of a set; they are not “distinct and well-defined objects,” as Georg Cantor said.<sup>17</sup> Each signification, as unity of a term and an indefinite range of referrals, is emptied into all the others and *is* also through what it is not. It would be wrong to say, as Ferdinand de Saussure pretty much said, that it is only these referrals; those referrals can obviously be only referrals from...to.... Yet it is certain that it is not without them. Isolating signification in order to formalize it is possible only if one literally plays with words, that is to say, if one takes the materiality of the signifier for the entirety of the signification, the denoter for the denoted, which is here, essentially, an indefinite range of connotations.

In psychoanalysis, this impossibility is raised, if one may say so, to a higher power. For, here we are dealing with embodied significations, namely: representations that are borne by intentions and are of a piece with affects. I shall not speak of *affects*, about which Freud said that “very little is known,”<sup>18</sup> except to express my regret that his heirs have not been faithful to his wish to explore their nature further. About intentions, I shall note only that already through them each *this* that can appear in analysis communicates with (and is

---

<sup>17</sup>Although he does sometimes, in general, employ the adjective “well-defined” (*bien définis* in the original French), Castoriadis usually, when quoting Cantor’s July 28, 1899 letter to Richard Dedekind, offers *définis* (definite) in his translation.

<sup>18</sup>*The Ego and the Id*, SE 19: 22. Freud praised Schopenhauer for having recognized “the dominance of the emotions” (*An Autobiographical Study*, SE 20: 59).

borne by) the whole life of the individual under consideration, including what will be his future. There is indeed no essentially isolable intention; beyond the reflex, every locatable intention arises within the subject's intentional field and has existence and meaning only in and through this (largely unconscious, of course) field. Now, an essential part of this field is suspended over the void of what is to come.

Yet representation is manifestly the finite-infinite, the concrete *this, par excellence*, solidly given to all and yet which flees in all directions and eludes every conceptual schema, even the most elementary one. How many representations are there in "My friend R. was my uncle; . . . A yellow beard that surrounded [his face] stood out especially clearly"?<sup>19</sup> What is little Hans's father for little Hans? It is this nature of representation that characterizes the Unconscious through and through and that lies at the foundation of the fact that the Unconscious knows not the laws of ordinary logic—which the Conscious, in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, tries to impose on representation by means of language when it is reduced to its function as code, of the structure of sets, and of the Understanding which separates and defines. It is this nature that also allows one, certainly not to "explain" the singularity of the individual, but to discern better the problem this singularity constitutes.

The individual is not only a first chain [*enchaînement*] of representations—or, better, a first "total representation"—it is also and especially, from this standpoint, uninterrupted surging forth of representations and unique mode of this representational flux, a particular fashion of representing, of existing in and through representation, of focusing on this or that representation or such and such a term of a

---

<sup>19</sup>T/E: Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE 4:137.

representation, of passing from one to the other, from some type of representational term to some other one, and so on and so forth.

To see this, it suffices to reflect on the signification of this type of linkage [*enchaînement*], whose existence was suspected already before Freud but whose importance psychoanalysis was the first to show in dazzling fashion. I am speaking of symbolic causation, such as it appears not only in most symptoms but in the association of representations each time such association is free, that is to say, removed from conscious control (and even when under conscious control, but that is another story), and which is the foundation for their unconscious concatenation. I say *causation* expressly, and not *motivation* or *symbolic equivalence*, for reasons that will be better understood in what follows. There is in such linkage both a *post hoc* and a *propter hoc*, and it must be affirmed, against various recent efforts to water down psychoanalysis, that the symptom is an effect and not a manner of expressing oneself or an incomplete text; the incompleteness of the text, this manner of speaking—they do not rest upon themselves; they have a logically and chronologically prior condition. Yet such causation is absolutely *sui generis*, and it contradicts what one habitually thinks is the essential feature of causation: it cannot be reduced to biunivocal relationships; it does not constitute a definable form of determinism. That is why one can just as well call it *symbolic creation*.<sup>20</sup> There is indeed no way to say which procedure of symbolization will each time be utilized, upon what it is going to be applied or toward what it is going to lead. Within the magma of the initial representation, symbolic representation can sample a real part or a formal element and pass from there to some

---

<sup>20</sup>When all is said and done: *mode and moment of imaginary creation*.

formal elements or real parts of another representation through procedures that are assimilative (metaphoric or metonymic), oppositive (antiphrastic or ironic), or otherwise. Nothing allows one to define in advance, for this individual or that psychical act, the procedure and terms that will be called upon. *Ex post*, it is possible to describe this or that pathological formation in terms of the procedure utilized, as Freud did in his *Draft M*<sup>21</sup>—and others after him—by characterizing hysteria as “displacement by association,” obsessional neurosis as “displacement by (conceptual) similarity,” paranoia as “causal displacement,” or in terms of the type of phantasies (whether “systematic” or not). Yet here we have a description, not an explanation (unless one postulates in the Unconscious, in the place of the “chemical process” of which Freud speaks in the same context, a *metaphoriston* or a *metonymiston*, of which these patients would have received an inordinate share); it offers no help at all in understanding either why these tropes have been predominant (they can never be exclusive) or why they become instrumented in this or that particular fashion (any representation lends itself to an indefinite range of immediate tropic linkages, and still more mediate ones, and to an indefinite range of other representations).

There is thus not only an overdetermination but also and at the same time an underdetermination of the symbol—just as there is at once oversymbolization and undersymbolization of the symbolized. These mixtures of symbolic thrift and prodigality (which appear to us as mixtures of logical thrift and prodigality) show that the trajectory of the unconscious intention in the space of

---

<sup>21</sup>*Draft M* accompanied Freud’s May 25, 1897 letter to Fliess (*SE* 1: 250-53).

representations does not satisfy Fermat's principle and refer instead to the essence of symbolism. Everything flows from the following fact, whose self-evidence seems to have prevented people from thinking it: the symbol is (for) what it is not, therefore necessarily at once in excess and in deficit with regard to every homology and every functional relationship. This excess/deficit is approximately mastered only when one functions lucidly; the moment of reflection signifies here, essentially, a turning back upon the *for* of the symbol, the decaethesis or derealization of the symbolic, which begins with the *ti legeis, ti sēmaineis hotan touto legeis?* [What are you saying, what do you want to signify by saying that?]

Things are not and cannot be the same for unconscious thought in the strict sense, which really is, in a sense, thought since it is a bringing into relation [*mise en relation*] of representations guided by an intention (and, even so, matrix of all meaning of meaning for man), but not reflective thought; for it, there is no other of representation, and therefore the symbolic *quid pro quo* cannot but be a case of mistaken identity, period [*quiproquo tout court*], and this case of mistaken identity is immediately reality and truth, the sole kind it might know. It may be asked here whether representation is or is not adequate. It is so necessarily from the moment it surges forth. Starting from something that is almost nothing, the symbol which is not one is rendered obligatorily adequate, because the intention (and, behind it, the drive) has to make its way through, it has to become instrumented. It cannot just make use of all wood that presents itself to start its fire, but within that which presents itself all species of wood are to be found. Besides, one can hardly untangle here the respective roles of intention and representation, for the initiative is constantly passing from

one to the other. It is the intention that links the representations, but it is also the representations that awaken, activate, inhibit, or become the intentions. Behind this idea is to be found one of the essential aporias of psychoanalytic theory and of its object. In a sense, the intention could be said to be nothing but a linkage of representations; it is thereupon that we read the intention. Not only would we not otherwise know anything about it, it has no other mode of existence. Yet if we made of it simply meaning, more exactly the act of connecting the group of representations brought together in a series or a scene, we would not only lose that which animates this series, that which stages [*met en scène*], but we would lose, too, the anchorage within corporeal reality, the push of the drive—which is its essence, *das Wesen*, says Freud<sup>22</sup>—we would no longer be dealing with anything but a disembodied soul. If, on the other hand, we wanted to ignore the proper role of representation, the fact that it is no mere vehicle but an active principle, that this embassy or delegation of the drive into the soul (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*) has barely any precise instructions to fulfill or even to interpret but has to invent some on behalf of its proxy, mute since birth, it would then no longer be worth the effort to speak of *psychism*, as everything would be settled at the somatic level by the drive that would always find the representations that suit it and necessarily always the same ones, for they would belong to the “mute generic essence of the species.”<sup>23</sup> So then, there would be neither individuals nor individual history nor

---

<sup>22</sup>*Triebe und Triebchicksale*, *GW* 10: 214 [T/E: “The Instincts [*sic*] and Their Vicissitudes,” *SE* 14: 122].

<sup>23</sup>T/E: This is Castoriadis’s paraphrase of the second point in the sixth of Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach.”

history, period.

It is in representation that one finds the moment of creation in the psychical process (I am speaking, obviously, of creation *ex nihilo*), first in its very surging forth, and just as much in its deployment and its products. It is here that what is irreducible to any combinatory, to any formalization, dazzlingly appears. The formalizers have been forced for years to make the following longshot bet: to speak of psychoanalysis without speaking of representation. Also, it is not of psychoanalysis that they speak, any more, besides, than they formalize anything at all. Their case has already been described:

An author of memorials of our time, wishing to write without too obviously seeming to be writing like Saint-Simon, might, on occasion, give us the first line of his portrait of Villars: “He was a rather tall man, dark...with an alert, open, expressive physiognomy,” but what law of determinism could bring him to the discovery of Saint-Simon’s next line, which begins with “and, to tell the truth, a trifle mad”?<sup>24</sup>

What Proust is saying of the creation of art and style holds just as much, and with good reason, for the Unconscious; in eliminating representation therefrom, one substitutes for the text an anemic and clumsy pastiche.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1924), p. 175.

<sup>25</sup>That is what Freud is referring to in this sentence: “There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown” (*GW* 2: 116, n. 1 [T/E: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *SE* 4: 111, n. 1]). See also *GW* 2: 530:

The word *creation* will surprise those who for some time have become habituated to seeing in psychoanalysis an exclusively regressive approach and in its material a set fixed forever in place by an origin. That is because one does not reflect enough on what these words signify. One needs to go back to the origin only when and because the origin is creation, when and because a meaning cannot be dissolved into the determinations of a present system. And if one tries to give an account of this originary meaning while forgetting its essential character as instauration or creation, one can only boil it back down to some determinations that flow therefrom and presuppose it; the discourse on the origin then becomes irresistibly mythical and incoherent. The best example was given by Freud himself with the myth of the murder of the father in *Totem and Taboo*, which has some meaning only if

---

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled but has also made no further contributions to the dream's content. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation have to, in an even obligatory and quite universal fashion, remain without any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly dense that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.

The translations of this second passage, both in the *Standard Edition* (5: 525) and in the French translation (1967 edition, p. 446), contain, beyond the customary flattening of Freud's text, a flagrant mistranslation [T/E: the *Gesammelte Werke* has: *aber auch zum Trauminhalt keine weiteren Beiträge geliefert hat*, while the *Standard Edition* translation offers, instead: "and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream"]. [See also [IIS](#), 279-80.]

one presupposes the essential features of that of which it tries to give an account; the behavior of the father from *Totem and Taboo* is comprehensible only if his murder has already taken place (whether really or phantasmatically, it matters little). If the past were not creation, one would not have any need to come back to it, and it is from this standpoint that perhaps the most important aspect of the cure best allows itself to be seen. It is because the history of the individual is also a history of self-creation that not everything can be found again in the present; it is because the individual is always borne forth ahead of what it is that it can find itself again only by going back from where it currently is. The efficacy of the cure does not flow from finding the past again in the present but from one being able to see the present from the point of view of the past at a moment when this present, still to come, was wholly contingent, when what was going to fix it in place was still *in statu nascendi*. If it were merely a matter of finding again an element similar in its nature to all the other ones, one would not understand why the patient's situation might be able to be modified thereby. Likewise, the intensity of the affect that accompanies this fecund resumption of the past as present, and distinguishes it from any banal form of remembering, is not mere sign or indice of the fact that something important is *ante portas* but is, rather, the very labor of the soul that allows its return; what is thereby reproduced is the high temperature under which the first alloying, the first fusion of impulsive and representational elements, was carried out, and which now allows their dissociation. (Here belongs, quite obviously, the transference itself, as refusion-defusion, and it is in this way that one can understand why it is at once the essential instrument of analysis and the most formidable obstacle its ending encounters.) Plunged into the parenthetical reviviscence of the past, the individual lives its present as

contingent, not in the repetitive irreality of reverie that emptily rewrites history, but in its return to what was real instauration and what thus reveals itself as a fixation that is as solid as it is arbitrary. The practical essence of the psychoanalytic cure involves the fact that the individual finds itself again as partial origin of its history, undergoes gratuitously the experience of the act of making itself, which was not known as such the first time round, and becomes again origin of possibilities as having had a history that was history and not fatality.

The confusion results, too, from the complacent way one draws Freud's mythic historicosocial archaeology (from *Totem and Taboo* or *Moses and Monotheism*) in a "regressive" direction. Such was assuredly not Freud's intention,<sup>26</sup> but had it been so, the discussion here is superfluous. One is quite evidently fabricating an ideological superstructure on a base that cannot support it. One can confine oneself to voluptuous (for whom?) contemplation of the return of the repressed and ignore the rest. Yet this remainder is just as and even more important, for it is thereupon that this very discourse leans. Is psychoanalysis a return of the repressed, *simpliciter*? Likewise, one can limit oneself to repeating the theme of repetition, forgetting that repetition would not even be locatable as such if it did not emerge within a process of nonrepetition, namely, continued creation.

---

<sup>26</sup>To be convinced of that, one need only reread *Civilization and its Discontents* or *The Future of an Illusion*. Freud never refrained from speaking of the "social and technical advances in human history" (*SE* 13: xiv); likewise, he emphasized that psychoanalysis can examine only one of the sources of religious institution and that it demands for its point of view neither exclusivity nor primacy (*SE* 13: 100).

## V

All that concerns but one aspect of psychoanalytic theorization. The point of departure for such theorization is taken through an attempt to elucidate a singular history, a *this*, but there it necessarily encounters the universal in two kinds of ways. On the one hand, as the universality, or quasi-universality, of what comes within the treatment, more generally within the phenomenon, as content: the participable part of representation, language, the act, or the event. What has been in question till now is this quasi-universality of concrete contents, which may be called *psychological universality*. On the other hand, psychoanalytic theorization is irresistibly and legitimately led toward another universality: that of concepts, constructions, and hypotheses that are not given as such in experience, that are to be inferred therefrom and are destined to make up a theory of the soul. This is metapsychological universality. What individuals do or say is never absolutely singular, but also that which makes them do or say this or that, thusly rather than otherwise, is broadly shared by them.<sup>27</sup> Metapsychological theory is thus led to ask

---

<sup>27</sup>Failure to recognize the presence of the universal at each of these levels and confusion between the two make up the substance of Politzer's argument. It is not only, as Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire write ("The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study" [Sixth Bonneval Colloquium, 1966], tr. Patrick Coleman, *Yale French Studies*, 48 [1972]: 118-75; see: 123), that he refuses to "take...realistically...the law scientists construct in order to explain certain facts in physics." It is also that he denies that such a law might, in this case, be constructed and naively opposes the statement "the stone fell on account of the law of gravitation" with the statement "the stone fell because I let go of it," forgetting that the second statement is essentially incomplete and that the first one is in no way reducible to a simple summary of statements of the second type.

itself about that which functions in order to produce that which appears—therefore to ask itself about the organization of a “psychical apparatus” and the “forces” that act thereon—and to ask itself about the psychism’s “laws of operation [*lois de fonctionnement*].”

It is then that this metapsychological theory takes on a naive, coarse, realistic demeanor that sometimes upsets the philosophers most favorably disposed toward it. When one speaks of a “psychical apparatus,” of “laws of operation,” of a topology, of an energetics, is this not to fabricate entities and to make significations real? As if one had waited for psychoanalysis to make significations real, as if nature at one level, history at another, had not always and forever made significations real. That does not keep people from resuming their attack against the absurdity of the Unconscious, this meaning that would not be self-meaning. Strangely, this reproach, which could have been addressed to Hegel as well as to Aristotle, to Plato or to Marx, is formulated only apropos of Freud, in outraged [*scandalisé*] tones. Yet this meaning that is not self-meaning, which is present in every great philosophy in one form or another, is forgotten in the name of the most impoverished, the most tautological version of a *cogitatum est, ergo cogito*. Even in psychoanalytic circles do such infiltrations make themselves felt; here, some gently try to camouflage this scandal of the Unconscious, presenting it as the sum of the lacunae in manifest content, the integrative factor that allows the completion of its meaning. As if one could in this way elude the following, urgently pressing questions: What governs this division of the segments of meaning? What, above all, is it that so fiercely opposes their reunification? Can one “complete” a conscious meaning with an unconscious meaning? Are these varieties of the same species? Where Freud—if one takes not the

metaphor of translation he often employed but his thinking on the basic substance [*fond*] of the matter<sup>28</sup>—saw not even two different languages but a language and the other of language, some try to see a single text, analysis of which would correct its misprints or would supply the missing words.

Such infiltrations are occurring, moreover, all along the metapsychological front. Thus, some speak condescendingly of the “energy metaphor.” Perhaps the term *metaphor* allows one to eliminate the tiny problem of someone who barely lifts his head at the sight of certain objects but goes off to his death at the sight of others? The ineliminable economic concepts no longer seem to haunt anywhere but the abandoned ruins of the edifice half destroyed by Freud himself in *The Economic Problem of Masochism*. Nor is the topology taken seriously: those regions that were also agencies [*instances*] are no longer used except as words, the problems posed by differences in sitings of psychical phenomena, over which Freud fretted so much, do not seem to preoccupy anyone.<sup>29</sup>

Because it has been activity, psychoanalysis has not been simply another philosophical or psychological theory. And it has not been literature or dramatic activity that writes itself as it is played because it has attacked head on the problem of the theoretical conceptualization of what it was discovering. That for which Politzer, and others in his wake, in sum reproach Freud is not to have wanted to be the

---

<sup>28</sup>We know that for Freud, an unconscious representation cannot be likened to a verbal representation and that unconscious representations are representations “of things” (*The Ego and the Id*, SE 19: 21) See also *GW* (*Das Unbewußte*) 10: 300 [T/E: *The Unconscious*, SE 14: 202].

<sup>29</sup>The problem of topology, as Freud saw it, cannot be confused with the “topological” illustrations Jacques Lacan provides for his own views.

Sophocles, the Shakespeare, the Proust of his patients and of himself. A strange demand, which need only be removed from its latent state [*délarver*] in order to be rejected.

It is because psychoanalysis has seriously confronted the problem of the soul as such, that of its organization, of the forces that manifest themselves there, of the “laws” of its operation, that it has been able to lead to the radical innovation with which we are familiar. For, it is from this angle that its object appears in its inflexible hardness: as living signification, *logoi embioi*. The kingdom of shades could be abandoned because Freud tried to think all the way through the following enigmatic, evident fact of the psychical: embodied meaning, realized signification, and the conditions thereof. That is something he could do only in a realist language, subjecting as much as possible the new region to the available categories of the Understanding that aim at the real, since it is as real that this object gives itself out. To reject that would be to return to the bad abstractions of a bad philosophy. To accept it was not to return to the bad abstractions of a bad psychology, and this for a reason around which Politzer revolved without ever truly seeing it, even though Freud had formulated it explicitly.<sup>30</sup> These were abstractions not inasmuch as they posited the universal, or inasmuch as they postulated sites, mechanisms, faculties (all that being ineliminable), but inasmuch as they operated through real abstraction, separating and breaking up the object in order to retain only a part thereof that, for this very reason, no longer was a part of that object. Linkages that are not linkages of meaning are not psychical linkages. Faculties

---

<sup>30</sup>*The Question of Lay Analysis*, SE 20: 192-93: “Academic psychology” provides nothing but “a number of classifications and definitions”; it “has never been able to inform us what this meaning [of dreams] is.”

whose usage is not codetermined by the what, the who, the whence, and the toward what are not psychical faculties. Abstraction in the old psychology entailed a forgetting of the content and meaning of psychical phenomena. Psychoanalysis would have fallen into a symmetrical abstraction—at present, this is increasingly the case—had it in turn forgotten that meanings and contents *are* only in and through the life of a body without being reducible to that life, and that they manifest themselves with differences in level, quality, intensity, and time that irresistibly refer back to an organization, to forces or tendencies, to locatable regularities. Organization of what, forces acting where, regularities bearing on what? The frankest way of speaking of the something here presupposed or implied—as a matter of fact, the soul—is to speak of it as a thing.<sup>31</sup> Some philosophers become irritated by that and protest against its realism. Yet such realism lies on their side. Never having been able to think the thing other than from a realist perspective, they believe that the thing is realism. In fact, apart from naive philosophical attempts at preemption, one knows not what a thing is; one knows only what the idea of the thing is in a realist philosophy—an idea whose real referent has never been found. To speak of the soul as a thing is to raise the problem each of these two notions poses to its most acute level.

Metaphorical language? All theoretical language is so necessarily and to the second degree. Yet metaphors are not mere images here. Granted, the terms do not have the same

---

<sup>31</sup>“The intellect and the mind [T/E: the German (*GW* 15: 171) has *Geist und Seele*] are objects for scientific research in exactly the same way as any non-human things” (*New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, *SE* 22: 159).

meaning as in physics, or in everyday life. But that does not exhaust the question.

The topology can pass for being metaphorical since attempts at anatomical localization of the parts of the psychical apparatus fail and even seem to have no meaning.<sup>32</sup> That, however, hardly eliminates the question that is insistently posed at both extremes of the discourse. Topology cannot be a mere metaphor if one places oneself at the most primitive, the most categorial of standpoints. Our habitual space exists only as modality of another, more originary space, as the possibility of ordered coexistence of the manifold.<sup>33</sup> Now, one cannot avoid thinking the terms dealt

---

<sup>32</sup>In 1925, Freud wrote: "...*agencies* or *systems* whose relations to one another are expressed in spatial terms, without, however, implying any connection with the actual anatomy of the brain" (*GW* 14: 58 [T/E: *SE* 20: 32]). It suffices to read the second chapter of *The Ego and the Id*, written a few years earlier, to glimpse that the "propagation" of psychical charges is not just a mode of expression—just as little as the following astonishing sentence would be: "The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface" (*SE*: 19: 26). Freud also said there that the Conscious is "spatially the first one reached from the external world," with "spatially" to be understood "not only in the functional sense but, on this occasion, also in the sense of anatomical dissection" (*SE* 19: 19). He said this, it is true, to evoke, a few lines below, the "difficulties that arise when one begins to take the spatial or 'topographical' idea of mental life seriously" (*ibid.*) [T/E: Castoriadis's French translation from the German here (*Ernst machen*, *GW* 13: 253; he also mentions *GW* 13: 246-47) would, in English, read: "too seriously [*trop au sérieux*"]; we have replaced his previous quotations and citations, from the French translation, with ones from *SE* 19].

<sup>33</sup>Like the site of the *Timaetus*, "receptacle and, as it were, the wet nurse of all generation" (49a), "an invisible and formless *eidōs*, which receives all, which partakes of the intelligible in the most perplexing fashion (*aporotata pē*), and which is the most ungraspable" (51a-b); "and there is still a third kind, the site (*chōra*), incorruptible, furnishing a seat to all

with in psychoanalysis as being in a certain order of coexistence; therefore, one cannot avoid asking oneself what is this type of order and what is the site of the different terms within it. If one says that the terms are not to be distinguished by their sites, but by their functions, qualities, or degrees of latency, either one is not reflecting on the words being employed and one is really just changing metaphors or else one is catching a glimpse that each of these words requires a deeper investigation that is just as problematic. Yet neither can topology be a mere metaphor if one places oneself at the most concrete, the most material of standpoints. The difficulties and the failures of the initial conceptions of localization do not erase the evidence of the localization *in toto* of the psychism, nor even of a series of particular localizations. The age-old adage *in vino veritas* like the most recent neuroleptics pose no other question; would the molecules of alcohol or Largactil exist, in vulgar space, only metaphorically? And *that which* they encounter when they act—well, *where* do they encounter it?

This may be old-fashioned stuff about the soul and the body, granted. Old-fashioned stuff that is, however, younger than today's stillborn fashions. Scientists are not curious, Freud said.<sup>34</sup> Would those who claim to be his followers have ceased to be so? That some medications or surgical operations might act specifically on these outward manifestations, those

---

things that are born, itself tangible, outside of any sensation, to a bastard reflection, barely believable, at which we aim as in a dream by saying that it is necessary that all being be somewhere, in a certain site and possessing a certain place, and that that which is not somewhere, neither on earth nor in the sky, is nothing" (52a-b). [See [IIS](#), 195-201.]

<sup>34</sup>T/E: Freud is actually quoting a phrase from Anatole France, which, in *SE* 4: 93, appears in the original French: "*les savants ne sont pas curieux.*"

psychical symptoms—such facts do not seem especially soporific for a psychoanalyst. Less than ever can one treat topology as metaphorical in an age when one is beginning to intervene topologically.

The same goes for the problem of “energy.” Force is the product of mass times acceleration—it has to be measurable as such. What, then, are “psychical forces” if not fallacious metaphors? Yet do we have here the most primitive concept of force? Force has to do with changes in movement—and “movements of the soul” are metaphorical. Are they? We have reduced all movement to local movement, to the *phora kata topon*, and we seem to have forgotten alteration, *alloiosis*,<sup>35</sup> simply because physics has succeeded in boiling down most of the alterations it deals with to local movements. Now, what are the forces one encounters in psychoanalysis if not that which pushes toward some alteration and resists some other one? And here again, the question also arises on the basis of the most concrete, the most material considerations; for, the differences in intensity between psychical tendencies are evident on a daily basis.

Such examples could easily be multiplied. For, there is not a single psychoanalytic concept that does not partake of this problem and that does not lead to analogous questions. They suffice to show that it is legitimate to make an effort to devise a psychoanalytic conceptualization of this type and that, in wanting to ignore the inevitable and pressing problems to which Freud strove to respond, psychoanalysis is being transformed into literature or into a pseudophilosophy of the subject.

---

<sup>35</sup>Aristotle *Physics* 3.1.201a9-15; 5.2.226a26-28; 7.3.248a6-9. “Imagination and opinion seem to be sorts of movement”: 8.3.254a29. See also *De Anima* 3.3.428b12.

Yet this legitimate conceptualization is at the same time impossible as a scientific conceptualization. For, none of the concepts being proposed is univocal, none is operative. These are dialectical and philosophical concepts. They are of the tribe of potentiality and actuality, of substance and *conatus*, of the monad and of *perceptio*, of negativity and of alienation. They live near the Platonic and Kantian topologies; their reason operates especially through cunning; their kinship with scientific *constructa* is much more remote. Freud was not mistaken when he named the principal ones: Eros, Thanatos, Ananke, Logos. The swan has perhaps sometimes been taken for a duck, but it really hatches out swan's eggs.

The aporia thus manifested is genuine, that is to say, insoluble. Both the necessity and the impossibility of a scientific conceptualization of psychoanalysis are neither accidental nor temporary; they are of the essence. The Freudian conceptualization can be amended, ameliorated, modified from top to bottom. It will forever retain its atopic core. For, such is its object, with its two really and theoretically impossible sides. On one of its sides, it enjoins us to grasp it under the logic of sets and allows us to grasp it in this way. Here, it presents itself as a collection of distinct and well-defined elements; the nervous system really is a spatiotemporal multiplicity; a molecule is never in two places at once; an electrical charge cannot travel without traversing all the intermediate points; everything is categorically determined (with an assignable probability). Yet there, it is an "inconsistent multiplicity";<sup>36</sup> set logic has no handle thereupon; representation is at once one and several

---

<sup>36</sup>Georg Cantor's July 28, 1899 letter to Richard Dedekind (*Gesammelte Abhandlungen* [Hildesheim: Olms, 1962], p. 444).

and these determinations are for it neither decisive nor indifferent; neighborhood relations are not defined or are constantly being redefined; and the impossible and the obligatory, far from exhausting the field, leave what is essential outside their grasp.

Granted, the real goes infinitely beyond set logic—as nuclear and cosmological physics are on the brink of rediscovering—but through this complacency that has allowed us to be men, it also lends itself thereto, to an almost indefinite degree. Things proceed entirely otherwise for one of its regions, which happens to be precisely the one where we are, the one we are *par excellence*: signification or representation. In all practical regards, and almost in all theoretical regards, two goats plus two goats make four goats. But *what* do two representations plus two representations make? Granted, too, set theory leads to some astonishing results and even ones incomprehensible for common sense. Each of the points of the Brouwer curve is arbitrarily close to some points situated on an infinity of other curves from the same plane, and that sphere Banach decomposed into a finite number of pieces by means of which *two* spheres of equal size to the first can be reassembled seems to bother even mathematicians. I doubt, however, that a multiplicity in which every point is at once arbitrarily close to and arbitrarily far from every other point might ever be treated with the resources of any current or foreseeable mathematics.

Yet what does not admit of calculation still admits of being thought.

## VI

In theorizing itself, psychoanalysis therefore encounters some problems that are, in a sense, eternal, that it

renews in a radical way, but that it does not resolve. What forbids all confusion with the theorization of science is not that it does not resolve them but that it does not instaurate objective procedures to do so, and, moreover, that it is unclear in what such procedures might consist.

Psychoanalysis is thereby certainly philosophical—but is not, despite what one might be tempted to say, philosophy. It is philosophical insofar as it has to remain hitched to those Sisyphean rocks that are meaning, the conditions of meaning, and the meaning of those conditions, the subject as object and the object as subjective, the reality of speech and the truth of the act; insofar, too, as, in a way that is proper to it and henceforth ineliminable, it sheds light on other sides of these inexhaustible significations. Yet it is not philosophy, because it would disappear were it dissociated from the practico-poietic activity that in essence defines it, because, too, its theoretical discourse derives its universal and philosophical value and meaning from the fact that it doggedly pursues a particular and specific object, psychical reality. Psychoanalysis cannot do the science of this strangest of objects and it does not have to make a philosophy of it; it does the aporetic and dialectical elucidation thereof.<sup>37</sup> It can thereby also contribute to a renewal of the problematic of philosophy. This is what I would like to show, in conclusion, around an example of capital importance.

What psychoanalysis posits in all the acts of the individual—and shows at work there—is unconscious codetermination. The latter is alien to any truth of statements and to any value of acts—more exactly, it would seem that it

---

<sup>37</sup>*Dialectical* in Aristotle's sense—*exetastikē* (*Topics* 1.2.101b3), *erōtēsis antiphaseōs* (*Posterior Analytics* 1.1.24a24)—and of Kant—logic of appearance and critique of appearance.

leaves no room for them. For, nothing can escape such codetermination, and in this regard Socrates and Herostratus, Court President Daniel Paul Schreber and Sigmund Freud are all in the same boat. Every act that claims to be just and every discourse that purports to be true are borne by the unconscious intentions of their subject, just as much as a crime or a bout of delirium. And that of course holds equally for psychoanalytic acts and psychoanalytic theory themselves. Nothing is changed when it is underscored, as was done above, that the moment of indetermination and the process of creation are just as essential; indetermination and creation in themselves hold no value.

It is not upon this point that psychoanalysis innovates philosophically. We had to have the neobarbarism of this hypercivilized age, the neoilliteracy underlying its hyperinformation to believe that, from the philosophical standpoint, the “cleavage” of the subject moves the problematics of knowing and acting one inch. The novelty is to be found only in the naivety with which certain psychoanalysts shut their eyes to the antinomy that thus bursts forth before them or believe that they are eliminating it when speaking of a “desire to know” or of a “desire to analyze.” From this standpoint, psychoanalysis offers but a variation on the concrete content of what Kant called *empirical psychology*, just another example of the antinomy between the empirical point of view and the transcendental point of view, as has clearly been formulated since Plato’s time.<sup>38</sup> In the Kantian discourse, there is, when it is taken rigorously, much more than a “cleavage” since the effectively actual man finds himself entirely on the side of empirical determinations and

---

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, the speeches of Glaucon and Adimantus in book 2 of the *Republic* 358e-368e.

could not for a second claim, without illusion, that he acts (or judges, since judgment is a psychological act caught within these determinations) outside their grip. One could not sneak into those determinations a nanogram of truth, value, or “freedom.” And at this level of discussion, it makes completely no difference whether they might be libidinal, socioeconomic, or something else. Effectively actual man is caught within the determinations of the effectively actual world, where there are but causes and effects, neither truth and value nor their opposite. And yet, this assertion claims to be true—while being effectively actual.

How philosophy has faced up to this antinomy is another story, woven into its whole history. Most of the time, it has been under the illusion that it has resolved that antinomy. In reality, it has never done anything more than posit a postulate of reason as such: we can speak only by granting that we have access to a transcendental point of view and that we can pose the question *quid juris* and respond to it independently of every effectively actual psychological determination. Psychoanalysts necessarily use this postulate without necessarily knowing it each time they affirm or deny the truth of a statement, and even when, as some among them do at the pinnacle of confusion, they place all “truth” on the side of the Unconscious.

It is not by exacerbating this antinomy anew but by furnishing—*dunamei*—a new way of posing it that psychoanalysis innovates. For, it indicates a possible path for thinking the genesis of meaning and the genesis of truth for effectively actual men.

Indeed, psychoanalysis shows not only that man has to live everything as meaning but also that the acceptance of this meaning has to undergo a radical torsion in the course of the development of the individual—and even of history, if at

least Freud himself is to be believed;<sup>39</sup> I shall return to this—if this individual is to become normal.<sup>40</sup> This torsion may be described in diverse ways, but for the present problematic such diversity matters little. Whether one is speaking of the instauration of the reality principle, of the resolution of the Oedipus Complex, or of the sublimation of the drives—partial expressions, certainly, in no way equivalent, each one referring back to considerable problems—one thing is certain: psychoanalysis would be a crazy and meaningless [*insensé*] noise *qua* discourse and a swindle *qua* activity if it did not posit a radical difference between psychosis and nonpsychosis. On that difference depends, each time, one's accession to the real, to truth, to the other, to oneself, and to one's own finitude and mortality, and that difference, in turn, depends on, or comes back to, the instauration of a certain relation of the individual to itself, bringing the imaginary to see reason or transforming the relationships between unconscious intention and conscious intention.

Psychoanalysis brings partially to light the conditions of possibility for this bringing to reason, this transformation.

---

<sup>39</sup>“But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life.’ We may call this ‘*education to reality*’.... By withdrawing their expectations from the other world and concentrating all their liberated energies into their life on earth, they will probably succeed in achieving a state of things in which life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone” (*The Future of an Illusion*, SE 21: 49-50). And also: “the time has probably come, as it does in an analytic treatment, for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect” (SE 21: 44).

<sup>40</sup>The problems this term may raise never led Freud to place it within quotation marks.

In part only, because those conditions have a twofold existence, another root beyond the psychoanalytic field, in the social-historical field. Psychoanalysis cannot give an account of the prohibition of incest; it has to presuppose it as socially instituted. It can describe the instauration, in the individual, of a reality principle, but in its general nature and in its each-time specific content, this reality cannot and does not have to be accounted for; reality is for psychoanalysis a datum that is defined elsewhere: reality, Freud said, is society.<sup>41</sup> Its contribution to the elucidation of several aspects of language might be huge, but it has nothing to say about the existence of an instituted language. It shows how the individual is able to attain a sublimation of the drive but not how that essential condition for sublimation—an object for the conversion of the drive—is able to appear: in the essential cases, this object *is* only as an instituted social object. The institution, the social field as the everywhere-dense presence of an anonymous collective, the historical field as ever possible irruption of something new that no one willed as such all presuppose the individual of which psychoanalysis speaks though they are at the same time presupposed by psychoanalysis.

Nevertheless, with these presuppositions recognized for what they are, psychoanalysis allows one to approach in a new fashion this enigmatic and antinomic coalescence of the empirical and the transcendental that the most rudimentary statement already constitutes from the moment when it purports to be true. To say that sublimation is a possible destiny of the drive is to say that the *de facto* existence of the

---

<sup>41</sup>*Totem and Taboo*, *GW* 9: 92. [T/E: *SE* 13:74: “The real world, which is avoided in this way by neurotics, is under the sway of human society and of the institutions collectively created by it. To turn away from reality is at the same time to withdraw from the community of man.”]

psychical individual is *de jure* an opening to the possibility of the truth. That does not eliminate the Kantian problematic but allows one to convert it into another, perhaps more fundamental one. It does not for all that become possible to seek, in effectively actual man, some pure determinations; the possibility of truth and of acting rightly still depends on unconscious, and in any case psychical, processes, and notably on this conversion of the drive, on this cathexis of other objects that knowledge, creation, and the just can be. Yet these objects can be determinative. Ethical or transcendental purism cannot be satisfied with them, since they are pure only insofar as they are cathected. Yet in its rigorous abstraction, such purism is ultimately incoherent: if the absolute and final foundation it seeks were pure, it would not be able to ground anything effectively actual. Foundation is here a pure fact: we are thus; *qua* men, we have the true as a possible object of cathexis (more exactly, we have this possibility of cathecting something that goes beyond every object). Kant called a *happy accident* this fact, which reason as such can neither produce nor guarantee: that the effectively actual world might be thinkable. There is another one: that the effectively actual individual might be able to think the true.

This discourse proves nothing, but it can be reflected upon; it does not contravene what it posits. First, it opens up anew, and in the very domain of psychoanalysis, the problem of sublimation, about which Freud knew very well that “it would be wiser to reflect upon this a little longer.”<sup>42</sup> For, quite obviously one cannot remain with an undifferentiated concept of sublimation or forget that the objects at issue in the present context are not the usual psychical objects, that they are even, *par excellence*, nonobjects: there is nothing true that can be

---

<sup>42</sup>*GW* 14: 457 [T/E: *SE* 21: 97].

defined and possessed as an object any more than there is anything just that can be defined and possessed as a fixed type of relations among men or a tranquil order of the city. Posited as such, they have already been transformed into their opposite; they have become imaginary objects. For us, nothing is outside of representation; everything must pass by way of it. However, truth is neither the existence of representation nor a property of the latter—its mere movement, its correspondence to another representation, some mode or other of its organization. From the psychical standpoint, the truth is that which announces itself in representation as the other of representation. This other of representation still is, in turn, like a representation that is to become realized. The critical difference is defined by the moment when this realization is taken as effectively actual, when, therefore, it no longer has any beyond, when the imaginary object that it has become captures as such the psychical cathexis. What, however, is a psychical energy that cathects a nonobject? Perhaps it is an avatar for the strongest narcissism that has no need to say “I,” still less “I said that,” and which is cathected as source of an ever-possible new discourse infinitely more than as origin of an already bygone discourse. If that is so, the alchemy of conversion is ever present there and shows straight off the other side of the affair, for this avatar presupposes that the individual has accepted, as a possible destiny of his discourse, that it might be outstripped [*dépassé*], without for all that saying just anything or fleeing into silence.

It also opens up, at the frontiers of psychoanalysis, some questions that for too long have been sidestepped. The object of sublimation—an imaginary object or nonobject—is essentially social; there is no more any individual money than there is individual religion, no more individual language than

individual knowledge. Reality itself, to which psychoanalysis cannot not refer, theoretically and practically, is a social reality. It is through some pitiful prevarications that, nowadays, one tries to turn this question—which Freud faced much more courageously<sup>43</sup>—either into an empiricist perspective or into a pseudophilosophical one. The ideology of adaptation to what is is no better than some phrases about the “Law,” which are blind to the fact that the Law never exists except as positive and which are devoid of what would allow one to think the difference between the law of Auschwitz and another law. The possibility of thinking this difference, just as much as that of escaping the naive contradictions of every ideology of adaptation, can be furnished only if one recognizes both the historical contingency of what is presented as social necessity and the radical difference between a sublimation that leads toward a social-imaginary object and a sublimation that goes beyond [*dépasse*] it. This, moreover, merely transposes, into the practical field, the exigency that arises from psychoanalysis itself in the theoretical field: that which holds for eroticized knowledge holds just as much for social relationships dominated by the imaginary. However, one is then led toward a historicosocial dialectic that is anything but simple; for,

---

<sup>43</sup>It suffices to recall his attitude toward religion, as well as his repeated formulations on the (“unjustified”) excess of repression of the drives by society, and the oft-expressed demand for a change in society in this regard (whose overall implications he clearly saw): for example, “Psycho-analysis has revealed the weaknesses of this system (i.e., of the repression of the drives such as repression is presently instituted) and has recommended that it should be altered” (*GW* 14: 106-107 [T/E: *SE* 19: 220]). See also his critique of private property (*ibid.*, 504 [T/E: *SE* 21: 143]) and his hope for a “pathology of cultural communities” (*ibid.*, 504-505 [T/E: *SE* 21: 144]).

these relationships, precisely because they are conditions for reality, and heavily instituted, cannot be treated—even theoretically—in the same way as imaginary objects, even if they are social, in the field of the individual. One can, if one wishes, write that “from the cathexis of feces to that of money *there is for the subject not the least progress*, insofar as this cathexis testifies to the perpetuation of the unconscious chain. That on other points the subject would no longer be the same is something that absolutely does not matter to the psychoanalyst”<sup>44</sup>—but on the condition that one not mask the problems that the “insofar as” and the “on other points” contain. In fact, there are, between the cathexis of feces and that of money a few slight differences: a handler of excrement generally risks confinement, a money handler does not. Until proven otherwise, psychosis remains a psychoanalytic concept, and to say that that which relates thereto absolutely does not matter to the psychoanalyst is to speak not as a psychoanalyst but as a dilettante of theory who is clearly transforming the analysis into “pure” interpretation, one that, moreover, is empty (that is, incapable of interpreting even the difference between psychosis and neurosis). Another slight difference is that a society of money handlers can exist—and can eventually give birth to another society—and that a society of handlers of excrement is an incoherent fiction. And psychoanalysis would have nothing to treat or to think were there no society, production, and labor. To disregard this consideration is to reproduce “the abstraction that separates

---

<sup>44</sup>Michel Tort, “De l’interprétation ou la machine herméneutique,” *Les Temps Modernes*, March 1966:1641 (emphases in the original).

and opposes the individual and society” [Marx].<sup>45</sup> The key fact is that excrement can be only an object of the Unconscious, whereas money, or a tool, is also a social object—and that makes all the difference in the world, both as concerns the individual and as concerns society. That there might be “perpetuation of the unconscious chain”<sup>46</sup> is one thing; that one might under that pretext obliterate the distinction between mental alienation, social alienation, and the possibility of going beyond alienation shows only the confusion that necessarily results from an intention to isolate a pure psychoanalytic standpoint. Such an intention is all the more untenable as there is nothing in the Unconscious that might engender and bring into existence the object *money* or the object *tool*; the conversion of the drive presupposes that the tool exists, therefore that it has been created elsewhere. One is thus led toward the problem of social-historical creation and the strange dialectic of the real and the imaginary that such creation instaurates, as expressed in this: that the effectively actual organization and survival of a society are possible only as a function of a system of imaginary social significations, by and through which emerges slowly, unevenly, contradictorily man’s capacity for truth—his self-creation as *zōon logon poion* perpetually mediated by the individual and social imaginary. Seeing that does not, however, signify only preferring history and society to nothing but also agreeing to face up to the historical dialectic, its obscurities, its indeterminations; it signifies accepting oneself also as social and historical subject, within a

---

<sup>45</sup>T/E: We have not been able to source this quotation or, more likely, paraphrase of Marx.

<sup>46</sup>T/E: “De l’interprétation ou la machine herméneutique,” *ibid.*

transformational project that here again could be formulated as follows: Where No One was, We shall come to be. And here again, this project knows that, no more than the Id can there be a question of eliminating or mastering No One—the social-historical field—but of instaurating another relation of the collective to its destiny.

Psychoanalysis, however, cannot ignore these questions, nor can it, as psychoanalysis, respond to them. From this standpoint, too, though in another fashion, psychoanalysis appears as essentially incomplete and incompletable.

# Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation\*

## “Destiny” of Analysis and Responsibility of Analysts

The ideologies that for fifteen years have been infesting the Parisian scene—and of which “psychoanalysis” à la Jacques Lacan has been an essential ingredient—have entered into their decomposition phase. A recent book by François Roustang represents at once a moment and a remarkable illustration thereof.<sup>1</sup>

---

\*“La psychanalyse, projet et élucidation” was published in *Topique*, 19 (April 1977). Reprinted in the [French edition of CL](#), 65-122 (81-157 of the 1998 reprint).

<sup>1</sup>François Roustang, *Un destin si funeste* (Paris: Minuit, 1976 [T/E: reprinted by Payot in 2009 and translated by Ned Lukacher, with a less literal title and an explanatory subtitle, as: *Dire Mastery: Discipleship from Freud to Lacan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982; American Psychiatric Press, 1986); a more literal translation of the title, used below to convey certain points made by Castoriadis, is: “Dire Destiny.”]). Italicized numbers in parentheses refer to the pages of this book [T/E: in its 1986 English-language edition]. As far as one knows, the author still belongs to the so-called (*sogenannte* and *selbsternannte*) “Freudian” School [T/E: Roustang remained a member until Lacan dissolved the École freudienne de Paris in 1980 (French Wikipedia, s.v.).] In order to avoid taking up again here points I have treated elsewhere, I allow myself to make frequent references to “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (first published in French in *L’Inconscient*, 8 [October 1968]: 47-87 and reprinted in the present volume as its first chapter); “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (first published in French in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 17 [1973], pp. 43-73, and reprinted below in the present volume), and [IIS](#).

I must strongly emphasize that, particularly as concerns the

Homage must first be paid to Roustang for his honesty, a commodity that would be priceless nowadays were the scarcity of its supply not balanced by the total absence of demand for it. Also, for the frankness of his manner of approaching a series of problems hitherto passed over in silence, mentioned only allusively, or spoken of solely during after-dinner psychoanalytic conversations.

What Roustang's work incites one to discuss, and that led me, responding finally to a quite old motivation, to write the pages that follow, goes very far beyond Lacan and Lacanianism. It concerns psychoanalysis in itself *and* in its social and historical anchorage. It reveals, too, despite itself, some important aspects of the contemporary situation of ideologies. As a stripping bare and, up to a certain point, a critique of the Lacanian syndrome, Roustang's work is itself a symptom of what he describes and a specimen of the effects of the ideology to which this syndrome belongs. Yet that is

---

resolution of the transference, the possibility of a "psychoanalytic society," and the nature of psychoanalytic "theory," the positions and expositions of Roustang are frequently heterogeneous and often, in my view, downright contradictory. That is undoubtedly due to several factors; beyond the different dates when the texts that make up the book were drafted, there is the difficulty and complexity of the thing itself and, on the horizon, the ultimate and authentic aporias with which analytic thinking and activity confront us—and to which "Epilegomena" was in the main devoted. Yet this pertains also and especially, in the present case, to the frame of thought within which Roustang continues to situate himself. I have not tried to "save" Roustang in the oscillation of these contradictions; on the contrary, I have each time taken what seemed to me revelatory—namely, the *limit* of this oscillation. The present text is therefore not a review or an "interpretation" of Roustang; it is, if you wish, "willfully unfair" to him. What really mattered to me is to discuss the problems themselves as well as to demonstrate that such discussion becomes impossible within a certain ideological framework and that the destruction of this framework alone can liberate that discussion.

but one phase of the question. Much more important are the other ones, which relate to the things themselves. Consequently, I could not too strongly counsel the reader well saturated in modern “culture” to stop reading here. What indeed I am proposing is to discuss matters from the incredibly hidebound and outmoded perspective of the true and the false, of what is to be done and what is not to be done: it is unreasonable for him to spend his leisure time on such a frivolous and futile subject.

It is likely that what Roustang says, and what I will be led to say, will be highly irritating to many psychoanalysts. And it is more than likely that the well-oiled defense mechanism, set up so long ago, will be employed once again: all this would merely express some “resistances to analysis” (or ill-resolved transferences, etc.). One will not be surprised that the essential identity between this defensive repression and the kind long employed by degenerated Marxism, Stalinism, and Maoism has never crossed the minds of these psychoanalysts. There, too, any questioning of the official dogma was ruled out in advance from the discussion. It sufficed to denounce it as coming from the “class enemy,” therefore expressing resistance to the “class truth” of the proletariat (for which the Party had erected itself into the position of sole authorized spokesman—like those psychoanalysts who erect themselves into the sole authorized spokesmen for the “truth of the Unconscious” *and*, through a slippage, of the theory *of* that truth). Yet this defense mechanism always jams up as soon as the monolithism can no longer be preserved. Moscow and Peking, accusing each other of being instruments of the “class enemy,” find themselves being denounced together, thus ruining the unquestionability of the dogma. “Traditional” psychoanalysts and Lacanian psychoanalysts alike, suggesting that the others are the ones

“resisting analysis,” inevitably raise the question: And what then would both be resisting together? I hope to show that what they are resisting are the questions psychoanalytic activity and psychoanalytic elucidation pose; they are resisting the question of the truth of what they are thinking and of the rectitude of what they are doing.

## I

There are three parts (or moments, or axes) to Roustang’s work, with each one meriting its own treatment, but they are certainly also intrinsically linked. For Roustang, too, they are linked in terms of how he proceeds and what his needs are. And they are linked in such a way that, in and through this connection as much as in the treatment of each of the parts, what is revealed and denounced is an ultimate attempt to cement back together what is about to fall apart, Lacan and Lacanianism, by means of some schemata and “concepts” that express and betray the author’s ongoing imprisonment within a universe from which he wants to free himself without wanting to do so while wanting to do so. Indeed, nothing is more enlightening than the way in which Roustang succeeds in using what he is criticizing in order to justify it and what he sees in order to continue not to see.

What Roustang *wants to say* may easily be summarized: Yes, Lacanianism is monstrous. Yes, Lacan and the Lacanians form an alienated and alienating circuit (which the author succeeds in thinking only through repeated recourse to the notion of *psychosis*), two parts each essential to the existence of the other and capable of functioning only

together.<sup>2</sup> Yet the reissuance of psychoanalysis's original sin does not lie there; when one looks closely, rending the veil tradition has cast over the relationships between Freud and his disciples, one will see that things did not proceed otherwise with the founding father and his "savage horde," that the intraclan psychical cannibalism, the *endophagy* if I may forge this word, are the "dire destiny" of psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> This then is a "*Destiny*" independent of any peculiarity of Freud (and, *a fortiori*, of Lacan), of foundational times, of a formative

---

<sup>2</sup>The terms *psychosis*, *abjection*, *contempt*, *enslavement*, *perversion*, and a few other similar ones are those used by Roustang in his description of Lacanianism. Like him, I use them here without quotation marks.

<sup>3</sup>The reference to the Atreidae and to the "Thyestean feast" makes little appeal to the myth. Thyestes obviously did not know that he was eating his children. Yet that is the implication—though unformulated—of Roustang's thesis, that Lacan would have long ago died of starvation had he not fed on the knowledge that it was his "children" that he was eating. One cannot erase the differences between the tragedy and the perverse defenses of what is, for Roustang himself, a psychotic kernel; for perversion, knowledge is essential. [T/E: Castoriadis is speaking here of the epigraph that opens Roustang's *Un destin si funeste* (though it is omitted from the English translation with its interpolated title, *Dire Mastery*). Itself an excerpt from the French tragedian Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon's 1707 play *Atrée et Thyeste*, this epigraph was used, in its French original, by Edgar Allan Poe in his short story "The Purloined Letter" and is quoted by Jacques Lacan in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" (*Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, tr. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg [New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006], p. 9): *Un dessein si funeste/S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste* (5.5.1386; "While such a dire design isn't worthy of Atreus, it is worthy of Thyestes"). Strangely, and without explanation, in his epigraph Roustang seems to be substituting *destin* (destiny or fate) for *dessein* (design/plan/intention/purpose) and building his title and his book around this altered quotation, found in neither Crébillon, Poe, nor Lacan, all of whom Roustang cites in this epigraph.]

stage in psychoanalysis from which apparently no amount of knowledge would allow one to escape. This “destiny” is consubstantial both with the impossibility of a genuine psychoanalytic “society” (that, is, with the impossibility of psychoanalysts ever forming a collectivity of autonomous adults) and with the character of psychoanalytic theory, which itself could not ultimately escape its phantasmatic *status*. For, theory is “perhaps” only “the delirium of several” (154) and one would have a choice only between a straightforward psychosis and a shared psychosis plugged up by reference to a “theory”: “This is no doubt why psychoanalysts form societies, thus giving themselves the illusion that they theorize together, while in fact they all cling—each for himself with his own fantasies and hallucinations—to a unique discourse” (*ibid.*). This is an excellent definition of the Lacanian school, presented here as covering all psychoanalysis and every psychoanalytic collectivity, past, present, and future. What finally is being offered is a “theoretical approach” to psychosis that is imbricated within the preceding system of rationalization and is aimed at supporting it. Unfortunately, nothing is offered to the reader that would allow him to differentiate between this “theoretical approach” and “the illusion that they [the psychoanalysts—but also, as it turns out, Roustang] theorize together” their “fantasies and hallucinations.” On the contrary, this theory, remaining for the moment that of a single person, *is*, according to itself, delirium: “delirium is the theory of one person alone” (34 [translation altered] and 154).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Despite the intimate connection with the other elements of his thesis and the illustration it offers of another—of one further—*reductio ad absurdum* of Lacanianism, the conception of psychosis Roustang proposes will not be discussed here, for lack of space and because that would take me too

As always, what the author leaves unmentioned that is central to the subject he has chosen to treat is just as important as what he says, if not more so. On the one hand, psychoanalysis is discussed as if it existed *in vacuo*: what happens to it would depend exclusively on internal factors that would be proper to it. A blind point for Roustang, as for all psychoanalysts, is the fact that psychoanalysis belongs to society and to history. On the other hand, Roustang remains silent, without explaining himself on that score, about the *practice* of Lacan and of a growing number of Lacanians. Silence, too, about what, within Lacan's "theorization," implicitly and stealthily underlies this practice—which thereby avoids any essential challenge to this "theorization." It is as if the perversion of the intra-analytic relations he is describing in no way impacted the "truths" Lacan is said to have revealed, in no way gave damning testimony about those relations, in no way affected practice toward the patients. It is as if, faced with some destructive practices of analysis, one did not have to interrogate oneself about what, in "theorization," furnished their conditions of possibility. No analytic theory without corresponding analytic practice, and

---

far afield from my purpose here. Suffice it to note that this conception basically boils down to the affirmation that the psychotic has no thoughts, but only "ideas" (O, shades of Plato!)—that is, undoubtedly, only "words" or signifiers. Besides the total failure to recognize the extraordinary activity of *thought* psychosis exhibits (see Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement* [1975; tr. Alan Sheridan (Philadelphia, PA and East Sussex, UK: Brunner-Routledge, 2001)], in particular the second half of this book), this affirmation, combined with the idea that "theory is the delirium of several," also leads to an insoluble aporia concerning the very possibility of any thought and of any theory. [Delirium is not of thoughts but of "ideas." These unthought "ideas," once shared by several people, will become "theory"!]

*vice versa*; and no *systematic* and *collective* perversion of practice without something that responds and corresponds thereto in “theory.”

This practice has shamelessly been in the public eye for many years, with—here is another phenomenon one must forcefully be reminded of here, while reserving the right to return to it elsewhere—the complicity by omission of the great majority of non-Lacanian analysts. *Augur augurem*.... Roustang keeps quiet about the scandal of sessions systematically reduced to a few minutes—for a long time, these shortened sessions were the prerogative of the “master,” but for ages now they have become *the* practice of the majority of Lacanians. One would search in vain—and with good reason—for any “theorization” whatsoever of that scandal, but its concealment under the deceitful label *sessions of variable duration* is well known. (“Variable duration” would obviously require that each five- or ten-minute session be matched by one of on average eighty or eighty-five minutes.) How, indeed, is one to theorize a practice that eliminates what is nearly the sole objectifiable rule binding the analyst in the exercise of his role, that inordinately increases the already exorbitant powers with which he finds himself invested, *nolens volens*, through the situation of the transference, and that makes of analysis for the analysand a situation of *real* (and in fact *monetary*, as “time is money”) frustrations and gratifications, a situation that is not phantasmatically but *really* infantile?

The adverb *shamelessly*, used above, might shock some. It should be recalled, therefore, that twenty-five years ago Lacan hinted that he would not start up again. The maneuver made at that time—to stay within the International Psychoanalytical Association—having failed, he continued

this practice with renewed vigor.<sup>5</sup> Here we have what such self-glorification of the “master” harbors, when that master “does not relinquish his desire” (27). Here, too, we have what ought to force a reinvestigation of the ideas of the “master” and of “mastery,” which are being brought back into circulation precisely by Lacan, ideas that suit so well the present ideological confusion that they are taken up again right and left—and especially on the “Left”—to accredit some alienating myths about the “master” and power.

Roustang also is led to question himself about the foundation for the alleged mastery of the “master.” The question “why one becomes a disciple or, correlatively, why one has disciples” is, he says, open only to “a single answer: in order not to go mad [*fou*]” (33). Plainly, Lacan for the Lacanians, and the Lacanians for Lacan, play the role of safeguard against madness [*garde-fou*] (*ibid.*), of a point of support within reality that allows one to avoid collapse; in short: of a shield against psychosis. Incidentally revealed along the way is the imposture of being “alone, as I have always been in my relationship to the analytic cause.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>See the texts about the 1953 split printed in the supplement to *Ornicar?*, 7 (1976): especially 130. The few parenthetical statements aimed at “justifying” short sessions that will be found here and there in Lacan’s texts are impossible to discuss seriously each taken on its own, contradict one another when set side by side, and, especially, purely and simply cancel themselves out on account of the fact that this practice applies indiscriminately to *all* cases. On the *necessary* temporal dimension of a psychoanalytic session, see Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, “Temps de parole et temps d’écoute: remarques cliniques,” *Topique*, 11-12 (October 1973): 41-70 [T/E: reprinted in *Un interprète en quête de sens* (Paris: Ramsay, 1986; Payot 1991), pp. 117-42].

<sup>6</sup>T/E: Lacan, speaking of himself, in the June 21, 1964 Founding Act of the École Freudienne de Paris.

Roustang sees quite well that “mastery must have its counterpart, abjection, and, if Lacan is to be everything, the analysts of the School are to be nothing. ...Adulation of the master thus goes along with contempt for all the disciples” (27 [T/E: translation slightly modified]). Yet, despite the discreet use of “correlatively,” the other side of the terms *abjection* and *contempt* remains veiled. It is as if the figure of the “master” had to be preserved at all cost in his “mastery”; as if, in this necessarily bilateral relationship, the “master” could, himself, succeed in “escaping” folly by plunging the disciples and nothing but them into a state of abjection, by pouring out upon them a contempt whose psychical source would remain mysterious; in short, as if *there could in effective actuality be a “master.”* Now, the master *does not exist*: the “master” is never but a windbag. Entertaining the illusion that there would be a “master” in flesh and blood is simply to remain enslaved to a flesh-and-blood character who has nothing of a “master” about him, to maintain oneself in the subjective position of the slave, to continue to propagate—to those who are, for other reasons too, reduced to slavery—the mystification of the “mastery” embodied by some one. There exists no “master”: there exist dominant people, exploiters, manipulators. The discourse on the “discourse of the master” belongs among their maneuvers.

One has to ask oneself whether, more than a century behind, the introduction of Hegelian studies into France has served for much more than to enrich the local rhetoric with a few new words. For, the implications of the Hegelian analyses of the master/slave relation are clear and are becoming still more so when they are taken up again from a psychoanalytic perspective. The master is the slave of the slave. That does not pertain simply to a formal logical determination (the term or meaning *slave* entering into the definition of the master).

It is at once ontologically and internally, in his “objective” and “subjective” position, that the master is slave of the slave: without the slave, he does not see his definition damaged, but he does see his substantial life disappear.<sup>7</sup>

From the psychoanalytic standpoint, it is obvious that the position of the “master” and of the disciple/slave, of he who takes pleasure [*jouit*] in rendering someone abject and of he who takes pleasure in agreeing to be so, of he who professes contempt and of he who undergoes it are, in the unconscious phantasms of the situation, necessarily and essentially permutable. Not only: *the subject is in all the places of his phantasy* but: *the subject is, at the core, this-here phantasy*: of the slave-relation, of abjection, of contempt. The enacting [*mise en acte*] of the phantasmatic situation in which one of the places is constantly imputed to one or several other real beings, while the subject reserves for himself the other one, abolishes in appearance the permutability of the real only in order to intensify it on the unconscious scene and to increase there the weight of the role the subject does not “realize” in enactments. From the moment that the subject and his partners/accomplices begin acting out [*passent à l'acte*], several paths remain open for

---

<sup>7</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, tr. Hyppolite, vol. 1: “The master is...for himself only through an Other...” (p. 161). “He (the master) is therefore not certain of his *being-for-himself* as truth, but his truth is on the contrary the inessential consciousness and the inessential operation of this consciousness...domination shows that its essence is the opposite of what it wants to be...” (p. 163) [T/E: cf. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, tr. J. B. Baillie, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. and corr. ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin and New York: Humanities Press, 1949), pp. 236-37]. Hyppolite comments in a note (p. 163): “It is this inequality of recognition that is now going to manifest itself; the master will become the slave of the slave, and the slave the master of the master.”

them to continue operations. Repetitive ritual is one of these. Escalation is another one. In that case, the psychological drug that the real staging [*mise en scène*] of the phantasy represents has to be administered in increasing quantities—at least so long as the constitutions of the participants allow them to do so. This is the path taken by Sade’s characters; this is the journey in the *Story of O*. It is also Lacan’s way of raising the stakes. Leaving the Lacanian School as one of the steps in this escalation, the sadly notorious *col de la passe* (1968),<sup>8</sup> was being crossed, Guy Rosolato reminded the assembled Lacanians of the phrase the Divine Marquis uses to describe the frolics between another “master who did not relinquish his desire,” the Seraphic Knight, and his companions: “The attitude is dissolved; one changes position.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the Sadean combinatory is not and cannot be static. New positions have to be invented, the sizes of members have to swell, the number of massacres has to increase. Transgression always has to transgress beyond, under penalty of no longer being lived as such. The stages successively traveled in abjection and the contempt of self and of others are well known—from

---

<sup>8</sup>T/E: This seems to be a multiple play on words, Castoriadis having just spoken of *passage à l’acte* (acting out) and *escalade* (escalation or climbing) and now of *la passe* (the controversial Lacanian process for the certification of “Analysts of the School,” that is, giving them a passing grade). A *col* is a mountain pass.

<sup>9</sup>T/E: In French: *L’attitude se rompt, on change de posture*. This narrative phrase or stage-direction device, translated variously as “the attitudes are dissolved” or “the circle is broken,” appears several times in Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse’s translation, “Philosophy in the Bedroom,” in *The Marquis de Sade: The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), to describe breaks in the sexual frolics (*ébats*) between Dolmancé, the Chevalier (Knight) de Mirval, Eugénie, *et al.*

the reduction of sessions to a few minutes, passing by way of the instauration of Little Master in Analysis for someone who is “neither an analysand nor an analyst” (27), and up to the latest one: claiming to adhere to Freud while awarding clinical psychoanalyst diplomas to persons who have never been analyzed.<sup>10</sup> Yet as is also known, even Sade’s

---

<sup>10</sup>See Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, Jean-Paul Valabrega, and Nathalie Zaltzman, “Une néoformation du lacanisme,” *Topique*, 18 (January 1977). Is it worth the trouble to recall that for Freud not only would an unanalyzed analyst have been inconceivable—“We...require that he (the analyst) shall begin his activity with a self-analysis and continually carry it deeper” (“The Future Prospects of Psychoanalytic Therapy” [1910], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [hereafter: *SE*], 11: 145)—but he rightly affirmed that only those who have had a personal experience of *analysis* can speak of it? That obviously does not prevent one from being able to speak very intelligently about Freud’s *books* or of other analytic writings. Yet *analysis* and *books* make two. In order to appreciate fully the value of the kind of “Freudianism” rampant in Vincennes and elsewhere, let us again quote Freud:

If knowledge about the unconscious were as important for the patient as people inexperienced in psychoanalysis imagine, listening to lectures or reading books would be enough to cure him. Such measures, however, have as much influence on the symptoms of nervous illness as a distribution of menu-cards in a time of famine has upon hunger. The analogy goes even further than its immediate application; for informing the patient of his unconscious regularly results in an intensification of the conflict in him and an exacerbation of his troubles (*SE* 11: 225).

And also: “It may be insisted that (the doctor) should have undergone a psychoanalytic purification. ... There can be no reasonable doubt about the disqualifying effects of such (personal) defects in the doctor” (*SE* 12: 116). [T/E: “Vincennes” refers here to the post-May 1968 “Experimental University Center at Vincennes” (later, the University of Paris-VIII), where the early Lacanian Serge Leclair created a Department of Psychoanalysis.]

imagination has its limits, and, as the paths leading its heroes toward death grow longer, boredom seizes hold of the reader. It would not be very interesting, and just as little entertaining, to try to foresee what might still be invented while the 120 Days of Lacanianism are being painfully drawn out. Perhaps Lacan will come to proclaim that psychoanalysis does not exist and that he is not a psychoanalyst while also doubling again the number of his “analysands.” One thing is certain: for many long years, Lacan has been malfeasant. Over the course of the last decade, he has in addition become—graver still, an aesthete would say—boring.

The moral of the story is clear. If one speaks, like Roustang, of abjection and contempt, those terms could not be reserved for the “disciples” while the “master” would be protected from them being applied to him. From the ethical standpoint, and also the political one, the polar positions in abjection and contempt are not symmetrical: he who reduces others to abjection or simply tolerates their being plunged into abjection is first and foremost obviously object: the first to be contemptible is he who is contemptuous. Yet from the psychoanalytic standpoint, there is indeed an essential “equivalence.” Taking pleasure in the abjection of another is impossible if “someone,” in he who takes such pleasure, does not take pleasure phantasmatically in being that other. The abjection practiced, provoked, and induced by Lacan is a gauge of how he lives his own life. Lacan’s proclaimed contempt for his “disciples” and his “audience” could not have any other psychical source but Lacan’s contempt for Lacan. To this perpetual narcissistic comedy necessarily correspond a basic insecurity and fragility.

Roustang quotes (81) the following lovely phrase by Victor Tausk: “Independent because nobody depends on me,

not a slave because I am not a master” (*ibid.*)<sup>11</sup> in order to qualify it immediately as an “illusory repudiation of all ties and of mastery” [T/E: translation slightly altered]. It matters little whether, *in Tausk’s case*, it would serve only to veil “a dependence...and enslavement” (*ibid.*). The implicit postulate of Roustang’s commentary shows that he is irremediably caught in the trap of the ideology of “mastery.” Not only is it absurd to identify the repudiation of all “mastery” with the rejection of any tie, but such an identification is precisely one of the master components of the ideology of power: You reject the King, the Emperor, the Führer, the General Secretary, the Scientific Director—*therefore*, you favor society’s destruction. In truth, it is quite the opposite: genuine ties can be instaurated only where and when the chains of “mastery” have been smashed.

To this Lacanian perversion of practice, the nonsessions called *short sessions*, must be added another one that, while not to be counted among his “Patented Without Government Guarantee” trademarks, has been pushed to the limit by this practice: mutism, analytic *alalia*, which would, given the deafness *necessarily* accompanying it, even better be called *cophalalia*. Perhaps because it is also practiced elsewhere, someone has finally dared to “theorize” it recently.<sup>12</sup> More and more one hears talk about an “analyst’s rule of silence.” For the analyst, there is a *task of interpretation*—which means *a work of speech*. That, for

---

<sup>11</sup>T/E: On page 17 of his Tausk biography, *Brother Animal: The Story of Freud and Tausk* (New Brunswick, NJ and London, UK: Transaction Publishers, 1969), Paul Roazen quotes this passage from a March 1, 1906 letter sent by Tausk to his wife, Martha.

<sup>12</sup>Octave Mannoni, “Le silence,” in *Psychanalyse et Politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974). [T/E: In pathology, *cophosis* means “total deafness.”]

countless reasons, the moments when this task can be accomplished *scienter*, wittingly, might be more or less rare, that they presuppose long periods of silent listening, that its accomplishment remains ever difficult—all that is *another* question.

That changes nothing about the fact that analysis is a shared work of the analyst and the analysand in which the part played by the former is most certainly not to be reduced to sleeping in his armchair. Without wakefulness to the task of interpretation—even if the accomplishment of that task has to, recurrently, be deferred—*there can be*, from the standpoint of psychoanalysis and of the psychical economy of the analyst, *no* genuine analytic listening. The transference is not some magical and autarchic vehicle for analytic truth; it is, among a thousand other things, that which allows the analyzable to come to light *for* its interpretation. Perpetual silence is but a maneuver for avoiding all responsibility as to the *outcome* of the analysis.

Take, then, the central, and in fact unique, variant of the Lacanian “standard cure.” The patient arrives, seats himself on the couch (if he is well advised, on a single cheek), speaks or keeps quiet for a few minutes, nothing is said to him, and he is dismissed. Can one call that *analysis*? Roustang speaks—keeps quiet—as if that posed no problem. But it does pose one—an enormous one. The perversion of the “master/disciple” relation goes hand in hand and together are of a piece with this way of practicing “analysis.” Roustang speaks as if an impenetrable wall separated “analysis” from what goes on *inside* the Lacanian school—and, *vice versa*, as if what goes on in that school in no way affected patients’ “analyses.” Both of these hypotheses are absurd. The Lacanian “analysts” have been trained in increasing proportion and today in the great majority of cases they are

trained in accordance with the modalities of this “cure.” If, at least, one remains Freudian on this point, how is one to think that they do not bear the indelible marks thereof? How could they analyze another without risking a repeat of the same “non-end” of analysis, without reproducing this same relationship of “mastery” and slavery? If, here again, one remains Freudian, one will be reminded that no analyst can help his patient go further than he himself had during his own analysis.<sup>13</sup> How, then, could the Lacanian School serve as a case study regarding the relations *among analysts*? Conversely, how can one evade the question of whether, in the special evolution and actual state of Lacanianism, *this* way of practicing the cure has not played a key role? How would the abjection of the “master/disciple” relation have a chance of being overcome [*dépassée*] without an analysis, as far-reaching as possible, of the transference—which is all the more imperative as the “analyst” is himself posing (or is positing his own “analyst”) as the “discoverer” of Freud—that is, more or less, of psychoanalysis itself? How would an analysis of the transference be possible in “sessions” lasting only a few minutes with a deaf-mute “analyst”? In reality: independent of all their other motivations, the modalities of the “cure” *à la* Lacan are *studied so that* the transference *could not* be analyzed. They belong to the series of devices that, within this School, function so that enslavement to the real character of Lacan would unremittingly be cemented, so that the sole possible “tie” remains that of “mastery”—namely, of domination and manipulation. No

---

<sup>13</sup>The analyst “who has scorned to take the precaution of being analyzed himself will not merely be punished by being incapable of learning more than a certain amount from his patients, he will risk a more serious danger and one which may become a danger to others” (*SE* 12: 117).

need to add that, under those conditions, any critical attitude toward the “theories” of Lacan becomes, in the great majority of cases, mentally and psychically impossible.<sup>14</sup>

Never having pronounced a word whose truth or error the analysand could put to the test using the sole example to which he has direct access—his own example—the analyst is maintained in a fictive position of infallibility—the vacuousness of which is covered back over by some pseudo-oracular writings that are all the more apt to fulfill that role as they are hermetic and as the disciples are incapable of countering their “algebraic” or “topological” bluffing with a critique, or even a counterbluff that would suffice to make them go up in smoke.<sup>15</sup> To what, then, could the strange

---

<sup>14</sup>The truth of the Lacanian School as a blend of the Proustian salon of Mme Verdurin and the tiny court surrounding an autocrat of a censorious regime becomes materialized in the “rumors” that there make and break “theoretical” fashions or express the latest alleged mood of the “master.” The story, lasting a fortnight, of the “reversibility of foreclosure” told by Roustang (31) is on a par with the finest evenings in the movie *Rose Rouge* right after the War: “He (Lacan) can say anything he likes, or its opposite, and it will immediately receive support. For two weeks there was a rumor circulating that foreclosure is reversible, the one who knows said so. Everyone believed it. Not long after, the well-informed sources spread the word that the rumor was a mistake. And everyone believed that: foreclosure is *not* reversible.” Too bad that Roustang does not specify what happened to the psychotics “treated” by the Lacanians during that two-week period and thereafter. [T/E: “Foreclosure,” *forclusion* in French, is Lacan’s disputed translation for certain uses of Freud’s German term *Verwerfung* (“repudiation” in *SE*.)]

<sup>15</sup>Aristotle and Hegel are difficult and often obscure. They are not hermetic. In the work of a great thinker, difficulty and obscurity result from the fact that thought is struggling with the thing, with language, and with itself in order to reach expression. By way of contrast, hermeticism is the painful and laborious trituration of expression in order for the latter

product of this strange “cure” cling, if not the blind certainty that the cophalalia of his analyst was covering up Absolute Knowledge? How could he ever saw off the branch from which he will henceforth hang his own armchair—and his being-an-analyst in his own eyes? How could he get beyond the infantile dependency into which he has really been plunged back by his “cure,” when his continued membership in the School is bought at the price of its maintenance?

As Pierre Bayle said, let us first be assured of the facts before going to seek out their causes. Let us not discuss the reasons that could make a gold tooth grow in a child’s mouth before we assure ourselves that there really is a gold tooth. One cannot examine the Lacanian School as an example (and, for Roustang, the example *princeps*) of an “analytic society” that would be said to demonstrate that such a society is impossible, except as a “society of madmen [*fous*]” (35), before asking oneself whether it really is a matter of an “analytic society.” One cannot discuss in the abstract the “master-teacher [*maître*]/pupil” relation and “mastery [*maîtrise*].” Mastery in what field? In astrophysics? It is a matter of psychoanalysis, and first of all of whether “master” and “disciples” have been trained in and through an analysis

---

to acquire the mere appearance of depth. This is imposture and the camouflaging of vacuousness. No great thinker has ever been hermetic: he has too much to do to waste his time on such ridiculously childish antics. In Lacan’s “formulae,” once one has the thing in hand, one finds only tautologies or open secrets. For example, “a signifier represents a subject for another signifier” [T/E: Jacques Lacan, “Position of the Unconscious,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 713] or “the sender...receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form” [T/E: Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” *ibid.*, p. 30], etc. Obviously, another function of hermeticism is to cut short, in advance, every demand for “explanations,” whether “hasty” or not, by making the potential questioner believe that he is simply stupid.

and whether it is really analysis that they are practicing.

Of course, even under such conditions the “cure” can have some “positive” effects. A first class of cases offers no interest for the present discussion: the “resolution” of certain symptoms can always take place by the very fact of the transference alone (and of suggestion, which, according to Freud, always plays a part therein); shamans and healers, too, could compile a nonnegligible record of successes from this standpoint. Another class is of greater interest. The whole population includes, at one end of the spectrum, a large proportion of unanalyzable individuals, and, at the other end, a much smaller proportion of individuals who would have gone through their analysis whoever the analyst and whatever the modalities of the cure might be. The examples of the first “disciples”—not to mention Freud’s self-analysis—show that that would be so: Who would claim that Karl Abraham or Sándor Ferenczi, for example, were really analyzed—and who would dare claim, whatever might have been their problems and “faults”—that they had not been analysts? Things are no different today, and one will easily find some examples, up to and including, certainly, among Lacan’s “disciples.” Still, one cannot forget that a good number of them were sooner or later led to break with Lacan and his School or to distance themselves—like Roustang himself. Yet it is also obvious that the question of analytic practice concerns neither the proportion of the population that is under all conditions unanalyzable nor the rare individuals who are capable of going quite far almost alone. It concerns the great majority of cases, where the outcome of the analysis depends decisively on the quality of the analyst and the modalities of the cure. And it is here that the responsibility of the analysts and of their societies is engaged.

