

CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH
Volume 2
HUMAN DOMAINS

by Cornelius Castoriadis*



translated from the French
and edited anonymously
as a public service

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

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

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* Much Castoriadis material has gone out of print and much more remains to be translated into English, publication projects in which T/E is currently engaged. 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*. 1st 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*. 2nd 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).

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CONTENTS

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

KAIROS

Transition	2
The Vacuum Industry	13
Psychoanalysis and Society I	23
Marx Today	40
Psychoanalysis and Society II	55
Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy	71
The "Left" in 1985	82

KOINŌNIA

Reflections on "Development" and "Rationality"	90
Presentation and Response to Critics	121
The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain	148

POLIS

Unending Interrogation	173
The Greek <i>Polis</i> and the Creation of Democracy	202
The Nature and Value of Equality	261

LOGOS

The Discovery of the Imagination	288
Institution of Society and Religion	337
The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy	366
Ontological Import of the History of Science	415
<i>Appendix: Potential Errata</i>	<i>470</i>

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

ASA(RPT) *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today* <http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: October 2010.

CL *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. 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 Insignificancy*. 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-insignificancy.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. 2nd 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.

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^{er} éd. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1981. 285pp. 2^e 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.

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Preface*

Published in 1978, *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe* consisted of texts written between 1968 and 1977 that surrounded, both temporally and thematically, *L'Institution de la société* (1964-65; 1974 [Translator/Editor (hereafter: T/E): and published in 1975; English translation: *The Imaginary Institution of Society* ([IIS](#), 1987; reprinted in 2005))). Those texts had prepared, accompanied, and followed [IIS](#). Coming in a variety of types and sizes, they were vessels for exploring the advanced path while covering the flanks and the rear, complementing the munitions, and supplementing the provisions of the main squadron.

Composed between 1974 and 1985, the present texts play the same role and have the same mission as regards two works I hope to see leave the naval yard soon: *L'Élément imaginaire* and *La Création humaine*. I have been occupied with their construction in my seminars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales since the Spring of 1980.¹

*Originally published as “Préface” in [DH](#), 7-15 (7-17 of the 1999 reprint).

¹French Editors: From an unfinished work, *L'Élément imaginaire* (The imaginary element), the author published only two chapters: “The Discovery of the Imagination,” which appeared in *Libre*, 3 (1978) and which is reprinted below, and “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition” [T/E: a text drafted in 1976-1977 that first appeared in English-language translation in *Thesis Eleven*, 36 (1993) and then in the 1997 edition of [WIF](#) while also appearing in French that same year in *FAF*; now in [CL5](#)]. The materials that were to serve for the elaboration of *La Création humaine* (Human creation) had supplied the content for Castoriadis’s École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales seminars over a period of more than fifteen years. A first volume taken from those seminars appeared in French in 1999 [T/E: and was translated into English as [On Plato’s Statesman](#) in 2002. The first volume in the *Création humaine* series to bear this overall title was *Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique. Séminaires 1986-1987* (2002). The second,

Three texts, which initially I thought that I would include in this collection and which originate from the same veins, ultimately had to be held back, for lack of space. “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, will form the core of a properly psychoanalytic book.² “Temps et création [Time and creation],” part of which had been presented in June 1983 during the “Temps et devenir [Time and becoming]” colloquium at the Cerisy-la-Salle International Colloquium Center, grew greatly in size as it was being worked out; it, too, will have to be added to the waiting list of to-be-published works.³

On the other hand, in the *Kairos* section of the present book, I have decided to reprint those occasional texts, talks,

third, and fourth volumes of *La Création humaine* were published by Le Seuil as *Ce qui fait la Grèce* in 2004, 2008, and 2011.]

²T/E: The Quatrième Groupe, or Organisation psychanalytique de langue française, is the “Fourth Group,” or French-language psychoanalytic organization founded in 1969 by Aulagnier, later Castoriadis’s wife, along with François Perrier et Jean-Paul Valabrega, as a breakaway from Jacques Lacan’s École freudienne de Paris, AKA the “Third Group.” The promised book of “properly psychoanalytic writings” was not published during Castoriadis’s lifetime and still remains unpublished.

³T/E: A “reworked” version of a lecture titled “Time and Creation” was delivered during a “Construction of Time” colloquium at Stanford University before being published, in again reworked form, in French in [MM](#) in 1990. An English-language version appeared belatedly in *Chronotypes: The Construction of Time*, John Bender and David E. Wellbery, eds (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 38-66. The version published in 1997 in [WIF](#) reflected changes in the French and English-language versions. It is now reprinted in [CL3](#).

articles, and interviews given since 1979 that seemed to me to correspond the best to the connotations of this Greek word.⁴

Kairos: a moment of decision, critical occasion, conjuncture wherein what really matters is that something be done or said.

For the most part, these texts formulate political positions I have been led to express during this period.⁵ I initially thought about placing them at the end of the present volume and arranging the sections in decreasing order of abstraction. Upon reflection, a strictly inverse order seemed to me far preferable. I hope that this will allow the reader, who is sometimes wrongly intimidated by philosophical terms, to familiarize herself with a mode of thinking that is essentially the same when faced with the question of the philosophical implications of science and that of democracy

⁴T/E: As explained in the Translator/Editors's Foreword for the present volume, we have not included in this section several texts the French Editors have since reprinted in *EP6*. We hope to include them in the sixth volume of the projected *Political Writings* series.

⁵I have left aside especially a number of interviews granted on the occasion of the publication of *DG* (1981; 2nd ed., rev. and corr., 1983) and some controversies this book has stirred up. To the extent that these interviews updated or developed the argument, they are better placed, on account of their content, in the second volume of this book. [French Editors: *DG*'s second volume never saw the light of day; for a glimpse of the author's ideas about how the Western world has evolved—which was to have formed the second part of the work—see “The Crisis of Western Societies” (1982) and “The Dilapidation of the West” (1991) T/E: both now in [CL4](#). See also a number of texts now published or reprinted in *EP6*; we hope to include these texts in the sixth volume of the projected *Political Writings* series.]

in the Third World, as well as to test, on the concrete level, the pertinence of the ideas being expounded in the theoretical parts.

For, Plato rightly remained in an awkward position [*dans l'embarras*] and asked himself whether the right way [*odos*] was the one from principles [*archai*] or the one that goes toward principles.

This remark by Aristotle⁶ 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*, 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.

And yet, accompanied by a summary delineation of ideas already expressed in the history of philosophy, a schematic sketch of these principles—of these source ideas [*idées mères*], rather—will facilitate, I hope, an understanding of the writings that follow. Here it is.

Creation. In Being/being (*to on*), there arise *other forms*—*new* determinations are posited.

What each time (at each “moment”) *is*, is not fully determined—not to the point of ruling out *other* determinations from arising.

Creation, being, time go together: Being signifies to-be; time and creation require each other.

No relation with theological “creation,” which has,

⁶T/E: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1095a31-32.

generally speaking, been pseudocreation. First, the Same once and for all (or the lightening-quick miracle, after which everything returns to the order of repetition). Next, this pseudocreation is imitation. The Demiurge of the *Timaeus*: producer imitating, “as much as possible” (that is the Greek trace in Plato’s work), the paradigm he has before his eyes, the eternal Living Being, in whose image he fabricates, assembles, gives form to the world. Basically (and inasmuch as it has purported to be “rational”), it is thereupon that Christian theology has attuned itself, in a harmony with—which is, moreover, also a mishearing of—Genesis, which knows only of a *formative* God, not an *ex nihilo* creator.

Theology ceased to be that only with Duns Scotus—perhaps the sole important philosophical innovator since the Greeks. Creation then becomes radically arbitrary no “reason” can be motive for the divine will that is disconnected from all, from a piece, and thereby becomes fully incomprehensible.

(a single long phrase without pause is forever unintelligible, as is said in *Exile*)⁷

For, what could prevent God from making a world, not where the Peano axioms do not hold (mere child’s play), but where the Peano axioms hold *and* $2 + 2 = 5$?

Yet the self-positing of being as to-be is the positing of *determinations*: interminably so, one is left to think.

Henri Bergson saw, and saw well, many things. Yet “creation,” insofar as it can be called that, result of an *élan vital*, effort to be freed of matter; the exclusive

⁷T/E: By Saint-John Perse, III.6.

centering on “life”; intuition attaining pure and unadulterated qualities, opposed simply and crudely to an intelligence doomed to fabrication and to the quantitative; the false, naively absolutized and ontologized antinomy between the discrete and the continuous—all that, and the rest, incomprehension of the essential solidarity that in an infinity of ways unites determination and creation or, another register, ensemblistic-identitarian and poietic.

Still more intractable, then, the aporias of time. There is, in Bergson’s work, no room for the most important creation of all: of meaning and significations. There is discovery of a spiritual reality already there, God, paradoxically almost inevitable conclusion of this *élan vital* prolonged into human history that, finally, attains to “dynamic religion.” Bergson’s spiritualism; despite appearances, unitary ontology; completely egological perspective (and, for all that, perfectly “classical” not to say Cartesian); radical misrecognition of social-historical creation—converging axes of his way and world [*mode et monde*] of thought, without any point of contact with my own.

~

Radical imagination. Pure arising by which, in which, why, and for what ineliminable subjectivity *is* discovery, with difficulty and antinomically, by Aristotle, rediscovered and reocculted by Kant, then mind-blowing [*hallucinante*] mimicry of the same movement by Heidegger at the time of the *Kantbuch* and then nothing and at the same time nothing (nothing in *Being and Time*, schizophrenically written at the same

time)⁸

at the center of all Freud's work, but anonymously
and as if ashamedly

ashamed, all the psychoanalysts still cowards
today not daring to name phantasying
[*phantasmatisation*] as what it is

as one of the arborescences of the radical imagination
of the singular subject

one strives, on the contrary, to cover back over
its importance by calling *imaginary* what
bears this title in high-school psychology
textbooks or, still worse, in Sartre's work

the fictive, the specular, the image in
the mirror, what is not, has no
consistency

nothing would be, nothing is for us without this power
(*dunamis*) of *positing for oneself and before oneself
something*

independently of what, "in itself," can very well be
this thing, *ho pot' estin, whatever it may be, was es
immer sein mag*, and even:

it being well understood that what is thus posited *cannot*, by
definition, and by *hypothesis*, be "what the thing is," but
always a phantasma, a representation

representation *ab ovo*, *Vorstellung*, which in the
decisive cases does not re-present (*vertritt*) anything
is not there in the place of anything, is not the
delegate of anyone or sign of something other
than itself.

⁸T/E: Martin Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929).



Social imaginary: social imaginary : radical imaginary : instituting society. *The social-historical*: till-now unrecognized level of being : self-creation of society as such and of the historical field as such : neither “subject,” nor “thing,” nor “concept.” Power of positing, in and through the anonymous collective, of imaginary significations and of institutions that bear them and that they enliven—the two holding society together, making it be as society and each time as *this-here* society, the two making individuals be as individuals and each time as *these-here* individuals.

Idea discovered, formulated, rendered explicit in
1964-1965

“Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire,”

Socialisme ou Barbarie, nos. 36-40⁹

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. An era of prostitution, then? No, why insult those women? An era that disarms the epithet.

the French Communist Party’s daily speaks of the “national imaginary of our people,” long live historical materialism and proletarian internationalism

the major evening newspaper headlines an article “The Imaginary: A Rising Value,” and this is not on the financial page, you understand, but in the culture section

⁹T/E: “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (1964-1965), now translated as the first half of [*IIS*](#).

a history professor, according to whom one can affirm anything whatsoever about history and the opposite

he nonetheless writes history books after having, like a mediocre high-school student, dealt with the question of whether a certain, upon my word, well-known people believed in its, upon my word, equally well-known myths

certainly without ever asking himself what *believing in myths* might mean and whether that might have changed between Homer and Pausanias

speaks in grave tones of the *constitutive imaginary*¹⁰

certainly while asking himself still less what this imaginary could indeed constitute or why, since it is incontestably historical, one cannot just as well call it *disconstitutive animation*

a Parisian university creates a research center on the imaginary

or something like that, apparently well financed,

which lists

¹⁰T/E: Paul Veyne's *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes? Essai sur l'imagination constituante* was published in 1983 by Éditions du Seuil, the same French publisher as the one for the present Castoriadis volume, *Domaines de l'homme*. The English-language translation of Veyne's book appeared two years after *DH*, in 1988: *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, tr. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

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)

~

PORTER: Faith, sir, we were carousing till the second
cock; and drink, sir, is a great provoker of three
things.

MACDUFF: What three things does drink especially
provoke?

PORTER: Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and urine.
Lechery, sir, it provokes, and unprovokes; it provokes
the desire, but it takes away the performance.¹¹

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,¹² 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

¹¹T/E: *Macbeth*, 2.3.

¹²T/E: [IIS](#), 156.

actors,” what do they do, and who has furnished them the conditions for being what they are and doing what they do? What is presupposed, for example, for someone to be able to believe in God and adore him, or go off to holy war against the infidels? What is presupposed for someone to do mathematics, or even philosophy?

A subjectivity cannot be “all alone”—neither as such nor as anything. But this “all alone” is still there, in the contemporary return of “liberal”¹³ cretinism as well as of the infrafeeble metaphysics that forms its basis

before our eyes we are witnessing a rebirth of the incoherent fiction of an “individual” that would come into the world as Athena springs, fully armed, from the head of Zeus

as well as in the insurmountable egology of the inherited philosophy.

Having well purged this subjectivity of all that is not it, the philosopher pretends to find himself suddenly, and late in the night, faced with the menacing phantom of an other who, a miracle and a terror, does not let himself be constituted by me.

Like Husserl, in the fifth and last of the
Cartesian Meditations

1929!

Of course, self as well as other, *seen thus*, are pseudoproblems, since the perspective in which they appear *thus* and as *these* kinds of problems is a pseudoperspective.

¹³T/E: Here and elsewhere “liberal” is to be taken in the Continental sense. In American terms, “conservative individualism” and an ideological belief in the “free market” are what is intended.

Like someone who, having posited a first absurdity, would then vainly exhaust himself in dissolving another one, without seeing for an instant that this one is but one of the innumerable consequences of the first.

In what *tongue*, then, does Husserl think—or, for that matter, Kant? Could he have invented it “all alone”? Would he have been able (!), would he even had the *idea* if a tongue had not always already been there—and a *particular*, not transcendental, nor even transcendentalizable tongue? Could he “demonstrate” that what he is thinking owes *nothing* to tongue in general and to the particular tongue in which he thinks it

what he thinks at the most fundamental level, after all the reductions, the bracketings, or disconnected circuits

and in what tongue will he expound his demonstration? What is a donation of meaning to phenomena by consciousness that could at no moment *be said*?

Self and other cannot for a single moment be thought seriously if they are radically cut off from the social-historical field in which and through which they are possible

that obviously having nothing to do with the other Parisian mystification since the mid-Sixties—the simulacrum subject, language effect, unbeing [*dès-être*].

~

Magma. One text in the present volume is devoted to this idea. Here, it suffices to point out that it offers the means to

think, other than as an exclusive and sterile alternative, the antinomy *and* the solidarity between logic and what is other than logic, between reason and the nonrational.

Opposition to the imperialism of a logic of the Understanding, an opposition that has been periodically renewed and considerably reinforced in the most recent period in exact proportion to the inordinate dilation of a “Reason” that has become purely instrumental (even in the field of theory), has remained till now sterile, confused, and at best negative and apophantic.

Certainly, “not everything is formalizable,” but how, by what means, does one think what is not formalizable? And how, by what means, does one think formalizing activity itself?

In the simply apophantic attitude, it is impossible to understand the character, importance, and effective actuality of the logic I am henceforth calling *ensidic ensemblistic-identitary logic*
ensidizing, ensidisable, ensidization
and its interminable practical as well as theoretical consequences.

Only the effort to distinguish at once *and* to think together the ensidic dimension and the properly imaginary, or poietic, dimension of Being

self-alteration as creation/destruction
and insistence as conservation/repetition
necessary but partial, each-time closed determination
and in-deducible and un-producible deployment

I hope to show in *Time and Creation*

this effort alone allows one to resolve certain aporias relative to time—to transport the other ones into a landscape where new thoughts are born

it alone also allows one to elucidate the origin and the

situation of thought in effectively actual society and history.

~

Creation, radical imagination, social-historical
imaginary and instituting society, magma, solidarity and
distinction of the ensidic and the poietic
interminably fecund source ideas

themes ignored or occulted by inherited
thought.

Without them, it is impossible to restore the
connection

to the extent that, in the way in which it is
possible

between thought properly speaking and human
making/doing—quite particularly, institutive political
making/doing. A connection that is, here again, wholly other
than those ones of which one has till now thought. Not
“grounding in reason” a politics, nor deducing therefrom an
ontology. But elucidating their relations and dissipating

if this is in reflection’s power
the illusions and the fictions of a “rational political
philosophy”

strictly equivalent, in content, to the
affirmation of people’s total
impotency before their own creations.

Understanding that politics appertains to people’s
creative making/doing, which has created, in the form of
thought, the possibility

certainly not the fatal inevitability
of its own elucidation, which itself appertains, after all, to our
making/doing.

Paris, December 1, 1985, Cornelius Castoriadis

On the Texts

All the already published texts are reprinted here in their initial form, save for the correction of some typographical errors and a few *lapsus calami*. A few additions are indicated by brackets. The original notes [T/E: appear as they first appeared; newly added notes are preceded by “French Editors,” “Author’s addition,” or “T/E”]. In certain cases, I have added some subtitles in order to facilitate understanding.

[French Editors: A French publication committee for the works of Cornelius Castoriadis has reread the text of [*Domaines de l’homme*](#), revising the transliteration of Greek terms and trying to update, where possible, the references found in the footnotes. This committee’s interventions—save for references to the republication of the author’s works—are preceded by the mention “French Editors.”]

Translator/Editor's Foreword

We bring together here for the first time in one place in English the bulk of the texts that were published in 1986 as *Domaines de l'homme* ([DH](#), Human Domains). This second, and longest, volume in Cornelius Castoriadis's *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series is organized thematically, its texts divided into sections—Kairos, Koinōnia, Polis, Logos—as was also the case with the three sections of the first volume—Psyche, Logos, Koinōnia.

The first *Carrefours* volume in English-language translation has a rather straightforward publication history (see now the new Translator/Editor's Foreword to [CL1](#), the first volume in the present series). By way of contrast, the present *Carrefours* volume in English-language translation, [CL2](#), has the most complicated publication history of all six *Crossroads* volumes. Below, I detail this twisting and tumultuous history, which may serve as a cautionary tale for the professional and/or activist translator as well as an introduction to some of the key themes now appearing in [CL2](#).

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My book-length translation, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* ([PPA](#); New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), was the first collection of Castoriadis's *Carrefours* texts to be published in English after the 1984 Ryle/Soper *Crossroads of the Labyrinth* translation. [PPA](#) had drawn upon extant Castoriadis texts that were, for the most part, ready for book publication in English at the time of preparation (1989). It included writings from the second and third *Carrefours* volumes that now appear in [CL2](#)—"The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy," "The Nature and Value of Equality," and "Reflections on 'Development' and 'Rationality'"—and [CL3](#)—"Intellectuals and History," "The 'End of Philosophy'?", "Individual, Society, Rationality, History," "Power, Politics, Autonomy," and "Dead End?"—plus one text that now is reprinted in [CL6](#)—"The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge"—and another—"The Crisis of Culture and the State"—which remains available only in [PPA](#).¹

¹This last text is a 1987 reworking by Castoriadis in English of a 1979 French text of his, now available in [PSW3](#) as "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation."