Once again, one has never dared to theorize this

practice as such. The logical situation, however, is clear: ultimately, either practice is wholly unrelated to theory, which condemns them both, the former like some blindly indifferent something-or-other, the latter as nonpsychoanalytic, or else they are related and rejection of the former is the beginning, and an essential part, of the refutation of the latter. In fact, practice is closely tied to “theory,” both to what theory *says* and, especially, to what theory *hushes up*, excludes from its field, and renders unthinkable for he who accepts it.<sup>16</sup> In the case of Lacan’s “theory,” I have to restrict myself to underscoring a few key aspects. Positively speaking: if the true being of the subject is unbeing [*dès-être*], what does it matter if it might un-be thus or otherwise? If the “truth” is entirely on the side of the Unconscious and all “knowledge” merely a lure, what does the patient’s speech matter and how could that of the analyst be anything other than luring? If the person is in effect only a *persona* (mask) and, behind the *persona*, no one, that is to say, *outis*, is not the best way to lead the subject to the “truth” in effect to let him marinate to the point that he (?) might “understand” (!) that he can talk and tell himself any old rubbish and also keep quiet, everything boiling down to the same thing, that is to say, to a thin film of words or of silence that covers over nothing?<sup>17</sup> If

---

<sup>16</sup>No need to recall that in this case, too, as in all of them, the relationship of “theory” or, more exactly, of Lacanian ideology to practice is not a relationship of univocal determination. In their birth, their operation, and their mutual conditioning, multiple indeterminacies always remain in play.

<sup>17</sup>I have been emphasizing this aspect of Lacan’s sophistry, as well as a few other ones, since 1968: see “Epilegomena,” above, 21-23.

“a psychoanalyst authorizes himself only by himself,”<sup>18</sup> what might be the limits to what he could “authorize himself” to do?<sup>19</sup> If the countertransference is but “the set of resistances on the part of the analyst to the analysis,”<sup>20</sup> how could a “true” analyst (who, one assumes, would have overcome these “resistances”) ever cathect *this* singular cure, *that* singular subject *qua* analysand, seeing therein something other than one more exemplar of the combinatory of signifiers? What more could the number 765 teach than the number 567?

Negatively speaking: if representation and affect—which are not simply irreducible to the “signifier” but radically *heterogeneous* with respect to the latter—are systematically excluded from the field of “theory,” whereas they form the very being of the psychical at all levels, how would an analytic cure truly be possible? If—despite a few grand and empty phrases—genuine *time*, the time of emergence, of creation, of essential alteration/alterity, has no place in theory and *cannot* have any place therein; if the life of the subject is never anything but circular movement upon the single surface of a Möbius strip—the possible varieties thereof being fixed, once and for all, for all eternity and

---

<sup>18</sup>T/E: From Lacan’s “Proposition of 9 October on the Psychoanalyst of the School” (first published in French in *Scilicet*, 1 [1967]; tr. Russell Grigg, *Analysis*, 6).

<sup>19</sup>Things have changed since then. The analyst henceforth is authorized by a scrap of paper delivered by a university division.

<sup>20</sup>This phrase of Lacan’s takes psychoanalysis backward seventy-five years. Thus, too, at the outset, had the transference been seen only as an “obstacle” to analysis, a source of resistances. Yet it is *thanks to* resistances that the neurotic can be analyzed. [T/E: We have not been able to find an exact source for this quotation or paraphrase from Lacan.]

forever, by “structure”—in short, if history does not exist, neither as individual nor as collective-social, how could the cure itself be a segment of a genuine history in which the subject would succeed, with the cooperation of the analyst, in altering himself in an essential way? At best and at most, there is a single possible event in this repetitive circulation: the moment when the subject discovers “himself” (!) as this very circulation, and makes a “theory” of it. But there is nothing that would allow one to think the *possibility* of such a moment (on the contrary: it *ought to be* impossible) and nothing that would allow one to posit the *alterity* of theory and of thought in relation to psychical contents in general; in this way, Roustang is led to posit theory as “delirium of several” or to reduce almost to nothing the difference between phantasying/projection and theory. *A fortiori*, there is nothing that would allow one to think a *history* of theory and of thought (which Roustang will encounter as an unapproachable riddle in his text “On the Transmissibility of Psychoanalytic Theory”; see below). Psychoanalysis was created around 1900 and not among the Assyro-Babylonians: Why? Lacan is obliged to proclaim himself to be a psychoanalyst and not a shaman or necromancer: Why? To believe that one can erase those questions is as absurd as to believe that one could give to them once and for all a determinate answer; the absurdity consists in wanting to erase the history in and through which we *are*, which we make, and which makes us.

If the imaginary is flatly reduced to the “specular” (therefore to the mere “image of...” something preexisting, predetermined, and therefore also *determined*) and, hence, mixed up, in a lamentable confusion, with “lures” and

“illusions,”<sup>21</sup> then the subject definitively goes unrecognized as radical imagination, indeterminable, perpetual, unmasterable self-alteration, therefore also as subject of a possible self-alteration in and through this practico-poietic activity that is analysis. If the subject’s relationship to society is broken up into a relationship with some other little “real beings” that are never but some shaky points of support for the enactment of his own phantasying and his “structuring” submission to a “symbolic” system and to a “Law” whose status one never knows (“Law” never exists except as effectively actual law, a given social-historical institution—as language, which is something quite other than a “symbolic system,” never exists except as *this* language and *such and such* a language—and when confronted with this fact, the Lacanians shift immediately toward a “Law” that would never be any effectively actual law, but the mere transcendental requisite for a law in general), the subject cannot help but be sent back simultaneously to his solitude (the solitude of “no

---

<sup>21</sup>In order for such confusion to be possible, the heroes of “structure” had to fall back upon the most vulgar, “commonsense” sort of substantialism. From the physical, epistemological, and philosophical standpoint, no mirror—and no optical instrument—has ever produced “illusions” and “lures.” They produce regular transformations from one observable thing to another one, which are just as “real” as any other physical phenomenon. To discover that the image in the mirror is an “illusion” or a “lure” must have been the epistemological break of the Pithecanthropi. And if there are some “laws” of illusion, one can no longer truly speak of *illusion*—save, at the very most, *for those who are unaware of them*. As Lacan, allegedly, is “discovering” these laws, the “illusions” would be, *de jure*, dissipated and ontologically another variant of the real. In short: Henceforth, the imaginary does not exist—except for those who are unaware of Lacan’s theory. In fact, Lacan’s “imaginary” takes on its appearance of meaning only in reference and opposition to something real, which would be *what one can touch with one’s hands*.

one,” *outis*, let us recall) and to his passivity toward the “Law,” and also toward the “master.” If “love is to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it”<sup>22</sup> (a “projective” formula *par excellence*, copied from François de La Rochefoucauld, among whose offspring, much more than Freud’s, must be counted Lacan), an “end” of analysis can only bring about the dissipation of this illusion and make the subject recognize the stupidity of a certain bent on the part Freud who counted the capacity to love among the “ends” of analysis.<sup>23</sup>

No doubt about it: to the abjection and contempt that are marks of Lacanian practice there corresponds, in the “theory” and behind a few verbal screens, the unlimited reign of “concepts” that are rooted in hatred, death, repetition, and the inane combinatory of “structure”—in the enraged exclusion of everything that is opposed thereto and that makes of the singular subject, of the activity of thinking, and of human history something other than an absurd assemblage of machines that are not even speaking, but spoken, and that never “speak” except to say—or to allow them to see, despite themselves (?!)—that everything is always the same.

## II

How did one arrive at this point and why? That is a question that, even though it is not liable to a definitive answer, cannot not seize hold of us—all the more so as the Lacanian perversion has been preceded by the administrative

---

<sup>22</sup>T/E: Lacan, Seminar XII, March 17, 1965.

<sup>23</sup>For Freud, the “incapacity for loving” is an “essential factor” in neurosis, which he links to repression (*SE* 7: 267).

trivialization/conformation of analysis in the traditional “psychoanalytical societies,” and as that kind of analysis has been the condition for the birth, the existence, and the propagation of Lacanianism.

Roustang’s answer to this question, as I have already said, is ultimately quite simple: the Lacanian perversion (he barely speaks at all of the other kind) is rooted in psychoanalysis in and for itself; it is its “dire destiny.” At bottom, things proceeded no differently with Freud and his disciples. Through and at the end of a series of hesitations and contradictions, Roustang more or less explicitly states that a resolution of the transference *pros tēn chreian hikanōs* (sufficiently as to need/usage) is in fact impossible,<sup>24</sup> that “the psychoanalytic situation itself from the start is constitutive of

---

<sup>24</sup>I cannot dwell here on this point, of absolutely fundamental importance, to which I refer through the Aristotelian formula (*Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20), and whose coverup conditions a series of sophisms and paralogisms both in the field of psychoanalysis and in the field of *making/doing* in general. To put it in brief: The mirage of Absolute Knowledge, of a perfectly conscious Ego, of a total mastery is always there, and always determinative, in the affirmation as well as in the fierce denial of the possibility of lucid *making/doing*. Apropos of the “resolution of the transference”: if one takes it *haplōs*, absolutely, one could affirm that it is impossible, just like the “resolution of the Oedipus complex”—or the renunciation of the omnipotence of thought (and here I am not even speaking of the Unconscious: someone who would find it *impossible* to formulate explicitly for himself a thought or a wish involving omnipotence may be said to be seriously ill). The inference—*Therefore*, the transference is *never* and *to no essential degree* resolved—is a lamentable sophism. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for conscious/unconscious relations. In analysis, it is a matter neither of rendering the subject totally “transparent” to himself nor of instaurating a “mastery” of the Conscious over the Unconscious; it is a matter of instaurating *another relation* between these two terms. See the second chapter of *IIS*, in particular 75-77 and 101-107; “Epilegomena...,” above, 12-16.

the asociality of psychoanalysis” (26 [T/E: translation slightly altered and page reference corrected])—and undoubtedly also of an anhistoricity (except in the synchronic and diachronic form of the “mastery” relationship, that is, in the form of submission to a single person). In response to this there is, on the plane of theory, repetition and psittacism<sup>25</sup> (21-22)—or else a revolt that can be nothing more than a “deviation” and that, by definition, places the rebel outside the analytic field (34)—with the sole way out being that “each analyst might produce his own theory.”<sup>26</sup> Although Roustang offers a superficial response (57), the evident aporias of such a position barely seem to bother him.

All that retains an appearance of meaning only on the condition that one veil from oneself—and we have seen that that is what Roustang does—the problem of the *content* of the theory, that of the *content* of the practice, and, finally, that of

---

<sup>25</sup>That Lacan’s most comical spoken and written tics are servilely imitated by the Lacanians should have, were it not for the age we live in, long ago discredited them. Apart from its other connotations, such apishness is but a resumption of the “wooden language” imposed by the Stalinist and Maoist parties: every phrase that is not poured into a well-known mold, does not employ canonized vocabulary, does not reel off the rosary of adjectives that have to accompany this or that noun is, by definition, suspect. But what is the point in recalling all that, when Lacan’s “style” consists, half the time, in compulsively sticking in everywhere the turn of phrase employed by the proverb *A savonner la tête d’un âne l’on y perd que sa lessive* (He who washes an ass’s head merely wastes his soap).

<sup>26</sup>T/E: The two unattributed quotations in this sentence, “deviation” and “each analyst...,” do not seem to appear in Roustang’s book, and so are probably either loose paraphrases (Jung is said by Roustang [38] to “concoct his own theory”) or simply phrases Castoriadis wished to place within quotation marks to indicate that these are not his own ways of expressing himself. A typo for the Roustang pagination cited in the previous sentence has been corrected.

their *relationship* (the same would go, with the necessary transpositions, if it was a matter of discussing the trivialization of “official” psychoanalysis). This leads to an occultation of the decisive differences between the situation of Freud and Freudians, on the one hand, and that of Lacan and Lacanians, on the other.

Roustang does not ask himself to what extent Freud “did” what he did in this regard *despite* his theory, whereas what Lacan does is in deep agreement with his theory. Lacanian “theorization” corresponds to this type of “cure,” renders unthinkable the time as well as the end of the analysis, renders impossible the resolution of the transference, renders inconceivable a relationship, a tie that would be other than that of “mastery,” namely, of abjection and contempt. With Freud, the situation is something quite else than that. It would certainly be ridiculously superficial to impute the “transgressions” of Freud and of his disciples to personal accidents or foibles. It would also be insufficient to chalk them up to a period when psychoanalysis was being formed and when some experience about what is to be done and not to be done was being built up. And yet, were it impossible to build up such an experience—and it effectively should have been impossible were we engaged in repetition—it is unclear how Roustang could, *post mortem*, do over a fragment of Tausk’s psychoanalysis and say what Freud or Helene Deutsch *ought to have done* and did not do (80, 106). And neither would it serve a purpose to *say* it today: if Roustang says it, that is because the lesson seems to him to be usable, because, therefore, something can be modified—in terms, *too*, of some *historical* knowledge—within transferential/countertransferential relationships. Yet it would be just as superficial to disregard the fact that Freud was trying to think and to render thinkable what Lacan’s “theory”

and practice are trying to render unthinkable and impossible: an *end* of analysis, a relationship of the *conscious* subject with the truth, a society that would not be condemned to *endophagy*, an exit of humanity from its “infantile state,” a struggle against repetition, an effort to place destructive drives as far as possible into the service of Eros. It is thanks to Freud, to the creations of his thought, and to the exigencies that command it that Roustang can today pose and, up to a certain point, think the questions of the transference and its resolution, or of the relationship to the father, and it is to the extent that he remains caught up in Lacan’s theories that he does not succeed in thinking them all the way through.

Freudian discoveries and creations were carried out amid the deepest ambiguity in certain regards—and how could it have been otherwise? These discoveries and creations were also accompanied by the occultation of two key points: the psyche as radical imagination (which Freud sees *and* does not see in the activity of phantasying) and the social-historical dimension, society as instituting and not instituted once and for all. (Granted, this problem does not appertain exclusively to the analytic field, but analysis inexorably encounters it as the question of the socialization of the psyche, of the social fabrication of the individual, which begins at birth).<sup>27</sup> That does not prevent Freud from being constantly, even though silently, preoccupied with the problems to which those two points give rise—and not only from a “theoretical” perspective but also and especially from a practical one. Freud makes it possible to think *another* individual and social situation (even though he offered no recipes, thank heavens). From the Freudian perspective, an end of analysis is thinkable—an end that is neither emergence of naked “desire”

---

<sup>27</sup>See the second part of [IIS](#) and, in particular ch. 6.

nor recognition by a nonsubject of his nonbeing; it is even *formulable* in a general statement. Freud's repeated returns to this formulation indicate at once its unsurpassable exigency *and* the impossibility of wrapping it up a determinate statement. And all the formulations Freud offers of it deal, directly or indirectly, with the subject's relationship to *truth* and to *society*. Equally thinkable (and, for Freud, hoped for and wished for) is another type of relations among individuals. Roustang recalls (4, 52) that it is at the very moment when he broke with Carl Jung that Freud, *in, through, and for* this rupture, wrote *Totem and Taboo*. Yet he minimizes what is key: the myth of the murder of the father could never be related to society's foundation if it did not include the *oath of the brothers*, therefore also the renunciation by everyone alive of an effort to exert any real "mastery" and their commitment to form an alliance to combat anyone who would aspire thereto. A myth, certainly—and not so mythical as that. Of this decisive feature, one will find in Roustang only one fleeting mention (16). On this point, the perversion of Freud's thought and the ideological imposture are practically universal. The "murder of the father" is *nothing* and leads to *nothing* (except endless repetition of the preceding situation) without the "oath of the brothers": now, the oath of the brothers commits *you* to *eliminating* anyone who aspires to raise himself up to a position of real "mastery"—yes, you personally, Sir, you over there, and your profession as a psychoanalyst does not shield you therefrom; rather, the opposite. Whether it be of the "Right" or of the "Left," the ambient debility cannot mask the following fact: as author of *Totem and Taboo* (and not only thereby), Freud belongs to the democratic and *egalitarian*

tradition.<sup>28</sup> The *Totem and Taboo* myth is also and above all *political*; it aims at rendering thinkable, in psychoanalytic terms, the institution of society as a society *among equals*, this same society about which Freud said, in the same work, that it *is* reality.<sup>29</sup>

~

One must certainly be grateful to Roustang for his honesty, for his meticulousness, for the finesse with which he at length sheds light on Freud's relations with Abraham, Jung, Tausk, Georg Groddeck—and, more briefly, Ferenczi. He mentions, too, in passing, the scandal of the conspiracy of silence, of which Freud was undoubtedly the principal artisan, toward Melanie Klein, which it would be too easy to impute solely to Freud's "paternal" motivations regarding Anna: Klein's conceptions succeeded in being at once Freudian and *other* (which, according to Roustang, *ought* to be impossible). And one could not glide over the "pathological," not to say monstrous, aspects of those relationships. These skeletons have remained too long in the closets where the

---

<sup>28</sup>See "Epilegomena..." above, 45-56. I am speaking here of Freud's *thought*—as well as of what also, in his work, sustained the project of analytic activity. What one complacently presents as Freud's "pessimism" appertains much more to his *mood*. In any case, nothing exists in Freud's conception of psychoanalysis that might, by near or far, furnish the least support for the thesis that "mastery" and slavery would be eternal and unsurpassable.

<sup>29</sup>In leaving aside the demonological distinctions between "real" and "reality," Lacan and the Lacanians are telling the truth when they say that the real (that is to say, the social) is the impossible. They merely forget to add: for them.

“respectuosity” of his epigones had locked them up. Bringing them out certainly does not suffice to prevent new murders from taking place, but it can help to render those murders more difficult.

No way can one forgo an extended stay close to these “examples” or “cases.” And no way to escape, when one meditates on them, the bitter, unavoidable, and interminable question to which our general social experience elsewhere constantly sends us back: *What’s the use, then, of knowing?* It is not only as if, in the early days of analysis, knowing was of almost no use in the relationships between Freud and his disciples. Quite the contrary: it is as if this newly-won knowledge served some use—sometimes “unconsciously,” sometimes “consciously”; it is as if it was in the service of aggression and murder (metaphorical murder—but, in Tausk’s case, physical, too, even if it was committed by omission, and even if one cannot rob Tausk of his suicide).<sup>30</sup> Freud’s *Correspondence* shows him utilizing wild “interpretations” *for others* with no holds barred, while being virtually blind about his own behavior. As when witnessing any tragedy, let us first be imbued by the *tua res agitur*.

The problem is not lightened, but on the contrary made heavier if one mentions the examples, heading in the opposite direction and which are apparently comforting, of other great founders who have behaved quite differently. We are unfamiliar with the “private” correspondence between Plato and Aristotle—but it is difficult to think that it would offer any similar specimens. We do know of the correspondence of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and

---

<sup>30</sup>Already, seven years earlier (in 1911), Freud wrote to Jung, apropos of Johann Jakob Honegger’s suicide, “I think we wear out quite a few men” (89). That was of no avail in Tausk’s case.

Hegel. Neither such aberrations nor such blindness will be found therein. Should it be thought that philosophy increases, and psychoanalysis diminishes, the chances of being lucid about oneself and of recognizing the other? Let us not push aside too quickly that thought, which is salubrious inasmuch as it helps us to remain sober. Also and especially, let us not do so because it shows us that the specificity of the psychoanalytic relationship must not be diluted within the generality of the master/disciple relationship.

Relationships within the “savage horde,” within the initial little Freudian clan, are not comprehensible by starting from an alleged impossibility inherent to the master-teacher/pupil situation; the “tragicomic” (83) aim of Freud—“wishing to have either independent disciples or faithful first followers”—is not necessarily that of a creative mind toward those who surround him. Socrates did not stifle Plato, who did not reduce Aristotle to a choice between repetition and silence. Fichte did not drive Schelling to suicide, and Schelling did nothing to prevent Hegel from distancing himself.<sup>31</sup> What Roustang (84) presents as a necessity of the master-teacher/pupil relationship—the longshot bet made when the latter has to “think his own thoughts through the thoughts of the master, or else speak for himself while strictly matching his words to those of the master” and has “the right to speak only in order to utter stupidities, stupidities that would be castigated and then picked up by the master” (*ibid.* [T/E: translation slightly altered])—is an excellent description of Lacan’s relationship

---

<sup>31</sup>Granted, some “masters” tolerate only servile “disciples”; there have been, there are, and there will perhaps always be some people like that. But they were not claiming to have unveiled the unconscious wellsprings of their own behavior.

with his “pupils”; it has no general validity, and is much less valid in the case of Freud and of his disciples. Did Abraham or Ferenczi have a right to speak only to say some stupid things? Was Melanie Klein reduced to silence by the disapproving silence of the master?

Nevertheless, the problem remains *specific* to the psychoanalytic field, and it is this specificity that is to be grasped. It is a specificity that is dissolved by Roustang into the generality of the “master/disciple” relationship, so that one asks oneself how a history of human thought has been possible. For the disciple, says Roustang, even if he “has been able, during his analysis, to analyze his transference onto his analyst or onto his analyst’s analyst,” it is necessary, “in order to gain access to the inner sanctum,” to

seal one’s lips and become the devotee of a magisterial discourse. This is not necessarily done through ambition, but in order to protect oneself from the void that would be produced by theoretical production without preexisting control, that is, production not restricted to the defense and illustration of the theory already in circulation (84).

Were that so, there would have been neither science, philosophy nor thought in any domain: we would still be repeating Thales and concealing millions of intervening suicides. For, in explicitly presupposing here that the transference could be “analyzed,” Roustang is officially putting the “disciple” analyst in the position of just any disciple in just any discipline. Now, the idea that the disciple in general is reduced to the choice between being-mute and being-a-parrot (a choice that ultimately is not one, the most talkative parrot being basically mute, as the Lacanian parrots are illustrating yet again, after the Stalinist and Maoist

parrots; the alignment of “signifiers” is obviously not speech, wooden language is not a language) is an idea that is demolished by all historical experience.

It is truly impossible to enumerate the paralogisms in the phrase quoted above. Absurd is the idea that “theoretical production without preexisting (!) control” would engender “the void.” Absurd is the tacit identification of such “preexisting control” with the erection of the sayings of a flesh-and-blood individual into a norm of the true and the false. The bearings that all theoretical “production”—or, better, creation—is seeking—in order to get oriented as well as, in the important cases, in order to *shake them up* and *alter them*—have been found by such “production,” since the invention of writing, in the *corpus* of the *texts* of what has already been thought or theorized, that is, in the *history* of thought, which goes infinitely beyond any living or dead *person*. This *corpus* is already quite considerable in the case of psychoanalysis today (though it was no more than a few writings by Freud in Abraham’s time, for example)—not to forget that, vertically as well as laterally, psychoanalysis is inseparable from the history of Greco-Western thought. Absurd, finally, is the identification of some “theoretical production” *with* “preexisting control” for the “defense and illustration of the theory already in circulation”: is the oeuvre of Descartes, of Kant, or of Hegel a “defense and illustration” of preceding philosophy? Yet Roustang’s phrase becomes clear when one notes the heavy tribute he pays to contemporary pseudo-“Marxist” ideology through his inattentive use of the term *production*: indeed, it is not a matter of theoretical creation, of the labor of thought here, but of industrial production, that is, *repetition*, the mechanical activity of workers on the production or assembly line. In *this* meaning of the term *production*, the Lacanians do indeed “produce” Lacanian “theory.”

As for the specificity of the master/disciple relationship, let us leave aside being introduced into “the inner sanctum.” What really matters to us are not the situational similarities between the future analyst and the candidate for admission into Freemasonry or the Stalinist party, but the differences. Those differences are rooted in the problem Roustang blithely assumes has been overcome: that of the resolution of the transference *and* of the countertransference in an analysis called (or tacitly presumed to be) *didactic*. And this resolution is, in this case, so difficult because it is the effect of the peculiarities of psychoanalysis as at once “theory” and “practice”—that is to say, as practico-poietic activity, indissociable from philosophical interrogation and philosophical reflection.<sup>32</sup> These peculiarities manifest themselves with incalculable power in the positions of subject/future analyst *and* of his analyst. To be brief: What *assures*, what *could* ever assure each of them in their respective positions, in their roles, in their strange relationship to this strange “discipline” that is psychoanalysis? Basically, *nothing*.

The problem under discussion is not to be reduced, indeed, to that of the resolution of the transference *in general*. The transference exists for *every* analysis: it has never been said that it is insurmountable. Experience amply shows that it can be resolved “sufficiently as to need/usage” in “therapeutic” analyses. And despite the exorbitant power the transference situation accords the analyst, and the means his knowledge gives him to abuse it, abuses are relatively rare. Things proceed quite differently in the so-called or presumed *didactic* analysis. Here, everything seems to have been set in place for the “pupil” and the “master-teacher” to fall headlong

---

<sup>32</sup>See “Epilegomena...,” above, *passim*.

into the “mastery” trap.

There are two reasons for that. The first was brought to light long ago, so I will be brief.<sup>33</sup> It relates to the very institution of a “didactic” analysis and to the antinomy these two terms imply. Whatever precautions are taken verbally, everything happens as if the subject was receiving *in advance* an affirmative response regarding the end, and *this* specific end of his analysis, as if he found himself vested by his analyst with the near certainty that he *will be* an analyst; as if he were encountering, before the analysis begins, a *real* guarantee both of a positive response to his demand to be an analyst *and* of his *real* future role. For his part, the “didactic analyst,” however little he may have said and almost whatever he may have said, is playing along, on account of the mere fact of his existence and of his title as “didactic analyst.”

The phantasmatic ties of the transference/countertransference thus end up reduplicated in real chains; a phage resistant to attack, a solid, almost unanalyzable element has snuck into the cell of the analytic relationship. The analysand can place his analyst in all positions save one: that he is perhaps a bad analyst, that what he is doing with the analysand is not a good analysis, that

---

<sup>33</sup>See, on the whole question of “teaching [*didactique*]” and “training [*formation*],” the texts published in the first two issues of *Topique* (October 1969 and February 1970), and in particular Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier’s “Sociétés de psychanalyse et psychanalyste de société”; Jean-Paul Valabrega, “Les voies de la formation psychanalytique”; François Perrier, “Sur la psychanalyse didactique”; and Nathalie Perrier, “Histoire critique des institutions psychanalytiques.” See also Valabrega’s “Le fondement théorique de l’analyse quatrième,” in *Topique*, 19 (1977). [T/E: Since the distinction between *analyse didactique* and *analyse de formation* exists in French and is mentioned above, we make the distinction in the English translation; normally, both are simply called *training analysis* in English.]

what the analysand is “learning” is not analysis, that therefore the analysand himself will not in turn become an analyst. For his part, the didactic analyst will face the greatest difficulties in going back on his word—and if he does so, he risks placing himself in the position of *real* persecutor; whether, while knowing that, he does not do so or, although knowing that, he does so, he will in any case be doing harm and the analysis itself will almost irreparably be compromised. Both are bound together, and there is little chance of their tie ever being able to be dissolved. The transference/countertransference has been transformed into mutual identificatory reassurance. The being-a-good-analyst of the trainee [*didactisé*] now hangs on the didactic analyst’s indisputable being-a-good-analyst (therefore, too, a good theorist); the being-an-analyst of the didactic analyst hangs on that of the cohort of his trainees. Hereditary transmission of such ties is more than likely.<sup>34</sup>

The second reason is much more fundamental: it would remain even if the “didactic analysis” and the usage of this term were proscribed under penalty of death. Psychoanalysis is not a “science” and not even, properly speaking, a “theory.” And psychoanalytic technique *is not* a technique in the accepted meaning of the term. The analyst is constantly held fast by the exigency of *thinking* and *doing* while faced with an endless riddle (an enigma squared, when it appears as repetition), which he has to elucidate *in concreto* through a series of “theoretical” constructions that are ever fragmentary, essentially incomplete, and never rigorously “provable.” There is a radical difference with respect to the position of the scientist: a scientific statement is verifiable

---

<sup>34</sup>Not only is nothing in this situation changed by the preliminary “visits” or “approvals” required by certain institutions but they are aggravated by a preliminary and totally extra-analytic confirmation: *dignus est intrare*.

and communicatable;<sup>35</sup> if the “master” has made a mistake or cheated with an experiment or a proof, I can repeat the experiment and demonstrate that the proof was erroneous. There is a radical difference with respect to philosophy. Granted, as a philosopher I am concerned *de jure* with the totality of the thinkable, and what I will say is not rigorously “provable,” either. Yet nothing obliges me to close my investigation, to conclude, if I am not satisfied; nothing takes hold of me as an exigency to *make do with* [faire avec] another person who *is there before me*; above all, nothing obliges me to think everything at every instant. I choose the theme of my work, I set its boundaries, and I show that I know them to be arbitrary and permeable by adding footnotes or phrases like “I hope to be able to return to this elsewhere.” Yet at the end of a day of work, a sleepless analyst is assailed by all the problems the psychical field poses, always within the context of such questions as: What to think of that? What to do about that? What is to be done?—and always in the *urgency* of a here-now.<sup>36</sup> It is an almost unbearable task to

---

<sup>35</sup>See “Epilegomena...,” above, 4-10.

<sup>36</sup>We are not talking here about any sort of “therapeutic” urgency but of the *continuity of the exigency* with which the analyst finds himself faced. The word *urgency* will shock only those who forget that *keeping quiet is still doing something* and mask the fact that during a session in which the analyst has remained silent from beginning to end, he has, *de jure*, made 2,700 times the renewed *decision* to say nothing (if he does not know that, that makes his case even worse). Whence the enormous convenience of relieving oneself of responsibility for those decisions and of settling into intellectual (and total) laziness, by inventing a “rule of silence”: The decision to keep quiet was made once and for all, *and by others*, that’s what analysis is, I’ve got nothing to do with it. That the weight of this decision may in fact be lightened considerably by the essential necessities of the analytic process changes nothing in the situation on the level of principle. It would be *strictly wrong* to say that for the analyst silence

have to *think* the dizzying deployment of unmasterable psychical material, wherein each time the singular sustains an indefinite number of relationships with the “universal”—save that of the simple instantiation of the universal. *No* dream is fully analyzable—even *de jure*;<sup>37</sup> and partial analysis of a single dream may take up a number of sessions, during which other dreams, materials, and events may arise. (Also, on account of laziness, the analysis of dreams is being practiced less and less.) Why does this or that dream come *exactly* on this or that day, and why *exactly* during such and such a phase of the analysis? Why has this or that “image” been chosen over an indefinite number of other possible ones to “represent” this or that thought in a dream—and why, another time, is it another “image”? Why do certain symptoms disappear without them having been analyzed (to the point that sometimes one learns of their existence *after* their disappearance), and others come back after a resolution that is apparently due to an interpretation? Why does the patient’s silence last sometimes three minutes, sometimes three weeks, and sometimes three months? Contemporary physics has recently, and once again, been shaken by the discovery of “particles” that, instead of having a life span of  $10^{-23}$  seconds, have a “very long” one, of  $10^{-20}$  seconds. To say that psychoanalysis differs  $10^{23}$  orders of magnitude from all “science” would still be to underestimate this difference

---

would be self-evident (or that there is an absolute prohibition to speak) *even* while the subject is uncoiling a chain of associations or relating a dream (for example: if he makes a slip, should that be pointed out, and *when*?)

<sup>37</sup>See “Epilegomena...,” above, 32-33, and ch. 6 of [IIS](#), in particular 278-81. See Freud, “The Handling of Dream-Interpretation in Psycho-Analysis,” in *SE* 12: 91-96.

transfinitely.

To these kinds of questions, and to an indefinite number of other, analogous ones, which should be arising in the mind of the analyst each instant of his day, he is in a position to give a *beginning*, a *snippet* of an answer, if we are being optimistic, only one time in twenty. And all that without mentioning the abyssal domain of “theorization” properly speaking, that is, metapsychology. A large part of the labor of analysis, and no doubt its most important part, is, remains, and has to remain subterranean, is not made explicit, and ultimately is not *capable of being made explicit*. The patient’s psychism is a black box, of which one observes, more than lacunarily, a few inputs and a few outputs. One could, in one’s practice, dispense with the box’s “internal mechanisms” if regular connections existed between the inputs and the outputs. Now, the very idea of such regular connections is doubly absurd. From the “epistemological” and “positive” standpoint, it may be said that inputs and outputs are never identical, neither between subjects nor even for the same subject, and are never observable “all other things being equal.” From the standpoint of the thing itself, it may be said that the psyche is radical imagination, and, as such, essentially indetermination. *Indetermination* does not mean *chaos*, the *absolutely unknowable*, an *ineffable singularity*. The “universal” is present there in multiple forms, the knowable too, almost everything can be said. Yet the new, creation, self-alteration always burst in. Among most analysts, the function of “theory” is to deafen them to this something new, this emergence, the singularity of the subject. The indispensable theoretical hypotheses the analyst puts forth—without them, the analyst would not be able to think anything at all—about the postulated “internal mechanisms” of the black box regularly become ossified into “theoretical” systems, which preserve one from the anxiety of having to think alterity, and

ultimately take on the ridiculous form of the explanations Molière's character furnished for the "dormitive virtues": "His resistances have increased," "There were some displacements of libidinal energy," and so on. The phrase "Time is working on my side"—which is certainly deeply ambiguous, and not without some truth, though so often with it patients also rationalize their resistance or express their "inertia" (*Trägheit*, Freud often says)—is also an appeal to inertia, resistance, and laziness of mind on the part of the analyst—for want of being the prelude to these other unanswered questions: And *how then* is time "working? *What* time is "working? What is time in general and the time of analysis in particular?

This paradoxical and untenable situation is also a *site-less "situation,"* if I may dare use such an expression—this is what I previously called the *atopia* of Freudian discourse<sup>38</sup>—within the present institution of society and when faced with the rationalistic and scientistic ideology that is an essential dimension thereof. Explain, prove, justify "rationally" and "scientifically" what you are saying and what you are doing—here we have the exigency contemporary culture and contemporary reality are constantly addressing to all and that the analysts ultimately "internalize." (Thereby, one more time, the social takes its revenge for having been ignored. To paraphrase a quip attributed to Freud, the analysts ignore the social but the social does not ignore them.) And the response to this exigency comes in the form of the positivist and scientistic deviations of psychoanalysis (already to be found in Freud himself) as well as in that of the smokescreens

---

<sup>38</sup>"Epilegomena..." above, 45-46.

of “structure” and the “matheme.”<sup>39</sup>

Nothing, I said, provides any assurance for the analyst in the performance of his strange role. For many long years, and perhaps forever, the sole “assurance” for the novice analyst is the course and outcome of his own analysis; that is, the *certainty*<sup>40</sup> that he has himself done a “good” or “true” analysis; that is, that his analyst is a “good” or “true” analyst; that is, an analyst with “*certain*” ideas and a “*certain*” practice; that is, finally, an analyst whose conceptions (or those of the grand-analyst or the great grand-analyst, etc.) could not be challenged. While apparently laughable, the reasoning becomes indisputable if one goes all the way back, that is to say, to Adam, that is to say, to Freud. Who could call himself a psychoanalyst if Freud had not seen the truth and known how to transmit it? Who could maintain simultaneously the following two statements: Freud was

---

<sup>39</sup>Granted, there also exists a diametrically opposed way of responding to the question—and there has been no lack of representatives: empathy, insight, analytic flair, and so on, terms that correspond to something decisive in the analyst but that remain mere words if what they cover is not elucidated as far as possible. As for what was, a short while ago, the tired cliché of many Lacanians—which may be summarized pretty much as follows: The analyst knows nothing; the analysand knows everything (without knowing it)—is an expression of total confusion (even after analysis, the analysand continues to know at once more and less than his analyst *and* he does not “know” in the same way and from the same perspective), and, above all, it merely displaces the site of total knowledge, from the analyst toward the analysand.

<sup>40</sup>Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier has used this term systematically, contrasting it with *knowing*. See, in particular, “À propos de la réalité: savoir ou certitude,” *Topique*, 13 (May 1974): 5-22. Freud spoke of the analysand’s “belief” in our “explanations” [T/E: *SE* 16: 445]—and it is clear that so long as this “belief” remains the key prop for his acceptance of interpretations, the analysis is far from over. See also Roustang, 18-19.

essentially mistaken about his theory and his practice; *and*: I am a psychoanalyst?

~

Granted, there is the *corpus* of the texts. Here we have another paradox: their existence only aggravates the situation—for those people who, it is assumed, are in a situation where nothing has taught them what *thinking* means, what *reading* a great text of thought means. Truly reading Freud is not easier than truly reading Aristotle. Just as ridiculous are the ideas that there could be a “Handbook of Theoretical Psychoanalysis” and a “Manual of Psychoanalytic Technique” (and the extant specimens are proof positive). Freud’s writings are enigmatic when one looks closely at each one of them in isolation and incomparably more so when they are taken all together. And they are contradictory—from the most superficial sense up to and including the deepest, the most unyielding sense of the term—and not even frankly contradictory so that one might clearly opt for Thesis A and against Thesis not-A. He lays out two topologies, which are neither squarely incompatible nor truly reconcilable. Narcissism is introduced, attenuated, eclipsed, and then it reappears on a massive scale (in the *Outline*). Sometimes (though this is occulted in the works of contemporary commentators), there is the overriding exigency to postulate a “unity”; sometimes, and more frequently, a “duality”—yet the terms for these are constantly being displaced. There is the mystery of the “pleasure principle,” and its attenuation, which does not really occur. The “economic point of view” faces ruin (in “The Economic Problem of Masochism”) and yet it remains ineliminable. And so on and so forth. And the situation becomes more complex still, if one wishes to take

into account the fact that some nontrivial contributions are made in the post-Freudian literature. As for “technique,” the term, a fantastic abuse of language, already contains in embryo all possible corruptions of analytic practice. A technique is a practically complete code of *positive* prescriptions about what is to be done and not to be done to ensure that a limited, delimited, definite, and determinate result obtains with a probability tending toward 1. Such a thing does not exist and will never exist in psychoanalysis. The so-called *technical* texts do not contain and *cannot* contain anything *certain* about the concrete practice of analysis—except for a few negative instructions and a few inspired principles; their transformation into positive prescriptions ends in unusable platitudes or in inanities.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Such statements as “Analyze resistances before material” or “Analyze everything in the transference” are, strictly speaking, *devoid of meaning*, except inasmuch as they signify: Don’t forget the analysis of resistances; don’t forget the analysis of the transference. Likewise, dream interpretation obviously requires that the maximum amount (?) of associative material first be provided. But where is the (non-deaf-mute) analyst who has not happened to formulate and communicate an interpretive remark *before* this “maximum” (??) comes out—a remark that has *allowed* a mass of new material to come to light?

I stated above in what sense one *cannot* speak of psychoanalytic “technique.” One must not confuse with some sort of “technique” the rules that govern the *arrangements* of the analytic process (no acting, fees, session length, etc.). The “rules” commonly called, by an abuse of language, *techniques* should be called *maxims for doing*, changing the meaning Kant gave to this term (*Critique of Practical Reason*, book 1, ch. 1, §1). These are general statements, but ones whose application remains by essence unspicifiable. For example, the application of the obvious *maxim*, “Don’t communicate an interpretation before the subject is ready to hear it” (Freud says: *on the point of discovering it himself*) *cannot* be given any specificity either via some temporal benchmarks or on the basis of some definite signs.

Confronted with this fundamental situation—lack of theoretical assurance, lack of practical assurance—and faced with the perpetual exigency of thinking and doing in a culture that aims at (and almost succeeds in) sundering everything between the algorithm and the ineffable, between the pure “machine” and pure “desire,” exiling and rendering unthinkable the essential features of what is and what really matters to us, the psychoanalyst—whether he be “master” or “disciple”—is almost inevitably led to append to himself one or the other of the following two prostheses: the prosthesis of the codified dogma and of the administration of the transmission of analysis by a bureaucratized institution; the prosthesis of the “mastery” relationship and of the power of a single person. The two systems are complementary and of a piece; they function together, each justifying itself through the denunciation of the other and both through the misappropriation [*détournement*] of psychoanalysis. Lacanian pseudo-“subversion” would not have much to subvert without the official institutions, whose routines and dogmatism are reinforced by the abjection of Lacanianism.

The function of the “mastery” relationship thenceforth becomes clear. Each time his practice would threaten to shake him up by sending him back to one of the innumerable riddles of the psyche, the “disciple” reassures himself not only by recalling the investiture received from the “master” but also and especially by believing that there exists somewhere someone who, himself, “knows” or “would know” and who, if not next Wednesday, then one of the following Wednesdays, will provide the answer to the question assailing him. (And certainly, too, as supreme gimmick, the “master,” while speaking interminably, has *also said* one day or written somewhere that, at bottom, there is nothing to know: therefore, also nothing to *say* that *might mean* something. The sophisticated lock on the system is just about complete.)

As for the “master-teacher,” the situation is symmetrical: the less he is certain of his position as theorist and as practitioner, the more he has to increase the number of his “pupils” (and even mere “patients,” while regularly transforming, moreover, those patients into “pupils”) and the more he has to assure himself of their “faithfulness” when put to any test, even to the test of abjection and contempt. The more Lacan is uncertain about what he recounts, the more the “Seminar” has to be filled up and the listeners taunted. The illusion in which the “master-teacher” traps himself can be formulated pretty much as follows: If they unflinchingly agree to be treated like imbeciles, that really goes to show that I am in addition bringing them something. Indeed, he is bringing them the illusion that they are witnesses to the deployment of a “theory” that would hold the “answer” to the questions they are posing to themselves. If, as Roustang says, theory is the delirium of several, the more people are madmen who have gone off on the same delirium, the more one believes that one is tipping delirium to the side of “theory.”

But what is at issue here is not necessarily madness. At issue is the inability to assume the position of analyst. Contrary to what Roustang says, one “does not become a pupil” (or, of course too, a “master-teacher”) “in order not to go mad.” One becomes “pupil” and “master-teacher” in order not to have to assume the situation of analyst. Let us cut this short: One becomes “pupil” and “master-teacher” *in order not to be an analyst, and because one cannot be one.*

Here, too, certainly, it would be the mark of a lazy mind to remain at the monstrous excrescences of the contemporary world and hide what, in the very situation of psychoanalysis, is tending to reproduce the seeds thereof—we have just spoken of them at length—but also what was already present in the relationships between Freud and his disciples. And here again, one must be grateful to Roustang

for having harshly cast light on those relationships. Yet the lighting is highly colored, the interpretation irremediably warped by the will to discover therein at all costs analysis's "dire destiny."

It is warped first by forgetting about the *incomparableness* between the situation of Freud and his disciples and *every* subsequent situation. There is the unique and unrepeatable position of Freud as founder, as central, ordinary person in the *instituting* movement of psychoanalysis. The "I am founding" phrase was pronounced in this domain once and for all, and it was so, as is always the case in authentic foundations, without needing to be done so explicitly—which renders repetitions thereof pretentious and ridiculous camouflage for a nonfoundation. Since the time of Greece, no one else (not even Marx) has thus founded something in near-absolute novation (Galileo continued something that had been underway for a long time). And no one else will any longer be able to found something in this way in the psychoanalytic field; if one wants, at all cost, to "found" something, go seek to create in *another* field. That does not keep there from being, in psychoanalysis, some creations that verge on being just as rich and as important as Freud's—any more than the foundation of philosophy twenty-five centuries ago did not prevent and still does not prevent some creative and original philosophers from existing.

It is within this unique and unrepeatable relationship that Freud and his companions found themselves placed; not simply that of "master" and "disciples" but of *founder* to those who draw the definition and consistency of their being from what the former had founded. This relationship—which had almost inhumanly encumbered the situation on both sides—will *never* exist again. Since then, there is a *history* of psychoanalysis; it is within that history that we live, and the question is posed in wholly other terms. In 1905,

psychoanalysis was indeed the thing, the affair, *die Sache* of Freud—and separating it from his personality was nearly impossible. For a long time now, it is the affair of all those who can make and create something within it.

Nevertheless, despite its radical novelty, this institution had not taken place within a vacuum. Freud himself connected himself and *wanted* to connect himself to the entire tradition of “science” and, more generally, of Greco-Western thought. And within the setting of this kind of thought, the problem of the relationship of a “master” to his “disciples,” far from being new, had been posed, often resolved, and resolved all the better, the greater the “master.” There have always been and there are still some sterile fake “masters” who need to keep their “disciples” at all cost in a state of blind loyalty. And from that standpoint, it is instructive to look closely at the “tumbles,” not so much of “disciples” (for whom a relationship of equality with the founder was impossible and for whom “appropriating” psychoanalysis for themselves was still “appropriating” for themselves what was *Freud’s* affair), but of the founder himself. Such “tumbles” show him not only and not so much in his “personal foibles” (which do not teach a great deal, except to those who believe in the existence of flawless “masters”) but in his difficult relationship with the very thing he had created.

Let us consider two examples. Roustang (81) quotes Lou Andreas-Salomé, who “perfectly described the Freud-Tausk relationship in the context of what she calls the ‘school’”:

it is also clear that any independence around Freud, especially when it is marked by aggression and display of temperament, worries him and wounds him quite automatically in his noble egoism as

investigator, *forcing him to hasty explanations*, and so forth (emphasis added [T/E: translation slightly altered]).<sup>42</sup>

Lou undoubtedly knew what she was talking about. But who then can ever be “forc[ed] to hasty explanations”? Only the person who does not know how to say, “I don’t know.” Only the person who has suddenly “forgotten” what he moreover knows, namely, the nonpolemical version of the Socratic adage, *touto oida, hoti polla ouk oida*—this at least I know, that there are many things I do not know—which is the principle for all labor of thought and for Greco-Western science. Why is it forgotten? It is difficult to think that had Freud continued his work in biology and medicine he would have felt “forc[ed] to hasty explanations” when some student posed him an “importunate” question. Roustang does not linger over this paradox: Freud knew perfectly well how to say “I don’t know” *when he was writing*. It was more difficult for him to say it out loud when faced with an “independen[t]” mind, present “around [him].” Why? When he writes, he remains—as we all remain, when we write—a master of ignorance: it is still he who decides to bring in some question and say that it has to remain for the moment unanswered; he who discovers and articulates a problem where common sense (or scientists who “are not curious”)<sup>43</sup> sees none. Owner and master of his field, he shows and tests out its fertility and its uniqueness while bringing out significant, pertinent questions that could not have grown up elsewhere. His thought has the

---

<sup>42</sup>T/E: Lou Andreas-Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, tr. Stanley A. Leavy (New York: Basic Books, 1964), p. 97.

<sup>43</sup>T/E: Freud is quoting here a phrase from Anatole France, which, in *SE* 4: 93 appears in the original French: “*les savants ne sont pas curieux.*”

potential to create or to unveil a new problem (something much more difficult than furnishing one or several “answers” to problems already posed). Yet Tausk—and others—pose to him, out loud or by letter, some *questions* that disturb him because he had not posed them to himself; by articulating authentic problems they show him that on this field can grow some grasses whose existence he had not suspected. In order to prove that his field remains his affair, he pretends to do some quick weeding, eliminating or closing off the question with some “hasty explanations” and telling them, in a pinch: The difficultness of the answer stems from the fact that you have ill posed the problem; you will see the correct way of articulating it as well as the solution in my next text.<sup>44</sup>

Is that simply a “desire for mastery”? Certainly not. Freud had to assure himself of what he had created—which he never ceased to think of as a “science,” with “science” understood in the accepted sense of his time (which, moreover, has not changed that much).<sup>45</sup> Now, he knows without knowing it, all the while knowing that his field is made of shifting sands or, to change the metaphor, that it is a minefield. He would at least like to believe that he knows the location of the mines, to draw a line around the perimeter of the spot, to dig them up even if he does not know for the moment how to disarm them. Yet others arrive to show him that his terrain is mined where he does not suspect it. The phrase “forc[ed] to hasty explanations” boils down to saying:

---

<sup>44</sup>“Likewise, when Abraham used the theory of stages to gain a better understanding of melancholy. Freud, far from being uneasy, lightheartedly explained to Abraham that he had been right to do so, but that he had still missed the true explanation of the disorder” (Roustang, 90-91).

<sup>45</sup>See “Epiliegomena...” and “Modern Science...,” *passim*, both in this volume.

Not only had I already dug up this mine, I was in the process of disarming it and it would already have been done had you not made me lose my time with your importunate and ill-posed questions. The brilliant confirmation of this is provided by a borderline case: the *denial* pure and simple of the existence of a *new* question. I am referring to the astounding moment when he discussed schizophrenia with Jung. Briefly speaking: Freud had long *challenged* whether dementia praecox or schizophrenia existed; the latter *had to* be either hysteria or paranoia: “It [dementia] is the same thing, you know, though I am accustomed to speak of paranoia. ...Incidentally, it seems quite possible that a true, correctly diagnosed case of hysteria or obsessional neurosis should take a turn toward dementia or paranoia after a certain time” (Roustang, 42).<sup>46</sup> Freud, who made light in the same letter (no. 20 of the *Freud-Jung Letters*) of “a true psychiatrist [who] mustn’t see anything that is not in Kraepelin,” cannot himself see (at age 52) what is not already in Freud. He reacts as if schizophrenia had been completely fabricated from scratch by the Zurichers to set an engine of war against the theory of sexuality and repression, which had enabled Freud to grant, as best he could, a status to neuroses and paranoia. As presiding judges say when faced with a question that endangers the expected outcome of a trial: The question will not be put. And a year later:

I thoroughly dislike the notion that my opinions are correct, *but only in regard to a part of the cases.*

---

<sup>46</sup>T/E: Freud to Jung, April 14, 1907, *The Freud-Jung Letters: The Correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung*, ed. William McGuire, tr. Ralph Manheim and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 35.

...That is not possible. *It must be one thing or the other.* ...Thus far, you know, no one has seen this other hysteria. Dem pr., etc. Either a case is our kind or nothing is known about it" (46; letter no. 84, emphases added; see also 48, letter 99).

Nothing is known about it, nothing is wanted to be known about it, it does not fit into the already established theoretical framework, it does not exist.

The question will not be put. All or nothing at all. The truth is total or is not. Let us note in passing: Freud's mistrust of psychotics and his "decision" that they are unanalyzable cannot not be related—beyond any "personal factor" on Freud's part—to the almost intractable problem they pose for Freudian theory, for their irreducibility, for the *expelled* certainty of what Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier recently formulated as follows: "If we do not understand psychosis, that means that we do not understand something essential in the functioning of the psyche in general."<sup>47</sup> And one cannot not think that it is again the question of psychosis that overdetermines Freud's *rejection* of Melanie Klein—who made "psychotic" states the point of departure for an intelligent understanding of psychical phenomena. Freud *is*, in his own view, through his work: and this work *is* if, and only if, it is "total." Yet neither is it possible to hide that this is but a "moment," a dimension, one of the two protagonists of the conflict within Freud: the other, which despite all and through all will finally prevail—without that, Freud would not have been Freud—is nonetheless true acceptance of knowledge's limitation, the reopening of questioning, the

---

<sup>47</sup>During her 1975-1976 seminar at the Sainte-Anne Hospital Center. See also the Preface to *The Violence of Interpretation*.

challenging of what he had “established,” the reshaping and upheavals to which he himself subjects his own views, nonstop, during the forty-three years when Freud was truly Freud.

Now, this conflict is, briefly put, the conflict between the cathexis of the *already thought thing* (and of self as “having already thought some assured thing”) and the—eminently risky because essentially uncertain and vulnerable—cathexis of *self as source capable of creating new thoughts* (and of that which always is to be thought beyond the already thought).<sup>48</sup> The elements of this conflict are certainly ever present and ineliminable—even already at the level of elementary logic (if *nothing* is assured in what I have already thought, my thought inevitably stops and thinking beyond is strictly impossible), and just as much at the level of psychical economy and of the supports for “self-representation” in its relationship with the “representation of the object (of self)” (supports that are always to be found, in this case, *also* in one’s assurance as to the self’s relation to things already thought, and that for this very reason always also run the risk of becoming rigidified). The life of thought is this very conflict, and it continues as creation insofar as, each time, the second element succeeds in prevailing over the first. Roustang does not see that. Having left aside the question of sublimation, he has no means, in psychoanalytic terms, to situate thought and the relationship of the one who thinks to oneself and to what one thinks (save, obviously, by seeing therein some “projections,” “phantasyings,” etc.). This is what also keeps him from seeing that, on both sides, the relationship of “mastery” is an attempt to eliminate this conflict in a radical way. The “pupil” alienates himself in the

---

<sup>48</sup>See “Epilegomena...,” above, 50-52.

“already-thought” of another and in this other as source of “new” thoughts; the “master-teacher” alienates himself in his own “already-thought” and in his pupils as illusory guarantors for his capacity to produce new, assured-in-advance thoughts.

The second example concerns Freud’s relationship not merely to “theory” but to the psychoanalytic movement as it was in the process of being instituted—insofar as these two things might be separated (in truth, they cannot be). In the same passage as above (82),<sup>49</sup> we have Lou speaking: “Certain it is that...Freud...longs in his heart for the peace of undisturbed research which he enjoyed until 1905—until the founding of his school. And who would not wish that he might have that peace forever and ever?” Who? The answer is simple: he who would reject psychoanalysis as a movement, as a practice, its transmission—which could never happen just through books—its social and historical dimension. In short: he who would totally fail to recognize what differentiates it radically from any “research” on or “theory” about the soul: he who would totally fail to recognize psychoanalysis *itself*. But what about Freud himself? If he missed the fine “peace which he enjoyed until 1905” (which was not so fine and not so peaceful as that), that could only be by his forgetting after the fact the bitterness he had so often expressed at being isolated and unrecognized. Did he want then to run the table, to have something for nothing—he who was from the outset imbued with the saying “*aber umsonst ist bekanntlich nur der Tod*,” Death alone, as

---

<sup>49</sup>T/E: We use the translation in Lou Andreas-Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, pp. 97-98.

is known, is free<sup>50</sup>—to found a School and to be *Führer* of the “International Association...,” without having his fine “peace” disturbed or having time taken away from his “research”? Perhaps. Yet what really matters, beyond Freud’s “subjective” difficulties or incoherencies, is the problematic of the relationship of the founder to what he founds, of the person who plays the leading role in the instituting process to the institution itself and to the individuals who are in the process of populating it. To spend a year’s time composing a symphony or writing a book—that is nothing; to spend oneself in order to found a movement, an organization, a collectivity whose *sole proof* that it has been founded and founded well is that it lives, functions, and develops all the better as you are in it to the least possible extent and ultimately not at all, to devote oneself to a collective work whose existence will be truly demonstrated only when the individuals who participate therein will demonstrate that without you they can do as well as and better than you, there is the rub. The value of a Beethoven sonata is neither confirmed nor invalidated by people continuing to write music after Beethoven. The value of Lycurgus’ legislation consists strictly and exclusively in the fact that Sparta lived without Lycurgus for centuries.<sup>51</sup> Here we have an extreme

---

<sup>50</sup>Freud, *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*), 17: 60. [T/E: The English-language equivalent, at *SE* 23: 274-75, offers merely the flat phrase: “But everything has to be paid for in one way or another.”]

<sup>51</sup>The figure of the legislator who goes into exile once his work has been adopted, like that of the legislator invited to establish laws for a city that is not his own and to leave that city right afterward, are well known in Ancient Greek history. The following lines from the *Tao Te Ching* date from about the same time:

The highest rulers: peoples are not even aware of their existence.  
The lesser ones: peoples feel close to such rulers and they give

avatar of a sublimated narcissism in which the self encompasses, perhaps, the others while losing oneself in them: let us agree that such cases have existed, that they are innumerable, that without them there would be no history, and that it is more than difficult to account, psychoanalytically, for them. Much easier is it, by contrast, to give an account of someone who would like for everything to disappear with him and does everything he can for that end. However, a gathering of people, the maintenance of which is conditioned by the real presence of one individual, is, sociologically speaking, a band, not an institution.

Whatever might have been his weaknesses, his faults, and his “tumbles,” Freud was ultimately able, with his disciples, to institute a movement, one that, despite the diversions [*détournements*], the perversions, and the neoformations, has endured, does endure, and doubtlessly will endure. Roustang remains silent about how this, too, differs from the contemporary scene. That is because, here again, the irreducible, ineliminable dimension of *the institution*—in other words, of the social and the historical—has to be occulted and, even more, because of the *impossibility* (35) of a “society of psychoanalysts” that was allegedly demonstrated by erasing the differences between the Lacanian School and the movement founded by Freud. What remains is to pick out a final thread, woven into the fabric of the difficult relationships between Freud and his companions, whose solidity is observable still today: the failure to recognize (and here it is Freud we are talking about) the collective dimension of even the most “personal” and “original” oeuvre, of what it

---

them much praise.

[T/E: We have adapted the 1994 Derek Lin translation to reflect the unattributed version Castoriadis quotes or paraphrases.]

always owes to other people besides its author, to their expectations, to their interrogations, to their effectively actual or supposed and anticipated objections, to their apparently least pertinent remarks. A personal oeuvre, even the most radically innovative one, is a singularity in the magma of continuous social-historical creation, a singularity surrounded by a denser and more differentiated region of this magma. This is what, independent of their derisive aspect, renders so undecidable squabbles over priority as soon as an author no longer works in the most total isolation—which, strictly speaking, *never can* be the case.<sup>52</sup> To recognize the instituting and innovative character of Freud's oeuvre does not rule out but obliges one, on the contrary, to recognize what that work "owes" to those who surrounded him. First, certainly, what is owed to his patients, whose decisive contributions to the discovery of the psychoanalytic method are too easily forgotten, as will surprise only the naive;<sup>53</sup> and next, to his companions. The idea that Freud would have better pursued his "research" had he been left to his fine "peace" is, with all due respect, laughable. Roustang does not draw the conclusions, which go quite far, from what he himself notes: "After the rupture with Zurich, Freud tried to answer Jung's questions in texts such as *On Narcissism*, the metapsychology papers, or later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and his second psychical topography" (53). And much more: it is again Jung who shook his monolithic stand on psychosis; it was for and against Jung that he wrote *Totem and Taboo*; it

---

<sup>52</sup>This has nothing to do with the plagiarism and parasitism that have for many years now been erected into systematic practice among the French intelligentsia. Here, it is not a matter of a "failure of recognition" but of mere pickpocketing, with the thief converting the produce into cash.

<sup>53</sup>See "Epilegomena....," above, 13.

was Tausk who in fact preceded Freud in developing the theory of narcissism (91); it was Groddeck who forced him into developing the theory of the Id and the second topology (109, 116, 118); it was from Sabina Spielrein that “came” the concept of a destructive drive that at the outset Freud “found rather uncongenial” (53). Must one be reminded in addition of the decisive contributions (*decisive* here is a weak word) of Abraham, particularly to the “theory of stages,” of what *Moses and Monotheism* owes to a 1912 article by Abraham that Freud does not even mention, or that it was also based on Ferenczi’s worries and experiments that Freud would be led to take back up the problem of how to conduct the cure and of what its end is?

In truth, it would be almost too easy for he who would, in a failure of recognition symmetrical to the first one, want to indulge in the stupid game of presenting Freud’s oeuvre as a sum of debts (not forgetting, among the creditors, Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, Gustav Fechner, German philosophical psychology since Johann Friedrich Herbart and Friedrich Eduard Beneke, etc.). In both failures of recognition, the same thing is at stake: an attempt to break the union-tension between the individual and the group, to make the one disappear through the other, to reduce one to the other—in short, to quash all at once the alterity, the autonomy, and the responsibility of the individual *and* the individual’s substantive tie to others. He owes everything to others—he owes nothing to anyone; these *equisignificant* statements aim at rendering impossible and unthinkable concrete, effectively actual individuality as well as collectivity and sociality. As such, they typically belong to the contemporary ideology: death of the subject, skirting of the social through “structures” and “networks.” As for these ties, they are those of friendship and of being-with, of *philotēs*, as well as those of combat and of being-against, of *neikos*, and

the latter are no less important than the former. *Polemos pantōn patēr*.<sup>54</sup> Still, one must be Freud to make of *polemos* the father of something. Yet even Freud was unable to recognize what he owed to those who surrounded him, even, perhaps especially, when they *were opposed* to him. Beyond some personal traits of Freud, that refers us back once more to one of the blind spots of psychoanalytic theory.

### III

This blind spot is not the only one. It is of a piece with some other ones, and all of them together with the most deep-seated features of contemporary culture, with the magma of social imaginary significations instituted in and through Western capitalist society. That magma, in turn, refers back to the entire Greco-Western universe, to the transformation of thought into Reason—that is, ultimately, into “theory” subject to the ensemblistic-identitarian<sup>55</sup>—to the misrecognition, the *occultation* of the historicity and sociality of thought, and, correlatively, of the historicity and sociality of the individual, to the occultation of the question of *praxis* and *poiēsis*, to the occultation of *creation* manifested as radical imagination of the subject as well as *instituting* social imaginary (instituting, of course, “logic” itself and Reason).

The deep-seated paradox of the Freudian creation—analogous, in a sense, to what I have long analyzed as the antinomy between the two elements of Marx’s

---

<sup>54</sup>T/E: *Polemos pantōn men patēr esti* (War is the father of all things), Heraclitus, fr. 53.

<sup>55</sup>See the second part of [IIS](#), in particular ch. 5.

thought<sup>56</sup>—is that it unveils and brings to light the radical imagination, creative indeterminacy, as the very element of the psyche—and that, *at the same time*, caught within the dominant social-historical metaphysics, it remains enslaved to the illusion that it could one day furnish the exhaustive “theory” of this psyche. It is also—this is another aspect of the same thing *and* the same thing—that it makes itself as practicopoietic activity, mutual transformation, creative self-alteration, of the analysand *and* of the analyst—once again, Freud would be *nothing* without his patients—and that, caught within the established institution of society, it irresistibly tends to posit itself as fixed and determinate technique.<sup>57</sup> Whether this technique might take the form of a set of prescriptions strictly ordaining what should be done (said) and not done (said) at each moment in the cure—or whether it tends, by contrast, toward zero technique or the empty set of technique, with sessions of negligible duration and deaf-mute analysts, is absolutely indifferent in this regard: in both cases, the analyst would allegedly be certain of what is to be done. For the subject (analyst), what is thus avoided in his social-historical fabrication *such as such fabrication exists* is lived as risk and source of anxiety: having to think, having to do. (We are not thinking; we are doing “science.” But also: We are not doing “science” or anything else; we are

---

<sup>56</sup>See ch. 1 of [IIS](#).

<sup>57</sup>Roustang (36) notes quite rightly the striking opposition between the inventiveness characteristic of Freud’s first analyses and the analyses “Freud practiced later on in life, when he used to force fundamental truths upon his clients,” and that “seem more like a caricature of analysis where everything has gone wrong.” In order to make things even more striking, let us strongly emphasize that no desiccation, no rigidification can be observed in what Freud was writing, until his final day.

applying a technique—that of experimentation, reasoning, inference, or psychoanalysis). And, from the standpoint of the thing itself—which is infinitely weightier—those questions are thus evacuated that the present institution of society imperiously requires to be evacuated: the questions of thinking and of making/doing. Thinking: *elucidating*, not “theorizing.” Theory is but a moment of ever lacunary and fragmentary elucidation. And a self-assured “theory” exists nowhere—not even in mathematics. That does not mean that we would be plunged into a Cimmerian night or that logic and theorization would be of no help. (Incalculable are the riches of geometric logic Freud or any analyst worthy of the name applies in order to unveil the ultimate alogicism of this or that dream, of such and such a constellation of desires, or of the psyche in general.) Yet, without being mere “instruments,” logic and theorization take on meaning only by being immersed in an *activity of elucidation* that goes beyond them and could not simply be subject to their criteria. But also: *making/doing* (which, must it be recalled, does not mean “acting out”)—and making/doing with *another*. Patients are not some materials of analysis to be exploited as a source for “matter for theorization” or to be transformed into “standardized [*normés*] individuals.” They have to *make themselves*, to self-alter themselves in and through the psychoanalytic process, to create a new segment of their history, and, in the typical and general case, to accede for the first time explicitly to a historicity that is at once singular and collective, an opening to creation as an oeuvre in which the other and others are always, be it only indirectly, present. And it is with this *self-making* on the part of the patient that the analyst has to cooperate—there we have his own *making/doing*. This is the whole problem of the patient

acceding to *autonomy*,<sup>58</sup> which is present, in flat formal logic, as an insurmountable antinomy: How could I cooperate with another acceding to *his* autonomy? (Thus also in political thought, flat formal logic jams up when faced with this alleged antinomy: How is one to say to the others that they are to depose [*destituer*] “masters” without placing oneself in the position of “mastery”?) For years, one has been chattering on in France about the “desire of the analyst.” Yet this “desire of the analyst,” *who gives a hoot about that?* What really matters—and what this chattering aims to occult—is the *aim*, the *will* [*la volonté*], the *project* of the analyst. It is false and mystifying to say that the analyst “wants [*veut*]” nothing for his patient; if he is incapable of *wanting* [*vouloir*] something about his profession and therefore about his patients, if he has remained at “desire” pure and simple, he urgently has to go back to the couch or change his profession.<sup>59</sup> Granted, he does

---

<sup>58</sup>On the meaning I give to this term, see ch. 2 of [IIS](#), in particular 101-14.

<sup>59</sup>On this occasion, one notices once again that behind these pretentious displays of verbosity are hidden at once an inability to think—to understand what words *mean*—and the dullest “realism.” The “desire of the analyst” is an expression that is as meaningful as “the desire of Sirius to listen to the *Ninth Symphony*.” Nothing in the genuine Unconscious can have *any relationship whatsoever* with a “desire” to be an analyst: the “desire” of the *subject* who has become an analyst can be to eat his patients, to kill them, to copulate with them, to transform them into excrement or into objects at his disposal (which leads to slaves/“disciples”)—anything you wish, *except to analyze* them. It is only through an essential *alteration*, a transubstantiation, in short, a *sublimation*, which presupposes and requires a “nonobject/object” that has neither meaning nor existence for the psyche properly speaking (the other as autonomous being and activity aiming at this autonomy), that there can be analysts and analysis. We have here another instance of what I have already indicated elsewhere ([IIS](#), 291 and 296-97) is the vulgar realism that lies hidden behind Lacan’s and the Lacanians’ tirades about “desire.”

not “want” just this or that: that the patient might pass his exams or succeed in writing his thesis, that he might earn a lot of money or that he would accept his poverty, that he might marry or divorce, or even achieve orgasm. Yet the analyst *wants* the patient himself to unalienate himself; the analyst wants the patient himself to alter himself by himself while knowing as far as possible that he is transforming the relationship between his Unconscious and his Conscious; the analyst wants the patient to bring the former to expression and the latter not to “mastery” but to lucidity and activity. Psychoanalysis unveils the Unconscious and desire; it does not remain there, and if that were what was at issue, LSD or peyote would suffice. To erase the passage from desire to will, from unconscious intention to project,<sup>60</sup> is equivalent to erasing the passage from phantasm, from pure representation, from delirium, to *thought*, to *elucidation*. And it is, in the same stroke, to abolish both the risk and the responsibility of having to think and to do in a world that, though obscure, can be elucidated and is faced with a psychical material and an other that, vesting us at each instant with the exigency of thinking them and of doing something with them, sends us back to our ineliminable lack of certainty and lack of power, without us being able, here more than elsewhere, to turn them—under penalty of being crooks, pure and simple—into the justification for *doing nothing* or *thinking nothing about*

---

Let us add that if what was at issue here were “desire,” *no one* could ever be an analyst. In the psychoanalytic sense (but certainly not the sense of a tabloid like *France-Soir*), desire is either unrealizable or realizable solely in phantasy. (But is all this chattering perhaps aimed, without knowing it, at demonstrating the impossibility of being an analyst?)

<sup>60</sup>See ch. 2 of [IIS](#), 71-79.

*them*. From this standpoint, Glover/Nacht<sup>61</sup> and Lacan are Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Both do function and can function only together, complementary parts of the era's system. What escapes the psychoanalytic equivalent of the bureaucratic cretinism that is masked beneath "technicalness" and "knowledge" is soaked up and coopted by "theorists" of "nonknowledge," of "untalking," and of "unbeing," even if and especially when they mask themselves behind "scientificity," "structure," "mathemes," and the grotesque bluff (with depths of ignorance rightly presupposed among audience members!) of an "algebra" and a "topology" of the Unconscious; even and especially when they have the effrontery to speak of an "ethic of psychoanalysis."

Here again, Roustang's argument is, despite itself, illuminating, because it carries to their limit the absurd implications of an alienated (and today general) manner of posing the problem. Roustang ultimately thinks that any "transmissibility" of psychoanalytic "theory" would be impossible. Why? Because—and despite a few weak reservations—he can think psychoanalysis *only* within the horizon of "theory" in the traditional (and illusory, because never achieved anywhere) sense of the term; certainly not a static doctrine, but an "extension" of a system of acquired truths, in a simply cumulative and additive diachrony. Because, at the same time, he veils the relation between psychoanalytic elucidation and "practice," that is, analysis's practicopoietic activity; what is thus eliminated once again is

---

<sup>61</sup>T/E: Most likely, Castoriadis is referring here to the psychoanalysts Edward Glover (1888-1972), a self-described "pure Freudian" and leading member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society (cofounded by Jones) who had a dustup with Lacanians in the 1960s, and Sacha Nacht (1901-1977), a president of the Paris Psychoanalytic Society, from which Lacan's Freudian School of Paris split in 1964.

the essential: the *history* and *historicity* of psychoanalysis as activity inseparable from an elucidation. Because, finally—all that being but phases of the same thing—he remains incapable of conceiving the collective and social dimension that is constitutive of being-human, of all thinking, of all making/doing.

Let us begin with this last point. A “society of analysts,” Roustang says, is something impossible: “this is undoubtedly only a dream” (35 [translation altered]). Why would that be? First, because Roustang has begun by identifying the “tie” to “mastery.” Certainly, if this identification held, it would be impossible to conceive a collectivity of autonomous adults cooperating in a common work that goes beyond every particular person. At most can one conceive a band enslaved to a “master,” and as sole tie enslavement (81), *bondage*. Yet, as has been seen, this identification is absurd logically—and, psychologically, it is mere projection: here Roustang transforms his phantasm into “theory.” Yet it is certainly also impossible to rub out the specificity of the analytic situation in this regard—and impossible to pass over the various shifts performed by Roustang. “Master-teacher/pupil” (teacher and schoolboy) is not distinguished from “master/disciple” (Socrates and Plato), the latter confused with “master/slave”—all of this aimed at *not* seeing what differentiates among them these different relations and, especially, what the analyst/analysand (and, eventually, future analyst) relation has and *has to* have that is specific and irreducible. In that last relation, there is nothing of the “master-teacher/pupil” relation; there is something, though to be overcome, of the “master/disciple” relation; what there is of a “master/slave” relation is what the analysand introduces phantasmatically and can try to introduce really into the relationship, and the task of the analyst is to dissolve it (an evidently impossible task, if he contributes toward

anchoring it in the real). The same goes for the “child/parental imagos” relation, which is, in essence, the transference itself. Now, it is on this point that Roustang’s contradictions give away what he does not succeed in thinking. Sometimes, this transference is assumed to be surpassable and resolved in order to show that even in this case the “pupil” *cannot but* fall into slavery and dependency (see above, 60-62); sometimes, the resolution of the transference (and Roustang here fails to specify whether he is talking about *every* transference or only the “didactic” one) is posited—in agreement with Lacan’s practice and even his theory—as being impossible. Yet what is shown thereby is a point on which psychoanalytic thinking in general constantly and almost inescapably tends to run out of steam. Roustang seems to hold at once as something to be wished for and as impossible the objective of “escaping at all cost from the system of filiations and of engenderment of generations upon which every society, be it psychoanalytic, is founded” (90 [translation altered]). Yet the very positing of the question is fundamentally wrong. Society *goes infinitely beyond this* type and *every* given type of “filiation” and “engenderment of generations”; being in society is not simply being the son of a father or simply acceding to the place of a father. *Which* father? The father is a father only *qua* participant in something to an indefinite extent vaster and essentially *other* than his real person, his “name,” and the series of *his* ancestors. The father is a father insofar as he refers back at once to the institution of the social *and* to other “fathers” socially equivalent to him, namely, to his coexistence and synchronic cooperation with others. And it is under homologous conditions that the son becomes a social individual. Clouding things up with “filiations” and the “engenderment of generations” is here again a means of making a bit of room for the social while skirting (and in order to skirt) its essential features. Society *is not* an enlarged

family and can be neither thought nor acted upon on the basis of a model (furthermore, a historically dated and relative model) of the family: the family *is* only as “part” of the institution of society and never *is* except as *such and such* a family, as a “part” of *such and such* an effectively actual institution of society. Here we have what Roustang, like most analysts, can neither comprehend nor hear. And *nothing* is changed in this deafness by mere reference to the “law” or to the “symbolic,” which aim in fact only at eliminating society as *effectively actual* (real collectivity that is definite/indefinite, “named” and anonymous, instituted in and through *such and such* a specific institution) and as *instituting* (creative of its institution, whether that society knows it or not). The “Law” and the “symbolic” (just like the idea of “structure” in ethnology and sociology) erase instituting society and reduce instituted society to a collection of dead rules, or Rules of Death, faced with which the subject *has to* (in order to be “structured”) be plunged into passivity.

Likewise, the psychoanalytical society *is not* a “family” or an “assemblage of families” deemed psychoanalytical. As long as the problem of the psychoanalytic society is not thought and acted upon in its radical *alterity* with respect to all “filiation,” it will remain insoluble. That is something Roustang at once sees (for example, 151) and does not see. Speaking of the suicide of Johann Jakob Honegger, who was described as a man “inextricably caught” by his “pathology...in the disputes between the father and the grandfather” (Jung and Freud) and for this reason having “no other way out than through madness and suicide,” Roustang adds that this was an “exemplary destiny of disciples who did not know how to withdraw in time from the battles of love and hate waged by their ascendants” (90 [translation altered]). Once again: for Roustang, disciple = son. Yet if that were so, to where could

the disciple have been able to “withdraw” in order to escape the father and the grandfather? Does there exist a psychoanalytic Thebaid under whose sun phantasies, parental imagos, and unresolved transferences melt away, leaving nothing behind?

An analogous failure of recognition—in no way the province solely of Roustang—occurs when it comes to considering the “transmission” of psychoanalysis, and in particular of psychoanalytic “theory.” Here again, Roustang is paying a heavy tribute *both* to the blind spots of psychoanalysis *and* to Parisian ideological mongery; on this point, he is simply a victim of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, *e tutti quanti*. For Roustang, thought, or what I call *elucidation*, does not exist: all that exists is “theory,” which, like them, he practically identifies with the so-called exact sciences. Roustang sees—though he far from gauges the depth of the problem<sup>62</sup>—that psychoanalysis is not, infinitely far from it, an “exact science.” At the same time, he finds himself standing before the immense hole psychoanalysis opens up about his own status: *What is psychoanalysis? Is a theory of the psyche possible? And is it possible from the psychoanalytic standpoint, too?* Finally, he—like the entire psychoanalytic tradition—closes himself off from the strange problematic of sublimation, in its relationship to the dimension—better: the *domain of being*—of thought and praxis. What remains, then? The “solution” he ends up with is as follows: Theory is only “fantasy or hallucination,” and also, the “delirium of several.” Therefore: In order for delirium, “theory of one person alone,” to become theory, “delirium of several,” it is necessary and sufficient that several people share it (it is unknown whether

---

<sup>62</sup>See “Epilegomena...,” above, *passim*.

this criterion remains specific to analysis or whether it is generalizable).