Subsequently, other [DH](#) texts appeared for the first time in book-length translations in *The Castoriadis Reader* ([CR](#); Malden, MA and Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1997)—“The Social Regime in Russia” and “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy”—*World in Fragments* ([WIF](#); Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997)—“The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain,” “The Discovery of the Imagination,” “Institution of Society and Religion,” and “The Ontological Import of the History of Science”—and *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)* ([RTI\(TBS\)](#); a 2003 electro-Samizdat online publication)—“The Vacuum Industry,” “Psychoanalysis and Society I,” “Psychoanalysis and Society II,” “Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy,” and “Unending Interrogation.” One [CL2](#) text, “Marx Today,” is a translation of an interview that first appeared in *Thesis Eleven* and then was reworked by Castoriadis himself for *Solidarity Journal*, the organ of Socialisme ou Barbarie’s British sister organization. Others are being translated here for the first time into English—the [DH](#) Preface (perhaps Castoriadis’s most eccentric text, bizarrely defying even normal paragraph organization), “Transition,” and “The ‘Left’ in 1985.” Finally, omitted from [CL2](#) are a number of texts that have subsequently been reprinted by the French Editors in the fifth and sixth volumes of Castoriadis’s posthumously published *Écrits politiques*. We hope to translate and edit these [DH](#) texts dealing with Russia and the former Eastern Bloc in the fifth volume of a proposed eight-volume set of Castoriadis’s *Political Writings*—“The Social Regime in Russia” (currently available, we said, in [CR](#))—or in its sixth volume—“Don’t Hold onto Your Illusions,” “The Toughest and Most Fragile of Regimes,” “Poland, Our Defeat,” “The Russian Regime Will Be its Own Successor,” “Which Europe? Which Threats? Which Defense?,” “Five Years After,” and “The Destinies of Totalitarianism,” to cite their tentative English-language titles.²

²“The Toughest and Most Fragile of Regimes” is currently available in a translation by David Berger, *Telos*, 51 (Spring 1982): 186-90. “Which Europe? Which Threats? Which Defense?” is currently available as “Defending the West” in a translation by Alfred J. MacAdam, *Partisan Review*, 51 (1984): 375-79 (Castoriadis called this title “misleading” and the translation “particularly bad”; his letter of protest to *Partisan Review* concerning this unauthorized translation was never published). “The Destinies of Totalitarianism,” an article originally written in English, was

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The Foreword to *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, which we reproduce below, is preceded here by my "2003 Preface to the Electronic Reprint of the 1989 Editor's Foreword." This Preface provides the publication-history background of the 1991 Oxford University Press volume, whose appearance was deliberately delayed by this academic publishing house and whose subtitle, "Essays in Political Philosophy," was, despite vehement objections from both the author and myself, imposed unilaterally and secretly by Oxford at the time of printing.

Before its unexplained, two-year publication holdup, occasioned by internal controversy at OUP surrounding its title and content, *PPA* was supposed to be rushed into publication (based on a promise, made to Castoriadis and to myself, for the issuance of two additional volumes of *Carrefours* translations that were to follow in fairly quick succession, a promise that never materialized). Not given even the time to prepare an electronic MS for editing, I was limited, for the most part, to making whatever hasty copyediting notations and corrections could fit in between the lines or within the margins of photocopies of existing published texts. The inclusion of *PPA* texts within the present series has afforded me the opportunity to reedit them while examining again the French originals (or the French translations, often but not always done by Castoriadis himself, of texts he had written in English).

The *PPA* Foreword, dated December 1989, does not, it should be pointed out, fully engage with all the texts now published in *CL2*. Some *DH* texts instead appeared later, as we explained, in other volumes. The Translator/Editor's Forewords to *CL3*, *CL4*, and *CL6* deal with additional Castoriadis themes from *DH/CL2* than the ones highlighted in the *PPA* Foreword. The reader is therefore invited to consult, *transversally*, those further introductions, now conveniently located together within the six-volume *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* boxed set.

To some, this Foreword may, a third of a century later, seem in some ways "dated." Admittedly, such hamhanded neoconservative efforts at "defending the West" as E. D. Hirsch's book on *Cultural Literacy* and the pronouncements of William Bennett, former Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and later the U.S. Secretary of Education, are now distant memories. And yet, what will be read below is perhaps not

as dated as one might at first surmise and may even strike in the reader some chords of real relevance.

The Foreword to [*Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*](#) highlighted and explored Castoriadis's thesis of the cobirth of philosophy and politics in Ancient Greece (as well as their rebirth, again as nonidentical twins, in early modern Europe). *Paideia*, the Greek conception of lifelong civic education, was a central concern for Castoriadis. Today, we need search no further than a bold and plainspoken April 19, 2021 *Washington Post* op-ed, "Howard University's Removal of Classics Is a Spiritual Catastrophe," to grasp some of the ongoing stakes. Against a historically Black, federally chartered research university's decision to dissolve its Classics Department, Cornel West and Jeremy Tate rise up in indignation and protest, reminding people that the great Abolitionist Frederick Douglass "risked mockery, abuse, beating and even death to study" classical authors, while, as they also point out, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would later "be similarly galvanized by his reading in the classics as a young seminarian." The ostensibly musty 1980s cultural wars—whose "left-wing" reactionary side was perfectly expressed at the time by a Stanford University student's sign reading "Down with Western Civilization!"—do indeed have their contemporary counterparts.

I hope to have brought out, in my [*PPA*](#) Foreword, both the misplaced insight of those Neoconservatives who rightly emphasized that our society must establish a relationship with its past while having minimized, however, its inherently and radically critical components, and of various identity-based "radicals" who—along with today's assorted "social justice warriors" or simply cost-conscious university administrators riding an identity-politics wave—consciously wish to challenge and change the established (dis)order while nevertheless neglecting, belittling, or attacking that side of our society's dual (and conflictual) institution whose critical impetus, begun more than two-and-a-half millennia ago in Greece, arises from a political and philosophical movement of contesting institutional practices and questioning received ideas.

N.B.: Some slight editorial changes have been introduced into this 1989 [*PPA*](#) Foreword and its 2003 Preface in order to make the text conform to the present series' publication protocols, to fix small errors, and to make it read smoothly in its present context. I also have updated the references and, on occasion, added new comments in square brackets, in both these cases preceded by my initials and the current year [DAC-2021].

Winchester, Massachusetts (USA), November 2021

2003 Preface to the Electronic Reprint of the 1989 Editor's Foreword*

The editor's Foreword to *[Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy](#)* and the book it introduces have an interesting history. A brief recounting of that history may help the reader to appreciate more fully both this Foreword and the problems the book itself encountered in the process of its publication. Like any other work in a capitalist society, a book is a product of struggle and bears the scars and mutilations of that struggle in the final product offered for sale to the often unsuspecting end-consumer. Not surprisingly, the cultural and intellectual conflicts of that society enter into the product and inevitably leave their disfiguring marks, as well.

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English-language translation of Cornelius's work already had a substantial history when I entered upon the scene. In the pseudonymous person of "Maurice Brinton," London Solidarity had been publishing excellent Castoriadis translations since 1960, even before Socialisme ou Barbarie's British sister organization adopted its definitive name.¹ The

* Available online at: <https://www.kaloskaisophos.org/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdactfppa.html>

¹DAC-2021: Now that he is deceased, the real name of this distinguished Anglo-Greek neurologist—who, under the Brinton pseudonym, was cofounder of London Solidarity as well as the pioneering translator of Castoriadis's work—can be acknowledged: Christopher Agamemnon Pallis. See the posthumous publication *For Worker's Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton*, ed. David Goodway (Oakland, CA and

baton was taken up temporarily, but not very skillfully, by *Telos* (between 1975 and 1982) until controversy surrounding the value of Castoriadis's writings led to a split in this American journal's editorial board, *Telos* editor Paul Piccone maintaining an aggressively negative view of Cornelius's contributions as against his champions, Dick Howard and Joel Whitebook, among others. Two volumes of post-*S. ou B.* Castoriadis writings in translation also were already under way by that time: soon before my first arrival in France in late December 1984, the first volume from the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series was published as *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* and [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) came into print in 1987 (though it remained available exclusively in an expensive hardbound copy for another decade).²

My initial translation project undertaken with Castoriadis's approval and support was to present what became the *Political and Social Writings (PSW)*, a selection in three volumes of his principal *S. ou B.* texts that had been reprinted by "Editions 10/18" along with previously unpublished materials as well as new introductions and essays (1973-79). Although many "political" and "alternative" presses were among the 40 publishers I contacted for this project, only one academic press, at the University of Minnesota, responded affirmatively. Once the first two *PSW* volumes appeared in 1988, Cornelius and I turned our efforts

Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2004).

²DAC-2021: In the 1997 revised paperback edition of [*IIS*](#), Polity Press incorporated only those corrections, improvements, and updated notes Castoriadis had asked me to prepare that would not affect pagination. As a result, the English-language translation of [*IIS*](#) still today does not include many key references to the three-volume *Political and Social Writings* series.

toward finding a publisher for *Domaines de l'homme* (1986), the second volume in his *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series. I had already translated a number of these texts for various journals in order to develop interest in publication of a book-length volume, and other texts already had been written and published in English by Castoriadis himself. When it became clear that it would be extremely difficult to find an editor willing to publish this 455-page volume in its entirety, we accepted an offer from Josué V. Harari and Vincent Descombes's Odéon series at Oxford University Press (OUP). In late November 1989, Harari proposed to us a three-volume series (for, in the meantime, a new volume in the *Carrefours* series, *Le monde morcelé*, was being readied for publication), if we would quickly prepare an initial selection of Castoriadis's *Carrefours* writings that by happenstance were already available in English.

Cornelius and I rapidly fulfilled our side of the bargain for what became *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (*PPA*). But neither was there a timely publication of this first volume (instead, there was an unexplained, nearly two-year delay between OUP's receipt of the materials and final publication), nor were contracts ever forthcoming for the two subsequent volumes Harari had promised "in principle." We thus irrevocably³ gave up the possibility of publishing translations of the *Carrefours* series in correct order with recognizable renditions of the original French titles, and we received little in return either for our good-faith efforts or for the trust we

³DAC-2021: *Till now* "irrevocably," since the present six-volume series in English translation is now appearing in full (except for a few *CL2* incidental pieces, since reprinted in the *Écrits Politiques* series, which we hope to include in a projected eight-volume *Political Writings* series) and with book titles in English easily recognizable as faithful translations from the French.

placed in the Odéon series editors, one of whom was a former member of S. ou B. Cornelius, especially, felt that we had to rely on these editors' good will and thereby overcame my objections when I questioned whether such an insecure arrangement, which didn't even include a signed translator/editor's contract for the first volume, might be too unreliable a proposition. (Cornelius nevertheless always insisted quite strongly that I be paid well for my professional work.)

To add insult to injury, even our joint choice for *PPA*'s subtitle was not honored! As I wrote, with Cornelius's prior approval, on December 13, 1990 to my OUP editor:

Our subtitle for *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* has been altered without our being consulted. "Essays in the Self-Transformation of Humanity" has been changed to the wholly unacceptable "Essays in Political Philosophy." The replacement subtitle is (a) redundant, considering that it already contains two-thirds of the title, (b) a contradiction of the author's insistence that there is no such thing as political philosophy (cf. p. 102 of MS: "political philosophy...really has never been anything but a philosophy talking about politics and external to the latter"), and (c) does not convey the overall argument of the book, which does not concern simply "political philosophy" but also the effort, to be undertaken by humanity as a whole, to transform itself (i.e., to assert its autonomy concretely). I see no valid reason why "Essays in the Self-Transformation of Humanity," which reprises the final page of the last article of the volume, should not be retained. I should note here that Castoriadis is in full agreement with all of the above

listed reasons. He will be glad to say so in writing, should you require this.

A promise was duly made to remove this redundant and contradictory subtitle to which we had both vehemently objected; and another proposed title, *Autonomy: Essays in Philosophy and Politics*, was at one time approved. In the end, without apology or explanation, the volume appeared with the offending and misleading subtitle substituted by OUP. Since that time, English-language readers have thus labored under a false impression that *PPA* is a purely academic volume concerned inexplicably with a “political philosophy” Castoriadis regularly belittled or denied, instead of a deliberate intervention in and explicit contribution to the effort to achieve the *project of autonomy* as Castoriadis helped to conceive it and to champion it.

It was only much later that I learned why OUP defiantly and steadfastly ignored the author's own wishes concerning the title and publication of his book as part of a three-volume series that never materialized. My New York OUP editor Liz McGuire finally admitted to me that, as soon as OUP editors in England saw a copy of the manuscript I had prepared for publication, with the word PHILOSOPHY figuring so prominently in the title, they sought to have the entire project scrapped immediately. Odéon series editor Harari had from the start entertained the (to me, rather repugnant) hope that *PPA* would become “the next *On Grammatology*” (the touchstone, for many Anglo-Saxon editors, of marketing success in the world of academic publishing, despite that Derrida tome's manifest unreadability). OUP's British editors in turn found it outrageous that someone like Castoriadis, often lumped into the “French theory” category, would be publishing a book

about Philosophy without having any recognized Anglo-American analytic-philosophy credentials. When it proved impossible to cancel purely and simply a book OUP had already accepted for publication, the next best thing was an alteration in the subtitle, apparently with the thought that relegating the book to the inconsequential realm of “political philosophy” lessened the outrage some OUP editors felt in seeing Oxford publishing this volume at all. For his part, Harari threatened to seize control of the book from me, its editor, when I questioned his failure to fulfill financial and moral commitments made to Cornelius and myself. Indeed, this was neither the first nor the last time I willingly made myself the lightning rod for criticism in service to the goal of making quality Castoriadis translations widely available in the English language. (Cornelius consistently resisted the idea of hiring a literary agent but agreed for me to play many aspects of that role; I always conscientiously checked with him before proceeding, as the excerpt from the December 13, 1990 letter to OUP quoted above attests.) Descombes, for his part, maintained that he was merely a “scientific advisor” having nothing to do with anything relating to contractual matters. As for OUP, it even took a year after publication for the company grudgingly to send Castoriadis his promised complimentary hardbound and paperback copies.

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In what follows on this [DAC-2021: electronic] page, I have scrupulously followed Oxford University Press's stipulation “that apart from converting into electronic format the OUP material must not be altered, modified, or added to in any way.” This, despite the fact that both the book itself, in its subtitle, and my editor's Foreword to this volume, were

altered without Cornelius's or my consent. The interested reader can click on the various links to discover what was excised from the original draft of this Foreword.⁴ Some sentences were eliminated apparently in order to tone down enthusiasm about the book's publication and about its contents, or to play down claims as to its philosophical significance and political import. Other, more substantial cuts go to the heart of what this book is about. The original draft Foreword was intended to show [*PPA*](#)'s relevance to contemporary issues both in academe and beyond, taking a stand against both neoconservative advocates of a narrowly defined authoritarian test of "cultural literacy" and multicultural "radicals" who had ceased to make the project of autonomy a central feature of their theoretical practice. A short incursion into the question of how Castoriadis's conceptions of "social imaginary significations" and of "the social-historical" might contribute to an understanding of the then-burning issues of "race" and "gender" was also dropped. Thus, like the subtitle of the volume, the final printed version of this Foreword offered a distorted and truncated view of the book it was introducing. By keeping in mind the subtitle Castoriadis and I had originally chosen and by reading the Foreword in the light of the excised passages, the reader may glean a more informed view of what we tried to bring to her attention and consideration, and she may also be encouraged to reflect upon the struggle cultural workers, like any other workers, face daily within a capitalist society.

David Ames Curtis, September 28, 2003

⁴DAC-2021: In the present reprint, all the OUP-excised portions of my Foreword appear within brackets, preceded by "RESTORED TEXT."

1989 *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* Foreword*

[RESTORED TEXT: It is with profound satisfaction, excitement, and anticipation that we present here a collection of the most recent and significant writings of Cornelius Castoriadis on philosophy, politics and autonomy.] Only of late has the Anglophone reading public become aware of Cornelius Castoriadis and his five decades of work. Despite the pioneering efforts of the British journal *Solidarity* to translate Castoriadis's writings, efforts continued at one time by *Telos* and now by *Thesis Eleven*, it was only in 1984, with the publication of *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, that Castoriadis's distinctive thought became accessible to a broad English-speaking audience. That first book-length translation, which contained articles from the previous decade, was followed by the publication of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) in 1987 and two volumes of his *Political and Social Writings* in 1988; the writings found in these latter translations, however, date from the mid-1940s through the mid-1970s. The publication of the present volume [DAC-2021: [PPA](#)] will be the first time that Castoriadis's essays are published in English in book form in a timely fashion.

What makes this situation so striking is that there are so few living, active writers of Cornelius Castoriadis's experience and breadth of vision. To recap briefly the path he has traveled,¹ Castoriadis, born in 1922 in Constantinople,

*Originally published in [PPA](#), v-x. Passages removed without my consent have now been restored within square brackets.

¹For an in-depth biographical/intellectual history, see Castoriadis's General Introduction to [the first volume of his *Political and Social Writings*](#), tr. David Ames Curtis, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of

began his political life at age fifteen years as a member of the Greek Communist Youth, formed an opposition group within the Greek Communist Party (1941) after the German Occupation, joined the Trotskyists (1942) when he became convinced that the Communists were unreformable, and spent much of the rest of the war dodging both Stalinist agents and the Gestapo. Leaving Greece for France, he joined the Trotskyist Fourth International in Paris, where his unwelcome attack on the Fourth's "unconditional defense of the Soviet Union" led him and others to form an opposition group, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Basing their criticism on people's actual aspirations toward autonomy in the form of workers' self-management, they developed an intransigent critique of Russia and other Stalinist regimes as new social formations, neither traditionally capitalist nor socialist. The group broke with the Fourth (1948) to become eventually the most influential source for a non-Communist Left in France as well as the forerunner to the ideas and actions of the May 1968 student/worker rebellion. [DAC-2021: Member of the Editorial Committee] of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Castoriadis authored its principal texts (1949-1965). He retired from his day job as an economist at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1970) and

Minnesota Press, 1988) and my Foreword, also found in this first volume. A constantly updated supplement to the bibliography, which appears in the Appendixes, is available through: Agora International, 27 rue Froidevaux, 75014 Paris, France. [DAC-2021: A third *PSW* volume followed in 1993. The bibliography of writings by and about Castoriadis and/or *Socialisme ou Barbarie* mentioned here, along with webographies, a videography, a "Teaching Castoriadis" section, and other material is now available online in twenty languages and counting; see the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website, created in 1997 with Castoriadis's explicit support and assistance: <https://www.agorainternational.org/bibliographies.html>.]

became a practicing psychoanalyst (1974) as well as a Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (1979). He is now recognized as one of Europe's foremost political and social thinkers. That he addresses in the present collection such a wide variety of topics and disciplines as philosophy, politics, and history, both ancient and modern, economics, ecology, contemporary political and social thought, aesthetics, the philosophy of science, and psychoanalysis is an indication of the breadth of his vision. [RESTORED TEXT: One searches with the greatest of difficulty to find any contemporary of comparable stature.]

In the articles, lectures, and conference discussions that follow, we discover Castoriadis the essayist and engaged writer.² Employing his vast erudition, his fine sense of purpose and proportion, and his sharp wit, he goes straight to the heart of the issues he addresses, placing the aspiration for individual and collective autonomy at the center of his concerns. [RESTORED TEXT: We therefore unabashedly subtitle this volume “essays in the self-transformation of humanity.” For, they] represent not discussions about specific political and social events, nor a discourse designed to erect

²More than half of these writings originally appeared in English, a language he speaks fluently; I have edited them mainly with an eye toward correcting printer's errors, standardizing terminology and clarifying a few ambiguous phrases. With one exception, I translated the rest. As mentioned in note 17 of my Foreword to [*the first volume of Castoriadis's Political and Social Writings*](#) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. xxi-xxii, the nonsexist—if still grating—use of “s/he” and “his/her” is employed when translating and editing Castoriadis's contemporary writings; he, too, now generally employs “nonsexist” language. [DAC-2021: See now “On the Translation” in [CLI](#) on this political-linguistic issue.]

or resurrect a “social theory,” nor even philosophical speculations about the nature of “the political.” These essays are actual philosophical and political attempts, through example and participation, to contribute to the ongoing historical movements that foster people’s creative assertion of their autonomy.

Where does this self-implicating human creation that is individual and collective autonomy come from? Like all creation, Castoriadis would say, it comes from nowhere (*ex nihilo*); we cannot reduce it to anterior “causes” or attribute it to an invariant “human nature.” However, creation does not occur without any means (*cum nihilo*) or out of all context (*in nihilo*). In fact—and this is the principal thesis presented and defended in this book—the beginnings of autonomy as a social-historically effective project can be dated and located. It began in Greece and took place in the Greek *poleis* from the eighth to the fifth century BCE, to be repeated in another form in the *bürger* cities that arose at the end of the Middle Ages in Western Europe. This project of autonomy is expressed in the simultaneous, but not identical, creation (and then recreation) of philosophy and politics as the reflective questioning of instituted traditions and the attempt to alter these traditions and institutions through conscious collective action.