Here we have gone back before the year of nongrace 450, as with every contemporary reissuance of the oldest, most dated sophistry. Back even before Protagoras who, at least as Plato presents him, was rigorous and much more subversive than the patronesses of “subversion” from Paris’s Fifth Arrondissement: “What I represent to myself, that same thing *is*” (*Theatetus* 152a). Indeed, what have the “several” come to do here? And how many of them are needed? And for how long? And who counts them? And what if his count is but delirium or phantasy? Ultimately, Roustang is obliged to go all out: the “answer” to the problem of transmissibility *and* of “detaching” the ties of mastery is that each analyst would have to make *his* theory (55-75). Starting from what? And up to what point? And how would all these “theories” be theories, *and*, taken altogether, *psychoanalytic* theories?

The question of truth, that of society, that of history, that of thought, that of praxis *will not be put*. Here we have the aim of the “modernist” ideology. In the present case, it claims to be covering itself in psychoanalytic trappings. “Truth is entirely on the side of the Unconscious.” Same idea from the pen of Roustang: no difference, no essential *alterity* among phantasy, hallucination, delirium (let us pass over the inadmissible identification of these three terms), and “theory.” The question of the *referent*, of the relation between imagination, thought, and their *other* has to be suppressed (and for a good reason: “the real is the impossible”).<sup>63</sup> Were he consistent, Roustang would have to say: Birth takes place through the anus. Indeed, the phantasy of anal birth is nearly

---

<sup>63</sup>T/E: These two phrases, “Truth is...” and “The real is...,” are statements from Lacan we have not been able to source precisely.

universal: this is the “delirium” not of “several” but of almost all. Yet between the statement, “Almost all children imagine that children come out through the anus,” and the statement, “Children come out through the anus,” the difference is that of the true and the false. It is that of the phantasy as object of psychoanalytic thought and this thought itself—which cannot even *posit* the second statement as a verbalization of a phantasy unless something that is not *mere phantasy* exists and is accessible to it. (It is still *another* question that in this phantasy are revealed, not multiple “truths,” but multiple *effective actualities* of the psyche—equivalence of orifices, cloacal conflation, faeces-children “identity,” and so on—which refer back to some essential aspects of the functioning of imagination/representation.) Psychoanalysis *is not* another variant of “infantile theories of sexuality,” nor is it their “tidying up [*mise en ordre*].” It is *thought of* “infantile theories” and of many other things. And it can be so only to the extent that there *is* first of all an essential alterity between phantasy and reality, representation guided by pleasure/displeasure and truth, between psyche as radical imagination and the social-historical world as the psyche’s *other*.

These are tiresome basics, which we are obliged to go over once again from the beginning due to the confusion that reigns in the hypercultivated year 1977. Let us end with a final implication of Roustang’s thesis. If the sole (or essential) difference between “theory” and delirium is that the one is shared by several and the other belongs to one person alone, one or the other of two things obtain. Either we all have the same phantasy, hallucinations, deliria, and so on (and this is indeed what “structure” would want), *therefore* we can only have the same “theory”—and the idea that each analyst ought to make “his” theory becomes pure nonsense (as does, obviously, that of a history of thought). Or else, “to each his

own madness,”<sup>64</sup> and then what else remains for me to do but *to force* others to share my delirium and *my* phantasy, seducing, inducing, manipulating, maneuvering, and blackmailing them to this end? In short: What else remains but violence, “mastery,” and slavery?

Roustang’s impasses are the very same ones as contemporary ideology. Roustang imprisons himself in the following false dilemma: either “theory” in the sense of “science,” from which the subject would be “foreclos[ed]” (21), or else shared projection, phantasying, and delirium. Thought, elucidation do not exist. Yet it is already wrong to posit “science” as existing in the “foreclosure” (or “repression” [T/E: *ibid.*]) of the subject. Granted, if I work *within* science and such a science, all that would matter to me is a mass of *de jure* anonymous “results” and methods. Yet that in no way means that science functions and exists like some pure objective “mechanism,” like some ensemblistic-identitary automaton. On the one hand, this very idea and postulation of “science” are a creation of the social imaginary, a specific social-historical institution<sup>65</sup>—begun in Greece, resumed and infinitely amplified in the West. *These* societies and not other ones are those that *invented* this social imaginary signification—“anonymous and objective science”—and *instituted* it concretely and in effective actuality, which implies, too, the formation of a mass of *effectively actual* subjects who make it “operate [*fonctionner*].” Now, this institution itself is deployed in a historicity and a temporality that are proper to it and are in no way reducible either to a mere additivity and cumulativeness

---

<sup>64</sup>T/E: This is the title of the third chapter of Roustang’s book.

<sup>65</sup>On the meaning of this term, see ch. 4 of [IIS](#).

(except over determinate temporal and sectoral segments) or to a *staccato* of “breaks [*coupures*].” In particular, it is impossible to cut “science” in its different epochs off from the magma of social imaginary significations of which it is a part—as well as simply to shut it up within that magma. In Greece as well as in the Seventeenth Century (and certainly today), mathematics and physics offer brilliant illustrations thereof: both are highly dependent on the central imaginary schema of those two social-historical worlds, on what they institute as real and thinkable—and do not reduce themselves thereto. The Pythagorean theorem not only is always “true”; it is, if may be put this way, infinitely truer—of an infinitely broader validity—than Pythagoras believed.<sup>66</sup> Here is what contemporary ideologues (even when they call themselves *epistemologists*) are incapable of thinking. Yet also, each time one leaves behind the habitual, routine, “productive” labor of “science” and observes the moments of upheaval, of fecundity, of creation, one notes the decisive contribution of *this or that* subject’s imagination/thought, the emergence of a new, of another imaginary schema, a figure and form of representation of the real and of the formal *as* thinkable. What, then, is the root of this confusion? Once more, the organic incapacity to think the social-historical and the institution. The institution does not imply a “foreclosure” of subjects; *it has nothing to do* with this concept; it is *another* thing. To think the collective, social, historical dimension as consequence of a “foreclosure” is pretty much to think universal gravitation as the love of particles for one another

---

<sup>66</sup>“(6.2.5.) (Pythagoras’ theorem) *In a prehilbert space E, if x, y are orthogonal vectors,*

$$\|x + y\|^2 = \|x\|^2 + \|y\|^2$$

(J. Dieudonné, *Foundation of Modern Analysis*, enlarged and corrected printing [New York and London: Academic Press, 1969]).

or the expansion of the universe as narcissistic elation. There are more things, in heaven and Earth, *and especially on Earth*, than are dreamt of in this “psychoanalysis.”

Within this framework, built up through the exclusion, the expulsion of the social and of the historical and of thought, the infinitely more difficult problems psychoanalytic elucidation poses evidently become unthinkable. The profound paradoxes implied by such elucidation are crushed and flattened, and in particular this one: that, in a sense—but *in one sense alone*—the “subject” and “object” of psychoanalytic thought coincide.<sup>67</sup> Because psychoanalysis does not happen within a cumulative, additive, arithmetical, mechanical temporality, it is said to have *no* temporality. Because the “subject” could not be “foreclosed” from psychoanalytic theory, theory is said to be but shared phantasying. The phantasies involved in and acted upon in Freud’s relationships with his disciples (and still more in Lacanianism) are said to be incapable of being an object of elucidation and such elucidation is said to be unable to think and act *otherwise*; they *state* the definitive truth about psychoanalysis; they seal its “dire destiny.” Because Freud “knew all about paranoia” since the time he became aware of the homosexual component of his relationship with Fliess (42), psychoanalytic theory is said to be *identically* this same psychical content—with addition of its acceptance by “several.” Why, then, have psychotics not at all times been psychoanalysts? Why are infantile theories of sexuality not psychoanalytic theories—but, rather, part of *what* psychoanalysis strives to elucidate *and* to transform if they continue to determine the life of the subject?

Granted, the discussion does not halt there; it is there

---

<sup>67</sup>“Epilegomena...,” above, 4-12 and 41-52.

that it *commences*. Yet, in order for it to commence, this strange relation of “subject and object” in psychoanalysis has to be seen—not destroyed in advance by the elimination of one of its terms. The “material” brought by the patients or that to which I can have access within myself is obviously not “material” like the results of a chemical reaction. It is already embodied and “living” meaning—*logos enulos, logos embios*.<sup>68</sup> As such, it makes one think and makes me think, in presenting me with articulations to which I am not enslaved, but which I also cannot ignore or, more generally, not reduce to what has “already been seen” [*du “déjà vu”*]. And it is because I dream and I fantasize that the patient’s dreams and phantasies can “speak to me.” Yet there is much more, and Freud knew it, when he invoked “the Witch Metapsychology” and stated that “without metapsychological speculation and theorizing—I had almost said ‘phantasying’—we shall not get another step forward.”<sup>69</sup> What Freud calls here “speculation

---

<sup>68</sup>“Epilegomena...,” *ibid*.

<sup>69</sup>*GW* 16: 69 [T/E: *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, *SE* 23: 225]. In quoting the passage in question, Serge Viderman points out two omissions in the French translation, published in 1939 in the *Revue française de psychanalyse*, the second of which eliminates Freud’s interpolation: *beinahe hätte ich gesagt: Phantasieren*, “I would almost say: phantasying” (*La construction de l’espace analytique* [Paris: Denoël, 1970], pp. 323-24 [T/E: Gallimard reprinted this book in 1982]). Roustang sees—sees only too well—this aspect of the question (see 55-75, where there are, moreover, many things quite close to what I am saying here, and which I had already said in “Epilegomena...”). Yet his reference framework is such that the conclusions he draws therefrom do not withstand discussion. When he says (92) that the “structure” of “discovery in psychoanalysis...always entails theft from another, from an unconscious other or the other who speaks during analysis,” he totally erases what separates phantasmal “theft” (the theft of one’s own phantasm or that of another) from the “labor” of “theorization.” How many times have I been

and...almost...phantasying” is in fact the *creation* of ideas/figures/forms/meanings that are neither “induced” nor “deduced”: in other words, the *creative imagination* and the central role it plays in thought, which he simultaneously saw in “phantasying” and, as I have already said, *would not/could*

---

sadly amused while listening to (or while reading) analysts who held this line of reasoning: My patient X has brought in this or that dream, which shows that.... Now, X is certainly a pervert. *Therefore, the pervert....* Roustang really loves the “kettle-story.” [T/E: See [English Wikipedia](#), “[Kettle logic](#),” on Freud’s examples of this paralogism and Lacan’s employment of this expression.] He should also think, from time to time, about the story about how all Englishwomen are notoriously ginger [T/E: that is, a proverbial case of false induction, perhaps with sexual connotation, by a French sailor visiting an English coastal town].

Things do not proceed otherwise when he speaks of the relation between “theorization” and “madness.” The lesson one is being led to draw from what he says about it is as follows: Be paranoid, but without “systematic continuity,” and schizophrenic, too, but while protecting yourself from “the fusional continuity of undifferentiation” (50-51, and elsewhere). He calls that “preventing paranoid construction through schizophrenic delirium,” which is said to constitute the “new mode of theorization” created by Freud! “His well-tempered reason enabled him (Freud) to avoid madness without having to silence it” (*ibid.*). What, then, is this “reason,” and what is the *psychoanalytic* status of his “good temperament”? *Either* theory is “the delirium of several” *or* what allows Freud to “avoid madness” is “well-tempered reason.” *Not both at once.* That psychoanalytic theorization presupposes access to the richest possible “psychical material” (madness or something else) is a truism; that this “material” is not a mere “material” is something I have been saying since 1968 (“Epilegomena...”), and I will come back to it; that its nature might reorient [*infléchir*] the labor of the theoretician, despite himself, is certain; also certain is that such “reorientations” might, *in the case of a great author*, be more than fecund (as I have shown, in another context, apropos of Marx, in [IIS](#), 33-34). Yet one last decisive step *cannot* be taken: nothing of all that abolishes the distinction between phantasy or projection and theory or, better, thought. See also, on this whole question, Viderman, *op. cit.*

*not* see (how could he give it a “scientific status”?). The situation does not differ essentially in the work of Roustang, for whom it remains impossible to see the power to figure, making-be as figure/meaning, the bringing-forth [*faire-surgir*] of forms/significations, the essential role of the creative imagination in psychoanalytic elucidation and psychoanalytic activity. A *figure of the psychical* as at once effectively actual and thinkable is created/posited/proposed, without one being able, in important cases, to sort out the “exact” part played by each of the following three elements: “projection” (the analyst states as true in general or *hic* and *nunc* a formulation of his own representation); “intuition/empathy” (the analyst offers a formulation of what he “sees” as the other’s representation); finally, *creation simpliciter*: this or that utterance will posit as figure/form/meaning that which, till then, remained, for him and for the other, unrepresented, unthought, unthinkable. Such creation can emerge within the session’s *hic et nunc* (which will not prevent its validity from transcending that moment); in any case, it emerges in a vivid way in the “theoretical” work itself. The (central) part played by the creative imagination in that work could in no way be confused with a “phantasying” or “projection” in the rigorously psychoanalytic sense of these terms. For example, the theoretical construction of the “psychical apparatus” in general and as totality is an imaginary creation/thought of Freud’s. *In no sense is it a phantasy of Freud’s*. There exists no “site” of the psyche properly speaking within which such a “phantasy” could arise whose content would be the psychical apparatus *as such* and in its totality, its differentiations, its cleavages, its “laws” of operation, and so on. The passage from phantasy to elucidation, imagination/thought, is the passage to another level and mode of being; it makes itself as essential alteration, which the psyche *as such* could *never* “produce.” Phantasy *is* as an

element of the psyche's world; thought belongs to the social-historical world; the fact that these two worlds are indissociable in no way signifies that they are the same (or that the social is to be reduced to "several" psyches). Phantasy is neither true nor false: it *is* as phantasy. Yet a "theory," and an interpretation, can be *true* or *false*. It is through a *rupture* of its world, a rupture that is imposed upon it by the social-historical, that the psyche opens itself up to the question of the truth and that thought/elucidation and effectively actual activity become for it possible.<sup>70</sup>

Psychoanalysis can neither "ground itself" as theory or thought, *nor even* account for itself on the basis of its own "concepts" (whence the pitiful inadequacies of the attempts to account for analytic *activity* on the basis of the "desire of the analyst" and for analytic *elucidation* on the basis of a shared "phantasy" or "delirium"). *And* at the same time, it cannot exist if *what it says* about psychical activity renders impossible and unthinkable an elucidation that would be something other than a mere projection of phantasies, an activity that would be something other than a mere enactment of desires. For, then it would simply be saying: "I am lying." What psychoanalysis can do and has to do is elucidate the process through which these "nonobjects/objects" that are thought, activity, the other as autonomous being, an effectively actual collectivity, and the institution as such can take on existence and meaning for the psyche and be "cathected" by it. That is, not only the "leaning" of social-historical creation on the singular psyche but the psychical *sap* the latter constantly supplies to the former.

This is obviously what Freud was trying to think under the term *sublimation*—and it is the terrain that has lain fallow,

---

<sup>70</sup>See ch. 6 of *IIS*, in particular 291-311.

and not by mere chance, among his epigones, quite particularly with respect to the problems being discussed here. I have discussed this at length elsewhere;<sup>71</sup> for my present purpose, it suffices to underscore that sublimation, in the sense I give to the term, is the process through which the psyche opens itself up to the social-historical world and can, thereby, gain access to a temporality of another order than psychical temporality, to “objects” that for it cannot, at the outset, have existence and meaning, to a “logic” that is other than the mode of being of the unconscious magma. Psychoanalysis itself exists, on its “subjective” side (for the analyst), as sublimation: de-eroticized, de-sexualized (narcissistic *and* transubstantiated) cathexis of an activity and an elucidation that are essentially *other* than every psychical “object” and every “object representation.” For the future analyst, the “resolution of the transference” can succeed if and only if it *is* this sublimation. The expressions “transference onto the work” or “onto theory” are absurd and expose, on the part of those who use them—it is Lacan, if I am not mistaken, who first launched them—a *just-anything* attitude in the usage of analytic terms. Whether the transference is thought as

---

<sup>71</sup>See *IIS*, 311-20. “The lack of a coherent theory of sublimation remains one of the lacunae in psycho-analytic thought” (J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, “Sublimation,” in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith [London and New York: W. W. Norton, 1973], p. 433).

In Roustang, unless I am mistaken, the sole mention of sublimation (in any case the sole one that would not be simply nominal) is to be found in the following phrase (55): “Theoretical work (like sublimation, perhaps) doubtless enables one to resolve something in the transference.” Besides being ambiguous (it signifies as well, or even rather, that theoretical work *is not* a sublimation but *is like* a sublimation), this “like sublimation, perhaps” is more than strange. What is then, what then *can* this “theoretical work” be, from the psychoanalytic point of view, if not a sublimation?

“displacement of objects” or as “displacement of representations” (91), *it cannot be* a matter of “transference” either here or *ever* in sublimation. There exists, in the Unconscious, no “object” or “representation” that could be “transferred” onto analytic activity, no archaic imago that might be “transferred” onto the process of the cure or the labor of elucidation. If they are so, one immediately ends in a perversion of both.<sup>72</sup> Such elucidation and such activity do exist, in the case of psychoanalysis and in other cases, because the psyche is capable of sublimating, of succeeding in representing itself and in cathecting “objects” that were for it inconceivable and impossible at its origin, inconceivable and impossible as “pure” psychical productions: “objects” that are social-historical creations. From then on, it becomes possible to think not only a “transmissibility of theory” but something other and much more: a historical temporality proper to psychoanalysis, a continued creation, a participation in an oeuvre that goes beyond us, a relationship to the thought and to the existence of the other that commences after the *dissolution* of the following *pathological* dilemma: either enslave ourselves to psychoanalysis (or master it)/reject it (or ignore it). From then on, too, a collectivity of psychoanalysts becomes thinkable and possible. But also, our responsibility

---

<sup>72</sup>*Analytic activity* (and the cathexis it implies) is one thing; the countertransference is another. See also Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier’s talk, “Le travail de l’interprétation—la fonction du plaisir dans le travail analytique,” given during the “Journées de ‘Confrontations’” meeting, May 1-2, 1976 (now in *Comment l’interprétation vient au psychanalyste* [Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1977], pp. 13-38). In this talk, the function of *pleasure* in the labor of analysis (on both sides) is rightly highlighted, this pleasure being essentially linked to the moments of unexpected invention that correspond to a correct and *unforeseen* interpretation during a session. See also, by the same author: “Un problème actuel: les constructions psychanalytiques,” *Topique*, 3 (May 1970).

becomes again full. There is no “dire destiny”; there are huge problems inherent in psychoanalytic affairs—as in human affairs in general—but brought here to a highly acute level; and there is a multiplication of these problems on account of the fact that a disembodied psychoanalysis could not exist, that psychoanalysis is itself a social and historical phenomenon, and that it is born in and through a given society and participates in that society’s history.

#### IV

A revolutionary discovery and creation, psychoanalysis emerges at a precise moment in Western history and society. It is born within and starting from a given metaphysical, ideological, and political framework—at once *through* that framework *and against* it. Straight off, it is formed and deformed by this framework. Tied to its immense *intrinsic* difficulties, these conditions have weighed heavily upon its birth and upon its history—and continue to do so. And it is the same thing to say that, within this framework, psychoanalytic thought had to remain blind about certain points and that these blind spots have conditioned the gradual enslavement of psychoanalysis to a given social-historical universe, a universe the psychoanalysts believed that they could ignore or bracket—and through which they have become, in the majority of case, its puppets.

We are talking here about enormous intrinsic difficulties. As “object” of psychoanalytic “theory,” the psyche rebels against the determinations of ensemblistic-identitary logic, against “Reason.” The radical imagination, undetermined creation, is a possible object of thought, of elucidation—not of “science.” Yet psychoanalysis is born and grows up in a world that wants to know nothing other than

“science.” That world is up to its eyebrows in a thick, simplistic metaphysics and no longer wants to hear anything of philosophy. Freud himself swears only by “science.” Yet, of course, behind all “science” stands an implicit or explicit metaphysics. Thus, psychoanalysis is pulled back down toward the study of the “laws of operation of the psychical apparatus.” One never has access to this psyche except through the individual who speaks and who thinks—that is, a social-historical fabrication. And *he who* wants to have such access *is* himself such a fabrication: he speaks/thinks in and through the social-historical world that has fabricated him. And he *is* also, in a sense, *that to which he* wants to have access.

The object of analytic activity is the transformation of the subject. But *what* transformation? Every transformation poses the questions of toward *what* and *how*. In *this* social-historical world, these questions are *reduced* to those of the “end” and the “means.” The “means” irresistibly become “technique” there. And the “end”? What is the “end” of analysis? Freud was thinking, at the outset, within a medical horizon, and all medicine exists only through the distinction of the “normal” and the “pathological.” What is, what *can* be the “normal” here? If it is the social “norm,” psychoanalysis can become only a technique for bringing back toward this norm the subject who departs therefrom, that is, a technique serving for the subject’s adaptation to society *such as it is*. Freud saw this quite quickly—and he spares no criticism of this society, such as it is.<sup>73</sup> He would have liked for it to

---

<sup>73</sup>See *supra*, n. 28. “We point out to [society] that it itself plays a great part in causing neuroses. ...[S]o society cannot respond with sympathy to a relentless exposure of its injurious effects and deficiencies” (*The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy*, SE 11: 147). Those who would really like to think that Freud abandoned these kinds of considerations

change—he sees very vaguely the *toward what*, not at all the *how*. Yet in psychoanalytic activity, the *toward what* question remains urgent and ineliminable. The reference to an Ego that would have to become *where* the Id was leaves the problem untouched: What Ego? What is the Ego, *this-here* Ego? An interpretation of the formula can lead only toward either a “philosophical” Ego or a social-norm Ego of the individual. The first version had few chances of prevailing—not so much because the psychoanalysts boast of knowing nothing about philosophy but because one hardly sees what one could make of it within the setting of the cure. The second one would therefore win out, and it will be a matter of allowing the Ego to achieve the best possible compromise or balance between the “demands of the drives” and the “demands of reality”—that is, let us repeat once more for the deaf, *the demands of society such as it is*, exclusively, rigorously, absolutely speaking (no cure I know of having ever come up against the difficulty of “reconciling” the patient with Fermi-Dirac statistics or of making him accept the cosmological term of general relativity’s equations; nor, even, quite simply, the fact that fire burns). Thus, for the major part of its effectively actual history and the majority of its practitioners, analysis would become an activity devoted purely and simply to the subject’s adaptation to *this-here society*. (In the coarse language of politics, that is called *a tool for preserving the established social and political order*.) One need only recall, among a hundred other possible examples, the monstrosities spoken and *acted upon* by the official psychoanalysis about woman and femininity—which are, moreover, fully there in Freud himself, and of which the Lacanian “phallus,” despite

---

later on would do well to reread the *Outline*, where Freud recalls the *social conditioning* of neurosis.

various old and recent cosmetic applications, is the worthy continuation.<sup>74</sup> There will exist a different type of activity only in a few “heretics” (like Wilhelm Reich), whose sects will, however, be doomed to rapid degeneration or else will exist in the interstices of the instituted psychoanalytic world.

Yet during these same three-quarters of a century that separate us from the birth of psychoanalysis and during which psychoanalysis became officialized, the social-historical world in which it was born has decomposed from within. And psychoanalysis itself is one of the ferments of this decomposition (“They don’t know that we’re bringing them

---

<sup>74</sup>Those who need to maintain at all cost the illusions of “mastery” and of the “infallible genius” are neither willing nor able to see what some great works may contain that is downright false or flatly contradictory. One keeps silent about this first aspect; one tries to salvage the second one through some subtle interpretations. Yet the *Timaeus* is, perhaps, one of the two or three philosophical texts one would choose to preserve in case of a universal flood—and, in its final part, one will find a number of absurdities. What Freud was able to say about woman and femininity simply defies description; it is, in fact, the translation into “theoretical” language of the most narrow-minded and stupid prejudices of the typical shopkeeper of his age, who remains totally enslaved to the instituted social imaginary significations, that is, to patriarchal ideology. This has placed a heavy strain upon his *entire* theoretical edifice through the uncritical use of the ideas of “passivity” and “activity,” among others. And this continues still, with the “dark continent” and “mystery of the female orgasm.” There is no more, and no less, “mystery” in the female orgasm than in the male one. There is the confusion between the emission of a few drops of sperm and orgasm. And there is the role this confusion plays, within the phantasms of both sexes, in sustaining the illusion that the male orgasm would be physically ascertainable *and therefore* clear as day. This illusion is transposed as is into the idea of a “mystery of the female orgasm.” Roustang correctly sees a part of this problematic (104-106), as well as that relating to social adaptation, where he nevertheless ends up in a mere impasse (23).

the plague”).<sup>75</sup> Even deformed, even perverted, psychoanalysis has no less participated to an essential degree in the effort to dismantle the Western world, to shake up its bearings and its norms. How and why—questions that in appearance are so simple are in truth too complex for me even to touch upon them here.

As is known, this decomposition accelerated after 1945, but as is also known it has continued to drag on. In the domain of concern to us here, it also takes the form of a reaction against official psychoanalysis, its conformism, its sclerosis, its intellectual poverty. Starting in 1950, it was Lacan who would in France be the protagonist of this reaction. Despite the deep-seated ambiguities that already marked his undertaking, and which were gradually resolved in the way one knows, he may be said to have had the merit not only of having been the hefty tome [*pavé*] thrown into the frog pond, disturbing the instituted somnolence, shaking up pseudo-“specialist” cretinism through his appeal to disciples “external” to psychoanalysis, but also of having revitalized the reading of Freud’s text, of having rekindled this enigmatic movement, of having extended psychoanalytic research in some key ways. Lacan’s decisive contribution during this period was that he forced one to think—and the “paradox” of his career is that, over the years, he did everything he could so that one might think no longer.

The ambiguities in question far exceed, here again, any “personal trait” of Lacan’s. The Lacanian undertaking was caught, almost from the start, in the new ideology that was in the process of being built up—and in turn, it formed a major element thereof—and that, both symptom and product

---

<sup>75</sup>T/E: Quip reportedly made by Freud in 1909 to Jung as they were arriving in New York harbor.

of the crisis of the Western universe, came at the same time to seal its breaches, at least among some intellectuals and students. Let us pay homage to the national genius by calling it the *French Ideology* without us being able to linger over the reasons why it was born and developed especially in France. Let us also note that the disease is not only national and that it belongs to the *Zeitgeist*. The products of the new industry enjoyed a certain success on the export markets and, along with various other fancy Parisian articles, brought in some currency for the balance of payments of the Fifth Republic. Despite their solid native good sense, even a few Anglo-Saxons were to allow themselves to be taken in by the new French rhetoric.

In the initial phase of “Structuralism,” that ideology was but a reissuance of the scientism and rationalism of yesteryear that afforded itself the luxury of denouncing “Reason.” But (ensemblistic-identitary) “Reason” was around and about more than ever, and in its poorest, flattest form: the combinatory. Reason was no longer in the “things”; it was in the “structure” and in the “symbolic.” Still less was it in the “subject” or in “history”—the death of which was noisily proclaimed—it was in the “systems of signs,” in the “algebra of the signifier,” in “Marxist science” and the “logic of modes of production.” An illegitimate extrapolation of *a few* aspects of language’s organization as *code*,<sup>76</sup> linguistic Structuralism was carbon-copied by Claude Lévi-Strauss for use in ethnology and by Lacan for use in psychoanalysis. Everywhere, the meaning, the finality, the hidden *signified* of the operation—which, of course, commanded that operation with or without the knowledge of the authors—was the same: eliminate tongue, and all the rest, the unmasterable element of

---

<sup>76</sup>See ch. 5 of [IIS](#).

signification; persuade the subject of his inexistence or of his irresponsibility, rendering him passive before “structures”; close the question of thought and of truth; deny history—unless it is as a jerky and incomprehensible succession of “structures” or of different “epistemes”—*therefore also* exclude in advance the question of the possibility of *another* society, for whose institution we could and would have to do something other than wait for it to fall on our heads. All that fit perfectly with the diversionary operations undertaken on behalf of the French Communist Party, transparent as they were for all but imbeciles—diverting attention from the monstrosities of Stalinist totalitarianism, its rootedness in Marxism, and its crisis—the symptomal Louis Althusser taking his place under the Structuralist banner while making the sign of Lacan. Roland Barthes, then Michel Foucault, then a few secondary vidames jumped on the bandwagon.

Pulverized, in university and student circles, by May 1968—history, famously nonexistent, sometimes has these strange effects—Structuralism went up like the smoke it had always been, and its main representatives have, more or less discreetly, switched sides (Lévi-Strauss alone, to my knowledge, still displays a heroic obstinacy). They have not for all that given up the *signified* of their operation. Surprised, during their climacteric period, by the politics that till then they had scorned, discovering, in the course of their third or fourth adolescence, the virtues of “subversion,” only to identify the latter right away with Maoist totalitarianism (O China, you are so far away and your signifiers are so beautiful), they were joined by some other tender quadragenarian children of May: the brave and improbable professors of philosophy who suddenly became prophets of schizophrenia, the formerly orthodox Marxists trying, despite all economic restraint, to spray the universe with their

libidinal flux, a host of hacks haunted by the midlife crisis “desire” had, with the help of the “sexual liberation” of the times, finally revealed. One no longer knew whether the Unconscious remained structured like a language, but in any case the “laws of structure” brusquely gave way to “*lalangue*”<sup>77</sup> (one of the best sui-referential expressions ever forged) and one learned, by turns, that all language is fascist, that all discourse is a power discourse, but that *power itself* does not exist since its “networks” are everywhere (*save*—watch out!—at the Collège de France), and that, besides, if there be fascism, that is because the tortured, the exploited, and so on libidinally enjoy being so treated. As if this ideological deluge did not suffice to keep them in a wholesome stupor, the frightened populations suddenly learned, from the very mouth of the “master,” that sexual relations do not exist, either, and they went back, detumescent and resigned, before their *Television*.<sup>78</sup>

This whole little world, which believes it is making world history because it is making the “cultural” news pages of *Le Monde*, talks on and on in order to say that speaking is meaningless, plays games of “scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours,” almost never engages in self-criticism, especially does not ask itself whether there is a relation between the tales it

---

<sup>77</sup>T/E: According to French Wiktionary (s.v.; our translation), *lalangue*, the “language of the Unconscious,” is a “contraction of *la langue*” (tongue) by Jacques Lacan, in reference to Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics.

<sup>78</sup>Author’s addition to the 1984 Ryle/Soper translation: A booklet published by *le Seuil* and reproducing a text of a TV performance by J. Lacan. [T/E: In English: Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment* (1974), tr. Jeffrey Mehlman, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Norton, 1990.)]

tells today and the tales it told yesterday, remains on the lookout for possible changes in fashion but also for political events in order to adapt accordingly (with prudence, however: Foucault cannot “as yet” give an opinion about totalitarian repression in China, whose recent evolution nevertheless gives rise to a cautious question, miracle of miracles, in Philippe Sollers’s head), and chats about the desirable but, alas, remote if not impossible abolition of the State with President Caviar at the home of President Beef Stew. This is the generalized reign of *just anything* which, moreover, is “theorized” as such in the most impoverished imitation of the most hackneyed sophistry upon which the gazettes of France and Navarre happily graze: the media industry needs a new star each halfyear and, contrary to the other plastics polluting the era, the kind of plastic of which these colossi of the mind are made proves to be eminently biodegradable.

However, *this* just anything certainly is not and cannot be just anything. The nullity of its signifieds itself has a signified. An expression and result of a social-historical situation, it is *also* an instrument. It functions in order to coopt the system’s failures, to consolidate individual and social alienation, to divert into dead ends the constantly reborn critiques of the existing state of affairs, to destroy what may remain of any lucidity and responsibility among human beings in order to leave them still more disarmed before the bureaucratic Moloch. The discourse of the established order and the pseudosubversion of discourse are in league with each other. For both, the conclusion is the same: There is nothing to do and nothing to say (one can do and say just anything, and thus the State can continue to do and say what it does and says).

Once more, psychoanalysis bears the brunt of this social-historical situation—at the same time that it is used as an instrument and a cover for operations already underway.

Put to work in every which way, sometimes regulated bureaucratically, sometimes academicized, practiced more and more by just anyone just anyhow, an object of increasing social and state demands (universities, asylums, schools, etc.), it is spread about to an extraordinary extent at the same time that it experiences near-complete dilution and loss of its substance. There is no *necessary* connection between these two aspects, *except within the existing social order*. All those who feel the need for it ought to be able to have access to a psychoanalysis—which has nothing to do with the malfeasant asinities being uttered daily by “analysts” over the radio.

A “dire” situation, certainly—but one that, here again, is not a “destiny.” I have recalled its broad outlines because one must at all cost break the schizoid isolation in which, systematically and repeatedly, the analysts are shutting themselves off. And it would be, for the best of them, another poor rationalization to console themselves by saying to themselves that their own practice remains correct—while shutting their eyes to what psychoanalysis has become as *social reality*. It boils down to the same thing to say that there is a “dire destiny” to analysis, inexorably and *exclusively* inscribed within the analytic situation itself, and to feign a splendid isolation in which the analyst and the analysand might continue, far from the tumult of history, to roam about the ivory tower of the Unconscious. Both positions are based on the same postulate: psychoanalysis would be the sole siteless and timeless human undertaking, one that would not be immersed in society and history and would not be involved therein, “passively” as well as “actively.” That is a *delirious* postulate, in the rigorous sense of the term. Let us go all the way to the end of the affair: in reality, a psychoanalyst can be much more—more *essentially*—a wisp of straw on the tide of history than a manual laborer is.

The history of psychoanalysis has not

ended—although it may be *possible* that it is ending sooner than one thinks. It is absolutely not inconceivable that psychoanalysis might finish up by becoming fully, in its social reality, a pure and simple instrument for the preservation of the established order—or that it might be reduced to a sort of psychical and ideological drug for a few “deviants.” That is possible—but not fated. The outcome depends on factors that go far beyond the psychoanalysts themselves but also on what the analysts *do* and *will do* in the situation where, whether they like it or not, they find themselves. And to begin with, it depends on the extent to which they will finally come to understand that, even though it aims at what is least social and even asocial in the subject, psychoanalysis itself, as thought and as activity, cannot but be social.

# LOGOS

# The Sayable and the Unsayable

## Homage to Maurice Merleau-Ponty\*

... language realizes, by breaking the silence, what the silence wished and did not obtain. Silence continues to envelop language; the silence of the absolute language, of the thinking language. —But for these customary developments on the dialectical relation to not be a *Weltanschauung* philosophy, unhappy consciousness, they must issue in a theory of the wild mind, which is the mind of praxis. Like all praxis, language supposes a *selbstverständlich*, an instituted, which is *Stiftung* preparing an *Endstiftung* —The problem is to grasp *what*, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, *wishes*, *speaks*, and finally *thinks*.<sup>1</sup>

---

\*“Le dicible et l’indicible: Hommage à Maurice Merleau-Ponty” was published in issue 46 (1971) of *L’Arc*, which was devoted to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Reprinted in the [French edition of CL](#), 125-46 (161-89 of the 1998 reprint).

<sup>1</sup>*The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), ed. Claude Lefort, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 176. The following abbreviations are used to quote from Merleau-Ponty books, originally published in French by Gallimard: *PhP*: *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), tr. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962; Routledge Classics 2002; Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005); *PW*: *The Prose of the World* (1969), tr. John O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *S*: *Signs*, tr. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964); *VI*: *The Visible and the Invisible*. All italics are in the original. [T/E: The translation of this epigraph has been slightly altered to adopt the more recent rendering for *l’esprit sauvage* in English: “wild mind,” instead of “savage mind”—this last phrase having been Lingis’s choice here, though he had already translated *la pensée sauvage* as “wild thought,” explaining in a footnote (*VI*, 13, n. 6): “*Sauvage*: wild in the sense of uncultivated, uncultured. There is doubtless an allusion to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (*La*

As early as *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty tested his thought by broaching the question of language, not as a methodical prerequisite for ensuring the possibility of monitoring and controlling the use of an ineliminable instrument but as that of a central phenomenon, consideration of which offers “the opportunity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy” (*PhP*, 202). Here already one sees the disposition and temperament that will increasingly distance him from Edmund Husserl. That was not just a germ; the decisive distance from Husserl—the challenge to the possibility of pure thought—was already being hollowed out in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and it was hollowed out first of all in the field of language itself. The resonances would only be amplified in later writings, and, in the end, it is the entire visible realm, all the invisible that will vibrate along with them. In the texts that followed, the theme of language and expression seizes hold of Merleau-Ponty, and the reader of his final writings sees his thought getting itself ahead of the formulas where it becomes fixed in place: “This problem,” he wrote in 1951, “more clearly than any other...takes the form of both a special problem and a problem which contains all the others, including the problem of philosophy” (*S*, 93). Arriving well before the linguistic epidemic, this move by Merleau-Ponty has nothing to do with the universal extrapolation of an insipid pseudomodel of language we have been witnessing since that time, any more than it has anything to do with a “linguistic philosophy” that would claim to be giving a response to everything by clarifying and fixing in place the permitted word usages. It is in an actual act that

---

*Pensée sauvage*) in the term.” McCleary (*S*, 181) had ventured “wild-flowering...mind.”]

reflection on language leads him to the whole of reflection and that the latter brings him back to the former; it is in an actual act that the question of language envelops the question of being that envelops it. For, it is upon language that one can see most clearly what Merleau-Ponty was going to say, ten years later, of the being of every thing: namely, that it “gives itself as a *certain* being and...the expression of *every possible being*” (VI, 218), and one must preserve at all cost the amplified polysemy produced by the coiling up of this idea upon language itself. Reflection on language is straightaway reflection on the final and first problems of philosophy; not because it has resorbed them but, quite the contrary, because it is their privileged crossroad, which bursts out in all directions. Thus, after having been the object of *The Prose of the World* and of several major texts reprinted in *Signs*, language settles in in *The Visible and the Invisible*, particularly in the truly wild humus of the *Working Notes*, no longer as theme but as universal infiltration; few phrases fail to refer back to language in one way or another, and there is no dimension of being or of thought to which it does not become attached.

Such being the nature of the field, and the quality of he who, in the train of the greatest minds, still knew how to till the soil in another way, seek here not a surveying of the land but just one possible entry among others and the sight of a few parts, “*torn up* from the whole” with the hope that each of those torn-up parts “comes with its roots” (VI, 218).

~

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty places language under the term *expression* (the chapter where language is broached for the first time is titled “The Body as

Expression, and Speech”). The term had already served to name the first of the *Logical Investigations*, but, from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty, its signification changes radically, and this change contains already the overturning [*renversement*] of Husserl’s work which Merleau-Ponty was to carry out while thinking (or wanting to think) that he was continuing it.

*Expression* no longer designates here, as it did for Husserl, that diaphanous (essentially supernumerary and incomprehensibly ineliminable) correlate of noemata aimed at by a pure noesis. On the one hand, *qua* linguistic expression, it is an essential support for thought. The very term *support* is, moreover, bad: “authentic speech” is “identical with thought” (*PhP*, 207n4); there exists no pure thought, in Husserl’s sense, except as *constructum* of reflection (as soon as one makes an absolute distinction between speaking and thinking, one is already “in the order of reflection,” he will write in *The Visible and the Invisible* [T/E: VI, 130]); the transcendental attitude is impossible without words, “it is necessary to have words in order to do so,” Merleau-Ponty repeats from one end to the other of his work [T/E: see, e.g., VI, 171]. As no more than one could establish language by convention could one agree with oneself to establish *ex nihilo* a language of pure thought that would owe nothing to anything (and besides, why would one do so if there were pure thought?), one can think only if one has received a language. Therefore, there exists no *Sinngebung* by which the subject would confer a meaning upon signs that would not have it (and, one step following the next, there is no *Sinngebung*, period, “every active process of signification or *Sinngebung*” is “derivative and secondary in relation to that pregnancy of meaning within signs which could serve to define the world,” *PhP*, 498). “Thus we refute both intellectualism and empiricism by simply saying that *the word has a meaning*” (*PhP*, 202), he calmly wrote, conscious, no

doubt, of this sentence's scandalously naive appearance.

There is no question here of exploring the consequences of this overturning, which Merleau-Ponty himself had far from exhausted; how, indeed, would he have done so, since it consists precisely in referring us back immediately, from the setting of pure philosophy and according to its very own necessities, to language, to the institution, to society, to history, to the world. However, two remarks have to be formulated, one allowing us to see the internal dynamic of Merleau-Ponty's thought, the other explaining the relative silence with which recent fashion has honored it.

Husserl maintained till the end that acts of representation are foundational compared to all other ones. We note that they, in turn, can found nothing if they cannot name what they found—and that such naming is not at their disposal. One can therefore say, if one wishes, that acts of representation are, themselves, in part founded by language (and as one knows, at the end of his life Husserl was headed in this direction as concerns idealities). Yet what especially needs to be said is that the very idea of foundation in the Husserlian sense (which is, after all, the general philosophical sense) for this reason falls into ruin. One can no longer think in terms of founding/founded; one must think in terms of crossing [*croisement*],<sup>2</sup> of reversibility—which is what is done explicitly in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

On the other hand, it must be seen that Merleau-Ponty's position is equivalent to a refutation in advance of those "conceptions" through which the sort of thinking found

---

<sup>2</sup>T/E: In *VI*, *entrecroisement* is translated as "intersection" and *recroisement* as "double and crossed situating," but *croisement* does not seem to appear there.

in the illustrated newsweeklies has finally been able to link up with the illustrations of contemporary thought, and consumer society with the consumption of ideas. The inseparability of thinking and speaking evidently has two sides, and no pure thought means, just as much, no pure signs. From this same illusion proceed both a philosophy of constitutive and sovereign consciousness that never deals in anything but loose noemata that are presentifiable in person and a structuralist or semiotic ideology that takes into consideration only assemblages of arbitrary traits whose combinatorics would bring into play some will-o'-the-wisps of meaning, an epiphenomenon so strangely lacking that it lacks even the status of epiphenomenon. Here, one does not want to know what one is doing; there, how one does it. One pretends to forget that one is saying *something*, or that *one* is saying something. One makes as if one is unaware that remaining absolutely silent is not in anyone's power, as it is not in anyone's power to speak without saying absolutely anything; and in fact, the Idealist philosophers fail in the first task, as the Structuralists do in the second. In both cases, the following issue is evacuated: the inherence, the encroachment, the reversibility, the passage, the *and* of sign *and* sense—which could not, even with infinite precautions, be called their *relationship* except by already making a mistake, since a relationship has fixed two terms as mutually external or in any case separable, and since one commits to this separation, it will forever be impossible to seize again that of which it was a matter, for the same reasons that render it impossible to reconstruct a world with, as sole, paltry instruments, an Ego or a pure *semiosis*.

Expression, however, goes beyond language, which is but one of its modes (certainly a privileged mode, since linguistic expression also, for example, “far from being a particular case of other possible systems of expression, serves

as our model for conceiving of them,” *S*, 105). “The body as expression” indicates already that verbal expression has to be thought as behavior. We are not dealing here with some preoccupations and orientations from Merleau-Ponty’s youth: this theme will be there until the end and, in a sense, his ultimate conception of expression (a term that will always remain central) will be the total expansion thereof, since expression will nowhere be absent and since there will be, if one dares use this phrase, something like a behavior of all beings and of being. In 1959, he wrote: “There remains the problem of the passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning, from behavior to thematization. Moreover the thematization itself must be understood as a behavior of a higher degree—the relation between the thematization and the behavior is a dialectical relation: language realizes, by breaking the silence...” (the rest of this note is quoted at the start of the present text).

Expression is the shared belonging of an intention and a gesture, intention having become or becoming gesture; it is therefore certain that in order to think it one must think behavior, a set of gestures animated by the intention. It is already there in gestures [*le gestuel*], in the movement of the body, and, quite obviously, in the body’s aspect as instantaneous behavior and point of departure for ever-imminent gestures, intersection [*intersection*] or origin of a bundle of behaviors immediately recognized as possible for this-here body and defining its style. In order to comprehend language, one must therefore place oneself back within this movement of the subject—it must even be said: of the living being—and it cannot prevent itself from having such movement even when it would be doing nothing, its very immobility never being but a mode of movement, which ensures that it can be only by going out of itself, by being “project of the world” [T/E: *PhP*, 499]. In expression is fully

manifested this essential character of being-subject that is illuminated as that which is irresistibly borne outside itself—and which underlies the impossibility of distinguishing in any absolute way intention and gesture, within and without, and ultimately the meaning of the phrase and the phrase itself.

~

Yet expression as moment of behavior, movement of the subject, realization of being outside of self, being in the world and for the other yields only one aspect of the phenomenon; or rather, another meaning is looming within these formulations that has not yet succeeded in coming out. Apropos of literature, apropos of painting, Merleau-Ponty constantly resumes and broadens his questioning: What renders expression possible? Where, then, does the painter each time find the means to remake painting anew? In what does expression, in the fullness of its potential, consist? What differentiates great prose from the rest? And once again: What expresses itself in expression? He will be able to give the answer only when, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he succeeds in thinking the three questions as one; or, rather, it is this unity of the three questions—which does not abolish their articulation—and their unity with questioning, which are the sole response possible. Also, it matters little in what order they are taken.

What expresses itself in expression is not One. What speaks in speech is the thing, the world, being, the *Working Notes* say. This is not something mystical or poetical. Expression is possible because its extralinguistic correlate belongs to the world; without the connection of referents, there could be no connections of signifieds in one's tongue.

Granted, neither an organization of signifiers nor a connection of signifieds is a reproduction, copy, reflection of an organization external to one's tongue that would be graspable independently of it. Yet they find one of their necessary conditions in the manner of being of things in the world. There is one side of the problem of language that is essentially identical to the problem of the *Critique of Judgment*, which the flattened versions of Kantianism forget as much as the current versions of naive Idealism that dominate linguistics (be it behavioristic). Whatever the autonomous potential one will acknowledge for language (for thought) to organize the world, the world still must, in order that it might be said (thought), be organizable. This is not simply a boundary condition, nor is it a "that without which" kind of thought, against which Merleau-Ponty rose up from the beginning to the end of his work: the apparent arbitrariness and the organizational freedom manifested by language are haunted from within by the being-thus of the world. Here again, the false logic of either/or has no hold, for it can only place language (like thought) before the dilemma of a description reflecting a world in itself or of an entirely arbitrary organization—both terms being equally impossible, both formulas being equally meaningless. The semantic coverage performed upon the perceived world varies immensely from one tongue to another, but none will be found that classifies yesterday morning's roses with tomorrow evening's stars. People go on repeating the example of the different ways different tongues carve up the visible spectrum, and the incongruent catalogues of colors that result therefrom. This is an important example, provided that one explore its full signification: the possibility of different ways of carving up the visible spectrum is furnished by its near-continuity, and twice over rather than once. It would not be possible to carve it up thus or otherwise were there not a unity, which is also

extralinguistic, of being-colored, if colors did not hold together: it is the visible spectrum that is being carved up. Nor would there be a possibility of an arbitrary way of carving up this spectrum if it was not near-continuous (as much in terms of color saturation as in terms of hue). Does one know of any tongue that classifies together the snout of a quadruped and the middle third of its tail? The relativity of the cultural and linguistic thing, which is in addition incontestable, cannot even be named without immediately invoking the obscure and unsayable irrelativity of the thing just as it is. Like thought, tongue exists thanks also to the following innumerable and enormous facts: There are trees. There is an earth. There are stars. There are days—and there are nights. Trees are rooted to the earth. Stars come out at night. In this sense, and not by virtue of a theology of being, what is speaks through the tongue. And it does not speak only in designating or classifying things. Every organization of the tongue rests on the organization of the world, for it necessarily rests on the invisible of the visible. One cannot help but smile at the naive ontology that underlies the attempts of linguists to ground in Reason the distinction between verb and noun, substantive and adjective, voices and aspects, cases and genders. What is a thing, what is a property, in what way is a thing other than the set of its properties? In what way is a thing not a process, a process a thing? Yet one must smile for the right reasons. The wrong reason here is to believe that there exists an indubitable ontology, the more or less deficient realizations of which are to be found again in effectively actual tongues; this wrong reason is essentially the same as Husserl's in the *Logical Investigations* and, further back, in Aristotle's least exacting moments. Once again, the man of positive science is the naive prisoner of an old metaphysics that has been so well assimilated that he has forgotten not only its name but its very existence. Yet it is, moreover, certain that every tongue

necessarily includes its own ontology or, better, its preontology both as *ontologia generalis* and as *ontologia specialis*, since it cannot exist without furnishing the type of what is and what is not, the opposition of true and false, and without instituting an organization of the world, establishing some regions within that world, distinguishing some definite beings in each region, and positing some universal formal relations among beings and lateral and transversal relations between regions. Yet such categorization, and the indefinite number of overlaps [*croisements*] it includes, find their guarantor in the invisible texture of the world, which ensures that it contains levels, fields, nestings and unnestings, “rays of the world” (VI, 218), that there is a “generality of the things...several samples of each thing,” coming from the fact that things are “field beings” (VI, 220), and that the world is this “whole” wherein “each part” can be taken “for itself” but wherein, on account of this very fact, each part “suddenly opens unlimited dimensions—becomes a *total part*,” and wherein, finally, all that is “at the same time gives itself as a *certain being* and...the expression of *every possible being*” (VI, 218).

Yet also, that which expresses itself in expression is tongue itself. In all speech are expressed the being-tongue of tongue and the being-thus of a tongue. Evident, unanalyzable, unconstructable, there is the expressiveness proper to each tongue, which translation cannot preserve even when it preserves a part of what is said. A banal observation; we are not making other kinds here. Philosophy does not discover unknown facts; it tries to reawaken what sleeps in the facts that have allegedly always been known. What is asleep here? For example, this: that each tongue could not in the same movement each time tell of the world and each time tell of it in its unique fashion if the world did not count for something in this astonishing possibility. What, then, is at issue here?

There is, first of all, the particular sampling the tongue under consideration performs on the indefinite range of possibilities offered by the world; as singular expression, the work or the word [*l'œuvre ou la parole*], but at another level, tongue finds itself faced with a world that can be told in an infinite variety of ways.

The “amorphous” perceptual world that I spoke of in relation to painting—perpetual resources for the remaking of painting—which contains no mode of expression and which nonetheless calls them forth and requires all of them and which arouses again with each painter a new effort of expression...which is more than all painting, than all speech [*toute parole*], than every “attitude,” and which, apprehended by philosophy in its universality, appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it (Proust): it is the *logos endiathetos* which calls for *logos prophorikos* (VI, 170).<sup>3</sup>

*Logos endiathetos* of the amorphous perceptual world: meaning of the thing, in the active disposition of the thing, in the disposition of the world. How, then, can the meaning of the thing call for an indefinite multiplicity of modes of expression and lend itself thereto? This is because, obviously, it is not simply a simple (which does not mean that it is numerically multiple). It is no more simple than the thing or the world is a simple. Yet one cannot think through this

---

<sup>3</sup>T/E: We follow Castoriadis’s practice of transliterating Merleau-Ponty’s Greek characters into Roman letters, though following, of course, English-language conventions for transliteration. *Logos endiathetos* is “the word remaining within,” while *logos prophorikos* is “the uttered word” ([English Wikipedia](#), “Logos,” s.v.).

question any further without thinking at the same time the second one: How, in their each-time unique fashion, can tongues all tell the same world? How can each, through its particular sampling, open itself to the universal? How can its telling [*dire*] be at once absolutely specific and allow it to say [*dire*] virtually everything?

Reflecting, in 1951, on the way to say “the same thing” in two different tongues, Merleau-Ponty noted that “expression is never total” but also that “every expression is perfect to the extent it is unequivocally understood” (S, 89-90). While this idea is no doubt true, it does not exhaust the problem. For, at the moment when we want to label a tongue’s universality as successful or effective communication, we are obliged to suspect that communication is effective only by virtue of the tongue’s universality; we would be able to complete the circle by defining them together, one by the other, were there only one tongue, but there are an indefinite number of them.

What is at issue here is at once the being of the world and the being of tongue. The sampling performed by one’s tongue is said to concern only a “part” of the world (and out of the gate it never concerns but a part of the world); this part is always necessarily “total part”; it is “representative of the whole, not by a sign-signification relation, or by the immanence of the parts in one another and in the whole, but because each part is *torn up* from the whole, comes with its roots, encroaches upon the whole, transgresses the frontiers of the others” (VI, 218). If a tongue allows one to say, “That is a speck of dust,” it allows one to say everything. For, holding a speck of dust in language is to hold the tip of a clump whose roots encroach on every other root—and thereby a pathway exists that leads to the one that holds the tip of another clump. Yet the being of tongue, it too, *is*, and that means: It reduplicates at its own level and in its unique fashion that

which is the mode of being of all that is. A word can be only by having a certain meaning, and, at the same time, as expression of all possible meaning. Signification resumes and reproduces, at its own level, both the *that* and the virtually total referral that are those of the thing, of just any thing. I would have no language if each time a word could refer me back just anywhere and in no matter what way, but neither would I have it if each time the possible referrals that belong to the signification and to which the signification just as much belongs were strictly circumscribed and definable. Because tongue is, precisely, something quite other than a semiotic system, because referral in each tongue is virtually total, it would need but a sole point of contact with the world in order to be caught up in the generalized and nonchaotic transgression that makes the world be and therefore in order to be able to tell the world. This is the reason why the sampling performed by every particular tongue is universal sampling and why each tongue is a total cross section of the world.

~

And yet, we can never reflect too much on the fact that tongue exists only as a particular tongue and that a universal tongue or fundamental tongue exists only for Leibniz or Court President Daniel Paul Schreber, or for subaltern penpushers who share neither the delirious genius nor the genial delirium of either one. The particular organization a tongue each time carries into effect cannot be thought simply as sampling within something preconstituted and definite; this is so not only because something of that sort does not exist as such (that the world calls forth an indefinite number of possible organizations in no way signifies that those organizations are

precontained, as seeds in a pomegranate) but also because the world one's tongue brings into existence as world is always a historical world. One's tongue does not just organize a natural world, be it perceptual, but also brings into existence a historical world and makes the both of them in one and the same stroke. Even the possibility of treating the world as an assemblage of "pure and simple" things that have become disenchanting and can be manipulated however one wishes—even this possibility *is* only through the world, and yet, it cannot in effective actuality *be* without a given organization of the social-historical world, the central figures of which are a flat rationality, operationalism [*l'opération*], and manipulation applied simultaneously to people and their relationships, to things, and quite evidently, in practice and in alleged theory, to tongue itself. What tongue as tongue expresses, therefore, is also sociality-historicity in general and this or that figure of sociality-historicity. "Containing everything that will ever be said," and "yet leaving us to create it," the "amorphous" perceptual world, precisely because it never gives itself to us as amorphous, because we cannot apprehend it as amorphous (except as a limit point for philosophical thought), is never merely perceptual. Whether a tree be dwelling place for the dryad or seat of a host of metabolic processes governed by its DNA, it is never purely and simply: tree. Pure perception is never but the purest of abstractions; "natural" perception is never natural. In order to attempt to rediscover it as natural, the philosopher, even though he lays claims to the *Lebenswelt*, has to abandon the *Lebenswelt* and immerse himself in the artificial, paradoxical undertaking, foredoomed to failure, of wanting to rediscover a pure lived experience no one has ever lived and no one will ever be able to live. Perception itself is instituted, since language can take "root" only "in a sensible world which had already ceased to be a private world" (*PM*, 42), since, whether

classical or not, there is somehow always a perspective and that perspective is “not a law of perceptual behavior. It derives from the cultural order, as one of the ways man has invented for projecting before himself the perceived world, and is not a copy [*décalque*] of this world” (*PM*, 51), and since, finally, “our perception...projects into the world the signature of a civilization, the trace of human elaboration” (*PM*, 69). The prejudice involved in describing the thing such as it is and without prejudice is itself but an avatar of a certain historical institution of the project of theory (which certainly does not mean that its logical validity depends on it). What tongue expresses each time is therefore also the invisible of the culture for which it serves as a vehicle, that by which there are for this culture something visible and *this* visible. More than expressing it, tongue makes it exist.

That tongue is original institution therefore does not refer back only to a *de facto* necessity or to an essential one (let us disregard here the ultimate impossibility of such a distinction) but to the very being of the social-historical. There is no culture without nuclei of meaning, without central significations, organizers of the world of this (“natural” and “historical,” therefore historical) culture and those nuclei can be present and effective only through tongue. Whether it is a matter of *mana*, *taboo*, *dikē*, *chrēon*, *sacer*, *God*; or of *polis*, *respublica*, *citizen*, *party*; or of *einai*, *reason*, *Geschichte*; or even of *chic*, *cute*, *gemütlich*, of these entities on which everything rests and on which everything depends, but of which one can furnish no photograph, nor any logical definition—what holds together, gives form, organizes as nonreal and more than real referent the whole of the culture under consideration or certain aspects of its life is detectable and referable, for the people who live therein, only because tongue brings the nonexistent foundation of society and of this society into existence. Under this heading, more than

expression, it is in turn *par excellence* “whole part” of the creation that each time the society under consideration is.

Yet here again there is more, and we rediscover another intertwining of universality and particularity. Each tongue—like each great prose writer, or painter—creates some such nuclei that, once posited, belong to the world, become public not only for the speakers of the tongue under consideration but for all those who would be able and willing to place themselves in one of the spots from where they are visible. If one wants to gaze at the Southern Cross, one must cross the Equator and wait for night to fall. If one wants to see a side of *phusis*, or an aspect of *kalos kagathos*, one must undertake another, undoubtedly more difficult voyage. But how is it that, *de jure* visible also from here, this meaning would rise up over there and only over there, and only in this time that must be found again? How is it that its ideality does not spare us from having to make an extended visit to its place of origin, to live there some years, perchance to forget ourselves there if we truly want to see?

~

It is not possible to think any further this particularity of the universal, this spatialization and temporalization of that which gives itself out as essentially foreign to space and time (*S*, 96-97), without elucidating further this bringing into existence, this creation tongue and culture each time represent, therefore without considering the social-historical as such and for itself. Yet, what is here in question, though in another fashion, is so also in the third instance of what comes to be expressed in expression: the speaking subject, when the latter realizes that which is eminently expression, the original or unusual expression. From the *Phenomenology of*

*Perception to Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty did not cease to return to this question. It is important to recall the terms in which he discusses it, in a text from 1951 (*S*, 89-92).

At the outset, “the significative intention” is “no more than a *determinate gap* to be filled by words—the excess of what I intend to say over what is being said or has already been said” [T/E: *S*, 89] (“an idea is a certain excess of my aim over the available significations,” he was later to write).<sup>4</sup> It is, to use one of his later expressions, a gap [*vide*] that swells within the already expressed; a determinate gap in the sense that he who is going to speak knows that he has to say there something else and something more than the already said but knows positively only this, that it is not said by the already said. In order to express himself, he has, in the first place, only “available significations,” the ones that “in their time, ... were instituted as significations” [T/E: *S*, 90, translation slightly altered]. “I express when, utilizing all these already speaking instruments, I make them say something they have never said” (*S*, 91). That is possible to the extent that the author, or the thinker, makes a different “utiliz[ation]” of words, that he imposes on the available significations a “coherent deformation” (an expression of André Malraux’s but which is already to be found in almost identical form in the *Phenomenology of Perception*), which “arranges them in a new sense.” As with all meaning, with this one, too, “only *Abschattungen*” can be “given thematically,” but, “once a certain point in discourse has been passed the *Abschattungen*, caught up in the movement of discourse outside of which they are nothing, suddenly contract into a single signification. And then we feel that *something has been said*” (*S*, 91).

---

<sup>4</sup>T/E: *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, tr. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 198 (translation slightly altered).

Henceforth, the new meaning will in turn be available, “a personal and interpersonal tradition will have been founded, . . . Sedimentation occurs, and I shall be able to think farther” (S, 92).

It will be acknowledged, I think, that, in its brevity, this description goes as far as one can go and that it shows one thing above all, that the phenomenon of original expression is truly indescribable: neither here nor elsewhere does one touch on anything but its consequences. From countless experiences, we know that new significations have in turn become available (though, in certain respects, this availability may be deceptive). This refers us back again to the being of the world and the being of tongue: of the world, there is always something else to be said, and tongue renders a new saying perpetually possible. Determinate beings, filling the world, indefinitely redeterminable; corpus of available significations, reduced, inert, dead signifieds, recumbent within the tongue but always on the point of resurrection for a glorious new life. In a process of fixation, without which it would not be able to operate, tongue renders possible the nonfixable, without which it would not be tongue. Far from it sealing upon the speaking subject some sort of alienation, tongue opens to that subject a space for mobility without assignable limit. Yet within this space, there must still be someone who moves, and we cannot think tongue’s being without thinking the being of the speaking subject.

No more than the being-thus of the world imposes absolutely any organization of tongue does tongue impose absolutely any expression on the subject. One must pursue this idea to the end. There certainly is a preontology to Greek, which animates and organizes it. Yet that is not what is to be investigated if one wants to understand why Democritus is not Parmenides or how Aristotle differs so profoundly from Plato. There is even infinitely more: not because their writings are

the monuments that give us material access to a linguistic treasure trove, but because they have formed this tongue that formed them, we would be able to say almost nothing about this preontology of Greek (or we would have said something else entirely about it) had these thoughts not gone to work on it. One is absolutely mistaken when one approaches Greek writings (or any other ones) as if there existed “a Greek meaning of *alētheia*,” “a Greek meaning of *logos*,” to which the interpreter could have access prior to those texts and independently of them. Parmenides’ *alētheia* is not the *alētheia* of the tribe, any more than it is that of Plato; Heraclitus’ *logos* is not that of Homer or that of Aristotle. If they are kin, this is perhaps like the bear and the whale, and no more than these two can they wage war against each other. While the available significations began by being unusual significations, we are not thinking anything about tongue if we do not think the question those latter significations raise. That is why Merleau-Ponty insists so forcefully and so frequently on the opposition between the *speaking word* and the *spoken word* (already there in *PhP*, 197 [T/E: translation altered]). That is why, too, he finds unacceptable any absolute duality between synchronic and diachronic perspectives (*S*, 86; *PM*, 26-43): he finds such a duality unacceptable not simply because, from a formal point of view that is beyond challenge, the idea that the same object could be considered in terms of instantaneous cross sections, on the one hand, and in terms of its becoming, on the other, without these two communicating is absurd, but also because, in a far deeper way, synchrony and diachrony “envelop” each other (*S*, 86). It is a characteristic of tongue as system never to be reducible to a set of available significations, not to be exhausted in its synchronic state, even when considered synchronically, and always to contain an imminent and eminent something more. And it is also a characteristic of tongue as history to insert

immediately within its system all that emerges as a change in the system and to render possible, through the usual, the unusual, and to transform the latter into the former.

What then of an unusual or original expression? What allows Aristotle to write? It is Greek as well as that which drives him to shake it up: what he has to say and what he will be able to say only by inflicting an unprecedented torsion upon it in order to write as one had never before written and as one will never write again, stepping on his tongue in order to bear it beyond itself; this is what will long lend credence to the strange idea of course notes written up by students. Happy times, when students wrote down line by line such phrases as “We call an origin...that...from which a thing either is or comes to be or is known.”<sup>5</sup>

What, then, is the origin of the original expression? What is the “significative intention” that, indubitably on the point of being expressed, does not yet know itself and that nevertheless imprints on its saying this torsion and not another one, a “coherent deformation”? How is one to think this “determinate gap”? Certainly not as a sum of determinate negations; true, thought *in statu nascendi* knows, with assured knowledge, what it does not mean, that with which it is not to be confused; or, rather, it is true that at each presentation, it would be able to say: No, it is not that. Yet this is but mere virtuality held in reserve, which is mobilized only accidentally and partially. To create is not to deny the infinity of what one does not want to create; nor even is it to deny certain determinations. It is easy to be convinced thereof; it suffices to take a philosophy professor at random, make him deny all systems, and wait for him to produce an original thought. The determinate gap is in fact a positing that is indeterminate and

---

<sup>5</sup>Aristotle *Metaphysics* Δ.1 [T/E: 5.1.1012b34-1013a19].

determining. This means that the original expression is origin, and that is so in three senses of the term: it is, comes to be, and is known starting from itself. In this sense, there is neither analysis nor description: no analysis, no description of that which comes to be in its movement of coming. If we could analyze the riddle of this coherence that does not yet know itself, that invents itself while speaking in the speaking word, we would possess the key to all original expression past, present, and future; in other words, we would have abolished the possibility thereof.

Merleau-Ponty knew that very well. While the 1951 text quoted above shows that analysis of the original expression exhausts itself before attaining its object, it indicates, too, what is of the essence: “a...tradition will have been founded” signifies in identical fashion: An origin will have arisen. To “conclude that language envelops us, and that we are led by it, much as the realist believes he is subject to the determinism of the external world, or as the theologian believes he is led on by Providence,” he wrote in 1945, “would be to forget half the truth” (*PhP*, 467-68). “Speech is...that paradoxical operation.” “Now all words which have become mere signs for a univocal thought have been able to do so only because they have first of all functioned as originating words...”; “the clarity of what is acquired rests upon the fundamentally obscure operation which has enabled us to immortalize within ourselves a moment of fleeting life. ... This operation must be considered as an ultimate fact, since any explanation of it—whether empiricist, reducing new significations to given significations; or idealist, positing an absolute knowledge immanent in the most primitive forms of knowledge—would amount to a denial of it.” “Expression is everywhere creative, and what is expressed is always inseparable from it. There is no analysis capable of making language crystal clear and arraying it before us as if it were an

object. The act of speech is clear only for the person who is actually speaking or listening; it becomes obscure as soon as we try to bring to light those reasons which have led us to understand thus and not otherwise" (*PhP*, 452, 453, 455, translation slightly altered). In discussing the film that recorded in slow motion the labor of Matisse and shows the painter's brush "meditating, in a suspended and solemn time, in an imminence, like the beginning of the world, beginning ten possible movements, performing in front of the canvas a sort of propitiatory dance, coming so close several times as almost to touch it, and finally coming down like lightning in the only stroke necessary," he notes:

There is, of course, something artificial in this analysis, and if at the end of the film Matisse believes that he really chose, on that particular day, between those possible strokes and, like Leibniz's God, solved an immense problem of minimum and maximum, he is mistaken. ...In his mind's eye, he did not have all the possible gestures, he did not have to eliminate all but one of them, .... He solved with a simple gesture the problem which, on analysis and reflection, seemed to contain an infinite number of data (*PM*, 44, translation slightly altered).

And he adds, in the margin of his manuscript, the following profound question: "Minimum and maximum: defined within what framework?" (translation slightly altered). Within what framework, indeed? Now, that is clear: within a framework that posits and defines the painter's very gesture, which cannot be recovered without this gesture. An analysis that after the event would show that the problem "seemed to contain an infinite number of data" and that the solution thereto consisted in eliminating all except one of them is but

a pseudoanalysis; this is the eternal idealist phantasy, whose execution has never reached even the shadow of a beginning, which can be stated only as an empty phrase, and against which Merleau-Ponty stood up so many times. Matisse's gesture is that concrete groping around in the dark that culminates in the necessary lightning flash. To affirm is not to deny negations, save in formal logic, where one never affirms and denies anything but the "just anything at all," that is to say, nothing. The original expression is origin.

One must try, however, to see the two sides of this originality, their essential solidarity and their distance [*écart*] from each other. The 1951 text, quoted above, seems to place on the same plane and present as superimposable the original expression and the comprehension thereof. And in a sense it is true that the operation of speech is always "paradoxical," as he says in the *Phenomenology of Perception*; that, relative to the new signification, hearing can, no more than saying, be reduced to a combinatory of previously "given significations"; and that reception of creation is itself a nontrivial operation. New music creates for itself, in the end, its audience, Merleau-Ponty notes, which means, too: An audience creates itself as audience of this other music. Yet it is true that the two movements are not superimposable; there is a fundamental dissymmetry between the posture of he for whom the successive *Abschattungen* conveyed by words, notes, or strokes crystallize slowly, or suddenly, in an unexpected way, and meaning is welcomed—and of he for whom an unbearable, because ungraspable and insistent, inflexible and tenacious meaning assays, cathects, abandons, or modulates some group of signs until reaching the jubilant moment of finally-found phrases, themes, and gestures.

This dissymmetry cannot be glided over so quickly. To understand this other banal truism, namely, that writing and reading are not symmetrical operations—though that is

what they absolutely have to be in an idealist or structuralist system—that the landscape is not the same upstream and downstream from the source of expression, is to understand that the speaking word is constantly instituting, that it is recommenced institution and, like all history, continued creation. History can be locally stable only by being globally unstable. That is because it contains this countless multiplicity of recurrent and varied origins, this accumulation of singular points, which, however, pass from one to the next without being lost, starting from which things are, become, and allow themselves to be known. Thus are we able to see this two-sided situation: that there is something new in the strong sense of the term, something irreducible to what preceded it, that the usual necessarily begins by being unusual, that each tongue and each culture each time instaurate an origin, are, become, and allow themselves to be known only starting from themselves, that each time one must undertake a voyage and, if one wants to reawaken the *unverstandene Selbstverständlichkeiten*, go inhabit for a time the site where they dawn; and that in a connected spatiotemporal area, however vast it might be, there are no absolute breaks, no impassable passages, since it is only in resting on “available significations” (or instruments, or institutions in the narrow sense) that the new signification can emerge.

The instituting origin is therefore not only that of an *Urstiftung* where, for the first and last time, an explicit tongue, culture, or institution has arisen. Nor only that of the *Stiftung* of tongues and cultures that do and will succeed one another. The instituting origin is always there, upright, traversing “vertically,” as will be said in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the here and the now. And if it is there, that is because the subject is origin. The subject and subjects. For, this ever-imminent origin has some temporarily privileged,

but never exclusive, sites. In a certain view of history, one's gaze is fascinated by the prose writer, the painter, the thinker; likewise is it attracted by the summit, forgetting that it *is* not without the mass of the mountain and the antivertical thrust that haunts it. That which is an abundant and condensed creation of new expression finds its condition of possibility in the anonymous, everyday creation in which all participate and which keeps tongue alive while constantly transforming it, as well as in that paradoxical and perpetually renewed operation by which "the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects" recreates itself while showing itself to be capable of welcoming the new.

~

Once more: What is it to speak? Might we be able to shed further light on the thing by posing the following absurd question: Of what is it impossible to speak? Gorgias feared not to answer: Of everything, of nothing—thus speaking of everything, of nothing. If one does not want to imitate him, where will one draw a boundary line that would not be transgressed by its very act of indication? Leaving behind, however, such games, we do know that true speech stops nowhere. It envelops everything; everything is sayable. "In a sense, ...language is everything" (VI, 155); "the sensible indeed offers nothing one could state if one is not a philosopher or a writer, but...this is not because it would be an ineffable in Itself, but because of the fact that one does not know how *to speak*" (VI, 252). And yet, whatever might be our speaking know-how [*savoir dire*], "silence continues to envelop language." There necessarily is, then, something unsayable; at the very moment when we would finally say it, we would still be enveloped by it. "*What* it does not see it

does not see for reasons of principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. *What* it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest.... *What* it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the *object* is born” (VI, 248). What cannot be said is what makes one say; the unsayable is sayability itself, what makes there be something sayable. The unsayable is the origin: the origin as such and each origin. “Of first terms and last ones, there is thought (*nous*) and not discourse (*logos*),” said Aristotle.<sup>6</sup> “Silence of the absolute language, of the thinking language,” wrote Merleau-Ponty (VI, 176). A strange expression: how can a language ever be absolute, in what sense can it remain silent? But is it not also strange that Aristotle affirms, not simply that the *anhupotheton* and the this or the concrete individual are discursively ungraspable, but that in both cases, it is through the *nous* that we have access to the *on hē on* and to the singular thing? Merleau-Ponty would probably not be surprised by this; for, in the *Working Notes* the essential kinship between thought and perception is increasingly affirmed, and that is so, whichever one is taken as point of departure: “seeing is this sort of thought that has no need to think in order to possess the

---

<sup>6</sup>T/E: *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.12.1143a36-1143b1. The Ryle/Soper translation includes a final endnote to this chapter that reads: “3. English translation slightly modified. [Note of the author for the English edition.]” But no corresponding callout number is to be found in the body of the text. After the *Metaphysics* (sourced in Ryle/Soper’s n. 2), no foreign-to-French texts are quoted, except the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is sourced here. And there is no indication that either of these Aristotelian passages has been translated from a published source, in modified or verbatim form. It is thus unclear what translation might have been “modified,” unless it is one of the English-language translations of Merleau-Ponty—but, again, no callout number has been found.

*Wesen*" (VI, 247). "To be conscious = to have a figure on a ground—one cannot go back any further" (VI, 191). "The history of philosophy" must be thought of "as a *perception* of other philosophers" (VI, 198). Certainly not an identity, an indistinction between perceiving and thinking; nor even here, simply mutual participation and encroachment. But a homology of being: being-for, as perceived or as thought, is to rise like a figure on a ground. A homologous disposition, multiply intersecting complicity, asymmetric reflection: what is in play here is and is not the same, in that the thing can *be* only within the horizon of the world, and that to see is to hold a figure on a ground; what is in play in perceiving and thinking is and is not the same.

What is this nonsameness? What, in thinking, would be this sort of seeing that has no need to see in order to gain access to the phenomenon? It must be noted that, despite their character, the *Working Notes* are accomplished to an astonishing degree. The questions raised there are indeed treated there (which does not mean that they are *closed*). There is one, and just one, that remains not open but gaping: that of the being of the subject. The philosopher who began his work with the declared intention to "leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy" [T/E: *PhP*, 202] and who in effective actuality was, starting from behavior and perception, to go far down this path; who, at the other end of his career, broached the visible and the invisible while trying to wipe out the ancient cleavages in a new ontology and eliminate from his own thought the last vestiges of "the philosophy of consciousness" and who succeeds therein almost at the moment of his death—the philosopher cannot brush aside the question of the subject, which he rediscovers in the form of a naked, disarmed, resourceless interrogation: "What is it that, from my side, comes to animate the perceived world and language?" (VI, 190). "Is it

the same being that perceives and that speaks? Impossible that it not be the same. And if it is the same, is this not to reestablish the ‘thought of seeing and of feeling,’ the Cogito, the consciousness of...?’ (VI, 202). And again: “But then how understand the subjectivity?” (VI, 194). Is it the same one that perceives and that speaks? From start to finish, Merleau-Ponty affirmed: to speak and to think are inseparable. What then can be the “silence of...the thinking language”? Why does philosophy, as he says again, have to return to silence?

Thinking is not One; it is said in multiple ways, and it *is* multiply. To think: to be conscious: to have a figure on a ground: to see: to speak. A *logos prophorikos* is at issue here: that of the subject, of the signification, of the thing. The thing is uttered [*se profère*], as the signification that is picked out is uttered; they *are*, like being-for, *qua* figures on a ground. Yet, too, the thing *is* only through its *logos endiathetos*, which is everywhere, which inhabits just as well “the ‘amorphous’ perceptual world,” which is “that *logos* that pronounces itself silently in each sensible thing, inasmuch as it varies around a certain type of message, which we can have an idea of only through our carnal participation in its sense” (VI, 208). There is something else than the figure/ground articulation. There is meaning of the thing, its *logos endiathetos*, namely, in its disposition: its essence as total part of the flesh of the world, which underlies its capacity to emerge as figure on a ground. So, thinking: the *logos endiathetos* of the subject resonates to the *logos endiathetos* of the thing (be it visible or invisible). This resonance can take place only in silence, a silence that is not empty, that is indeed absolute language since no term is essential for it outside of the meaning of the thing. No more than the flesh is amorphous, though without definite *morphē*, is silent thought ecstasy or stupid “intuition.” Proof of this is the fact that its silence is inhabited by a drive: it “wishes” something and “does not obtain it.” What it wishes is also to

see what it hears in the silence of resonance; it is therefore to thematize it: saying it, whereby the inaudible is heard, the invisible becomes, in some way, visible. In instaurating language, in forging the original word, the wild mind, mind of a praxis “realizes, by breaking the silence, what the silence wished and did not obtain.” Yet philosophy necessarily returns to silence, its ultimate “reversal [*renversement*]” is “return to *Sigē* the abyss” (*VI*, 179), for the meaning of the completed course can resonate fully only in a new silence. If thinking is thematizing, holding a figure on a ground, then thinking is speaking. If thinking is resonating to the internal logos of what is, rediscovering what supports the ground/figure articulation in general and this-here articulation, glimpsing the dawn of the ever prime dehiscence by which figure on ground comes to be, then thinking requires that one hold the word at the greatest distance, to think is to keep quiet: *rhēton gar oudamos*.<sup>7</sup> Man is as *logon* and *sigēn echon*; he is that which makes the *logos endiathetos* pass from all that is to *logos prophorikos*; but he is also the one who, in the perpetual volubility of what is and what cannot for an instant stop expressing itself without ceasing to be, is capable of keeping quiet and instaurates for the first time in the history of the world a domain in which there is the *there is* for a single one. It is inasmuch as he can resonate to the silence, and in the silence to the *logos* of things, that the subject is origin of expression—that he is, simply, a subject.