Here misunderstandings may arise. When someone speaks of ancient Greece or “European culture” today, the habitual reaction is often to shout “Imperialism!”, “Eurocentrism!”, and “Down with Western Civilization!” as a Stanford University student’s sign in fact proclaimed during a protest in favor of replacing the school’s mandatory introductory course in European culture with a broader study of world cultures. Philosophy and politics began in Greece? What a narrow view! What about “Eastern Philosophy”? And

did not Greek democracy mean slavery for many as well as the disenfranchisement of women?

[RESTORED TEXT: This reaction is somewhat understandable when we consider recent neoconservative attempts to revive a “core curriculum” based upon “Western values.” These attempts are themselves an authoritarian, hierarchal reaction against the project of autonomy, as it was expressed by students during the Sixties in their radical questioning of educational “relevance” as well as in their efforts to establish at that time, in the face of corporate hierarchy, a self-managed educational system. Certain “educators” now want to impose from above a canon of texts and ideas (and a test of “cultural literacy”), believing that this will teach the young the (lost) “values” of “the West,” usually conceived as “Judeo-Christian” in origin and nature. This ploy harks back (though with infinitely less sophistication and ambition) to the original Great Books program; one of its instigators, Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago in the 1930s, declared:

This is more than a set of great books.... Great Books of the Western World is an act of piety. Here are the sources of our Being. ...Here is the faith of the West, for here before everybody willing to look at it is that dialogue by way of which Western man has believed that he can approach the truth. (Quoted in George Steiner, “An Examined Life” [review of Harry S. Ashmore’s *Unseasonable Truths*], in *The New Yorker*, October 23, 1989, p. 143.)

How one can encourage unfettered dialogue and questioning (an expression of our autonomy) through the imposition from above of a canon and by means of a cultivation of “piety” and

“faith” within a hierarchal institutional setting (amidst Gothic buildings) is never explained. All that is lacking for today’s Neoconservatives is an education Pope, a position to which U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett apparently aspired until he graduated to the more prestigious authoritarian post of “Drug Czar.”

In other words, for those committed to the project of autonomy the neoconservative position is beneath criticism—though we must recognize its true insight that a society must impart its cultural legacy to its coming generations. We should take issue, however, with the response on the part of many of today’s students and point out that the critique of education, begun in the Sixties, had lost its way by the end of the Eighties. It is here in the realm of education that Castoriadis’s reflections about autonomy and the simultaneous birth of philosophy and politics in ancient Greece (and rebirth in Western Europe) acquire their highest interest and relevance and offer their greatest challenge to contemporary thought.]

For Castoriadis, philosophy is not synonymous with speculation about the world, its origins, its meaning. It is the reflective questioning of socially instituted representations, including those instituted with the help of philosophical reflection. His bold claim is that reflection itself as well as effective judging and choosing are historical in character and have their origins in ancient Greece. Thus there is, for example, no oriental “philosophy,” this being an anachronistic use of the Greek term. What Greek philosophy makes possible, he argues, is not (religiously) instituted ideas and beliefs along with interminable commentary thereupon, but dozens of contending schools of thought. Thus, too, politics as self-responsible conscious collective action to alter a society’s institutions is also a Greek creation, one that not

only implies but also presupposes the establishment of a public space open to all who assert themselves as free and consider themselves and each other as equals. As this is a *project*, autonomous political activity aims not at a readymade system requiring no further changes, but rather at the inauguration and continuous renewal of a reflective and willed effort to reshape our institutions to our recognized needs and desires in such a way that the project of individual and collective autonomy is itself fostered and reinforced. What is interesting about the Greek *poleis*, Castoriadis argues, is not a Greek “model” of democracy and politics (which we would somehow now be asked to endorse or to reject), but the ongoing instituting activity it fostered for four centuries. Moreover, philosophy implies politics and vice versa, for philosophy as the reflective challenge to inherited thought cannot exist without the assertion of a political will that this be possible, and politics cannot consciously transform existing institutions unless these institutions themselves can be called explicitly into question.

Far from being a sanctification of “Western values”—even those of dialogue and questioning for their own sake—the thrust of Castoriadis’s argument, then, is that it is only to the extent that we are willing and able to call our values into question, *knowing why and for what purpose we are doing so*, that we can continue the West’s unique project of autonomy. Autonomy is not merely “self-institution.” The latter is always occurring in society, most often in the form of *heteronomy*, the “self-occultation” of this self-instituting process, its imputation to an extrasocial, supranatural source. It was because the Greeks had no sacred books that this project could come into being in the first place. It was because the reassertion of autonomy in Western European cities was expressed in an effort at self-rule, free from Church dictates

and State power, that lucid philosophical questioning could effectively be reborn.

This being the thrust of Castoriadis's argument, the priority he assigns to ancient Greece as the birthplace of philosophy, politics, and the project of autonomy appears not as a "romantic" glance backward or a pious "defense" of "Western values," but as an elucidation of their unique meaning, which implies and involves a critical continuation of this very project. As he argues in "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy," the problem for those who wish to flatten out history and make the Greeks just another people is that history itself as impartial "historiography" along with "the reasoned investigation of other cultures and the reflection upon them" are also Greek inventions. This is the "minute" but absolutely "decisive point" that advocates of the flattening approach have missed. It is only when we acknowledge and come to appreciate the true uniqueness of the Greco-Western tradition that we realize the significant contribution an impartial understanding of other cultures *qua* other cultures offers for the project of autonomy, this effort to question our own representations and to transform our institutions. To adopt for a moment the coarse categories of course catalogues, coming to terms with and assuming the legacy of "Western Civilization" does not stand in contradiction to, but serves precisely as the presupposition for, the study of "world cultures" as well as the possible critical and genuine reception of them.³ Likewise, an awareness of other cultures is

³Should the point need making, "Greek" and "European" in Castoriadis's vocabulary designate cultural formations, not geographical locations, or "racial types." [RESTORED TEXT: But to designate a cultural formation does not yet tell us anything about what its significations are or how they are. Except in a trivial sense, the social imaginary significations of a cultural formation, the "magma" of such significations, have no biological

necessary for us to be able to criticize and alter our own. Here we can sense the aspiration for autonomy that is implicit in this talk of world cultures. Yet this aspiration often now not only does not speak its name but denies its own existence.

Autonomy is not the only “social imaginary signification” of the modern West. The other main cultural meaning guiding our lives is what Castoriadis calls “the unlimited expansion of ‘rational’ mastery.” Such pseudorational mastery has been implemented most notably in capitalism and totalitarianism but also in our technoscientific attitude toward, and transformation of, nature and society (now accompanied by the prospect of worldwide ecological destruction). With the waxing of the project of total control has come the waning of the project of autonomy. As with the *choice* Castoriadis has formulated of “socialism

(let alone racial) basis, nor can they be created by an individual psyche. An illustration of this point can be found in my Foreword to [DAC-2021: [the first volume of](#)] Castoriadis's *Political and Social Writings*, where I mention the role of improvisation in the formation of jazz, a “mulatto” art form (and, by implication, of a “mulatto” American culture, which remains, for the most part, unacknowledged). “Whiteness” and “Blackness” are social imaginary significations, figures that cannot be unambiguously and univocally assigned or imputed to specific, designatable, separable individuals in any sort of exhaustive way (even though this is how the terms are most often employed). Such a conclusion is, of course, anathema to racist opponents of “miscegenation” or social “race mixing,” just as a similar conclusion concerning “maleness” and “femaleness” would be to a confirmed and self-satisfied misogynist (or misanthropist). In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the present volume [DAC-2021: “The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge” (1991), now in [CL6](#); “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” (1988), now in [CL3](#); “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in [CL2](#)], Castoriadis explores the inadequacies of common conceptions of “social theory” in coming to terms with the unique domain of the *social-historical*.]

or barbarism,” the battle between autonomy and heteronomy—between the assertion of autonomy and that which today erodes its very existence—is not one of an external opposition but of two intimately connected options, unfolding together as they alter themselves and each other.⁴ To respond fully to the challenge of and the challenges to autonomy, in the domain of philosophy as well as in the political realm, is of the greatest import today. These essays invite us to assume precisely that responsibility, in our thought and in our action.

December 1989, David Ames Curtis

⁴DAC-2021: The same month I penned this Foreword for my [*PPA*](#) translation, [“Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis,”](#) my paper centered around some of the themes broached in this paragraph, appeared in the Castoriadis *Festschrift* edited by Giovanni Busino for an issue of his journal: *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (December 1989), which was also printed in book form as *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis* (Geneva: Droz, 1989). See the Translator/Editor's Foreword to [*CL4*](#) for a development of the other themes found in this paragraph.

On the Translation

We refer the reader to “On the Translation” in [CLI](#) for an overview of translation issues that have arisen and have been addressed in the six volumes of the present series.

We note here simply a list of the various English-language words and phrases Castoriadis employed in the original French-language texts for this second volume: for that matter, fast-foods [*sic*], rat race, last but not least, steady state, lobbies, output, input, nobody, “peculiarly Platonic and not very scientific,” unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics (thrice), begging the question, bits, surd, whatever that may mean, anything goes (twice), leap frog game, whatever it may be, “What is now proved was once only imagin’d.”

KAIROS

Transition*

Metropoli: By discussing “really existing socialism,” you have called into question some of the major categories of Marx’s thought. In what way can it be said that you have tried to reread Marx starting from Stalin and to find, in what Stalinism has produced, the limits of the political and cultural horizon not only of Leninism but of Marxism itself? Would you like to explain the most significant passages along this critical path?

Cornelius Castoriadis: It of course is not a matter of rereading Marx starting from Stalin, a lousy author and a millionaire executioner, but of starting from Russian *reality*, of starting from the whole way things evolved, which led from the Revolution of 1917 to the instauration of a regime of the heaviest exploitation, oppression, and domination history has known. To do that, one had not only to strip bare the Stalinist (and today Brezhnevian) mystification of “really existing socialism” but to demolish, too, the rationalizations and Trotskyist confusionism about Russia as a “degenerated workers’ State” as well as about “nationalization” and “planning” as “bases for socialism.” For me, the conclusions of this analysis were reached as early as 1946 (see the texts in *La Société bureaucratique*).¹ What emerged in Russia was a new dominant and exploitative stratum or class, the bureaucracy. This emergence was made possible by the suppression, between 1917 and 1921, of any authentic and

* November 30, 1978 interview with the “leftist” Italian monthly *Metropoli* (“Metropolitan Indians,” etc.). I do not believe that they published it. “Transition,” *DH*, 19-27 (21-31 of the 1999 reprint). [T/E: On [“Indiani Metropolitani,”](#) see: [English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)]

¹T/E: Some of the texts from *SB1* and *SB2* now appear in [PSW1](#) and [PSW2](#).

autonomous role for the organs created by the masses (soviets, factory committees) to the benefit of the exclusive and total power of the Bolshevik Party. Around this party were agglomerated all the ruling strata of the new State (hastily reconstructed on the old model by Lenin, Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks), of production, and of the economy. Negative conclusion: In no way can socialism be instaurated by means of the power of a Party that poses as *the* leadership [*la direction*] of the working class and of the revolution; such a power cannot but lead to the restoration of a total bureaucratic capitalism. Positive conclusion: Socialism is the power of the autonomous organs of the masses and of collectivities, which is expressed, of course, by the elimination of the old dominant strata, capitalists *and* bureaucrats, but also and especially by the *positive* power of these bodies [*organismes*] over all aspects of social life: collective management of production by the laboring people, local collectivities by the inhabitants, etc.

It is clear that this is radically opposed to the Leninist conception of the Party and of its “leading role.” Yet it must be seen that this Leninist conception really and truly has its roots in Marx himself. Briefly speaking, the “leading role” of the Party is “founded” on the idea (the superstition) that the Party possesses the truth: “scientific socialism,” Marxism. Now, Marx himself posits his conception as the expression of the point of view of the proletariat, history’s “last class,” “universal” class, etc. Thus, this theory is posited as possessing an absolute truth—and also, it is this theory that *decides* who is truly “proletarian” and who is not. (Thus, Lenin and Trotsky will shoot the Kronstadt rebels while saying that they are not “true” workers: they *could not* be so, since they were opposed to the Party.)

This led to a critical reexamination of Marx himself, which I began (apropos of Marx’s “economic science”) in

1952-1953 (texts on “the dynamic of capitalism”)² and which ended in a total and definitive break with Marx’s universe of thought in 1964-1965 (“Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” in issues 36-40 of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, reprinted in French in 1975 as the first part of *IIS*). Marx himself stifled the revolutionary element that was germinating in his thought and is expressed especially, but not only, in his youthful texts. He returned to a speculative-theoreticist attitude. He believes that he is able to establish “laws of history”—which is an absurdity. Thereby, he failed to recognize the revolution as historical *creation*. He makes of socialism a predetermined and determinate stage of history—whereas socialism is a political and historical *project*, the project of instituting an autonomous society. He falls entirely under the grip of the social imaginary significations of capitalism, setting the economy and the “development of the forces of production” at the center of everything; starting from this position, he massacres the entire preceding history of humanity, onto which he exports in an illegitimate way some categories that have meaning, and still just partially so, only for classical capitalist society. He has no critique to offer of the pseudo-“rationality” of capitalist technics and of the organization of capitalist production; he considers them to be straight-out rational (which will be found again in full in Lenin’s work and in the latter’s practice), the sole thing to be modified being that they ought to cease to be placed in the service of profit, of capital, etc. His “philosophy” is in fact essentially a

²T/E: The two-part text titled “Sur la dynamique du capitalisme” appeared in the twelfth and thirteenth issues of *S. ou B.* Both parts were reprinted in *EP8*, along with additional, previously unpublished material on this topic. We hope that a full translation of all these texts will appear in the last of the projected eight-volume *Political Writings*.

rationalist philosophy. In sum, Marx represents the ultimate passage to the social imaginary significations of capitalism: determinism, progress, productivism, economism, and especially the social phantasm of the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery.

What must be recognized is that production and economy become “central” social phenomena only in and through capitalism. History is *creation*, in large part indeterminate creation. The institution of society does not flow from laws—whether “natural,” “rational,” or what have you. It is the work of the instituting social imaginary. Society itself institutes itself each time. Yet it occults this self-institution by representing itself to itself as the work of the “ancestors,” of the gods, of God, of Nature, of Reason—or of the “laws of history,” as is the case with Marxism. Socialism, as project of instituting an autonomous society, implies also and especially the explicit recognition of this self-institution of society. A socialist society is a society that *knows* that its institutions are its own work and that does not alienate itself to those institutions.

Metropoli: Several elements of this critique are now accepted by quite a vast milieu of cultural and political forces: for example, the “new philosophers” and the socialist movement. Do you not believe that this debate often risks reducing the problem to a polemic with the “Jacobinism” of the Bolsheviks, without touching on certain questions that lie at the bottom of the tradition of socialist thought, such as: the superiority of planning over the market, of politics over economics, of the State over “private life”?

C.C.: Let us first be clear about a minor point. The critique I have carried out has *always* been conducted as a political and revolutionary critique; its central concern has been the elucidation of the project of radically transforming

society, of instaurating an autonomous society. This critique is parasitized and diverted by those who call themselves, by double antiphrasis, *the New Philosophers*, who without any rigor use some of that critique's elements in order to come to the conclusion that politics is Evil, that the revolution cannot but lead to totalitarianism, etc. Neither the "critique" they carry out nor these "conclusions" are new (those "conclusions" were already there in Karl Popper's work, for example). What is not false in the work of these people is not new, and what is "new" is false and reactionary.

And that is precisely what manifests itself, as you say, with the exclusive concentration of the discussion about the Bolsheviks' "Jacobinism," the condemnation of the French Revolution, etc. Yet the mere denunciation of totalitarian terror and the defense of the rights of man, which are certainly quite important (and for which one had not awaited the arrival of the New Philosophers), do not constitute a politics. It is totally incoherent to claim to be interested in human rights and to leave entirely by the wayside the problem of society's organization. Individual autonomy and social autonomy are, in the deepest sense, two sides of the same coin. And it is this problem, of the organization of a new society, that is of concern in the questions you emphasize: planning/market, politics/economics, State/society, "public"/"private." We do not have the time to enter into a true discussion about them. I will say only that one must radically destroy the traditional conception that "socialism" consists in seizing the power of the State in order to "plan" the economy and increase production, after which all the other problems would resolve themselves. Socialism is the self-organization of society, which without any doubt implies the elimination of the domination of every particular social category but also of the institutions that embody and give instrumental form to that

domination—like the present-day State.

Metropoli: In your analysis, you consider “bureaucratic society” as a phenomenon that, from certain points of view, is common to the countries of the East and the West. To what extent does your critique affect, along with Leninism, the experience of Western Social Democracies?

C.C.: There is a deep-seated identity between the two systems, and there is the distinction between them, which I summarize by defining the Western countries as countries with a fragmented bureaucratic capitalism and those of the East as countries with a total bureaucratic capitalism. I believe that these terms are clear and eloquent enough. It can just as well be said that the bureaucracy of the Eastern countries is a “hard” bureaucracy and that of the West a “soft” bureaucracy. (I am obviously talking about its structure and its reality, not the “psychology” of individual bureaucrats.) Western Social Democracy is typically a “soft” bureaucracy, one completely adapted to the fragmented bureaucratic regime.

Metropoli: Don’t you believe that the modern State is going to become, generally speaking, more and more a bureaucratic and authoritarian State?

C.C.: You no doubt want to talk about the Western countries. This tendency unquestionably exists. But I don’t think that, short of a historical cataclysm, the Western countries are tending toward totalitarian regimes in the classical sense. There are a rhetoric and a mythology of “ever imminent fascism” on the Left and among Leftists that create a specter in order to mask the real problems. In the “rich” developed countries, the bureaucratic State achieves its ends by other means than overtly totalitarian ones (manipulation of public opinion, privatization of individuals, economic carrots, etc.)

Metropoli: Do you think that the workers’ movement

of Western Europe has, in recent years, found the tools necessary to avoid ending up in authoritarian bureaucracy? Has Eurocommunism brought some new features to the situation?

C.C.: The situation is contradictory. Without a doubt, people have a greater and greater awareness of the problem of bureaucracy—but they do not always act accordingly. Above all, they do not, generally speaking, succeed in finding the self-managed collective forms of organization that are the sole response to the problem of bureaucratization. And that is what, with them, we have to work on.

As for Eurocommunism, I have never thought that it would be anything other or more than an attempt, by the Communist parties, at tactical adaptation to a situation in which they can no longer overtly maintain a totalitarian discourse. Nothing, in fact, has changed in the *effectively actual reality* of these parties, which remain dominated by a totalitarian bureaucratic Apparatus.

Metropoli: What do you think about the theoretical work being elaborated by the Budapest School and the contributions of Agnes Heller to the constitution of a theory of needs?

C.C.: I have much esteem and fondness for Agnes Heller and her comrades. When we met for the first time, around two years ago, we had the pleasure to note that our points of view converged on many important problems.

That being said, I do not think that the notion of *need* might be a very fruitful point of departure for elucidating social and political problems. Aside from an “animal minimum,” which can be defined only in abstract and uninteresting terms (so many calories per day, etc.), needs are, each time, a social fabrication. This is the problem Marx in fact dodged when he took over the formula, “From each

according to his needs.” *What* needs? And *who* defines them? *Each person*, sovereignly? That’s absurd.

Metropoli: Rightly or wrongly, you have been considered, from certain angles, as a precursor of Italian *operaismo*. Do you recognize yourself in the school that includes the Italian journals *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*?

C.C.: I know that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in general and my texts in particular were rather well known among the Italian militants who broke with the traditional organizations between 1955 and 1965. But I believe that most of those comrades stuck to the older texts, in particular those prior to “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1959-1960),³ a text that broke definitively with the Marxian analyses of contemporary society and with the thesis of the sovereign, or privileged, role of the proletariat. We have to understand that, if one retains for the term *proletariat* the content it manifestly had for Marx, this proletariat has become a minority, and a declining minority, in the so-called developed countries. And if, as confusedly and sophistically most contemporary Marxists do, one calls *proletariat* all wage earners [*salariés*], that no longer means anything: in contemporary society, almost everyone is or is tending to become a salaried employee [*salarié*]. In addition and above all, absolutely basic struggles and demands are supported by categories of the population that are not the “proletariat” and even do not admit of being defined in terms of “social classes”—women, youth, various minorities, and so on.

Metropoli: In fact, your critique of the traditions of the workers’ movement intersects with the consideration now being given to the new behaviors of social subjects who had

³T/E: A three-part *S. ou B.* text now in [PSW2](#).

till now been excluded from political struggle. What are, in your opinion, the most important ruptures brought about by the struggles of women and youth in recent years?

C.C.: Such ruptures are of colossal importance. One of them is precisely the one I just mentioned: the destruction of the idea of a “subject of the revolution,” identified with one “class.” It is *all society* that is concerned by revolution, and all of it, except for a tiny minority, that in one way or another, at this or that moment, contributes to the immense historical transformation that is underway. In another connection—and this is precisely what I was heralding in advance in this 1959-1960 text—these movements show that the problematic of revolution, namely, the problematic of being human today, goes infinitely far beyond all “economic” or narrowly “political” transformations. What the women’s and youth movements, for example, have called into question are institutions, norms, values, and significations that are far older and deeper than those of capitalism: patriarchal family and morality, passive “education,” etc. What these movements are as a matter of fact expressing is the refusal of domination in all domains, the search for autonomy. And what is characteristic is that all the political movements with their “theories” and their programs, all the “vanguards” have revealed themselves to be desperately behind the times—and at the outset radically hostile—in relation to these movements. Today, they indulge in various politicocommercial enterprises of cooptation, adding to their programs or their articles a few phrases about women, youth, and so on.

Metropoli: Terrorism has been a serious and major phenomenon in recent years. Many people consider it a relic of the past; for others, it is a consequence of the new movements. How do you judge it?

C.C.: Terrorism is an impasse. It leads to nothing. It uses the same means we condemn when it comes to the regime we are combating. When one examines the view of society by which the advocates of terrorism want to “justify” and “theorize” their activities, one notes that it pertains to the most naive and coarsest sort of Marxism: society is said to be a huge powder keg, ready to explode; one needs only to approach it with a match. Or else: this state apparatus is the sole thing maintaining the regime, *and* it would suffice to exterminate a few of its agents for it to collapse upon itself. Whether explicitly formulated or not, these ideas show that, from this standpoint, the terrorists are living in a dream world. And everything that is known about their organization indicates that that organization is constructed on the totalitarian Stalinist model.

Metropoli: You have written that our era is marked by radical and irreversible changes: crisis of age-old institutions (family, school, prison); disappearance of inherited orientations and traditional bearings [*repères*]; privatization of individuals; industrialization of ideological production, etc. How do you view the coming years?

C.C.: I think that we would be in agreement to say that the time for prophets is over. I can say only what are for me the major points of reference [*points de repère*]. Firstly, that the established regimes, as much in the West as in the East, contain deep-seated antinomies and irrationalities, so that it is inevitable that they will produce imbalances or phases of destabilization—*crises*, if you will, on the condition that one does not understand by that term solely economic crises (and still less economic crises of the “classical” type). Secondly, that the grip those regimes, and their ideological and political representatives, have over peoples is increasingly undergoing enormous wear and tear; both in the West as well as,

especially, in the East, the population has a cynical attitude toward the dominant institutions. Thirdly, that the changes you recalled cannot but have very profound, certainly cumulative effects, which we have not yet glimpsed and about which it is very difficult to formulate prognoses. What type of children, for example, will be produced by the boys and girls who today are twenty years old and who have attitudes and mentalities previously unknown in history? Finally, that all that we are seeing makes us think that, in one form or another, the movements that are contesting the instituted order will continue. The big problem, the big question mark, is the one that concerns the capacity and the desire of people to organize themselves collectively while participating in a fully active and responsible manner in the direction of their activities and to confront *the question of the overall institution* of society. And a part of this problem that concerns us directly is the reconstitution of a political movement in the deep sense of this term, and the forms that movement will have to take.

The Vacuum Industry^{*}

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

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

^{*}In a letter addressed to the editors of several newspapers and newsweeklies, Pierre Vidal-Naquet expressed his astonishment at the dithyrambs with which Parisian reviews [*la critique parisienne*] had, nearly unanimously, greeted Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Le Testament de Dieu* (Paris: Grasset, 1979), a work that, as he said, "is literally teeming with gross errors, vague approximations, fake quotations, and raving statements." Of all the publications that received this letter, only *Le Nouvel Observateur* printed it (on p. 42 of its June 18, 1979 issue), accompanied by an incredibly rude and dishonest response from the author whose work was being challenged. Vidal-Naquet responded to him in turn on p. 37 of the June 25, 1979 issue. The note to be read here was published in this same newsweekly on pp. 35-37 of the July 9, 1979 issue. The entire printed record of this correspondence was republished in *Quaderni di storia*, 11 (January-June 1980): 315-29. "L'industrie du vide" was reprinted in [DH](#), pp. 28-34 (32-40 of the 1999 reprint). [T/E: The present translation first appeared in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).]

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

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

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

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

him to the skies, can the public follow docilely along—and can those who unveil the imposture, without in any way being reduced to silence or imprisoned, elicit no effective response?

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

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

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

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

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

That the media industry would make its profits as it can is, within the instituted system, only logical: its business is business. That it finds some unscrupulous scribes to play the game is not surprising, either. Yet all this has still another condition of possibility: the attitude of the public. The “authors” and their promoters fabricate and sell their junk. But the public buys it—and sees therein only some junk, some fast food. Far from offering any consolation, this behavior is expressive of a catastrophic degradation—one that risks becoming irreversible—of the public’s relationship to the written word. The more people read, the less they *read*.

They read books that are presented to them as “philosophical” like they read detective novels. In a sense, certainly, they are not wrong. But in another sense, they are unlearning to read, to reflect, to engage in criticism. They are simply catching up, as the *Nouvel Observateur* said a few weeks ago, with “the chic-est debate of the season.”

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

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

We are not talking here about art criticism, which raises other questions. Nor are we talking about criticism in the domains of the exact sciences, or of specialized disciplines, where until now the research community has been able to impose its scientific ethos. In these domains, moreover, the mystifications are also rare for a good reason: trafficking in Bamileke customs or the decimals of Planck’s constant does not bring in anything.

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

Now, do not come and tell me that it is up to the readers to judge: that is obvious, and futile. Nor that I am inviting book-review critics to function like censors, to act as a screen between authors and the public. That would be egregious hypocrisy. For, contemporary book-review criticism is already carrying out this censorship function on a massive scale: it buries beneath silence everything that is not fashionable and everything that is difficult. Among book critics’ crowning jewels of shame, for example, is the following: they mention Emmanuel Lévinas, fleetingly, only after he, ransacked and chopped into little pieces, was thrown into the Lévy fruit salad. And insofar as things depend on it, book-review criticism imposes the “products.” If French book critics are to be believed, nothing but masterworks have been produced in this country for the past thirty years, and *nothing* would be bad or subject to criticism. It has been ages since I have seen a book critic truly criticize an author. (I am not talking about cases in which book critics are obliged to give echo to polemics among authors, nor of “politically”-oriented criticisms.) Everything that is published—everything that is talked about—is marvelous. Would the result be different if there were prior censorship and if the book critics wrote on somebody’s orders? Commercial-advertising subservience

does not differ so much, from this point of view, from totalitarian subservience.

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

The respect for formal standards of rigor is not a "formal" question. The book critic has to tell me whether the author is making up facts and inventing quotations, either gratuitously, which creates a presumption of ignorance and irresponsibility, or for the needs of his cause, which creates a presumption of intellectual dishonesty. To do this is not to be a prig but to do one's job. Not to do it is to abuse the public's confidence and to steal one's own salary. The book critic is charged with a public, social, and democratic function of checking up on authors and educating readers. You are free to write and to publish whatever you want. But if you plagiarize Saint-John Perse, be forewarned that that will be said loud and clear. The educational function is for future authors and

¹T/E: Castoriadis mentions "the French Ideology" in "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1979), [PSW3](#), 304, and in "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986), now in [CL4](#); in the latter essay, which offers a critical review of a book by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, he refers the reader, apropos of this "French Ideology," to "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation" (1977), now in [CL1](#).

readers, and it is all the more vital today as school and university education is constantly deteriorating.

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

The second reason is that there is no abyss separating the “formal” from the “substantive.” If book critics had flinched at this now-famous Hali-baba-carnassus author, they would easily have discovered, one thing leading to another, that the “author” was drawing his “dazzling erudition” from Bailly (an excellent dictionary for high-school seniors, but not for an investigation into Greek culture) and that the asininites he had recounted about the absence of “conscience” in Greece collapses already in the face of Menander’s “Conscience is a God to all mortals.” If they had flinched at Robespierre’s “killing of God,” they would perhaps have seen more readily what sticks out here like a sore thumb: that the “author” is falsifying the facts in order to connect atheism and Terror and

clouding up the massive historical evidence that goes to show that “monotheisms” have been, infinitely more than other beliefs, sources of holy wars, of extermination for those who are allodox, accomplices of the most oppressive powers, and that they have, in two and a half cases out of three, explicitly called for or tried to impose a nonseparation of the religious and the political.

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

Psychoanalysis and Society I*

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

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

*Interview with two New York psychoanalysts conducted in New York on October 4, 1981. Originally published with a short introduction in *Psych-Critique* (New York), 2 (1982): 3-8. It appeared as "Psychanalyse et société I," tr. Zoé Castoriadis, in [DH](#), 35-49 (41-59 of the 1999 reprint), with a few author's additions in brackets. [T/E: This interview was first reprinted, with these author's additions, in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).]

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

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

D.M.: Yes. ...

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

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

C.C.: Yes. What is collective autonomy? Well, what is its opposite? The opposite is heteronomous society. What are the roots of heteronomous society? Here we come up against what I think has been a misleading central idea of most political movements of the Left, and first and foremost of Marxism. Heteronomy has been confused, I mean identified, with domination and exploitation by a particular social stratum. But domination and exploitation by one particular social stratum is but *one* of the manifestations (or realizations) of heteronomy. The essence of heteronomy is more than that. You find heteronomy in primitive societies, actually in all primitive societies, yet you cannot really speak,

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

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

D.M.: Not “somebody else,” but “something else.”

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

So, society is alienating itself to its own product, which are its institutions. And autonomy is not just the self-institution of society, because there is *always* self-institution of society. God does not exist, and “laws of history,” in the Marxian sense, do not exist. Institutions are a creation of man. But they are, so to speak, a blind creation. People do not know that they create and that they are, in a certain sense, free to create their institutions. And they mix up the fact that there

can be no society (and no human life) without institutions and laws, with the idea that there has to be some transcendent source and guarantee of the institution. You see what I mean?

D.M.: Yes.

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

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

D.M.: Now, you have made a kind of equation

between the Unconscious and our past. You said, “dominated by our Unconscious, dominated by our past.” In a certain way, this strikes me as an optimistic idea about the Unconscious because it implies that it is accessible through work—one can remember—in a certain way, and the more one remembers, the less one is dominated, and finally....

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

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

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

D.M.: Um-hm.

C.C.: Right? It is clear with the dream. The, at any rate unattainable, identity of the meaning of this dream with some configuration dating from childhood is not in itself very significant or very imperative. What is important is that the patient can really see through this meaning and hopefully alter his or her attitude in relation to this meaning and all the complex structure of drives, affects, emotions, and desires linked to it. So, the past and the Unconscious are and are not the same, both theoretically and in the practice of the psychoanalytic treatment. Now, you ask: “What are the

limits?" This is a very important question. I mean, after all, why is it that a psychoanalytic treatment does not always work?

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

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

revolutionaries) ought to be also a sort of exemplary school for collective self-government. It ought to teach people to dispense with leaders, and to dispense with rigid organizational structures without falling, so to speak, into anomie or microanomie. I think this is the relation of the two sides of the problem.

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

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

The same is even more true on the psychical side. I think there is an embryonic psyche in every living being, and especially in what we call higher species. But there is also a gap between this “functional” psyche of animals, and human

psyche: the latter corresponds to a tremendous, monstrous development of this “faculty” of traditional psychology, thoroughly neglected by traditional philosophy, which is imagination. Imagination is the capacity to posit as real that which is not real. It breaks the functional regulation of the prehuman “psyche.”

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

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

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

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

C.C.: Violence.

D.M. Violence.

C.C.: No problem about it. And without that violence, you can’t have a survival of the human species. That is why I’m very strongly against some pastoral and idyllic dreams of

well-meaning people like us, that you could have a happy and glorious and chocolate-tasting entry into social life. This thing just cannot exist. If you ever had a child, and in whatever way you are bringing it up, from the first month onward it will inexplicably, at some point in time, start crying and screaming like hell. Not because it is hungry; nor because it is sick. Just because it discovers a world that is not plastic to its will. And we ought to be serious. Not only unconsciously, even consciously we would, all of us, wish a world that would be plastic to will, right?

M.&L.: Sure.

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

So, there is this psyche, with its imagination and omnipotence fantasies, and there is a first representative of society with the child, which is of course the mother. And the function of the mother is both that she limits the child—she becomes the instrument by which the child starts to recognize that everything is not obeying his omnipotence wishes—and at the same time helps the child make sense of the world. The role of this first person is essential and imperative; the mother, or the person who plays her role, maybe the father,

maybe a nurse, or maybe even, like in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a talking machine (where, of course, the effects would be different and rather bad). The mother helps the child make sense of the world and of himself in a way very different from the initial way of the psychical monad. The way of the psychical monad is that everything depends on its wishes and its representations [and that everything conforms to them]. The mother destroys this, and has to destroy it. This is the necessary, inevitable, violence. If she does not destroy it, then she drives the child to psychosis.

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

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

The mother has to give up this role of master of signification. She has to say to the child that if this word means that, or if this act is prohibited, it is not because it is my desire, but because such is the reason for it, or that is how everybody means it, or such is the social convention. Thereby, she divests herself of this omnipotence that the child, using precisely its own projection schemes, has attributed to her. The child projects on somebody—here, the mother—its own fantasized omnipotence, which it was to abandon at some stage. When it thinks falsely, "But Mommy is omnipotent," Mommy has to say, "No, I am not." "Words do *not* mean

what I want them to mean,” contrary to what Humpty Dumpty says to Alice, “They mean what people mean by them,” and so on.

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

C.C.: As long as this is the case, it is not true that it is a sharing or a coparticipation. I mean, as long as we are in this stage, the child imagines that the breast appeared because he or she wished it to appear. The decisive moment, as Freud knew very well, is the moment the child becomes aware that it wishes for the breast to appear and the breast does not appear. And there is always a moment like that and this corresponds, like Melanie Klein would say, and very rightly so, to the “bad breast.” This is also the root of the fundamental ambivalence in all human relations. I mean the Other has, all the time, inherited these two sides of the good breast and the bad breast, the good figure and the bad figure. Most of the time, the one totally covers and dominates the other. Therefore, we love or we hate people. For people we are related to, one or the other element predominates. But we all know that in even the greatest love there is always hidden the negative element, which does not prevent it from being a love.

The real change comes first, when the child has to

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

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

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

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

C.C.: But "shared signification" implies what? Unless you have a concept of some biological sociability of the human animal, which I don't believe can hold water, the shared signification can come only from positing two separate and independent persons, as entities in themselves. There is A and there is B and there is he or she and me and he or she thinks or wishes or calls things that way and I call them this way and some common ground can be found. But this is a quite late stage.

Some embryonic elements of this—this is a difficult point because, after all, we can never be in the psyche of an

infant of six months or even eighteen months—some embryonic elements of this might be there before. But I think that this situation exists qualitatively only from the point in time when the infant has been able to recognize its mother as both an independent and limited entity.

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

C.C.: No, I think that that is another specific discussion. What has not been recognized among left-wing critics of the Oedipal construction of Freud, granted that there is a lot of patriarchic ideology in the Freudian construction, is that the main point about the Oedipal problem for Freud is the problem of civilization. It is not so much the wish to make love to your mother and kill your father; it is the problem that as long as you are only two there is no society. There has to be a third term to break this face-to-face. The face-to-face is fusion, or totally dominating the other, or totally being dominated by the other. The other is the total object, or you are the total object of the other. And in order that this sort of quasi-psychotic absoluteness be broken, you have to have a third term. And never mind if it is the father or the maternal uncle. I mean the discussions between Bronislaw Malinowski and Géza Róheim are so irrelevant. Is it the father, or is it the maternal uncle, and so on—the main point is not there. The main point is that you can't have just two; you must have a third element. Of course, this does not lead to the conclusion that the father must be the master—that is a total *non sequitur*. And you even must have a fourth element. I mean this couple has to behave in such a way as to bring the child to the awareness that the father is not the source or the origin of the law, and that he himself is just one among many, many other fathers—that there is a human collectivity, you see?

And this Freud had seen. People always quote the myth of *Totem and Taboo* ending up with the killing of the

father and the ceremonial ritual feast. They forget the collective oath of the brothers, which is the real founding stone of society. Each of the brothers renounces omnipotence, renounces the omnipotence of the *primaeval* father: I am not going to have all the women and I will not kill anyone. This is self-limitation through collective positing of the law.

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

C.C.: That's not the way I would put it. I just want to say that when Freud was writing *Totem and Taboo*, he was facing the problem of the initial institution of society. Of course, *Totem and Taboo* is a myth and it is silly to criticize it even if Freud took it to be a sort of history about the exactness of which we would never be sure but which represents more or less how things happened—this is irrelevant. I mean, he was wrong in that. But his preoccupation was with the ontological conditions for a society to exist in which nobody could exert unlimited power like the *primaeval* father. In this respect, not the myth itself, but the meanings that are in the myth are very important. I mean society is there precisely at the moment when there is a self-limitation of all the brothers, all the brothers and sisters.

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

C.C.: Yeah, and with the ambivalent relation to it. I think, precisely, that the totem is the embodiment of the

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

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

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

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

C.C.: That’s right.

D.L.: ...in continual construction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

D.L.: It would follow then that there is a parallel in "working through" between the collectivity and the individual. That is, that there's a kind of uncertainty about history, a vision of indeterminacy in which one does not resolve the question of history and in which one does not solve the past and know from the past exactly what to do. A collectivity is able to take a position in which the future can be worked through.

C.C.: Absolutely. That's absolutely correct and I think this is the correct position. In fact, I think the true human position is *to assume*, in the French sense of the word: to accept, to take over the indeterminacy, the risk, knowing that there is no safeguard, and no guarantee. I mean the safeguards and the guarantees that exist are trivial and not worth talking about. In the real decisive moment, there is no safeguard and no guarantee. We have to take the risks and to take the risks means we are responsible for our actions. Of course, a full concept of responsibility would imply conscience. Always

there is the “I did not know.” I mean you can argue that way in front of a court, but in front of your own eyes, even though knowing we are not omniscient, you still cannot simply argue, “I did not know.” You just have to take on a standard by which you are really responsible.

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

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

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

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

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

C.C.: By all means. I would be very glad. I found our discussion to be very positive.¹

¹T/E: Beginning with “Well, those of us...,” included here is a last D.L./C.C. exchange, which was dropped from [DH](#).

Marx Today*

Lutter: What is the use of Marx today, for militants who want to fight against capitalism, be it Western capitalism or the bureaucratic societies of Eastern Europe?

Cornelius Castoriadis: It is not quite appropriate to speak in terms of *usefulness*, since an author is not a tool. That said, if one reads Marx as all great authors should be read (not in order to find in him a dogma or ready-made truths, but critically) one understands what it means to think, one discovers new ways of thinking and of criticizing thought.

In this respect, Marx is a particularly difficult and even “dangerous” author; indeed, he is so “deceptive” that he managed to deceive himself. Marx has written a very great number of works, but his writings are neither homogeneous nor consistent; Marx is a complex and ultimately antinomic author.