How then is one to understand subjectivity? There is

---

<sup>7</sup>T/E: Phrase from Plato *Seventh Letter* 341c, translated as “For it does not at all admit of verbal expression” in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 7, tr. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1966). In *The Human Condition* (1958), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), p. 291, n. 56, Hannah Arendt translates this phrase as follows: “for it is never to be expressed by words.”

the meaning of the thing, being and meaning are in each other; the visible of the thing is by its invisible in one way, and in another the latter by the former. My perception is linked at once to the thing's visible and its invisible; my speaking thought, too, in the same and another fashion. But both are also: *mine*; for, they are correlatives of my silence that underlies them, of a certain flesh that I am, of my movement of expression. And all that is—meaning. If meaning is coextensive with what is, if “the infinity of Being that one can speak of is *operative*” (VI, 251), if there is “not a *nichtiges Nichts*” (VI, 201), if there is even transcendence of the phantasm (VI, 191), if “the subjective ‘lived experiences’ count in the world, are part of the *Weltlichkeit* of the ‘mind,’ are entered in the ‘register’ which is Being” (VI, 185), it is impossible for me to exclude myself from being, from meaning, and a meaning is coextensive with me. Not spiritual doublet, nor ideal reproduction, any more than a thread crossed on the weft since I always find the thread in the weft and the weft in the thread, but *logos endiathetos*, which expresses itself in the silence of thought and which underlies the movement of expression that culminates in the speaking word—whereby every man, *qua* man, can be origin. I *am* only in the pleats of being, of meaning—I am but one of their folds, but the fashion of being of this fold consists in folding over and unfolding the rest, in its fashion. It is that by which the “*operative...finitude*” [T/E: VI, 251] of being operates upon itself. A thing among things, I express myself like every other thing; but also, I am this particular thing that can, in the silence, resonate to the meaning of every thing and thereby express them all, therefore ultimately express myself as no thing expresses itself. My fashion of being total part is other; it is double. For, wherever I am and at no matter what

moment, there is no “ray of the world”<sup>8</sup> that cannot, in principle, reach me, in one fashion or another. Like the curtains of the room, like the thick air of night, Albertine expresses herself while sleeping; the whole night of the earth expresses itself in this air, all the peaches of the world express themselves in the downiness of her cheeks, all anxious loves in the gaze that embraces them and the silence underlying it; and all that expresses itself in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, as is expressed there the sea seen from La Raspelière’s terrace and that septet by Vinteuil which henceforth counts in the world more than other ones, actually composed. Yet Albertine awakens and speaks. She says: “I’ve slept.” “Confused and annoying [*irritante*] situation of a being who is what he is talking about” (*PM*, 15). Proust awakens and speaks of his sleep in the room at Doncières; he speaks of his “subjective lived experiences,” thereby inscribing them on a second, larger page of the register; he speaks of what he was when he was not yet. As he is seeing-visible, he is speaking-spoken, multiply speaking and multiply spoken. The situation is multiply confused and irksome [*irritante*], which is that of a being who will become what he will have been only by speaking of it. And Merleau-Ponty speaks of Proust’s speech, of his relation to his object and to all speech, perhaps making us hear the unsayable of this relation—and thereby, he speaks of his own speech.

It is therefore true that reversibility alone “is the ultimate truth” (*VI*, 155), but also that this reversibility gives itself out only in the irreversible movement that recognizes it as reversibility. Within universal [*catholique*] reversibility,

---

<sup>8</sup>T/E: This Husserlian phrase is examined in the March 1960 note from the *Working Notes* titled: “Notion of ‘ray of the world’ (Husserl—Unpublished texts) (or line of the universe)” (*VI*, 241-42).

there emerges the other, particular reversibility, that of the subject, and the relation of the one to the other is not reversible. A final gap of being remains, irreducible, which underlies the asymmetric movement from silent thought to the speaking word and from the latter to the former, which makes it that the sayable and the unsayable—which, moreover, are strictly coextensive—are not superimposable. To forget or to obliterate this final gap would as a matter of fact be to forget or to obliterate that by which reversibility gives itself out to us. Merleau-Ponty would not obliterate it. “The dilemma: how to rely on the consciousness? how to challenge the consciousness? to be surmounted by the idea of consciousness as *Offenheit*” (VI, 198). The mind, without quotation marks around it, is “this chiasm, this reversal,” “what makes the leaving of oneself be a retiring into oneself, and *vice versa*” (VI, 199), which certainly could not be said of a natural thing. Even if this fatigues or irks the thinkers of the newsweeklies, we have to recognize “the circularity of that singular being who in a certain sense already *is* everything he *happens to think*” (S, 113). Circularity of this singular being, or singularity of this circular being, which binds with the circularity of that which is a circle that is not superimposable upon itself: a reversibility that exists only through an irreversible relation, that of the mind and the world and what makes it that the mind is in the world, but as the other. The subject is opening, but that does not mean that it is a window, or a hole in the wall. “The open, in the sense of a *hole*, that is Sartre, is Bergson, is negativism or ultra positivism (Bergson)—indiscernible. There is no *nichtiges Nichts*” (VI, 196). Opening, then: oeuvre of the opening, ever-recommended inauguration, operation of the wild mind, mind of praxis. Or else: the subject is the opening.

## Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation\*

What really matters to me, said the philosopher, are neither stones nor trees but men in the city.<sup>1</sup> He was not able to remain faithful to this affirmation till the end. His reflection on men in the city led him to assign them a place in the world and a substantial kinship with stones and trees.

What matters to us are still men and their city. Yet we know that one cannot separate them from stones and trees. We are also beginning to know where that separation leads.

Perhaps, though this is debatable and murky, we know more about men and the city than Plato. Assuredly, we know infinitely more, in the banal sense of the word *knowledge*, about stones and trees. We are also beginning to know that this knowledge, endlessly effective in certain respects, serves no purpose at all in other, much more important respects. Some will readily say: We have never sought knowledge for anything other than itself. It is uncertain whether they would maintain this affirmation, or their coherence, were they reminded that knowledge comes at a cost or that there are experiments that they would never have dreamed of

---

\*A first version of this text was drafted in October 1970 and sent to a preparatory committee for an interdisciplinary colloquium, among whose members were Claude Grégory, François Jacob, Claude Lefort, Jacques Monod, and Edgar Morin. It was later distributed to the forty or so participants in the colloquium, which was held at Royaumont in February 1971. It was published, with a few minor modifications, as “Le monde morcelé,” in *Textures*, 4-5 (1972). The version reprinted here, “Science moderne et interrogation philosophique,” is the appreciably enlarged version that appeared in volume 18 (*Organum*) of the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (November 1973). Reprinted with this title in the [French edition of CL](#), 147-217 (191-285 of the 1998 reprint).

<sup>1</sup>T/E: Here, Castoriadis is paraphrasing *Phaedrus* 230d.

conducting, but it is especially certain that they would not know, any more than we do, how to say what knowledge means today.

There is no doubt, and this was something explicitly formulated at the dawn of the modern scientific era, that the immense labor carried out over the course of centuries has also been motivated in part by the idea that man could thus render himself master and possessor of nature. The results of his technical-scientific activity would make him appear today rather as the most nefarious vermin on the planet. They remind him in any case, and perhaps under pain of death, how he is indelibly inscribed within a natural world whose subtlety and depth his conscious activities will never succeed in fully gauging. Nature is his habitat but will never be his domain. Nature inhabits him as much as he inhabits it; his new pathology, somatic as well as psychical, individual as well as collective, bears witness thereto. And it is becoming trite to remark that, while it has succeeded in degrading on a grand scale, and perhaps irreversibly, his natural setting, the unilateral technical can-do power [*pouvoir-faire technique*] he exerts over things has in no way diminished the impotence of men in the face of the problems involving their collective organization, the rending of national and world society, the physical misery of two-thirds of humanity, and the psychical misery of a third thereof.

Nor, however, is there any doubt that this effort has, perhaps more profoundly still, been motivated by this desire to know for the sake of knowing, about which it could be said very early on that it was man's nature, and which is no nearer to being satisfied today than it was twenty-five centuries ago. To resolve a problem is always to pose other ones, each head chopped off the Hydra makes several others sprout up, and our latest interrogations are not lessened with time. Theories succeed one after the other, the success of each one

containing the seed of its death *qua* theory. Except for mathematics, where the question is posed in a different fashion, and for pure description, where it is not posed, all scientific truth is an error on reprieve. And yet, it is not just that. What, then, is it, and what are we seeking in knowledge? Must it be said that, like all desire, this one, too, is forever condemned to be mistaken about its object, to not know it and therefore to miss it? Would this love, like the other kind, see what it acquires slip irresistibly through its fingers? But how can one think that the object of this excellent rational activity is essentially an imaginary? Were that so, would we not be irremediably caught within a circle forged of iron? How could we ever unearth it except by pursuing this same rational activity, which it would hypothetically be continuing to overdetermine? If taking possession of nature through knowledge is a phantasy, how would taking possession of knowledge through knowledge not be? It is only in another dream, that of an absolute subject and of pure reflectiveness, that one can exit this circle—an incoherent dream, certainly, for waking logic and one that obeys, as it should, only the logic of desire, that is, a dream both absolute spiritualism and totalitarian scientism dream together without knowing it.

The practical and theoretical lines of these interrogations converge. It is commonplace and even banal that, struck by the brutal contrast between technical-scientific power over things and men's total impotence when faced with their own affairs, between the exact knowledge of the composition of stellar cores and the thick obscurity that surrounds the processes taking place on the shop floor in a factory, one turns again toward knowledge, in order to accuse, to deplore, or to proclaim the need to surmount the human

disciplines' "backwardness" relative to the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup> The reaction is understandable and, in its intent, honorable if at least one accepts, as we do, that the answer to the current historical set of circumstances neither has to nor can be sought in a return to religious, emotional, or pseudopolitical obscurantism; nevertheless, its lucidity leaves something to be desired. As difficult and even chaotic as the situation of the anthropological sciences incontestably may be, to speak of their *backwardness* has no meaning unless one has already set the approach of the so-called exact sciences as one's achievable ideal and as one's model, exportable outside its field of origin; unless one postulates that some progress in the anthropological disciplines along the lines and methods of the natural sciences is at once possible and desirable; unless, in short, one has already decided that the objects *psyche*, *society*, and *history* are, essentially and without residue, in homogeneity with physical and biological objects. That is no more evident than, indeed, any coherence between the approach's conclusion and its initial motivation would be

---

<sup>2</sup>T/E: In this paragraph Castoriadis speaks, seemingly interchangeably, of the "human disciplines" and the "anthropological disciplines" or "anthropological sciences." And an entire section below is titled "Anthropological Disciplines." He may have in mind what, in modern Greek, are called the *anthrōpistikes epistēmes*, or "humanistic disciplines." Later in his work, he will write of "philosophical anthropology," "political anthropology," "anthropological conditions," and, especially, "anthropological types." Clearly, he is not just talking about Anthropology as an established and distinct discipline, along with such subdisciplines as Biological Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, and so on, but of what have variously been labeled—within the magma of significations customarily used to distinguish the "natural" or "physical sciences" from what Castoriadis calls, in the literal translation of the title of the second *Crossroads* volume, the "Domains of Man"—the "human sciences," the "social sciences," the "humanities," and so on.

evident. If the extraordinary development, spanning three centuries, of a given type of activity is not unrelated to the appearance of a critical situation, can one really accept without further ado that what is required is just an extension of this same type of activity to other domains? And if, by some miracle, this extension could occur, what could be expected therefrom? Can it be forgotten that all our knowledge of nature would have no practical value had we not arrogated unto ourselves the right to use and abuse all natural objects within our grasp, both animate and inanimate? Is there anyone, today, who claims this right, for himself or for the future Fermis and Tellers of the human nucleus? And were one not to dare to do so, would that be from fear of the slaves and their morality,<sup>3</sup> from a residual superstition that will disappear with progress of the scientific mind? Or from an insurmountable dichotomy between practice and theory? Or else from a heterogeneity, on the practical level, between the human order and the natural one and, in that case, would we not be led to accept the idea that it is perhaps not possible to think them straight away within the same theoretical perspective?

There is little doubt that, under this form, the request that one try to make up for the backwardness of the anthropological disciplines remains dominated by ideas that have codetermined the present-day situation and that this request is even but a manifestation thereof. What is truly required is reflection on the very situation of contemporary scientific knowledge, its internal problematic, its historical rootedness, its social function. If such reflection is pushed

---

<sup>3</sup>T/E: For Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase "slave revolt in morality," see *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), §195, and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), First Essay, §10.

forward just a little, it leads one to take note not only that the knowledge constituted by the natural sciences provides no remedy to the questions raised above but that it is itself going through a deep crisis that comes really from afar and goes quite far—as far as the historical period that witnessed its growth and proliferation, as far as the social organization it has modeled and that has modeled it, as far as the ontological ideology it has embodied, and as far as a certain moment, now undoubtedly eternal, of the human imaginary.

*The Crisis of Modern Science and Scientific Progressivism*

One must therefore resume the theoretical interrogation of scientific knowledge without ignoring the fact that, in doing so, one runs head on against the common representation the cultivated and uncultivated public today have of science. Indeed, through one of those paradoxes that history has, *ad nauseam*, accustomed those who are not content just to undergo it, the contemporary era, which is uncertain of everything, loves to believe that it is certain of at least one thing: its knowledge. Granted, it is an era that sometimes feels a bit uneasy when recalling that such knowledge is its own only through the rashest of synecdoches and that its nontotalized and perhaps nontotalizable fragments exist in the possession only of a few corporative entities whose tongues no longer have any relation to its own and less and less to one another's. Granted, the contemporary era periodically and spasmodically interrogates itself about the relation, made up of a surprising lack of relation, between this alleged knowledge and the total disarray in which that era lives, the absence of ends or of illusions that take the place thereof, the inability to define an economy of means that are doomed to unprecedented proliferation, the concerning confirmation of the equation  $E = mc^2$  by the corpses of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, more recently, the perhaps irreparable destruction it has, with the help of our knowledge, been able to inflict in less than a century upon a biosphere that is billions of years old. Yet the nature, value, orientation, mode of production, and products of this knowledge seem to it to be above all discussion as dogmas that, in their solidity and in their subjective mode of support, differ in no way from the religious dogmas that reigned not so long ago. Just as, indeed, only illogical or perverted minds could contest the Blessed Virgin's virginity, which is demonstrated by its mere enunciation, so only people who do not understand what words mean could contest the scientificness of science. Now, to affirm the scientificness of some undertaking is today to speak of its excellence. The man in the street and the stars of the contemporary spirit share one and the same absolute certitude. Fichte's "I = I" is today pronounced: *Science is science.*

This paradox is, moreover, twofold. For, the scientific ideology is triumphing in society and is seizing hold of it at the very moment when this ideology is starting to vanish in its original homeland and when, for the scientists themselves, the death of science as the West had dreamt it since 1600, almost believing that it had been achieved around 1900—Galilean science, that is—is becoming manifest.

What has indeed succumbed to the series of explosions that are quanta, relativity, uncertainty relations, the rebirth of the problem of cosmology, and mathematical undecidability are not simply specific, determinate conceptions but the orientation, program, and ideal of Galilean science, which has been at the foundation of scientific activity and at the pinnacle of its ideology for three centuries: the program for achieving a form of knowledge that constitutes its object as a process that is in itself independent of the subject, is locatable on a spatiotemporal reference

system that holds for all and is devoid of mystery, is assignable to indisputable and univocal categories (identity, substance, causality), and is expressible, finally, in a mathematical language of unlimited power whose miraculous preadaptation to the object and internal coherence did not seem to raise any questions. Added to the evident regularity of large-scale natural phenomena, these conditions seemed to assure the existence of a single system of natural laws that are at once independent of man and readable by him. While *de facto* ineliminable, the gap between the program and its achievement was seen as *de jure* reducible to an indefinite degree: either this was due to the limitations of the constantly broadening inductive base or it resulted from the continually reduced imprecision of measurements. Thus did one speak—and one continues to do so—of science's asymptotic progress toward knowledge without seeming to suspect that the expression, which is meaningless if one does not possess the asymptote being invoked, would be absurd if one possessed it.

This scientific progressivism may today find its place among the fecund grand illusions of history. Science's incontestable progress is not an accumulation of truths, the construction of wings of a building harmoniously added to one another through the labor of workers who are curiously condemned never to know the overall plan. Nor, certainly, is it, as disappointment has perhaps made some say, a mere elimination of errors, a falsification of fabricated hypotheses, a phantom fleet of disarmed theories. What scientific progress is in itself a problem of the highest order—and certainly not a scientific one. Yet here, too, some errors can be eliminated: the one that makes of scientific progress nothing but the sum of abandoned hypotheses; the one, too, that sees in the gap between the reality of science and the classical idea of knowledge only a set of marginal imperfections and residual

slag. Science includes uncertainty at its center as soon as it goes beyond empirical-computational manipulation or mere description and wants to be theory. Besides, when reflecting on this very term, *theory*, it is unclear how it could ever have been otherwise, and what suddenly arises is a sense of surprise, rather, that one could for so long have believed the opposite.

That can no longer be believed today. This is no longer, indeed, doubt about the validity of this or that particular theory, or of some acceptable level of obscurity about ultimate concepts—which could continue disdainfully to be given to the philosopher as a present without that troubling actual scientific work. Arising suddenly from this work itself, trammeling it and seeding it at each of its large strides, uncertainty has become a way of calling into question and a crisis for the categorial armature of science, thus bringing the man of science back explicitly to philosophical interrogation. Such interrogation leaves nothing outside its field. For, what is at issue is the metaphysics that has underlain Western science for three centuries—namely, the implicit and nonconscious interpretation of the type of being manifested by mathematical, physical, living, psychical, and social-historical objects—as well as the logic, in whose element these objects had been reflected; the model of knowledge aimed at; the criteria for what has been called the demarcation between science and philosophy; and the situation and social-historical function of science, of the organizations and men who are its bearers. It should at the same time be evident that a just as radical calling into question of philosophy results therefrom. For, the absolute separation between science and philosophy cannot be at once impossible from the standpoint of science and necessary from the standpoint of philosophy. In this regard, it is the same illusion that, despite appearances, is shared by a positivist

epistemological philosophy, which believes that it can break all connection between the construction of an “exact” science and the “inexact” consideration of significations, values, and so on, and by a philosophy like Martin Heidegger’s, which makes of ontological difference an absolute difference, believes it is able to “think Being” apart from beings, and, in doing so, necessarily remains prisoner of a certain view of being as well as of a determinate language corresponding thereto, on whose bases alone that philosophy is able to think.

*The Foundations of Mathematics and the Undecidable*

In the case of mathematics, the crisis has, as is befitting, unfolded with the rigor of a classical tragedy, hubris unfailingly bringing in nemesis, and catharsis taking on the purity of a mathematical proof of a radical impossibility. Few things heralded that crisis within the imposing empire that, at the end of the previous century, had been racking up conquered provinces and standardizing their legislation, when David Hilbert, with still less reasonable motives than Oedipus for wanting to know at all cost, proposed to the world’s mathematicians, meeting in Paris in 1900, the proof of the noncontradiction of mathematics as one—among twenty-two others—of the problems that would have to be resolved in the course of the twentieth century. Three years later, the crisis erupted with the publication of Russell’s paradox as an appendix to the already printed principal work of Gottlob Frege, who noted that his life’s work had thereby been ruined. The phase of acute conflict that followed saw mathematicians divided into several camps and the lines of demarcation were fixed by the answers to questions like: What is the object of mathematics? What does one mean by *existence* and by *proof*, therefore by *mathematical truth*? What is the activity of the mathematician? Quickly, mathematicians were led to use the

terms *Platonic realism*, *nominalism*, and *intuitionism* to designate their opinions or those of their adversaries, and those are indeed the fitting terms.

In order to try to resolve the conflict and to “eliminate from the world once and for all the questions of foundation,”<sup>4</sup> Hilbert was led to set up metamathematics—a recognition of the obvious fact that the coherence of mathematics is not a mathematical question and cannot be discussed within mathematics and with its resources. The formal gains were considerable, but one may ask oneself whether, from the fundamental standpoint, any gain had been made, since all discussion of metamathematics (or of a metalanguage of any order) can ultimately occur only within the thickness and polysemy of ordinary language—that is, of language, period. Yet there is much more, since Hilbert’s immense work forged the very arms with which, a few years later, a young, hitherto unknown mathematician was going to demonstrate in a rigorous manner that a nontrivial formalized system (one sufficiently rich to contain the arithmetic of natural numbers) necessarily contained undecidable propositions, and that it was impossible to demonstrate, within such a system, its noncontradiction (Gödel, 1931). The epistemological situation thus created is absolutely unique and highly paradoxical. In a sense, Gödel’s theorems are of no real importance; in another sense, they signify a total and irremediable catastrophe. Assuming that one day one might prove a theorem that contradicts other already proven theorems, it is likely that one will succeed in saving the main

---

<sup>4</sup>T/E: David Hilbert, “The Foundations of Mathematics” (1927), reprinted in *The Emergence of Logical Empiricism: From 1900 to the Vienna Circle*, ed. Sahotra Sarkar (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p. 228 (translation altered to reflect Castoriadis’s translation from the original German; see [IIS](#), 381, n. 8).

features of the system by amputating them from some of its parts, and this eventuality appears highly improbable. Yet it is, precisely, only improbable. Were all the particles of the universe mathematicians proving a new theorem every second, and this over a period of fifteen billion years, the logical situation would not be altered: the subsequent appearance of a contradiction would always remain logically possible and the system's coherence would be but a highly probable conjecture. Now, if one mathematician calculates on his own for the other ones the probability of a statement, he calculates it on the basis of theorems and he has never considered a probable statement as an  $x\%$  theorem or a theorem as a statement whose probability is equal to 1. While in disciplines based on induction, probability is measured on a continuous scale, in a discipline based on deduction an abyss separates an infinitely probable statement from a true statement, namely, an apodictically necessary one. We thus have a rigorously deductive science—the only kind we might possess—that owes nothing to experience but that could be falsified by an experimental fact; not, of course, an empirical fact, but the act of a mathematician. Thus do mathematicians now have to cohabit permanently with the questions of foundation, which are ineliminable from this world and from their world.

The philosophical importance of this situation could not be overestimated. From Pythagoras and Plato to Kant and Husserl, the fascination mathematics has exerted over philosophy has not, as has often been said, been motivated by the belief that mathematics offered the paradigm for absolute certainty; Plato knew perfectly well that it was based only on *hypotheses*. Yet, in mathematics, it was thought that one possessed, precisely, the model for hypothetico-deductive certainty: once the question of the “truth” of the hypotheses was suspended (a question about which one finally came to

affirm that it was meaningless in the mathematical context—which, from another standpoint, does not fail to raise some considerable problems), the system of mathematical inferences seemed to exhibit an apodictic certainty. It was therefore believed that one could refer to a domain in which hypotheticality affected only the “content,” but in which the “form”—the type of necessary concatenation of statements—appeared to be absolutely categorical. It is this reference that Gödel’s two theorems, and the other theorems of undecidability that have since proliferated, definitively ruined. Yet there is much more: what is thus called into question is the very idea of a rigorous logic, in the sole domain where that logic seemed compatible with having some fecundity. Despite the countless discussions that have taken place since the time of Gödel’s theorems, it cannot be said that philosophy has, to date, confronted the genuine implications of this situation.

The problematic thus created is in no way eliminated by the construction of metalanguages and metasystems in which one “demonstrates” the noncontradiction of the initial systems. It would rather be multiplied to infinity. It is known, on the basis of an absolutely general result of Tarski’s work,<sup>5</sup> that one can render all the sentences of a given formal system decidable (and all its terms definable), on the condition that one places oneself within a richer system. Of course, this latter system will then include undecidable sentences and undefinable terms; one could rid oneself of them by passing once again to a new, still richer metasystem. Clearly, this *regressus ad infinitum* not only does not “resolve” the initial

---

<sup>5</sup>Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics: Papers from 1923 to 1938*, tr. J. H. Woodger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) in particular pp. 273-74 and 406-408.

question but aggravates it; for, the use of ever richer languages is equivalent to the implementation of ever-stronger hypotheses.

A deeply analogous situation is encountered in the various attempts aimed at eliminating the “paradoxes” of set theory. Thus, whether we are talking about its original version in Bertrand Russell’s work or how it was worked out by John von Neumann, and independent of the other objections it has raised, the “theory of types” merely postpones to infinity the question posed by the fact that in natural thought and language every attribute defines a class (or every property is collectivizing). One tries to rid oneself of the difficulty by arranging the axioms of set theory in such a way that the expression “set of all sets” is meaningless, that the object it designates “does not exist,” that not every relationship would be collectivizing, and therefore that “there exists no set of which every object is an element.”<sup>6</sup> Yet at the same time, it is clear that either set theory is empty (objectless) or there really exists something that is “sets” in general, the object of the theory of the same name, whose statements necessarily bear on *all* sets. It will then be said that the statement “set theory considers all sets” does not belong to set theory itself (within which it is even devoid of meaning) but to metatheory. The argument is irrefutable, and pointless. For, this metatheory is, in turn, very much obliged to consider the property “being a set” as collectivizing, and to say, for example, that sets form a “class”; or that one is considering “a collection of objects...that will be called *a universe*,” sets being “objects”

---

<sup>6</sup>Nicolas Bourbaki, *Elements of Mathematics: Theory of Sets* (Paris: Hermann, and Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1968), II.1.7, p. 72. [T/E: “Nicolas Bourbaki” is the collective pseudonym for a group of French mathematicians.]

*of* this universe; and, so as not to say that the  $x$  belongs to  $U$ , it will be said that the “object  $x$  is in the collection  $U$ .”<sup>7</sup> Yet how is it not seen that the preposition *of*, in this context, is already pregnant with all the paradoxes of the “naive” theory of sets? What is “being in”? What is a “collection”? Is there a collection of all collections—and can a collection be “in” a collection? If it can, one immediately finds Russell’s paradox again; if it cannot, one has merely gone up one flight and there the same question will be found again. As Cineas would say,<sup>8</sup> one could have quietly stayed on the ground floor from the outset and accepted Cantor’s initial and “naive” definition, which is marvelously clear precisely because of the vicious circles and indefinable terms it exhibits: “A set is a collection of distinct and definite objects of our perception or of our thought.”<sup>9</sup>

Even a question as apparently simple, and at the same time as fundamental, therefore a question as elementary, in the primary meaning of the term, as that of order, of the

---

<sup>7</sup>Jean-Louis Krivine, *Théorie axiomatique des ensembles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), p. 10. [T/E: We translate Krivine’s French. David Miller’s English-language translation, *Introduction to Axiomatic Set Theory* (Dordrecht: Reidel, [1971]), which seems to have been published the prior year, differs here (p. 1) from the French original.]

<sup>8</sup>T/E: See Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives, The Life of Pyrrhus* 14.2-7.

<sup>9</sup>T/E: In “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in [CL2](#), Castoriadis provides a slightly different translation of this passage found on p. 444 of Cantor’s *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, which has been translated there by Castoriadis from German to French (and then by me into English) as follows: “A set is a collection into a whole of definite and distinct objects of our intuition or of our thought.” This version, also found in [IIS](#), 223, is the same as the one found below, in the present chapter.

architectonic, of the respective places of the different parts of mathematics, a question that clearly rules over the question of their logical validity, remains wide open. Since Cantor's creation of set theory, people have been led to think that this theory was logically placed at the beginning or at the foundation of mathematics, that it preceded all its branches, which, moreover, have been reformulated by explicitly using its concepts and results. The capstone of this point of view was to be found, as one knows, in Bourbaki's *Elements of Mathematics*. Yet besides the logical and philosophical difficulties it raises, it is already contested, and one would be tempted to say *rejected*, within mathematics itself. Thus does one read in a recent work: "The approach of the book may appear a little odd to anyone who thinks that *axiomatic* set theory (as opposed to the naive theory, for which, perhaps, this is true) must be placed at the very beginning of mathematics."<sup>10</sup> From the pen of a mathematician, this "perhaps" concerning so grave a question—namely: Starting from what does one demonstrate anything at all in any branch of mathematics?—sets one adreaming; but let us retain simply this: one "perhaps" must place at the start of mathematics a naive theory of sets (and, hence, a nonrigorous theory, one containing paradoxes), which would, provided that one does not pose too many questions, allow one to build up a good part of mathematics, whereby (in explicitly using the resources produced by this construction) one could formulate an axiomatic theory of sets. What causes a problem here is not so much the logical circularity, which is not an absolute vice in the eyes of the philosopher (but rather the "vice" of all that is, and in particular of all thought), but the hereditary

---

<sup>10</sup>Krivine, *Introduction to Axiomatic Set Theory*, p. vi (emphasis in the original).

transmission, all along these successive constructions, of the initial defects of the naive theory of sets.

The logical and philosophical difficulties alluded to above are numerous; it will suffice to point out the most striking example. Objects such as the set of natural numbers ( $\mathbb{N}$ ) or relations such as the order relation are presented as being constructed in and through set theory, and even (for  $\mathbb{N}$ ) at a rather advanced stage in that theory. It is clear, however, that the corresponding concepts (or categories, or schemata) are at work as early as the first steps of mathematical reasoning and that, in truth (as, in a sense, Kant was already saying), they are not logically derivable from something else. Every proof, whether mathematical or otherwise, does effectively use the order relation, and even a well-order relation, between the propositions it arranges; within a statement itself, the order of the symbols is generally essential (“there exists an  $x$  such that, whatever  $y$  may be...” is in no way equivalent, as is known, to “whatever  $y$  may be, there exists an  $x$  such that...”). Likewise, the natural numbers effectively are used from the outset: without the “one,” the “two,” and especially the “etc.” or the “...” (which boils down practically to introducing, and effectively using, potential infinity), one could not advance a single step. It is indeed difficult to accept Bourbaki’s argument<sup>11</sup> that numbers are being used, in this case, as “marks,” like colors could be; one could use colors to distinguish objects or to know the one to which one is referring, but when one speaks of the *binary* relation, for example, it really and truly is the cardinality of “two” that is at issue. This is recognized, moreover, by

---

<sup>11</sup>“Introduction,” Bourbaki, *Elements of Mathematics: Theory of Sets*, p. 10.

Bourbaki himself,<sup>12</sup> when he underscores that, from the first steps of metamathematics, one encounters proofs that fully call upon the resources of mathematics itself, with the employment of arbitrary integers and mathematical induction, when he speaks in this connection of that being dangerously “suspect, even tantamount to *petitio principii*” (another strange way for a mathematician to express himself; should one henceforth consult an insurance company to know whether a mathematical argument is or is not circular?), and when he ultimately agrees that there could be no question of teaching mathematics to “beings” who would not know how “to read, write, and *count*” (our emphasis), which is quite obvious and which formalism and logicism are always bent on denying. Yet if that were so, there no longer could be any question of construction, but, at the very most, of renovating  $\mathbb{N}$ 's facade.

### *The Situation of Physics*

The crisis of the foundations of mathematics therefore remains largely open, and it is difficult to imagine how it could be overcome—unless, as a matter of fact, one recognizes that in mathematics, no more than anywhere else, could it be a question of assuring oneself an absolute foundation or of obtaining a guarantee of any coherency other than the *theoretical making/doing* of mathematicians. Yet there exists in mathematics the possibility of logically disconnecting the region in which there is a crisis from the rest of the discipline; that in no way diminishes the philosophical import of the existing problematic, but it does allow the day-to-day work of mathematicians, as important as

---

<sup>12</sup>Bourbaki, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

it is, to go on at a remove from that region. The situation is wholly other in physics, where, because it concerns the essential logical tools for the labor of physicists, the problematical situation interferes in a decisive way with the task of theorization. Indeed, it is not just the possibility of an intuitive representation of physical processes, as one sometimes wrongly says, that has been ruined by the upheavals that have occurred since 1900. The very categories of thought in physics, and ultimately the nature of the physical object, the nature of the physicist's activity, and the physicist himself as such, namely, as operative scientific understanding, have been called into question. This ever-weightier part of physicists' reflections, which consists in them questioning themselves about the ultimate ideas their activity presupposes, obviously cannot be called *metaphysics*—though Werner Heisenberg did rightly wax ironic about the attitude of the Logical Positivists, who gladly spoke of *metamathematics* or *metallogic* but became frightened when the prefix *meta* preceded the word *physics*.<sup>13</sup> It could have been called *prephysics*, since these ideas precede the most elementary approach to physics. However, in truth it is not a matter of pre- or of meta-physics. These questions come neither before nor after contemporary physics; they *are* contemporary physics. Indissociably tied to ultimate theoretical decisions, they come to the center of the debate each time the theoretical stakes rise. If one wanted to draw a boundary, on whose near side the physicist could pursue his work while ignoring the problems of principle, that boundary would not separate

---

<sup>13</sup>Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond: Encounters and Conversations* (1969), tr. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 210. Heisenberg attributes this ironic remark to Niels Bohr.

philosophy from theoretical physics but theoretical physics from what must really be called, despite its grandiose effectiveness, *an empirical-experimental makeshift job [bricolage]*.

These problems have been sufficiently debated over the past sixty years that one might limit oneself here to naming the principal ones. The physicist is obliged to question himself about what he understands by *time* and *space* and about the very foundation of that distinction. The question of the nature of the boundary between the phenomenon on the microphysical level and the enlarged observer (the system formed by the observer and experimental devices) remains in its entirety, just as does the epistemological antinomy, formulated as early as 1935 by Heisenberg, between the ascertainment of the nonvalidity of the categories and laws of ordinary physics in the domain of microphysics and the demonstration of this nonvalidity by means of apparatuses that are constructed in accordance with the laws of this ordinary physics and interpreted according to the usual categories. Just like the effects of the crisis of the category of causality, this antinomy cannot be considered fully settled by an appeal to large numbers and probabilities, since, as has been remarked, a unique quantum event to which only probabilities have been attached, can, through the use of a suitable experimental device, trigger a macroscopic event that is in principle set within a network of deterministic relationships. Some believe that these debates are tending to wear themselves out. Nothing could be further from the truth, for the progress of physics constantly rekindles them and brings forth others of the same kind. Among the examples that testify to this are: what has been called *the decline of the category of field*, which, for a century, had gradually gained dominance in the whole of physics and nourished the (constantly frustrated) hope of constructing a unified theory,

but which is now proving incapable of accommodating the last wave of “elementary” phenomena; the questioning of the principles of symmetry in nature, of reversibility of elementary phenomena, and even of conservation; the persistent impossibility of reconciling (and even of relating) general relativity and quantum mechanics; and the challenge to the very notion of a physical phenomenon.

Indeed, the physicists themselves note that they agree among themselves about the use of quantum mechanics but disagree deeply about its signification and its fundamental concepts.<sup>14</sup> Thus Eugene Wigner, stating that in quantum mechanics the primitive concept has become that of an act of observation, therefore of a “mental act,” recognizes straightaway that this is tantamount to “explain[ing] a riddle by a mystery”; there exists no agreement as to whether the “state vector” (which describes the system from the standpoint of quantum mechanics) “represent[s] reality” or simply “a mathematical tool to be used to calculate the probabilities for the various possible outcomes of observations”; he recalls, too, that “the self-contained nature of quantum mechanics is an untenable illusion” and that “quantum mechanical theory, if followed through consistently, leads to difficult epistemological and philosophical questions.” On quantum mechanics itself, it is perhaps worthwhile, in light of the illusions that still have currency, to quote *in extenso* one of the best-known contemporary physicists:

---

<sup>14</sup>E[ugene] Wigner, “The Subject of Our Discussions,” in *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, ed. B[ernard] d’Espagnat (New York and London: Academic Press, 1971), p. 4-5. [T/E: Additional quotations, in the following sentence, are drawn from pp. 6 and 19 of this same article.]

the theory remains generally unsatisfactory, not only because it contains what at least appear to be some serious contradictions, but also because it certainly has a number of arbitrary features which are capable of indefinite adaptation to the facts, somewhat reminiscent of the way in which the ptolemaic epicycles could be made to accommodate almost any observational data that might arise in the application of such a descriptive framework.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of *physical phenomenon* is being challenged, we said, and this from (at least) two standpoints, which ultimately converge. On the one hand, the traditional idea that “physical systems exist and have well-defined physical properties independent of any observation of these properties” (“hypothesis C,” as Bernard d’Espagnat has called it, about which Josef-Maria Jauch notes additionally that “it is rather difficult, if not impossible, to say what the exact meaning of such a hypothesis could be”) has to be abandoned; in any case, it has been demonstrated that it is incompatible with the behavior of mutually interacting quantum systems—and in reality, obviously, there are no other kinds.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the paradoxical situations one encounters in studying interacting quantum systems are increasingly leading one to think that “the notion of partial system or subsystem is perhaps not compatible with the structure of the

---

<sup>15</sup>D[avid] Bohm, “Quantum Theory as an Indication of a New Order in Physics,” *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, p. 434.

<sup>16</sup>J[osef]-M[aria] Jauch, “Foundations of Quantum Mechanics,” in *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, pp. 28-29. Bernard d’Espagnat, *Conceptions de la physique contemporaine* (Paris: Hermann, 1965).

quantal laws,”<sup>17</sup> which boils down in fact to saying that the notion of isolated or separable phenomena is meaningless.<sup>18</sup> This clearly threatens the conceptualization as well as, ideally speaking, the operational methods of established (modern, not classical) physics, which cannot, either in its equations or in its experiments, treat only partial systems or some aspects considered as *de jure* separable from the rest. If, as Bohm says, quantum theory involves “the dropping of the notion of analysis of the world into relatively autonomous parts, separately existent but in interaction,”<sup>19</sup> we are brought before an endlessly enigmatic situation: the very notions of *observer*, *observed*, and *observation* become ungraspable, and it is no longer even possible to say with full rigor (as was said in the formerly revolutionary and henceforth classic interpretation of quantum mechanics, which spilled so much ink and which Einstein, Erwin Schrödinger, and Louis de Broglie could never come to accept) that “what is observed” is in fact the product of the interaction of the observer and the observable.

---

<sup>17</sup>Jauch, *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup>B[ernard] d’Espagnat, “Mesure et non séparabilité,” *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, pp. 84-86. H. D. Zeh, “On the Interpretation of Measurement in Quantum Theory,” *Foundations of Physics*, 1 (1970). Author’s addition for the 1983 English edition [T/E: i.e., the Ryle/Soper translation, which appeared the next year]:

This question has come back with renewed force in the last few years, following the actual realization of equivalents to the famous Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen “mental experiment.” The results seem, up to now, to support heavily the idea that “separability” of physical phenomena is more than doubtful. See, e.g., B. d’Espagnat, *À la recherche du réel* (Paris: Gauthiers-Vil[ars], 1979).

<sup>19</sup>Bohm, *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, p. 433.

The partial regularities we note at various levels of physical “reality” (and without which, moreover, we simply could not live) are stamped with a radical contingency and become totally unintelligible. The universe would no longer be but a single hyperphenomenon, were it nonetheless still possible, under these conditions, to speak of “phenomenon” since it would be necessary to integrate totally therein the observer *for whom* there is a phenomenon, and were it still possible to speak of *one* universe since it really seems that the reality described by quantum mechanics is “not the reality we customarily think of, but is a reality composed of many worlds.”<sup>20</sup> Yet nothing indicates more than this question of the “universe” the chaotic situation of contemporary physics; for fifty years, no theoretical domain has been subjected to such powerful and also continuous shakeups as the one that, at its origins, modern science had believed, through Newtonian theory, could triumphantly establish the potency of its methods and the truth of its results: theoretical astronomy or, more exactly, cosmology. Let us recall that contemporary cosmology is, not gratuitous speculation, but an approach imposed [*démarche forcée*] by astronomical observations of capital importance as well as by the need to generalize local laws, and this forced-march approach stumbles, at each step, over some formidable obstacles that result from the inescapable need to challenge or to abandon the most elementary categories and means of conceptualization. Thus, the theory of general relativity started out with Einstein’s intention to incorporate rigorously into physical theory that which till then had remained a “coincidence,” the identity between gravitational mass and

---

<sup>20</sup>B[ryce] S[eligman] Dewitt, “The Many-Universes Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics,” *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, p. 226.

inertial mass (Mach's principle of equivalence); people are still discussing whether the theory achieved that. In any case, this theory has succeeded in emptying of all content the Newtonian concepts of space, time, and matter; it has above all culminated in some equations that, compatible equally with a singularity in a finite past, with a periodic evolution of the universe, or with an unbounded temporal horizon, obliged physicists to resuscitate the enigmatic terms of an origin of time, or of cyclical time, and, finally, to pose the question of the reality and of the signification of time. Likewise, Olber's paradox (formulated as early as 1826 and unknown not only to the educated public but even to the great majority of scientists, who are said to have been quite astonished to learn that no one on Earth could explain why the sky was dark at night or, more exactly, why its temperature was not constantly at 6,000 degrees) has in a sense been "resolved" by the discovery of the red shift and the "explanation" of the latter as resulting from an "expansion of the universe"; but on the theoretical interpretation of this expansion, unanimity is far from achieved and, what is more important, each of the two principal rival theories is obliged to abandon some physical principles that are perhaps still more fundamental (because more abstract) than those that have been abandoned by quantum theory: the steady-state theory is obliged to abandon the principle of matter-energy conservation (since it postulates a "continuous creation" of matter in the universe), whereas the theory of the "superdense initial state" is in fact obliged to abandon, as Fred Hoyle underscored, nothing less than the invariance of physical laws.<sup>21</sup> Yet, undoubtedly the

---

<sup>21</sup>Author's addition: For a few years now, the observational data (discovery of uniform cosmic radiation corresponding to a temperature of 3°K and interpreted as left over from the Big Bang, from the initial

most important question contemporary cosmology brings up is precisely the following: So, what is it aiming at? What could a theory of a unique object be? Can one speak, and in what sense, of laws governing this unique object, the universe? Can the very separation between object and law be maintained at this level? The most radical cosmologists insist on the idea that a theory constructed to describe a unique system “should not contain any arbitrary features”; that signifies in fact that it ought not to refer to any “initial conditions.”<sup>22</sup> Yet no one can currently visualize [*se représenter*] what a *physical* theory without “initial conditions” (or “boundary conditions”) might be, and neither can anyone think in terms of the distinction between essence and accident as applied to an absolutely unique object. For every partial physical system, giving itself initial conditions boils down in fact to giving itself its spatiotemporal localization and its “original state”—and that is what, from the standpoint of theoretical physics, appears to be “accidental.” In this regard, it is immediately obvious that, when it comes to the whole universe, “there is then nothing accidental left,” as Sciama says<sup>23</sup>—except that he should add: if not the universe itself. We are faced here with the question

---

explosion of the universe) have strongly tipped the balance against the steady-state theory. They do not, for all that, allow one to decide between the different cosmological models that are compatible with the equations of general relativity theory.

<sup>22</sup>D. W. Sciama, *The Unity of the Universe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 145, 179 [T/E: the 1961 Doubleday reprint includes the first phrase on p.162; the phrase “any arbitrary initial conditions” appears on pp. 167 and 177 of that edition]. See also Hermann Bondi, *Cosmology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

<sup>23</sup>T/E: See p. 165 of the Doubleday reprint of Sciama’s book.

posed by the impossibility of applying the ideas of contingency and necessity when it comes to the ultimate physical object. Another way of illustrating this antinomy, which differs from the preceding one only in appearance, is this: a cosmological theory that would like to stick strictly to the principle that nothing concerning the universe is to pertain to “initial conditions,” a phrase that has a hard time making any sense here, obligates itself to offer a theoretical deduction of all the properties of the universe, *including the fact that there are four dimensions and not two or fourteen and including the numerical values of the fundamental constants*. We know that Arthur Eddington spent the last years of his life exploring this path, without much success. Yet let us suppose that, *per impossibile*, this program might be achieved; what would the epistemological and philosophical situation then be? The cosmos would find itself dissolved, into an idea, into a set of logicomathematical determinations, and the question would arise: Why, then, does this set happen to have a “real” counterpart?

Just as one sees, in discussions on mathematical epistemology, a return of the references to classical philosophy, likewise does one have the impression, in present-day cosmological debates, that one is rediscovering the antinomies of the “transcendental dialectic,” Kant’s investigation into the foundation for the unity of experience, and Plato’s and Leibniz’s into the uniqueness of the world and the possible reason for this.

### *The Problem of the History of Science*

These considerations may seem contingent, bound up as they are with the present phase of history and with a given stage of the development of physics. Great physicists who maintain that some new progress in science would, at least in

certain cases (determinism), allow one to return to the *status quo ante*, at the cost of a few complications, have not been lacking. It is impossible to accept this view, which, besides, has now been abandoned. This is not only because the crisis of twentieth-century physics has, after all, merely unveiled what had always been there, namely, that every physical theory presupposes a set of categories that do not go without saying and are not some neutral framework, that pose, therefore, the question of interpretation, which thenceforth inescapably interferes with all theorization of experience. But it is also because, in light of this crisis, another fact can be seen that, it too, should always have been seen but still is seen today only in a partial and superficial way: the historical character—*historical* in the narrowest, simply diachronic sense—of science creates a situation that bursts apart the classical program, for it absolutely cannot be thought within that program. The classical conception does not have the means to think a history of truth—which, moreover, flags the highly idealist character of traditional scientism. This diachronic character of science is one of those great trivial, nay tautological, facts—analogueous to the fact that in order to “see” an electron one must “light it”; or that to think is to think something; or that, if a subject is to have knowing familiarity with a real world, that subject itself has to be, in a certain fashion, “real”—from which flow some consequences of capital importance. Indeed, it poses the following question: Since it is not true that the first scientist constituted absolute knowledge in a single stroke and it is not true that his successors have done nothing but endlessly confirm it, how is a succession of physical theories in general possible and thinkable? For the classical conception, which still dominates the common way scientists represent things in this regard, it is possible and thinkable only by means of three totally inadequate notions: successive approximations,

generalization, and addition. One can easily set aside the idea of successive approximations (approximations of *what?*), which can be invoked in this context only on the basis of a total incomprehension of what a theory is. The predictions resulting from a theory can be arranged according to their greater or lesser proximity to something, but theories cannot. Different theories have different logical structures and are not comparable in this way. How, then, is one to think the succession of theories as such? Under what conditions can a temporal order also be an intrinsic logical order?

Inadequacy of the usual interpretations of the evolution of science

One speaks often of *generalization*, understanding thereby that the subsequent theories contain the previous ones as “particular cases.” This description is often true in the petty affairs of physics but not in the great ones. It results, once again, from the confusion between numerical prediction and the logical content of a theory. One cannot take seriously the expression, currently employed, that Newtonian theory is a particular case of special relativity for  $c$  [the speed of light in a vacuum] taking on an infinite value; all that can be said is that, if, in the formulas of special relativity, one gives to  $c$  an infinite value, one generally lands back on Newtonian results. Yet this cannot make one forget that special relativity begins by positing as an axiom the absurdity of the fundamental implicit axiom of Newtonian theory: the possibility of a propagation of signals at infinite speed. Can it be said that  $a$  is an approximation of non- $a$ ? As Hermann Bondi says, “nowadays...the Newtonian concepts are known to be

untenable.”<sup>24</sup> To present Newtonian theory as a first approximation of something of which relativity would be a second and better approximation is to show that one does not give a hoot about the concepts and the logical structure of a theory and that one is interested only in the decimals of numerical values predicted on both sides; it is to claim to be saving an absolute ideal of science while presenting the latter as nontheory, as capable of boiling together any ground-up mixture of concepts, provided that the numerical juice would be satisfying. Nor is it possible to say that quanta contain classical physics as a “particular case”: this would be pretty much equivalent to affirming that the set of integers contains the set of reals as a particular case. Moreover, even in the case of mathematics and contrary to what is usually thought, it is difficult to speak of *generalization* pure and simple apropos of the advances that have been truly decisive. Thus, it has rightly been remarked that it is completely improper to speak of the “considerable progress” made toward the proof of Fermat’s last theorem; such progress has in reality consisted in the construction of entire and entirely new branches of mathematics (notably the theory of ideals) and, such as it is envisaged today, the “problem” is a problem about which Fermat “had no conception” and which would have been totally incomprehensible to him.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the passage from

---

<sup>24</sup>Bondi, *Cosmology*, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup>R. L. Goodstein, *Essays in the Philosophy of Mathematics* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1965), pp. 90-91. [T/E: Unproven at the time of Castoriadis’s writing, Fermat’s last theorem, first proposed in 1637, was finally proved in 1994 by Andrew Wiles. The [English Wikipedia article “Wiles’s proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem”](#) indeed states: “Wiles’s proof uses many techniques from algebraic geometry and number theory, and...also uses standard constructions of modern algebraic geometry, such

Euclidean geometry to non-Euclidean geometries, or from three-dimensional geometry to  $n$ -dimensional geometry (whether  $n$  is finite or infinite) can be considered to be a “generalization” only from a formal and empty point of view. It is a bit ridiculous to believe and to lead others to believe that human thought has for twenty-five centuries resisted the passage from the number 3 to the numbers 4, 5, ..., for no reason, whereas it would have sufficed to “generalize.” For this passage to be carried out, one had, not to “generalize,” but to revolutionize, not only the mathematical category of space but the very conception of what mathematics and its object are. What was needed was this philosophical upheaval that assigned to mathematics as its object not relationships among “natural” magnitudes and their immediate extensions but any sorts of formalizable relationships among objects of any sort.

These examples also show that it is impossible to describe the evolution of science as an “additive” process. While it is true that new domains are periodically discovered and that, at the outset, the theories worked out are added to those already worked out for the other ones, it is no less true that, sooner or later, the question of their relation is posed and that it has never been resolved by mere juxtaposition; as a general rule, unification has deeply shaken the particular, already established theories or has conferred upon them a different signification. No more than it is diachronically cumulative is scientific truth synchronically additive. Yet that also means: No more than the successive layers we discover in the object can be thought of as laid out in themselves according to a logical order adapted to our liking that would

---

as the category of schemes and Iwasawa theory, and other twentieth-century techniques which were not available to Fermat.”]

allow us to go successively and regressively from corollaries to theorems and from the latter to axioms can we think that the coexistent aspects of the object, from which we make so many domains of particular disciplines and specific theories, are isolable and re-composable as one pleases. Every phenomenon is an interphenomenon. The boundaries become uncertain and *region* resumes its enigmatic character as a central categorial feature of knowledge. Yet if that is so, the sole theory worthy of this name would be a unified and unitary theory. Contemporary physics does not possess such a theory and seems incapable of constructing it. Discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope of our text and no doubt beyond our capacities, as well. Yet we must consider more closely the historical process of science and the problems it raises.

The conception defended above—namely, that it is impossible to present the historical process of science as an “addition,” a “generalization,” or a “perfecting” in which new forms of knowledge [*connaissances*] would leave intact already existent ones, in short, that it is impossible to present it as a *cumulative* process—boils down to saying that what will be called, for lack of a better term, the *historical stages* of science correspond to as many *ruptures*. Thenceforth, several new questions arise: Of what are these ruptures? In other words: What, at each stage and through all the stages, constitutes the “essence” of the accepted scientific system? What are the factors that, each time, lead to the rupture? What, finally, is the relationship among the stages thus distinguished and, correlatively, among the successively produced scientific forms of knowledge?

The philosophical status of these questions, the fact that they indissociably bear on the essence of knowing, on its historicity, and on the nature of its object, is immediately evident. Also, it is perhaps not surprising that such questions

are generally evacuated, even as naive scientific progressivism is more or less being abandoned. When one limits oneself to shedding light on the successive “paradigms” of science and to emphasizing that there exists among them an incommensurability of criteria, incommunicability of languages, or “different worlds”;<sup>26</sup> or when one insists simply on what has curiously been called the “episteme” of each epoch, apparently unrelated to that of the others, one pulverizes at once men’s theoretical making/doing and its object. One is still not thinking through the formidable problem posed by the fact that science has a history when one represents that history as a mere series of absolute leaps and when one refuses to envisage the question posed by the relations of the “contents” of scientific knowledge among its different stages. However, what the contemporary situation obviously shows is that this philosophical question forms part of the very content of “positive” scientific activity. The ordinary macroscopic world can (and, in a sense, has to) be described, analyzed, and explained in accordance with the methods of “classical” (prequantum) physics. Yet the bridge between this world and quantum description has to be built at any cost and, apparently, cannot be, which lies at the heart of the difficulties of contemporary physics. Thus the “philosophical” or “historical” question of the relations between classical physics and contemporary physics is just as much and directly a scientific question, which physics is obliged to pose to itself since it bears on the relationships between the different “layers” or “manifestations” of its object.

---

<sup>26</sup>As does, for example, Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1962) [T/E: the phrase “different worlds” appears on pp. 120, 150, and 193].

To pose these questions is therefore, of course, to interrogate oneself about the organization and the content of “scientific knowledge” at each stage and in each era, but it is also, obviously, to interrogate oneself about *what* is thus each time known; in other words, about the organization and the content of what, simply, *is*. If this question is not raised, if the successive “paradigms” (or the *epistemes*) are posited in purely descriptive fashion, without any interrogation concerning their mutual relationship and what, in the object at which they aim, renders possible their existence, their succession, and their succession in this order and not just any other one, one is not truly reflecting on science; at best, one is just doing the ethnography thereof. One perhaps thinks that one is thus avoiding doing “philosophy,” but in truth, in those cases, one is really making a philosophy that dares not speak its name: it is the one that posits that the history of men’s science and knowledge is but a succession of myths of equal value.

Impossibility of thinking a history of science within the framework of the inherited philosophy

Yet it is equally true that one would turn in vain toward the inherited philosophy in order to find therein the means to think a history of scientific knowledge. For (skeptical and pragmatist tendencies excepted), the inherited philosophy ultimately offers only two ways of thinking this history, both of them untenable. In what may be called the “criticist” conception (of which Kant is the most systematic, but in no way the only, representative), what can evolve is the “content” of knowledge as a function, for example, of the fact that the available phenomenal material is broadened by new observations or experiments, or that scientific “work” on this material becomes more refined and accumulates. That boils

down to saying that the concrete content of what physics each time considers to be “laws of nature,” in a second-order sense of the term, can (and even necessarily has to) change, though not the genuine ultimate laws of nature, which are posited as categories and therefore as identical to the very organization of scientific thought and of all thought of the real. This view already encounters, on the strictly philosophical plane, some insurmountable aporias, the most important of which is the impossibility of accounting for the existence of a relationship between the “categories” and the “phenomenal material” that ensures that the latter really is thinkable and organizable by the former; the fact that such a relationship exists is ultimately described by Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, as a “happy accident” (*glücklicher Zufall*). But how could that view be maintained today? When categories as fundamental as causation or substance are being called into question, one’s ambition can no longer be to carry out some repairs on the edifice of the “transcendental deduction of categories,” which would replace these concepts with other ones, better adapted to the contemporary situation (even though that means, moreover, having to start over again tomorrow). For, it is precisely the central idea of criticism that is at issue, namely, the possibility of carrying out an absolute separation between “material” and “categories” and of “deducing” the latter from the mere idea of “knowledge” of the former, *whatever it might be*. Wanting to derive from the mere idea of a subject confronted with the task of establishing “the unity of a manifold”—or from there being a *factum* of experience for a subject—the necessary, given once-and-for-all system for all the forms through which this unity is instaurated, or which are implied in this experience, runs up against an impossibility because of the *a priori* indeterminate and indeterminable character of the terms *unity*, *manifold*, and *experience*: the “unity” at issue here is not just any unity, and the “manifold”

is not just anything and, above all, it assuredly is not an absolutely chaotic manifold. And if one wanted to give to the expression *unity of a manifold* a meaning that would be the same for Aristotle, for Kant, and for us, it would become nominal and empty.

In the other view, which can be called *panlogistic* (Hegel is its most systematic representative, but here again in no way the only one), there is no separation of form from matter, categories and content imply each other, and there is a “historical dialectic” of knowledge. Without entering into a discussion of the properly philosophical aporias to which it gives rise, let us note simply that this view could, at best, represent only a program that cannot be accomplished in effective actuality. Yet that boils down to saying that it is in full contradiction with itself: because for it the truth can *be* absolutely only within the element of absolute knowledge, but, being unable to produce the latter, it is obliged to make of it once again, whether it says so or not, a “Kantian idea,” infinitely removed from all effectively actual knowledge.

It could be shown that these two (impossible) ways of thinking a history of knowledge are the sole ones possible within the framework of the inherited philosophy, but that would take us far away from our topic. In order to return to it, let us note with Kuhn that a scientific theory never more than “more or less” adapts itself to the facts.<sup>27</sup> The entire history of science is there to show the “less”—the fact that it never adapts itself fully to the facts, that it never exhaustively accounts for them. Yet it is upon the “more” that one must reflect: there always exists a class of facts for which the theory successfully accounts. What the history of physics (which is, *par excellence*, of interest to us here, for obvious

---

<sup>27</sup>T/E: Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, e.g., pp. 147-48.

reasons) makes us see is that, at each stage, there is, for a given class of facts, a “description-explanation” that is at once adequate, according to the accepted criteria of rationality, *and* on the one hand *lacunary* in relation to the set of known facts, on the other hand *logically incoherent* from the standpoint of what the “rationality” of the following stage will be. Everything happens therefore as if there existed layers or strata of the physical object that would be “describable-explainable” in correlation with a given “categorical system” *and* as if the former and the latter had to be, each time, essentially incomplete or *deficient*. In order to avoid misunderstandings, let us note that when we are speaking of “description-explanation” we have in mind nontrivial description-explanations, the kind that allows, for example, authentic prediction not of “events” or of “facts” but of previously unknown *types of phenomena* (as has been accomplished so many times by theories subsequently abandoned). We have to have the courage to confront the following two irrefutable and apparently, for inherited thought, impossible remarks. The Newtonian model is not a mere arbitrary *constructum*; it “corresponds,” in a way, to an immense class of facts of all orders that are without manifest kinship; it has allowed one to explain or predict types of facts that absolutely had not been taken into account when that model was constructed (for example, the secular motion of the planets or the evolution of globular clusters); it even is said to have “predicted,” as Edward Arthur Milne and William McCrea showed in 1934, the expansion of the universe.<sup>28</sup> And yet, the Newtonian model is “false” if this word has some meaning here: not only does it not predict other facts that, in order to be explained, require its

---

<sup>28</sup>Bondi, *Cosmology*, pp. 75-89.

abandonment, but it contains absurd hypotheses and concepts and leads to other absurd conclusions.<sup>29</sup> And we cannot say that its “deficiencies” refer us unavoidably back, in a univocal and indubitable manner, to a vaster model that would “contain” them; it refers us back to the abysses of contemporary cosmology, which cannot “contain” the Newtonian model but has to break therewith.

We therefore cannot think what is starting from the traditional idea of a simple infinity-indefinity *in extenso* and *in profundo* of the empirical world, conceived of as mere negative determinations, as an “ever more and more” that can limitlessly be effectuated and repeated; nor can we do so starting from the other traditional idea of an organization articulated *in profundo*, where each level would form a part, complete in itself and yet well integrated into the “whole,” completely determinable in itself and yet referring in a necessary and univocal way to the lower (or, if one prefers, higher) level. We can think it only as a *stratification* of a hitherto unsuspected type, an organization of folia or leaves [*feuilles*] bound by partial adhesions, an unlimited succession *in profundo* of layers of being, always organized and never totally so, always articulated among themselves and never fully so.

If that is how it is, it is illusory to posit and oppose *one* phenomenal layer and *one* (hypothetically) “real” layer. For, neither of them is unique; and neither one has an absolute privilege. The “first” stratum, that of ordinary perception, of the allegedly natural and immediate world is in a sense the

---

<sup>29</sup>See Albert Einstein, *Relativity* (London: Methuen University Paperbacks, 1960), pp. 105-107. Also, A. Trautman in A. Trautman, F. A. E. Pirani, and H. Bondi, *Lectures on General Relativity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 229ff.; and Bondi, *Cosmology*, pp. 407-409.

least privileged, the most “illusory” of all, since it is full of the inexplicable, is teeming with lacunae, flees in all directions toward something else, and, as soon as we begin to question it, refers us to other strata that account for it. In another sense, however, it possesses an absolute privilege, since every scientific procedure, every interpretation, verification, reduction, and explanation ultimately has to be able to exhibit its evidence in *this-here* world and be said in one’s everyday tongue. As Wigner said, following Niels Bohr, “our science can not entirely stand on its own feet, ...it is deeply anchored in common concepts acquired in our babyhood or born with us, and used in everyday life.”<sup>30</sup> To put it in another way, it is not only from a philosophical standpoint, as Husserl said, that the Earth, *qua* “ordinary ark,” “does not move”,<sup>31</sup> it is that, from a logical standpoint, the accurateness of the statement “the Sun regularly rises in the East and regularly sets in the West” is presupposed in the proof that establishes the heliocentric system. The truth of geocentric appearance is an ingredient of heliocentric truth.

Thus, each of the strata is, in a sense, coherent and, in another sense, lacunary. Yet, too, coherence and lacunarity, adequacy and deficiency are, each time, evidently such only relative to the corresponding “categorical system.” Can we say that they are simply the product thereof? Certainly not. It is

---

<sup>30</sup>*Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup>T/E: In a note written on the envelope holding his manuscript for “Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Räumlichkeit der Natur” [Foundational investigations of the phenomenological origin of the spatiality of nature] (1934), Husserl wrote: “*Die Ur-Arche Erde bewegt sich nicht*” (see the publication note on p. 307 of *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940]).

one thing to recognize that there exists no organization-in-itself of the given that is absolutely required, any more than there exists any question that might arise on its own and might have a meaning outside of every theoretical framework; as Einstein said, “It is the theory which first decides what we can observe”<sup>32</sup> and, it can be added, it is only in and through a theory that lacunae or anomalies can appear. It is, however, quite another thing to suggest that, before this theory—or this endless succession of theories—there would exist only an absolutely amorphous chaos having no organization of its own and yet endowed with the astonishing property of lending itself to any organization whatsoever that the theory would decide to impose upon it. It suffices, moreover, to inspect this last idea closely to see that it is contradictory: insofar as it would be absolutely unorganized, the real would be indefinitely *organizable*, therefore it would still be *organized qua organizable*.

We are thus led to note that we cannot think science or our knowledge of the object under any of the inherited modes of the philosophical tradition: no more as an arbitrary or extrinsically determined succession of constructions of equal value than as “reflection” of an objective order existing in itself or as sovereign imposition of an order proceeding from theoretical consciousness on a chaotic and amorphous given. And we are led to suspect the reason why this is so: it is that each of these modes, when closely examined, has been formed as a *transfer copy* or *tracing* [décalque] starting from a particular and partial empirical relationship achieved in this or that human activity. It would perhaps be time to begin to reflect on this extraordinary enterprise that is people’s

---

<sup>32</sup>Quoted by Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond: Encounters and Conversations*, p. 77.

theoretical making/doing starting from itself, and not starting from representations of the mirror, of the mason, of a crap shoot, or of storytelling [*fabulation*].

We are thus enjoined to think what is—and what, each time, we think about what is—in a way that has neither analogy nor precedent in reflection as it has been inherited. We can neither impute to the real *one* logic nor refuse it any sort of logic, just as we can neither impute to our theories of the real, and to their succession, *one* logic nor refuse them any sort of logic. Faced with the real as well as these theories, the traditional ideas of logic and organization, taken with the absolute extension and potency philosophy wanted to confer upon them, reveal themselves to be inadequate and insufficient. Like knowledge, the real personifies neither its total realization nor the complete absence thereof, and neither the real nor knowledge can even be thought as heterogeneous compounds [*mixtes*] of these determinations and of their contradictories but really rather as lying on the near or far side thereof.

The questions of foundation, which have been debated by philosophy since its origin, thus reemerge in the midst of science, which had long believed that it was protected therefrom. This shows, incidentally, the hopeless superficiality of the notion of *epistemological break*, which is experiencing an anachronistic vogue at the moment when its emptiness may be noted on a material level. They are reappearing as fecund questions because they are not merely being repeated in their naked philosophical form—which, moreover, has never been the case for the great philosophers but only in the Schools. They are being reproduced on the basis of a new and irreplaceable self-experience; the light in which they are viewed and even their tenor have for this reason changed, while renewed discussion thereof is in certain regards “prestressed” by the effectively actual procedures and

results of scientific activity. One must understand—and meditate at length upon—the identity and the nonidentity between the perspective laid out by the *Timaeus* and that of our fundamental physics, between the idea that guides Kant in the transcendental deduction of the categories and the postulation of the invariance of the laws of nature that lies at the foundation of relativity or the perfect cosmological principle. Yet it is precisely this identity and nonidentity that renders them mutually fecundable.

If, then, contemporary science in its own way brings back to the surface philosophical questions as *its* questions *too*, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we can no longer remain at the naive demarcation, naively thought of as guaranteed, between philosophy and science. Granted, it is not, save by accident, the same man who invents an experimental procedure and thinks being. Yet the pure experimenter, as such, is not a physicist, and one may ask oneself whether he who just thinks being is still a philosopher.

What is to be understood, and what is new, is not that number, continuity, iteration, relation, equivalence, order, matter, space, time, causality, identity, individual, species, life, death, organism, finality, and evolution remain problems for which science each time is to presuppose, by preterition, a particular pseudosolution and about which the philosopher—or the physicist dressed up as a philosopher—would have the right or, more than ever, the duty to speak. It is even improper to call *problems* these ultimate heterogeneous compounds of reality and thought, of universality and concretion, which condition our capacity to articulate problems. What is to be understood, and what is new, is that we are henceforth obliged to speak of them starting from an interrogation that is at once scientific and philosophical and that the philosopher and the scientist can

neither each reserve these terms for himself nor refer them over to the other party.

Indeed, it is scarcely possible to accept any longer the current theory of a “demarcation” between science and philosophy as it was formulated and propagated by Logical Positivism and the Vienna School for a half-century and seems to be accepted, curiously, by most philosophers. When one posits as criterion for the scientific character of a (not purely logical or formal) theory the possibility of it being falsifiable by an experimental fact, one forgets that the term *experimental fact* as well as the term *falsification* harbors some immense problems that are, precisely, philosophical ones. What Logical Positivism has so pretentiously advanced holds perhaps for characterizing empirical statements at the most platitudinous level but certainly not a scientific theory. “All swans are white” is an empirical statement inasmuch as it can be (and has been) falsified by the presentation of a single nonwhite swan. A scientific theory worthy of the name, however, is never purely and simply falsifiable by the presentation of an experimental fact, first for the simple reason that the experimental facts with which scientific theories deal do not have the curious property Logical Positivism naively attributes to them, that of being perfectly determined and univocal in themselves. An experimental fact is such only within the framework and in terms of a theory; once again, “It is the theory which first decides what we can observe.” We therefore cannot pretend to believe that there exists a world of facts in themselves, which are such as they are before every scientific interpretation and independent thereof, to which we compare theories in order to see whether they are or are not falsified by it. Granted, scientific theory cannot do just anything or go without any empirical content, but the empirical content is presented therein with an enormous degree of conceptual elaboration, which comes,

precisely, from the theory. The relation between the two terms is therefore infinitely more complicated and profound than Logical Positivism presupposes, since it brings into play the entire conceptual apparatus of science and, behind that, as precisely the contemporary situation of physics shows, the categorial system and even the logical forms of thought. Neither can one consider that the notion of *falsification* goes without saying. A theory can always enlist some additional hypotheses when faced with a “fact” that disturbs it, and saying that it is then no longer “the same” theory is just playing with words, since, after all, no one has ever been in a position to count exactly the number of independent hypotheses a physical theory implicitly or explicitly contains. The accumulation of additional hypotheses can go on indefinitely (one is rarely short on hypotheses) and when finally the theory is abandoned this is most often not because a new “fact” has definitively falsified it but because one has been able to invent a “simpler” theory (a term that, in turn, is more than mysterious but we cannot enlarge upon that here). The demarcational criterion we have discussed therefore becomes, much more modestly: A scientific theory maintains a certain relation, which remains to be defined, with a class of events named *experimental facts*, which also remains to be defined. Yet these two definitions cannot be produced either exclusively by science as such or exclusively by a theory of science (epistemology or philosophy) that would furnish them while ignoring what science has done and is in the process of doing. It is in this sense that we are saying that a strict demarcation between science and philosophy is impossible.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup>T/E: In the Ryle/Soper translation (p. 226), immediately below the original endnote, numbered “23” (here, n. 32) appears an endnote marked “23a,” though in the body of the text there is instead here a second callout

On this level, it is unclear what separates Martin Heidegger from Sir Karl Popper when the former writes that “physics does well not to concern itself with the thingness of the thing”<sup>34</sup>—save that, as is known, physics does not merit the praise thus bestowed upon it. For, here one shares in the illusion that there might exist a “positive” knowledge of the thing, capable of determining it and manipulating it endlessly, without ever finding oneself obliged to ask oneself: But what, then, is a thing? That this alleged “positive” knowledge possesses in Heidegger’s view less (or more) value than in the view of positivist scientists is obviously of no importance; for, what we are dealing with here are really some arbitrary subjective preferences of no possible philosophical status. What really matters to note here is the mutilation, the blindness to which such a position condemns philosophy

---

“23” at the end of the paragraph. In any case, the endnote reads as follows:

The text, in its present form, was drafted in the autumn-winter of 1970-1971. Since then, work by Lakatos, Feyerabend, Elkana and others (some of which was already published in 1970, but of which I was not aware) has brought to light numerous and important instances in the history of science which, in my view, lend heavy support to the ideas expressed in the text. This is not to say I share in the least the epistemological conclusions of some of the authors mentioned—neither Lakatos’ reformed Popperianism (though, judging from his last texts, I believe that Lakatos, had he survived, would have severed his last links with Popper’s conceptions); nor Feyerabend’s “epistemological anarchism,” which is sheer epistemological nihilism and in fact ignores naively the problem of truth. (Footnote [*sic*] added by the author to the 1984 English edition.)

The French Editors of the 1998 reprint failed to include this note, perhaps out of ignorance of it.

<sup>34</sup>T/E: We have simply translated Castoriadis’s French for this unattributed Heideggerian quotation or, perhaps, paraphrase.

itself. For, to philosophize is not only to inquire of oneself about the thingness of the thing but also to inquire of oneself about the thing itself; if there is a metaphysics that is itself really over and done with, it is this separation between the question of thingness and the question of the thing, this illusion that one would be able to establish in a completely secure fashion the line of demarcation, to really create a border for the un-borderable. To philosophize is to question this thing and each thing—and to open it in this way to something else and to what is not a thing. The question of the thingness of the thing would be hard pressed to mean something for someone who would know no thing. Now, contrary to what Heidegger thinks and practices, the thing—things—are not given once and for all; he remains, by a strange rebound of things, prisoner of the obsolete metaphysics that underlay classical physics and that is itself a degenerated byproduct of the great ancient metaphysics. Things—the *pragmata*—are constantly *made*; they are produced, too, by human making/doing, including scientific making/doing among other kinds, and this making/doing brings to light or brings into existence some aspects of the thingness of the thing that, without that making/doing, would remain hidden or nonexistent. Having ignored that, having remained blind to contemporary physics, psychoanalysis, and revolution, Heidegger condemned himself to being able to say of the thingness of the thing only what Aristotle or Kant could and did indeed say about it already. It is no surprise, then, that he, in turn, hastens to proclaim the “end of philosophy”—at a moment when everything is calling for a radical philosophical renewal—and that he is thinking of an “end of philosophy” determined by the “independen[ce of the] sciences” and of a “dissolution of philosophy in the

technicized [*technisierten*] sciences.”<sup>35</sup> Philosophy is certainly not inductive thinking, but neither can it be empty thinking of being as such. It is only in contact with beings that the question of *their* being can be discussed or even simply raised.

If, therefore, we are correctly interpreting the meaning of the present crisis of the exact sciences as a demonstration of the untenable character of the Galilean program—which required that it be possible to effect an essential separation between science and philosophy, guaranteed by a set of categories that seemed as evident to scientists as his axioms did to Euclid—the conclusion to be drawn therefrom cannot be a mere renewal of philosophical questions starting from the impossibility of sticking to a conceptual base assigned once and for all to knowledge; it is the denial of the possibility of separation between the conceptual base and the results, the recognition that the results have repercussions on the base, the drift of that base within the Maelström of discussions, discoveries, and refutations, its being in perpetual question, the end of scientific tranquility, in short, the definitive removal of the roadblock between philosophy and science. It is the absolute separation of regions that is at issue. Not because all of them would be but a single one but because an articulation of them exists that is wholly other than a partition, than a mere juxtaposition, than a gradual specification or a linear, logical, or real hierarchy. Explicitly restoring this articulation in another way than Plato or Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, or Hegel could do seems to me to be the present task of reflection.

---

<sup>35</sup>Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” in *On Time and Being*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 58 and 59 (translation slightly altered).

One is forced to note that this task is rarely taken on. Fortunately, it is more and more being taken up by scientists. The most serious problems of contemporary physics have given rise to the need to ask oneself: So, what, beyond the measurements imposed upon it and the mathematical formulas in which it is dressed up for but one season, are the physical object and the physicist's object, which are inspiring a growing number of writings in which the great physicists question themselves—while sometimes going all the way back to Thales—about the foundations and the meaning of their scientific activity? Likewise in biology, where the debates over principles had in fact never abated, the great discoveries over the last 15 years have revived and renewed discussion around the nature of the living being and the categories the knowledge thereof put into play, and several of the researchers responsible for these discoveries have felt the need to formulate the more general reflections to which they had been led. Certain philosophers might find these efforts one-sided, even naive. They would be wrong, for they would find therein inexhaustible matter for reflection, and they would be quite ungracious, since contemporary philosophy's shortcomings in this regard are total. Contemporary philosophy has indeed rendered itself incapable of welcoming new questions either because, in claiming to confine itself to a discussion of "linguistic conventions" or to an epistemology brought down to the level of formal logic, it has become entirely desiccated; or because, pridefully withdrawn onto the mountain of being, it has posited once and for all a radical separation between the thought of being and the knowledge of beings, such knowledge being abandoned to science, which is identified with technics and described explicitly as nought. In both cases, the result is the same: maintenance of a separation between what at all costs has to be held and thought together.

*Contemporary Biology: False and True Problems*

The discoveries of capital importance that have been made over the last twenty years in biology have led several authors, and not the least of them, to affirm that the problems of principle that had divided biologists and philosophers for centuries have finally been settled [*liquidés*]. It may nevertheless be asked whether it is rather the terms in which these problems had been discussed that have been liquidated, and whether recent attainments, in renewing them, are not deepening our interrogations and do not force us to reflect on them within a horizon that stretches beyond that of the living being as such.