Why *antinomic*? Because Marx provides us with a relatively new idea or inspiration or intuition, namely that it is men who make their own history, and that the emancipation of the workers will be accomplished by the workers themselves. In other words, the source of truth, especially in

*Interview with libertarian militants recorded March 23, 1983 and published in *Lutter*, 5 (May-August 1983). Reprinted in [DH](#), 74-85 (90-104 of the 1999 reprint). English translation in *Thesis Eleven*, 8 (1984): 124-32. [T/E: “Amended and corrected for Solidarity by” the author, Franco Schiavoni’s *Thesis Eleven* translation appeared as “Marx Today: The Tragicomical Paradox” in *Solidarity Journal*, 17 (Summer 1988): 7-15, thus *after* the [DH](#) reprint. The present, edited version Americanizes spelling and punctuation as well as standardizes the text while restoring some phrases previously present only in the French original and placing in brackets some French phrases that may help clarify *Solidarity*’s edited translation. In order to avoid confusion and to conform to Castoriadis’s usual distinction, “technology” has been changed to “technique” or “technics” when the original French has *technique*.]

the realm of politics, is not to be sought in heaven or in books, but in the living activities of people operating within society. This apparently simple and even commonplace idea implies a great number of extremely important consequences that Marx never managed to bring out. Why? Because at the same time, that is to say since his youth, Marx was dominated by the ghost of a complete, total, fully accomplished theory. Not by the ghost of the obviously indispensable theoretical *work*, but by the ghost of the definitive *system*.

Thus, from *The German Ideology* onwards, he sets himself up as the theoretician who has discovered *the law* ruling society and history, the law of how society functions, the law of the order of appearance of social formations within history, the “law of capitalist economy,” and so on.

This second element, which we are justified in calling the *theoretical* or *speculative* element, dominates Marx’s thought and attitude from the very beginning. It relegates the first element to some lapidary and enigmatic expressions. This helps us understand why he spent thirty years of his adult life in an attempt to finish *Capital*, the book whose task was to prove theoretically, and on the basis of economic considerations, the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism. Marx would obviously fail in this attempt, and he could not finish *Capital*.

The second element is false, and at the same time incompatible with the first. Either history is really governed by *laws*, and in that case a truly human activity is impossible, except perhaps in a technical sense; or human beings really make their own history, and then the task of theory will be directed not to discovering “laws,” but to the elucidation of the conditions within which human activity unfolds, the regularity of their appearance, and so on.

However, it is this second element that has enabled

Marx and Marxism to play such an important and catastrophic role in the working-class movement. In Marx, people have sought (and have believed that they had found) a certain number of ready-made truths. They have believed that all truths, or in any case the most important truths, can be found in Marx, and that it is therefore not worthwhile, and even dangerous and suspect, to think for oneself. It is this second position that has legitimized the bureaucracies of the working-class organizations invoking Marx and that has helped them to become the official and authorized interpreters of socialist orthodoxy.

One must acknowledge that the success of the Marxist claim to represent scientific truth has not done violence to people. It has, indeed, represented an answer to something people were seeking and are still seeking. At a very deep level, this something corresponds to the *alienation*, the *heteronomy* of people. People need certainties, they need psychological and intellectual security. They consequently tend to abdicate the task of thinking for themselves, and to entrust it to others.

And, of course, the theory is there to provide pseudoguarantees. Our theory proves that capitalism is doomed to collapse and to be “followed by socialism.” The nineteenth-century fascination with “science” is obviously still alive, a fascination made stronger by the fact that this strange “science” (Marxism) claims to be “objective,” namely independent of the wishes and desires of those professing it. At the same time, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, the “science” is able to “produce” a future condition of mankind in full harmony with our wishes and desires: “historical laws” that guarantee that the society of the future will necessarily be a “good society.”

Incidentally, it is funny to see Marxists, interminably

busy “interpreting” this or that point of Marx’s theory, *never* asking themselves the Marxist question *par excellence*: How has Marxism *really worked* in real history, and *why*? This simple fact totally and irrevocably disqualifies them.

Lutter: We can then find a totalitarian aspect within the very conception of theory, its nature and role, in Marx himself. But libertarians tend to condemn Marxism globally and rather hurriedly, by claiming that it contains the theoretical foundations of what they call *authoritarian socialism* (Leninism, Stalinism, and so on). But don’t you think that it is possible to find in Marx categories and theoretical notions that could be useful to the struggle for self-management?

C.C.: Marx’s relationship with the birth of totalitarianism is a very complex question. I would not talk about a *totalitarian theory*. The term *totalitarianism* applies to social and political regimes. I do not think that Marx was totalitarian, nor that he was “the father” of totalitarianism. It is quite simple to prove it. Marxism did not give rise only to Leninism-Stalinism. First and foremost, it gave rise to Social Democracy, which can be described in many ways but cannot be called *totalitarian*. Many historical ingredients were necessary to give birth to totalitarianism. Among the most important of these we can list the creation by Lenin of the very *type* of totalitarian organization, the Bolshevik Party, and the role it was given within the State and Russian society after 1917. From this point of view, Lenin is the real “father” of totalitarianism.

No doubt some of the ingredients can be traced back to Marx himself and to his theory. I have tried to discuss these in the texts published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1959

(“Proletariat and Organization”)¹ and then in 1964 (“Marxism and Revolutionary Theory”), now republished as the first part of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#).

The first ingredient, to which I have already alluded, is the very position of theory as such. Just like Hegelian philosophy, Marx’s theory is presented as the “last theory”: it takes the place of Hegel’s “Absolute Knowledge.” Naturally, Marxists will protest and swear that they do not *think* in these terms. But we must consider what they actually *do*. They can chatter about “dialectics,” “relativism,” etc., but their “work” is always directed to interpreting (correcting, completing, improving, etc.) Marx’s thought, as if, on the whole, one had to remain permanently *submitted* to that thought. In general, their practice corresponds to the affirmation that the fundamental truth about our times was told by Marx. This has grotesque consequences, for instance in the realm of economics. More than a century after the conception and formulation of Marx’s ideas and analyses, Marxists continue to want to prove at all costs that Marx was right, as if the important thing were to salvage some of Marx’s statements, rather than to ascertain and understand what really happens in the economic field.

This concept of theory as “the last theory” (in effect as “Absolute Knowledge”) is not something external, which could be discarded while allowing the rest to be saved. It is imperatively born out of and demanded by the very *content* of theory. The latter claims that, on the one hand, the proletariat is the “last class” in history, and, on the other hand, that to

¹T/E: The first part of “Proletariat and Organization” (1959) now appears in [*PSW2*](#). Excerpts were reprinted in [*SouBA*](#). The second and final part (also from 1959) is projected to be included, along with the first part, in the second volume of the eight-volume *Political Writings*.

each class there corresponds a conception that “truly” expresses its interests or historical role. It follows that either Marxism is nothing at all, or it is *the* theory, the only true theory of the proletariat, the “last class” in history. And, if this theory is the theoretical expression of the historical situation of the proletariat, questioning it is tantamount to opposing the proletariat, to becoming a “class enemy,” and so on (these things have been said, and acted upon, millions of times).

But what happens if someone, you, me, a worker, does not agree? Well, “he places himself outside his class.” He joins the side of the “class enemy.” We can thus see that one fundamental component of Marxism is absolutely unacceptable to a democratic working-class movement, to a democratic revolutionary movement. Democracy is impossible without freedom and diversity of opinion. Democracy implies that, in the political field, no one possesses a *science* that can justify statements such as “this is true; this is false,” and so on. Otherwise, anyone “possessing” such a “science” could and *should* take a sovereign position in the body politic.

This is exactly what has happened, at the ideological level, within the Leninist parties. The ruling bureaucracy of the working-class parties of the Second International legitimized itself in its own eyes and sought to legitimize itself in the eyes of the workers on the strength of this idea: we are those who hold the truth, Marxist theory. But a theory merely consists of words and sentences, necessarily endowed with several possible meanings and thus requiring an *interpretation*. An interpretation itself still consists of words and sentences themselves requiring an interpretation, and so on. How can all that be stopped? Churches found an answer long ago: they defined an *orthodox* interpretation and, above all, a *real* structure [*instance réel*] that incarnates, guarantees,

and “defends” orthodoxy. And it is never noted that this reactionary monstrosity, the idea of *orthodoxy* and of *guardians of orthodoxy*, seizes the working-class movement and enslaves it through Marxism and thanks to Marxism. At this level, Leninism has definitely been more consistent than Social Democracy, hence its much greater success.

There is another example, another ingredient that has played a very great role in legitimizing Leninist-Stalinist bureaucracy: the talk of crypto-Stalinists and fellow travelers aimed at covering up the horrors of the Stalinist regime. Historical materialism maintains that each stage of the development of the productive forces is accompanied by a specific social regime, and that the establishment [*instauration*] of socialism is therefore dependent upon a “sufficient” degree of development of the productive forces. It follows that even though Stalin kept terrorizing, murdering, sending millions of people to Siberia, factories were still being constructed, and also therefore the material bases of Socialism. Thanks to a “sufficient” development of the productive system, the other evils [*tous ces phénomènes malheureux*], which can be attributed to the “backwardness” of the Russian productive forces, will finally disappear. Even today, if you scratch a Communist a little, he will talk exactly like this. This is the outcome of the *content* of Marxist theory. Socialism is not seen as a political and historical project, the socially rooted activity of a great number of people who aim at modifying the institution of society, but as the result of an objective historical movement incarnated by the development of the productive forces.

Lutter: But are there or are there not, in Marx, ideas that can be used in the struggle for self-management?

C.C.: I will use the example I know best, my own. When I began to write on self-management, on the collective

management of production and of social life in 1949, from the first number of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* I was a Marxist. And I thought that the idea of collective workers' management was the necessary way of giving concrete form to the Marxist conception of socialism. But once I began to develop this idea starting in 1955 (in "The Content of Socialism"),² I rapidly realized that it was profoundly incompatible with Marx's conception and that in that respect Marx was useless.

In developing the idea of workers' management, of the management of production by the producers themselves, one rapidly comes up against the question of technique. Marx has nothing to say on this issue. Marx and Marxists have provided no critique of capitalist technics [*la technique capitaliste*]. What they criticize is the misappropriation in favor of capitalists of a technics that appears, as such, unquestionable.

And is there, in Marx, a critique of the organization of capitalist factories? No, there is not. He does, of course, denounce its most cruel and inhuman aspects. But in Marx's view, this organization is a true incarnation of rationality, because it is completely and necessarily dictated by the state of technique. Nothing central to it can, therefore, be changed. This is why he thinks that production and the economy are destined to remain within the realm of necessity, and that "the realm of freedom" can be built only outside the realm of necessity through the reduction of the working day.³ It is like saying that work, in itself, is slavery and cannot ever become a center for the unfolding of human creativity.

In point of fact, contemporary technics is well and

²T/E: The first part of "On the Content of Socialism" (1955) now appears in [PSW1](#), the second and third parts (1957 and 1958) in [PSW2](#).

³T/E: See ch. 48 in vol. 3 of Marx's *Capital*.

truly *capitalistic*; there is nothing neutral about it. It is modeled upon specifically capitalist objectives, which do not consist so much in the increase of profits as, above all, in the elimination of the role of human beings in production, in the subordination of producers in the impersonal mechanisms of the productive process. Consequently, as long as this type of technics prevails, it is impossible to speak of self-management. The self-management of the assembly line by the assembly-line workers is a sinister joke. To establish self-management, it is necessary to abolish the assembly line [*casser la chaîne*]. I am not saying that all existing factories should be destroyed overnight. Nevertheless, a revolution that does not *immediately* tackle the question of a conscious transformation of technics in order to allow people, as individuals, as groups, as a working collectivity, to have access to the control of the production process—such a revolution would be condemned to a rapid death. People who work on the assembly line six days a week cannot be expected to enjoy, as Lenin pretended, Sundays of soviet freedom.

Marx did not and could not develop such a critique of technique. The reason is profoundly bound to his conception of history. Like Hegel's "Reason" or "Spirit of the World," in Marx it is the "rationality" incarnated by technique (the "development of productive forces") that makes history advance. This explains why Marx and Marxism could only be massive obstacles to a movement aiming at self-management, autonomy, or self-government of human collectivities.

Lutter: However, in reading your writings, which have obviously developed in time and fortunately show a thought in a state of evolution, one gets the impression that, while you formulate a very caustic critique of Marxism, you utilize a number of categories molded or at least systemized [*mise en ordre*] by Marx. One example is when you show that the

societies of Eastern Europe practice exploitation. On the other hand, your critique of technology is quite valid. But in positing the elements of a revolutionary project, you, too, rely upon certain aspects of existing technology that in your opinion can be positively utilized [*possibilité de détournement*]. Data processing, for example, can be an element leading to the totalitarianization of society but can also be appropriately transformed and become an element of democracy throughout the world.

C.C.: Once again it must be said that Marx is a very important author. But in the history of Greco-Western society, we can find about thirty or forty authors of equal importance, whose ideas, methods, etc., are being constantly utilized without anyone, for that reason, being called a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a Kantian, and I know not what. In this perspective, Marx enjoys no privilege.

Marx does hold a privileged position in relation to the first element of the antinomy I formulated earlier, to the extent that he sees that it is the living activity of human beings that creates social and historical forms (it is no accident that Marx does not express the concept in these terms). At the same time, he does not simply decide to wait for the next stage of this activity, but he takes up a political stand. He wants to be an active part of the movement or take charge of it (in this last formulation we can see already the sinister ambiguity underlying this position). Having a historical project, and trying, at the same time, to understand to what extent this political project is nourished and borne by historical reality, by the workers' struggle against capitalism, therein lies Marx's originality, his absolute singularity. Insofar as I still personally feel a specific link with Marx, it is through this element that he taught me (or that I found in him). But this does not mean "being a Marxist."

Once we come to content, it is obvious that several notions put forward by Marx have now become incorporated in our thought. But even in these cases we are compelled to be critical and to move further. One example is my text “The Social Regime in Russia” (*Esprit*, July-August 1978, republished by Éditions Le Vent du Chemin),⁴ in which I summarize in the form of theses all I have written on Russia since 1946. The exposition begins with a somewhat educational part, intended for Marxists, which makes use of the notions of the relations of production and of classes defined in terms of their positions within these relations, so as to say to them: If you are really Marxists, you must agree that the Russian regime is based on exploitation, that it is a class regime, and so on. But immediately after, I show that this analysis is quite unsatisfactory, because, for example, in Russia, the total *political* subjugation of the working class totally transforms its position, *even within the relations of production*. This leads us very far. Independently of the concrete case of Russia, this situation carried deep implications both in respect to concepts and in respect to methodology. It means that I cannot define the position of a social category within the relations of production solely by taking into consideration the relations of production. Consequently, the concept of “historical determinism” and the view that the base determines the superstructures and that the economy determines politics begin to crumble.

As for technology, what I wish to say is that there is no neutrality of technique as to how technique is actually applied. To give an example, television, as it is today, is a

⁴T/E: “The Social Regime in Russia,” now in [CR](#), is omitted from [CL2](#) in order to be included instead in the fifth volume of the projected eight-volume *Political Writings* series.

means of brutalization. And it would be false to say that another society would use *this* television differently; there would no longer be *this* television in a different society. Many things would have to be modified *in* television, to allow it to be “used differently.” This type of relationship, in which everybody is connected to a single actively emitting center, while all the others hold the position of passive, horizontally unrelated receivers, obviously constitutes an alienating political structure, incarnated within the applied technics. How all this could be changed is another issue, an issue that cannot be solved by a single individual, but partakes of social creativity.

What remains true is that in today’s scientific and technical *knowledge* there is a potential that must be explored and exploited with a view to modifying present technique [*la technique effective*].

Lutter: If we want to summarize your thought on Marx, we can say that you consider him an important author, useful in certain respects, but that it is useless to refer to Marxism as if it were an accomplished system of thought. You consider the usefulness of Marx to be very relative indeed.

C.C.: There is something that has amazed and even shocked me for a long time. There is a tragicomical paradox in the spectacle of people who claim to be revolutionary, who wish to overthrow the world and at the same time try to cling at all costs to a reference system, who would feel lost if the author or the system that guarantees the truth of what they believe, were to be taken away from them. How is it possible not to see that these people place themselves by their own volition in a position of mental subjection to a work that is already there, that has mastered a truth that henceforth can only be interpreted, refined, patched up?

We must create our own thought as we advance; we must create it, of course, always in connection with a certain past, a certain tradition. We must stop believing that the truth was revealed once and for all in a work written 120 years ago. It is essential to communicate this conception to people, especially to young people.

There is something else equally important. It is impossible to avoid drawing up a balance sheet of the history of Marxism, of what Marxism has actually become, of how it worked and still works in real history. First there is Marx himself, already antinomical, more than complex, more than open to criticism. Then we have a Marxism without inverted commas, a number of authors and trends claiming to derive from Marx, who make an honest and serious attempt at interpretation (let us say Georg Lukács up to 1923, or the Frankfurt School). By the way, this type of Marxism no longer exists today. And then we have “Marxism,” the historically powerful and overwhelming “Marxism” of the bureaucratic States, of Stalinist parties, of their various appendages. It is a “Marxism” that plays an extremely important role; indeed, it is the *only* Marxism to play a real role. It still continues (almost no longer in Europe, but still to a great extent in the Third World) to attract people who want to do something against the horrible situations prevailing in their countries. It continues to convince them to join movements that appropriate [*confisquent*] their activities and deflect them to the benefit [*vers l'établissement*] of bureaucratic regimes. This “Marxism” still continues to offer a cover of legitimacy to the Russian regime and its expansionist undertakings.

Lutter: This is true, but we are still faced with a problem. Militants do need psychological security, but this is only one side of the story. A revolutionary who wants to

transform the world needs a certain number of tools. One cannot just face the world, keep one's eyes and ears wide open, and try to understand in a subjective manner. I agree with your critical remarks, but I still think that the problem of the reference framework remains. It is the type of process that you got involved in, to some extent, when you wrote [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#); the first third of the book is devoted to a critical assessment of Marxism. Today there remains a real void, a real gap.

C.C.: I am not suggesting that everyone should start by making a *tabula rasa*. In any case, no one does it and no one can do it. Everyone carries along, at all times, an ensemble of ideas, convictions, readings, etc. The question is to get rid of the idea that there is, before one starts, a given theory in a privileged position. When I wrote the beginning of the text you mentioned, I aimed among other things at destroying this idea because I am convinced that it bars the way to lucid thinking [*réfléchir lucidement*].

But let us consider seriously the problem you raise. It is true that we need to find an orientation in the modern [*contemporain*] world. And we do need to elucidate our project for a future society, what we want, what people want, what the project implies, how it could be implemented, what new problems and contradictions it might give rise to, and so on.

Concerning all these things, Marx has nothing to say, *strictly* nothing, except that we must abolish private property in the means of production, which is right, provided that we know exactly what this means (after all, don't nationalizations continue to pass as socialism?). And there are other problems as well: all forced collectivization is to be radically excluded. At bottom, all the essential ideas that still maintain some relevance for us as revolutionaries had already been

formulated by the working-class movement before Marx, between 1800 and 1848, more exactly in the newspapers of the first English trade-unions and in the writings of the French socialists.

And if we want to find an orientation in the contemporary social world, such as it exists, our main object (in respect to power structures, economics, and even culture) is obviously bureaucracy and bureaucratic Apparatuses. What can Marx tell us on these issues? Nothing. Less than nothing, worse than nothing. It is by means of Marx's ideas that Trotskyists have sought for sixty years to eliminate the problem of the bureaucracy: "the problem is the ownership of capital, not the bureaucracy; the bureaucracy is not a class," and so on—whereas it is clear that the problem lies more and more in the bureaucracy, and not in "capital" (in Marx's sense).

And it is not just the bureaucracy "opposite us," as a dominant layer: it is also the bureaucracy "in us," the enormous and anguishing questions raised by the perpetual and perpetually recurring bureaucratization of all organizations, trade unions, political parties, and so on. This has been a fundamental experience for a century. Yet Marx and Marxism have nothing to say about this. Worse: they blind us. It is not possible, within Marxism, to conceive of a working-class bureaucracy, rising from a political and organizational differentiation, and pursuing its own objectives, becoming "autonomous" and finally seizing power and the State for its own benefit. From a Marxist viewpoint, such a bureaucracy *must* not exist, because it is not rooted in the "relations of production." So much the worse for reality, since Stalinism exists all the same.