What is certain is that the conjunction between molecular biology and the cybernetic/information-based model is dissolving some of the aporias that had shaped the object of the age-old debate between mechanism and finalism. However, it does so, strangely, through a simultaneous confirmation of the essential thesis of mechanism and of its finalist refutation. It has been argued against mechanism that to say of an organism that it was a machine meant *ipso facto* that it was something with a finality: a machine is a machine insofar as it is arranged *for the sake of* producing a given result, and this *for the sake of* alone furnishes its *raison d'être* in general and the *wherefore* [le pour-quoi] of the arrangement of its parts. Likewise was it remarked that it was impossible, within a mechanistic conception, to account for adaptive and labile behaviors or to understand temporal developments characterized by an absolutely unique orientation that comes to the fore through immensely complex and heterogeneous means, with the most extreme rigor and the greatest plasticity, like the transition from fertilized egg to adult organism.

At present, we are able to consider a class of

machines—ones we construct, perfect, and put into operation on a constantly broadened scale—whose result, the pertinent output, therefore the finality, can be defined, not upon the basis of the whole of their environmental attributes, but upon the basis of the whole of their own attributes, the operation of which is governed by a rule of self-conservation and even self-modification. Finality is thus immanentized by a machine, as it is by the living being. We can endow such machines with conditional programming of a considerable complexity that allows them to have “adaptive behaviors” toward a large range of external conditions, and “heuristic programs” that lead them to optimize certain states according to predetermined criteria. We can even show that, under certain conditions, the appearance of adaptive or heuristic behaviors may result from random processes. Finally, the possibility of deploying an order temporally from a purely spatial arrangement, of “spatializing time” (of representing in advance and straightaway on a device a succession of conditionally interdependent operations), is the trivial presupposition of the simplest computer program.

Therefore, there exist, mathematically and really, some machines that, provided that they have an energy input and an energy sink, offer a given capacity for adaptation to variable external conditions and an immanent finality of self-conservation or self-development. Their existence certainly does not violate any physical law or bring into play any “material principle,” any “force” that would be unknown to physics (an assertion that is, moreover, obviously tautological). Do we have here, however, an answer to the true question? Ought not that question rather to be formulated as follows: Can the description, analysis, and explanation of these machines and, more generally, of all classes of automata—from computers to bacteria, all the way up to human societies—be performed solely by means of the

categories and concepts of physics, or do they have to introduce something new, not only unparalleled but without physical signification? In both cases, could not these categories and these concepts lead to the formulation of laws proper to automata and not reducible to physical laws? Finally, if that were so, could it not be maintained that, even supposing that the laws of physics account for the appearance of automata (as, in principle, they ought to be able to do), they would do so only insofar as those automata are physical systems and not insofar as they are automata?

#### The standpoint of information theory and its limits

It has long been noted that the living being can be grasped, described, and analyzed only in terms of concepts unknown to physics, such as *function*, *organ*, *individual*, *species*, *internal environment* as opposed to *external environment*, and so on. The validity of this important remark remained, however, unsettled [*en suspens*], so long as one could not show that those concepts are effectively irreducible or basic, so long as they are not simply manners of speaking, perhaps anthropomorphic ones, abbreviations to which no level of reality proper would correspond. The discussion of this issue has to be taken up again at the most elementary level: it seems like that could be done today, in terms, precisely, of the standpoint of cybernetics and of the generalization cybernetics allows—though not in the way in which one sometimes sees this done. As much as the cybernetic-informational standpoint has been essential for dispelling some false problems and for eliminating some marvels that have no reason to be, so does its indiscriminate and uncritical utilization, which one too often witnesses (and for which the creators of cybernetics and information theory are in no way responsible; for, on the contrary, they have

explicitly and repeatedly warned against extensions of the theory's concepts and methods outside of a rigorously circumscribed field), risk engendering considerable confusion and mystified euphoria that veil the true problems. One can try to formulate the principal questions as follows:

- Can the categories of thermodynamics be presented as covering adequately the entire field of biology? Or do we have to admit that we have no clue about it?
- Does the strict concept of *quantity of information* (and its thermodynamic equivalent) established by the theory of the same name suffice to explain, or even describe, the functioning and behavior of an automaton of the slightest degree of complexity? Or is it indispensable to introduce other dimensions of information, and perhaps other concepts—like *pertinence, weight, value, signification* of the information or of the “message”—in order to grasp what the automaton is?
- Is the concept of *order* needed in biology, as well as in anthropology, identical to the one used in physics? Or is its connection with the latter only that of a vague analogy, or even just of homonymy?

#### Automaton as self-definition

There is no question of discussing here these problems in any sort of thorough way. It is necessary, however, to summarize a few considerations that ground their legitimacy. The first concerns the very notion of automaton (or of living being). People do not pay enough attention to the fact that cybernetics leans implicitly on a concept of automaton that is, strictly speaking, void of physical signification. What first of all characterizes logically, phenomenologically, and really an

automaton—and the living being in general—is that the latter establishes, within the physical world, a system of partitions that hold only for it (and, in a series of degressive embeddings, for its “fellow creatures [*semblables*]”) and that, being only one among an infinity of such possible systems, is totally arbitrary from the physical standpoint. The rigor of the arguments contained in the *Principia Mathematica* is of no interest to the mites of the French National Library. Ambient lighting is not pertinent to a computer’s operation. Radio waves do not carry any information for terrestrial living beings, modern man excepted. The segments of the universe that are and are not pertinent to an automaton, therefore that, simply, *are* or *are not* for it, form a system of partitions corresponding to the automaton under consideration that the physicist *qua* physicist does not know and has no reason to know; he can only, if required, construct it *qua* engineer, that is to say, on the condition that he has been furnished the complete description of the automaton under consideration and its corresponding devices. In other words, far from being able to explain that automaton, the system of partitions in question presupposes its specification.

This consideration may be given concrete form while heading in two different directions. It is obviously only this system of partitions—and the hierarchy of “discursive universes” in which, each time, the automaton finds itself situated—that allows one to define in each case what for the automaton is information and what is noise or nothing at all; it is also this system that allows one to define for the automaton, within what is, information in general, pertinent information, the weight of some information, its value, its operational “signification,” and, finally, its signification plain and simple. These different dimensions of information, which cannot be ignored, indicate that one could not confine oneself to the quantity of information the telecommunications

engineer measures or boil down all the questions to the calculation of probabilities. They refer equally to this obvious fact: that, if not in general, in any case within this framework and *qua* correlate of information, measurement of probability is possible only *as to*—as to a device for elaborating the received instructions, as to a set of prior knowledge, and so on; therefore, *as to* referred to an essentially subjective system. They ultimately show that, in the sense that really matters, the automaton can never be thought except from within, that it constitutes its framework of existence and meaning, that it is its own *a priori*, in short, that to be alive is to be for oneself, as certain philosophers had for a long time stated.

#### The concept of conservation

On the other hand, this system of partitions maintains a relation, as tight as it is obscure, with the rule the operation of the automaton obeys, the state the latter aims at attaining or conserving, in short, its finality. Ordinarily, we do not pay enough attention to this question, led astray as we are by the deceptive simplicity this question displays in the case of artificial automata. When we build a computer, we are the ones who set the desired output as well as the operational conditions: the discursive universe of the computer and the fact that it reacts to punch cards or magnetic tape but does not cry upon hearing *Le vase brisé*<sup>36</sup> have been set by us with a view toward a result or toward a well-defined state that is to be attained. In the causality involved in men's production of a computer, the computer's finality (rather, its representation) is the cause, its discursive universe (incorporated in its

---

<sup>36</sup>T/E: A poem by Sully Prudhomme published in an 1865 collection.

construction) is the consequence; in the computer's operation, the order is reversed; but both moments are quite distinct and the logical situation is clear. Things do not proceed the same way with natural automata for a host of reasons of which it suffices to mention the principal one: we can say nothing about its finality. We cannot say that the overall functioning of the living being aims at the conservation of something definable. It cannot be stated that it aims at the conservation of the individual *qua* individual, for that would be circular (the functioning of the living individual would aim at the conservation of the individual *qua* living individual, obviously) and doubly false (such conservation infallibly fails and happens to be subordinated to the conservation of the species). And yet, for the same reasons, it cannot be said that the functioning of the living being aims at the conservation of species: in order that species continue to exist, some species disappear. Does the functioning of the living being aim, then, at the conservation of the biosystem in general? What, however, does that signify? The biosystem is but the set of living beings, namely, of automata whose operation is compelled to conserve the biosystem, namely, the set of living beings, namely, ...; in short, conservation is invoked while disregarding the fact that such conservation, if it is something, is conservation of a state that would be definable only by referral to conservation.

Can we, however, even speak of *conservation* where it is a matter of a biosystem essentially characterized by its expansion and its evolution? And can we grasp such expansion and such evolution by means of thermodynamic categories alone? It has long been noted that the living being is equivalent to a machine that locally decreases entropy or at least prevents it from increasing. Granted, in the end the living being dies, but before then it creates in its place one or several other entropy-decreasing machines. More generally,

the overall terrestrial biosystem—the sole consideration that really matters from this standpoint—not only does not die but has been expanding for a considerable amount of time. This local entropy-decreasing machine, whose mass is on the order perhaps of  $10^{18}$  grams over an inverted cone of two or three billion years, while minuscule on the scale of the universe, though immense when compared to a glass of water and to the ink droplet with which one can at every instant verify the iron necessity of the second law of thermodynamics, and near in fact to the geometric mean of these two extremes, is obviously not an isolated system. It functions at the expense of solar energy, and its thermodynamic accounts are in order, at least as concerns the first law (in order to do the accounting for the second law, one would have to be able to calculate the entropy of the rest of the universe, and it is uncertain whether that expression makes any sense).

#### The concept of thermodynamic fluctuation

However, the terrestrial biosystem also represents—like, perhaps, billions of other analogous systems throughout the universe?—a fluctuation that, taken globally and through its evolution, appears less than improbable. Whatever might have been the composition of the primordial soup (unless, of course, some living beings were already introduced into it) and the then-reigning conditions, the probability of a first “spontaneous” fluctuation bringing some fragments of matter first to the state of complex organic compounds, then to that of proto-organisms capable of inventing for themselves, nearly simultaneously, some metabolic and replicative servomechanisms, a genetic code that can function only if the products in which its instructions are expressed are already available, a membrane that is at once impermeable and permeable as needed, is minute. Yet

what is one to say of the constant reascent, against the downward slope of entropy, over two billion years, of this increasing (and, it seems, accelerated) complexification not only of species but of the biosystem? What of the increase by leaps and bounds by powers of 10 of its order and of the interdependency of the properties of its parts? What of the fact that  $10^{16}$  seconds, one after another, have never witnessed a major and lasting spontaneous downward fluctuation of the system, one capable of pulling it back, would it only be for a time, toward its natural inclination? Granted, it can always be said: Had that not been so, there would have been nothing to observe, nothing to explain, and no one for whom there would be this nothing. But to say that, had the problem not been resolved one way or another, we would not have been in a position to pose it to ourselves does not signify that we possessed the solution thereto. From the thermodynamic standpoint, what we are postulating here is not only equivalent to the idea that, for a brief instant, the ink diluted in an immense liquid had spontaneously concentrated itself in a well-delimited region of the container but also that such a concentration kept on increasing, that the ink, again in spontaneous fashion, had gradually stratified itself into previously indiscernible colors, then started to produce regular drawings, among which can be distinguished at present the signs that make up the Boltzmann-Gibbs equations and a series of texts explaining that such evolving states are so improbable that they are in fact impossible.

Everything happens as if life were not, of course, violating the second law of thermodynamics but swindling it for an indefinite period of time, circumventing it, rendering it irrelevant for its operations, like a gambler who, over the course of a gigantic game of roulette composed perhaps of  $10^{100}$  runs, was able to combine his selections with his bets in such a way that, starting with a penny, he finds himself now

with one billion times one billion tons of gold (these numbers are not just manners of speaking) and continues to win. Theory assures us that such an event is possible, that its probability is finite and assignable, but that it is so minute that no one will ever be able to observe it. Now, not only are we observing this immensely improbable event; we are that event. Is the roulette wheel rigged? Has the gambler found an infallible winning formula (though we can prove that none can exist)? Or, are we simply in the domain of probability theory, therefore in the domain of statistical thermodynamics?

#### The concept of stationary state

These considerations are accepted and forcefully underscored by those biophysicists who, for a few years now, have been trying to study the living being from the standpoint of the thermodynamics of irreversible phenomena and stationary states. One may well doubt the ultimate success of such efforts, and it is legitimate to ask whether one is not again starting to eliminate the very property one wants to account for: namely, that the biosystem is essentially nonstationary (or else that, if stationary, its relaxation time is such that the theory in question has lost all relevance); whether, too, one is not neglecting to take into consideration the specific distinctions and dimensions that are pertinent to an analysis of the living being. An analogy can usefully clarify this point. What, from the cybernetic standpoint, essentially distinguishes an automaton from any machine or from a physical process, however complex it might be, is that, in the automaton, the expenditure and the circulation of energy as such—which, of course, always exists—is not a pertinent variable: it can be varied to an almost arbitrary extent, provided that the message gets through. The variable that counts is, in the first place, the quantity of information.

Yet, while the quantity of energy is a matter of indifference, its quality is of the essence: the automaton operates by absorbing “noble” energy, which it transforms along the way into information, and which it dissipates in a less “noble” form. Following Schrödinger’s famous saying, “What an organism feeds upon is negative entropy.”<sup>37</sup> Now, the living being does not limit itself to consuming negative entropy, to utilizing free energy, in order to conserve a given flow of information and a given type of order: considered in its proper temporal dimension, as segment of the terrestrial biosystem, it increases the flow of information, changes its type, modifies its order, and raises its level of organization. In these regards—which are absolutely decisive, since what really matters to us are self-evolving automata—not only the quantity but the quality of the energy absorbed ceases to be pertinent, provided that the energy is sufficient. Whether or not the biosystem raises its level of information, the same quantity of free energy, with the same characteristics, is supplied to it per second and per square centimeter of the Earth’s surface; it utilizes roughly the same proportion of it per gram of living matter; it dissipates the same amount of it into the cosmic drain via radiation. For the same quantity of biomass, the overall balance will be approximately identical, whether the surface of the Earth would be occupied by protists, dominated by saurians, or witness to the first hominoids lighting the first fires. What is thermodynamically identical, however, is precisely what makes all the difference biologically (and cybernetically).

Thermodynamics is the sole part of physics in which

---

<sup>37</sup>T/E: Erwin Schrodinger, *What Is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell & Mind and Matter* (1944; London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 76.

a true time—an irreversible time—appears. However, this true time is not yet true enough to be the time of biology or of history. Thermodynamic time is oriented by the arrow of increasing probability. Yet this increasing probability, certainly ever active in pockets or layers of biological evolution and of history, no longer seems to play a role when it comes to their most important aspects. Must it be said that biological or historical time is oriented by the arrow of increasing improbability? It seems to us, rather, that one must purely and simply deny the pertinence of those concepts in this regard. But what can the idea that there would “objectively” exist several species of time really mean?

Contemporary biology therefore does not eliminate principled investigations into the living being. It renders them even sharper. At the same time, in obliging one to reflect anew about the concepts of *information*, *order*, *organization*, *self-evolving systems*, and even *history*, it can lead to light being shed, if only by contrast, on objects that are to be found beyond its own field, and quite particularly those of the anthropological disciplines. For, it is not difficult to see that those concepts, like most of the considerations developed above, appertain, too, to the categorial framework through which we try to understand the organization and the evolution of individuals and of human societies.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup>T/E: In the Ryle/Soper translation, an endnote “24a” that does not appear in the French original is called out here. Though there is no explicit indication, it seems as if this is another Author’s addition to the 1984 English-language translation since a reference provided therein postdates the 1978 *Carrefours* edition. The endnote reads as follows:

Recent developments in theoretical biology seem to me to be fully situated within the horizon of the questions raised by the text. See, in particular, Henri Atlan, *Entre le cristal et la fumée* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1979); Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *La Nouvelle alliance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); Francisco Varela,

*Anthropological Disciplines*

The situation of the anthropological disciplines (or “human sciences”) is assuredly the most problematic in all these regards. It is difficult to say whether it is publicly perceived as such since, on the one hand, “crisis” has been, from the time they appeared, their permanent state and since, on the other hand, one periodically hears it improperly being proclaimed, as a result of some real or alleged progress in one or another of these disciplines, that the key to all anthropological problems has finally been found (as has successively been the case with economics, psychoanalysis, and linguistics). Here, the effects of the separation between disciplines make themselves felt more heavily than anywhere else: of their separation from philosophy (which, truly speaking, never was effectively able to be achieved), since it leads one to forget the countless philosophical presuppositions and implications of every anthropological discourse; of their separation from the other great sets of disciplines, physical and especially biological, since it is impossible to see in man’s physical and biological nature a mere abstract condition for his historical activity; finally, of the separation between anthropological disciplines, since the unity of the object immediately defies scientific dissection and since it may be asked whether the distinction we make between different disciplines has a meaning for societies other than our own.

---

*Principles of Biological Autonomy* (North Holland, NY and Oxford, 1979).

The French Editors of the 1998 reprint failed to include this note, perhaps out of ignorance of it.

Economics

Take, for example, economics. How could any economic knowledge—in the sense of the description, analysis, and explanation of effectively actual economic phenomena—exist without leaning on some postulates or results concerning individuals' behavior, its motivations, its degree of rationality, and the nature of that rationality, concerning the division of society into groups, layers, classes, and concerning the internal operation and social role of organizations and institutions, particularly the business enterprise, the trade union, and the State? It cannot. But from where would economic knowledge take them? The conclusions of psychology and sociology do not impose themselves upon it with the same force that the latest accepted results of atomic physics impose themselves upon the astrophysicist or the biochemist. And, moreover, those conclusions do not, far from it, offer it the same assistance. Also, either the economist takes refuge in the affirmation that his knowledge concerns “the pure logic of choice” (an incoherent and fallacious position, as will be seen in a moment) or he procures his postulates within his own “self-evident facts,” which are obviously only the most naive of prejudices. So, the totality of the contemporary literature leans implicitly on a psychology of individual behavior a writer of serialized novels from 1850 would have rejected as too summary: an individual never acts except with perfect knowledge of what he wants and how to obtain it, and never wants but one thing, to maximize his gain while minimizing his effort. Buttressed with this profound view of man, the standard economist is ready to shower with sarcasm every psychological or psychoanalytical consideration. At most, he will maintain that such considerations explain the deviations in individual behavior in relation to an average type, which

even out statistically—without glimpsing that the question bears precisely upon his construction of a determinate average type, a hollow dummy that corresponds to no concrete or statistical reality. Likewise, sociology and philosophy continue to be held in suspicion, which allows contemporary economics to speak, without knowing it, the prose of the most naively absolute Hegelianism since everything that economics says about the role and behavior of the State, for example, the advice economics offers the State, and the rules of behavior economics sets for the State postulate that the State is nothing other than a purely rational instance of authority and the reality of the moral idea. This is not some privilege reserved to academic economics; in standard Marxism, too, no integration between the theory of the State as the dominant class's instance of power and the analysis of its economic role has ever been performed. The same goes for the business enterprise and the trade union. In all these cases, the sociological function of institutions as well as their bureaucratic constitution and the irrationality that by construction is thus incorporated therein are almost totally ignored.

Here appears already the ineliminable problem of the ends of economic activity, whether one is talking about the effectively actual ends a given socioeconomic system achieves or the normative ends, which remain forever an open question. The attitude of the majority of academic economics (in the countries of the East, of the official economics) consists in asserting, simultaneously, that the existing system is, give or take a few disruptions, optimal, and that its own role is not to discuss ends but, rather, means. What really matters here is not the sociological interpretation of the duplicity thus manifested, which is evident, but the logical consistency of the alleged *Wertfreiheit* of economics. Is the system optimal relative to all possible ends; is it a pure

universal means? It would clearly be absurd to make such an assertion. The economist will respond that the system is optimal relative to the ends the people living in the system have in view. This answer is no good, since what people have in view and the way they can manifest it, including on the economic level, are heavily determined by the system itself, and asserting its optimality leads one in a circle. One can therefore set aside the pretension of economics to pronounce its opinion, *qua* economics, about the optimality or nonoptimality of systems and consider only the intention to constitute a “pure logic of choice among limited means to attain unlimited ends.” Economic science would therefore be a pure technique of generalized calculation that would produce colorless results if it were furnished premises concerning what ends are to be achieved. That would show already that it could in no way advance our intelligence about the social world and about the real operation of the economy. There is, however, more, for in fact it is not possible to establish a neutral economic calculus. Apart from trivial cases, a plurality of ends immediately raises the question of the comparability or the common measure of those ends, therefore of an evaluation. The economist will respond that it is up to the project manager to furnish one; he accepts only clients capable of specifying for him the ordinal and cardinal utilities they attach to the satisfaction of their desires, after which he considers how to economize the means. But economize what, in relation to what? If it is a matter of economizing the expenditure of energy to accomplish a task, it is not an economist of which one has a need but an engineer or an agronomist. It is obviously not a matter of that but, rather, of economizing the productive consumption of a set of means that are physically and temporally heterogeneous. The reduction of those means to a common measure still requires a relative valuation of them; where can one procure that? In

fact, one always procures it where it actually takes place, in the market, and money is the measure of all things. This is also true, of course, when it comes to the effectively actual valuation of ends, and the economist accepts that just as it is performed, in theory as well as in practice, by the price system of end products, which obviously reflects the given distribution of incomes, the historical state of production and of habits, and so on. In theory, one could dispense with having recourse to that, if the system under consideration satisfies a set of fairly restrictive conditions, the most important of which is the existence of a means that enters, directly or indirectly, into all production processes. It happens that, in effectively actual human affairs (but not necessarily in pure universes of choice), one may, by means of some abstractions, think that such a universal means exists: it is labor. Yet even labor cannot be torn from the concrete historical world it fashions and that fashions it in order to become abstract and transhistorical universal equivalent. To say *hic et nunc* that such and such an act or this or that decision expends usefully or wastes some quantity of labor is to say that it wastes or expends usefully some quantity of labor in *hic et nunc* determinations, whose signification is nothing, economically speaking, outside of the different assortments and quantities of products in which it might have become materialized. This is therefore to say that these products, such as they are and in the way that they are, *have value*. Now, this is evidently arbitrary from the pure point of view; that is to say, this is social-historical. When 30 young people decide to live in every which way in a hippie commune, the economist will say that the opportunity cost of this act, “for society,” is the whole set of commodities those persons could produce in whatever sector in accordance with the most efficient techniques. It could be answered that nothing would in fact be gained “for society” or for

whomever, if 30 additional individuals were to sweat and bore themselves to death on an assembly line, in order to produce useless objects that would not be sold if other individuals did not spend their lives persuading the population that it must possess them. The most efficient techniques as well as the structure of demand are consubstantial with the social system, and to economize labor is to economize it in relation to the ends of the established system, which are in a deep relation of homogeneity with respect to its means. The fallacy of the separation between ends and means—which is to be found in all domains, and particularly in discussions over the role of science and technics—is one of the most harmful of all those dominating the contemporary scene; the entire ideology of economics, like the “logic of the choice of means,” is based on this absurdity. Just as an individual’s true ends are not what he says they are, but what his acts in fact tend to achieve, so the ends of a society are in the first place nothing other than what its means constantly produce, and society will use its means only with a view toward the ends that are its own; besides, it cannot do otherwise, because those ends are inscribed within the very materiality, the nature, and the organization of the means. And the finality of a productive system, which wholly determines it, is not production in general, nor is it even the production and reproduction of people’s material lives; it is the production and reproduction of the existing social system (of which people’s material survival, within generally broad limits, is simply a necessary condition).

To say that economics—which cannot in reality but be inextricably explanatory or positive and normative or political—cannot ignore the question of ends is to say that it can be separated absolutely neither from the rest of the anthropological disciplines nor from philosophy, nor from politics in the true, that is to say grand, sense of the term. As

absurd as it would be to discuss an investment choice or a market's equilibrium conditions with philosophical arguments, it is just as absurd to forget that all the arguments utilized ultimately rest on extremely weighty, and in no one way self-evident, philosophical, anthropological, and political postulates.

### Law

The same thing goes for a discipline like law. No positive knowledge of the law (in the sense of a history/sociology of the law, which remains in large part to be created) will ever be able to be constituted without appealing to the entire set of disciplines that aim to describe, analyze, and explain the appearance, the functioning, and the mechanisms for the preservation of a social system (including those that analyze the constitution and the maintenance of a relation between the social individual and positive law) as well as to the logical and technical necessities of a coherent juridical system. And one of its capital tasks, where it could serve as a model for the other social-historical disciplines, would be to render intelligible the relation, at once complementary and antagonistic, between those two moments, namely, how the social system conditions the birth of a particular and historically specific logic-technics of the sector under consideration and overdetermines it, and how, and up to what point, this particular logic-technics becomes autonomized and can end up working against the overall finality of the system. Likewise is it obvious that the practice of law, the effectively actual application of a juridical system by those who are responsible for it, is inseparable from a consideration of the ends of the social system. The insurmountable distance that necessarily separates the legal rule from the material it is to cover—which was discovered

by Plato and correctly attributed by him to the essentially abstract character of the rule<sup>39</sup>—is recognized by the modern theory and philosophy of law as an unavoidable lacunarity of every juridical system and is recognized for its productive, and not adventitious, character in the interpretation of the rule by he who applies it. This lacunarity can be made up for, and the interpretation can be made, only by effecting a dual linkage—of the rule to the intention animating it beyond its letter, and of the rule to the concrete situation that is to be judged. This requires, therefore, on the part of he who applies the rule, that he might know this intention and, as this expression is meaningless, that he might supplement it, and that he might understand the situation sufficiently in order to judge whether, in the individual and social circumstances, the overall effectively actual results of a decision will or will not conform to the intention as he interprets it. To say that the jurist has to be at once politician, psychologist, and sociologist, as much as logician capable of preserving the coherence of a system that obeys other ends no doubt has implications that go beyond the questions being discussed here, but it shows, too, on a particularly weighty example, the signification of the separation of disciplines.

### Linguistics

The uncomfortable dependence on concepts and first terms that the discipline under consideration does not have at its disposal, but merely a partial and problematic usufruct thereof, could easily be seen in the case of linguistics, had not the thing been muffled, these past few years, by the noise

---

<sup>39</sup>T/E: On p. 2 of [OPS](#), Castoriadis provides the reference as Plato *Statesman* 294a-c.

being made around various schools of this discipline and their claim to have finally given it the status of rigorous science. Granted, the question, “What is a tongue [*la langue*]?” along with the primitive circle it immediately draws around itself and every response, can be challenged by the linguist, who will refuse to discuss essence and will call as witness the physicist, who is said not to ask what *phusis* is but is said to try only to predict what it will do. However, as is known, physical theory is obliged to make hypotheses about “what acts thus or otherwise” is, lest it be demoted to the rank of a purely empirical-pragmatic activity that would grant the equivalency of all the *constructa* that supply similar predictions, whatever might be their logical incompatibilities. Here, too, the question of what tongue is does not arise only when it comes to constituting the object of linguistics and delimiting its boundaries (which are readily transgressed by certain linguists when they state that there are or are not “animal languages,” that the “genetic code” is a language, or that the human world can be reduced to the exchange of women, objects, and signs). The essence of language [*du langage*] and the question it poses return in all its manifestations and thereby in the concrete work of linguistics. Must it be said, for example, that double articulation<sup>40</sup> is essentially inherent to language, or else is it simply a universal empirical fact? Before challenging that distinction, let it be recalled that the linguists do not challenge it but are divided about it—a fact that is in itself highly significant, since a physicist would not for a second doubt the essential

---

<sup>40</sup>T/E: “The French concept of double articulation was first introduced by André Martinet in 1949. The English calque *double articulation* is sometimes replaced by *duality of patterning*” ([English Wikipedia, “Double articulation”](#)).

necessity of a universal fact and would try immediately to deduce it. Must it be said that the few parts of speech [*classes grammaticales*] one encounters in all known tongues express some essential traits of language or else do we have here a mere inductive generality? And what is to be said of the other ones, specific to certain tongues alone, but without which the former ones would not be able to function, and of the relation between the two? How is one even to begin to discuss this question, and all those that deal with the universals of language, without asking oneself up to what point any categorization of the world is subject to some unsurpassable internal necessities—and in this case, whether they come from what categorizes, from what is to be categorized, from the two and in what proportion and with what relation—and up to what point it merely reflects some aspects, which in this regard are accidental, of the culture under consideration? Yet what else is this question but a new formulation of a philosophical interrogation that is as ancient as it is central? In this regard, the culturalist theses, like the apriorist theses currently receiving support, are to a discomfiting degree reminiscent of some philosophical positions that are as old as our history. A malevolent person will add that these theses now burden those positions with a naivety they did not have at the start; a benevolent one, that these theses renew those positions with the material they bring in. One will perhaps easily agree with both.

Language has to do with meaning. How, then, is one to speak of language without talking philosophy? For a half-century, linguistics has been able to experience this enigmatic identity/nonidentity, these adamantine bonds, only as a trap, a philosophical trap from which it had to free itself at all cost. A majority of linguists have therefore denounced the term as well as the notion of *meaning* as philosophical and tried to rid themselves thereof. Obviously, this majority could not have

succeeded: by way of compensation, it has succeeded in getting bogged down in an unreserved philosophical commitment to a particular philosophy, behaviorism (it is of little matter that this philosophy dares not speak its name). Some people today want to break this commitment in the name of another, regarding an alleged Cartesianism. May we hope that the lesson will be heard? It does not seem that it has been learned yet, either for the problem of meaning as such or for its countless implications for linguistic theory. Otherwise, one would perhaps have heard less talk about structural semantics—that is to say, an undertaking based on the incredible postulate that meaning is composed of discrete elements subject to the laws of an additive group. One would perhaps also have reflected more on the currently granted distinction between the “surface structure” and “deep structure” of statements, which either reflects merely the purely arbitrary will of the linguist (who reconstructs a linguistic statement and decides that it is “deeper” than the effectively actual statement) or leads back to the impossible idea of content being fully constituted before expression and therefore postulates a meaning fully determined in itself, independent of the sign. Finally, one would perhaps have asked oneself about the status and the source of legitimacy of conceptions that maintain the innate character of certain aspects of language. Are these proven or refutable scientific affirmations? Is this speculation disguised as science? Is this related to philosophy? Do these distinctions perhaps have no place? But could one then obliterate them in any way whatsoever? It is obviously not a matter of saying that the question of language’s relationship, in general and in its particularities, with man’s biology as well as that of its relationship with systems of animal “communication” and with “informational” processes within the organism and within the cell are not of prime importance. Yet some light

will be able to be shed on such questions only when in effective actuality one succeeds in thinking human language itself as what it is, and not through a prior likening of it to what it is not.

### Psychoanalysis

Most assuredly, however, there is no domain in which the consequences of separation manifest themselves in as acute a fashion as the domain of content psychology, that is to say, of psychoanalysis. On the one hand, psychoanalysis covers, *de jure* and *de facto*, the totality of the manifestations of man, since they proceed (at least, they proceed also) from the organization, the functioning, and the evolution of his psychism. On the other hand, it considers them from a highly particular standpoint and in relation to a unique practice and to a necessarily singular praxis. Already on this account, its strange epistemological and philosophical status poses a question, discussion of which cannot even commence without one going beyond the traditional epistemological criteria (whence the formal correctness, as perfect as their insignificance, of the criticisms, either “scientific” or “philosophical,” that have been addressed to psychoanalysis). Yet, its relations with the other disciplines are just as difficult to elucidate. There is incontestably, at least we think so, an essential contribution psychoanalysis makes to the understanding of social phenomena—whether they be economic, political, or religious. What, however, is its nature, what renders it legitimate? Can one ground this passage from the individual field to the social field? The attitudes of psychoanalysts in this regard in no way tally. For some, this passage goes without saying. For others, there is not even room to speak of such a passage, for everything could be reduced to psychoanalytic terms. Certainly, this last attitude

is hardly tenable, since ultimately psychoanalysis cannot interpret the very fact of the institution, which all its interpretations presuppose. Yet it is precisely for this reason—namely, because the reduction of the social to the individual Unconscious is possible neither logically nor really (any more than the reverse reduction)—that the question exists. Can it be said, as Sigmund Freud did at other moments, that society is reality, namely, that psychoanalysis cannot but presuppose society and this or that society, which each time would furnish its concrete content to the “reality principle” the individual encounters, and that their examination is to be left to other disciplines? Yet such an abandonment is not possible, since psychoanalysis has, as a matter of fact, some things to say about, for example, religion: this essential part of social reality, psychoanalysis says, is an illusion. What then is “reality,” and what is society, and its history? Is it the same “reality” that individual and society face? For the individual, it is undoubtedly society that constitutes, in both senses of the word, reality: the law or the given organization of the economy imposes itself upon the individual in an irrefutable fashion, and the penalty for refusing to recognize these will generally be psychosis. Yet what is steel for the individual is soft wax for history, which has created and continues to create an apparently limitless variety of social forms. Are there some bounds to such creation, and what are they? There certainly are a few, and society, too, encounters a few unsurpassable realities, external as well as internal realities, though consideration thereof leads only to some trite truisms and, since they are posited once and for all, contributes nothing to our intelligence of the different reality each society posits. It is not the insurmountable need for so many calories per day that would allow one to understand the infinite variety of concrete dietary systems. No society has some language; each one has its tongue. The idea

of *law* as such says nothing about the effectively actual systems of regulated social organization. What, then, is the source of this immense variation in social systems? And how do they each time play out in the constitution, development, and functioning of the psyche? Does nothing change, psychoanalytically speaking, when one passes from the contemporary Parisian to the Balinese or to the Dogon, or, if one could, to the Babylonian? To say “Yes” is to affirm that there is essentially no history; to say “No” is to affirm that the Unconscious itself is in a sense historical. Neither of these assertions can, in principle, be legitimated from within the properly psychoanalytic field and still less by the methods that are specific thereto and from which psychoanalysis draws more than its originality: its right to existence. Yet the question itself remains legitimate and traces the boundary of a field that ignores the conventional demarcations between disciplines.

The aporias created by psychoanalysis are not limited to this. The relation, which it at once posits and maintains at a distance, between the psychical processes it analyzes and the body does not simply resuscitate an ancient philosophical question; it renews this question. The somatic symptom, and its interpretation as a sign of an unconscious meaning, quite obviously postulate a type of connection between these two levels of the existence of the individual that remains completely unintelligible—just as much as the manifestations of the opposite and symmetrical process, which have always been known, though contemporary chemiotherapeutic techniques have not only lengthened the list of such manifestations but also substantially altered their character. Were it not appalling, one might find amusing the present-day situation, where psychoanalysis interprets, and thereby often resolves, a hysterical symptom, while next door the psychiatrist cleans up a case of delirium by administering a

carefully dosed specific substance, and, in a third building, the philosopher holds forth discursively on the soul's relationship to the body, after which the three characters, glancing sideways, avoid each other in the courtyard. It is easy to believe or to make believe that advances have been made in the intelligent understanding of these relations because the expression *body language* [*langage du corps*] has been forged, as it is difficult at present to conceive how, despite the progress it has made and with the aid of cybernetics, the physiology of the central nervous system will ever be able to step across the abyss that separates the storage, elaboration, and circulation of information in a hypercomplex system from the realities of desire, affect, and creation. Must it finally be recalled that, *qua* praxis, psychoanalysis is constantly and necessarily encountering ethical and political questions it is impossible for it to discuss with its own means, and to which it responds, no matter what it does, along the way? Every analytic treatment tends to avoid certain results and to surmount certain situations, guided by an aim that, while having been formulated in dazzling terms by Freud—"Where Id was, Ego shall come to be"—remains no less indefinable, just as such treatment cannot help but encounter this "reality" that is the arbitrariness of the each-time-given form of society and—were it not for the particular features of the social setting involved here—perhaps cannot keep from running up against it.

### Sociology

We must not leave the domain of the anthropological disciplines without considering the one that ought in principle to accommodate them all and that is far from being able to do so: sociology. Already, when it comes merely to grasping its object, a key difficulty emerges: Does reality have a level of

its own that would be the social, and how could one, beyond this word, conceive it? Or would what we call *the social* be but an abbreviation for a sum of particular realities, and which ones? We have just evoked one aspect of this problem, apropos of psychoanalysis and of the impossibility of reducing the social to the individual. However certain that seems to us, it nonetheless does not settle the following question: What thus remains irreducible? Whatever their proclaimed intentions may be, all the slightest bit satisfying fragmentary explanations or interpretations of social phenomena that can be inventoried ultimately refer back to the individual as efficient cause and in fact construct the social starting from the addition of the individual; that holds for economics (not only academic but even Marxist economics), as well as for the psychoanalytic interpretation of religion. Those who have wanted to go beyond this situation have done so only in words, invoking, for example, a “collective consciousness” or a “collective unconscious,” which clearly remain just words without any other assignable signified than the very problem discussed here, or they posit the social totality as a primary element, without any discussion. It does not seem possible to go any further without calling into question the central categories of traditional thought: in this precise case, the way in which we think the types of possible relationships between a “whole” and its “parts” or its “elements.” It is clearly not possible to think society as a “composition” that starts out from elements that, logically or really, would preexist it: one could “compose” a society, if indeed the expression already has a meaning, only starting from already social individuals, that is to say, ones who already bear the social within themselves. Nor is it possible to apply here the schema that, for better or worse, seems applicable in other domains, namely, the idea that there emerges at the level of a “totality” some new properties that

do not exist or have no meaning at the level of the “components”—what the physicists call *cooperative* or *collective* phenomena or what corresponds to the well-known idea of the “transformation of quantity into quality.” There is no sense in considering language, production, and social rules to be “properties” that emerge as soon as one puts together a sufficient number of individuals; these individuals are nonexistent and inconceivable outside of or before these alleged “collective properties”—and neither are they “reducible” thereto.

The same question is to be found again when one considers the relationship between the organization, and overall life, of society and the “sectors” or the “domains” society includes. There is no available schema that allows us truly to grasp the relationships between economy, law, and religion on the one hand, and society on the other, any more, indeed, than the relationships among those sectors themselves. Nor is there a schema that would allow us to say in what fashion they *are* these particular entities that they are. It is not a matter, certainly, of “aspects,” in the sense in which one can speak of the thermal or chemical aspect of a reaction; nor can one speak of coordinated “partial systems”—like the circulatory, respiratory, and nervous systems of an organism—since, for example, we may encounter, and we often do encounter, the automatization or the predominance of this or that of these alleged “partial systems” in given social organizations. What are they, then? The question becomes all the more complicated as we cannot even say that this articulation of the social into technics, economics, politics, law, religion, and art is given once and for all. It is precisely quite the opposite, since we know perfectly well that law and economics, for example, emerge as explicit moments, posited as such, of the organization of society only belatedly, that the religious and the artistic as relatively separated

moments are, on the scale of human history, but quite recent creations, or that the *type* of relationship (and not only the content) between “productive labor” and other human activities has, throughout this history, exhibited some enormous variations. The overall organization of society itself redeploys itself each time in a different fashion and each time it itself not only posits the different “moments” in which it embodies itself but brings into existence a type of relationship between those “moments” and the “whole.” Neither of these can be reduced *a priori* by theoretical reflection or inferred by a consideration, via induction, of the hitherto observed forms of social life or thought within a given once-and-for-all logical framework.

We are therefore in the presence here of an “object” that shows that, in their effectively actual usage, terms such as *part* and *whole*, *one* and *several*, *composition* and *inclusion* cannot everywhere have the same meaning; even more, that outside a few quite narrow and well-circumscribed domains, it may be asked whether they have *a* meaning that is other than “nominal and empty”—*logikōs kai kenōs*, as Aristotle said.<sup>41</sup> We are placed before the apparently untenable exigency to think “relationships” between “terms” that would not be discrete, separate, individualizable entities. More than that, we are faced with the exigency to consider the dyad “terms/relationships,” as it each time presents itself at a determinate level, as impossible to grasp at that level independent of the other ones.

### Society and history

This self-redeployment society performs throughout

---

<sup>41</sup>T/E: See n. 14 in the Preface to the present volume.

its history equally poses the question of historical temporality in a manner that is incompatible with the traditional determination of time. It makes us see that the distinction between society and history, and therefore between “sociology” and a genuine “science of history,” is ultimately unacceptable. Because, in a justified reaction against an evenemential pseudohistorism in the domain of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure insisted on the fact that nothing is to be understood about tongue when one confines oneself to retracing phonological or semantic evolution, the etymology of words, or changes in grammatical form and that tongue must be conceived as a system that, at each moment, has to function and does effectively function independently of its “past,” some have, for a few decades now, erected the distinction between the synchronic and diachronic standpoints into an absolute opposition and, through one of those seesaw movements to which human reflection does indeed seem irredeemably condemned, worked as if the synchronic standpoint alone were legitimate, diachronic considerations being exiled from the scientific domain; as is known, several of Structuralism’s spokesmen have distinguished themselves in the use of this rhetoric. It should, however, be clear that, already from the most elementary standpoint, the idea that the same object might be considered from the point of view of its instantaneous cross sections, on the one hand, and from that of its becoming, on the other, without those views at any moment communicating, is absurd. Yet it is at a much deeper level that the question of the relations between “system” and “becoming” is being posed here: it is a question of the very possibility of this apparently so clear distinction. As indicated above, already in a domain such as cosmology, “structure” and “becoming” do not seem to be able to be distinguished without problem, it not simply being that the structure of the universe evolves but that, if the expansion of the universe can

in no way be considered “accidental,” the structure of the universe entails a history—from the perspective of general relativity—or *is* its history—in that of steady-state theory. In another manner, this interrogation arises in biology, where the “system” is each time a living system *only* through its capacity to “evolve,” at the ontogenetic level as well as at the phylogenetic and at the level of the overall biosystem. And it is in still another manner that the question arises in the social domain. This may easily be illustrated with the example of language, considered in its essential aspect, namely, its relation to *signification*. For, it is a property of tongue *qua* system not to be exhausted in its synchronic state, never to be reducible to a set of determinate, fixed, available significations, but to contain always an eminent and imminent *something more*, to be always synchronically *open* to a transformation of significations, in short: to render possible, through known means, an original discourse, to allow an “unusual” use of the usual. Yet it is also a property of tongue as history to integrate immediately into its system all that emerges as a modification of the system, to render constantly possible the acquisition or elimination through which the system perpetuates its capacity to function, to transform the unusual constantly into the usual. And it is, finally, in yet another manner that we find the question again at the level of society as a whole, since the “social space,” in the vastest sense of this term, and all that it “contains” *are*, constitutively, such only through their opening to a temporality, since nothing, in any society (however “archaic,” however “anhistorical” that society might be), *is* that would not be inconceivable presence of what is no longer and just as inconceivable imminence of what is not yet, since the being-there of the social is always internally dislocated or, if you wish, constituted in itself by the outside-itself, present efficacy of the “past” in tradition and institution of the

“future” in anticipation, uncertainty, undertaking. To reflect truly on society and history is therefore to try to reflect on the *social-historical* in a dimensionality for which we find an example nowhere else, and which, for that very reason, we were till now incapable of recognizing in its irreducible originality.

*The Problem of the Unification of Disciplines*

It is therefore the problematic proper to the particular disciplines and how they evolve, and this in all domains, that creates the overriding exigency to overcome the extreme separation that has characterized their development for the past three centuries. This involves a separation between disciplines of the same domain, a separation among domains, and a separation between scientific disciplines and philosophical reflection. In various forms, awareness of this exigency has been shared by a growing number of scientists for some years. If this awareness has not led to even the least notable modification of the situation, that is because this situation rests on some deep-seated conditions and because the various attempts already made have attacked the symptom of separation without trying to analyze and understand the reasons it exists.

For a long time, and still today, one could thus think that overcoming separation had to be done and could be done only through a unification of the fundamental methods in the various domains or by reducing those domains to a single, elementary one. In fact, there is no essential difference between these two programs. If psychical, historical, and social phenomena are reducible to biological phenomena, and the latter to physicochemical phenomena, and if, finally, physics is but mathematics materialized, reduction of the contents and unification of the methods have one and the

same ultimate signification, which is mathematization. Reciprocally, if method, in the deepest sense of the term, could be unified all over, the diversity of regions would be reduced to a merely apparent diversity. The attempt by the Vienna Circle—whose explicit program was “the unification of science”—clearly illustrates what we are saying: the search for epistemological unity among disciplines was inspired by a physicalist philosophy, which at the same time it aimed at grounding.

Such a more or less direct unification of methods seems out of the question today and perhaps forever. It is not even possible to envisage it within just the anthropological domain. In this latter case, the attempt at mathematization had long taken the naive form of a search for quantitative laws, the discovery of which would be able to confer upon the human sciences the much envied rigor of mathematical physics. The results were nil or trivial; in the best—and the worst—of cases, that of economics (which lays for the researcher a first-rate trap, since its phenomena present themselves as already constituted in themselves in a measurable and quantifiable form), hardly any ones stand out as indisputable. As Norbert Wiener has written,

The success of mathematical physics led the social scientist to be jealous of its power without quite understanding the intellectual attitudes that had contributed to this power. The use of mathematical formulae had accompanied the development of the natural sciences and become the mode in the social sciences. Just as primitive peoples adopt the Western modes of denationalized clothing and of parliamentarism out of a vague feeling that these magic rites and vestments will at once put them abreast of modern culture and technique, so the

economists have developed the habit of dressing up their rather imprecise ideas in the language of the infinitesimal calculus.<sup>42</sup>

“Nowadays,” adds Joan Robinson, “the pretensions of the economists have impressed some of the exponents of other branches of social studies, who are aping the economists aping the physicists.”<sup>43</sup> The reason for this failure is clear: the aspects of social phenomena that satisfy the conditions of the mathematical theory of measurement are not pertinent or do not stand in a functional relationship to the pertinent aspects.

More recently, some have wanted to give a new, neoformalist or structuralist, orientation to this unification, which is supposed to allow an independent mathematization of the notion of measurement. Even supposing that the structuralist program might be achieved, it would end at most only in a partial unification of disconnected aspects of certain anthropological disciplines, precisely those that are liable to this type of treatment. Now, already in the domain where it was born, linguistics, it is more than doubtful that the structuralist method would succeed in grasping the essential, and even that it might take into consideration anything more than certain, ultimately secondary components of phenomena. Besides, questions of interrelationship and integration within a given social world of different structures—linguistic, economic, power-related—cannot even be approached through the structuralist method; to speak of *structural*

---

<sup>42</sup>Norbert Wiener, *God and Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1966), pp. 89-90.

<sup>43</sup>Joan Robinson, *Freedom and Necessity: An Introduction to the Study of Society* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), p. 120.

*homology* or *shared belonging* to an encompassing structure of a society's phonematic oppositions and forms of power brings to mind more a hoax than a research program. Moreover, had they been resolved, one would still have to inquire as to the *why* of different structures and the *why* of their succession in time. Now, a problem as fundamental as the historical linkage of forms, the source of alterity and of innovation at the same time as this *sui generis* continuity that characterizes history appears so unapproachable by Structuralism that its supporters have till now found no better means of defense than to deny its existence or its importance.

Again in this case, some have wanted to mathematize and formalize without asking themselves whether the conditions had been fulfilled that would allow a formalization, and which kind. It is not only the theory of measurement and classical analysis that reveal themselves to have no grip upon social phenomena but also some much more primitive categories of mathematics in its constituted state—order relation, equivalence relation, function, and, finally, the very category of the set—that here leave the essential out of reach. If naive quantitativism in the anthropological domain can be compared, with a moderate amount of maliciousness, to an attempt to analyze museums according to the number and total surface area of the paintings they house, with an even more moderate amount of maliciousness Structuralism could be compared to trying to analyze them according to the characteristics of the distribution of schools and subject matters among the various rooms. Both operations can always be carried out, and they are always of nearly no interest; painting itself is not a concern in either case. What would I know of the Louvre if I knew only that a Dutch painting rules out the presence of an Italian portrait in the same room and requires that of an English seascape in the next one?

One attempts, too, in the anthropological domain, some pseudoformalizations through mere transposition or transfer copying of some types of formalization that seem to have had some success elsewhere, without inquiring about the legitimacy of such transpositions, and still less without suspecting that such formalizations pose immense problems in their own original domains. How is one to think that mathematics in its constituted state—whose resources are already, despite their fantastic progress, incapable of measuring up to the tasks set for them in the domains of hydrodynamics, elementary particle physics, or cosmology—could allow one to master such regions as the living being, the psychological, or the social-historical? It was one of the greatest mathematicians of the century who, at the end of his life, and after having accomplished immense theoretical and practical work on automata, was led to conclude, “the language of the brain is not the language of mathematics.”<sup>44</sup> Which means that it is pretty much ruled out that the language of mathematics might suffice to grasp the functioning of the brain; still less, then, that of the psyche or of society. Were it so, however, in what language might one be able to speak of those objects? What does it mean that several “languages” might exist? And what is the relation of these languages among themselves, and to language as such? The lines that follow are devoted to a preliminary exploration of those questions.

---

<sup>44</sup>John Von Neumann, *The Computer and the Brain* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1958) pp. 80-82. [T/E: The quoted passage appears on p. 81.] See also, by the same author, *The Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata* (Urbana and London: University of Illinois Press, 1966), pp. 31-80.

*Ensemblistic or Identitary Logic*

Von Neumann referred to the language of mathematics first, of course, because that was his own language and because he had left there some powerful imprints—but also, more essentially, because there is indeed an extraordinary privilege of this language. On a deep level, that privilege is not unrelated to the motive we imputed above to the fascination mathematics exerts over philosophy: despite its apparent unreality, its divergence from the world of natural perception and immediate life, and the immense strangeness of its Babelian constructions, mathematics embodies, in the fullest and purest fashion possible, the extreme outcome of an essential type of logic that is, for that reason, improperly identified with logic as such. We call this logic *identitary* logic, and also, conscious of the anachronism as well as the forcing of terms, *ensemblistic* or *set-theoretical* [*ensembliste*] logic: its privilege is that it constitutes an essential dimension of language as such—and of every language—as well as of all life and of all social practice.

Let us repeat Cantor's "naive" definition: "A set is a collection into a whole of distinct and definite objects of our intuition (*Anschauung*: here, the term covers the empirically intuited, whether externally or internally, the perceived, as well as the Kantian 'pure' intuited) or of our thought. These objects are called the elements of the set." Once again, it is not despite but because of its circularities and its "naiveties" that this "definition" seems to us fundamental, for it admirably corresponds to the essential operations of what we will call *legein* as at once condition for and production of society, condition produced by that which itself conditions. *Legein*: choosing-positing-assembling-saying. For society to be able to exist and for a language to be able to function, everything must be able, somehow, at a certain level, at a

certain layer or stratum of practice and social discourse, to be rendered congruent with what this “definition” implies. Namely: some “objects,” quite “distinct” from one another and “well defined” (in the sense of a “practical-decisory” definition), must be able to be posited-chosen-assembled-said—whether those objects pertain to external or internal “perception,” to “representation” in the most general sense, or to “thought” in the strictest sense of the term. These objects must be able to be assembled, in a second sense, into “collections” that form “wholes,” that is to say, new “objects,” of a higher type. Therefore, one must always be able to distinguish, or be able to act as if one could distinguish, and be able to define, or be able to speak as if one could define, that is to say, in such a way that everything that is “intended” [*visé*] might also be, through saying, designated sufficiently and adequately as to the “aim” [*visée*] of the other ones. One must always be able to “collect into a whole,” at least discursively, and, obviously too, be able to perform the inverse operation, decompose a given “whole” into “wholes” of a lower type or into distinct and definite “elements.” Even though this remains implicit in Cantor’s definition (and without entering here into the discussions this question has been raising anew for the last fifty years, for they are not pertinent for our aim), one must be able to have at one’s disposal the operational equivalence: property  $\equiv$  class; and this at both ends: possessing a property defines a class and belonging to a class defines a property.

#### Ontological presuppositions of ensemblistic logic

The essential pieces of identity, or ensemblistic, logic are all here, explicitly or implicitly. To demonstrate that in a rigorous way would take a long time: let us content ourselves with noting that the terms “distinct” and “definite”

imply the principle of the excluded middle; likewise, that the Cantorian definition implies, entails, or permits the construction of the couples subject/attribute and substance/accident, and, ultimately, of almost all that the West has thought as a being's "determination," and that it contains, therefore, the central core of its thought: *determinacy*, conceived as immanence to what pertains to the possibility of being defined and distinguished. It is thereby clear that this logic amounts to an ontological decision about the organization of what is (or what is taken into account in discourse and in social practice), a decision that goes infinitely far and that, despite the internal reservations, restrictions, and objections lodged by almost all the great philosophers, has always prevailed in the final analysis within the history of Greco-Western history and therefore also in its offspring, modern science. Bound together therein is that enigmatic identity of being and of thinking whose fate was sealed as early as Parmenides, since it boils down to saying that "what is/what can be thought" is and always has to be able to be well defined and quite distinct, composable and decomposable into definite totalities by universal properties while including parts defined by particular properties (from the standpoint of interest to us here, it is a matter of indifference whether this composition/decomposition might or might not end in an ultimate totality-unity, *henpanta*; and whether it might or might not arrive at ultimate indivisibles, *atoma*); and since, finally, what *is* not in this way is *less* or is not at all, is but "transitory existence, external contingency, opinion, appearance without essence, untruth, deception,"<sup>45</sup> as

---

<sup>45</sup>T/E: G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §1, p. 25.

Hegel said, or an “inconsistent multiplicity,” as Cantor put it (letter to Dedekind, July 28, 1899).<sup>46</sup>

### Ensemblistic logic and social organization

Now, one sees immediately that the very existence of society, as organized collective making/doing, is impossible without such a logic being at work. Whatever might be the type and content of the overall and detailed organization of the world and of oneself that society institutes, whatever might be the imaginary signification underlying it<sup>47</sup> and the magic, mythical, religious fluid that runs through it, whatever might be the mode of thought (“prelogical,” via “participation,” etc.) that accompanies it, social making/doing always presupposes and refers to “objects” (in the broadest sense of this term) that are distinct and definite, composable and decomposable, defining and definable by well-settled “properties.” Whether such and such an object may possess some invisible properties, whether this or that stone or animal might be a god, whether some totemic clan may or may not be “consubstantial with” or partake in the essence of its eponymous animal, whether the child may be seen as the ancestor’s reincarnation or as the ancestor himself in person, and whether all these attributes and relationships might be thought, lived, and spoken in the utmost total “sincerity,” “duplicity,” or “confusion” (in our view), each cow and every cow must be a part of cows; it must not (or not just anyhow) be able to be a bull; it must with practically absolute certainty

---

<sup>46</sup>T/E: In “Epilegomena...,” above in the present volume, Castoriadis informs the reader that this phrase can be found in Georg Cantor, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962), p. 444.

<sup>47</sup>See [IIS](#), 135-46 and 340-69.

procreate some calves and heifers; the set of huts must form *the* village that is *this* village and *our* village, the one to which we “belong”; knives must cut and fire must burn. There is an ineliminable imaginary-logical bedrock dimension of society that is and can only be immediately congruent with ensemblistic or identitary logic. Structuralism’s error was in this case, on the one hand, to believe that this logic exhausts the logic and even the life of a society; on the other hand, it was to want to evacuate the question of what is the signification of the fact that *some* such society distinguishes and opposes these or those terms and not some other ones, and in this-here fashion and not in another, and consequently to act as if the “oppositions” it interminably lines up had been given once and for all and went without saying (while it is obvious that even the masculine/feminine opposition is socially instituted, *qua* social opposition, and not a biological difference, and that it is so each time differently); in other words, its error was to be itself completely and naively caught up in ensemblistic logic.

#### Domain of validity of ensemblistic logic

Yet, to say that this is so boils down to saying that the ontological decision of which we spoke above is, at least in part, “grounded”; it is to say that there indubitably exists a layer or stratum within which what is gives itself or presents itself in point of fact as subject to an ensemblistic or identitary logic: this layer or stratum is unproblematically classifiable within hierarchies and juxtapositions or overlapping hierarchies always appertaining, *qua* distinct and definite element, to locatable collections, always possessing properties that suffice to define classes, always conforming to the “principles” of identity and the excluded middle (which always retains its sovereignty and its force, whereas its

*content* may vary endlessly: human/nonhuman brings into play the excluded middle for the Jews, but not for the Christians, for whom there is a theanthropos). It must be noted here that this layer finds a formidable representative in the person of that with which society deals from its origin, immediately and ineluctably, namely, the *living being*, vegetable and animal, since not only are the stable properties, the sufficient decisory categories intrinsically necessary to the very existence of the living being (and of the society that lives upon it), but it presents itself as already in itself and for itself achieving an Aristotelian ensemblization-hierarchization, grouped by itself into genera and species that are fully definable by union, intersection, or disjunction of “properties” or attributes.

That this layer or stratum is in fact always, as we said above, lacunary and not totally coherent is evident. Yet it is evident, too, that lacunarity and noncoherence can appear as such only when one passes from *legein* to full *logos*, discourse that knows no limit but the one that results from its own nature and from its own possibilities, wherein emerges, therefore, the question that no longer bears on the facts alone but on the *logos* of the facts, wherein, therefore too, no criterion holds except the one discourse finds in its self-coherency (that such coherency would ultimately, and despite appearances, be interpreted as *infinitely developed identity* and enveloping in itself contradiction is an apparently ineluctable destiny of *this logos*, which we cannot analyze here). Before this passage to *logos*, the lacunarity is filled in in advance, noncoherency is kept from appearing by *mythos*, a narrative-discourse that has already, through its mode of being and through the attitude of those who bear it and live it, ruled out every question within an unlimited horizon, because it has already responded thereto by invocation of an *event*.

The ensemblistic dimension of language

This ensemblization of the given is not only *performed by* tongue; it is also and especially *embodied in* tongue, in the “material-abstract” elements that make it up as well as in the significations it conveys. Indeed, the institution of tongue is first of all institution of “discrete” elements that function *qua* quite distinct and well-defined entities (phonemes, morphemes, grammatical classes, syntactic types). In its “material-abstract” being-there, tongue is the first and (setting aside mathematical constructions) the sole genuine set that would have ever existed and that will ever exist, the sole “real” (and not simply “formal”) set. But obviously, too—and this is what has led “structuralist” semanticists astray—even at its essential level, *qua* “body” of significations, tongue also necessarily includes the ensemblistic dimension. For he who is not caught up in the contemporary ideology, for he who has ever reflected on what a signification is, this affirmation may seem paradoxical, if not absurd; for, it is clear that a signification is signification only inasmuch as ensemblistic logic does not have a grip on it. If these terms are not taken as the clumsiest of metaphors (and it is possible, for some deep-seated reasons, that it might be impossible to find other ones), to say of a signification that it “belongs to” or “is decomposed into” hardly makes more sense than to say that it is blue or yellow, charged with positive or negative electricity. And yet, signification can be signification, can enter into the very discourse that would like to say what we are attempting to say here, only insofar as, through one of its aspects—and in one of its strata—it allows itself to be grasped *as if* it were a “definite, distinct object”; without that, one absolutely could no longer know of what one speaks. I can use the words *vague* or *fuzzy* only if, in a certain fashion, “to be vague,” “to be fuzzy” were still well-

determined properties and only if, *de jure*, the class of *thises* that are vague or fuzzy were well defined and included rigorously drawn boundaries. Language can function only because the significations it conveys are but indefinite and interminable *referrals to something other than...* (what would seem to be said immediately) *and* at the same time because these referrals can be only referrals of...to..., relationships between terms momentarily posited as fixed. In this way, tongue can be simultaneously a tongue of myth, of poems, of philosophical thought and a tongue of practical cooperation, of calculation, of understanding. A signification is nothing “in itself”; it is but a gigantic borrowing—and yet it has to be *this-here* borrowing. It is, as can be said, entirely outside itself—but it is *it* that is outside itself. And the two sides of this being of signification are impossibly unstuck, one from the other, when one posits significations either as solid terms that would maintain relationships among themselves as if by addition, as every kind of substantialism does, or as relationships without terms, as Structuralism does. The genuine state of affairs was seen, in part, by Hegel but immediately veiled by him, in a heroic and vain effort to subject once again the whole to determinacy, to reason, be it infinite, to identity logic, be it “dialectical”; for, Hegel empties of their determinate signification all the terms he encounters along the way (beginning with the “here” and the “now” or with “being, pure being”) only to lead them back into their fully realized totality of infinite determinability, where all significations are ultimately recovered as infinitely determined.

#### Ensemblistic logic and formalization

It is clear that mathematics and, more generally, everything that today we can conceive of as a formal system

are wholly subject to ensemblistic logic (this being independent of the problems mentioned above concerning the “content” of set *theory*, its place in the system of mathematics, etc.). We have used Cantor’s terms, *distinct* and *definite*; we just as well could have spoken of *discreteness* and *separation* as essential characteristics of ensemblistic logic. Now, precisely in this acceptance of those terms (which is certainly not their acceptance in mathematics), mathematics knows of no other objects than “discrete” and “separate” ones. The mathematical “continuum” is but the coexistence of an infinity of quite distinct and well-defined entities; in the interval defined by two real numbers, however close they may be, there is a uncountable infinity of reals, each of which is an individual that never could be confused with another, and about whose properties there could not be, *de jure*, any doubt, any more than about the fact that it shares or does not share them with such and such other ones, belonging thus to such and such subsets contained in this interval. And as far as one advances, even in the most bizarre Daedalean labyrinths of “teratopology,” this same logic continues to reign. Let us note in passing that nothing essential changes in this situation when one replaces the principle of the excluded middle or “excluded third” (from the Latin *principium tertii exclusi*) with that of the excluded  $n^{\text{th}}$ , any more than when one considers, as in certain recent attempts that undoubtedly can be quite fruitful in other regards, “fuzzy sets,” since their definition calls upon probability theory, which presupposes, in turn, “conventional” set theory, therefore also ensemblistic logic in the sense given

here to this term.<sup>48</sup>

### Limits of ensemblistic logic

Now, everything seems to indicate that, beyond the first layer or stratum of which we have spoken, what is is not congruent with ensemblistic logic. The questions and aporias with which contemporary physics is struggling, and which have been mentioned briefly above, refer, it seems to us, to an “organization”—if that term still has here a meaning—that underlies what is physically extant, that goes quite beyond what Niels Bohr boldly tried to think under the term of *complementarity*, and that is essentially ungraspable in terms of ensemblistic logic.<sup>49</sup> Yet the strongest indications come to us indubitably from the anthropological domain. We believe that we have shown above that the central categories of ensemblistic logic collapse upon contact with the social-historical. The situation is the same, and perhaps still clearer, in what, since Freud and thanks to his genius, we are finally succeeding in seeing in the domain of the psychical, and which truly was always before our eyes. The Unconscious, wrote Freud, knows nothing of [*ignore*] time and contradiction; one must take “ignores” here in the English

---

<sup>48</sup>Author’s addition: In its most recent versions, the theory of “fuzzy sets” no longer calls upon probability theory. It no less continues to lean on ensemblistic-identitary logic.

<sup>49</sup>One will find some rather different, though similarly inspired, formulations in Bohm’s study cited in n. 15 above.

sense of the word: wants to know nothing about them.<sup>50</sup> The Unconscious exists in a mode in which contradictories do not exclude each other; more exactly, this is a mode in which there can be no question of contradictories. Of the essential “element” of the Unconscious, of representation (*Vorstellung*), we could say nothing if we remained within our usual logic; already we do violence to the thing when, as concerns the genuine Unconscious, we speak of *representation* while separating it from the unconscious affect and unconscious intention, which is, *de jure* as well as *de facto*, impossible. Let us suppose, however, that this separation has been effectuated, and let us stick with representation as such; let us even take banal, conscious representation, in which we are constantly immersed or, rather, which in a sense we are. How can one not see that it flees in all directions and escapes the most elementary logical schemata? *How many* representations are there in “My friend R. was my uncle; .... A yellow beard that surrounded [his face] stood out especially clearly”?<sup>51</sup> *What* are Little Hans’s father, the horse of his phobia, and their relation *for* Little Hans? How is one ever to hope to think the associative chains as biunivocal relationships between distinct and definite terms? We truly have here the “inconsistent multiplicity” of which Cantor spoke, where the representation is at once one and several and where these determinations are neither decisive for it nor indifferent to it, where the impossible and the obligatory, far from exhausting the field, leave what is essential outside of their grasp, where neighborhood relations

---

<sup>50</sup>T/E: “There are...no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty [in the Unconscious].” “Reference to time is bound up...with the work of the system Cs” (Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious*, SE 14: 186, 187).

<sup>51</sup>T/E: Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE 4:137.

are not defined or are constantly redefined, and where every point is at once arbitrarily close to and arbitrarily far from every other point.<sup>52</sup>

Can we go further than these negative determinations, than simply noting the limits of identitary and ensemblistic logic? We think that the answer is “Yes,” that a new logic can and has to be worked, and that it will be. For, one will ultimately have to forge a language and some “notions” that will measure up to these objects that are “elementary” particles and the cosmic field, the self-organization of the living being, the Unconscious, or the social-historical: this would be a logic capable of taking into consideration what is, in itself, neither disordered chaos that stirs up some “impressions” within which the Conscious would freely cut out some “facts,” nor a system (or well-articulated, finite or infinite sequence of systems) of “things” well carved up and well placed some alongside the others—and which, however, *also* allows itself, “in part,” to be grasped thus and in a manner that still testifies, “in part,” to a relative freedom of consciousness with regard to the given. This new logic will not surpass ensemblistic logic, nor will it contain that logic as a particular case, nor will it simply be added thereto; given the very nature of our language, it will be able to maintain only a circular relationship with ensemblistic logic since it will itself have to, for example, utilize “distinct and definite” terms in order to say that what is, allows itself to be thought, or allows itself to be said is not, in its ultimate essence, organized in the modes of the distinct and the definite. The task of elaborating

---

<sup>52</sup>See “Epilegomena...,” above, 25-32 and 43-45. [T/E: In *IIS* (published in 1975 in French, and so later than the composition of the present text), Castoriadis slightly qualifies his “every point” statement here by writing instead (as it appears in the 1987 English-language translation: *IIS*, 277): “almost every point.”]

this new logic lies wholly before us, and there is no question of broaching it here.<sup>53</sup> However, these preparatory reflections would remain incomplete on a crucial point if we did not mention another problem that any attempt at working out this new logic will have to take into account.

### Categories and regionality

Ensemblistic logic is necessarily a logic that has to posit universal categories and to treat the universal as a “strong” determination of what is, allows itself to be thought, or allows itself to be said (the opposition between Nominalism and Realism is not pertinent for us here). Thus is it led very early on—as early as Plato and, obviously, especially as early as Aristotle—to posit explicitly that the *same* “forms” (“highest genera” for Plato; “categories” for Aristotle and all subsequent philosophy) are encountered, have value, and are implemented in all the domains of the real and of what is thought. We are saying that this is so necessarily, since, on the one hand, for this logic, to be distinct, to be definite, to belong to, and so on are necessarily decisive determinations, *everywhere* alike, of what is, allows itself to be thought, allows itself to be said; and since, on the other hand, the ensemblistic organization of the given can make headway (and, according to its own ideal, be achieved) only by positing, as it advances, the class  $\equiv$  property equivalence and, ultimately, the equivalence of the class “all that is” (or “all that is thinkable,” or “all that allows itself to

---

<sup>53</sup>Author’s addition: What is intended here is to elaborate a *logic of magmas*, which I hope to be able to tackle one day. See [IIS](#), 340-44. [T/E: In 1983, Castoriadis published in French his promised text on magmas, which he had composed in May and June of 1981; see “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy,” now in [CL2](#).]

be said”) with a group of “properties” (“attributes” or, better: “*predicabilities as to...*”) that, thenceforth, can be conceived only as *essential and universal constituents* of objects and of all objects (in themselves or such as they allow themselves to be thought or said). It is not an accident, or some secondary aspect, but a necessity originating in the deepest recesses of the organization of inherited thought to affirm in fact the existence of transregional categories that possess a *full* meaning and *the same* meaning, whatever the type of object under consideration. This remains true even when such thought seems to recognize explicitly that a proper logical organization appertains to each type of object. (Thus, one might believe that in Hegel the question of the transregionality of categories is transcended [*dépassée*] since in a sense the very difference between categories and types of objects is abolished and since, for example, “mechanism,” “chemism,” “organism,” and “species” are concepts from the *Science of Logic*. Yet there we have but mere appearance, for what in fact functions in Hegel’s work as a group of transregional categories and what is constantly utilized as such is not thematized and displayed in an explicit way: these are the categories *mediate/immediate, in-itself/for-itself, inner/outer*, etc.)

Inherited thought is therefore necessarily obliged to affirm in fact that “one” or “a [*un*],” for example, has the same meaning whether it is a matter of a Hilbert space, a factory, a neurosis, a battle, a dream, a living species, a signification, a society, a contradiction, a legal rule, an ant, a revolution, a work; or that “belonging” has the same meaning throughout all domains and agencies [*instances*] where one can speak of a relationship of belonging; and so on. Now, this affirmation is clearly and immediately false; for, “one” or “a” does not operate in the same fashion in the expressions *an electron* and *a great love* or *a feudal society*; the meaning of

the “form that organizes” comes to it also from *what*, each time, that form organizes; were it otherwise, we could organize what is literally just anyhow, and we know perfectly well that that is not true. We can treat categories as univocal only if we suppress simultaneously every gap and every relationship between thought and being, either by making of what is a chaos that does not require, impose, and prevent anything and with which thought can do absolutely whatever it wants, or by positing it as fully and exhaustively identical to the determinations of thought. Both of these views are untenable and, by way of consequence, categories are essentially multivocal, their signification is codetermined by what they determine. What Aristotle had already seen and said apropos of *being*—that it is a *pollachōs legomenon*<sup>54</sup>—and what the Vedanta calls, in the translation proposed by Louis Renou, *surimposition* (superimposition in English) holds for all categories: one and several, whole and parts, substance and reciprocal action have no other unity than being indices of the problem, but their full and operative *signification* differs essentially from one region to another. Forgetting that leads directly to what is the supreme form, or foundation, of all reductionism, *logical* reductionism: the belief—apparently justified simultaneously by the “necessities of thought” and the formal identity of the terms of language—that the given presents, at all its levels, types of logical organization that are ultimately equivalent “short of homomorphism” (which shows, incidentally, how naive it was, when this premise was granted, to fight over whether the organization of “matter” or that of “mind” is “primary”).

---

<sup>54</sup>T/E: In the original English-language version of “Time and Creation” (first published in French in 1990 and now in [CL3](#)), Castoriadis translates this Aristotelian phrase as “a term used in many different ways.”

If this is so, some important consequences ensue. First, some negative ones: in its essential aspect, human theoretical making/doing is discovery and exploration of new regions; it therefore advances only by conferring new significations upon already available “categories” and, more important still, by positing/bringing out new “categories.” So, every attempt to constitute a true “table of categories” or to “close” their group and, still more, to “deduce” them or to “deploy” them in their totality cannot but be fallacious, reflecting only a certain stage of our theoretical relation to what is (and erecting into absolutes the results of that stage) or else only “nominal and empty,” that is to say, describing nothing other than the “predicabilities as to...” within a determinate, completed—and therefore dead—language. Yet, there are also some positive consequences: we have to recognize that the primary regions, the great original objects cannot but be “conceivable through themselves,” to borrow Spinoza’s expression.<sup>55</sup> What reflection on society teaches us, for example, is that the “relationship” between economics and law is not a particular case of “relationships in general,” that it is, not only irreducible, but *incomparable* to any other one, however “universal” it may have been, since one would be led astray (as has indeed been the case) in thinking it as a relationship “of cause to effect,” “of matter to form,” “of infrastructure to superstructure”; we can think it only starting from itself. Not only do we, in contact therewith, learn something that no other relationship will ever teach us, but we learn much more from it about the idea of relationships in general than the idea of relationships in general can teach us about the “relationship” between economics and law.

---

<sup>55</sup>T/E: This expressions is used in ch. 7 of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*; see n. 8 there.

Likewise, the “relationship” between sense and sign when considering tongue is not exemplary of or an instance of “relationships in general” and absolutely cannot be grasped as a “relationship of a content to a form,” of an “inner to an outer,” or of a “combination to the elements that enter into it.” To the person who asks, “To what type of relationship does the sign/sense relationship belong?”, we have to reply: The sign/sense “relationship” *does not belong to any type of relationship*; it *itself defines* a type of relationship starting from which one can think it and eventually think something else; it is as originary and as fundamental as everything that can be conceived of as original and fundamental: number, nature, thing, cause, or whatever else. And it is easy to see that, if one finally considers it thus, for itself and without wanting to reduce it to something else, countless “problems” disappear immediately that arise only in terms of “superimposition,” of the vain effort to export into this region some concepts and schemata that possess validity only in other ones.

It therefore seems to us that every attempt to work out a new logic will, from the outset, have to take into consideration and render thinkable this strong *regionality* of what gives itself to us, and its implications. It also seems to us that this effort will not be possible without a radical reconsideration of the most elementary and most primitive notions—such as that of the universal and the particular—and that such a reconsideration could, in turn, have far-reaching and decisive consequences for the entirety of our edifice of thought.

### *Social-Historical Situation of Contemporary Science*

As none of the attempts at unification made thus far has succeeded, the need to overcome separation is obviously

felt only that much more strongly. In the absence of a unified theory, one tries at least to reunite the theorists; for a few decades now, colloquia, symposia, and collectively written volumes have quickly multiplied. The results of these efforts never cease to surprise when weighed against the number and quality of participants: at worst—that is to say, in the majority of cases—there is a laborious vacuum; at best, a few landmark contributions or monologues for which it is manifest that, while the gathering in question might have been the occasion, it was in no way the necessary condition, and still less the source. Besides, those contributions generally concern the author's own domain; one would be hard pressed to cite instances where progress in working out any truly interdisciplinary problems had occurred as a result of these undertakings [*entreprises*].

In this case, what goes unrecognized are the effectively actual social and historical conditions within which contemporary science and the contemporary men of science exist and operate. For, what we have called throughout this text *separation* is but the other aspect of modern science's contradictory integration, its conflictual way of belonging to this social and historical world from which it proceeds all the more profoundly as it contributes to the creation of that world. Science is *institution* in the strong and weighty sense of the term, and more and more it is a central institution of the contemporary world. As such, it is taken by the material means, the organizational forms, and the ideas that it takes from the world today and that it gives to this world. Like every institution, it is an inertia sustained by a myth: left to itself, it continues in the same direction at the same speed; calling into question its value, its methods, its orientation, and its results is tantamount to iconoclasm. The fact that science belongs to the contemporary system of social organization is expressed by a division of labor that has been

pushed to absurd limits; as much as in today's factory, the effect is that the overall meaning of operations no longer is possessed by anyone, not even by the directors. It is expressed, here as in all other domains, through a typical phenomenon of modern societies: the fabrication of backwardness at a scale still grander than that of "progress." This is the result of the coexistence of a pace of rapid change with a relentless resistance to institutional transformation: this factor's contribution to the crisis of contemporary teaching hardly needs to be recalled on this score. As, parallelly, scientific research has become an enterprise involving the commitment of considerable capital and numerous personnel, a large-scale management problem becomes apparent that is resolved as in the contemporary business enterprise and State, namely, through bureaucratic organization that incorporates a deep-seated irrationality and wears itself out resolving with one hand the problems it creates with 100 other ones. This enterprise obviously depends on the established economic and political powers, in multiple ways and with all sorts of effects, which have long been the topics of public commentary. The one of particular interest here, while less apparent, is no less important: in addition to the other forms of servitude encumbering today's research commitments, such research must be "efficient" and the "results" thereof must be seen as rapidly as possible. It is not a matter here of the efficacy [*efficacité*] of industrial or military applications: we are speaking of *efficiency* [*efficacité*], a certain sense of efficiency, as relates to research itself. The consequence thereof is a bias that is all the stronger as it is often accompanied by best-faith efforts to select what is to be encouraged or promoted in terms of what is each time considered, by established opinion, to be potentially fecund and reasonably solid. Yet obviously an anticipatory estimation thereof can generally express only a projection into the future

of past experience and therefore imposes a reverse “selective pressure” favoring the prolongation of lines of research that have demonstrated their efficacy and the continuation of hitherto prevailing methods. As the history of science shows with blinding clarity that every established line of research becomes sterile after a while, that every method sooner or later exhausts the domain in which it is fecund—and we hope that we have shown that this ensues from the most deep-seated characteristics of the enterprise of knowledge and of its object—the result in the end risks becoming a block upon this same scientific progress one boasts about favoring.

These last considerations indicate already that there is more than just a material, political, and social dependency of instituted science on the instituted system. There is, just as importantly, its dependency on the implicit and nonconscious metaphysics of this society, on the imaginary-ideological lines of force of the contemporary historical field. Experimentation, quantification at all cost even if it is trivial or not pertinent, at the very least formalization, unlimited expansion of the cybernetic-informational paradigm (which takes the place of the “mechanistic” paradigm of the eighteenth century and the energetic-evolutionary one of the nineteenth century), exclusive preoccupation with can-do power and with organization as ends in themselves—these are, in the scientific domain as well as in the other ones, just the manifest symptoms of the transformation of *homo sapiens* into *homo computans*, of *zōon logon echon* into *zōon logistikon*. How can one be surprised when the situation allows of no modification through colloquia? How can one be surprised at the almost insurmountable difficulty one encounters in raising consciousness about questions that go beyond this framework and virtually destroy it; or at the fact that such an attempt can be experienced by the prisoners of the scientific cave—their gaze fixed on their indicator lights,

on the screens of their devices, and on the printouts from their computers—only as an attempt to cast them into darkness, which is often indeed their own inner obscurity? How can one be surprised, too, by the fact that so many young people, who refuse to be transformed into logistical animals but who most of the time, precisely on account of the system that has “educated” them, do not have the opportunity to bring out the theoretical inconsistency of this system, often give irrationalist forms to their revolt?

The exigencies that follow from this analysis formulate themselves on their own. We are required to reflect on the current mode of relationship among particular scientific disciplines and their relation to philosophy; we are required to call into question their separation as it is practiced and instituted, therefore to challenge the type of division of labor that dominates them. We are, finally, required to reflect on the way science is integrated into established society and to call its institution into question.

It is just as clear that the questions thus raised are but shards of the problem humanity encounters today wherever it might flee. And it clearly would be naive to think that these questions could be resolved, by near or by far, outside of some thoroughgoing transformations in social organization and historical orientation.

What, indeed, could a calling into question of the social institution of contemporary science be outside of a calling into question of instituted society? There is no more a politics of science than there is a science of politics, except, in both cases, as mystification or a manipulative pseudotechnique. There is only, there has to be a thoughtful politics and political thought, and there we have what the times are demanding of us. And how could this institution be abolished in its present form without a radical upheaval in the internal organization of the knowledge and of the scientific

labor that is congruent thereto? What could such an upheaval be if it was not at the same time a full resumption of the question of knowledge, of those who know and of what they know, therefore philosophy again and philosophy more than ever, that philosophy whose death a few simple minds believe that they could cause by stating it? The transformation of society our times require proves to be inseparable from the self-surpassing [*autodépassement*] of Reason. No more than that transformation has to do with the mystifications of all kinds of demagogues and cranks can this self-surpassing be confused with the “revolutions” periodically proclaimed by the imposters who mount the stage. In both cases, what is at stake is not only the content of what has to change—the tenor and organization of knowledge, the substance and the function of the institution—but just as much and more so our relation with knowledge and the institution; no essential change is henceforth conceivable that would not at the same time be a change of this relation. To have glimpsed this possibility will remain, whatever might happen, the grandeur of our time and the promise of its crisis.

KOINŌNIA

## Technique\*

To the Greek idea of man, *zōon logon echon*—living being possessing *logos*, speaking-thinking—the Moderns have juxtaposed, and even opposed, the idea of *homo faber*, man defined by the fabrication of instruments, therefore the possession of tools. For a while, anthropological records seemed to prove them right, but that was but an appearance: chipped stones may be preserved, whereas only indirect inferences are possible about speech before writing. Progress in anthropology allows one today to relativize this opposition to a considerable degree (which does not for all that mean that the riddles of hominization have been solved). Granted, the cortexes of the higher apes show that, among them, “the equipment for articulation and gesticulation is subhuman,” but “the physical potential for organizing sounds and gestures was already present in the first known anthropoid.” “To put it another way, humans... can make tools as well as symbols, both of which derive from... the same basic equipment in the brain. ... language is as characteristic of humans as are tools, ... both are the expression of the same intrinsically human property.”<sup>1</sup> What André Leroi-Gourhan thus considers to be practically certain when starting from material data meets up with what philosophical reflection on technique and language could ascertain. In both cases, the same disengagement from immediacy comes into play; in both cases, a temporality and a *sui generis* order emerge that are superimposed upon natural

---

\*“Technique” was published in volume 15 of the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (March 1973). Reprinted in the [French edition of CL](#), 221-48 (289-324 of the 1998 reprint) as well as in *EP7*, 63-94.

<sup>1</sup>André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (1964), tr. Anna Bostock Berger, intro. Randall White (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 88, 89, 113.

temporality and natural order while reversing the signs thereof; in both cases, there is, to speak like Marx, an externalization or “objectivation” of man, which remains unintelligible if cut off from an interiority that is, however, itself inaccessible; tool and speech immediately line [*doublent*] their empirical existence, *de facto*, with a universal *eidos* (they are tool or speech only as concrete instances of *this* tool, of *those* words); finally, for the both of them, there is the reality and the appearance of their mastery by the individual user, the appearance and the reality of their mastery over the individual whom they preexist and who, without them, would not be.

For a quite long time, however, the question of technique has ceased to be a mere object of scientific research or philosophical reflection and has become a source of growing preoccupation. An obvious result of the enormous impact of contemporary technology upon man in his concreteness (at once as producer and as consumer), upon nature (alarming ecological effects), upon society and how it is organized (technocratic ideology, nightmare or paradisaical dream of a cybernetized society), this preoccupation remains massively marked, at the sociological level, by a thoroughgoing duplicity. Delight and wonder at artefacts and the ease with which ordinary mortals as well as Noble Prize winners allow themselves to be imprisoned within new mythologies (those “thinking machines”—or “thought as a machine”) accompany, often among the same people, a mounting clamor against a technics [*la technique*] suddenly rendered responsible for all of humanity’s ills. The same duplicity manifests itself on the sociopolitical plane, when “technicalness” serves as a screen for real power and when one curses the “technocrats” to whom one would nevertheless be ready to entrust the solution for all problems. What is being expressed here is simply society’s incapacity to face up

to its own political problem. Yet things do not proceed otherwise when it comes to one's overall attitude toward technics: most of the time, contemporary opinion, whether commonly held or scholarly, remains mired in the antitheses of technique as pure instrument of man (though perhaps poorly used by him) and of technics as autonomous factor, a fate or "destiny" (whether beneficial or maleficent). Thought continues thereby its ideological role: furnishing society the means not to think through its genuine problem and to skirt its responsibility in the face of its creations.

With the current proliferation of easily accessible literature on the subject, it has seemed preferable to concentrate here on a few nodal themes, ones capable of furnishing some benchmarks for reflection on a reality that is coextensive with human history.

### 1. The Meaning of Technique

#### *Greek "Technē"*

Technique or technics, from the Greek *technē*, dates back to the quite ancient verb *teuchō* (attested to solely, though through countless instances, by the poets; its root is *t(e)uch-*, Indo-European *\*th(e)uch-*), whose central meaning in Homer is to "fabricate," to "produce," to "construct"; *teuchos*, "tool," "instrument," is also the instrument *par excellence*: arms or weapons. Already in Homer, this meaning already passed over to that of causing, making be, bringing into existence, often detached from the idea of material fabrication but never from that of the appropriate and effective act: the derivative *tuktos*, "well constructed," "well fabricated," comes to signify: achieved, finished, completed; *tektōn*, at the outset the carpenter, is also in Homer the artisan or worker in general, later the master in a given occupation,

ultimately the good constructor, producer, or author. *Technē*, “production” or “material fabrication,” rapidly became production or effective, generally adequate *making/doing* (not necessarily linked to a material product), the manner of making/doing that is correlative to such a production, the faculty that allows production, productive know-how [*savoir-faire productif*] as relates to an occupation, and (starting with Herodotus, Pindar, and the tragedians) know-how in general, therefore method, manner, effective fashion of making/doing. The term thus comes to be used (frequently in Plato) as nearly synonymous with rigorous and grounded knowledge, *epistēmē*. In the classical period, its connotations are found in the oppositions *technē/paideia* (lucrative professional occupation as opposed to disinterested learning), *technē/tuchē* (causation by an efficacious, because conscious, making/doing, as opposed to an effect of chance), and, finally, *technē-phusis* (see below). The Stoics would go on to define *technē* as *hexis hodopoiētikē*, “*habitus* creative of a path.”

It is important to note that, parallel to this sifting out of the meaning of appropriate and efficacious know-how from a meaning having to do with fabrication, which the documentary record makes apparent was immediate, there was an infinitely slower and ever-uncertain sifting out, from material “fabricating,” of the concept of creation (*poiēsis*) to which Aristotle will in the end moor *technē*. Of the two initial meanings of the verb *poieō* (*to make* and *to do* in English), only the first (therefore that of producing, constructing, fabricating) exists in Homer, almost as a perfect synonym for *teuchō*. The third one, “creating,” was to arise only during the classical era. At its beginnings, Greek thought could not take the *ex nihilo* into consideration (all philosophy to this day has in fact joined in this incapacity). That which makes something else exist than what already was either is *phusis* (and therefore the something else is not truly other) or is *technē*, though

*technē* always proceeds from what is always there; it is assembly, mutual adjustment, an appropriate transformation of materials. Homer does not say of Zeus that he makes a storm of rain and hail be; rather, he *etuxēn* (*Iliad* 10.6), he fabricates it, produces it, assembles it. The gods are in *technē*; they are its initial possessors (Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* 506: all *technai* come to mortals from Prometheus). This outlook was to remain the dominant one down to the *Timaeus*, whose god constructs the world starting from preexisting elements of all orders which he assembles, mixes, transforms, and adjusts to one another in light of his knowledge, as a veritable *technitēs*—a *demiurge* in the classical sense of the term, someone who is today called an *artisan*.

It is Plato, however, who was the first to give to *poiēsis* its full determination: “Cause that, whatever the thing under consideration may be, brings that thing from nonbeing to being” (*Symposium* 205b), such that “the works [*travaux*] that depend on a *technē*, whatever one it may be, are *poiēsis* and their producers are all poets (creators).” What Plato was once again to have sown in passing was going to be taken back up by Aristotle and rendered explicit: *technē* is a *hexis* (*habitus*, acquired permanent disposition) *poiētikē*, namely: creative, accompanied by true reason (*meta logou alēthous*);<sup>2</sup> like *praxis*, it aims at “what could also be otherwise,” therefore its field is the possible (*endechomenon kai allōs echein*, that which accepts in itself to be disposed just as much otherwise), but it differs from *praxis* in this, that its end is an *ergon* (work [*œuvre*], result) that exists independently of the activity that has made the *ergon* be and that is worth more

---

<sup>2</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 6.4.1140a10.

than that activity.<sup>3</sup> It always cares about genesis, considers how to bring about what, in itself, could just as well be as not be “and whose principle is to be found in the creator and not in the created”; it therefore leaves outside its field everything that “is or comes about by necessity or according to nature, and consequently possesses its principle within itself.”<sup>4</sup> There is, then, a domain in which human making/doing is creative: “*Technē* in general either imitates *phusis* or effectuates what nature is incapable of accomplishing.”<sup>5</sup>

It will be noted that the interpretations offered by Martin Heidegger, to the effect that “what is decisive in *technē* does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing,”<sup>6</sup> do not have, in this case, any more or less relation than usual with the Greek world. The famous chorus from *Antigone* (332-75), “numerous are the awesome things, but none more than man,” sings of the human power of making/doing, handling, fabricating, on the material level, and of creating, inventing, instituting, on the nonmaterial level. If “the principle of being or of coming to be is to be found in the creator and not in the created,” as Aristotle says apropos of *technē*, the sole “revealing” of which it might be

---

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* 1.1.1094a5-6. [T/E: Aristotle’s phrase *endechomenon kai allōs echein* appears in *De Anima* 433a30.]

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* 6.4.1140a14-15.

<sup>5</sup>*Physics* 2.8.199a15-17.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. and intro. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 13. See also, from the same author, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, tr. David Farrell Krell, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), pp. 80-81.

a question is the revealing of the producer *qua* source of the principle of being or of coming to be. This is pretty much what Marx was to say twenty-three centuries later. Aristotle, however, is not Marx (and neither will Marx completely be Marx, as we shall attempt to show below). The idea of creation, *poiēsis* and *technē*, necessarily remains, in the former's work, ambiguous and enigmatic; the phrase from the *Physics* quoted above could just as well be translated: "Technē...perfects (*epitelei*) what nature is unable to elaborate all the way through (*apergazesthai*)."<sup>7</sup> In any case, creative making/doing is grounded on two presuppositions: there is possibility, the world is not exhausted by *anankē*; and there is *logos alēthēs* (let us say, *true reason*; and Aristotle ties the absence of art, *atechnia*, explicitly to *logos pseudēs*, to false reason). These two presuppositions are far from unrelated: it is obviously *logos alēthēs* that perceives that a thing could be or not be, come to be or not and, at another level, knowing not only the *what* but the *wherefore* [*pour-quoi*], allows the action it sheds light upon to posit, in the appropriate relation, the *protera* and *hustera*, the antecedents and the consequents, whose at-once general and specific model for the production under consideration it finds in *phusis*.<sup>7</sup> If, however, *technē* effectuates what nature is incapable of accomplishing, that is because this thing was already borne by the *endechomenon*; therefore, it is nonnatural actualization of a possibility that cannot not be natural, through that particular agent, man, whose own *phusis* contains precisely the virtuality of actualizing the virtual of *phusis* in general. It is not hard to draw this idea toward the canonical and empty tautology of traditional philosophy: the new is but actualization of a possibility given straightaway (to

---

<sup>7</sup>*Physics* 2.8.199a15-17.

whom?) with being. It is, in any case, significant that, when Aristotle came to consider that *technē poiētikē par excellence*, the one we still call *poetry*, he would define it (as Plato had already done) by imitation, and, when it comes to tragedy, imitation of an “important and perfect act.” Is such an act in *phusis*? *Praxis* is (like the desire to know) *phusei* in man, but the “important and perfect act” tragedy imitates is exclusively abuse of power, parricide, incest, infanticide. The *phusis* of man essentially contains crime and excess, anomie and hubris; it is that which tragedy—which at the same time aims at modifying this nature of man “through pity and terror”—“represents.” However, one could thereby still see therein “the man who heals (medically treats) himself; and *phusis* is like that.”<sup>8</sup> And yet “the principle is in the creator and not in the created.”

One can go no further. At the frontiers of Aristotelianism, *technē* is the other of *phusis*, but *technē par excellence*, poetry, is imitation of a *phusis* that is not *phusis* as such.

### *The Western Conception of Technics*

Our contemporary tongue and culture have pushed aside almost nothing from the constellation of significations of the Greek term. Technics is thus implementation of some knowledge, insofar as it distinguishes itself from this knowledge as such; insofar, too, as it does not take into consideration the ultimate ends of the activity in question: already Aristotle was saying, “in *technē*, he who errs willingly is preferable” [namely, preferable to he who errs without

---

<sup>8</sup>*Physics* 2.8.199b30-32.

wanting to];<sup>9</sup> therefore, the domains of *technē* and of ethical virtue are separate. One is to judge this implementation of means only upon how those means are efficaciously adjusted to the end aimed at, which is posited by another instance of authority. Thus are opposed “technical” considerations to “political” ones, and artistic (e.g., pianistic) techniques to expression and interpretation properly speaking. Yet the Greek sense is also surpassed, insofar as efficacious activity is always considered as voluntary and at the disposal of the subject, though not as flowing necessarily from some explicit knowledge; it can be simply an inherited efficacious practice, provided that it is standardized, canonical, and *invested*—that is, “materialized” in terms of an expenditure, of objects or of time, in an internal or external device that can be taken on its own terms. Thus, for the contemporary era, technique or techniques are at once: the power to produce, through an appropriate mode of action and starting from some already existing elements, in a manner conforming to...; *and* the arrangement of a coherent set of already produced means (instruments) in which this power is embodied—which boils down to saying that technics is separated from creation (of which it would be, at best, the more or less skillful servant) and that it is also separated from questions concerning *what* is thus produced, and *for what* [pour quoi] *it* is so.

Marx

An apparent paradox: this “vulgar” notion of technics, as ancillary or neutral instrument, is that of an age in which one witnessed the birth of the first great conception, going beyond the Greek idea of *technē*, to posit technique explicitly

---

<sup>9</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 6.5.1140b23.

as a moment at once central to and creative of the social-historical world. We are obviously speaking here of Marx (the term *technique* is not frequently employed in his work, but the thing is no less intended when it comes to “labor,” “industry,” and “productive forces”). This is not the place to retrace the lineage that links Marx to everything in German classical philosophy, since Kant and especially from Fichte until Hegel, that relates to the self-positing of the subject. Let us note that Marx’s first formulations are at once quite close to Hegel, whom he praises for having seen in “labor...man’s act of *self-genesis*,” and already quite removed from him, for “the only labor which Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstractly mental* labor.”<sup>10</sup> As early as 1844, the man who engenders himself through labor is not for Marx a “moment” in a dialectic of a consciousness already posited at the outset, but the whole man, in flesh and blood, the “generic man” and not the individual, historical man: “the *entire so-called history of the world* is nothing but the creation of man through human labor.” “Only through developed industry...does the ontological essence of human passion come into being, in its totality as well as in its humanity.” “The history of *industry* [is] the *open book* of *human faculties*.” “Industry is conceived as the *exoteric* revelation of man’s *essential powers*.”<sup>11</sup> Self-genesis through labor is creation by man of man and of the human world, mediated by objects; this creation is no longer transcendental self-positing or a mystery of an “artistic creation,” but effectively actual (*wirklich*) self-positing in all the connotations of this word.

---

<sup>10</sup>Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 5<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (New York: International Publishers 1988), pp. 152, 141.

<sup>11</sup>T/E: *Ibid.*, 107, 128, 104 (translation slightly altered to reflect the French Costes edition Castoriadis cites), 105.

The meaning of this creation, of this self-genesis of man by labor, was nevertheless going to become increasingly restricted and would become practically identical with technical creation, inasmuch as the latter constitutes its truly active core. (From *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847, to the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859, categorical formulations heading in this direction abound. The humus of the texts, especially the youthful ones, is richer and more contradictory; nevertheless, it would be pointless to deny that it is in the direction indicated that Marx's thought became set.)

This narrowing was to have some weighty consequences, which will be evoked below. One point has to retain our attention: In what sense are labor, industry, productive forces, and technique self-genesis and creation of man? The idea is, at the outset, ambiguous: man himself engenders himself through labor because sociality and labor can be posited and thought only together, because man makes himself exist in this way *qua* being deploying faculties and *qua* "objective being," and because he makes a "human" nature exist for himself while transforming his environment [*milieu*]. (The idea is pushed to absurd limits in a passage from *The German Ideology* wherein Marx wrongly transgresses the boundary of *phusis*: it is true, as he says, that the cherry tree would be absent from the German landscape had men not imported it there, but they did not transplant there the air, the mountains, or the stars.<sup>12</sup> And to say that the stars also belong to a "human" nature is true in a sense—on the condition that it not be forgotten that it is in no way through technical activity as such that the stars have become

---

<sup>12</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. and intro. C.J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), p. 62.

“human.”) On the other hand, however, technics is creation *qua* deployment of *rationality*; this is the meaning that would rapidly become dominant. Still, the meaning of this term must be specified. Marx ultimately thinks through the rationality that is in question here by reference to two fixed points: the postulation of a “scientific” nature, which man progressively learns to know, particularly by means of his “practice,” therefore in the first place by means of his labor (see the second of the *Theses on Feuerbach*); and the human needs whose “historical” character Marx underscores at the outset (the “production of new needs is the first historical act”),<sup>13</sup> but without ever genuinely taking that historical character into account later on and still less indicating in what it consists. In the end, man no longer appears as the being who engenders himself but as the one who aims at “subdu[ing], control[ing], and fashion[ing] the forces of nature” and that, so long as he does not “real[ly]” succeed in this, makes up for it in mythology.<sup>14</sup> Thus, history becomes real progress in rationality and technics becomes instrumental mediation between two fixed points: rational, subduable, shapable nature and the human needs that define the toward-what and the for-what of such domination.

Ultimately, just as in the “current” notion, one need not worry either about what is produced or about the wherefore of such production. Marx, who, as a young man, insisted on “what significance...both a *new mode of*

---

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49. [T/E: On the previous page, Marx/Engels had made, however, also the following assertion: “The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.”]

<sup>14</sup>Karl Marx, 1857 Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), p. 216.

*production* and a new *object* have,”<sup>15</sup> did not later truly challenge either the objects or the means of capitalist production, but just the appropriation of them both, the capitalist diversion of the efficiency—which in itself would be irrefragable—of technics for the benefit of a particular class. Technics has not only become “neutral” but positive in all its aspects, operative reason; it is necessary and sufficient that men retake control of its operations.

### Critics of Technics

Without being able to insist on the point, we will mention only the opposing conception that, from well before John Ruskin up till Jacques Ellul by way of several texts by Heidegger (and notwithstanding some other texts by the same author), leads to curses, to despair, or to contempt in the face of what is posited as the “intrinsically” negative character of modern technics. From precisely this perspective, some have pointed out a host of harmful consequences stemming from technical development under capitalism, which are just as important if not more important than its ecological effects: from the pens of some (including Ellul’s)<sup>16</sup> have come some vigorous denunciations of the illusions of the “neutrality” and pure instrumentality of technique and a focus on the near-irreversible autonomization of contemporary technological progress. It is, however, legitimate to ask oneself whether, at

---

<sup>15</sup>Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup>Including his book *La technique ou l’enjeu du siècle* (1954; tr. John Wilkinson as *The Technological Society* [New York: Knopf, 1964; London: Jonathan Cape, 1965; rev. ed.: New York: Knopf/Vintage, 1967]), which anticipated in great depth many of the ideas that have since become commonplace.

the deepest level, anything else has changed in relation to Marx, except the algebraic sign affecting the very essence of technique.

The irresistible process that was to lead humanity to affluence and communism leads it toward total dehumanization and catastrophe. The future of man was the “realm of freedom”; “the destiny of being” now leads to the “absence of the gods.”<sup>17</sup> Where one glimpses that the contemporary movement of technology has a considerable amount of inertia, that it cannot be deflected or stopped at minor cost, that it becomes heavily materialized in social life, one tends to make of technics an absolutely autonomous factor, instead of seeing therein an expression of the overall orientation of contemporary society. And where one can see that “the essence of modern technics...is itself nothing technical,”<sup>18</sup> one immediately reimmerses this essence in an ontology that removes it at the decisive moment from the human world—from *making/doing*.

### *Technique, Creation, and Constitution of the Human World*

#### Technique as absolute creation

One must pick up the threads that were left by Aristotle and Marx or that broke between their fingers and knot them back together. One must also look with fresh eyes

---

<sup>17</sup>T/E: The first quoted phrase comes from ch. 48 in vol. 3 of Marx’s *Capital*, the last two from Heidegger.

<sup>18</sup>Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” p. 20 [T/E: translation modified: where Castoriadis’s French had “technique...technique,” Lovitt’s translation here has “technology...technological”].

and set aside a good part (and a part that is good) of the philosophical tradition that is in this case preventing one from seeing what is. What, here, is preventing one from seeing is the Platonic *eidos*, the necessary eternal paradigm of all that could ever be, and the consequence thereof, *mimēsis*. What technique brings into being, in the decisive cases, is not an imitation or a resumption of a natural model (even if a vague analogy may be found to be achieved by accident in nature); it is something that, in relation to nature, is “arbitrary.” Technique creates “what nature is incapable of accomplishing.” A wheel around an axle, a distilled brew, a piano, written signs, the transformation of rotational movement into alternating linear movement or the opposite transformation, as well as a fisherman’s net, are “absolute creations.” There is in nature no equivalent, near or far, to the pulley, the stirrup, the potter’s wheel, the locomotive, or the computer. A computer does not “imitate” the central nervous system; it is constructed on other principles.<sup>19</sup> The expression *absolute creations* can be understood only if one rids oneself of an infantile sophistry wherein either everything, including permanence in being for one more instant, would be creation or nothing would be so. The precise matter of the object created by technique, or its form, or the way in which it diverts the efficaciousness of physical laws, or its finality, or all that at once are generally without any natural antecedent. To create a technical object is not to alter the present state of nature, as one does just as well by moving one’s hand; it is to constitute a universal type, to posit an *eidos* that henceforth “is” independently of its empirical exemplars. This *eidos*, quite evidently, is in turn inscribed within a hierarchy or a

---

<sup>19</sup>John Von Neumann, *The Computer and the Brain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 80-82.

network; it is what allows Leroi-Gourhan, through the countless varieties of adzes really encountered, to speak explicitly of the adze as being of some essence or of some ideal type, or of *the* propeller, “impersonal, nonexistent, which is at once the primary level of fact and the tendency itself.”<sup>20</sup>

### The constitution of the real

However, technique is not just creation taken in itself. It is an essential dimension of the overall creation that each form of social life represents, and this is so above all because technique is, just as much as language, an element for the constitution of the world *qua* human world, and in particular, an element for the creation, by each society, of that which, for it, is real-rational, by which we intend that which society posits as imposing itself upon society; magic in an archaic society is a centerpiece of that society’s “real-rational.” Every society is immersed in a setting [*milieu*] that resists and is itself traversed by such an internal milieu. This setting, nevertheless, does not resist just anyhow and does not resist, period. It does not resist, period: what renders possible not only technique but any kind of making/doing is the fact that brute reality is not frozen, that it includes immense interstices allowing one to move, assemble, alter, and divide; and also, that man can insert himself as real cause within the flux of the real. But above all, the setting does not resist just anyhow: whether it is a matter of outer nature, of the neighboring tribe, of people’s bodies, or of their actions and reactions, such resistance is regulated; it presents some lines of force,

---

<sup>20</sup>André Leroi-Gourhan, *L’Homme et la Matière* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1971), pp. 321-25. [T/E: This book was first published in 1943.]

reinforcements, and unfolding developments that are in part systematic. Like all making/doing, like all knowledge, like mere observation (think of primitive biological taxonomy or astronomy), technique is supported by the “rationality of the real.” Yet it does much more: it explores, actively discovers, forces that which was simply virtual to appear, with *virtual* here in the most abstract sense of the term. The extraordinary compressed-air bellows of the Dayaks of Borneo (and the same can be said of all nontrivial inventions: hundreds of them may be found in Leroi-Gourhan)<sup>21</sup> makes use of a set of nature’s hidden properties that never happen to converge in this way, and about which it can be said not only that in nature they have no contact with one another but that they were condemned, *phusei*, to remain so forever. Technique thus divides the world into the following two basic regions for human making/doing: the one that resists in every way and the one that (at a given stage of history) resists only in a certain way. It constitutes, in brute reality, that in relation to which one can do nothing and that in relation to which some making/doing is possible. Technique is creation *qua* arbitrary use at once of the rational makeup of the world *and* of its indeterminate interstices.

#### The indeterminacy of ends

Both parts of this statement are key. Leroi-Gourhan was right to write: “There is, then, a whole side of the tendency of technique that is due to the construction of the

---

<sup>21</sup>See, by this author, besides the previously cited *L’Homme et la Matière*, his work *Milieu et Techniques* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1945).

universe itself.”<sup>22</sup> Yet one could not underscore too strongly that what “is due to the universe itself” has to be sifted out and can be so only through another term: while it is “normal that roofs would be gabled, axes would have handles, and arrows would be balanced at a third of their length,” it is neither “normal” nor “abnormal” that *there be* houses, axes, and arrows; it is “arbitrary.” Granted, the rationality of the real is, each time, made use of, but in order for it to be so in fecund fashion, in order for it to be freed up, an “absolute positing” of the house, the ax, the arrow is needed. It is true that there are “obligatory solutions,”<sup>23</sup> but it is just as key to observe that there are, for man, no obligatory *problems*. Now, here again we are touching upon a key aspect of technical creation: there are not one or several problems for man that are defined once and for all, and for which man would provide, down through the ages, some “obligatory” or gradually improved solutions; there is no fixed point of human “needs.” The abyss separating the necessities of man as biological species from the needs of man as historical being is dug by man’s imaginary, but the pickax used to dig it is technique. The image is still faulty. For, here, too, technique taken *in toto* is not mere instrument, and its specificity codetermines each time in decisive fashion what is dug: historical need is not definable outside of its object. Industry is not only “the open book of human faculties”; it is also the endlessly ongoing text for the impossible translation of desire into a realizable aim.

---

<sup>22</sup>*Milieu et Techniques*, p. 359.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 367.

## Social organization

So far, it has been a question only of “material” technics, of society’s relations with nature. It ought to be clear that what has just been said holds *a fortiori* for the other aspect of the constitution by society of what for it is real-rational: of its own constitution by itself, of its self-institution—and of the huge technical component this self-institution includes. It is possible to give here only a few indications. On the one hand, as Lewis Mumford has strongly underscored,<sup>24</sup> one of history’s most extraordinary inventions was the construction not of any material machine but of the “invisible machine,” “labor machine,” or “megamachine”: the assembling and organization, by monarchies 5,000 years ago, of immense masses of men beneath a meticulous and rigid division of labor that made it possible to achieve works of a type and on a scale hitherto unknown and comparable to those of today (Marx already said that the “mode of cooperation is itself a ‘productive force’”).<sup>25</sup>

Yet in a form at once less spectacular and much more general, that is true of every known society: of all “techniques,” the most important one is social organization itself, the most powerful apparatus ever created by man is the regulated network of social relations. Granted, it must be recognized that this network is the institution, and the institution is much more and something other than technics,

---

<sup>24</sup>Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967), particularly chap. IX, pp. 188-211.

<sup>25</sup>*The German Ideology*, p. 50. [Author’s addition: As one knows, this theme was to be developed by Marx in chapters 13-15 of the first volume of *Capital*.]

but it contains, indissociably, social “technique”—the “rationalization” of relationships among men such as such “rationalization” is constituted by the society under consideration—and is impossible without it.<sup>26</sup>

### The neutrality of technique

The preceding considerations may be clarified if one attempts to respond to the following question: What value is there to the traditional distinction between implemented means and the end aimed at? There is no doubt that, considered in and for itself, a technician’s activity takes no account of the value of the ends proposed to it. For such activity, value means efficacy; a nuclear technique is good if it cheaply produces megawatts or megadeaths, and it is bad should the opposite occur. This standpoint cannot be disregarded, and it is impossible to confuse an engineer who is responsible for making the calculations for a bridge that collapses with the engineer who builds, since that was the order, a solid bridge where there was no use for one. Thus, technique appears as *wert-frei*, neutral as to value, with efficacy as the sole value.

At the scale of society and history, however, those considerations become sophisms. A freedom to use this or that instrument or procedure, taken in isolation, disappears totally when it comes to the whole set [*l’ensemble*] of techniques that a society or given era has as its disposal but that just as much has society at its “disposal.” Today, one can choose between a thermal, hydraulic, or nuclear generating station and prefer one site to some other one. There is, however, no choice about the whole set of techniques used,

---

<sup>26</sup>I have developed this idea at length in chapters 3 and 4 of [IIS](#).

which will really appertain no matter what the case is to the specific type that defines the technological spectrum of our era; they include, indeed, specific methods, a specific type of relation to a specific type of knowledge, as well as the specialized human bearers thereof. They are heavily invested in the entirety of installations, routines, know-how, and manual and intellectual dexterity of hundreds of millions of men, and they have, as one is beginning to see, some massive effects that nothing or no one controls (even the means presently being imagined to ward off these undesirable effects belong to the same technological spectrum). Under these conditions, neutrality and freedom of choice are meaningless; such a freedom would exist only in the case of a total revolution, unprecedented in history, where society would explicitly pose to itself the question of the conscious transformation of its technology; and it would still at the outset find itself conditioned and limited by the very technology it would like to transform (see below).

Nor could there be a question of neutrality as to the meaning and interpretation—as difficult as this may be—of a society's relation to its technics. How could one separate the significations of the world that are laid down by a society, its "orientation," and its "values," from what is for it *efficacious making/doing*; how could one dissociate the organization it imposes on the world from the nearest embodiment of this organization: its instrumentation in the canonical procedures of this making/doing? It is one thing to say that one cannot think the relation between those two terms as a simple or complex causal dependency. It is another to forget that in both of them are expressed, at different and yet articulated levels, the creation and self-positing of a given society. In the overall organization of society, ends and means, significations and instruments, efficacy and value are not separable in accordance with the classical methods of conceptualization.

Every society creates its world, inner and outer, and technique is neither instrument nor cause of this creation but dimension or, to use a better topological metaphor, everywhere-dense part. For, it is present in all the places where society constitutes what is, for it, real-rational.

## 2. Technics and Social Organization

### *The Marxist Thesis*

In the *Republic*, Plato retraces the city's genesis in parallel with the diversification and division of labors. And in a famous remark by Aristotle (who makes the inexistence of mechanical slaves the condition for the enslavement of men), one has rightly seen one of the first formulations of historical materialism. A century and a half after its appearance, and despite all the literature to which it has given rise, it is Marx's great thesis that still today dominates the topic: the state of technics (of the "productive forces") at a given moment determines the organization of society, for it determines immediately the relations of production and mediately the organization, first, of the economy and then of the whole set of social "superstructures." The development of technics determines the changes in this organization. Without one being able to reduce Marx in general, or even Marx on this particular point, to this thesis, one cannot hide the fact that he expressed his thesis categorically, frequently, and clearly, that it was the central theme of the Marxist vulgate, which is itself an essential component of the dominant ideas of the twentieth century, and, finally, that it is, at first sight, sufficiently plausible to allow one to organize the debate on the question around it.

Technics and social life

It is one thing to say that a technique, an organization of labor, a type of relation of production go hand in hand with a type of social life and of overall social organization. It is another to speak of *determination* of the latter by the former. Beyond all quarrels over the question of causality in the social-historical domain, an essential *prerequisite* for every idea of determination is not fulfilled here: the separation of the determining and determined terms. One would first have to be able to isolate the “technical fact,” on the one hand, some other fact of social life, on the other, and define them in a univocal manner. One would then have to be able to establish biunivocal relations between the elements of the first class and those of the second one. Neither of these possibilities is given. The postulation of the first class seems to be the banal effect of a sociocentric projection (in our society, technical “facts” and “objects” seem quite distinct from other realities) and of a shift in meaning that pushes one to identify a technical fact with the corresponding material object. Now, that object is not necessarily, for the majority of cultures, a pure “instrument”; it is caught up in a network of significations of which its productive efficiency is but one moment. More importantly, since more specifically: The technical fact absolutely cannot be reduced to the object. The object is nothing as a technical object outside of the *technical ensemble* (Leroi-Gourhan) to which it belongs. Nor is it anything outside of the bodily and mental skills [*dextérités*] (which in no way go without saying and which are not automatically induced by the mere existence of the object) that condition its use; the tool as such, Leroi-Gourhan says quite well, “is but the testimony of the externalization of an efficacious gesture.”<sup>27</sup> Technical ensemble and dexterous

---

<sup>27</sup>*L’Homme et la Matière*, p. 318.

skills can just as well induce the invention, or the borrowing, of an object as it can modify, sometimes “regressively,” its patterns of use (the Eskimos and Laplanders have “reduced” to their technical level the wooden chisels brought by Europeans in order to incorporate them in their traditional adzes), or condition a rejection thereof. Finally, this object is itself a product; its genesis therefore involves the totality of the social existence of the collectivity that gives birth to the object: not only its “mental aptitudes” but also its organization of the world and the specific bias that characterizes it. There is not only a “style” to inventions and artefacts that are proper to each culture (or to classes of cultures), which corresponds pretty much to what Leroi-Gourhan calls the *technical group*, but in the technical ensemble a grasp of the world is expressed.

Yet the technical ensemble itself is devoid of meaning, of a technical kind or of any other sort, if one separates it from the economic and social whole [*ensemble*]. There is certainly no capitalist economy without capitalist technics—but it is blazingly obvious that there is no capitalist technics without a capitalist economy. A huge number of precapitalist and quasi-industrial techniques are unusable, are quite simply not socially applicable, without the existence of a large quantity of labor power that can be consumed at will, the maintenance of which is of the same interest as the maintenance of cattle, in short without slavery. Yet, is it the galley that “determines” slavery or is it slavery that renders the galley possible? When Engels says, without any cynicism but as a good Hegelian, that “the invention of slavery was the condition for immense social progress” and when at the same time he implicitly (and wrongly, but that is of little matter here) attributes this “invention” not to a “technical” fact but to an essentially *social* invention, the exchange of objects

(extended, according to him, to the “exchange of men”),<sup>28</sup> he unintentionally shows that no technical fact can in itself account for the genesis of slavery. It is, moreover, clear that every reductive attempt of this type would be absurd by definition since some kind of exchange is always constitutive of society and since if one links its precise forms or its degree of extension to technical situations, this relationship is neither always necessary nor, especially, term to term. The technical situation would have allowed Japan’s entry into the modern network of commercial exchange as early as the seventeenth century if the Tokugawa shogunate had not deliberately closed the country to trade with foreign countries, and it was not some progress in navigational techniques but the Meiji Restoration that opened it up to such trade.

#### The contemporary era

Despite appearances, it is still more certain that it is impossible to establish such a determination in the contemporary world, which is characterized, as Marx rightly said, by “the reasoned application of science to industry”<sup>29</sup> on an immense scale. For such an application to be possible, there has to be science in the modern sense of the term, and that means a boundless quantitative proliferation of knowledge (therefore also human, economic, social, and ideological support for this proliferation, which in no way goes without saying), a content to and particular methods for

---

<sup>28</sup>T/E: We have been unable to source this quotation or series of paraphrases from Engels.

<sup>29</sup>T/E: See n. 7 in “Epilegomena...,” above, on Castoriadis’s various usages of the phrase *application raisonnée*, or variants thereof, attributed to Marx.

this knowledge, and a singular relation on the part of society to its knowledge: Brahminical or Buddhist India, classical Greece, or the traditional Jewish community prize knowledge infinitely more than does the West today (whose attitude, roughly and sociologically speaking, is that of a superstitious shopkeeper who has found the goose that lays the golden eggs), but this knowledge has neither the same content nor even the same orientation as ours.

There were, of course, some rich merchants in Greece. There also are some disinterested scientists, droves of them, in the contemporary world. The key thing, however, is how the latter are used by merchants today and not in the past. Archimedes' inventions during the siege of Syracuse are an exceptional and isolated fact: the Pentagon's employment of thousands of scientists and the mention, "financed by US NAVY Project No. XXX," which is placed at the end of publications about animal psychology, linguistics, or mathematics, are typical. The modern world is undoubtedly "determined" at a host of levels, and as no other world previously, by its technology, but this technology is nothing other than one of the essential expressions of this world, its "language" regarding outer and inner nature. And it is not born of itself, or of some "autonomous" progress of knowledge, but of an enormous reorientation of the conception of knowledge, of nature, of man, and of their relations, which was achieved in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, and whose programmatic phantasm (becoming masters and possessors of nature) Descartes was to formulate in such a lapidary fashion.<sup>30</sup> And, certainly, the "modern" type of scientific development is impossible without some "technical" development *stricto sensu* that

---

<sup>30</sup>T/E: In the sixth part of René Descartes's *Discourse on Method*.

would allow the kinds of observations and experiments on which such development rests: beneath these two factors, however, there still must be the reorientation already indicated above.

A note in passing: to say that in the modern world social development depends on technical development is to burst open in a violent way the paradox contained in “the materialist conception of history.” For, that would boil down to saying that the development of the modern world depends on the development of its knowledge, therefore to saying that ideas are what make history progress, the sole qualification being that these ideas belong to a particular category (scientificotechnical ideas).

#### Nonunivocal relations

Therefore, “technical facts” cannot be separated in a rigorous way from the other ones and no meaning can obtain for the idea of a linear or circular “determinism.” And insofar as one agrees to give to these terms some much looser significations, one glimpses that it is impossible to establish biunivocal relations among them. Some extremely similar “technical ensembles” are found to correspond to a limitless variety of cultures and histories. Dozens of archaic cultures in the Pacific, all containing highly related “technical ensembles,” introduce traits that are as differentiated among themselves as those of our culture compared to that of the European fourteenth century; and one can say as much of a great number of African or Amerindian cultures. Today, America and Russia partake in the same “technical ensemble,” with “superstructures” that are nevertheless quite different (although one could show the deep-seated kinship of the two systems in many respects). Conversely, cultures quite close from other standpoints display very different “technical

ensembles”; some tribes whose modes of production and labor are quite far removed from one another live under “analogous” systems: it was only for a brief moment that ethnology was able to believe that “matriarchy” is necessarily tied to agriculture and “patriarchy” to pastoral life.

The complexities and difficulties of this argument again reinforce the standpoint being defended here. It will be asked: What does “identical trait” mean in different cultures? The imputations being discussed here would have some meaning, however, only if this notion did not raise a major problem. Now, it raises some enormous ones, as much for the “technical facts” as for cultural characteristics. It is not to be concluded from this that the social-historical world would have to be pulverized into a collection of singular and heteroclitic observable things but, rather, that some significations like *matriarchate* or even *agriculture* are not of the same type as the properties that define several elements as belonging to one and the same set or to one and the same class. What two “patriarchal” societies have in common rules out one harmlessly making one-to-one imputations of separable traits. This common lot certainly leaves standing (and even makes one see much more clearly) the cobelonging of a culture’s different moments, but to call that mutual *determination* is a fallacious tautology.

### *Technics and Economics*

#### Continuity and discontinuity

The preceding considerations may be made more precise by examining the relation between two more-than-just-close sectors of social life: technics and economics. From its origins until today, political economy has posited as “given” a set of factors (geographical and climatic conditions,

population, institutions, etc.), among which is the “state of technique.” Upon these “givens” and a few other ones (individuals’ motivations and behavior, etc.), one can construct one or several systems of political economy (and economic laws). Up till what point, however, does political economy have the right to consider “the state of technique” (or its development) as given? This could be so only if there existed each time just a single, rigidly determined state of technique and if the changes in this state did not depend on the economy’s own movement (even if they continued to depend upon other aspects of social life).

In the regard, Marx took up an identical position, except that, for him, the key thing was not a *state* of technique but its ceaseless *development*. *Capital* takes as given an autonomously developing technics, which is to be distinguished from the technics of the prior phases essentially by the following traits: (a) it imposes the centralization and collectivization of the production process; (b) it evolves rapidly; (c) by their nature, but obliged especially by competition, the capitalists are brought to hasten and to intensify the application of this technics to production. With the existence of primitive accumulation (that is to say, of an initial leaven, created through violence, of capital and expropriated labor), we have here the minimum presuppositions of the system, the axioms of its theory. One does not really go into the sources of this technics and of its potential to evolve any more than one broaches the question of the choice among several techniques. At each moment, it is implicitly assumed, there exists one technique that is the most cost-effective, the capitalists pounce upon it, the first who succeeds in applying it on the vastest scale “kills many

others.”<sup>31</sup> The “irrationalities” are introduced only in the form of “legacies [*l’héritage*],” and they are so only for the individual capitalist (who discovers, before having recouped the cost of one machine, that a new and better one has appeared), not from the standpoint of the system, nor in themselves (a calculation always exists that allows one to determine whether changing machines is or is not profitable).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, academic political economy “discovered” that to a given state of *technology* several specific *techniques* can correspond for this or that production. Insofar as these different techniques can make use of different relative quantities of capital and labor, the adoption of this or that one among these different techniques will modify the relative demand of each production factor, therefore also its price and ultimately its share in the social product. An essential indeterminacy is thus introduced into the system that will finally be lifted, for better or worse, through an extension of the neoclassical schema of general equilibrium; a single one of the techniques that are each time rendered possible by the technological state will be optimal for the given relative prices of capital (“rate of interest”), of labor, and of “land.” These prices are always a function of the relative demand (or “shortage”) of the factors of production; granted, the latter is now affected by the choice of the technique being applied, which depends in turn on these relative prices; but this circular determination is a feature proper to all states of equilibrium and is expressed mathematically through a system of simultaneous equations.

This analysis was recently refuted on its own plane

---

<sup>31</sup>T/E: In chapter 32 of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx asserts: “One capitalist always kills many.”

when, on the basis of a major work by Piero Sraffa,<sup>32</sup> it has become possible to show that different optimal techniques can correspond to a given “interest-rate” level (or, conversely, one technique can be optimal for different “interest rates”). Yet this refutation still remains prisoner of the scientific ideology whose particular product it is criticizing here. Neoclassical analysis is void of real signification, because it carelessly quantifies phenomena whose quantification is impossible in our current state of ignorance (the “quantities of capital and labor” are but collections of heteroclite objects arbitrarily homogenized for the needs of a theory that is simplistic despite the complexity of its pseudomathematical apparatus), because, too, it identifies profit with the “rate of interest” and postulates the existence of a regulative, uniform rate of profit. But especially because, in making the choice of techniques a purely economic affair, it conceals two key factors: that the effectively actual choice is not the result of a rational decisional procedure grounded on perfect information and aiming at a well-determined objective (maximization of

---

<sup>32</sup>Piero Sraffa, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960). [Author’s addition: The idea was already to be found in Joan Robinson’s *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Macmillan, 1956), book 2, section 2; see, in particular pp. 109-10. Since then, the controversy has raged and continues to rage within the circles of academic economists in a way that is out of all proportion to the real importance of the problem but certainly in proportion to the real problems this discussion allows one to avoid confronting. Those who are amused by exercises in elementary mathematics being applied to a totally fictive “economic” world will find a summary of the controversy, up till 1968, in G. C. Harcourt, “Some Cambridge Controversies in the Theory of Capital,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 7:2 (June 1969): 369-405, and a good selection of texts in *Capital and Growth*, G. C. Harcourt and N. F. Laing, eds (Harmondsworth: Penguin Educational Paperbacks, 1971).]

profit) but occurs, on the basis of ever-imperfect and “costly” information, through the sociological process of “decision-making” within the ruling bureaucracy of large modern business enterprises, where the determining factors have but a remote relation to profitability; and that here there is no indefinite approximation of the “optimal solution” through trial and error—for, that would presuppose conditions of continuity that are meaningless in the present case, and the path toward an optimal solution under the given conditions can just as well lead in the opposite direction, on account of a modification of these conditions, of which those who decide are obviously not the masters.

#### Applied technics and social struggles in the business enterprise

Academic political economy’s analysis also, like Marxian analysis, veils the most important factor: social conflict within production, the class struggle inside the business enterprise. The fact is that, very early on, the way capitalist technology has evolved and been applied at the point of production has been oriented in a well-defined direction: suppressing man’s human role in production, eliminating to the greatest extent possible the producers from the production process. Whether the price of labor is high or low, the management of the capitalist firm will always chose, if it can, the process that ensures the greatest independence of the production process in relation to the people who labor there; management wants to depend on machines, not men: this is the director’s parry (or preventative measure) against the workers’ struggle over imposed output quotas and labor conditions, a struggle that is, moreover, a decisive factor in the determination of the *effectively actual* (as opposed to the contractual) level of wages. In addition, it may thereby be

seen that economic determinations are equally present in this matter.<sup>33</sup> The limit of this tendency is, of course, the complete automation of the production process, a not ideal but utopian limit, it should be remembered, and even doubly so; for, in order that this tendency might truly attain its objective, it would be necessary to automate the consumption process.

This key example for an intelligent understanding of the contemporary world shows not that technology engenders capitalism, nor that capitalism creates completely out of thin air a technology that responds to its desire, but that a capitalist world emerges in which this technology is “everywhere dense.” Among the historical peculiarities of this technology is its “amplitude,” which is undoubtedly the greatest of all time: for each “need,” for each productive process, it develops not an object or a technique but a vast gamut of objects and techniques. The concretization of this technology, the sampling, from this gamut, of the technique that will be applied under given circumstances, is at once instrument of and stake in the class struggle, the outcome of which each time determines the appearance and the disappearance of occupations, the flourishing or decline of entire regions. The result of this struggle depends on the totality of circumstances, and its effects may be unexpected. In the nineteenth century, the effects of the combat of the Luddites,

---

<sup>33</sup>I first developed this idea—namely, that what exists at present is a *capitalist* technology and not a technology in general and that the way it evolves is determined essentially by the workers’ struggle, *at the point of production*, against the business enterprise’s management—and the parallel critique, of Marx’s implicit conception of capitalist technics as “neutral,” in the second part of my text, “On the Content of Socialism” (*S. ou B.*, 22 [July 1957]: 14-22). See also the third part of “On the Content of Socialism” (*S. ou B.*, 23 [January 1958]). [T/E: Both texts now appear in [PSW2](#). For the first text, Castoriadis is referring specifically to [PSW2](#), 101-108.]

who destroyed machinery, were limited to industry; the struggle the English dockers are now conducting against “containerization” (whose progress on the market is highly codetermined by the desire to get rid of the dockers, one of the most inflexible of guilds in general and in the Anglo-Saxon countries in particular) has, through one of the minor incidents in this struggle (three dockers’ defiance of an arrest order and the resulting threat of a strike that would have dealt a very severe blow to British foreign trade), led to the decision to let the pound sterling “float” starting in June 1972 and to a new international monetary crisis.

Even in the domain of the organization of labor *stricto sensu*, which seems at first glance merely the flip side of the technics of an era, one notes the complexity of the relations in play. It is clear *a priori*, and attested to by countless examples, that the same material set of tools can be put to work in highly varied ways of organizing labor. A number of “inventions,” some of which are essential, are mere modifications in the layout of the labor force around machines or objects without affecting these latter items, and neither is there any optimality in the abstract, the attitude and composition of the workgroup being among the most important factors. This is even clearer when the organization of labor as a whole becomes an explicit and central object of attempts at “rationalization” on the part of the business enterprise’s management. Beyond an initial stage, efforts to retrace a history of industrial labor solely in terms of the evolution of material techniques and methods of “rationalization” encounter a tremendous obstacle: the organization of labor becomes an instrument of and stake in the everyday struggle within the factory. The “formal” or “official” organization of labor, a conscious construction of the business enterprise that serves its ends, runs up against the “informal” organization of the workers, which responds to

other motivations and seek other ends. Depending on the results of the confrontation—which are, moreover, ceaselessly being called back into question—the effectively actual organization of labor may, on the same material base, be quite different. The workers may even (as at Fiat in Turin, a few years ago) go so far as to set up a “countermanagement” to the directors’ management or else sabotage it by strictly applying the instructions given in the work rules (known as “working to rule” in English and *grève de zèle* in French). All the preceding considerations show the huge share of indeterminacy every organization of labor, even the most “scientific” one, includes, even when the material base and the set of other conditions, excepting those that relate to the behavior of men, of individuals and of groups, have been set in place.

### 3. Technics and Politics

The contemporary era is undoubtedly the first to pose explicitly and effectively in all domains what is the grand political problem: not only as a struggle for power within given political institutions, or for the transformation of those institutions and of a few other ones, but as a problem of a total reconstruction of society that challenges the family unit as well as the mode of education, the notion of deviance and criminality just as much as the existing relations between “culture” and life.

Granted, the great “utopians” of the past, and in particular Plato, the first and most radical among them, did not shrink from shaking up education or from getting rid of the traditional family. One can even find some who start all over again concerning the natural framework of society. For all of them, a sole datum remains inviolable: technology itself. And, despite a few formulations in his youthful

manuscripts, that remains true for the Marx of *Capital*: capitalist technology appears to him as rationality incarnate; he describes and denounces, certainly, its inhuman consequences, but those consequences flow essentially from the capitalist utilization of a technology that is positively valued in itself. Technology and the sphere of social life that is in direct contact therewith—that is to say, labor—are not for him objects of reflection and political action: they belong, according to his celebrated phrase, to the “realm of necessity” upon which the “realm of freedom” can be erected only through, primarily, a “shortening of the working-day.”<sup>34</sup> The Russian Marxists of the revolutionary era pushed this idea to its furthest consequences, Trotsky going so far as to write that Taylorism was bad in its capitalist usage, good in its socialist usage<sup>35</sup> and Lenin positing that the sum of electrification and Soviets was equivalent to socialism. There is no need to go back over the fallaciousness of the separation of means and ends, which has been able to be verified experimentally in the Russian case. If, however, it is true that “the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist,” as Marx wrote,<sup>36</sup> the nuclear power station, the computer, and artificial satellites give you, then, the present form of American and world capitalism, and it is

---

<sup>34</sup>T/E: In chapter 48 of vol. 3 of Marx’s *Capital*.

<sup>35</sup>Leon Trotsky, *Dictatorship vs. Democracy (Terrorism and Communism): A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (1920; New York: Workers Party of America, 1922), p. 149. [Author’s addition: See my analysis of these aspects of this text in “The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy” (*S. ou B.*, 35 [January 1964]), now in [PSW3](#).]

<sup>36</sup>T/E: Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 109.

unclear why or how one could erect thereupon another political and social “superstructure.”

*Technology in Question*

At present, it is technology itself that is beginning to be called explicitly into question. This has been done first in the domain of labor.<sup>37</sup> People were indeed beginning to become aware of the impossibility of envisaging, in coherent fashion, a socialist transformation of society without a radical modification of the labor process itself, which in turn implied the conscious transformation of technology by laboring people under a regime of workers’ management. For a few years now, this kind of concern has taken on broader proportions, but the emphasis is placed especially on the ecological consequences of contemporary technology; moreover, the critics seem to be aiming much more at the consequences than the substance and are calling more for its limitation or the return of traditional “soft” or “natural” techniques than the organized and systematic search for a new “technical ensemble.”

Just as much as or more than in the problems of new forms of family life or of education, discussions of this theme inevitably sound “utopian.” One can, one even has to, disregard this risk. The real difficulties involved with this topic are due to the fact that it touches all aspects of social life and that every proposed orientation is worthless and has no

---

<sup>37</sup>See my text cited in n. 33. More recently, and among others, see Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (New York: Ramparts Press/Simon and Schuster, 1971). [T/E: 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh, UK and Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004). Castoriadis also notes here the existence of a 1976 Éditions Christian Bourgois translation into French by former S. ou B. members Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard.]

chance of being given concrete form if it does not correspond to what society is willing and able to create and to support in this domain and in all other ones.

*Technics in Post-Revolutionary Society*

Thus, in the fundamental domain of labor, a conscious transformation of technology aimed at stopping the labor process from being a mutilation of man and at having it become a training ground for the free creativity of individuals and groups presupposes the close cooperation between laborers/users of instruments and technicians, their integration into new ensembles that dominate production, consequently the suppression of the ruling bureaucracy, both private and public, and workers' management with all that that entails in other connections. Despite all, the ideal model remains that of the "savage" who fabricates his tool or his weapon on the same scale as his body and his own dexterous skills; at present, it is obviously no longer a question of the isolated individual but of the workgroup. Reconciling this adaptation of tools to their users with the inherent universality of modern production is one of the key problems (much more difficult than the elimination of particularly arduous or mind-numbing labors, which could quickly be achieved were research consciously directed along this path).<sup>38</sup> What we have called above the extraordinary "amplitude" of contemporary technology increases the flexibility of its possible uses (a flexibility that at present is exploited in a single direction, as was seen above), and, as is already the case for many available consumer objects, one can aim at a synthesis between the universality and the specific needs of users

---

<sup>38</sup>See the texts cited in the preceding note.

(different “assemblies” of elements appertaining to limited ranges of compatible modules, etc.). However, the “strong” universality of contemporary production goes hand in hand with very large-scale economic units; thus is posed the question of the very foundations for economic calculation and for values in a society radically different from our own. In certain domains at least, the alleged absolute advantages of large-scale production clearly appertain to the prejudices of the dominant ideology: one would have to know to what extent their existence is not tied to the ongoing deterioration in the quality of manufactured objects and to the obsolescence incorporated into those products. Likewise, a host of so-called *more economical* solutions are so at the present time only because the arduousness, boredom, and mutilating character of labor are not entered into the accounts, and even are so in reverse, since the more a job has those characteristics, the less it is paid, therefore the less it “costs.” Economies of scale or other such economies are not for all that always fictive (as Bookchin’s work seems to imply). For a host of products, production is practically inconceivable except on a large scale; it is known right now that such production could, in certain cases, be “miniaturized,” but, even in those cases, its level would remain above a scaled-down community’s own needs.

There remains, then, a problem of universalization, which could not be eliminated by a return toward near-autarchic communities (even when leaving aside the largely open question of whether such a return would be desirable in itself). A return of this sort does not necessarily further facilitate a solution to the problem of ecological balance. The problem is obviously tied directly to that of the size of self-managed communities and of centralization, therefore to questions that entail giving a sound response only on the scale of society as a whole. It involves at once human habitat (a

theme that, quite evidently, goes infinitely beyond every solely technological aspect and raises the most profound questions about what has come to be called *urbanism* or *urban planning*) and the means whereby the whole of the population could (if it wanted to) exercise power directly. One of the technological aspects of the exercise of power brings into play communications and information, domains<sup>39</sup> in which the already existing possibilities are immense; but it is just as evident that the development of these possibilities in the intended direction or even their mere implementation is impossible unless there is an unprecedented deployment of activity on the part of the people as a whole. Available communication and information technology allows the population to be furnished with all the necessary elements that would allow it to decide *in full knowledge of the relevant facts*, but on the meaning of this last expression, again only the population itself, and no one else in its stead, can decide.

What is of the essence here is situated, in fact, beyond such considerations: if a new human culture is created, after a radical transformation of the existing society, it will not only have to tackle the division of labor in all its known forms, in particular the separation of manual labor and intellectual labor; it will go hand in hand with an upheaval in established significations, in frames of rationality, in science as it has existed for the past several centuries, and in the technology that is in homogeneity therewith. Yet today we have to renounce listening to any of this music from a far-off

---

<sup>39</sup>It is Lewis Mumford who was the first to note this aspect; see: *Technics and Civilization* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1934), p. 241. [T/E: Mumford's book has been reprinted many times, most recently by the University of Chicago Press in 2010.] I reprised this idea and linked it to the problems of collective management of a postrevolutionary society in "On the Content of Socialism, II," now in [PSW2](#), 144-45.

future, lest we confuse it with the auditory hallucinations to which our desire might give rise.

# Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us\*

For Constantin Despotopoulos  
*in memory of his seminars, 1938-1942*

The contradictions contained in the form of equivalent now require a more in-depth analysis of its peculiarities.

*First peculiarity of the form of equivalent:* use-value becomes the form of appearance (*Erscheinungsform*) of its opposite, Value.

...

*Second peculiarity of the form of equivalent:* concrete labor becomes the form of appearance of its opposite, abstract human labor.

...

Insofar, however, as this concrete labor, the labor of the tailor, is valid (*gilt*) as a simple expression of undifferentiated human labor, it possesses the form of equality with another labor, the one that linen conceals and is thus, though private labor, like any other labor producing commodities, labor under an immediate social form. That is why it represents itself (*stellt sie sich dar*) in a product that is immediately exchangeable with another commodity. This is therefore a *third* peculiarity of the form of equivalent, that private labor becomes the form of its opposite, labor under an immediate social form.

The two peculiarities of the form of equivalent being examined ultimately become still easier to grasp if we go back to the great researcher (*Forscher*) who was the first to analyze the

---

\*“Valeur, égalité, justice, politique: de Marx à Aristote et d’Aristote à nous” was published in *Textures*, 12-13 (late 1975). Reprinted in the [French edition of CL](#), 249-316 (325-413 of the 1998 reprint). [T/E: Besides the 1984 Ryle/Soper translation, which matches the [French version published in CL](#), Andrew Arato translated a version of this text as “From Marx to Aristotle, from Aristotle to Us,” *Social Research*, 45:4 (Winter 1978): 667-738.]

form of value, like so many other forms of thought, of society, and of nature. I mean Aristotle.

In the first place, Aristotle clearly expresses that the money-form of the commodity is only the developed aspect of the simple form of value, that is to say, of the expression of the value of a commodity in any other commodity, for he says:

5 beds = 1 house (*klinai pente anti oikias*)

does not differ from:

5 beds = so much money (*klinai pente anti...hosou ai pente klinai*)

He sees in addition that the relation of value, which contains this expression of value, presupposes, for its part, that the house is posited as qualitatively equal/identical to the bed (*qualitativ gleichgesetzt wird*), and that these sensually different things (*diese sinnlich verschiedenen Dinge*), without such an equality/identity of essence (*ohne solche Wesensgleichheit*), could not be related to each other as commensurable magnitudes. "Exchange," he says, "cannot be without equality, nor equality without commensurability" (*out' isotēs mē ousēs summetrias*). But here he hesitates and gives up pursuing the analysis of the form of value. "But it is in truth impossible (*tē men oun alētheia adunaton*) for such dissimilar things to be mutually commensurable," that is to say, qualitatively equal/identical. This positing of equality/identity (*Gleichsetzung*) cannot but be foreign to the true nature of things, and thus is only a makeshift for practical needs.

Thus, Aristotle himself tells us that against which the pursuit of his analysis runs aground, that is to say, against the lack/defect/imperfection (*am Mangel*) of [his] concept of Value. What is the equal/identical (*das Gleiche*), that is to say, the common substance (*die gemeinschaftliche Substanz*), that the house represents for the bed in the expression of the value of the bed? Such a thing, says Aristotle, "cannot in truth exist." Why? *Vis-à-vis* the bed, the house represents something equal/identical, insofar as it represents that which is in effective actuality equal/identical in the both of them (*das in beiden...wirklich Gleiche*). And that is—human labor.

But that in the form of the value of commodities all sorts of labor are expressed as equal/identical human labor and consequently as equivalents (*als gleiche menschliche Arbeit und*

*daher als gleichgeltend*), is something Aristotle could not read in the form of value itself, for Greek society rested on the labor of slaves, and for this reason has as its natural foundation the inequality of men and of their labor-powers. The secret of the expression of Value, the equality/identity and equivalence (*die Gleichheit und gleiche Gültigkeit*) of all sorts of labor because and so far as they are human labor in general (*menschliche Arbeit überhaupt*) can be deciphered only when the concept of human equality/identity already possesses the solidity of a popular prejudice. But that is possible for the first time only in a society in which the commodity form is the universal form of the produce of labor, where, consequently, the relation between men as possessors of commodities is the dominant social relation. Aristotle's genius brilliantly appears precisely in the fact that he discovers in the expression of the value of commodities a relation of equality/identity (*Gleichheitsverhältnis*). The historical bound of the society in which he lived alone prevents him from finding out in what this equality/identity relation "in truth" consists.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, part 1, ch. 1: "Commodities," Section 3: "The Form of Value or Exchange-Value." I am translating this passage on the basis of the text for the second German edition, and I am including, where necessary, the phrases added by Marx to the French translation by Joseph Roy. Here and in what follows, unless otherwise specified, the words in italics are in the original. See vol. 1 of the Éditions Costes French translation, pp. 34-39; vol. 1 of the Pléiade edition, pp. 586-91. To simplify things, the page references are to [T/E: Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling's translation of the third German edition, ed. Friedrich Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967); here: pp. 56-60. The first, introductory sentence cannot be found at all in the Moore/Aveling translation but does exist in the French. The version of this long quotation that appears above in the body of this text, along with other passages from *Capital* below, thus are original English-language translations of Castoriadis's distinct German-to-French translations.] The same passage from Aristotle had already been commented on, in a more summary fashion, by Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) [T/E: see p. 68, n\*, in the 1970 Progress Publishers (Moscow) edition].

The Pléiade edition reproduces almost in full the Roy translation

As is known, Marx is certain that he has “in truth” deciphered the “secret” of the expression of value. He is certain that he has found the “equal something”<sup>2</sup> that grounds the quantitative proportions of the exchange of objects—and

---

of vol. 1 of *Capital*, which was, as is known, revised and corrected by Marx himself, who invited the reader to grant to the French version “a scientific value independent of the original” (“Afterword to the French Edition (1875),” Moore/Aveling translation, p. 22). Nevertheless, when one compares the French version to the German original, it is impossible not to share Engels’s opinion:

All its power and life’s blood have been sent to the devil. The mediocre writer castrates the language in order to express himself with a certain degree of elegance. It is becoming increasingly difficult to think in this modern constrained French. Already the sentence inversions, necessitated almost everywhere by pedantic formal logic, deprive the presentation of all its force and liveliness (Letter of November 29, 1873, in *Marx Engels On Literature and Art* [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976]).

Perhaps, when one compares the German and French texts, one is struck still more by the flattening of the terminology. As will be seen, the philosophical character of the first chapter of *Capital* goes far beyond any “coquetting” by Marx with Hegelian *words*; these words correspond to philosophically loaded concepts, which Marx used with their full weight. That is strikingly apparent in the German text and is veiled by the smoothing and “simplifications” of the French translation. An analogous case may be found in the term *Wertform*, which Roy and Jacques Molitor [T/E: the translators of the Costes edition] often render as *forme-valeur*—which had to have left most French readers endlessly perplexed. Now, *Wertform*, where *Wert-* has the value of a “genitive,” is the form of value. For Marx, there is Value itself (as I will write it), which is a Substance/Essence, and *its* Form, the Form of this Substance-Essence, the Form of Value—which can be “simple,” “total,” and so on.

<sup>2</sup>Roy renders the German *was ist das gleiche* as “je ne sais quoi d’égal.” [T/E: “Equal something” is Moore/Aveling’s English-language equivalent (no pun intended), p. 65.]

also certain that he had not been prevented in this by the “historical bound” of the society in which he lived (but rather is certain that he owes his own “sober senses” in part to this society).<sup>3</sup> The fragment quoted above testifies sufficiently well to the spirit of his solution and to the method followed to attain it, which are strikingly apparent throughout the first chapter of *Capital*. How could there be an exchange of objects in determinate and stable proportions, how could one write  $aX = bY$ , were there not, between the two exchanged objects, X and Y, something *common and were that thing not present, contained* in the *same* quantum? This thing is a “common substance”; exchange, as quantitatively determined exchange, presupposes an “equality/identity of essence” of the exchanged objects—an essential homogeneity. There must be a common Substance/Essence, the same here and there—and, of course, one that is *essentially* quantifiable—in order that one might be able to exchange 5 beds for a house, in order that the expression “x meters of linen = y ounces of gold” might make sense. This Substance/Essence is, and can only be, the sole thing that the exchanged objects possess in common when one leaves aside their sensual differences.<sup>4</sup> *What* these objects possess in common, besides their utility or use-value—which, according to Marx, could not ground

---

<sup>3</sup>T/E: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels assert, in “The Communist Manifesto,” that “man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* [New York: International Publishers, 1968], p. 38.).

<sup>4</sup>Homogeneous and commensurable, the exchanged objects are so, certainly, *qua* sensual—through their mass, for example. It is obvious, however, that economic exchange is not an exchange of equal physical masses.

quantitatively determined relations of exchange—is their being “products of human labor.” *It is*, therefore, labor that they “contain,”<sup>5</sup> which *is* this common Substance/Essence, and it is the quantum of this Substance/Essence “condensed,” “congealed” into each of the objects that determines the proportions of their exchange. But *what* labor and *what* quantum? In its effectively actual reality, as “concrete labor” (of the weaver, of the mason, etc.) labor is heterogeneous. And the quantum of labor “contained” in a meter of fabric coming out of a machine is different from the quantum of labor “contained” in a meter of fabric woven on a loom. It therefore *has to* be a question—it cannot but be a question—of another sort of labor, of a labor that, truly speaking, no one has ever seen or done (and which, like the commodity, “does not fall under the senses”): Simple and Socially Necessary Abstract Labor. “The substance of value and the magnitude of value are now determined. What remains to be analyzed is the form of value.”<sup>6</sup>

*Capital*’s first chapter is metaphysical. The question posed by classical political economy is as follows: Why are exchanged objects in such and such a proportion and not in another one? Marx reformulates the question in his own way, in a formulation that already contains, or predetermines, the answer: “What is the equal/identical (*das Gleiche*), that is to say, the common substance (*die gemeinschaftliche Substanz*),

---

<sup>5</sup>Universal attribution thus becomes Substance. One goes from: The sole *property* common to all objects (outside their use-value) is their being products of human labor to: There *exists* a Substance of which these products are the “crystals.” Generality *has to* have a substantial foundation.

<sup>6</sup>Phrase added by Marx for the French edition [T/E: in turn translated into English].

that the house represents for the bed in the expression of the value of the bed?" He reformulates it in his own way: The labor-value of the classical authors, of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, does not invoke the category of "substance" and, were the word to be discovered there, it would undoubtedly be in some innocent usage. That commodities are exchanged proportionately to the labor their production costs means, for the classical authors: If someone offered me to exchange one product that cost me ten hours of labor against one of his products whose fabrication would cost me only nine hours of labor, I would reject his offer, and, through competition, the relation of respective "average" times will set the relation of exchanged quantities.<sup>7</sup> Before the immense (and insurmountable) complications created by the differences in individual labors, "capital," "land," "time," and so on, "labor-value" is thus a matter of common sense and even a *simple* tautology: Who would give ten to have nine?

Marx reformulates the question in his own way—which places the question straightaway on the terrain of *metaphysical* tautology. What one observes—the relations of exchanged quantities, "exchange-value"—is only what one observes: a quantitative expression of *something* that, unobservable as such, grounds the observed appearance. The self-evident argument of the classical authors is superficial and of a second order; it reproduces in a more elaborate form the common sense (mediated by competition, etc.) of the exchangers, which only brings back in representation, only presents and represents (*Darstellen* and *Vorstellen*) the "something in common," the shared substance of two commodity-objects—each of which already, as a useful object

---

<sup>7</sup>See the quotations Marx provides in a footnote, pp. 46-47 of the Moore/Aveling translation.

in a determinate quantity, *is* a form of appearance (*Erscheinungsform*) and presentation (*Darstellung*) of the substance of the other one. What really matters first of all is to know what the commodity *is*: now, the commodity not only “*is*” not exchange-value but “in itself,” as Marx recalls, *has no exchange value*: exchange-value is the *relation* of two commodities (and ultimately, of all commodities to the general equivalent, money). If this relation is such as it is, that can be only the effect of something immanent, inherent, proper to commodity A and to commodity B which ensures that the proportions of the exchange are what they are.

The few economists who have sought, like Bailey, to analyze the form of value (*Wertform*) have been unable to arrive at any result: first, because they always confuse the form of value with Value; and second, because, under the coarse influence of bourgeois practice, they are preoccupied from the beginning exclusively with quantitative determinacy [T/E: cf. Moore/Aveling, p. 49n1].

One obviously cannot speak of *quantity* without asking oneself: quantity *of what*? There is quantity only of substance. And the form of the value of commodities could not be confused with the Value of commodities. The form of the value of commodities is an “expression of Value” (*Wertausdruck*)—by means of which the Value of the commodity appears or manifests itself, not *in persona* (no metaphysical substance worthy of that name has ever done so or could do so), but in and through a relationship or a relation; this relation, this form, is exchange-value, which deploys itself logicohistorically as “simple or accidental form,” “total or developed form,” “general form,” and, finally, “money-form.” All these “forms” are but manifestations, expressions,

presentations, forms of appearance—of what, then? Every expression is expression *of* something. Here: of *Value itself*. We begin, necessarily, with phenomena, but we are seeking therein the essence. “In fact we started from exchange-value, or the exchange relation of commodities, in order to get at the value that lies hidden behind it. We must now return to this form of appearance (*Erscheinungsform*) of Value” (Moore/Aveling, p. 47 [T/E: translation slightly altered]). What, then, is Value? It is a “shared social substance”—Simple Labor, etc.—of which each particular product is a “crystal”: each product is Value *qua* crystallization, congealment, gelatin, deposit, and so on of a fragment or part of this Substance. In order that the *alterity* of men and their labors might be boiled down to simple (quantitative) *difference*, homogeneous Substance/Essence is needed. What is in question, here and there, has to be the same: Simple, Abstract, Socially Necessary Labor.

Substance and essence (*Substanz* and *Wesen*) are not innocent words, and especially not in the post-Hegelian German language. Neither was Marx an innocent author. And Marx does not use these terms innocently. Apropos precisely of the beginning of *Capital*, he has spoken of his having “coquetted” with Hegel;<sup>8</sup> it is rather this sentence itself that is an example of coquetry—for, the first chapter of *Capital* is Hegelian through and through. It is, moreover, *also* something else: it is *chemical*. If coquetry by Marx there be, it is toward the great chemists of the first half of the nineteenth century: the chemical “metaphors” he uses all the time are far from

---

<sup>8</sup>T/E: See Marx’s 1873 Afterword to the Second German Edition: “I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker [Hegel], and even here and there, in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him” (Moore/Aveling, p. 20).

being mere metaphors. The Substance Labor, in this chapter—and in all of *Capital*—is crystallized in the products; it is deposited there or congealed there; it exists as an amorphous gelatin; it is decanted from one product to another (for example, the wear and tear on the instruments of production make their Value pass into the product), and, at least at the start, it can be thought only under the basic law of its *conservation*: the discovery of the production of surplus-value flows immediately from the idea that from this retort<sup>9</sup> of exploitation that is the capitalist factory no more Value can *exit* than has *entered* therein (and it suffices to discover that it has entered therein as Labor, not, as bourgeois economics believes, as Value of Labor-Power).<sup>10</sup> Just as there is a

---

<sup>9</sup>T/E: Castoriadis is here employing “retort” (*cornue* in French) in its alternate etymological meaning, as used in chemistry: “a vessel or chamber in which substances are distilled or decomposed by heat” (*Merriam-Webster*).

<sup>10</sup>Such conservation is, in a second stage, put in check by the “depreciation” of capital, resultant of the technical change that reduces the value of the existing instruments of production. Marx insists thereupon a great deal, as is known, in the *Grundrisse*—though much less in *Capital* (“volume 3”) and that is in no way accidental. To take “depreciation”—and, more generally, technical change—fully into account would truly make it impossible to calculate value in general and, in particular, would split wide open the inconsistency of the arguments that lead to the alleged “falling rate of profit.” See my texts, “Sur la dynamique du capitalisme,” *S. ou B.*, 12 (August 1953): 4-5, and 13 (January 1954): 63-64 [T/E: now reprinted in *EP8*; see: 46-47 and 77-78; we hope to translate this two-part text for the projected eighth volume of Castoriadis’s *Political Writings*]; also my Introduction, *SBI*, 26-27 [T/E: this 1973 General Introduction to the entire 10/18 series is now translated in *PSWI*; see: 13-14]. I will return at length to this point, as well as to Marx’s whole “theory of value” and its anchorage in the Hegelian interpretation of the category of Substance in *La Dynamique du capitalisme* [T/E: a volume originally promised to be included in the 10/18 series but never published;

dialectic of chemistry (which, with Marx's approval, Engels would expound upon in his *Anti-Dühring*), so there is a chemistry of the social dialectic.

This chemistry is obviously an alchemy: it is the alchemy that, as will be seen, will allow the social-historical to be transformed into physiology and *vice versa*.