Psychoanalysis and Society II*

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

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

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

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destructuration?

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

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

At present, norms and values are wearing down and collapsing. The models being proposed, to the extent that they still exist at all, are flat or hollow, as is said. The media, television, the advertising industry offer models, certainly. They are the models of “success”: they operate from the outside, but they cannot truly be internalized; they cannot be

valued; they could never respond to the question: What ought I to do?

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

C.C.: You are right, and I was going to come to that. In its time, the family formed the concrete link between the social institution and the process of forming and educating the individual psyche; it matters little, in this regard, that (justified) criticisms can be made about its patriarchic character, etc. The great fact today is the dislocation of the family. I am not talking about divorce statistics but about the fact that the family is no longer a normative center for people: parents no longer know what they should permit or prohibit. And they have just as bad a conscience when they do prohibit as when they do not. In theory, this family role could have been filled by other social institutions. In Western societies, school was, quite obviously, such an institution. School, however, is itself in crisis. Everyone talks now of the crisis of education, the crisis in its programs, in its contents, in the pedagogical relationship, etc. In my case, I have written about it since the early 1960s.¹ The essential aspect of this crisis, however, one that no one talks about, lies elsewhere. It is that no one any longer invests in, that is to say, cathects, as such, the school and education. Not so very long ago, school was, for parents, a venerated place, for children an almost complete universe, for teachers more or less a vocation. At present, it is for teachers and pupils an instrumental form of forced labor,

¹In "Student Youth" (1963) and "The Crisis of Modern Society" (1966), both now in [PSW3](#).

a site for present or future breadwinning (or an incomprehensible and rejected form of coercion), and, for parents, a source of anxiety: “Will my child get into the right schools [*l’enfant, sera-t-il ou non admis à la filière menant au Bac C*]?”

M.Z.: Shouldn’t one introduce here distinctions according to which social class one comes from? In the 1960s, there was an upturn in educational consumption for all social classes. Today, in order to assure one’s place in the process of social reproduction, one no longer can gain legitimacy simply with an inherited status; one must gain the approval that comes with a diploma, even if one has a small amount of economic capital. Is it not a bit paradoxical, in relation to what you are saying, this educational overconsumption and this lack of cathexis of which you are speaking?

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

M.R.: Hasn’t what you’re describing in fact accelerated over the past few years? Since 1975, people are

looking in all directions, and in somewhat desperate fashion. Since the late 1970s, to the loss of general values has come to be added a sense of disarray.

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

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

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

M.Z.: Perhaps it would be that, fathers no longer having any beliefs, they transmit this nonbelief to their sons, and the sons inherit this nonbelief. At that point, the law would no longer be an impediment to the demand for enjoyment [*jouissance*]. This might explain, on the clinical

level, signs like the wave of drug addiction we are now dealing with.

C.C.: What you are saying could be made more precise by asking a question: What is it, today, to be a father? Let us suppose that the answer to the question, *What is it to be a mother?* is less difficult—though that would be superficial, because in fact the two are inseparable, and because, moreover, in reality more and more women are obliged to assume both roles. I do not have the figures in my head at this moment, but in the United States the number of female “heads of households” is constantly on the rise; among Blacks, it has reached an enormous proportion, on the order of 90 percent in the case of single “heads” of households. But let us center on this point: What is it to be a father? Is it simply to feed the family? Is there a “paternal discourse” [*parole du père*], what is it, where is it, what is it worth, what gives it value? We began with changes in symptomatology and we related that to a certain wearing down of values—concretely represented in the family by the emptiness of the “paternal discourse” (or, what boils down to the same thing, the void of the father’s place in the mother). And at the same time there is, as a function of a host of factors, a wearing down of reality-testing for children: there is nothing solid for them to run up against: they mustn’t be deprived; they mustn’t be frustrated; they mustn’t be hurt; one must always “understand” them. You know, perhaps, that marvelous flash of wit by D. W. Winnicott: “I always give at least one interpretation per session, so that the patient is sure I have not understood everything.” I am tempted to say, without kidding, that from time to time one must show the child that one does not “understand” her. The *de facto* experience that one is not necessarily “understood,” even by those beings who are the closest, is constitutive of the human

being.

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

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

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

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

C.C.: But does it suffice that the President of the French Republic discovers one day the distressing quality of history textbooks and demands an increase in school hours devoted to history? Can the collapse of historical awareness in our societies, the absence of a project for the future, and the placement of the past into the Frigidaire of history be countered by textbooks and supplemental hours? We live in a society that has instaurated a quite original and unprecedented type of relationship with the past: complete

disinvestment. Of course, we have numerous admirable specialists—the search for scientific knowledge requires that—but for everyone else, the relationship to the past is, at best, touristic. One visits the Acropolis like one goes to the Balearic Islands.

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

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

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

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

C.C.: I do not see why there would necessarily be a

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

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

C.C.: Your question touches on two points. First, I cannot prevent myself from contrasting what is happening with what I want to happen, my aim, my political and psychoanalytic project. My aim is for us to pass from a culture of culpability to a culture of responsibility. Now, a culture of anxiety and enjoyment, in the sense in which you speak of it, would be moving us still further away from that. But, second point, a culture of anxiety and enjoyment—is it, quite simply, possible? We are touching here, once again, on the fundamental, and more than just obscure, problem of the articulation between the organizations of the psyche and the institution of society. A culture of culpability—as also a

culture of shame, to borrow E. R. Dodds' theme²—is perfectly conceivable because the affects on which the social fabrication of individuals in these cultures plays in privileged fashion can bear an instituted structure, can be its subjective inclination. It is, however, unclear—at least for me—how a coherent social institution, one capable of functioning, could be built upon anxiety and obligatory enjoyment.

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

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

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

M.Z.: We are perhaps now in the second moment of the considerable cultural shock that was 1968, of the idea of indefinitely enjoying oneself [*jouir*]. At the time, it was: God is dead, we can do anything. Now we are coming to realize that one cannot do very much of anything.

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

²E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 2nd ed. (2004).

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

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

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

C.C.: I don't know. Passions here signify, of course, the near-total mobilization of the affect upon an "object." Now, as you know, the affects and their movements are the

most obscure part of psychical functioning. We have daily proof of it in psychoanalysis. To the extent that the affects depend on representations, the labor of psychoanalytic interpretation functions. To the extent that representations depend on affects, one is aware that one has very little grasp at all.

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

C.C.: Desire, as such, could not be a social force; for it to become so, it must cease to be desire; it must be metabolized. If one speaks of desire in the true sense of the term, unconscious desire, it evidently is an antisocial, and even an asocial, monster. A first, superficial description: I desire that; I take it. I desire someone, I take him or her. I detest someone, I kill him. The "reign of desire" would be that. That, however, is still superficial, for this "desire" is already immensely "civilized," mediated by a recognition of reality, etc. True desire forms immediately the psychical representation that would satisfy it—and it satisfies itself therein. It also forms contradictory representations: I am man and woman, here and elsewhere, etc. Against the absurdities of those in the desire chorus since the mid-1960s, it may immediately be seen that desire is death, not only of the others, but first of all of one's own subject. Desire itself, however, is only the first breakup of the psychical monad, of the first, originary unity of the psyche, the limit point one can attempt to describe as follows: pure pleasure of representation of the self by the self, completely enclosed upon itself. From this monad derive the decisive traits of the Unconscious:

absolute “self-centeredness,” the omnipotence (wrongly labeled *magical*—it is real) of thought, the capacity to find pleasure in representation, the immediate satisfaction of desire. These traits obviously render the being that bears them radically unfit for life. The socialization of the psyche—which implies a sort of forced rupture of the closure of the psychical monad—is not only what adapts the human being to this or that form of society; this is what renders it capable of living at all. By means of this process of socialization of the psyche—of the social fabrication of the individual—human societies have succeeded in making the psyche live in a world that contradicts head on its own most elementary exigencies. *That* is the true sense of the term *sublimation*: sublimation is the subjective, psychical side of this process that, seen from the social side, is the fabrication of an individual for which there is diurnal logic, “reality,” and even acceptance (more or less) of its mortality. Sublimation presupposes, obviously, the social institution, for it signifies that the subject succeeds in cathecting objects that no longer are private imaginary objects but, rather, social objects, the existence of which is conceivable only as social and instituted (language, tools, norms, etc.). These are objects that have a validity, in the most neutral sense of the term, and impose themselves on an anonymous and indefinite collectivity. If one really thinks about it, this passage is rather miraculous.³

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

C.C.: Yes, certainly, there are equivalences and there are also, just as striking and important, complementarities. The objects in question here are not and cannot be isolated or for the moment; they necessarily form a coherent, functioning

³See [IIS](#), ch. 6, in particular 301-20.

system. Here is what the Unconscious could never produce; here is the work of what I call the social imaginary or instituting society.

In this process of socialization, we always observe this extraordinary mutual adjustment between a social institution—which can exist only in deploying itself in these immense systems of objects, norms, words, significations, etc.—and a psyche for which, at the outset, nothing of all that could make any sense, since their very mode of existence is contrary to the most deep-seated exigencies of the psyche. The psychical monad is led to renounce in part these exigencies—and that always signifies violence being exerted upon it, even when that occurs under the “mildest” of conditions—at the same time that it creates, successively, a series of “secondary” organizations, which cover it over without ever making it disappear and which approach the mode of operation required by “reality”—that is to say, society. There is in this process, however, always one constant—that is why I spoke of “mutual adjustment.” The social institution can make the psyche do just about everything—as proved by the infinite diversity of human cultures—but there are a few minimum requirements. The social institution can refuse the psyche just about everything (trivialities aside), but there is one thing that the institution cannot refuse it if this institution is to exist as a permanent, stationary regime of society—and that is meaning.

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

C.C.: In my terminology, it is a matter of *social imaginary significations*. And that has been, of course, the role of this central institution of society that was until very recently, in all societies, religion. Here we meet up again with the problem today: present-day society, due to the wearing out of its imaginary significations (progress, growth, well-being,

“rational” mastery, etc.) is less and less capable of furnishing meaning. That each individual fabricates its own meaning for itself can be true only at a second-order level; never at the radical level.

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

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

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

C.C.: The goal of analysis is to aid the subject in becoming autonomous, as far as is possible. And once again, let us avoid misunderstandings. Autonomy does not mean the victory of “reason” over the “instincts”; autonomy signifies another relation, a new relation between the conscious Ego and the Unconscious or the drives. I wrote back in the mid-1960s that one had to complete the famous phrase of Freud, “Where Id was, Ego shall come to be,” with “Where Ego is, Id must spring forth.”⁴ The task of analysis is not the “conquest” of the Unconscious by the Conscious but, rather, the establishment of another relation between the two, which may be described as an opening of the Conscious to the Unconscious—not an assimilation, or a drying up, of the Unconscious by the Conscious. And in this work, I do not see how one could fail to recognize, if one wishes to remain coherent, that we are guided by an idea, an aim: the idea of a human subject who can say, in full knowledge of the relevant facts: “That is my desire” and “I think that this is true”—not, “Maybe yes, maybe no.”

M.R.: Or else say, “That is true,” without being able

⁴ Author’s addition: See *ibid.*, 102-104.

to say “I think” beforehand.

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

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

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

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

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

⁵T/E: This second volume of *DG* never saw the light of day during Castoriadis’s lifetime. Nevertheless, an excerpt from this work in progress appeared as “The Crisis of Western Societies” (1982), which was translated for [CR](#) and is now reprinted in [CL4](#); additional, previously unpublished related texts now appear in *EP6*, which we hope to translate for the projected sixth volume of Castoriadis’s *Political Writings*.

Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy^{*}

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

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

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

^{*}Speech given during the “Third-Worldism in Question” colloquium organized by *Liberté sans frontières* on January 24, 1985. [T/E: Originally published as “Intervention de Cornélius [*sic*] Castoriadis” (in the Table of Contents) and as “Démocratie et développement (suite)” (as the actual chapter title) in *Le Tiers-mondisme en question*, ed. Rony Brauman, President of Médecins Sans Frontières (Paris: Éditions Olivier Orban, 1986), pp. 212-20. Reprinted as “Tiers monde, tiers-mondisme, démocratie” in *DH*, 104-11 (128-37 of the 1999 reprint). The present translation first appeared in *RTI(TBS)*.]

¹T/E: The essayist Jean-François Revel (see *Le Tiers-mondisme en question*, pp. 204-11) had spoken right before Castoriadis, the colloquium's last speaker.

In modern Europe, there have been two views of the history of humanity, and these views continue today to form the core of the two dominant ideologies. At bottom, they are but two sides of the same coin, for both appeal to an evolutionary process, a march of progress, as an immanent tendency—no matter what happens—of human history.

For the first of these views, the Liberal view,² which, historically speaking, is the older of the two, there exists in the human being a natural tendency toward the greatest possible liberty, a recognition of the rights of the other, democracy. History leads, or has to lead, toward a canonical state of society, the “representative” republic plus the free market and competition among producers, which ensures, at the same time, man’s exercise of his “natural” and “inalienable” rights. Typically and generally speaking—there are certainly exceptions—those who hold such a view are not content just to propose this form of society as the “good society” or to call upon people to struggle for human rights; they affirm that what is at issue here is the very form toward which history is intrinsically tending. This can be confirmed by examining thinkers as far removed from each other as Immanuel Kant, for whom the *Aufklärung* is an obligatory moment in universal history, and Alexis de Tocqueville, who sees the tendency toward equality dominating the entire modern era and invincibly overcoming all obstacles it might encounter—an equality which, he says, undoubtedly corresponds to a design laid out by Providence.

What those who hold the second view, the Marxist view, affirm is much clearer and firmer: history develops

²T/E: Here and elsewhere “liberal” is to be taken in the Continental sense. In American terms, “conservative individualism” and an ideological belief in the “free market” are what is intended.

toward ever-more elevated forms. This “ever more” returns, apropos of anything and everything, like an obsession, in Marx as well as in Lenin. In this development, as one knows, the determining factor is not a tendency toward a political regime but the growth of productive forces and the succession of the modes of production. Political regimes are but a consequence thereof. Capitalism’s domination of the modern era does not appear then as what it is—namely, arbitrary creation of a particular humanity—but as fated phase of all historical movement, at once fated and welcome, since it is the mode of production that assures maximum productivity and efficiency and that, wrenching people from the traditional conditions of life, from their particular limited horizons, and from their superstitions of all kinds, obliges them to “face with sober senses [their] real conditions of life, and [their] relations with [their] kind” (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*).³ As a function of its “internal contradictions,” capitalism in this view is pregnant with a socialist revolution, one that will transform the mode of production but that will also, in addition and as if by a miracle, achieve all the aspirations of humanity. Capitalism engenders the agent and the bearer of this revolution, the proletariat. In the only version of Marxism that has proved to be historically effective—Leninism—the proletariat is replaced, however, by the Party, which possesses socialist consciousness and inculcates that consciousness into the proletariat, and which, in any case, directs the latter and, by means of its alleged possession of the “true theory,” is judge of last resort as to what is to be done and not to be done.

³T/E: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 38.

As is also known, however, the proletariat ceased, after a certain period of time, to manifest itself as a revolutionary factor and began to appear more and more integrated into capitalist society. The hopes revolutionaries or certain ideologues placed in the proletariat weakened or vanished. Nevertheless, instead of an analysis and a critique of capitalism's new situation, these hopes were purely and simply transferred elsewhere. This is the essence of those supremely ridiculous operations that, for intellectuals *over here*, were Fanonism, "revolutionary" Third-Worldism, Guevarism, and so on. And it obviously is not by chance that these operations had the support of that paradigm of political confusion, Jean-Paul Sartre, or of other minor scribblers who, moreover, have since that time become complete turncoats.

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

struggling for power. And in three or four quite notorious cases, they have indeed seized power.

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

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

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

Long before the CIA and the multinationals, military and other dictatorships occupied a special place in the political history of Latin America. With just one or two exceptions, liberal constitutions coexisted there with a near-

feudal situation, if not worse, in the countryside.

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

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

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

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

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

France in a few months.⁴

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

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

⁴T/E: When President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and his center-right government were defeated in 1981, the Socialists took political power in an electoral alliance with the Communist Party. Castoriadis correctly predicts here the 1986 election of centrist and conservative parties to government and the appointment of neo-Gaullist Jacques Chirac as Prime Minister under France's then-President, the Socialist François Mitterrand.

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

Let us conclude.

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

For, certainly the first of these rights (and the presupposition for every right and for all discourse on rights) is the right of men and women to institute a culture or to adhere to an existing culture. What then must be said of institutions of society that enjoy popular support but that include features that in our view are monstrous? Of course, such adherence is fabricated by the already existing institution of society. But so what? Should we then “force to be free”⁵ these people who have internalized, certainly without any free choice, the caste system? I think that one of the functions today of the simple-minded discourse on “human rights” and on “individualism” is to conceal a flight from political and historical responsibility. This responsibility consists in being able to affirm loud and clear that *we* do not want, either here or elsewhere, any society in which the hands of thieves are cut off, and this affirmation is made in terms of an ultimate and radical political option that there can be no question of “grounding” (upon what?). But we, and what we are and what we do, are the ones who bear witness for, and who are the ultrafragile guarantors of, this responsibility, for our salvation and for our damnation.

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

We can and should exercise our critical faculties with

⁵T/E: On the idea of forcing people to be free, see the seventh section of the first book of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*.

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

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

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

The “Left” in 1985*

Question 1: The French Communist Party (PCF) has just held its twenty-fifth Congress. Indicators of its popularity are at their lowest point. There has been a break with the Socialists. How is one to explain the fall of the PCF?

Cornelius Castoriadis: What poses a problem, and demands an explanation, is not the current fall of the PCF but such a long duration of its influence and, even today, the persistence of its relatively significant influence. The first aspect relates especially to a set of archaic traits of French capitalism, which survived even long after the War and allowed the PCF to position itself as the sole effective defender of the basic demands of wage earners. The second aspect may be explained in part by the high degree of “clientelism” practiced by the PCF in the trade unions as well as in the municipalities where it is implanted. And yet, in both cases this influence is expressive of the strength of totalitarian tendencies among various strata of contemporary society.

Questions 2 and 3: For what reason did [PCF head] Georges Marchais not expel the [“renovative”] protesting members Pierre Juquin, [former French Minister of Vocational Training] Marcel Rigout, and [former European Parliament Deputy] Félix Damette from the Central Committee? Was he afraid, or did he want to project an image of democracy that allows the expression of currents within the party?

C.C.: Here again, what might be surprising is that he threw Juquin out of the Politburo; for, the latter is said to be but a decorative element. The solution adopted by Marchais

*Interview granted in writing to the *Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro) on February 17, 1985 and published March 24, 1985. “La ‘gauche’ en 1985,” *DH*, 28-34 (138-44 of the 1999 reprint). [T/E: A few explanatory phrases are introduced within brackets.]

allows him both to show himself to be a “democrat” and to indicate that one cannot contest the summit of the apparatus with impunity.¹

Question 4: The PCF has remained a product of Stalinism when other European Communist parties were embracing Eurocommunism. How is one to explain the maintenance, within the PCF, of Stalinist practices and values?

C.C.: First of all, one must see that a large part of these Stalinist practices and values are still to be found in the “Eurocommunist” parties. In politics, one must consider real actions and behaviors, not words and proclamations. Next, there is no general “theoretical” explanation for such phenomena: in order to explain the PCF’s persistent Stalinism, one must go back over its entire history. Briefly speaking, that party, far from insignificant before the War, grew enormously stronger during the Occupation and the Resistance; then, as I have said, it was able for a long time, thanks to the complete putridity of French Social Democracy, to hold a monopoly over the “defense of the interests of laboring people.” Whence the constitution of an enormous and very solid apparatus (and lifelong paid careers open to tens of thousands of people). Now it has happened, historically, that the leadership of this apparatus (let’s give it a name: Maurice Thorez [PCF leader from 1930 to 1964]) was much more closely tied and vassalized to Moscow than the Italian leadership group. (Thorez was a nobody who had

¹T/E: [Wikipedia \(s.v.\) explains that Pierre Juquin](#) “was excluded from the Politburo in October 1984, and publicly disagreed with decisions taken at the 25th Party Congress of February 1985. His opposition was tolerated until October 1987, when he was excluded from the Party altogether—after he had expressed his wish to run for French Presidency on his own platform.”

been imposed on the PCF by Moscow; this was not completely the case with Palmiro Togliatti [Italian Community Party leader from 1927 to his death in 1964].) It also happened that the French leadership group persisted in playing the “Russian card,” which had some meaning through the Sixties, but not afterward: the Italian CP, stronger locally and more independent, was able to play the card of a condominium with Christian Democracy. However, it’s been twenty years now that the PCF has been at the end of a cul-de-sac: whatever it might do, that will be an “error”; it will be trapped. There is no conceivable “good policy” for the PCF. Under these conditions, party cohesion can be maintained only through the persistence of Stalinist methods. I am convinced that Marchais “is right” and that, contrary to the pious wishes of the tearful reformers of the PCF, a “liberalization” would blow it apart.