What, then, "in truth," is Simple, Abstract, Socially Necessary Labor? What is the mode of being of this Substance/Essence, and how does one succeed in isolating it in its (chemically) pure state or in fully determining it (philosophically)? What gives itself out in the vulgar world of appearance is not Labor Itself but heterogeneous and incomparable sorts of labor: different trades, each one exercised under different conditions here and there, by individuals who are different in strength, ability, diligence, and so on. To pass from this phenomenal diversity to the unity of the Substance/Essence Labor requires multiple operations of *reduction* (in all senses of this term). We are going to see, briefly, that these operations are "in truth" impossible, that Value and its Substance (like, moreover, its magnitude), far from being "determinate," are rather nebulae of riddles, and that this situation is deeply anchored in the antinomic character of Marx's thought.

~

The reduction of the labor-times effectively expended to the labor-time "socially necessary" for the production of such and such a product would pose no problems worth lingering over were it a matter simply of stating that it does not suffice that one cobbler might be more lazy or less skilled

---

see now the previously unpublished texts now available in *EP8*].

than another for the value of the shoes he makes to be higher.<sup>11</sup> More exactly, on the level of principle the problem would be the same, but discussion thereof would not allow one to reveal, in Marx's work, a series of insurmountable contradictions. To speak of socially necessary labor-time implies that one knows what "socially necessary" signifies. Now, of the multiple significations of this expression, none is tenable when it comes to the capitalist economy. One can consider as "socially necessary" the time required by (the labor performed in) the most efficient business enterprise—since one could just as well say, in the absolute, that, the other business enterprises being "behind" the forward march of technics and economics, some labor-time has been wasted there unnecessarily. One can, in contrast, consider as "socially necessary" the time required by the *least* efficient business enterprise of all those that still have to operate to cover "social need"; indeed, this "need" would no longer be satisfied, *ceteris paribus*, if this business enterprise (the "marginal" one) disappeared, and the economy would no longer have devoted to the production of the product in question the "socially necessary" labor-time in the sense of

---

<sup>11</sup>In fact, certain formulations in "volume 3" of *Capital* "betray" Marx in this regard, showing that he cannot prevent himself from thinking of the "quantity of [*effectively actual*] labor" contained in the commodity, "crystallized" in the latter, as well as of an initial determination of its Value, later corrected by a "social" process. Thus, for example: "some commodities are always produced under abnormal conditions and must, therefore, be sold below their *individual value*" (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 833, emphasis added). "Individual value" is an expression that is devoid of meaning—unless one is thinking of effectively actual, and not "social necessary," labor as determining this value. See also *ibid.*, p. 845.

“volume 3” of *Capital*.<sup>12</sup> Finally, one can consider as “socially necessary” the *average* time devoted to the production of the product while taking into account all the business enterprises in the branch under consideration.<sup>13</sup> The first interpretation can be eliminated, for it leads to unreal and incoherent results. If values were determined by production under optimal conditions, all suboptimal business enterprises would be eliminated and the optimal business enterprise would be in a monopoly situation, in which case there can no longer be a question of the “law of value”; or else, then, the optimal business enterprise or business enterprises not sufficing to satisfy “social need,” it would be demand that would determine at once the level of production and prices, thus allowing for the existence of a gamut of business enterprises of decreasing efficiency, until there is one business enterprise (or class of business enterprises) that would operate without any profit or with a negligible profit. One is thus brought back to the second interpretation, which leaves nothing remaining

---

<sup>12</sup>Author’s addition: That is to say, corresponding to the “social need” or to the “social demand.”

<sup>13</sup>That is the signification Marx has mainly in mind and most of the time formulates explicitly. Yet the first one is not totally absent from his thought—as is shown, for example, by the quotation on the previous page, where “normal” is equivalent to “optimal.” And the second is present in the *Grundrisse* (particularly in the fourth volume of the 10/18 edition [T/E: Ryle/Soper indicate here: “see especially pp. 310ff of the edition published by the Pelican Marx Library, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin/New Left Books, 1973”]; however, “the fourth volume of the 10/18 edition” corresponds, rather, to pp. 745-882 of the 1973 “First Vintage Books edition” of Nicolaus’s translation of the *Grundrisse*]), as well as in “volume 3.” I write “volume 3” in quotation marks because what we currently possess beyond volume 1 of *Capital* are some arbitrary selections made by different editors from among a mass of manuscripts their author was never able to complete and publish.

of the “law of value” and leads straight to the neoclassical conception of profit as differential “quasi-rent” (the “marginal” business enterprise making zero profit or a negligible profit, and the others a profit that represents the difference between their production costs and the price determined by the production costs of the “marginal” business enterprise).<sup>14</sup> In order to have a “theory of labor-value,” there remains, then, only the third interpretation: “socially necessary” time is the *average* time. This “average” time is, however, an empty abstraction, a mere result of a fictive arithmetical operation that has no effective actuality and no efficacy in the real operation of the economy: no real or logical reason exists for the value of a product to be determined by the result of a division that no one makes or could make. For this phantom to acquire a bit of flesh, it must be assumed that the business enterprises working under “average” conditions form the overwhelming majority of business enterprises in the branch under consideration. That is not and has never been the case in the real life of capitalism. But let us leave aside reality—about which contemporary “Marxists” are teaching us every day that it has no importance. It is the “model” that is intrinsically incoherent and even contradictory—both as model of a *capitalist* economy and as a model of an economy with “simple commodity production.”

In order that “average” business enterprises might be at the same time typically and in their majority the prevalent

---

<sup>14</sup>This is what, obviously, allows neoclassical economics to present profit often as reward for the greatest “efficiency” of nonmarginal business enterprises. Granted, even within this framework one still has: total of net profits = total of the net product minus wages, or “unpaid labor,” but this is also an accounting tautology ever verified on the scale of the overall economy.

business enterprises, it must be assumed either that there is no technical change or (as Marx in effect explicitly postulates in several places) that “competition” is constantly and *in effective actuality* drawing effectively actual times back toward average times. The first hypothesis entails that a theory of value is pertinent only for an economy *without* technical change, for an economy with static technology. A static-technology capitalism is, however, a pure fiction—and is not the one aimed at in *Capital*, where what would happen in a capitalism ruled by the “law of value” and dominated by a perpetual upheaval in technics is examined.<sup>15</sup> It must therefore be assumed (be included in the *axioms* of the theory) that, whatever the leaps and the bounds and the nature of technical change, there is sufficiently powerful “competition” for the effectively actual times (or effectively actual productivities) to be, in every period, for all branches, effectively drawn back, in the great majority of cases, toward the average times. That would mean that, far from belonging among the economy’s “superficial phenomena,” “competition” is an essential and even sovereign mediation. Such a potential for “competition,” however, is conceivable only with a quite vast and deep capitalist market and through the most delirious postulates of neoclassical bourgeois economics: one needs perfect and instantaneous mobility of capital and workers, the absence of any hindrance to “entry”

---

<sup>15</sup>In truth, a static technology is necessarily implied by the construction of the “law of value”; without the hypothesis of such a technology, the instruments of production no longer have any definite value in the general case. It can be left up to Messieurs Louis Althusser, Michael Kidron, Ernest Mandel, Paul Sweezy *et alii* to construct a “model” of static-technology capitalism and show how the increase of the rate of exploitation, the growth of the industrial reserve army, or the falling rate of profit would happen there.

into a branch of production, the existence, within each branch, of a host of business enterprises, each of which is negligible in relation to the total demand of the branch, the “transparency” of the market and free, instantaneous information, and so on; in any case, one needs a simultaneously “developed” and “pure” form of capitalism to have been established and to function in a “competitive” mode. If, however, such a capitalism is established, the “law of value” can no longer be applied, and that according to Marx himself: commodities are no longer exchanged according to the “labor-time socially necessary” for their production, that is to say, according to their values, but according to the “production prices” (this is the celebrated pseudoproblem of the pseudo-“equalization” of the rate of profit and of the “relation” between volume 1 and “volume 3” of *Capital*). For the law of value to apply, it is necessary *that there be no capital*: for, the existence of capital entails (under the posited conditions) a rate of profit that is *equal* among branches—therefore, a gap between “values” and “prices.”<sup>16</sup> Would, then, the “law of labor-value” hold where there is exchange but not yet capital—that is to say, under “simple commodity production”? Simple commodity production, however, does not allow one to define, sociologically *and* economically, a “socially necessary labor-time” for the production of a product—nor does it allow one to say that the “exchange-values” (the proportions according to which the

---

<sup>16</sup>It is a matter here, of course, of *capital* in Marx’s sense—not of the physical instruments of production. A rate of profit that is equal among branches is another unreal and unrealizable postulate of classical (and neoclassical) economics that Marx adopts, and for the same reason as it does: the necessities involved in a “rational” treatment of economic phenomena. I will return at length to this point in *La Dynamique du capitalisme*.

products are exchanged) are governed by these times. Within each branch, there is not the degree of competition among producers that would *in effective actuality* equalize the labor-times required for this or that product; still less does such competition exist *among* branches. For the law of labor-value to apply to an economy of simple commodity production (roughly speaking, an economy of exchange among craftsmen), Saturday's cobblers, for example, would have to become Monday's tailors, if they had noticed, on Sunday's market, that the shoes/clothing "rate of exchange" is favorable for tailors and unfavorable for them. In short: When *one part* of the conditions of validity for the "law of value" is given in the form of competition and so on, one is smack in the middle of developed capitalist production, which *ipso facto* implies not exchange according to "values" but exchange according to "production prices." And when exchange is not yet subject to the laws of capital and to the equalization of the rate of profit, under simple commodity production, it is not possible to define an average "socially necessary labor-time," for the mediation that is essential for the effectively actual domination of such an average time, "competition" of the capitalist type, is not there. When, then, does the "law of labor-value" hold? In a sense: never, under any group of effectively actual or coherently constructible social and historical conditions. In another sense: always, since the beginning of time and for all time. For, this law results from the positing of this Substance, Labor, which is there from the beginning to the end of human history and is "crystallized" in products—which may or may not be "exchanged," and exchanged in this or that mode; these modes concern the form of value, which could not be confused with Value Itself—any more than one could confuse the physical substance [*corps*] H<sub>2</sub>O with ice, water, or steam.



The situation is essentially the same when it comes to the notion of *Simple Labor*. In the world of phenomena, almost all effectively actual sorts of labor are complex and skilled (the degree of such “skill” or its extent matters little; for there to be a problem, it suffices that *a few* sorts of labor belonging to the economy’s “base” be so). Now, says Marx, complex (or skilled) labor “is only an exponential power (*potenziert*) of simple labor or rather is only simple labor multiplied, so that a given quantity of complex labor corresponds to a greater quantity of simple labor.” How do we know that? By a metaphysical *and* at the same time physiological postulate. For, “the Value of commodities represents purely and simply man’s labor, an expenditure of human labor-power in general, .... It is an expenditure of simple labor-power that every ordinary man, without any special development, possesses in the organism of his body” [cf. Moore/Aveling, p. 44]. If that is so, Simple Labor is obviously the same in every society and every phase of history: among Australian savages, the Gauls, Russian serfs, and the workers of Detroit. Conscious of the difficulty, Marx immediately adds: “True, *average simple labor* changes character in different countries and at different times, but it is always determined in a given society.” What is *a given society*? Do Manchester in 1800 and Manchester in 1975 belong to the same “given society”? *They have to* belong to it—if not, the entire edifice of the “economic laws” supposed to govern the evolution of capitalism (which presupposes the *identity* of Simple Labor along this evolutionary line, for it presupposes an *invariant* measurement of values) goes up in smoke. There can be little doubt, however, that, if one grants that the “ordinary man, without any special development,”

differs from one society to another, that man differs “more” from the Manchester of 1975 to that of 1800 than the later from the London of the fourteenth century. And what is this “character” of Simple Labor that changes according to countries and eras? Is it more than a slight external accident of Substance? Marx had stated, a few lines earlier, that two trades, “despite their difference, are all (both) a productive expenditure of brain, muscles, nerves, and hand of man, and in this sense *human labor under the same heading*” (emphasis added). Yet *if it is under this heading* that different trades are “human labor”—*then*, the Substance is the physiology of man, and we can reduce to multiples of the same Simple Labor the labor of a milling-machine operator at the Renault car factory and the labor of a Polynesian fisherman, and the mention of different countries and eras becomes redundant.

Let us remain, however, within a “given society.” How can we perform the “reduction” of complex labor to Simple Labor? “Experience shows,” says Marx, “that this reduction is constantly being made.” Yet what happens in experience is never but a *de facto* reduction, and without entering into a vicious circle, it cannot be taken as the expression of a *de jure*, substantial/essential commensurability among diverse varieties of labor. The reduction made in experience is *not* a reduction of all sorts of labor to Simple Labor; it is a “reduction” of all sorts of labor to *money* (or to another “general equivalent” or socially instituted numéraire), which is absolutely not the same thing, which we already knew without any “theory of Value,” and which the “theory of Value” *ought to explain*—instead of which, it rests thereupon in order to exist as theory. And how could the theory ever explain the reduction? Perhaps one day physiology or chemistry will be able to say how, to what degree, *and in what sense, qua* “expenditure of brain, muscles, nerves,” and so on, the labor of lady lacemakers is

intrinsically a “multiple” or submultiple of the labor of the miner or the female typist, how it represents a different quantum of the same Substance/Essence, and how it will furnish the corresponding conversion coefficients. Marx, however, does not think of such a “possibility”: “The different proportions in which different sorts of labor are reduced to simple labor and to their unit of measure are established by a *social process* that goes on behind the backs of the producers and thus appear to them as given by tradition” (emphasis added; cf. Moore/Aveling, p. 44). What is this “social process” and what can it be? The sole conceivable such process (to which Marx quite evidently is implicitly referring) would be that of the confrontation of the products of the different sorts of labor on the market—therefore, once again, “competition”—which would perform indirectly this “reduction” (by tracing the products back to the producers, the supply of a product being broken down [*s’analysant*] into the supply of the types of labor its production requires). For that to be so, however, it does not even suffice that competition be sovereign on the market for products; it must be so also on the market for the different sorts of labor—in other words, the “production” of the diverse varieties of labor must itself be subject to the same (hypothetical) mechanisms that are said to govern the production of any commodities whatsoever on the competitive market where homogeneous products are produced on a large scale and without hindrance (that is, solely on the basis of considerations of “profitability”). Such cannot be the case in simple commodity production, where “labor-power” is not a commodity, nor is it produced as a commodity, and such is not the case, either, under capitalist production, where the “possessors of the commodity labor-power,” namely, the workers expropriated of all but their “labor-power,” cannot behave, with regard to the latter, as producers of any commodity whatsoever and, for example,

transform their simple labor-power into skilled labor-power because the latter would have a price superior to its “value.” Labor (whether simple or complex) certainly is not “labor-power,” but it is indissociably tied to the latter, not only in general, but specifically: there is no Labor of the lathe-operator without the labor-power of the lathe-operators. One cannot increase the quantity of lathe-operator Labor in the economy without increasing the quantity of lathe-operator labor-power. Now, contrary to the thesis Marx considers the cornerstone of his theory—and which it indeed is—labor-power *is not* a “commodity” like the other ones—for multiple and fundamental reasons I have at length indicated elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> and also because the “production” thereof does not occur under the same conditions as that of other commodities: it is not and cannot be set as its “possessor” pleases on the basis of conditions of “profitability.” If, for one reason or another, the production of shoes leaves the makers of this article a profit higher than the average, new capital will enter into that branch, Marx (like all classical and neoclassical economics) postulates (wrongly), until the moment when the rate of profit of this branch will be “equalized” with the average rate of profit. If, however, the “price” of the labor-power of airline pilots is superior to the “value” of this labor-power, it is absurd to suppose (as political economy in fact always does) that the street sweepers will undertake to obtain the necessary skills and will be able to do so in sufficient

---

<sup>17</sup>See the texts cited in n. 10 and also “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” *S. ou B.*, 31 (December 1960): 70-81 [T/E: these final pages of the first part of this three-part text now appear in [PSW2](#), 242-58].

number to bring the “price” back down to its “value.”<sup>18</sup> Obviously, the question would be not resolved, but *suppressed*, were capitalism to develop as Marx anticipated: if *in effective actuality* capitalism transformed all sorts of labor into unskilled kinds of labor within large industry, there would no longer be *anything but* Simple Labor (and nothing but simple labor-power), the “reduction” would have been *really* performed, and discussion about whether or not this would be possible would become no more than a simple subtlety for academic debate. Such is not the case. We have here another speculative-“theoretical” thread leading from the “necessities” of the postulates of Marx’s economic theory to the “necessities” of its orientation and of the “predictions” in which that theory *has to* end up in order to take on an appearance of coherence.

~

The same thing holds for the reduction of effectively actual, concrete labor to Abstract Labor. We cannot linger over this. Let us just note that, in the span of a few pages, (Abstract) Labor is, alternately, “productive expenditure of brain, muscles,” and so on, or “expenditure, *in the physiological sense*, of human labor-power, and, *under this*

---

<sup>18</sup>The “reduction” Marx postulates could take place in the hypothetical case of a slave-based pseudo-“capitalism” in which the “capitalists”/slaveowners, noting, for example, that the slave cooks or private tutors have become scarce and dear, would mass “manufacture” some until their sale (or rental) price would balance out with the cost of their training, and so on. Although some “pockets” of such a situation may be observed during certain phases in the ancient world, particularly under the Roman Empire, such an economy has never existed—and, in any case, it would not be a capitalist economy in Marx’s sense.

*heading of equal human labor*, it forms the Value of commodities”—and a “social unit...(that) can *manifest* itself only in social transactions” (emphasis added [T/E: cf. Moore/Aveling, pp. 44, 46]). Is this abstraction, then, “physiological,” or is it “social”—or else is there no room for this distinction? Are nerves and muscles a “form of appearance” of the social—or else is the social an “expression” and “presentation” of nerves and muscles?

~

What in truth underlies Marx’s thought *is not* simply a consideration of a particular social-historical institution, capitalism, positing effectively actual mechanisms that are said to ensure the domination of “average socially necessary labor-time” as the measure for the quantum of Value contained in the commodity, or the “reduction” of all sorts of labor into Abstract Simple Labor. This institution—whose historically particular and specific “relative” character Marx was the first to show in a powerful way, against the still-current platitudes of bourgeois economics—is in fact for him, in another sense, *also* endowed with an *absolute* signification, insofar as it is in and through this institution that the essential determinations of humanity’s social and historical life *finally* manifest themselves. Just as “industry is the open book of human faculties”<sup>19</sup> (therefore, almost nothing is known about these “faculties” so long as industry has not “opened,” developed, and deployed itself); just as labor, in the purest Aristotelian casting of a formula, materializes “the faculties that *from the beginning slumber* in man as producer” (my

---

<sup>19</sup>T/E: See n. 11 in “Technique,” above, about this phrase from Marx’s *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

emphasis; and man's thoroughgoing transformation into a "producer" alone completely awakens these dormant faculties and actualizes the *telos* of man);<sup>20</sup> so is the "exchange-value" of the capitalist economy the Epiphany of Value, the presentation/manifestation/expression/figuration of what was always, since the beginning of time and for all time, though only potentially, *dunamei*: Labor. Marx says, nearly everywhere, that the different determinations of Value presuppose exchange—but he also says the *opposite*: "The product of labor acquires the commodity form as soon as *its Value acquires* the form of exchange-value, as opposed to its natural form" (my emphasis; the phrase was added by Marx to Roy's French version and appears in vol. 1, p. 593 of the Pléiade edition). A Value, and whatever else it might be, could "acquire" such a particular form only if it *was already there*. The paradox, the antinomy of Marx's thought is that this Labor that modifies all and is itself constantly modified is at the same time thought under the category of Substance/Essence, of that which subsists, inalterable, which can "appear" under such and such a form or take on this or that "expression" (concrete labor as opposed to abstract labor, production of "use-values" as opposed to the production of "commodities," etc.), but, in itself, is not modified, is not altered, *subsists* as immutable foundation for the changing attributes and determinations. In this sense, capitalism is historically and philosophically privileged. History is man—but man is essentially Labor, and that appears only when, freed of all the "rubbish" and of all the prior "nonsense," of all the "accidental" factors, the identity of this

---

<sup>20</sup>T/E: On p. 177 of the Moore/Aveling translation, one finds Marx's assertion that man "develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway."

Substance/Essence can finally assert itself triumphantly and prevail, in and through capitalist production. For this to take place, the Economic [*l'Économie*] must become sovereign: the Self-Identity of the Substance Labor can be thought only by means of this “equalization” of the products and of the sorts of labor that large-scale industry, mass production, the market, and competition perform. However, as Marx explicitly states, all this *was already there* as early as the first exchange, from the time of the “simple form” of Value. Value was already there as soon as there was “exchange.” Yet there is *always* exchange where there is society—including in “primitive communism”: the medicine man/witchdoctor/sorcerer furnishes spells and receives a share of the game. There even is some exchange, if it dare be said, “before” society—in any case, there is, according to Marx, Value for Robinson, except that for him it is “transparent”: “like a true-born Briton” (which means: as a “rational” *homo oeconomicus*), he keeps a “set of books” and his “stock-book contains...the labor-time that determinate quantities of those objects have, on an average, cost him....All the essential determinations of value are contained therein.” And the same thing will hold for the future communist society, that “gathering of free men working with the means of production in common...according to a concerted plan. All that we said of Robinson’s labor is reproduced here, but *socially* and not *individually*” [T/E: cf. Moore/Aveling, pp. 77-78].

This Substance is therefore ultimately an instrument or vehicle of Reason and *this* is the privilege of the Economic. This is why what is at the outset—barely sketched out, it is true—for Marx a *critique of the economy*, of the economy *as such*, as mode in which men relate to one another, rapidly becomes a *critique of political economy*, by which is meant bourgeois political economy, a refutation of the latter as ideological and mystified representation of *economic reality*,

and ultimately, *economic theory*, “true” theory as opposed to false theories. That is so because the Economic is (seems to be) rationality-rationalization, that is to say ultimately, the kernel of Identity in the heterogeneous and multicolored social-historical world. It is the domain in which the Different is but a form of the Identical, where the Other is reduced to the Same; it is *that*, precisely insofar as it posits and ensures the triumph of the form of Equivalence, insofar as, for it, two things are essentially the same inasmuch they have the “same value,” insofar therefore as the heterogeneities of objects and men are reduced to purely quantitative differences. In and through the Economic, the abstraction of quantity, the pure repetition/cumulation of the absolutely homogeneous, becomes effectively actual, a reality more real than the real.

But *which* “economy [*économie*]”? Marx is constantly oscillating between these positions: the capitalist economy/the whole economy, from the beginning to the end of history. Throughout his work, Marx says simultaneously and successively:

- the capitalist economy *transforms in effective actuality*, and for the first time in history, men and their heterogeneous sorts of labor into a homogeneous and measurable Sameness, and *makes be*, for the first time, the following thing: Abstract Simple Labor, which has no other pertinent determination than (clock) “time”;
- the capitalist economy *finally makes appear* that which has forever been hidden, the substantial/essential equality/identity of men and of their various sorts of labor, which had hitherto been masked by “fantastic” representations;
- the capitalist economy *gives the Appearance of Sameness* to that which is essentially heterogeneous

(individuals and their various sorts of labor) through the production of commodities and the transformation of labor-power itself into a commodity, therefore its reification (*Verdinglichung*).<sup>21</sup>

Now, this oscillation is fatal. Marx knows very well and he is the first to say that the apparent homogenization of products and sorts of labor emerge only with capitalism. It is capitalism that *makes it be*. But how, within the ontological framework that remains his own, can Marx think that capitalism could make be something that was not already there, at least potentially? Capitalism, therefore, can only *make appear*, it “reveals” humanity to itself—the humanity that till then believed itself to be magical, political, juridical,

---

<sup>21</sup>Numerous examples could be provided to support each of these conceptions. I will do so elsewhere. Rapidly: the first conception appears throughout the *Grundrisse*; the second one underlies the commentary on Aristotle that is reproduced at the beginning of the present text; the third one is expressed in the “Critique of the Gotha Program” (see below). It is obviously in the famous paragraph about “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” that Marx confronts in the most audacious way and with the greatest depth the problems this situation (and his situation) creates for him: here, the world of realities *is* a world of appearances and the world of appearances *is* a world of realities. But one could not read this text while *glossing over* (as one always does) the fact that this phantasmagoria of reality and reality of phantasmagoria holds, according to Marx, *only for capitalism*: all the other “epochs” he contrasts therewith, from “Robinson Crusoe” to the final stage of communism, are characterized by the *transparency* of *economic* relations (including the “European middle ages shrouded in darkness,” during which the “tithe to be rendered to the priest is more matter of fact than his blessing”) [T/E: Moore/Aveling, pp. 77; Section 4 of *Capital*’s first chapter, on “fetishism,” begins on p. 71; it ends with the “famous paragraph” whose second sentence, “Could commodities themselves speak...,” begins on p. 83].

theological, philosophical, and which learns by means of capitalism its true truth: that it is economic, that the truth of its life has always been *production*, which is a crystallization in use-values of that Substance/Essence, Labor. If, however, one remained there, the truth revealed by capitalism would be truth, period, which would imply, politically, the futility of every revolution and, philosophically, a new (and sinister) already achieved “end of history.” Therefore, this truth is and is not truth: capitalism *gives the appearance* of Sameness to that which is not so (reduction, fetishism)—and the higher stage of communism will finally be able to take account of the true and full truth, the incomparability and irreducible alterity of human individuals. Yet it will be able to take this into account only by also taking account of the economic “truth” that capitalism has made *appear while giving it the appearance* of being the whole truth (reification). At the foundation of the “realm of freedom,” there will always be a “realm of necessity,” and in the latter, “the *determination of value continues to prevail* in the sense that the regulation of labor-time and the distribution of social labor among the various production groups, ultimately the book-keeping encompassing all this, *become more essential than ever*” (emphases added [T/E: cf. *Capital*, vol. 3, p. 851]). How, then, could such “regulation” occur without any measuring unit, and what could this be if not, as Marx says, the “determination of value”—namely, Labor boiled down, in one fashion or another, to its purely quantitative determinations?

Entirely homologous is the ambiguity of Marx’s critique of Aristotle—and the excuse Marx finds for him. Did Aristotle not see the “identity/equality” of the various sorts of human labor because he was prevented by the prejudices of this times (or by the absence of the “popular prejudice” of equality); or did he not see what was there but had not yet appeared; or did he not see because *there was nothing to see*,

because the equality of the various sorts of human labor, insofar as such equality “exists,” was *created* in and through capitalism? The antinomy that perpetually divides Marx’s thought between the idea of a “historical production” of social categories (and of thought) and the idea of an ultimate “rationality” of the historical process (*therefore* of the rational “producibility” of these categories, each starting from the others, *therefore* ultimately of their “a-temporality”) is again revealed here. If Antiquity had as its “natural foundation the inequality of men and of their labor-powers,” if, therefore, labor *was* not homogeneous, Aristotle was right to say what it *was* and not to say what it *was not*; and he would have been *wrong*, if, by *one* miracle of historical divination, he had said that labor was what it was going to become only 2,000 years later. What can the idea that Aristotle was limited by the “peculiar state of the society in which he lived” signify—if not that there *was* something to see, and that Aristotle, this “giant thinker,” *could* not, on account of this “peculiar state,” see? [T/E: Cf. Moore/Aveling, pp. 60 and 82n1.] What, however, was there then, in truth, to see? *Nothing*. This real phantasmagoria, this historical *constructum* of an *effectively actual* pseudohomogeneity of individuals and of sorts of labor, is an institution and creation of capitalism, a “product” of capitalism by means of which capitalism produces *itself*—and which Marx, chained to the “peculiar state” of the society in which he lived, transforms every other time into a universal, transhistorical determination, into the Substance Labor.

What, then, does Aristotle “in truth” say?

Aristotle does not say that the positing of equality/identity (*Gleichsetzung*) of products—therefore, of sorts of labor—is a “makeshift for practical needs” (*Notbehelf für das praktische Bedürfnis*). He says that individuals (therefore also their various sorts of labor and ultimately their

products) are “wholly other and nonequal” and that “they must be equalized” in order that there might be exchange and society. Such equalization is the work of *nomos*, of the law, of the social-historical institution. The latter can never render *genuinely* commensurable products, sorts of labor, individuals: it cannot, for example, make them into either triangles or quantities of butyric acid or weights, to use the analogies that appear evident to Marx in the first chapter of *Capital*. It can, however (and in one way or another, it always does so) equalize them *pros tēn chreian hikanōs*, “sufficiently as to need/usage.”<sup>22</sup> In this “sufficiently as to need/usage” is to be found in condensed form all the philosophical *phronēsis*, the Wisdom of Aristotle—that *phronēsis* which will be missing in Hegel and in his main inheritor. The great speculator does not allow himself to be carried away, in this case at least, by speculative delirium; he knows that there are domains in which rigorousness is *de rigueur* and other ones in which the requirement of rigor is the hallmark of an uncultured mind. “It appears similar to accept merely probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician rigorous proofs.” “For, of the indeterminate, indeterminate is also the rule.”<sup>23</sup> He knows that

---

<sup>22</sup>T/E: *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20; see “Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation,” above, n. 24.

<sup>23</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1094b25-27; 5.10.1137b29-30. See also *Metaphysics* 5.4.1006a5-6. “Indeterminate” (*aoristos*) does not signify here that there is no rule but that the rule each time has to be adapted to the case, without ceasing to be a rule. See below the commentary on equity. The translations here and in what follows are mine. To lighten the notes and facilitate the reader’s task, the references are given by an indication of book, chapter, and paragraph numbers furnished by the usual translations in France, and not by an indication of page, column, and line from Bekker. For the fifth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which will

it is due to “the very matter of the things acted upon”—that is, human affairs—that universal determinations—and measurement is one of them—have not always been fully taken therein. *Chreia*, need/usage, has nothing to do with being something “makeshift”: Aristotle just defined it a few lines above as that which “holds the whole (of the city) together” (*hē panta sunethei*, 5.5.1133a27); equalization (of objects, of sorts of labor, of individuals) is performed each time sufficiently as to the need/usage of society, in order that society might hold together. It can never be genuine equality and mathematical commensurability—that is completely obvious.

Marx discusses—criticizes, explains, and excuses—Aristotle as if Aristotle had wanted to make a theory of the economy, and even of the *capitalist* economy. He sees Aristotle “hesitate”: Aristotle does not hesitate; he states as categorically as possible, in a way that is fully coherent with the deep-seated problematic he has just elaborated, and with the most brilliant truth, that individuals, various sorts of labor, and products are not truly commensurable, that the social law alone “equalizes” that which is, by itself, “wholly other and nonequal.” This is what Marx was to paraphrase ten years later, in writing the “Critique of the Gotha Program.” What Aristotle says in this regard has no need to be explained, and is not explained, by a “historical bound” that would have prevented him from seeing what was not there, what has never been there, and will never be there: a Substance Labor, upon which one could ground a commensurability “in truth” of the various sorts of

---

frequently be cited, I indicate only the chapter and paragraph. [T/E: Where possible, more specific Bekker lines are provided in the present Greek to French to English translation, preceded by book and chapter numbers.]

human labor; such a commensurability, taken as existing “in truth” and “objectively,” is valid only as an imaginary signification operating in and through capitalist society. This social imaginary signification, this figment more real than all “reality,” this effectively actual fictive thing—and all the significations it conveys and to which it refers—constitutes rather the “historical bound” that allows one to understand, to a certain extent, how Marx can think the Substance Labor sometimes as purely physiological-natural and sometimes as fully social, sometimes as transhistorical and sometimes as tied specifically to the capitalist phase, sometimes as a manifestation of man’s reification under capitalist exploitation and sometimes as the foundation that will allow a “rational calculus” in the society to come. Finally, Aristotle has no need to be excused, for he is not making a theory of the capitalist economy—in which alone this pure absurdity, the strict commensurability of the various sorts of human labor, becomes fundamental social reality and thus can take on, imaginarily, the appearances of an incontestable objective truth—and even because he is not making a theory of the *economy*. He is doing much more: he is conducting a *political* investigation; he is investigating the foundation of the *polis* and of the *politeia*—of the instituted community and of its constitution/institution, in which alone an “economy” can appear and be.

~

It is indeed impossible to understand Aristotle’s formulations about equality, and commensurability, and to gauge their full depth and their topicality, if one does not see on what basis and by what means equality and commensurability arise within his investigation as questions

and what they bring forth there as a question.

As has been said, Aristotle “discovered” the economy. Yet the economy did not interest him as such and for itself. In the two main instances where he speaks about it—the fifth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the first book of the *Politics*<sup>24</sup>—he considers it from the perspective of a “science or power to make/do” (*epistēmē ē dunamis*) that goes beyond it and dominates it from above: politics, “which is the most sovereign and the most architectonic,” which aims at “the good and the supreme good,” that is, “that end (*telos*) of that which is to be done (*tōn praktōn*) which we want for its own sake” and not as a means to something else [T/E: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1-2.1094a14-22]. It is to politics that the most precious powers to make/do, like strategy, economics, rhetoric, are subordinated; it is politics that, by means of laws, lays down what must and must not be done. Its end therefore has to contain and subordinate to itself all other ends, and is exactly that, “human good” (*tanthrōpinon agathon* [T/E: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.2.1094b7]). Whatever difficulties may surround the question of whether and under what conditions that which is good for the individual coincides with that which is good for the city, Aristotle has no doubt that ethics—and, infinitely more, “economics”—is contained within politics and is part of it. The *Nicomachean Ethics* affirms straight off that the investigation that is going to be undertaken is, in its aim and in its method, “in a way political” (*politikē tis*).<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>The *Economics* is generally considered today to be spurious.

<sup>25</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1-3 [T/E: see 1.2.1094b11 for this specific Greek phrase]. On the question of whether that which is good for the individual and that which is good for the city are the same, Aristotle offers neither in the *Ethics* nor in the *Politics* any definitive and simple answer. We shall

The end at which politics aims, the highest human good, is determined straightaway by Aristotle to be “what is beautiful/good and just” (*ta kala kai ta dikaia*).<sup>26</sup> But also, the beautiful/good and the just “include so much difference and error that it appears (*dokein*) to be only in/through/for/with regard to the law alone, and not in/through/for/with regard to nature.” Aristotle is taking back up here the opposition between *nomos* (law, convention, institution) and *phusis* (nature). That opposition violently bursts forth as soon as Greek thought awakened—just as do the profoundly related, though not identical, oppositions between *doxa* (opinion/representation) and *alētheia* (“truth”), between *phainesthai* (appearing, letting oneself be seen, manifesting oneself) and *einai* (“being truly”). These oppositions, which from the outset divide the philosophers and philosophy, are themselves *political* oppositions: they are, as might be said, the political conflict that rends the *polis* in its ontological expression, or ontology itself as politically divided. I do not mean thereby that the philosophers are “spokesmen” or “ideological representatives” for this or that political movement, or that such and such a philosophical position has been put forward to “justify” some political aim or another but, rather, that it is the same movement that, starting at the end of the seventh century, shakes up at once political and social institutions *and* hitherto uncontested ideas and

---

return to this below. I emphasize here that the whole discussion in the pages that follow is based essentially on the *Nicomachean Ethics*; to extend it to the *Politics*—which certainly should be done—would require much more than one article.

<sup>26</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1094b14. Most often, *kalos* means “beautiful” but frequently also “good.” It is clear that here it is not a matter of aesthetic “beauty.” Latin translations render *kalos* as *honestum*.

representations, and that this movement, in and through which are simultaneously born democracy and philosophy, is not a simple “*de facto*” movement. It is contestation and a calling into question of the instituted social imaginary, of the established (political, social, and “ideological”) institution of the city and of the social imaginary significations the city bears and conveys, not simply as contestation and a calling to question of *this-here* institution to which one might prefer another, but as calling into question of the *foundation* and the *raison d’être* of the institution, of the possible justification of *nomos*—of *this-here nomos* as well as of every possible *nomos*. It is this calling into question that is deployed as—or goes hand in hand with—the opposition between *nomos* and *phusis*, and this is what gives philosophical depth to the oppositions (otherwise trivial and well known everywhere and always) between opinion and truth, appearance and being. It is this split, this scission that really matters—not a one-to-one correspondence between philosophical “positions” and political “tendencies,” which does not truly exist and could not exist, since the “discourses are reversible [*se retournent*].” The *dēmos* can, against the *oligoi*, highlight the conventional and arbitrary character of instituted law and invoke a “by nature” equality of free men. Or else it can lean precisely on the absence of all “naturalness” of *nomos*, of every law given “by nature,” in order to impose *its* law, and *its* opinion, its *doxa*: *Edoxe tē boulē kai tō dēmō*, “It appeared, it seemed (good) to the *boulē* and to the people...” is the introductory clause for Athenian laws. *In any case*, the artificiality, the nonnaturalness of *nomos* is at once a prerequisite for explicit and explicated (“reasoned”) political struggle—and *entailed* by such struggle. Now, for the Greeks this artificiality is at once incontestable and enigmatic: the enigma of *nomos* is not only and not so much that it is arbitrary, *thesei*, as a gesture or individual act can be; it is that it is a *universal arbitrariness*

or *universality as arbitrary*—and that, nonetheless, this arbitrary universality is the foundation and the condition of existence for that which appears to them and is indeed the least “arbitrary” thing of all: the city, society.<sup>27</sup>

So, no one-to-one correspondence between political struggle and philosophical conceptions. Yet it must be underscored that the most radically subversive attitudes, in the domain of ideas, are those of the thinkers who put *nomos* forward *against phusis*, who insist on the “arbitrary,” “conventional,” instituted character not only of “political constitutions” but even of the constitution/institution of the *world*. The central figure here is undoubtedly the great Democritus—with his “Eleatic” forerunners (the “conventionality” of the usual representation of things and of the world can immediately be read between the lines or negatively in the arguments of the Eleatics) and his continuators among the great Sophists. The subsequent tradition, still dominant today, has always wanted to cover up this current—or present it as triumphantly liquidated by Plato and Aristotle. It could accomplish that, however, only by *mutilating* those same authors they claimed to follow—a mutilation repeated more recently by Heidegger. For, in Plato and Aristotle, precisely because they are great, because they aim at overcoming unilaterality and take up again in thought

---

<sup>27</sup>It is this opposition that Heidegger has to hush up or not see when he speaks of Greek texts—as he has to, for the same reasons, cancel out the question of *doxa*. What he says can take on the appearance of an interpretation of these texts (and not an exposition of his own thought) only on the condition of expunging the very terms *nomos* and *doxa* and the problematic they convey. Yet it is only in and through their opposition to these terms that *phusis* and *alētheia* take on their meaning—and that all the texts in which they are talked about, that is to say, all Greek philosophical texts, also take on their meaning.

the divided world in which they live, this scission becomes an *internal* division of thought. Granted, they are the philosophers of *alētheia*, of the *ontōs on*, of *phusis*, but they would not have been what they were had they been only that, had this radical scission—without which, obviously, these very terms *no longer make any sense*—not been, for them, constantly present.

For the same reasons, all “interpretations” of Greek philosophy are unilateral and ultimately fallacious that care only about a few pre-Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian texts and word etymologies—and ignore not only the “opposing” philosophers but also the poets, the tragedians and Aristophanes, Thucydides, and social/political history *as philosophical sources*. For, the great Greek philosophical texts *are also political* texts. Was it by coquetry that Plato had Socrates say that what really matters are not stones and trees but men in the city?<sup>28</sup> Would it be because he did not know the rules of literary composition that he says what he has to say about truth, essence, and what lies beyond essence in a book he titled *Politeia*—the *Republic*—and which is, quite rightly, subtitled *peri dikaiou*—*Politikos*, “On the Just: A Political Dialogue”? The question of *dikaiosunē*, of justice, of the just institution of the city is *also* what leads Plato to ask himself about what truly is.

Just as the *polis* is not simply peace, harmony, and tranquil discussion among citizens, but just as much *polemos*, war among men and between cities, exile, and massacre; just as Greek man is not, as the Western nostalgic pastorelle would have it, naturally measured and bathed in light, but, rather,

---

<sup>28</sup>T/E: Castoriadis is paraphrasing *Phaedrus* 230d here, as he did at the start of “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” above in the present volume.

borne irresistibly toward excess [*démeseure*], *hubris*, and the blindness *hubris* brings about—not conatural to the truth, but capable of seeing it only while putting his own eyes out after having killed his father and slept with his mother—neither does Greek thought grow in the clearing of Being inundated by the light of *alētheia*. Greek thought is, rather, an interminable struggle with the insurmountable self-evidence of *doxa*, a hand-to-hand combat with the riddle of *phainesthai*, which is not *einai* and which, however, cannot be Nothing, and of *einai*, which should nonetheless *phainesthai* and yet does not appear and could not appear as such. It is an interminable struggle with the inescapable question that for it is brought forth by the recognition, from its first steps, that the principal human affairs—and, to begin with, the very element in and through which alone it can exist as thought (that is, language)<sup>29</sup>—are not settled by “nature,” *phusei*, but by law/convention/institution, *nomōi*—and that, however, the very positing of *nomos* inescapably leads back to the positing of *phusis*, of an indubitable *fact of being* as normative/normed *mode of being*, whether this be in the logical/ontological domain (for example, the aporias of truth as mere convention) or in the political domain (in which the legislative activity of the people, or even of the Sage/Legislator, consists in *preferring* some *nomos* to some other one and therefore invokes, implicitly or explicitly, something that cannot be simply *nomos*).

Aristotle, as is known, is thinking constantly with reference to *phusis*. And yet, the *phusis/nomos* opposition (like the homologous opposition of *phusis/technē*) remains

---

<sup>29</sup>As is known, the dispute over whether language exists as *phusei* (being by nature) or *thesei/nomōi* (being by positing/convention/institution) began as early as the sixth century.

internal to his thought, divides it, is not “surmounted.” The question raised at the very start of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—Is the highest human good, the beautiful/good and the just, *nomōi* or *phusei*?—will find no genuine answer either in this book or in the *Politics*. What I am aiming to do here is to elucidate the meaning of this situation. This investigation is neither philological nor archeological; in subterranean fashion, this same situation commands the aporias and ambiguities of Marx discussed above: Do the “equality” of men and the commensurability of their various sorts of labor pertain to the *phusis* of man (and is this *phusis* “natural” or “social”), or to *nomos*, to the law, to the social-historical institution of a particular society, capitalist society—or is there a *phusis* of history, ensuring that this particular *nomos* has to be posited at a particular moment? This elucidation leads us to free up the question from a purely theoretical context and to pose it as a properly *political* question.

~

For Aristotle, the political question is at once a question bearing on the highest human good—“happiness” in the Aristotelian sense, *eudaimonia*—and on the means that allow one to attain it, which depend essentially on the constitution/institution of the city (*politeia*).<sup>30</sup> Now, for Aristotle this question is, identically, the question of *justice*, to which he devoted the fifth book of the *Ethics*: “So let us call, according to one acceptance, *just* all that creates and

---

<sup>30</sup>The term *politeia* is used here by Aristotle in its usual sense. He will also use it in the *Politics* to designate a particular type of constitution, a mixture of democracy and aristocracy.

safeguards, for the instituted/constituted community (*politikē koinōnia*), happiness and its parts” (5.1.1129b17-19). Thus, too, can Aristotle call this sort of justice, justice in this acceptance of the term, which aims at the whole of society, “total justice”; it is not a part of virtue but “perfected” or “completed” (*teleia*) virtue and “total virtue.” It is virtue itself; it differs therefrom only according to the “essence”/definition (*to d’einai*).<sup>31</sup> inasmuch as it is considered as “exercise/effectively actual use (*chrēsis*) of virtue” with regard to others, it is justice, and inasmuch as it is considered as “acquired disposition” (*hexis, habitus*), it is virtue “simply/absolutely” (*haplōs*; 5.1.1129b25-1130a15).

Why “according to one acceptance”? Here again—as was the case for “being” and for “good”—Aristotle starts from the observation that justice “is said in multiple ways” (*pleonachōs legesthai*, 5.1.1129a26), and here again, the current acceptations and significations of the term (*dokei*, 5.1.1129a32) offer a first basis for investigation. A remarkable and fundamental thing: in *this-here* case, these acceptations and significations will be elaborated, elucidated, enriched but neither rejected nor corrected. *The just and justice are what the Greek people’s tongue says are just and justice*: someone is considered unjust if he acts against the law, or if he wants to have more than... (*pleonektēs*), or if he is inegalitarian (*anisōs* [T/E: 5.1.1129a32-33]). Therefore he is just who conforms to the law and is equal/egalitarian (*isos*). The current popular signification of the terms—and the “fixed popular prejudice” that it includes, and that Aristotle, as one

---

<sup>31</sup>It is impossible to find in modern languages a translation for the distinction between *esti* and *to einai*, which is technical in Aristotle’s work, that would not be unilateral and highly interpretative. The distinction itself raises some considerable problems, which I cannot discuss here.

sees, not only does not ignore but accepts explicitly—immediately furnishes the content for the definition, which will be maintained and validated by Aristotle throughout his investigation: what is just is the legal and the equal/egalitarian; what is unjust is the illegal and the unequal/inegalitarian.

Granted, these terms immediately pose some considerable problems. The just is the legal, the *nomimon*—from *nomos*, law, convention, institution, derived from *nemō*: to share, to allocate [*attribuer*]. *Nomos* is therefore also the law of allocation and sharing—and it is this sense that we find again during the examination of “distributive justice.” Yet, would all that is legal, all that the law as it has been laid down [*posée*] (*keimenos*, “positive” as will later be said) prescribes, be *ipso facto* just, *dikaion*? “In a certain way” (*pōs*), Aristotle responds to start out: “What has been determined by legislative activity is legal, and we call (in the usual way of speaking, *phamen*) just (or right, *dikaion*) each of its prescriptions” (5.1.1129b12-14). This initial affirmation, however, is immediately limited or cast into doubt by the phrase that follows. For, the laws are statements bearing “on everyone and about everything (*peri hapantōn*) that aims at either the common interests of everyone or the interest of the best, or the interest of the dominant (*kuriois*), according to virtue or another similar mode” (*allon tina tropon toiouton, secundum aliquem alium modum talem*, 5.1.1129b16-17). Yet would some laws that are said to aim *only* at the interest of the dominant—and the sole interest of a tyrant, for example, an example that is in no way

hypothetical and that Aristotle knew only too well<sup>32</sup>—without *any* relation to virtue/or some other similar referent still define, as is, what is just and what is right? Those doubts are immediately reinforced by the phrase, already quoted, that follows: “So let us call, according to one acceptance, *just* all that creates and safeguards, for the instituted/constituted community, happiness and its parts.” Granted, the political community is—as Aristotle specifies later on, and I will come back to this—the community of those who participate in power; it therefore can just as well be the community of oligarchs or even the tyrant as individual. Yet in these cases it would be more than difficult to speak of “happiness,” *eudaimonia*, which is, for Aristotle, inseparable from “virtue,” *aretē* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5.1095b30-1095a2; 1.7.1097b2-5, 1.7.1098a15-20; 1.13.1102a5-6). The specification comes, moreover, immediately: the law orders those acts that are in conformity with virtue and forbids those ones that are contrary thereto, “correctly if it is laid down correctly (*orthōs*) and worse (*cheiron*) if it was done just anyhow (*apeschediasmenos* [T/E: 5.1.1129b24-25]).” The conclusion brooks no ambiguity: “This justice (which was just spoken about, total justice, referencing the law) is perfect/completed virtue,” and not “part of virtue but virtue entire” [T/E: 5.1.1129b25-26, 1130a8-9].

There is, then, a total justice, “exercise toward the other of total virtue,” which “nearly” (*schedon*) coincides with legality; “indeed, the law orders one to live in conformity with each virtue and forbids one from living while giving

---

<sup>32</sup>As is known, for Aristotle tyranny is the worst of all possible regimes, even though, in the famous chapter 11 of the sixth book of the *Politics*—in which one has often seen one of the “sources” of Machiavelli’s *Prince*—the most effective methods for maintaining a tyrannical regime are examined “coldly” and “positively.”

oneself over to practicing any vice” (5.2.1130b22-24). However—and this is what especially matters—the law is not content with ordering and forbidding; the law is “creative of total virtue” through “the legal prescriptions concerning education oriented toward the community” (*peri paideian tēn pros to koinon*, 5.2.1130b26). Total justice—and the essential feature of the law—is therefore infinitely more than bidding and banning; it is first of all and above all, “creative of total virtue” and this is done through *paideia*, “education,” training with a view toward common affairs, the full birthing of the citizen, the transformation of the little animal into a man in the city. Total justice is constitution/institution of the community, and, according to the end of this institution, its weightiest part is that concerning *paideia*, the formation of the individual with a view toward his life in the community, the socialization of the human being.

Aristotle does not propose to examine in the *Ethics* this total justice, which aims at the totality of what really matters for the excellent man (*peri hapanta peri hosa ho spoudaios*, 5.2.1130b4-5), any more than he wants to close here the question of whether it is “the same” to be a good man and a good citizen (5.2.1130b29). Both questions will be the subject of the *Politics*—where, moreover, they will not be “resolved.”<sup>33</sup> They overlap and the difficulties are homologous. Already mentioned are those raised by the

---

<sup>33</sup>The key passage is to be found in third book of the *Politics*, chapter 4, which, despite appearances, lends itself to endless discussion. An attentive comparison between the *Ethics* (first and fifth books) and the *Politics* (third, seventh, and eighth books) shows that one cannot draw from Aristotle any simple answer to the question. [T/E: Since the body of the text speaks of “two questions,” the “question” mentioned here in the singular may refer more to the “endless discussion” raised in the previous sentence of the present note.]

affirmation that what is just is what is legal: Is the law, always and without addition, just?<sup>34</sup> Likewise, the law aims at the “creation of virtue” by means of *paideia pros to koinon*, training with a view toward the community. But is the virtue of the citizen virtue “absolutely” (*haplōs*, 5.2.1130b27)? In other words: Does the social institution of virtue exhaust virtue as such? In a sense, there is virtue only in and through the institution, since already there can be no man outside the city, since virtue is created by *paideia* and the latter pertains to the law, and since, finally, virtue is *hexis proairetikē* [T/E: 2.6.1106b36], a deliberative acquired disposition, and this acquisition—which is not to eliminate *prohairesis*, deliberation and free choice—is obviously an acquisition *starting from and by means of* that which is given to/imposed upon the individual by the law of the city. But saying this without adding anything else would boil down to saying that virtue itself *is* only by convention, *is* but “relative”; it is correlative to the law of the city, to *nomos*, which is opposed to *phusis* and which is conventional, instituted, “arbitrary,” variable. “Fire burns in the same way here and among the Persians, but the just (things) move” (5.7.1134b26-27). Is there *one* city, *one* institution of society about which it may be affirmed that it is not simply another “convention” but that it is *absolutely* the best—that it is best *phusei*, by nature? Is there a *phusis* of *nomos*, a natural norm of the social norm, a nature of the law and a law of nature that would also be the city’s law? Aristotle seems at times to affirm this: “And, likewise, the nonnatural, but human, just (things) are not

---

<sup>34</sup>This question also is evacuated in contemporary discourses on “the Law” and “the symbolic”—within whose framework it becomes impossible to ask: In what way and why is the law of Auschwitz or the Gulag not the Law? [T/E: The mentions of “the Law” and “the symbolic” indicate that Castoriadis is taking aim here, once again, at Jacques Lacan.]

everywhere the same, since political constitutions (*politeia*) are not so, either; nevertheless, a single (constitution) is everywhere the best according to nature (*phusei*)” (7.5.1135a3-5). Yet, as opposed to every other form of being determined by nature and by its nature, which, in being, achieves almost everywhere (monsters excepted) the norm that *is* its being, *to ti ēn einai*, what it was to be—the best city *phusei* is nowhere to be encountered; all existing cities are defective, Aristotle states everywhere. The identity between the law and justice, that between the “common” *paideia* and “private” *paideia* (5.2.1130b26-27), between the virtue of the citizen and the virtue of the man—like, also, the inclusion of ethics within politics—would cause no problem if it could be affirmed that every *de facto* city is a *de jure* city (all that is *nomōi* is also *phusei*), something that Aristotle knows and says is not true, nor would there be a problem if one could affirm that everything is always simply *de facto*, that there is no norm for the law—for, then the very question of the law, of justice, of politics would be eliminated. The problem remains, despite its in-advance solution at the beginning of the *Ethics*, because, on the one hand, Aristotle affirms that there exists a *politeia* that is everywhere the best by nature (and because, for our part, we continue to pose the political question, namely, to affirm that something else is *preferable* to what is), and because, on the other hand, he experiences (as we experience) the greatest difficulty in saying what it is or would be and because, would he (would we) even say it, it would remain the case that it is not achieved, that we are not living in that city, and that, in the meantime, we really do have to live and to act one way or another without being able to stop asking ourselves whether we are doing what must be done—whether what we are doing is *just*.



There always is, then, a question of total justice. For, there is always a question of the right or correct (*orthos*) law, of the “how” we are to do things and the “for what” we are doing them, therefore a question of virtue and of happiness, of the law as *poiētikē aretēs* and *poiētikē eudaimonias*, creative of virtue and of happiness, of the institution of society. The question of total justice is a question of politics, a question of the law in the most general sense of *nomimon*; in this regard, the question of what is just is the question of what is legal—What is the law to be?—and the idea of equality does not appear (5.2)

There also is, however, the question of equality. The violation of the law does not necessarily produce an inequality (the law includes provisions that do not relate to the equal or the unequal), whereas inequality is always a violation of the law (5.2.1130b12-14). Equality is a “part” of justice (to violate equality is to violate justice); there is, then, “synonymous and of the same sort” (*en merei sunōnumos* [T/E: 5.2.1130a33]), a partial justice, a part of justice and of virtue or a particular justice and virtue, that deal with equality. And its opposite, partial injustice, concerns “the honor or money or safety (of the individual) or all things of that order if we could designate them by a single name and has as motive the pleasure that arises from gain” (5.2.1130b2-4). In this sense, to be unjust is to want to have *more than one’s part*, for the *sake* of having more than one’s part. One’s part of what? Honor, money, safety, and all the things of that order “if we could designate them by a single name.” Aristotle provides this single name a few lines below, in an apparently tautologous manner: “That which is shareable (*meriston*) among those who participate (*koinōnousi*) in the city”

(5.2.1130b32).

Partial justice has to do with the equal and is regulated by the equal. As is known, Aristotle distinguishes therein two “species”: distributive justice (*en tais dianomais*) and corrective justice. The distributive kind concerns *sharing*, the corrective kind *transactions* (*sunallagmata*), both voluntary (contracts properly speaking) and involuntary (for one of its parties: offenses [T/E: 5.2.1130b31 ff.]). Both are determined by the idea of the *equal*: for there to be justice, all sharing, every distribution have to be equal, in a sense that remains to be defined; and every transaction has to be governed by equality, or else redressed, rectified, corrected, so that equality might be restored.

Distributive justice concerns sharing, and there is sharing only of what is “shareable (*meriston*) among those who participate in the city.” What, then, is shareable, and is it everywhere and always the same? Aristotle does not discuss that here, but he discusses it at length in the *Politics*. It is clearly apparent there that the boundary between the shareable and the nonshareable is (trivialities aside) given neither logically, nor naturally, and that what we have here is, precisely, one of the questions that the *Politics* has to resolve at its own cost and under its own responsibility (without being able to refer it to physics, logic, or metaphysics).

To what is the shareable opposed, or what is the nonshareable? Aristotle does not say, but this is obvious: to the *participable*. To share is to give while excluding: sharing is private/exclusive distribution/allocation. It bears on that of which the allocation to one excludes (by the nature of things, or by the law) the allocation to the other. There exists, perhaps, some participable but not shareable natural things: one would be tempted to say that light and air are so, but that would be false (slums and pollution today, and dungeons for millennia). There certainly do exist, however, some social

things that *are* inasmuch as they are participable and not shareable: tongue, customs, and so on. The “appropriation” of tongue by an individual not only does not exclude but implies its “appropriation” by an indefinite number of other individuals. Likewise: the “acquisition” by an individual of virtue renders not more difficult but easier its “acquisition” by others. The participable is that which cannot be shared. The shareable is that which can be shared—and therefore raises the question of whether it *is to* be so. Thus, for example, the “earth” (and more generally, the “means of production”) is physically shareable, but that does not imply that it necessarily has to be *shared*: in examining the *Republic*, or other “communist” proposals, Aristotle discusses the question of whether the earth is to be common, or not, or only its fruits, and so on: he responds to the question by taking into account some facts and some “opportunities”—not starting from some essence of things. Likewise, for individuals considered as sexual subjects, whom Plato wanted to render, in a sense and under certain conditions, participable, and about whom Aristotle thinks that it is preferable to keep them reciprocally allocated in an exclusive/private way.<sup>35</sup>

Now, total justice is precisely that: creation of the socially participable, and of the conditions, ways, means that assure each access to this participable; and separation between the participable and the shareable. It is in this sense that it is at once identical to the “law” and also to “total virtue.” It has

---

<sup>35</sup>The second book of the *Politics* is devoted in large part to this question. It is remarkable that neither here, nor elsewhere in the *Ethics*, is *power* mentioned among the “shareables.” The sharing of power is discussed, of course, in the *Politics*. One could not insist too strongly on the fact that for Plato as well as for Aristotle this separation of the participable and the shareable has nothing natural about it and pertains to laws, to the institution of the city.

to not only define the participable and the shareable and separate them but constitute them or institute them. Total justice is the first institution of society. That men born in the city participate in an *apparently* natural or spontaneous way in language, for example, in no way settles the problems posed by the “training toward the community,” which is to “create total virtue.” To socialize individuals is to make them participate in the nonshareable, in that which is not to be divided, privately, among the members of the community. Total justice therefore bears on the totality of the city’s order, in its form and in its content; as such it *is* politics (and forms the subject of the *Politics*, as well as of Plato’s *Republic* and his *Laws*). Thereby is justified the idea that politics is the “most architectonic.”

Once the boundary between the participable and the shareable is drawn, there is something shareable to share. There is, then, a *first sharing* of that of which, by nature or by law, the allocation to someone excludes the allocation to someone else. It is this idea that Marx will make explicit in the narrow sphere of production: “Any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves.”<sup>36</sup> This initial sharing out [*répartition initiale*] is the task and the work of distributive justice; it always exists (and always will exist), at least in minimal fashion. It is a law that has to say whether each does or does not have “his” body at his disposal—a law and disposition which in no way go without

---

<sup>36</sup>“Critique of the Gotha Program,” in *Selected Works in One Volume* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 321. See also the Introduction in the *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 81ff, and my commentary on the latter text in “The Relations of Production in Russia” (1949), *PSWI*, 110ff.

saying, as the very term *habeas corpus* and countless historical examples show, from slavery to the Gulag and Chinese concentration camps (which show, too, one more time in history, that *habeas mentem* does not go without saying).

The definition and the separation of the participable and of the shareable as well as the first sharing of the shareable are, “in fact,” of just any sort: they are, each time and for each city, what they are. One can describe them, possibly “explain” them (as Plato does in the *Republic* and Aristotle in the *Politics*). One can, however, also discuss them, contest them, call them into question. And one cannot not discuss them once they have been contested: those very people who would say, and who have said, that this initial sharing out is never anything but *de facto* have had to make endless speeches [*discours*] in order to *justify* this idea. To say that there is no question of the initial sharing out, or that it cannot be discussed, is to say that there is no question of society and of politics but only fact, the fact of violence and the violence of fact. But then, there is just as much the fact of the question—since it is historical making/doing itself that raises the question, in making be the contestation of the *de facto* order and conflict within the city. And to say, as Marx did when taking up the Saint-Simonian adage, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,” is not to eliminate the question of distributive justice, it is to respond to that question; for, it is to respond to the question: *What to whom* and *according to* what criterion?

From what, however, can one start out to discuss this initial sharing out? What does it mean that some sharing is *preferable* to some other one—or that it is more *just*, in

Aristotle's terminology as well as everyone's?<sup>37</sup> To discuss this question, to have a public and defensible discourse *erga omnes* that maintains that such and such an initial sharing out is better or preferable, requires that one be able to boil the question down to some "rational" terms—for, this requires that one posit that there might be a comparability of individuals between whom one shares and of the things one shares. There must be "rationality," or *logos* of the question. "This is why we do not leave the power to one man, but to *logos*" (5.6.1134a35). Almost all the senses of the word *logos* are to be found again here. For there to be discourse—*logos*—on the question, and arguments—*logoi*—defending it, there must be a definition—*logos*—of the question and of its terms, and relation/proportion—*logos*—among them; there must also be reflection—*logos*—to preside over the solution. However, to say *logos*, is it not to say already, in a certain fashion, "equality"? Heraclitus spoke of *logos xunos* (common, public *logos*, belonging to all), and the *Meno* had shown that in this *logos* there is "equal" participation by all, free men and slaves. Is not equality, or equivalence, always multiply implied by all rationality—an equality or equivalence of the discussants, without which there is no *dialogos*, equality or equivalence of statements, without which there is no sequential demonstration, equality or equivalence of the discourse's referents, without which that discourse could not even begin?

---

<sup>37</sup>Including the "Marxists," who denounce the term as mystifying, petty-bourgeois, ideological, and so on, when they are "doing theory"—but make abundant use thereof, and could not not make use thereof, when they address the people.



This function of *logos* is clearly apparent in the solution Aristotle *in principle* furnishes for the question of distributive justice.

The foundation and criterion remain equality: “if the unjust is the unequal, the just is the equal—which is what all believe, too, and without demonstration” (5.3.1131a11-13). Aristotle will, if not ground this belief, at least render it plausible—thus justifying the “fixed popular prejudice”—while showing that the equality in question here is not simple arithmetic equality but geometric proportionality.

If the unjust is the unequal where there is some more and some less (which presupposes that one knows how to say, in this domain, what is the more and the less—we shall return to that), the just, *qua* equal, has to be *between* the two (the more and the less), in the middle, a “mean” (*meson*). *Qua* “mean,” it has to be the mean of something (of the more and the less); *qua* equal, it has to be so relative to two objects; and, inasmuch as it is just, it has to be so in relation to individuals. For a question of sharing to be posed, four terms, at minimum, are required: two individuals, between whom one shares, and two objects (or two parts of an object) that one shares. And the sharing is an instauration of two relations: relation between the two individuals, relation between the two objects—or: relation between each individual and the object received by him as his share. Now, the *equality* of the two *relations* is obviously *proportionality*, “geometric equality,” *analogia*. There will therefore be justice if there is

the same equality as to individuals and as to objects;  
for (then), as the former are to be found between

them, the latter also find themselves so. Indeed, the objects are (in this case) one to the other as the individuals are one to the other; and certainly, if the individuals are not equal, they will not have to have equal things, and it is here that the battles and challenges have their origin, when equals have and possess unequal things, and unequals equal things (5.3.1131a20-24).

In what way is this solution “rational”? If the sharing is to be equal, this equality cannot be arithmetic; it is not equal (nor is it just or healthy) to give the same quantity of food to a child and to an adult, clothing of the same size to a giant and to a dwarf. Arithmetic equality is inequality, as Marx will repeat twenty-two centuries later.<sup>38</sup> Equality can therefore be only *proportional* equality: individual A is to individual B *as* object a is to object b; what is just in the distribution consists in “a certain proportionality” (*analogon ti*, 5.3.1131a29): “a certain,” *ti*, since nothing is yet known of the *measure* implied by such proportionality, and the *basis* of this measure—the *according to (kata)*, about which I shall return at length. Proportion encompasses in one and “the same equality” the four facing terms; it is the sole one to include “four terms, at minimum”—that is, to equalize their *relations*, to place in relation two *heterogeneous* dyads (two individuals/two objects). One cannot think of the “equality”

---

<sup>38</sup>We shall return to this at length. The explicit philosophical source is, here again, Plato: citations abound, from the *Gorgias* to the *Republic* and especially to the *Statesman* and the *Laws* (6.756e-758a). Yet the ultimate source is the life and political struggle of the Greek cities; see Pericles’ Funeral Oration, Thucydides 2.37. A major discussion of the problem will be found in Henri Joly’s *Le Renversement platonicien: Logos, épistémé, polis* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), pp. 258-373. See also, below, n. 42.

of a man (or of his “labor-time”) and of an object—but it seems that one might be able to think of the *relation* of two men and of the *relation* of two objects. And such a relationship between two relations is implicitly *always* posited, as soon as there is distribution. The distributively just is therefore a relation of relations, proportionality (*kai ho logos ho autos*, 5.3.1131b4). If a and b are objects allocated respectively to individuals A and B, there will be justice if it can be said: “a is to b *as* (*houtōs...hōs*, 5.3.1131b6) A is to B.” If it is taken in the sense of “under the same heading, in the same manner...,” this apparently inoffensive “as” becomes in reality “in equal ratio [*raison*] to...” in the mathematical sense. It seems evident, in the trivial cases, that one might “write”: “A is to B as a is to b,” and *that* is equal and just—if A and B are men and a and b are clothes in their sizes. Whence is “written”:  $A/B = a/b$ , which “allows” one to pass to  $A/a = B/b$ ; and “this conjunction of A to a and of B to b is the just in distribution” (5.3.1131b9-10; Aristotle writes  $\Gamma$  and  $\Delta$  for a and b).

What, however, gives us the right to “write”  $A/B$  and  $a/b$ ? The question arises immediately of the *commensurability* of A and of B, as of a and of b, of their measurability as such, of their reduction to “common units” (which would make of each of the expressions  $A/B$  and  $a/b$  pure numbers and would thus render them comparable). If a and b are homogeneous objects and “naturally” (physically) measurable—bushels of wheat, meters of fabric, and so on— $a/b$  is meaningful, but  $A/B$  is meaningless if a and b are heterogeneous. Still more,  $A/B$  (for example, Socrates/Gorgias) is strictly meaningless, unless one is referring to some physical characteristics of individuals (weight, height, etc.)—or one *reduces* them to such characteristics.

Therefore, there is a question of the “basis” of the “measure” of A and B, of a and b. It is obviously this “basis,”

and *the same one* for A and B, for a and b, that will be, for Marx, “simple abstract—and socially necessary—labor” as “Substance” of Value. Yet, even if we accepted it, this “basis” would be of no use to us here, where we are discussing the question of the initial sharing out: it is meaningful only starting from such a sharing out that had already been done and done in a determinate manner: the one that leads to the exchange of products of independent labor, and so on.<sup>39</sup> In this question, the “commensurability” of A and B (of individuals) dominates by far the “commensurability” of a and b (of objects); for, in assuming that I have found a means to render a and b comparable, or more simply: assuming that a and b are homogeneous, therefore *ipso facto* comparable (and for example, quantities of money), I have not advanced one step if I cannot compare the men. It is of no use to know that  $a/b = 3/2$  if I cannot boil the “relation” between Socrates and Gorgias down to a numerical relation, if I cannot find a “basis” *according to* which Socrates and Gorgias would become properly comparable and could enter into distributive proportion. To this question, Aristotle furnishes a first response—which refers straightaway to some still deeper questions. That justice consists in an equality of relations (proportionality) is, he says,

manifest starting from (the universally granted criterion, that distribution has to occur) according to worth (*ek tou kat' axian*); for, everyone is in agreement to say that what is just in distributions has

---

<sup>39</sup>Likewise, the “basis for the measure” of an equitable distribution that Marx was to adopt in “Critique of the Gotha Program” (“From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”) is meaningful only by *positing* these “needs” and these “abilities” as *given*, independently of the institution of society. We shall return to this.

to be (established) according to a certain worth (*axia*), although all do not say that it is the same, but democrats (say it is) freedom, the supporters of oligarchy wealth, and others noble birth, and the supporters of aristocracy virtue (5.3.1131a24-29).

I am translating *axia* as “worth” [*valeur*]—and in order to distinguish it from the other kind of value, I will designate it as Proto-Value, for reasons that will become apparent straight away. *Axia* has equally been translated as *dignitas* or merit. In its earliest meaning, *axios* is the one that counterbalances, is a counterweight, that weighs as much as..., that *equi-librates*; the meaning of *axia* as worth or value is, starting from a physical “equivalency,” of an “equilibrium,” clearly rooted in the concrete acts of exchange: *boos axiov*: “an ox’s worth,” says Homer (*Iliad* 23.885), the ox being precisely, in his poem, the “standard of values” and the object that “is worth an ox” being able to counterbalance an ox on metaphorical scales. *Axia* in the sense of the worth, dignity, merit of a man has been commonly used since Herodotus. The *kat’ axian* of Aristotle could be translated, according to an at-once primitive and modern sense: in accordance with the weighting coefficients of the different individuals, according to what each *weighs* for the community. Yet the question of the translation of *axia* by *worth* (which may seem modern), by *dignity* or *merit* (which may seem old-fashioned or moralizing) is unimportant—for, whatever one does, one finds oneself in the same circle: what is the worth of this worth, what is the merit of this merit, what is the dignity of some dignity, or, if you prefer, for what is *such and such a worth worth?* This circle is the circle of Proto-Value—that is, of the institution of a core imaginary signification, of and for which one could not give an account and a reason. The democrats say that the *axia* of each is his

freedom; they are saying thereby not only that freedom is a “value [*valeur*]” but also that it is worth [*vaut*] more than any other value one could name; likewise, the others for his own “worth.” Each party is obliged to affirm that his “worth” is worthy [*vaut*], that his “merit” merits being the basis for distribution, that his “dignity” is fit for or deserving of [*digne de*] furnishing the criterion of justice. He is therefore obliged to posit one value as *the* value, *one* attribute of men as *the* attribute that will define the “weight” of each individual for the sharing. Thereby, each party affirms that the just distribution is *relative to* that which each individual is/has already *as to* a “value” that, itself, is not “relative” to anything whatsoever, is not *as to*..., but is posited absolutely, justice’s point of origin, baseline, or benchmark that cannot be referred to anything other than itself; “value” *as to* which and by means of which individuals are worth (or weigh) what they are worth and which, itself, “is valid [*vaut*]” absolutely—which boils down to saying that, properly speaking, this value does not hold [*ne vaut pas*], or it does more than be valid, it has no possible counterweight. Each is worthy through his freedom, but nothing is worth freedom, the democrats would say. It is only once this Proto-Value, this *axia* is axiomatically posited that there can be a response to the question of sharing *according to*.

Every *debatable* [discutable] sharing—and, in truth, all sharing—invokes in words, but in any case, uses in fact a criterion *according to* which it is done and which, from that moment on, determines what is just and unjust *within* the established *nomos*, within the given institution of society. Thus, the democrats say: Every free man, *qua* free, is as worthy as any other free man, weighs as much as him—and that has to be the basis for sharing (which then has to be arithmetically egalitarian). If A, B, C...are free men, then  $A = B = C \dots$  and  $A/B = B/C = \dots = 1$  *always*. The supporters of

oligarchy say: Each is worthy according to his wealth,  $A/B = (\text{wealth of A})/(\text{wealth of B})$ —wealth being already itself assumed to be measurable (“we call wealth everything whose value is measured in money,” says Aristotle 4.1.1119b26-27). Or, perhaps: Each is worthy according to his noble birth,  $A/B = (A\text{'s quarters to nobility})/(B\text{'s quarters to nobility})$ .<sup>40</sup> The supporters of aristocracy (power of the best) say: Each is worthy according to his virtue,  $A/B = (\text{virtue of A})/(\text{virtue of B})$ . (But how is one to *measure* virtue?)

But who said that men as such, or *such and such* men, are free? Who has already shared out the “wealth” or the “noble birth” *according to* which the sharing is to be done? And since virtue does not grow naturally but is at least a coproduct of *paideia*, of the social training of individuals, who has rendered individuals virtuous or not, and such and such individuals more virtuous than other ones? All these criteria, these “bases for measure,” these Proto-Values appear only because they have already been instituted, posited by *nomos* and such and such a *nomos* as Proto-Values, *axiai*. What Aristotle is implying is that every society (and, in political conflict, every party) *always* posits in fact an *axia*, a Proto-Value, and a proportionality based on this *axia*—whether or not that society makes the effort to explain it and “justify” it. What, however, he is also raising—and, as will be seen, *explicitly* so—is the question: What could *truly* justify this proportionality, which is always established *de facto* in one way or another (for example, today: to each, according to what he possesses—to the capitalist according to

---

<sup>40</sup>Thus when some more-recently elevated duchess wishes to take precedence over his wife, the Duke de Saint-Simon is a bit distressed because such acts ruin state order, but especially is angry because they are unjust.

his capital, to the worker according to his “labor-power”)? This is a direct interrogation about *axia* itself and its foundation. *Nomos* is always already there; the initial sharing out has always already been done, starting from a given Proto-Value; but, since it is not the same Proto-Value, *axia*, that various cities pose as the foundation of their initial sharing out, which Proto-Value is valid? By means of its initial sharing out, every city posits individuals as *worth* more or less (or the same) inasmuch as they more or less (or to the same degree) are/have *that*. But why *that* and not something else? What can ground or *justify*—render simply/absolutely just—the Proto-Value, the *axia*, posited each time by *nomos*, the constitution/institution of the city, by means of which individuals are for it “worth” more or less and, in general, are “worth” something?

To this question, Aristotle provides two answers—but also, in a sense, he says that *there is no* answer. He will say, in what follows in the fifth book of the *Ethics*, that this *axia*, the “basis for measure” and the “measure” itself, is *chreia*, the need/usage/utility of individuals for one another and all of them for the city: each “is worthy” according to what he brings to the common *chreia*. And he will also say, almost everywhere and particularly in the *Politics*, that the *axia has to be* “virtue.” It is within the discussion of *chreia* that there appears Aristotle’s formulation that Marx criticized. And it is this discussion that allows one to measure the depth of Aristotle’s thought about the problem of society. However, before broaching an analysis thereof, a detour is necessary in order to shed light on a difficulty that seems to be created by Aristotle’s formulations on “arithmetic” equality such as it appears in “corrective” justice.

Corrective justice is the kind that concerns “transactions” (*sunallagmata*) that are either voluntary (contracts) or involuntary (for one of the parties: offenses). The just and the unjust are, here again, the equal and the unequal. However, whereas in distributive justice, equality signifies geometric proportionality, in corrective justice it is a matter of “arithmetic proportion” (*analogian...arithmētikēn*, 5.4.1132a1-2)—of quantitative equality in the usual sense.

One would be wrong, however, to think that arithmetic equality governs, can govern, and is to govern *every sunallagma*: it governs only the “transactions” that could be called *second-order*—and it *cannot* govern *the* first transaction, *exchange* (*allagē*) as constitutive of society. Arithmetic equality intervenes when it comes to *correcting*, rectifying, redressing voluntary or involuntary transactions that have all taken place and have an existence within and starting from a constitution of society whose central and irreducible moment is exchange—which cannot be thought in terms of arithmetic equality. It is only when it comes to *correcting second-order* inequalities/unequalizations that, on the one hand, the law is to lay down a numerical equality among individuals, “treating them as if they were equal” (*chrētai hōs isois*, 5.4.1132a5), by punishing, for example, the adultery or theft of the equitable man as much as that of the bad one, and that, on the other hand, the judge “tries to equalize” (*isazein peiratai*, 5.4.1132a7) gains and damages acquired or suffered by the parties—and, to do this, “measures” them (*metrēthēi to pathos*, 5.4.1132a13). Transforming passion and action (*pathos kai praxis*) in this way into measured gain and damage (*kerdos, zēmia*, 5.4.1132a10), the judge “corrects,” taking away for example from the one who has wronged a quantity equal to the one “lost” by the wronged person (which is not to be confused with the *lex talionis*, criticized at the beginning of fifth book).