Question 5: We are witnessing an ebbing of the Left in general. Are the PCF’s losses just the most apparent beginning of that?

C.C.: I do not do that kind of forecasting in politics. That said, the decline of the Socialist Party, too, is already a fact in France, and an understandable one. Why the devil would people support a government that does nothing different from what a “right-wing” government would do? The French Socialists take offense when they are described as “Social Democrats.” Yet Social Democracy, in its glory days, made some major and real reforms. The French Socialists have done nothing. One has rarely seen such a void of political imagination. What has resulted from the Socialist Party’s time in power in France is, at present, a still more advanced depoliticization of people. This is what explains, too, the political resurrection of such unlikely dinosaurs as [former French President Valéry] Giscard d’Estaing and [his

former Prime Ministers] Jacques Chirac and Raymond Barre.

Question 6: Do the paths taken by the Socialist parties, especially the choice to live in a market economy, represent progress compared to the traditional standards of socialism?

C.C.: The “choice” in question does not date from today, but from three quarters of a century ago. This is not a choice for the “market” economy but *for the present-day capitalist economy*. The latter is only quite partially a “market economy” (monopolies, oligopolies, combines, directly state-run sectors, guaranteed prices, open or hidden interventions on the part of the State, etc.). When you draw up the list of the products that enter into the GNP, you see that it is doubtful whether, in *one quarter* of the cases, the prices are formed as treatises in political economy suppose them to be. Granted, for reasons it is not possible to analyze here, this hybrid economy retains an enormous superiority, relative to “economic efficiency,” over the centralized bureaucratic economies, like those of the Communist countries. Yet as much as it is a mystification to call these economies *socialist economies*, just so much, almost, is it a mystification to call the former ones *market economies*. An autonomous society, a society that will have abolished the power of the capitalists as well as of the bureaucrats, will certainly instaurate a genuine market of consumer goods, but that requires, quite obviously, the elimination of the enormous income inequalities that exist today, in France as in Brazil, in the United States as in Cuba, in China as in Chile.

Question 7: The thesis of the disappearance of the State remains a unifying factor among left-wing parties. Why?

C.C.: Here again, one must distinguish between words and actions. The Leninists proclaimed that their objective was the disappearance of the State. And never in history has one known a State as monstrously reinforced as the Communist

Party-State. As for the Socialists, they have always remained vague on this issue, in theory. In practice, however, they, too, have always accentuated the bureaucratization of society through an increase in state interventions: “soft” bureaucratization, but bureaucratization nonetheless. The activities of the French Socialist Party offer numerous illustrations of this point. Thus, in the affair surrounding the bill on private schools, they preferred to lose votes and increase the budget deficit rather than give up a small increase in the state and trade-union bureaucracy’s control over the teachers.

That said, there is the substance of the issue. This substance involves the confusion created by Marx with the idea of a society in which everything would be regulated “spontaneously,” which is an absurdity. An autonomous society is inconceivable without the destruction of the State as bureaucratic apparatus separated from society and dominating the latter. Yet an autonomous society will also have to govern itself and legislate about itself. There will therefore be an established power and magistrates. Yet that does not a “State” make. The ancient Greek *polis* was a political collectivity (which was self-governed when it was democratic); it did not “have” a State and “was” not a State.

Question 8: Does the acceptance of the rules of parliamentary democracy by certain Communist parties and by all European Socialist parties imply a revision of their conception of political participation?

C.C.: The Socialist parties have always played the parliamentary game. As for the Communist parties, one must always distinguish between tactics and the final objective. The final objective has not changed: this is the complete conquest of power and the totalitarian transformation of society. Most of the time, this objective is presented as

unrealizable under "normal" circumstances (but one must not forget that in Portugal in 1974-1975 it was a close call whether a CP with a minute amount of support within the population might not seize power). The CPs are therefore obliged to adopt some sinuous and tortuous tactics that cover the full spectrum (from participation in a government up to civil war). Among these tactics is a proclamation, in certain cases, that they are accepting the rules of parliamentary democracy. One could revisit the matter when one has seen a Communist party already brought to power organize democratic elections, lose them, and resign. Till then, one might as well discuss Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.

Questions 9, 10 and 11: How do you see the future of the forces of the French Left? And of socialism in Western Europe? Someone wrote that the true liberation of national energies in France, and the explosion of those same energies, passes by way of the marginalization or isolation of the PCF. Do you agree?

C.C.: Once again, I don't deal in political "forecasts," and I do not believe that one could do so seriously, if they are not trite. However, through your question the whole political problem of industrial and liberal countries is posed. It is clear that the *traditional* ideologies of the "Left" are bankrupt and that people are glimpsing that more and more. This is what, in certain cases (Reagan and Thatcher are the most obvious and important ones), is giving renewed strength to a Right that is just as ideologically bankrupt, just as incapable of having a new "reactionary" idea. Yet it is also clear that these are but symptoms of something much deeper, which is the crisis and decomposition of Western societies. A much greater manifestation (at once effect and cause) of this crisis is people's privatization, their depoliticization, the disappearance of genuine social and political *conflict*, the

complete transformation of *politics* into confrontations and compromises between lobbies, and so on. All the existing political parties, on the “Left” as well as on the “Right” (these terms have long lost their meaning), are not only themselves caught up in the way things are thus evolving; they are among the most active agents therein. A genuine liberation of energies, in France and elsewhere, passes by way of the marginalization of *all* existing political parties, the creation by the people of new forms of political organization, based on democracy, the participation of all, the responsibility of each with regard to affairs shared in common—in short, through the rebirth [*renaissance*] of genuine thinking and political passion, which would at the same time be lucid about the results of the history of the past two centuries. Nothing says that that is fated, but neither does anything say that this is impossible. Outside such a rebirth, Western societies will, at worst, fall under the power of Russia; at best, they will fall into an increasingly air-conditioned nightmare.

KOINŌNIA

Reflections on “Development” and “Rationality”*

Posing the Question

For some time now, “development” has been simultaneously the motto and theme of the official and “professional” ideology—as well as of government policies. It is perhaps useful to recall briefly the genealogy of the notion.

Despite the acerbic and bitter criticisms lodged by those who opposed a triumphant capitalism, the nineteenth century glorified “progress.” World War I and, after a short

*Text of a lecture presented to the Figline-Valdarno Colloquium on “The Crisis of Development” (September 13-17, 1974). Originally written in English, translated into French by Mme de Venoge, and printed in this form in *Esprit* (May 1976), then published in *Le Mythe du développement*, ed. Candido Mendes (Paris: Seuil, 1977), a volume containing the proceedings of the colloquium, it was retranslated into English, in consultation with me, by John Murphy and published in *Thesis Eleven*, 10/11 (1984-1985): 18-36. “Réflexions sur le ‘développement’ et la ‘rationalité,’” the French version of this 1974 lecture that was published in *DH*, 131-54 (159-99 of the 1999 reprint), includes my comments during a round-table discussion held two years later in Paris at the initiative of Jean-Marie Domenach; this discussion focused on “socialist models” of development, a topic that had hardly been broached at all at Figline-Valdarno (see now, *Le Mythe du développement*, pp. 111-40, and *DH*, 155-74 [189-214 of the 1999 reprint]). I was thus led to restore here some of the comments of the participants at the round-table discussion, without which what I said would have been incomprehensible; I thank them for their understanding, and I refer the interested reader to the full discussion found in the collective volume cited above. [T/E: A translation of these comments was first published in *PPA*, 199-218, following an edited reprint of the Murphy translation (*ibid.*, 175-98). The entire English-language text has now been edited anew for its present publication.]

interlude, the Depression, the rise of Fascism, and Nazism in Europe, and the obvious inevitability of another world war, all seemed to demonstrate that the system was ungovernable and led to a collapse of the official ideology. The theme of the 1930s was "the crisis of progress."

In the postwar world, the great powers were first of all and above all preoccupied with reconstruction, and with the new problems created by the struggle between the United States and Russia. For the West, the success of economic reconstruction surpassed all hopes, beginning a long phase of expansion. When, with the end of the Korean war, Russo-American tensions seemed to be diminishing, and when, despite some bloody exceptions, the "colonial question" seemed to be in the process of being settled more or less peacefully, official minds began to dream that they had finally found the key to all human problems. That key was economic growth, which was easily achievable thanks to the new methods of demand regulation, and the rates of growth of gross national product (GNP) per capita contained the solution to all problems. True, a potential conflict with the Eastern Bloc remained a threat. But the idea gained ground that, as these countries grew to industrial maturity and were invaded by consumerism, their masters would be induced to follow a less aggressive foreign policy and perhaps to introduce a degree of internal "liberalization." It was also true that hunger was (as it still is) a daily reality for a huge part of the population of the globe, and that the Third World had *not* achieved economic growth, or that its growth remained too feeble and too slow. But the reason for this was that the countries of the Third World *had not "developed" themselves*. The problem was thus one of developing them, or of making them develop themselves. So the official international terminology has been adjusted accordingly.

These countries, formerly called, with a sincere brutality, “backward,” and then “underdeveloped,” were politely designated “less developed” and finally “developing countries”—a nice euphemism, signifying in fact that these countries had *not* developed themselves. As the official documents put it time and again, to develop them meant to make them capable of entering a stage of “self-sustaining growth.”

But this new ideology was no sooner in place than it was attacked from several sides; the established social system began being criticized not because it could not guarantee growth, nor because it distributed the “fruits of growth” unequally—traditional critiques of the Left—but because it concerned itself *only* with growth and could deliver *only* growth—and growth of a given type, with a specific content, involving determinate human and social consequences. Limited initially to a very narrow circle of heterodox social and political thinkers, these critiques became widespread, in the space of a few years, among the young and began to influence the student movements of the 1960s as well as the actual behavior of various groups and individuals, who decided to give up the “rat race”¹ and try to establish for themselves new forms of communal life. More and more pointedly, the question of the “price” that human beings and communities “paid” for growth was being raised. Almost simultaneously, it was “discovered” that this “price” contained a huge component that until then had been passed over in silence and whose consequences did not directly concern present generations. This additional cost factor was

¹This expression, *rat race*, which has gained common currency in the United States since the 1950s, designates a lifestyle dominated by an attempt by everyone to rise in the hierarchy and on the consumer ladder.

the massive and perhaps irreversible accumulation of damage inflicted upon the terrestrial biosphere as a result of the destructive and cumulative interaction of the effects of industrialization; effects triggering environmental reactions that, beyond a certain point, remain unknown and unforeseeable and that could eventually end in a catastrophic avalanche spinning out of all “control.” From Venice sinking beneath the waters to the possibly imminent death of the Mediterranean; from the eutrophication of lakes and rivers to the extinction of dozens of living species; from the silent springs to the possible melting of the polar icecaps; from the erosion of the Great Barrier Reef to the thousandfold multiplication of acidity in rainwater—the immense actual or virtual consequences of unbridled “growth” and industrialization began to emerge. The recent “energy crisis” and the depletion of world resources arose at an appropriate time to remind humans that it was not even certain whether they could continue their destruction of the Earth for much longer.

As could have been foreseen, the powers-that-be reacted in a manner conforming to their natures. Since the system was being criticized for being solely preoccupied with quantities of goods and productive services, new bureaucratic organs were established to take care of the “quality of life.” Since there seemed to be an environmental problem, ministries, commissions, and international conferences were organized to resolve it. Such organizations have indeed resolved efficiently some pressing problems, such as, for example, finding ministerial posts for politicians who had to be found a place without political importance, or inventing good reasons for maintaining or increasing the budgetary credits for various moribund or idle national and international organizations. Economists immediately detected a new and

promising field for their delectable exercises in elementary algebra—without for one moment pausing to question their conceptual framework. Economic indices were supplemented with “social indices” or “indices of the quality of life,” while new lines and columns were added to the matrices of interindustrial transactions. “Costs” and “returns,” along with the potential impact of pollution control measures on the rate of growth of GNP, were the only angles from which the environmental question was discussed; while this impact was likely to be negative, it has been hopefully suggested that it might well be counterbalanced by the new growth of a “pollution-control industry.” Needless to say, the phrase “pioneering work in pollution control” has immediately taken a prominent place in the publicity of the main polluters, the giant industrial companies. The questions that received the most earnest discussion were whether and how one could and should “internalize” the costs of pollution control.² The idea that the problem as a whole goes far beyond “costs” and “returns” did not so much as cross the minds of the economists and politicians.

Even the most “radical” reactions to have emerged from within the dominant strata have not, in reality, questioned the deepest premises of the official view. Since growth creates problems that are impossible to control, and,

²Which is to say how was one to have these costs borne by the polluting firms rather than by the public (the State). “External economies” or “externalities” (positive or negative), which will be discussed again, comprise all the effects of a firm’s activity on other firms and on society (as well as the effects of the activities of other firms, etc., on the given firm) that diminish or increase the production costs of the firm considered. In the reigning economic conceptualization, the destruction of the environment appears—and can appear only—as an “external (negative) economy” resulting from the operation of the firm.

what is more, since all processes of exponential growth must inevitably run up against some physical limits sooner or later, the "radical" response has been "no growth" or "zero growth." No consideration has been given to the fact that, in the "developed" countries, growth and gadgets are all that the system can offer the people, and that a halt to growth was inconceivable (or could lead only to violent social upheavals) unless there were to be a radical transformation of social organization as a whole, including the psychic organization of men and women.

Nor were the dramatic international aspects of the question taken any more seriously. Should the gap be maintained between those countries with a GNP of \$6,000 per capita per annum and those of only \$200? Would the latter accept the perpetuation of such a gap, given their pressing material needs, the "demonstration effect" continuously exercised on them by the example of life in the rich countries, and, *last but not least*, given the politics of power and the desire for power among the ruling classes of all countries? (Is there any one single president of one single "developing" country who would not willingly sacrifice the lives of half his subjects in order to have his own H-bomb?) And if we should fill this gap, which is to say if, *grosso modo*, the entire population of the globe should be brought to a level of GNP per capita per annum of \$6,000 [\$12,000 in 1985]—then how are we to reconcile the reasoning and conclusions underlying notions of "zero growth" with the tripling [and much more] of "gross world product" involved in such an equalization (a tripling requiring one more quarter-century of world "growth" at a rate of 4 percent per annum, assuming a *static* population) and how are we to reconcile it with the ensuing indefinite continuation of a level of annual production around \$25 trillion at 1970s values—that is, approximately, 25 times the

current GNP of the United States and thus also some 25 times their present consumption of energy and raw materials, and so on?³ Finally, given existing social and political structures, would the “developed” countries accept becoming and remaining an impotent minority compared with the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, equally “rich” and much more populous? Would Russia tolerate the existence of a China three times more powerful than itself? Would the United States accept a Latin America twice as strong as itself? As always, reformism pretends to realism, but when one comes to the truly crucial questions, it reveals itself as one of the most naive modes of wishful thinking.

The “Obstacles to Development”

Obviously, the questions discussed here are tightly bound up with the whole of social organization, as much at the national as the international level. Still more they are tied to the fundamental ideas and conceptions that have dominated and formed the life, action, and thought of the West for six centuries, and by means of which the West has conquered the world and would conquer it again even if it were to be materially destroyed. “Development,” “economy” and “rationality” are only a few of the terms one can use to indicate this complex of ideas and conceptions, of which the

³These figures—roughly corresponding to the official statistical data for 1973 and 1974—have mainly an illustrative value, but they accurately represent the orders of magnitude of the variables in question. For 1985, and in current dollars, one would, roughly speaking, need, respectively, \$12,000 and \$200 per capita per annum. The other figures in this passage would have to be adjusted in corresponding fashion—a simple academic exercise.

greatest part remain nonconscious, as much for politicians as for theorists.

Thus, almost nobody stops to ask himself: *What* is “development,” *why* “development,” or “development” of *what* and *toward what*? As already indicated, the term “development” came into use when it became evident that “progress,” “expansion,” and “growth” were not intrinsic virtualities, inherent in all human societies, the realization (actualization) of which could be considered inevitable, but were specific properties of Western societies possessing a “positive value.” Thus one could consider these societies as “developed,” meaning by this that they were capable of producing “self-sustaining growth.” And the problem then seemed to consist simply in bringing the other societies to that much-talked-about stage of “takeoff.” So the West thought of itself, and proposed itself, as the model for the entire world. The normal state of a society, what one could consider as the state of “maturity” and designate with this apparently self-evident term, was the capacity for indefinite growth. Other countries or societies were considered to be naturally less mature or less developed, and their main problem was defined as the existence of “obstacles to development.”

For some time, these obstacles were seen as purely “economic,” and as negative in character; lack of growth was due to lack of growth—which, for an economist, is not a tautology, since growth is a self-catalytic process (it suffices that a country enters into a process of growth for it to continue to grow more and more rapidly). Consequently, injections of foreign capital and the creation of “poles of development” were proposed as being necessary and sufficient conditions for bringing less developed countries to the stage of “takeoff.” In other words, the essential thing was to import and install machinery. Soon enough, one was compelled to discover that

it is people who operate machines, and these people have to have suitable qualifications, and so “technical assistance,” technical training, and the acquisition of professional qualifications became all the rage. But in the end, account had to be taken of the fact that machinery and qualified workers were not enough, and that a great many other things were “lacking.” The people were not always and everywhere ready and able to give up all that they had been in order to become mere cogs in the process of accumulation—even when, gripped by famine, they “ought” to have done so. Something was going wrong with these “developing countries”; they had plenty of people who were not themselves “developing.” In a quite natural and characteristic way, the “human factor” was equated with the absence of an “entrepreneurial class.” This absence was profoundly regretted, but the economists had little advice to offer on how to proceed to develop such a class. And while the more cultivated among them had some vague memories relating to the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, they were not quite able to transform themselves from missionaries of growth into apostles of an inner-worldly asceticism.

And so it dawned upon the ruling strata that particular and separable “obstacles to development” did not exist, and that, if the Third World was to “be developed,” the social structures, attitudes, mentalities, significations, values, and psychic make-up of human beings would have to be changed. Economic growth was not something that could be “added” to these countries, as the economists had thought; nor could it simply be superimposed upon their other characteristics. If these countries were to “be developed” they would have to undergo an overall transformation. The West had to assert not that it had discovered the trick of producing more commodities more cheaply and more quickly, but that it had

discovered *the* way of life appropriate to every human society. Fortunately for the Western ideologues, the unease they could have felt on this score was allayed by the haste with which the “developing” nations tried to adopt the Western “model” of society—even if its economic “basis” was missing. By the same token, it was unfortunate for them that the crisis of “development policies,” in a real but limited sense, the failure of “development” in the “developing” countries, has coincided with a much broader and deeper crisis in their own societies, with the internal collapse of the Western model and of all the ideas it embodied.

“Development” As Social Imaginary Signification

What is development? An organism develops when it progresses toward its biological maturity. We develop an idea when we explicate as far as possible what we think it implicitly “contains.” In short, development is a process of realization of the virtual, of the movement from *dunamis* to *energeia*, from *potentia* to *actus*. Obviously this implies that there is an *energeia* or *actus* that we can determine, define, fix in place; that *there is* a norm pertaining to the essence of what is developing; or, as Aristotle would say, that this essence *is* the becoming-adequate [*le devenir-conforme*] to a norm defined by a “final” form: the *entelecheia*.