It is clear that, if the initial sharing out was done according to distributive justice and geometric proportionality, disturbances that can be reduced to additions and subtractions bearing on what each “had received” can be redressed by subtractions and additions (which obviously assumes a resolution to the problem of measuring what one subtracts and one adds).<sup>41</sup>

Corrective justice has to have recourse to arithmetic equality, for the reason just stated, but also for a deeper reason, which outstrips it and brings us back to another aspect of the riddle of *nomos*—of the instituted law. Plato’s famous theme is present in the fifth book of the *Ethics*—as it will be in the “Critique of the Gotha Program.”<sup>42</sup> The law “treats

---

<sup>41</sup>Even if, moreover, such a solution existed for the voluntary *sunallagmata*, it would not hold for the involuntary *sunallagmata*, that is to say, offenses. In the latter case, “penalty” or “compensation” is necessarily conventional; they “equalize” incomparable offenses and, in general, do not restore the state of justice supposed to exist at the outset. If this state has been disturbed by a civil contract, creating for example unwarranted enrichment of one of the parties at the expense of the other, the initial state can be restored between the two parties and thereby between each of them and among the other members of society. If, however, it was disturbed by an offense infringing on one’s bodily integrity, the restoration, by whatever means, of an “equality” between the wrongdoer and the wronged party (which in any case can be only imperfect and conventional) would not reestablish the latter’s situation in relation to *others*. Aristotle himself indicates that the terminology of *gain* and *loss* or *damage* (*kerdos*, *zēmia*) stems from the language of contracts.

<sup>42</sup>*Statesman* 293e-297e. “Never will the law be able, in embracing exactly what is the best and the most just for all, to order what is the best and most perfect; for, the dissimilarities both of men and of acts and the fact that almost no human thing is ever at rest don’t permit one to state anything absolute that is valid for all cases and all times, in any matter and through any science. ...Now, we see that that’s the very thing the law wishes to achieve, like an arrogant and ignorant man who wouldn’t permit anyone

individuals as if they were equal”<sup>43</sup> by *logical* necessity: it posits the simple equality of subjects, of *Normadressaten*, for it cannot take concrete situations into consideration. It exists in the abstract universal; it says: *adultery* and *theft*, and so on, without mentioning particular cases. It punishes adultery and theft *in general* and *the one who* has committed these offenses, whoever he may be—instead of punishing *according to....* The law is the *universal quantifier*, as modern logic says so well: *Let x....* That is inherent not only to the ineliminable universality of its statements but also to the fact that, in essence, it bears on *future* events, therefore “contingent” ones, that can be covered only “in the abstract.” And the judge has to apply the law, the abstract rule: therefore, he, too, “tries to equalize.” Yet Plato’s and Aristotle’s judge is *alive*, as is also the Roman praetor; he is not a *Paragraphen-automat*, like the modern judge. Chapter 10, devoted to equity, shows this dazzlingly—and Plato’s ideal of the “royal man,” *anēr basilikos*, appears between the lines. “The just and the equitable are the same...and the equitable is better” (5.10.1137b10-11). Just and equitable appertain to the same kind—and in this kind, the equitable

---

to do anything against his orders, or to pose questions to him, or, even, if something new arose, to do better outside the rules he has prescribed...” (294b-c; my translation [T/E: now translated from French to English; see two slightly different, later versions, now also translated into English, in [OPS](#), pp. 120 and 132]). It seems obvious to me that Plato is taking up again, here and elsewhere, the theme of the *artificiality* of *nomos*—which had been put forward at least since Xenophanes (for example, Diels 11, 12, 14, 15, 16), was central to Democritus, and then extended by the Sophists—and, in integrating it into his own views, is assigning to it an entirely different role.

<sup>43</sup>T/E: 5.5.1132a5. A slightly different translation/interpolation by Castoriadis is found below in the present chapter.

occupies the summit. “The fault,” says Aristotle, pursuing his eternal dialogue with Plato, “is not that of the law, or of the legislator, but in the nature of the thing; for, such is, simply, the matter of the things acted upon” (*hē tōn praktōn hulē*, 5.10.1137b19). “When the law expresses itself universally (*katholou*), and when something arises outside of universality, it is then correct, where the legislator neglects (to give his pronouncement) and has failed, in speaking absolutely, to redress what is missing (by laying down) what the legislator himself would have said in the same way had he been present and what he would have laid down as law had he known” (5.10.1137b19-24). *This* is the rule of equity. It is an indeterminate rule, for “of that which is indeterminate, indeterminate is also the rule” (*aoristos*, 5.10.1137b29-30)—which does not mean that the rule is nonexistent or is not a rule, but that it has to be adapted “to the things acted upon” (*pros ta pragmata* [T/E: 5.10.1137b32]).

Apropos of this famous passage, it is important to note that, if “the nature of the equitable is *that*, correction of the law where the latter is defective because universal” (5.10.1137b26-27), then “the matter of the things acted upon” implies that, strictly speaking, the law is *always* defective, for it is always ill adjusted in truth, always *arithmetically* equal, *therefore* unequal—which is what Plato said and Marx would go on to repeat: “This *equal* right...*is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right*” (“Critique of the Gotha Program,” p. 320). But it is especially important to underscore the poisoning [*balancement*] of the ideas. While the legislator is working for justice, the judge is working for equity, which is justice, but a “better” justice; the “end,” the *telos* aimed at by the legislator therefore can truly be implemented only by the judge, who is the sole one truly in contact with “the matter of the things acted upon” and can take into account concrete situations and the merits of the

particular case. Yet, when it is a question of defining the judge judging in equity, it is to the legislator that one once again has recourse, the judge having to judge “as the legislator would have done, had he been present and had he known.” In truth, legislator and judge, justice and equity, refer back to each other: once more, it is a question of restoring the norm of analogy, of proportionality, of the *according to....* The judge has to act as the legislator would have done—for, the genuine legislator is ruled, has to be ruled, by the *analogon*, and, had he been present, he would have proportioned, adapted his solution to the concrete case; he would have for a second time “geometricized” the law, which language renders “arithmetic.” Conversely, the genuine judge, the judge in equity, will act in such a way that the solution he gives to the particular case fits into the geometric proportionality of the just social rule. The rectitude of his solution will not be mere “adaptation of the rule” to the concrete case: *what* adaptation? It will consist in this, that the solution will achieve, in *this* case, justice *in general*, which is, intrinsically and essentially, *always* a property of the *relationship* of the case to *other* cases and to *all* cases. Justice *is* a relationship and in relationship. If justice were in itself arithmetic equality, one could, abstractly, pick a “number” and relate the acts and the individuals to this “number,” “equalizing” them between themselves while equalizing them to that number. Equalization is, then, equalization of individuals only as a second-order corollary of their resorption by this abstraction, “number” having become standard of equality; it is not *social* or “*political*” equalization. Yet justice is geometric proportion: it is essentially social; it goes beyond the “concrete case” even though it considers only that case, since it consists in bringing this case into just proportion with another case—and this proportion has to be valid and hold among *all* cases. Thus, equity is the particular case’s

reinsertion into the regulated, effectively actual totality; it is realization of justice as social, that is to say, as just relation/equal relation among all participants in society. Equity is “better justice” because it regeometrizes in the place where, through the “matter of the thing,” the law had been obliged to arithmetize—because it *resocializes* in the place where the law had been obliged to *logicize*.

~

Thus, equity not only “corrects” what Aristotle is saying about the best kind of justice but *overturns* what he is saying about “corrective justice,” and arithmetic equality. Yet the limited character of the interest of the latter also appears from another standpoint that is just as fundamental.

When one reads simply chapters 3 and 4, where the questions of distributive justice and corrective justice are formally treated, it may seem like arithmetic equality governs and has to govern “transactions,” and that these “transactions” can exist only starting from the sharing of the shareable. One can engage in exchange only on the condition that there would already be an initial sharing out; one can exchange only what has already been allocated. *Nemo plus juris transferre potest quam ipse habet*, the Roman jurists will go on to say in one of their brilliant tautologies.<sup>44</sup> Likewise for offenses: there must be allocation to each of his bodily integrity or of his freedom, for example, in order that infringement on one or the other might constitute an offense. These transactions raise the question of arithmetic equality: it must be known, in the case of a voluntary transaction (contract), whether that which has been transferred from both

---

<sup>44</sup>T/E: “No one can transfer more rights than he himself has.”

sides is *equal* (“exchange of equivalents”) and, in the case of an involuntary transaction (offense), whether the “correction,” the “rectification” (*diorthōsis*) has, somehow or other, “equalized” what the offense had “unequalized.”

But what, then, is this “equality”? Starting from what and by what means can the exchanged objects be said to be “equal” (to have the same “exchange-value,” even an “improper usage” following the expression from the first book of the *Politics*)? Ten measures of wheat are equal to ten measures of wheat of the same quality, but no one exchanges ten measures of wheat against ten measures of wheat—any more than against nine measures of wheat; one exchanges, for example, ten measures of wheat against so many pairs of shoes. What is the meaning of the clearly meaningless equality, ten measures of wheat = so many pairs of shoes? Here appears the *radical* character of Aristotle’s reflection on the “economic”—here, in chapter 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, much more than where it is usually sought, in the first book of the *Politics*. Indeed, the *sunallagmata*, “transactions” in the usual sense, where the exchange of equivalents appears, are but particularizations, modes of *the* permanent, essential transaction/transfer, which is constitutive of society: *allagē*, exchange in the primordial sense of the term. “For, society would not be if exchange were not, nor exchange if equality were not, nor equality if commensurability were not” (5.5.1133b17-18). There must be commensurability in order that there might be (be a question of) equality, equality in order that there might be exchange, exchange in order that there might be society. The whole problematic is knotted together here: society presupposes commensurability, but this commensurability is not and cannot be “natural”; it is not given *phusei*. It can exist only *nomōi*, by convention/institution; it can *be* only as *posited* by society *in order that* society might exist. In short, society presupposes

society—one might as well say that society is creation of itself, which Aristotle *does not say*, and *cannot say* (any more than Marx).

However, Aristotle does see and say that the question of society and of its institution is expressed also by this, that society does not include in fact or by accident the difference or, better, the *alterity* of individuals, but necessarily and essentially implies such alterity. “For, it is not starting from two doctors that society arises (*ginetai*), but starting from one doctor and one laborer, who are absolutely other (*holōs heterōn*) and nonequal; and yet, those two must be equalized” (*alla toutous dei isasthēnai*, 5.5.1133a16-18). The constitution of society, like exchange between the “doctor” and the “laborer,” requires the solution of the following enigma: equalizing what is absolutely other. Doctor and laborer can exist only by communing/communicating (*koinōnein*) and they can commune/communicate only by exchanging; in order for them to exchange, they have to be—themselves, their “products,” the latter by the former or *vice versa*—equalized. Behind the constituted exchange, there is the constituting exchange—and the latter still requires, implies, a commensurability or “equality.” For, one can think usual exchange, everyday “transactions,” as exchange of simple material “equivalents”: so much money, so many beds. But the exchange constitutive of society *is not* the exchange of beds and of money but the exchange of the “work” (*ergon*, 5.5.1133a13) of the doctor and the “work” of the laborer—that is to say, of the being-doctor and the being-laborer such as they are “actualized” in their respective “works.” It is *the* doctor and *the* laborer that society “has to equalize,” it being understood that they are, Aristotle says—it being understood that society has *made them be*, I would say—“absolutely other and nonequal.” Here again, the *phusis/nomos* antinomy subterraneously haunts Aristotle’s text

and determines what appears as its limits. For, of course, doctor and laborer are not “given” and one cannot “give them to oneself” when speaking of society. Their *alterity as* doctor and laborer (which has nothing to do with their incomparability *qua* singular individuals) is instituted/created by society and manifests the latter’s nonnaturalness. Likewise, when Marx writes, “The first division of labor is the division of labor between man and woman in the sexual act,”<sup>45</sup> it has to be noted that this “division of labor” is already present in horses, that it therefore is not a “division of labor,” that it takes on another meaning in humans only because human/social sexuality is something wholly other than biological “sexuality” as such.

What, then, can this equality/equalization be, and how can it be achieved? Here again, it is geometric proportionality. “In exchange societies (that is to say, according to what Aristotle just said, in every society), what holds them together (*sunechei*) is this just thing that is reciprocity/requital [*réciprocité/rétribution*] (*antipeponthos*) according to proportion and not according to equality (namely, arithmetic equality); for, the city keeps itself together (*summenei*) by means of proportional reciprocity/requital (*antipoiein*)” (5.5.1132b31-34). At the foundation of the originary transaction is to be found again, not arithmetic equality, but geometric equality, proportionality. The city can be kept and held together only if exchange materializes that which Aristotle calls, successively, *antipoiesis*, *metadosis*, *antapodosis*, *antidosis* (5.5.1133a1-6). Let us remain on this last term: *antidosis*, giving-for, giving-against. “What yields

---

<sup>45</sup>T/E: In *The German Ideology*, p. 51, Marx states: “...there develops the division of labor, which was originally nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act.”

*antidosis* according to proportion is conjunction according to the diagonal; for example, let A be a mason, B a shoemaker, C a house, D a shoe” (5.5.1133a5-8). “Diagonal” signifies that in the quadrilateral ABCD, the conjunction of A (mason) and C (house) is the same or equal to the conjunction of B (shoemaker) and D (shoe)—which is what happens with the diagonals AC and BD of a rectangle. The straight lines AC and BD, which symbolize respectively the relations of mason and house, of shoemaker and shoe, are equal; so, too, are the straight lines AB (relation of the mason and the shoemaker) and CD (relation of the house and the shoe).

Exchange therefore implies not only equality but *proportionality*, and that, not in order that it might be just but in order that it might, quite simply, *be*. Why?

The mason must receive from the shoemaker the latter’s work, and must give his in exchange. If, then, there is (existed, is posited) first the equal according to proportion, and then the reciprocity/requital (in the exchange) is achieved, what has been said will take place; if not, there will be no equality, nor will (the exchange) be able to be maintained; for, nothing prevents the work of the one from being better than (from being preferable to, from pre-vailing over, *kreitton*) that of the other; they must therefore be equalized (5.5.1133a8-14).

It is necessary, therefore, that what the mason is to the shoemaker, let so many shoes be to the house or to food. ...For, if that is not, there will be no exchange, nor any society. And that will not be, if (things) are not/are not rendered equal in a certain fashion (*pōs*).... There will therefore be reciprocity/requital when (the things) will be equalized, so that what the

laborer is to the shoemaker, let the shoemaker's work be to that of the laborer. ...Let a laborer A, the food (namely, that he produces) C, a shoemaker B, his work be equalized (namely, to the food) D. If it was not possible to reciprocate/requite thus, there would be no society (5.5.1133a22-1133b6).

All the questions of exchange, this passage in truth says, boil down to the following problematic relationship:

$$\frac{\textit{mason}}{\textit{shoemaker}} = \frac{? \textit{house}}{x \textit{shoes}}$$

How, then, is one to compare a mason and a shoemaker—or a house and some shoes? Modern political economy says in general: One compares products by comparing their “production costs.”<sup>46</sup> Yet “production costs” are themselves heteroclite assemblages of heterogeneous objects. I am told: If you do not know how to compare a house and some shoes, you only have to compare, on the one hand, a pile of bricks, wood, plaster, paint, days of a mason, of a plumber, and so on, and, on the other hand, a pile of bits of leather, nails, tools, days of a tanner, of a shoemaker, and so on. The absurdity of the answer is masked only because, in the “costs of production,” the heterogeneous objects have already been rendered “comparable” by their monetary expression. What, however, is money? Classical political economy, and Marx, say: One only has to compare the labor-times the mason and the shoemaker (and all those who have produced, respectively, what the mason and shoemaker have

---

<sup>46</sup>Discussion of “subjectivist” conceptions—marginal utility, etc.—would take us too far from our purpose.

utilized) have expended in order to produce the house and the shoes. Yet, to compare the labor-times of the mason and the shoemaker is obviously to compare the mason and the shoemaker; one has seen the questions that this comparison in turn raises.

In order that there might be exchange, there must be comparability or commensurability. Now, says Aristotle, “things that differ so much cannot in truth be rendered commensurable, but that is possible sufficiently as to need/usage” (5.14.1133b18-20; cf. section 11 of chapter 5 of book 5). Commensurability is referred here to objects; they are what are “rendered commensurable” by money, “for, everything is measured by money” (5.5.1133b22-23). Yet, as the fundamental problematic relationship of exchange shows, behind objects there are the men who have produced them—those “totally other and nonequal” men. It is the *œuvre*, the *work (ergon)* of the doctor, the shoemaker, the mason, the laborer that is exchanged; they themselves are, in a sense, what is exchanged and “one must equalize” *them (toutous dei isasthēnai, 5.5.1133a18, coming after dei tauta...isasthēnai a few lines earlier)*. Aristotle *is not* involved in “fetishism”—and it is Marx who, paradoxically, is so on this point. Aristotle does not think for an instant that, since effectively actual exchange (the “market”) somehow or other “equalizes” house and shoes, that furnishes “weighting coefficients” that would allow one to posit  $x$  (days of the mason) =  $y$  (days of the shoemaker), *therefore also* 1 mason =  $y/x$  shoemakers; it is Marx who thinks that, since the reduction of complex labor to simple labor occurs daily “in fact” (that is to say, on the market), complex labor *is* simple labor multiplied. Granted, in both cases—whether one says that the objects have such and such an “exchange-value” because they have such and such a Value, that is to say, because they contain the same quantum of the same Labor-

Substance; or that the objects have such and such an “exchange-value” because such is the *proportionality* established among the men who produce them—one comes back from the objects to the human activities that make them be. In the second case, however, it is difficult not to interrogate oneself about the foundation of this proportionality, and to forget that such proportionality is socially instituted; whereas, in the first case, it is only too easy to slide toward saying that there is a “naturalness” to this Substance. It is the author of *Capital*, not the author of the *Metaphysics*, who is, in this affair, the metaphysician.

The question of the exchange that is constitutive of society is therefore deeply homologous to that of distributive justice; both immediately give rise to the need to posit what I have called above the *fundamental problematic relationship*: some man/some other man = ? some object/some other object. Both run up against the same inescapable difficulty: the objects are not “in truth” commensurable; men are “totally other and nonequal.” The “solution” to the problem proposed by Aristotle in chapter 5 of the fifth book is an iteration of the problem at a deeper level. It boils down to saying that “in truth” there is an answer to the question—but that this answer is not “truly” achievable, while at the same time the foundation and the nature of what furnishes the true answer remain enigmatic. In order that there might be exchange, it is necessary that “in a certain manner (*pōs*) all the things of which there is exchange might be comparable (*sumblēta*).... It is necessary that all things be measured by means of a certain unit” (*heni tini*, 5.5.1133a19-26). Now, “that (namely, the unit that can measure all) is in truth (*tē...alētheia*) the need/usage/utility (*chreia*), which holds everything together”; without need (*deointo*) and without “similar” (*homoios*) needs, “either there would be no exchange or there would not be the same exchange” (of these objects or according to these

quantities; *homoios* is obviously what is not *tautos*, identical [T/E: 5.5.1133a26-28]). *Chreia*, need/usage/utility, “holds together, as if it were a unit” (*sunechei hōsper hen ti on*, 5.13.1133b6-7). Need grounds the unity of society and, in a sense, *is* this unity itself; it *would be* the true measure that renders everything comparable. But it is not; for, this unity is not a unit of a measure or of a number: one cannot measure by need or measure the “intensity” of a need. It is therefore “like a substitute (*hupallagma*, *vicarius*) of the *chreia* that money has come about by convention (*kata sunthēkēn*). And it is for that reason that it bears the name money (*nomisma*), because it is not by nature (*phusei*) but by convention/institution (*nomōi*), and because we have the power to modify it or render it useless” (5.5.1133a29-31).<sup>47</sup> Thus, the required measure/unit (*hen de ti dei einai*) that renders everything commensurable (*panta poiei summetra*) can be only through convention/institution, by *postulation* (*ex hupotheseōs*, *constituto*, 5.15.1133b21). Money “equalizes” objects, but this equalization is not genuine; it is sufficient as to usage/need. And this equalization function is already implied by the institution of exchange as such (which always presupposes some sort of hypothetical “numéraire”); it is not linked essentially to the specific institution of money. “It is clear that it is thus with exchange, before there was money; for, it in no way differs (from exchanging) a house against five beds, or against so much money as five beds are worth”

---

<sup>47</sup>I cannot expand here upon Aristotle’s formulas showing that he sees this “equalizing” function of money not only among objects but also between present and future (5.5.1133b10ff.): money, he says, is like a “surety” for future exchange (instrument for the “conservation of values”)—and, here too, it “undergoes the same thing,” namely, it does not truly “equalize,” for “it does not eternally have the same power” (buying power)—although it may be that at which money “aims” (*bouletai* [T/E: 5.5.1133b12-14]).

(5.16.1133b26-28). Money is but simplification/generalization of a convention/institution of measurability already inherent to exchange. The relationship one house = five beds is just as conventional/instituted as any other relationship expressed monetarily and it contains the latter's essential features (just as, for Marx, "the whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this elementary form," "x commodity A = y commodity B").<sup>48</sup> And this convention/institution refers us back to another, more fundamental one: the one that "equalizes" "totally other and nonequal" individuals.

*Chreia* is/would be the genuine *unité* in both senses of the French term (unity and unit)—but it cannot be so; it has to be made up for by the *nomos* of *nomisma*, of money. Yet is *chreia* itself, the need/usage/utility that holds the whole society together, *phusei* or *nomōi*? Does it pertain to a naturalness of man, or is it, inasmuch as it is and *such as*, each time, it is, posited/created in and through the institution of society, a unity made by society in order that society might act and make itself [*faire et se faire*] as *one*?

~

Aristotle poses the question of justice: total justice, total institution of the city; partial justice, essentially distributive justice, response to the question: *What to whom?* He starts from the common idea of equality—which he does not stop for a second to discuss; he notes, rightly, that equality in the ordinary sense, arithmetic equality, not only is, in social affairs, conventional, but that it offers no means to respond to his questions. In exchange—which he posits as constitutive of

---

<sup>48</sup>T/E: *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 48.

society—he sees, behind objects, men and their activities, in relation to which the idea of an arithmetic equality is devoid of meaning. Exchange itself implies *another* equality, proportionate equality, geometric equality: the objects exchanged are among them *as* the men who have produced them are among them. Likewise, distribution always establishes a proportionality: it is always ruled by an *according to*...and this “according to” is an *axia*, a Proto-Value; once this *axia* is posited, the distribution that occurs *according to* it is just.

However, men, parties, and cities as a matter of fact differ among themselves and oppose one another over the definition or the positing of this *axia*, this Proto-Value. In a sense, every distribution carried out in a city appears as *de facto* just, if one dares express oneself in this way, since it necessarily corresponds to the *axia* this city has posited/instituted as criterion and Proto-Value (and, complementarily, to the “commensurability” of the individuals and of the objects in and through which this positing/institution instruments itself). In another sense, there will be—there would be?—distributive *justice* or *just* distribution only when one will be able—if one were able?—to give a determinate and grounded—“justified”—answer to the question: *What to whom?* That would require the solution to three problems: the problem of *axia*, of the Proto-Value *according to* which distribution *is to* be carried out; the problem of the comparability of individuals as to this value; the problem of the commensurability of objects from the social standpoint. Aristotle “resolves” these problems neither in the *Nicomachean Ethics* nor in the *Politics*. As regards the first problem, it is clear that, in his view, the sole *axia* that would merit being taken into consideration is *virtue*, but at the same time, his formulations about *chreia*, need/usage/utility, makes

the latter appear as at once society's cement and proportionality's norm. Assuming that this problem has been resolved, and positing virtue as the *axia* according to which distribution ought to occur, how is one to *measure* the virtue of individuals? (The same question arises when it comes to measuring *chreia*—and Aristotle states that every answer can only be by convention.) It is only the third problem that he resolves, by dissolving it and by affirming, rightly (about which Marx tries to correct him, wrongly), that the commensurability of objects can never exist “in truth” but can always be established “sufficiently as to usage”; in other words, if we knew what a just society is and how to instaurate it, the question of the commensurability of objects would not remain as an impassible obstacle. What remains above all, hanging over everything, is the enigma of the *phusis/nomos* relation, to which I shall return.

~

As almost always on the essential points, Aristotle's text above all raises questions. Centuries of commentary and interpretation, driven by their thirst for certainties and their need for authority, will read therein only some answers.

When, twenty-two centuries later, Marx was in his turn to take on and to discuss the question of what a just or equitable distribution is and was to attempt to respond to it, he would do so within the horizon traced by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and through the categories in the main laid down by the latter. His response is essentially but a paraphrase of certain passages from the fifth book. It would suffice, after what has been said above, to invite the reader to reread, with some attention, the third part of the first section of the “Critique of the Gotha Program” [T/E: pp. 317-21]. But

the smoke being wafted for a long time by the “Marxists” and particularly the Trotskyists around the ideas Marx is defending in this text is so thick that a brief commentary may be of some use.

In substance, Marx says there that, in its “first phase,” communist society will base distribution on arithmetic equality, which is still unjust, and that it will be able, in its “higher phase,” to establish a just distribution in conformity with geometric proportionality, in accordance with the principle: “From each *according to* his ability, to each *according to* his needs!”

Arithmetic equality—which Marx calls *equality*, period—prevails in the “first phase” of communist society.<sup>49</sup> According to this kind of *equality*, “the individual producer receives from society—after the deductions have been made—exactly what he has given to it. . . . The same quantum of labor he has given to society in one form he receives back in another” [T/E: cf. *ibid.*, p. 323]. The relationship between the individual producer and society—or the totality of the other producers—is an “exchange of equivalents” [T/E: *ibid.*, p. 320].<sup>50</sup> Arithmetic equality reigns here over the relation

---

<sup>49</sup>“As it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society” (“Gotha,” 320). Marx knew nothing of the “transitional societies”—one contained within the others, like Russian dolls and Chinese boxes—which the Trotskyists were to invent later on. See also, “The Relations of Production in Russia,” *PSWI*, 132-35.

<sup>50</sup>Not taking account of the “deductions” or levies about which Marx had spoken previously (accumulation, social consumption, etc.), which do not interest us here. Marx expresses himself more rigorously further on: “The right of the producers is *proportional* to the labor they supply.” This “proportionality” has nothing to do with geometric proportionality: it is still arithmetic equality. If the levies represent 30 percent of the net social product, one will have: labor received = 0.7 labor provided, *for all*

between the individual producer's contribution and recompense [*r tribution*]: both are "the same quantum of labor under two different forms"<sup>51</sup>—as it does over the relationships *among* producers: all are subject to the same quantitative or numerical rule. Both aspects are summarized in Marx's phrase, "the equality consists in the fact that labor serves as *common measure*" [T/E: cf. *ibid.*].

Such labor, which "serves as *common measure*," is the Substance of Value in *Capital*. Distribution in this "first phase" nevertheless also occurs in accordance with a Proto-Value, *axia*—which is Labor-Value, period ("exchange of equivalents"). For, the latter still appears as the necessary "*common measure*," foundation for the universal commensurability of the productive contributions and of the distributed objects.

It is this *axia*, Labor-Value as Proto-Value, that Marx rejects as foundation for distribution in the "higher phase" of communist society. For, this arithmetic equality is still inequality ("in truth," he could have added), and "right," *qua* (arithmetically) equal, *is* unequal.

This *equal* right...*is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right.* By its nature, right can consist only in the employment of an equal measure for all [Aristotle: "the law treats individuals as equals"]; but unequal individuals (and they would not be distinct if they were not unequal) [Aristotle: "totally other and nonequal"] are measurable by an

---

*producers.*

<sup>51</sup>T/E: This phrase placed in quotation marks is perhaps Castoriadis's paraphrase of the previous quotation in the same paragraph about "the same quantum of labor" rather than strictly a new quotation.

equal measure only insofar as one considers them from one and the same point of view, insofar as one looks at them from a unique and *determinate* angle [Aristotle: “they must therefore be equalized...one must measure in employing a certain unit”]; for example, in our case, solely as laborers, abstracting from all the rest [T/E: *ibid.*, p. 320]. [Aristotle: “every law is universal, but there are subjects on which it is not possible to pronounce oneself universally.”]

Arithmetic equality, says Marx, is inequality inasmuch as it is *abstract* (therefore also partial), inasmuch as individuals can be considered “equal” only if one places oneself at a sole and unique point of view (here, labor—but the same would go for any other one)—therefore, “in truth,” in *no longer* considering them as *individuals*. In particular, taking into account only their labor—positing labor as *axia*, Value as Proto-Value—remunerating individuals *according to* their contribution to production (“length” and “intensity” of their labor) is possible only if one disregards the following self-evident facts: the same quantum of labor does not signify the same thing for each individual (there is by nature an inequality of their “productive capacity”), the same quantum of goods received does not bring the same satisfaction (the needs of individuals are different). In addition and above all: to the extent that, through their labor, men are posited as “equal” to the objects (produced and received), they *are* still *as* objects in the “first phase” of communism.

In truth, from the beginning to the end of his career Marx would never cease to repeat what Aristotle had posited as the fundamental given of the question of the exchange that is constitutive of society, that individuals are “totally other and nonequal,” and he would do so each time he did not fall under the sway of his own fetishism for economics as a

“science.” As early as the *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, political economy was accused of dealing only with means and abstractions; the theme returns frequently in the *Grundrisse*, and even appears, in places, in *Capital*; finally, it would furnish the basis for the response Marx attempted to give, in 1875, in the “Critique of the Gotha Program,” to the question of “equitable distribution”—namely, to the question Plato and Aristotle (and every society in which political conflict has become explicit) raise about justice. And, whether it is a matter of exchange or of distributive justice, Aristotle (and already Plato) posits as indisputable and undisputed postulate that one must *equalize* and that genuine equalization is not and cannot be arithmetic, but geometric, in other words, proportionality. This postulate is just as indisputable and undisputed for Marx: individuals are “naturally unequal”—and they must be equalized. To begin with, he thinks, one can equalize them only by means of labor—and that seems to him “still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it (communist society) emerges” [T/E: *ibid.*, p. 319]; but such equality is still not satisfactory (it contains some “defects” [T/E: *ibid.*, p. 320]), *because it is not yet equal enough*.<sup>52</sup> Genuine equality is the kind that, because it takes into account the “natural” inequality of individuals, allows one to overcome it in and through proportionality: to each *according*

---

<sup>52</sup>Marx is saying: *As soon as capitalism is overthrown*, what is needed is equality in the sense that each (and everyone) receives as remuneration what he has in effective actuality furnished as labor. Yet such equality is still unsatisfactory, because abstract, arithmetic, juridical, bourgeois; one must go further and find an equality that would truly be equality. The bureaucracy’s sycophants, particularly the Trotskyists, present him as saying: Equality appertains to bourgeois right, therefore—(with the implication: it is of no interest?).

to his needs. It is in this way that, responding to the question of “equitable distribution,” Marx gives (for “economic” goods) concrete form to the Aristotelian idea of *equity*, “justice and better than justice”—equality and better than equality.

Whence comes, then, this indisputable and undisputed idea of equality? Why does Aristotle accept without hesitation the (current) idea that “the just is the equal” and why does Marx, after having criticized the expression *equitable distribution*, nonetheless try to resolve the problem of distribution by formulating the law of a truly equal, that is to say equitable, distribution? Why, faced with the natural and social fact of nonequality, do both feel themselves gripped by the exigency to overcome it, positing genuine equality, for the first, as end of justice and, for the other, as end of (pre-?)history?

~

Let us linger a bit longer over Marx’s “solution.” In order that right might cease to be a right of inequality (abstract universal rule), says Marx—while, as always, making of his political project a historical forecast and while positing his own exigency as law of the “higher phase” of communist society—each’s contribution and recompense must be proportional to *what he is*, to what he is concretely, as singular individual, and not exemplar of the category *laborer* or *consumer*. Now, Prosper Enfantin’s formula, which Marx takes up here—“From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”—is quite evidently an attempt to respond to the problem posed by Aristotle: it achieves distributive justice as geometric proportionality. For contributions:

$$\frac{\textit{contribution of A}}{\textit{abilities of A}} = \frac{\textit{contribution of B}}{\textit{abilities of B}}$$

For distribution:

$$\frac{\textit{consumption of A}}{\textit{needs of A}} = \frac{\textit{consumption of B}}{\textit{needs of B}}$$

It *seems*, furthermore, to be the *privileged* solution to that problem. For, the question of “measure” (which in truth is insoluble, as Aristotle had seen) seems to have been eliminated—each individual positing or, better, *becoming his own* “measure.” And, as that holds for all, the rule or law is *at once* social and individual, universal and concrete. It is more and better than justice; it is straight off *equity*. A and B (and all the others) receive, *as to themselves, according to their needs*—and furnish, *as to themselves, according to their abilities*. Each and everyone posits his own “measure” and *is* this “measure.” The rule is the same for all, without there resulting a numerical pseudoequality. Individuals are equal, in and through the eventual quantitative inequality of what they “receive,” since they all receive enough to satisfy their needs, and of that they are themselves the best judges. Likewise, they are the best judges of the labor they furnish, since “labor has become not only a means of life but *life’s prime want* (emphasis added [T/E: *ibid.*; Castoriadis’s French has: “le premier *besoin de la vie*,” with *besoin* normally—though not in the standard translation of Marx used here—translating into English as “need”]).

The solution seems privileged from the practical standpoint: if each receives enough to satisfy his needs (and can freely satisfy his “need” for work), one will have finished with the “battles and challenges.” No one would challenge the

sharing since each would be, by construction, “satisfied.” It seems to be privileged also from the theoretical or logical standpoint: the sole solution to the question of distribution—of distributive justice—that reconciles the universality of the rule with taking concrete situations fully into account. Thus does it seem to correspond to *logos*, and to *logos* alone, and to “resolve” the social problem while boiling it down to its logical essence. Everything happens as if one had asked oneself: Under what conditions, independent of every particular institution of society, and therefore also of every *axia*, could a particular Proto-Value, the fundamental problematic relationship of exchange implicitly formulated by Aristotle be given concrete form in an indisputable manner? And as if one had finally found the answer in contribution according to abilities and distribution according to needs.

Obviously, this solution presupposes a determinate response to the question of the division between the participable and the shareable as well as to the question of the initial sharing out: it is grounded on a “distribution...of the material conditions of production” that makes of the latter a “cooperative property of the workers themselves.”<sup>53</sup> In this way, Marx is responding to the questions underlying Aristotle’s text: the boundary between the participable and the shareable (in the economic domain) and that between means

---

<sup>53</sup>“Critique of the Gotha Program,” p. 325. It is to be noted that Marx affirms, in the same paragraph, that the “distribution of the means of consumption follows on its own” [T/E: translation slightly altered] once the distribution of the conditions of production, which characterizes “the mode of production itself,” is defined; and that Marx has just explained at length that to *the same* “distribution of the conditions of production” (the “cooperative property of the workers themselves”) will correspond *two* essentially different modes of distribution of the means of consumption (that of the “first phase” and that of the “higher phase” of communist society).

of production and objects of (“personal”) consumption; the equality in the sharing is geometric proportionality; the criterion, the *axia* that grounds this sharing, is “needs” (including labor inasmuch as it has become the “prime want”). Obviously, too, it presupposes still something else: at once a thoroughgoing sociological/anthropological change (disappearance of individuals’ subordination to the division of labor and of “the antithesis of mental and physical labor,” labor having become “life’s prime want,” “all-round development of the individual” [T/E: a “universal flourishing of individuals,” to translate from the French])—and, concomitantly, “abundan[ce].” It may be asked to what extent this “solution” to the problem does not amount to an elimination of the conditions under which there is a problem, and whether Marx’s “answer” does not in truth signify that the sole way to resolve the question of justice (that is to say, of politics) is to create the conditions for this question no longer to be posed. Does the *apparently* “unassailable” character of Marx’s answer not come from its *mythical* content? Is what he is aiming at to “cross...in its entirety...the narrow horizon of bourgeois right” or is it, rather, to cross beyond right, period—which is what he does indeed affirm *expressis verbis* in several places—to resorb law totally into individuals’ effectively actual behavior, to eliminate any gap between the private and the public as well as between instituting society and instituted society, to return to a (supernatural) naturalness of man, who, no longer being enslaved by “abstraction,” would become immediately a concrete universal, namely, in Marx’s own expression, “total man”?<sup>54</sup> It is not possible, here, to discuss this question for its

---

<sup>54</sup>T/E: In the *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

own sake.<sup>55</sup> Yet it must strongly be emphasized that the question of the possibility of a radical revolution and of an explicit self-institution of society must not be confused with the question of the possibility of a society without explicit institutions.

A single, truly cardinal point requires some additional discussion. Behind Marx's "logical" and "ultimate" solution, there is still a *particular* choice of an *axia* that is in itself neither justifiable nor theorizable—itsself flowing from a particular metaphysical thesis about man as "need," including (in his *telos*) as labor being "prime want." Even if what Marx is saying in the "Critique of the Gotha Program" concerns only the contribution to society's labor and the distribution of the "means of consumption" (about which "it was in general a mistake to make a fuss" [T/E: *ibid.*, p. 321]), the *axia*, the Proto-Value *according to* which this contribution and this distribution are to be made, is *need*. Yet, where Aristotle was positing need (*chreia*) as that which "holds the whole society together" (*sunechei, summenei*), for Marx it is a matter of the need of *each*: to *each*, according to *his* needs. Each is "measure" of his ("own") needs—he is his good and just (and sole) measure. The individual is the judge thereof; the individual *is* the judge. What, then, is the origin, the nature, the content of those needs? Can one thus refer to the needs of "each," take them as foundation for and criterion of his contribution and recompense, without positing the individual's "satisfaction" as society's end, without, especially, positing that man is defined and defines himself through "his" needs *and* that he can define them all by

---

<sup>55</sup>I have done so in the subsection "'Communism' in its Mythical Sense," from "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (*S. ou B.*, 39 [March 1965]: 35-40), now translated in *IIS*, 110-14.

himself, as an individual—in other words, without postulating a trans- or metahistorical, a trans- or metasocial *phusis* of man, which would leave no doubt about the nature and legitimacy of “*his*” needs? Is this not to assume that these “needs” are fixed and definite, or develop in accordance with a naturalness (a “universal flourishing”) about which there is nothing to say? Is this not to assume that they are by definition indisputable, mutually compatible—good? Are needs *phusei* or *nomōi*, natural or instituted? If they are—as they are, trivialities excepted—*nomōi*, if every need is socially instituted, what does it mean, even when it is a matter of the “means of consumption,” “to *each* according to *his* needs”? This phrase is devoid of meaning. As is meaningless the phrase, “from *each* according to *his* abilities”—since these “abilities” [*capacités*] are capacities for social labor (and not, for example, genetically determined brute muscular force) only as *created* by society by means of the individual’s training. Contemporary American, French, Russian, and Chinese societies create among the children of the dominant classes the “needs” for a private airplane, a Saint-Tropez villa, a dacha, and so on; to each according to *his* needs? Likewise, they create among assembly-line workers the “ability” to make the same gesture at an exhausting pace eight or nine hours a day—and, among the inhabitants of the Gulag or of the Chinese camps, the “ability” to labor fourteen or sixteen hours per day at a temperature of  $-20^{\circ}$  while eating practically nothing: from each, according to *his* abilities?

The question of what needs and abilities society is to create, starting from what and by what means, and for what it is to train individuals, is an ineliminable one. It occupies a central place in the works of the philosophers of *eidos* and of *phusis*, Plato and Aristotle: the *Republic*, the *Laws*, and the *Politics* never stop talking about it. Paradoxically, it is erased in the work of the philosopher of history—Marx. Considered

from the standpoint of justice, the social creation of individuals' needs and abilities is *paideia*, the "training of individuals toward/for the community," of which Aristotle speaks, and which, with just cause, he identifies with the question of total justice, in other words, once again, the question of *politics* as bearing on the overall institution of society. Granted, while the needs and the abilities of each are, first of all and above all, what society has created in him as needs and abilities, to this social imposition are opposed—more exactly, *can* be opposed, starting at a moment and by means of a process of historical becoming—the aims of the individual, itself a social institution but an institution that is the transformation of a singular and ultimately irreducible core: the psyche. If this opposition arises—as it has arisen for a long time in so-called *historical* societies—the reconciliation of these two terms can never be spontaneous and automatic. And this, *too*, is what gives, for us, concrete form to the question of total justice and of politics. We cannot find, in individuals that would be said to be already fully determined before any socialization, an answer to the question of justice, since it is absurd to believe that individuals define "their" needs and "their" abilities; likewise is it absurd to believe (despite the efforts of Stalin and Mao to demonstrate the contrary) that the totalitarian State, disguised as the "people" or "society," can define these for them indefinitely and fully. The question of the coexistence of these two terms has to be confronted for its own sake; it does not allow itself to be dissolved in the myth of a society that would be the immediate reconciliation of all with each and of each with himself. There will always remain the question of total justice, of the forming of individuals, of *paideia* in the vastest and deepest sense of the term, of the socialization of the psyche, which will never be resolved automatically and spontaneously by any "universal

flourishing” of individuals, since any sort of flourishing can exist only by means of the social fabrication of the individual. And whatever the state of society’s “abundance,” there will always remain the question of distributive justice, of the definition of the shareable and of its sharing, since there will always be a question of how to delimit the individual sphere, of right and of the rights of the individual correlative to its own life and to the means granted it to live that life, and a positing of rules relative to the attribution to each of his own body and of a sphere of autonomous activity. Immense is the distance separating the idea of a society in which men would not kill one another for a few francs from the idea of a society in which the needs and desires of each and all would spontaneously harmonize; it is the distance separating a historical political project from an incoherent fiction.

Upon this occasion, the deep-seated antimony dividing Marx’s thought may again be observed. It would obviously be false to say that Marx thinks human needs as “natural”: he knows and affirms many times their “historical” character. And yet, *he can do nothing with this idea*. He *cannot* take it into account each time the category of need is to be utilized: neither when it comes to his analysis of the capitalist economy, which is conducted as if fixed and stable needs could be posited and, for example, could define once and for all a working-class “standard of living” (with such a definition, the idea that “labor-power” is a commodity goes up in smoke); nor, as we have just seen, when it comes to the “higher phase” of communist society, where the “needs” of each become, without question, the criterion for an equitable distribution; nor, finally, when it comes to history considered as a whole, where everything seems to unfold as if men were laboring in order to satisfy better and better and more and more some needs given once and for all—without which there could never be a question of “abundance.”

~

Marx comments Aristotle as if Aristotle had proposed to resolve the quantitative question of “exchange-value.” The question Aristotle poses to himself, however, is much deeper and goes much further—and it is a question Marx at times believes he can eliminate by referring to the “laws of history,” wherein he is obviously mystifying himself. Aristotle’s question is the *political* question, the riddle of the foundation of the political community, of society—*koinōnia* or *polis*—as creation of social individuals (*paideia*), as justice (*dikaiosunē*), as exchange (*allagē*), as indissociability of the three, a foundation where the question of fact (*quid facti*) and the question of right (*quid juris*) allow no easy separation, either at the origin or at the end, where *phusis* and *nomos*, nature/spontaneous finality/norm/life regulating itself in accordance with its eternal destination, on the one hand, and mutable, contingent, arbitrary convention/institution, on the other, can be neither identified with each other nor absolutely separated from and opposed to each other. It is man’s *phusis* that makes it that he lays down *nomoi*; it is in and through his *phusis* that he is a political animal. Yet, too, every *polis* implies a particular *nomos*; the *politeia*, the constitution/institution of *all* existing cities, including even the one Aristotle considered to be “the best by nature” (*phusei hē aristē*) and about which he affirms that it is “everywhere the same” (except that it nowhere exists), contains and will always contain some purely conventional *nomima* (see 5.7.1134b18-1135a7). Likewise, language *is* in and through man’s *phusis*—but its elements are “significant by convention” (*kata sunthēkēn*).<sup>56</sup> Likewise, as concerns *technē*.

---

<sup>56</sup>*De Interpretatione* 2.16a19.

That man would be in *technē* “by nature,” one could have no doubt; man is naturally an artificer—and artificial. What, however, is *technē*? “*Technē* either imitates nature or perfects what nature is incapable of accomplishing.”<sup>57</sup> Might *technē* be repetition of nature, instrument nature gives itself in order to imitate itself (why?)—or else in order to accomplish, through man, its own ends, which it cannot itself perfect? However, what man accomplishes by means of *technē* “serves” only man; does it serve him *qua* natural being? When men perfect weapons and the *technē* of war; when they fill the city with all those “inutilities” that are “bulwarks and naval shipyards,” as Plato said;<sup>58</sup> when they transform necessary exchange into unnecessary *chrematistics* [T/E: *Politics* 1258a14-15], the activity of unlimited acquisition ruled by an “endless desire”<sup>59</sup>—an art that is squarely *against* nature (and which is *vain*, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.2.1094a21—whereas “nature makes nothing in vain” [T/E: *Politics* 1253a9]); when they invent musical instruments and modes that Aristotle, after Plato, criticizes and wants to exclude from the *paideia* of youth;<sup>60</sup> and when, finally, they commit these “important and perfect acts” [T/E: *Poetics* 1.6.1449b24-25] named *parricide*,

---

<sup>57</sup>*Physics* 2.8.199a15-17.

<sup>58</sup>T/E: See Plato *Gorgias* 519a, translating here Castoriadis’s French. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) translates this passage as follows: “these statesmen of old... have filled the city with harbors and dockyards and walls and [tribute] revenues and similar rubbish.” Castoriadis’s *inutilités* (“rubbish” in the *Collected Dialogues*) reads as *phluariōn* (foolishness, nonsense) in the original.

<sup>59</sup>*Politics* 1.9.1258a2.

<sup>60</sup>*Politics* 8.6 and 8.7.

*fratricide, infanticide, incest, massacre of innocent prisoners,* and which this *technē* that is tragic poetry “imitates”—are they “natural” beings?

Man is *phusei* and he is naturally a political animal. And the city is *phusei* and “naturally” precedes the individual man<sup>61</sup> (it is *phusei...proteron* [T/E: *Politics* 1.2.1253a25]). One should therefore be able to define *the* city that is, in its specific constitution/institution, in its *politeia* and its *nomos*, truly “natural” or “best by nature,” but that is truly not possible. Even more: this natural city, *if* the city is “by nature,” ought to *be* in effective actuality the real city in the great majority of cases—just as the “normal” man is the rule, the “pathological” man the exception. Now, the *Politics* knows and shows, once again, that this is absolutely false. All cities are far from the “best by nature”; the foundation of their constitution/institution, the *axia* that grounds their justice, differs a great deal from pure and simple, or absolute, justice;<sup>62</sup> all are in agreement about the exigency of justice and of proportional equality but never achieve it;<sup>63</sup> while all constitutions include “something just, they are, absolutely, in error”<sup>64</sup> because the *axia* they posit always has a partial validity, but they transform it into *axia* as such.

What, then, would be the *axia* that would have an absolute (*haplōs*) validity? Without any doubt: virtue itself, total virtue—which coincides, as has been seen, with total justice. Yet precisely in the case of virtue there is a brutal

---

<sup>61</sup>*Politics* 1.2.1253a1ff., 1.2.1253a19ff., and 1.2.1253a29-30.

<sup>62</sup>*Politics* 3.9.1280a9-12 and 3.13.1283b27ff.

<sup>63</sup>*Politics* 5.1.1301a25-28.

<sup>64</sup>*Politics* 5.1.1301a35-36.

separation between the two sides of *phusis*: the norm/finality and the norm/predominant effective actuality, the *eidōs* as *telos* and the *telos* as tendency or immanent and spontaneous push. Every being *is* insofar as in being it actualizes what it was to be (*to ti ēn einai*), insofar as it fulfills its destination. In man, however, the *ti ēn einai* is shattered. Its two moments, the indissociability of which forms the core of Aristotle's ontology, an indissociability that ensures that every thing *is* only in being *what* it is, that is to say, "what it was to be," that the being of a thing *is* its *eidōs*, that is to say, its *telos*, its end, its eternal destination—these two moments are dissociated in man. Virtue is man's *telos*, his "natural end," but it is not "natural" in the sense that man would attain it "most often" (*hōs epi to polu*)<sup>65</sup> and spontaneously. Almost every horse, *qua* horse, fulfills the *telos* of the horse; almost no man truly fulfills his virtue. And of course, virtue does not "grow" (*phusei*) among men;<sup>66</sup> virtue has to be created by *paideia*, that is to say, by the fundamental institutions of the city. Thus, man's *phusis/telos* is conditioned by the *nomos* of the city. *What* is the virtue that thus has to be created, what is the *telos* of man? Those are questions to which the *Ethics* and still more the *Politics* respond: *ho de logos hēmin kai ho nous tēs phuseōs telos*, "logos and nous are the end of nature for us men."<sup>67</sup> But *how* can the institution of the city fulfill this end, starting from what, and by what means—this question remains open at the end of the intricacies [*dédales*] of the unfinished *Politics* and undoubtedly it would remain so in any

---

<sup>65</sup>T/E: This Aristotelian phrase is to be found at *Metaphysics* 6.2.1027a21 and *Posterior Analytics* 87b20.

<sup>66</sup>See, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1.1103a19.

<sup>67</sup>*Politics* 7.15.1334b14-15.

case, were it only for the following reason (already known by Plato): the creation of virtue by the institution of the city presupposes *itself*, since it presupposes that virtue is already created in effective actuality as aim of total justice capable of being realized in the institutor—whether that be the “legislator” or the people.

This bursting of the ontological determination of man and of the city, this impossibility of saying either that every *nomos* is *phusei* or that there is no *phusis* of *nomos* (and of the city), traces the limit, the boundary, of Aristotle’s thought, of Greek thought, and, in the main, of Western thought.

~

Aristotle thinks starting from *phusis*: in the bundle of the term’s significations, what really matters for us here is the logical/ontological *organization* of the being and of the beings it intends, and particularly the relationship it posits between determination and indetermination (*peras/apeiron*) and the conception of this determination. What is the type of this organization, and why can it be said that in this regard Western thought—Hegel and Marx included—has never truly exited from the Aristotelian horizon? As Aristotle constantly repeats, nature is end; nature makes nothing “in vain” (*matēn*). Makes nothing in vain: makes nothing “without reason,” “without cause.” “Cause” here is “final”—but at this level of consideration, the distinction between the “final” and the “causal” has strictly no importance.<sup>68</sup> The final cause *determines* the organization of what is and grounds its being; it is the final cause that renders an account of and a reason for how it is and “why” (= *for what*) it is such as it is; it ensures

---

<sup>68</sup>See ch. 4 of [IIS](#).

that it *is* in being *what* it is, what it was to be. It determines the necessary linkage of means and ends—which necessarily is instrumented in a linkage between causes and effects. This linkage is itself determined by the push, the tendency of *phusis* toward its likening to *nous*: *nous-theos*, God-thinking, thought thinking itself and, as such, absolutely *separate*, *absolute* from the world. God, who does not act in the world, and yet acts in a sense on the world, insofar as he magnetizes it or, rather, insofar as the world is drawn magnetically toward him. This magnetization, nature’s *eros* for the *nous-theos*, is a tendency to draw as closely as possible to *nous*, to “resemble” it to the greatest extent possible, to become as much as possible *like* the *nous*. This is also the end proposed to human life, the highest rung of *phusis*, since “our end is *logos* and *nous*,” since we are to “divinize ourselves as much as possible” (*eph’ hoson endechetai athanatizein*).<sup>69</sup> It is this tendency that renders *eros* thinkable: *phusis* is thinkable insofar as it is *eros* of thought.

Yet *phusis* is *eros* of thought—not thought. Insofar as it is this *eros*, it is determinate—it is thinkable, and intelligible, for us. It is insofar as it is this *eros* that it is finality, *eidōs*, determinate destination, *ti ēn einai*. Yet it would not be *phusis* were it *only* that. Now, it is also essentially something else: matter, movement, alteration, indefiniteness, indeterminacy. Every *phusis* includes some matter, some movement, some “potentiality,” some “power to be otherwise”—if not, it would be God, thought thinking itself, pure act, immutability. Thereby, Aristotle, after Plato, in a manner that is at once profoundly other and profoundly analogous, manages to arrange for both an indeterminacy of what “physically” is—of all that is outside of absolute,

---

<sup>69</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7.1177b33.

separate *nous*—and an ontological foundation for the limits of human knowledge and for the existence of *error*. To the extent that *phusis* “is never without matter,” there is “in itself” an indeterminacy of what is, and “for us” error. Yet once this essential limitation is posited, there is no longer any problem on the level of principle; one must, and one can, each time know the kind and degree of “exactitude” the thing under consideration and the corresponding discourse include (cf. *supra*). Such indeterminacy also affects, of course, not only our knowledge but our acting: “the matter of the things acted upon” includes an essential indeterminacy since simultaneously it is “matter” and has to do with “what could also be otherwise.”<sup>70</sup> Conversely, in positing matter as indeterminacy, Aristotle again manages to arrange for, on a profound level, a space for action, human making/doing as *praxis* and *poiēsis*: both do indeed rest on the fact that *not everything is* determined in what it is, that there is some indeterminacy and something “objectively” possible. We can act because we are *in phusis* as matter, because we are ourselves part of *phusis*, *we are phusis*.

Yet here Aristotle finds again the other problem of principle, which is much graver. Human affairs are not simply indeterminate *qua* “physical” (affected by matter like all of nature). From one side, they are the *opposite* of *phusis*: interminably and essentially, they involve *nomos*, as they involve *technē*; they are, in a sense, *nomos* and *technē*. The city is *phusei*—by nature, but the city and each city is *nomos* and *this nomos*. Even the perfect, completed, finished city, the “unique” city “that alone is everywhere the best according to nature,” will be *that* only in and through *nomos*; it will be just—and the just is “the legal and the equal” and there is

---

<sup>70</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics* 6.6.1140b31ff.

neither any legality nor any equality that is “natural.”

Aristotle does not evade this ultimate division, *phusis* and *nomos*; he confronts it, but he cannot “surmount” it. That is why, faced with this division, he vacillates—as Marx, in another manner but for deeply homologous reasons, vacillates. Aristotle *has to* separate *phusis* and *technē*—and he has to not separate them absolutely, for then there would no longer be for *technē* and its products any status, any ontological site; were *technē* not anchored in “imitation” or “perfection” of *phusis*, it would be *nothing*. Insofar as *technē* essentially *exceeds* nature, it remains unassimilable within Aristotelian ontology (and within all inherited ontology). For the same reason, he *has to* separate *phusis* and *polis*—and he has to not separate them absolutely. Insofar as the city is *never*, in effective actuality, what it had to be *physei* as “the best,” and insofar as, quite to the contrary, its construction is always, absolutely speaking, in error, it is unclear what it can *be*. Nor is it clear what *nomos* can be—starting from the moment when it is not *simply*, nor “most of the time,” a means to “our natural end, for us men, *logos* and *nous*.” If the differences between *nomoi* were minor, accidental, exceptional, one could possibly disregard them or assign them to some sort of “matter” of political being/existent. They are not so, however. It is in and through its particular *nomos* that each city is what it is. *Nomos* is not matter—and neither is it *eidos* or *phusis*. What is it, then? What is this indeterminacy of *nomos* in relation to the natural end of man—*logos* and *nous*—which is not mere “matter,” movement, “potential” of human affairs but expresses itself through the *instituted alterity* of *nomoi*? There would have to be a nature of law and natural law—and, despite certain formulations people have over the centuries rushed toward, Aristotle cannot bring himself to affirm this, to affirm fully, categorically, unreservedly, or unrestrictedly, that *nomos* is *phusei* or that

there is a *phusis* of *nomos*. For, he knows that there is here a contradiction in terms—that is so, in any case, in the Greek language. For the being of *nomos*, there is no ontological site.

One can in this way understand the necessity of the aporias of the fifth book of the *Ethics*—which continue on in the *Politics*. There is *one* city that is *everywhere* best by nature—and *no* real city is this city.<sup>71</sup> There is an *axia*—virtue—*according to* which the initial sharing out is to be done—though this *axia* cannot in truth ground sharing, for it cannot be thought as (logically and really) *prior* to the *politeia*, to the constitution/institution of the city. This *axia*, virtue, can be only through *paideia*, the training of individuals with a view to common affairs—itself the core of society’s institution/constitution. It is therefore *nomos*, the institution of the city, that is to *create* virtue (*poiētikē aretēs*)—virtue that is nevertheless man’s “natural end.” And, in order for this *paideia* to be genuine *paideia*, the appropriate institution of the city would have to be *posited*—posited by whom, starting from what, by what means, and whence would he himself draw his virtue? In order for there to be just distribution, there needs to be a comparability of individuals as to the *axia*, the Proto-Value of society—but virtue is not measurable, nor, more generally, are individuals comparable other than by convention. In order to fill in this lacuna and also for deeper reasons, an appeal is made to evident and enigmatic *chreia*, but *chreia* itself is that which, each time, it is as instituted and, in itself, it is not “measurable.” It, too, has to be made up for by a conventional—that is, instituted—equalization, that is, an equalization that exceeds all *phusis* of man and of the

---

<sup>71</sup>Although Aristotle does not go so far as to say, as Plato did in the *Republic*, that all effectively actual cities are “diseased”—that is, pathological.

city. There is, finally and above all, the *explicit destruction* of any possibility of a “rational” response in the following phrase, wherein all the aporias are to be found in condensed form, and which I shall leave without commentary:

Therefore, there is neither just nor unjust in the political; for, these *are* according to the law, and they *are* for those for whom there is, by nature, law; these are the ones for whom there exists equality as to the fact of governing and being governed (5.6.1134b13-15)

Aristotle’s greatness—and one aspect of his importance for us—lies also in the fact that he takes on the division and contradiction tearing at the Greek universe and that he agrees to engage in this hand-to-hand struggle with the ultimate questions which not only does he not leave dormant but whose endless creases and folds he doggedly delves into, even though they exceed the means at his disposal to think them and even though they ultimately burst apart his ontological framework.

~

In appearance, we are quite far from chapter 1 of *Capital*, from Marx, and from the questions that are his—and ours. Are we really so? Marx himself does not arrive at a decision as to whether Labor-Value is transhistorical Substance/Essence, a particular phenomenalization by capitalism of this Substance/Essence, or Appearance that is created by capitalism and to which its “reality” would be reduced. Yet what is there, behind this vacillation, if not the vacillation over the *phusis* of man, of society, and of history,

the question of whether there can be a question of *phusis* in this domain? Does not Marx want to show that a certain *phusis* of man and of history has to lead them to their “end,” to their predetermined *telos*, communism? Is he not trying to find in the proletariat the “legislator” that, through its own *historical nature* as universal class having no particular interests to set off to advantage [*faire valoir*], *would set off to advantage* the essence/human nature of man, such as it will undoubtedly manifest itself when “labor will become life’s prime want”? Is he really up to the task of stepping away from the oscillation between what he knows and what, in passing but clearly, he says about needs as being defined socially and historically—and, on the other hand, his own need [*sa nécessité*] to postulate fixed, stable, determinate needs in order to be able to speak of the capitalist economy as well as of communist society? Can the phrase “to each according to his needs” take on meaning in some other way than by reference to a nature (and a “good” nature) of the individual man, whose needs would at once be determined without any (individual or social) arbitrariness *and* be spontaneously compatible with his sociality? Does he not see technique in its total ambiguity, as at once historical creation and natural manifestation of man? Is there not in his work—and not only in his youthful writings—an enigmatic “naturalness” of man—complementary to a just as enigmatic humanity/rationality of nature? Is not this the deep thinker of society, the man who insisted the most on the irreducibility of the social sphere [*du social*] and denounced “Robinsonades,” who went so far as to write, in his foremost work, “The life-process of society...does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan” (*Produkt frei vergesellschafteter Menschen unter deren bewußter planmäßiger Kontrolle*; *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 84)—in

other words, who went so far as to posit the future society as a product of the *free association* of men and the prior sociality of those clearly “unfree” men as a sort of “mystical veil”?

One could go on. But that suffices to show what is at issue here. The true “historical bound” (which is not simply “historical” in a contingent sense of this term) of Aristotle as well as of Marx is the question of the institution. It is the impossibility of inherited thought to take the social-historical into account as a mode of being not reducible to what is “known” from elsewhere. This impossibility does not appear among dull-minded authors—who do indeed “reduce” the social-historical to something else (to “nature,” to “structure,” to “desire,” etc.). It appears among the great ones—and precisely in the form of antinomy, of internal division of thought. Thus does it trace the limits of great Greek thought, as well as that of Hegel and of Marx—and thereby, of inherited thought, conceived of as theory.

The question of the institution and of the social-historical becomes inherited thought’s limit, because and insofar as it is posited within a “purely theoretical” horizon; because and insofar as one wants to give an account of and a reason for the institution such as it is, and to ground in reason the institution as it “ought” to be. The question of the institution, however, far exceeds “theory”; thinking the institution such as it is, as social-historical *creation*, requires that the inherited ontological logical framework be shattered; to propose another institution of society pertains to a *political* project and a *political* aim, which may certainly be discussed and argued over but cannot be “grounded” on any sort of “Nature” or “Reason” (even if they are the “nature” and “reason” of “history”).

To cross this frontier, to go beyond this limit requires that one understand the following “banality”: value (even “economic” value), equality, and justice are not “concepts”

that one could ground, construct (or even destroy, as Marx sometimes wants to do for justice) in and through theory. These are political ideas/significations concerning the institution of society as it could be and as we would like it to be—an institution that is not anchored in a natural, logical, or transcendent order. Men are born neither free nor nonfree, neither equal nor nonequal. *We will them* (we will ourselves) to be free and equal in a just and autonomous society—knowing that the meaning of these terms will never be able to be defined definitively and that the help theory might be able to bring to this task is always radically limited and essentially negative.

So it is with “value” and with “equality,” including in the domain that seems the most “rationalizable” of all, that of the “economy.” We do not have here some “concepts” whose definition an autonomous society could ask for from some theoreticians (as it will be able to ask its engineers to specify the technical methods for building a factory). While I have, for example, been maintaining for twenty-five years that an autonomous society ought to adopt immediately, as regards “recompense,” the absolute equality of all wages, incomes, and so on, this was done neither on the basis of the idea of a natural or any other kind of “equality/identity” among men, nor on the basis of “theoretical” arguments. What such arguments show to a sufficient degree are the incoherency, the fallacies, and the mystifications contained in all alleged theoretical “justifications” (“economic” or otherwise) for an inequality of wages and incomes. The demand for an equality in this domain, however, has an aim and a meaning that far outstrip “economic” considerations. It is a question here of the imaginary significations that hold society together, and of the *paideia* of individuals. *It is a question of destroying economic motivation*, by destroying the “socially objective” conditions for its possibility: the differentiation of incomes.

It is a question of destroying economic “value” as Proto-Value *according to* which society is regulated and functions. And still more: it is a question of destroying the core imaginary signification, in this field, of all so-called *historical* societies: that of a *hierarchy* among men, whatever might be the basis and the mask thereof. Likewise, as concerns “economic calculation” in an autonomous society. While I maintain that such calculation—whose results in any case will have to be subordinated to other, much weightier considerations—will have to be performed on the basis of labor-times and by positing the equivalence of all sorts of labor,<sup>72</sup> that is not only because no other calculative basis stands out as indisputable—rather, all those ones hitherto proposed are fallacious and incoherent—but because it is a question at once of anchoring in real life the destruction of hierarchy and of rendering in the clearest and most intelligible way for everyone the relation between their labor and their consumption. “Equality” and “commensurability” of all sorts of “economic” labor will have to be *instituted* by an autonomous society as instruments of its institution, in order to dethrone the economic and hierarchy, to render its operation more intelligible for everyone, and to facilitate another kind of *paideia* for individuals.

---

<sup>72</sup>See “On the Content of Socialism, II” (*S. ou B.*, 22 [July 1957]: 42-44) [T/E: now in [PSW2](#), 126-27.]

## *Appendix: Potential Errata*

N.B.: Despite having in their possession, for a period of four months, a list of potential *errata* for the first volume in the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series, the Castoriadis Estate, which has a moral obligation to cooperate, and the Association Cornelius Castoriadis, which has a legal obligation, according to its statutes, to cooperate, have not responded to the request to correct and/or to amend this first list and have shown no indication that they will cooperate in examining and confirming or revising *errata* lists for the other five volumes in the series. This, despite the fact that it is standard professional operating procedure, in the case of a translation, to work from such corrected versions of the originals, a process in which the owners of the originals have a clear responsibility. Without the establishment of definitive versions of the French originals, we are unfortunately unable to ensure that the present translations are indeed the best renditions possible.

In order to be fully transparent to the reader, the potential *errata* listed below reference the page numbers of the September 1998 reprint of *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*, the (uncorrected) French source for the present [CLI](#) translation.

[Highlighted version of the French original of Carrefours du labyrinthe, tome 1.](#)

- 9 position = positron
- 18 pensée « le génie = pensée. « le génie
- 22n7 philosophes.... = philosophes...».
- 24 étants) = étants).
- 26 elle-même. et = elle-même, et
- 35n4 Aussi. = Aussi,
- 41 aziomatiquement, = axiomatiquement,
- 42n8 *logoi en halé* = *logoi enuloi*
- 43 l'anormal. = l'anormal ?
- 46 L'impossibilité = l'impossibilité
- 51 n'est pas) = n'est pas).
- 58 *otan touto* = *hotan touto*
- 60n19 mycélium. « = mycélium. »
- 65 Shakespeare. = Shakespeare,
- 66 repérables = repérables.
- 66n25 *G. W.*, X, 171. = *G. W.*, XV, 171.
- 67n26 le chapitre » = le chapitre II
- 69 lointaine = lointaine.

- 75 la possibilité de la vérité et de l'agir juste dépendent toujours = la possibilité de la vérité et de l'agir juste dépend toujours {au singulier}
- 79 création social-historique. et = création social-historique, et
- 81 (*sogennante* et *selbstgennante*) = (*sogenannte* et *selbsternannte*)
- 90n7 Valabréga = Valabrega  
{[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Paul\\_Valabrega](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Paul_Valabrega)}
- 92 « maîtrise » = « maîtrise ».
- 101n18 le mirage...sont...déterminants = le mirage...est...déterminant
- 102 (52) = (42)
- 102n19 langue de bois » = « langue de bois »
- 106 suicide) 23, = suicide) 23.
- 107n24 les ressorts inconscients de leur propre =les ressorts inconscients de leur propre comportement.
- 110n26 Valabréga = Valabrega  
{[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Paul\\_Valabrega](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Paul_Valabrega)}
- 111 L'analyse...avec lui = L'analysé...avec lui
- 113 celui-ci = celui-ci.
- 114  $10^{23}$  secondes... $10^{20}$  secondes... $10^{23}$  ordres de grandeur =  $10^{23}$  secondes... $10^{20}$  secondes...  $10^{23}$  ordres de grandeur
- 123n35 a raison. mais = a raison, mais
- 124 lettre 95). = lettre 99).
- 125 « établi » = « établi »,
- 126 tableaux avoir = tableaux, avoir
- 127 pré /sence= pré- /sence
- 129 casser a la fois = casser à la fois
- 130 à lui = à lui.
- 130 théorie psychanalytique = théorie psychanalytique.
- 131 déterminée<sup>45</sup>, = déterminée<sup>45</sup>.
- 132 secours = secours.
- 133n47 « *désir de l'analyste* = « *désir de l'analyste* »
- 133n47 de manger ses patients de les tuer, = de manger ses patients, de les tuer,
- 136 système de filtrations = système de filiations
- 137 indéfinie. = indéfinie,
- 139 75 à 104 = 79 à 104 {pages inclusives du chapitre 4}
- 140 faces-enfants = fèces-enfants
- 140 réalité repré- = réalité, repré-  
(pensée) = pensée).
- 140 séduire induire = séduire, induire
- 141 déterminis), = déterminés
- 141 « Voici = Voici
- 143 *beinahe hätte Ich gesagt* = *beinahe hätte ich gesagt*

144m54 78 à 104, = 79 à 104, {cf:139}  
147 « déplacement d'object » = « déplacement d'objects »  
147 n'existe. = n'existe,  
149 Découverte et création révolutionnaire, = Découverte et création  
révolutionnaires, {?}  
153 dénonciation de la « Raison » = dénonciation de la « Raison ».  
155 leur *Télévision*. {NOTEZ : Ajout à l'édition anglaise de 1984 (p.  
115, n. 61):}

A booklet published by *le Seuil* and reproducing a text of a TV  
performance by J. Lacan. (Author's note for the English edition.)

**{QUESTION : Pour quelle(s) raison(s), les French Editors  
n'ajoutaient-ils pas cette note ?}**

165 que l'ont dit = que l'on dit {?}  
171 *loges* = *logos*  
173 historique La = historique. La  
174 percep-/tion». *projet*te = percep-/tion...*projet*te  
174 *einai raison*, = *einai, raison*,  
175 vivent. que = vivent, que  
195 synecdoques que = synecdoques, que  
195 Nagasaki plus récemment, = Nagasaki, et plus récemment,  
195 bisphère= biosphère  
199 par vérité mathématique = par vérité mathématique ?  
201 hypothético-déductive une fois = hypothético-déductive : une fois  
204 naïve) » Ce = naïve) ». Ce  
210n12 M. D. Zeh, = H. D. Zeh,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H. Dieter Zeh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._Dieter_Zeh) }

210n12 {Il y manque l'addition de l'auteur à la traduction anglaise. :}  
Author's addition for the 1983 English edition [T/E: i.e., the  
Ryle/Soper translation that appeared the next year]:

This question has come back with renewed force in the last few  
years, following the actual realization of equivalents to the  
famous Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen "mental experiment." The  
results seem, up to now, to support heavily the idea that  
"separability" of physical phenomena is more than doubtful. See,  
e.g., B. d'Espagnat, *À la recherche du réel* (Paris: Gauthiers-  
Vil[ars], 1979).

**{QUESTION : Pour quelle(s) raison(s), les French Editors  
n'ajoutaient-ils pas cette continuation de la note ?}**

212 Freud Hoyle, = Fred Hoyle,  
215 pensable » = pensable ?  
215 prenant - une valeur infinie ; = prenant une valeur infinie ;  
218 « addition » une = « addition », une

- 222 produire celui-ci. = produire celui-ci,  
222 raisons évidentes = raisons évidentes)  
225 théories n'existerait = théories - n'existerait  
229

Ajouter quelque part la note "23a" de l'édition anglaise de 1984 ? Je l'ai ajouté après : "entre science et philosophie est impossible." vers la fin de la page 229 :

T/E: In the Ryle/Soper translation (p. 226), immediately below the original endnote, numbered "23" (here, n. 32) appears an endnote marked "23a," though in the body of the text there is instead here a second callout "23" at the end of the paragraph. In any case, the note reads as follows:

The text, in its present form, was drafted in the autumn-winter of 1970-1971. Since then, work by Lakatos, Feyerabend, Elkana and others (some of which was already published in 1970, but of which I was not aware) has brought to light numerous and important instances in the history of science which, in my view, lend heavy support to the ideas expressed in the text. This is not to say I share in the least the epistemological conclusions of some of the authors mentioned—neither Lakatos' reformed Popperianism (though, judging from his last texts, I believe that Lakatos, had he survived, would have severed his last links with Popper's conceptions); nor Feyerabend's "epistemological anarchism," which is sheer epistemological nihilism and in fact ignores naively the problem of truth. (Footnote [*sic*] added by the author to the 1984 English edition.)

**{QUESTION : Pour quelle(s) raison(s), les *French Editors* n'ajoutaient-ils pas cette note ?}**

232 qu'est-ce donc, ... leur activité scientifique. = qu'est-ce donc, ... leur activité scientifique ?

243 À la fin de la page, ajouter la note suivante, de l'édition anglaise de 1984 ?

T/E: In the Ryle/Soper translation, an endnote "24a" that does not appear in the French original is called out here. Though there is no explicit indication, it seems as if this is another Author's addition to the 1984 English-language translation since a reference provided therein postdates the 1978 *Carrefours* edition. The note reads as follows:

Recent developments in theoretical biology seem to me to be fully situated within the horizon of the questions raised by the text. See, in particular, Henri Atlan, *Entre le cristal et la fumée* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1979); Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *La Nouvelle alliance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); Francisco Varela,

*Principles of Biological Autonomy* (North Holland, NY and Oxford, 1979).

**{QUESTION : Pour quelle(s) raison(s), les *French Editors* n'ajoutaient-ils pas cette note ?}**

- 245 fallacieuse. comme = fallacieuse, comme  
255 psychanalyse des choses = psychanalyse a des choses  
255 puisqu'elle sont = puisqu'elles sont  
263 explicite et = explicite était  
268 propriété = classe, = propriété = classe  
271 propriétés stables les caractères décisaires = propriétés stables, les caractères décisaires  
273 d'une certaine façon = d'une certaine façon,  
278 classe = propriété = classe = propriété  
291 savante. reste = savante, reste  
291 être amener = être, amener  
291 *tek-/tôn.* = *tek-/tôn*,  
292 efficace Le = efficace. Le  
292 *technètuchè* = *technè-tuchè*  
292 *technè* Des = *technè*. Des  
295 la démesure l'anomie = la démesure, l'anomie  
295n7 *Phys.*, B, 8, *ibid.* {*ibid.* = 199 a, 15-17 ? voir la note 5}  
306 vue. et = vue, et  
309 cor-/respond Or = cor-/respond. Or  
309 Leroi-Gouran = Leroi-Gourhan  
310 terme La = terme. La  
317n29 général. et que = général, et que  
317n29 parallèle. de = parallèle, de  
319  $31^9 = 319$   
319 question l'organisation = question -, l'organisation  
321n31 Rem-/part Press = Ram-/parts Press  
321n31 Shuster = Schuster  
323 ses caractéristiques = ces caractéristiques {??}  
325 (*Erscheinung form*) = (*Erscheinungsform*)  
326 (*diese sinnlich verschiedene Dinge*) = (*diese sinnlich verschiedenen Dinge*)  
326 *adanaton* = *adunaton*  
339 *une partie...* sont données = *une partie...* est donnée  
347 ou donc = où donc  
348 vérité l'incomparabi-/lité = vérité, l'incomparabi-/lité  
351 *é panta sanechei*, = *hé panta sunechei*,  
357 *nomô* = *nomôi* {aussi : la note 21, même page, 358, 363, 381, 387, 388, 398 (2 fois) ; voir *Figures du pensable*, p. 140}  
363 politique, ne feraient pas = politique — ne feraient pas

- 364 (IL 6). = (II, 6).
- 365 la Politique = la *Politique*
- 366n27 la cité = la cité.
- 368 participation « égale, = participation « égale »
- 369 reste = restent {au pluriel}
- 370 distribution Le = distribution. Le
- 370 « a est à b *comme...*A est à B. = « a est à b *comme...*A est à B ».
- 370 «A est à B comme a est à b, = «A est à B comme a est à b », {?}
- 370n30 note 34 = note 34.
- 371 blé. des = blé, des
- 372 *boos axios* = *boos axiov*
- 375 qui peu fonder = qui peut fonder
- 376 *metretai to pathos*, = *metrèthèi to pathos*,
- 378 *é hulé tôn praktôn*, = *hé tôn praktôn hulé*,
- 386 (*sumbléta*).. = (*sumbléta*)...
- 389 Protovaleur = Proto-valeur
- 389 convention). = convention.)
- 394 Les deux diviseurs de la version originale de 1978, “besoins de B” et “besoins de A”, sont renversés dans la réédition “besoins de A” et “besoins de B”. Lesquels sont corrects ?
- 398 *selon ses* = selon *ses*
- 401 (*dikalosuné*), = (*dikaïosuné*),
- 403 absolue<sup>47</sup> tous = absolue<sup>47</sup> ; tous
- 403 *ce qu'elle est c'est-a-dire* = *ce qu'elle est, c'est-à-dire*
- 403n47 *Politique*, Γ, IX, I et XII, 19. = *Politique*, Γ, IX, I et XIII, 13. {? Voir 3.13.1283b27ff.}
- 404 (*phyei*) = (*physei*)
- 404n51 *Politique*, Z, XIII, 22. = *Politique*, H, XV, 22. {? Voir : 7.15.1334b14-15}
- 405n53 *Éth. Nic.*, I, VII, 8. = X, VII, ?? . {Voir : 1177b33 }
- 407 comportent la *technè* = comportent la *technè*,