In this sense, development entails the definition of “maturity,” and beyond this, the definition of a *natural norm*: development is only another name for the Aristotelian *phusis*. For nature contains its own norms, as *ends* toward which beings develop and which they effectively attain. “Nature is end (*telos*),” said Aristotle. Development is defined by the fact of attaining this end, as the natural norm of the being

considered. In this sense also, development was a central idea for the Greeks—and not only as regards plants, animals, and humans as simply living beings. *Paideia* (upbringing, training, education) is development; it consists of bringing the newborn little monster to the fit state of a human being. If this is possible, it is because such a fit state *exists*, as a norm, a limit (*peras*), the norm embodied in the citizen, or the *kalos kagathos*, which, if attained, *cannot* be exceeded (to exceed such norms would simply be to relapse). “Now die, Diagoras, for you will not ascend Olympus.” How and on what basis could such a fit state be determined once the constitution of the *polis* (which defines the norm of development of individual citizens) has been questioned and perceived in its relative character; in what sense can one say that there is a *phusis* of the *polis*, a fit state unique to the city? For the Greek philosophers, such a question necessarily had to remain an obscure point at the frontier of their reflection, despite or because of their constant preoccupation with *dikaiosunē* or the *orthē politeia*. Similarly, and for the same deep-seated reasons, *technē* had to remain undefined, hovering somewhere between the simple imitation of nature (*mimēsis*) and creation properly speaking (*poiēsis*)—between the repetition of an already-given norm and, as Kant was to put it twenty-five centuries later, the effectively actual positing of a new norm embodied in the work of art.⁴

The limit (*peras*) defines simultaneously being and norm. Unlimitedness, infinity, the without-end (*apeiron*) is quite obviously incomplete, imperfect, a lesser-being. Thus, for Aristotle, there is only a virtual infinity, not an effectively

⁴For a fuller discussion, see my “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us” (1975), now in [CLL](#). See also [IIS](#), 196-98.

actual infinity. And reciprocally, insofar as any object contains unactualized virtualities, it is infinite, since it is, by the same token, incomplete, undefined, indeterminate. So it is not possible to have development without a reference point, a defined state that must be attained. And nature furnishes, for any being, such a “final” state.

With the Judeo-Christian religion and theology, the notion of unlimitedness, of a without-ending, of infinity, acquired a positive sign—but one that remained, in a way, without social or historical relevance for more than ten centuries. The infinite God is *elsewhere*, and *this* world is finite; there is for each being an intrinsic norm corresponding to its nature as it has been determined by God.

The change occurs when infinity invades *this* world. It would be ludicrous to attempt to compress here, within a few lines, the immense mass of well-known historical facts, some of them less well known than we think, covering so many countries and centuries. I will attempt only to reassemble some of them into a particular perspective, discarding the usual “rational” explanations/justifications of their succession (explanations and justifications that are, of course, a self-“rationalization” of Western rationalism, trying to prove that there are rational reasons explaining and justifying the triumph of the particular variety of “Reason” displayed in the West).

What really matters here are the “coincidence” and convergence that one can ascertain, beginning from, let us say, the fourteenth century, between the birth and expansion of the bourgeoisie, the obsessive and growing interest prompted by discoveries and inventions, the progressive collapse of the medieval representation of the world and of society, the Reformation, the passage “from the closed world

to the infinite universe,”⁵ the mathematization of the sciences, the perspective of an “indefinite progress of knowledge,” and the idea that the correct use of Reason is the necessary and sufficient condition for us to become the “masters and possessors of Nature” (Descartes).⁶

It would be uninteresting, and senseless, to try to explain “causally” the rise of Western rationalism by the expansion of the bourgeoisie, or the converse. We must consider the emergence of the bourgeoisie, its expansion, and final victory in parallel with the emergence, propagation, and final victory of a new “idea,” the idea that the unlimited growth of production and of the productive forces is *in fact* the central objective of human existence. This “idea” is what I call a *social imaginary signification*.⁷ To it correspond new attitudes, values, and norms, a new social definition of reality and of being, of what *counts* and what *does not count*. In a nutshell, henceforth what counts is whatever can be counted. On the other hand, the philosophers and scientists apply a new and specific torsion to thought and knowledge; there are no limits to the powers and possibilities of Reason, and Reason *par excellence* is mathematics, at least insofar as the *res extensa* is concerned: *Cum Deus calculat, fit mundus* (As God calculates, the world is being made—Leibniz).⁸ We should

⁵T/E: Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957).

⁶T/E: In the sixth part of René Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*.

⁷See [IIS](#), in particular, 135ff. and 340ff.

⁸T/E: The full quotation, *Cum Deus calculat et cogitationem exercet, fit Mundus*, originally appeared as a handwritten addition to his 1677 *Dialogus*.

not forget that Leibniz equally cherished the dream of a calculus of ideas.

The marriage—probably incestuous—of these two currents gives birth, in diverse ways, to the modern world. It is revealed in the “rational application of science to industry” (Marx)⁹—as much as in the (rational?) application of industry to science. It is expressed in all ideologies of “progress.” Since there are no limits to the march [*progression*] of knowledge, there are no more limits to the march of our “power” (and of our “wealth”); or, to put it another way, limitations, where they present themselves, have a negative value and must be transcended. Certainly, whatever is infinite is inexhaustible, so that we will perhaps never achieve “absolute” knowledge and “absolute” power, but we ceaselessly draw nearer to them. From this comes the curious notion of an “asymptotic” march of knowledge toward an absolute truth, which is, even today, still shared by the majority of scientists. Thus, there cannot be a fixed reference point to our “development,” a defined and definitive state to be attained; this “development” is nevertheless a movement with a fixed *direction*, and, of course, the movement itself can be measured along an axis upon which we occupy at every instant an abscissa of increasing value. In short, the movement is directed to more and more; more commodities, more years to live, more decimal points in the numerical values of universal constants, more scientific publications, more people with PhDs—and “more” is “good.” “More” of

⁹T/E: The phrase *application raisonnée* 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*].”

something positive and, of course, algebraically, “less” of something “negative.” (But what *is* positive or negative?)

Thus we reach the present situation. Historical and social development lies in exiting from *any* defined state, and in attaining a state that is defined by nothing except the capacity to attain new states. The norm is that there are no norms. Historical and social development is an unfolding that is indefinite, infinite, and without end (in both senses of the word *end*). And as far as we find the indefinite unbearable, definiteness is provided by the growth of quantities.

I repeat: I am not trying to compress centuries of thought and events into a few lines. But I argue that there is a layer of historical truth that can be represented only by the bizarre cross section attempted here, traversing, let us say, Leibniz, Henry Ford, IBM, and the activities of some unknown “planner” in Uganda or Kazakhstan, who has never heard of Leibniz. Obviously, most philosophers and historians would severely criticize such a bird’s-eye view. But we must renounce the spectacle of the valleys and the scent of the flowers if we want to “see” that the Alps and the Himalayas belong to the “same” mountain chain.

Ultimately, then, development has come to signify an indefinite growth, and maturity, the capacity to grow without end. Thus conceived, as ideologies, but also at a deeper level, as social imaginary significations, they were and remain consubstantial with a group of (theoretical and practical) “postulates,” of which the most important seem to be: (1) the virtual “omnipotence” of technique; (2) the “asymptotic illusion” relative to scientific knowledge; (3) the “rationality” of economic mechanisms; and (4) various *lemmas* about humanity and society, which have changed with time but which all imply either that humanity and society are “naturally” predestined to progress, growth, etc. (*homo*

œconomicus, the “invisible hand,” Liberalism,¹⁰ and the virtues of free competition), or—what is much more appropriate to the essence of the system—that they can be manipulated by various means in order to be led to progress, growth, etc. (*homo madisoniensis Pavlovi*, “human engineering” and “social engineering,” bureaucratic organization and planning as universal solutions applicable to any problem).

The crisis of development is obviously also the crisis of these “postulates” and of their corresponding imaginary significations; which is simply to say that the institutions that embody these imaginary significations in effectively actual reality undergo a brutal shakeup. (The term *institution* is used here in the broadest possible sense: in the sense, for example, in which language is an institution, as are arithmetic, the ensemble of tools of every society, the family, law, “values.”) This shakeup, in turn, is essentially due to the struggle which those living under the system carry on against the system—which is to say that the imaginary significations referred to are accepted less and less socially.

This is the principal aspect of the “crisis of development,” which I am not able to go into here.¹¹ But these “postulates” also collapse in and by themselves. I will attempt to illustrate briefly this situation in the course of discussing some aspects of economic “rationality” and the

¹⁰Note added in 1989: Here and elsewhere “Liberalism” is to be taken in the Continental sense. In American terms, “conservative individualism” is what is intended.

¹¹See my works, *SB1*, *SB2*, *EMO1*, and *EMO2*. Many of these articles now appear in my *Political and Social Writings* [T/E: see *PSW1-3*].

“omnipotence” of technique.¹²

The Fiction of An Economic “Rationality”

Perhaps it is not difficult to understand why it is that the economy has for two centuries been considered as the realm and paradigm of “rationality” in human affairs. Its subject matter is what has become the central activity of society, its discourse to prove (and for opponents like Marx, to disprove) the idea that this activity is achieved in the best possible manner in the framework of, and by means of the existing social system. But also—by a happy “accident”—the economy provided the apparent possibility of mathematization, since it is the only field of human activity in which phenomena appear to be measurable in a manner that is not trivial, and even in which this “measurability” seems to be—and to a certain extent effectively is—the essential aspect in the eyes of the human agents concerned. The economy deals in “quantities”; on this point all economists have always fallen into line (though from time to time they have been forced to discuss the question: Quantities of *what?*). So, economic phenomena seem to lend themselves to an “exact” treatment and one that is amenable to the application of mathematical tools, the tremendous effectiveness of which has been demonstrated day after day in physics.

¹²I have discussed elsewhere some aspects of the problem of modern science understood as an “asymptotic illusion”: “Le Monde morcelé,” *Textures*, 4/5 (1972), subsequently expanded as “Science moderne et interrogation philosophique,” *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, vol. 17 (Paris: Organum, 1973) and now translated as “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” in [CLI](#).

Within this domain, identifying the maximum (or extremum) and the optimum seems the obvious thing to do—and it has quickly been done. There was a product to maximize, and costs to minimize. Thus, there was a difference to maximize: the net saleable product for the firm, the net “surplus” for the overall economy (“surplus” appearing under the guise of “goods” or of the growth in “leisure” measured in “free time,” without consideration of the use or content of this “free time”).

But what is the “product,” and what are the “costs”? H-bombs are included in the net product—because the economist “is not concerned with use-values.” Equally included are the costs of publicity, by means of which people are induced to buy the junk that otherwise they probably would not buy, and of course, this junk itself. There are also the expenses accrued from having Paris cleaned of industrial soot. And for every road accident, the net national product is increased on several scores. It is equally augmented every time a firm decides to nominate an extra vice-president drawing a substantial salary (because, *ex hypothesi*, the firm would not have nominated him if his net marginal product was not at least equal to his salary). More generally, the “measure” of a product reflects the valuations of various objects and of various types of work performed in the existing social system—valuations that themselves, in their turn, reflect of course the existing social structure. GNP is what it is *also* because a business manager earns twenty times what a street-sweeper earns. But even if these valuations are accepted, the measurability of economic phenomena, trivialities apart, is only a misleading appearance. The “product,” on any definition, is measurable “instantaneously,” in the sense that one can always add up, for the whole of the economy and at a given moment, the quantity of produced

goods multiplied by the corresponding prices. But if the relative prices and/or the composition of the goods changes (which, in fact, is always the case), the successive “measurements” taken at different moments in time cannot be compared (any more than they can be compared between different countries, for the same reason). Strictly speaking, the expression “growth in GNP” is nonsense, except, and only, in the case where there is a homothetic expansion in all types of products. Particularly, in an economy undergoing technical change, “capital” cannot be measured in any way that makes sense, except by means of *ad hoc* hypotheses that are highly artificial and contrary to the facts.

All this immediately leads to the conclusion that it is equally impossible to really measure “costs” (since the “costs” for one are for the most part the “products” of another). There are other reasons why “costs” cannot be measured: because we cannot apply the classical idea of *imputing* one part of the net product to this or that “factor of production,” and/or this product to this arrangement of the means of production. Imputing parts to “factors of production” (labor and capital) involves postulates and decisions that largely go beyond the domain of the economy. Imputing costs to a given product cannot be done because of various types of indivisibility (which the classical and neoclassical economists treat as exceptions, though they are present everywhere), and because of the existence of all sorts of “externalities.” “Externalities” signify that the “cost for the firm” and the “cost for the economy” do not coincide, and that a nonimputable (positive or negative) surplus appears. What is even more important, these “externalities” are not confined within the economy as such.

We are accustomed to think of most of the environment (its totality, with the exception of land under

private ownership) as a “free gift of nature.” Similarly, the social framework, general learning, and the behavior and motivations of individuals were implicitly treated as “free gifts of history.” The environmental crisis has only made obvious something that was always true (as Justus von Liebig knew over a century ago): an “appropriate state” of the environment is *not* a “free gift of nature” in all circumstances and without regard to the type and to the expansion of the economy considered. Nor is it a “good” to which one can assign a “price” (real or “dual”)—since, for example, no one knows the cost of refreezing the polar icecaps, should they melt. And the case of “(non-)developing” countries shows that we cannot treat Judaism, Christianity, or Shintoism as “free gifts of history”—since history made a “gift” to other peoples of Hinduism and fetishism, which up till now appear rather as “obstacles to development,” given freely by history.

Behind all this can be found the hidden hypothesis of *total separability*, as much *within* the field of economics as *between* this field and historical, social, and even natural processes. Political economy always supposes that it is possible, without absurdity, to separate the consequences of action X by firm A from the total flux of economic processes internal and external to the firm; as it also supposes that the effects of the presence or absence of a given “total” of “capital” and of “labor” can be separated from the rest of human and natural life in a meaningful fashion. But the moment we abandon this hypothesis the notion of an economic calculus, in other than a trite sense, collapses—and with it, the notion of economic “rationality” in the accepted sense of the term (as the achievement of an extremum or a family of extrema) as much at the theoretical level (the comprehension of facts) as at the practical level (the definition of an “optimal” political economy).

What is at stake here is not simply the “market economy” or “private capitalism,” but the “rationality,” in the sense just indicated, of the economy as such (of any expanding economy). This is because the ideas underpinning what I have just said apply as much to “nationalized” and “planned” economies, literally or *mutatis mutandis*.

To illustrate this last point, I will use another example, which touches upon the fundamental question of *time*. Time is taken into account in political economy only inasmuch as it can be treated as nontime, as a neutral and homogeneous medium. An expanding economy implies the existence of (“net”) investment, and investment is intimately related to time, since in investment the past, the present, and the future are brought into mutual relation. Now, decisions concerning investment can never be “rational,” except at the level of the firm and providing one takes a particularly narrow point of view. There are many reasons for this, of which I will mention only two. First, not only is the future “uncertain,” but *the present is unknown* (things are constantly happening everywhere, other firms are in the process of making decisions, information is partial and costly, and this to different degrees for different actors, etc.). Second, as already mentioned, the costs and the product cannot really be measured. The first factor may, in theory, be eliminated in a “planned” economy; the second could never be.

But, in any case, a much more important question arises: What is the correct *overall* rate of investment? Should society devote to (“net”) investment 10, 20, 40, or 80 percent of the (“net”) product? The classical response, for “private” economies, was that “the” interest rate constitutes the balancing factor between the supply and demand of savings, and is consequently the appropriate “regulator” of the rate of investment. As we know, this response is pure nonsense.

(“The” interest rate does not exist; it is not possible to assume that the rate of interest is the main determinant of total savings, that price levels are stable, etc.) Von Neumann proved, in 1934, that, given certain hypotheses, the “rational” interest rate must be equal to the rate of growth of the economy. But what *should* the rate of growth be? Supposing that this rate of growth is a function of productive capacity, and knowing that this rate depends upon the rate of investment, we arrive back at the original question: What should the rate of investment be? We can make the additional hypothesis that the “planners” are set on maximizing “final consumption” for a given period. The question then becomes: What is the rate of investment that will maximize (under complementary hypotheses about the “physical productivity” of additional capital) the integral of “final consumption” (be it individual or public, of “goods” or of “leisure”) in a “permanent” (or “steady”) state? The value of this integral depends, of course, upon the interval of integration—which is to say, upon the time horizon the “planners” have decided to take into account. If it is “instantaneous” consumption that is to be maximized (time horizon at zero distance) then the appropriate rate of investment is obviously zero. If the consumption to be maximized is “forever” (time horizon at infinite distance) the appropriate rate of investment is nearly 100 percent of (“net”) product—assuming that the “marginal physical productivity” remains positive for all corresponding values of investment. Any answer that “makes sense” obviously lies between these two limits, but where exactly, and *why*? No “rational calculus” exists that can show that a time horizon of five years is (for society) less or more “rational” than one of 100 years. The decision would have to be made on the basis of considerations other than “economic” ones.

All this does not mean that everything that happens within the economy is “irrational” in the positive sense, still less that it is unintelligible. But it does mean that we cannot treat an economic process as a homogeneous flux of values, of which the only relevant aspect would be that they can be measured and ought to be maximized. *This* type of “rationality” is secondary and subordinate. We can make use of it in order to clear part of the terrain, to scotch some obvious absurdities. But the factors that today effectively fashion reality—among them, the decisions of governments, of firms, and of individuals—are not susceptible to this sort of treatment. And, in a new, alternative society, they would be of a completely different nature.

Modern Technique as Vehicle for the Illusion of Omnipotence

The question of technique has long been treated from within one or another of successive mythic frameworks. At first, “technical progress” was, of course, good and nothing but good. Then technical progress became good “in itself,” but utilized badly (or for evil) by the existing social system; in other words, technique was considered as a pure means, in itself neutral as to ends. This remains, to this day, the position taken by scientists, Liberals, and Marxists; for example, there is nothing to be said against modern industry as such: what is wrong is that it is utilized for the profit and/or power of a minority, rather than for the well-being of all. This position rests upon two intertwined fallacies: the fallacy of the total separability of means and ends, and the composition fallacy. The fact that we can use steel to make either ploughs or guns does *not* mean that the total system of machines and techniques existing today could be used, indifferently, to

“serve” either an alienated or an autonomous society. Neither ideally nor in reality is it possible to separate the technological system of a society from what this society *is*. And today, we have more or less come to the exact opposite position of the initial one: more and more people believe that technique is an evil in itself.

We must try to fathom the question more deeply. The unconscious illusion of the “virtual omnipotence” of technique, the illusion that has dominated Modern Times, rests upon another idea, concealed and not discussed: the idea of *power*. Once this is understood, it is obvious that it is not enough to simply ask: Power to do *what*, power for *whom*? The question is: What is power, and even, in what meaningful sense can there ever really *be* power?

Behind the notion of power lurks the phantasy of total control, of will or desire mastering all objects and all circumstances. Doubtless, this phantasy has always been present in human history, either “materialized” in magic, etc., or projected onto some divine image. But, curiously enough, there has also always been a consciousness of certain limits forbidden to humanity—as is shown in the myth of the Tower of Babel, or in Greek *hubris*. Everybody obviously agrees that the idea of total control or, better, total mastery, is intrinsically absurd. Nevertheless, the idea of total mastery *remains* the hidden motor of modern technological development. The blatant absurdity of the idea of total mastery is camouflaged behind the less blunt absurdity of “asymptotic progression.” Humanity in the West has lived for centuries with the implicit postulate that it is always possible and feasible to achieve more power. The fact that, in some particular domain, and to some particular end, we have been able to do “more” has been taken to signify that in all domains taken together and for all imaginable ends, “power” can be

extended without limit.

As we now know for certain, the fragments of successively conquered “power” remain always localized, limited, insufficient, and, most probably, intrinsically inconsistent if not downright incompatible with each other. No major technical “conquest” can escape the possibility that it will be used other than originally intended, none is devoid of “undesirable” side effects, none can avoid interfering with the rest—in any case, none of those that result from the type of technique and science *we* have “developed.” In this sense, *increased “power” is also, ipso facto, increased powerlessness or even “antipower,” a power giving rise to the contrary of that which was the original aim*, and who is to calculate the final balance sheet, in what terms, on what hypotheses, and for what time horizon?

Here again, the illusion operates on the basis of the idea of separability. To “control” things consists of isolating separate factors and precisely circumscribing the “effects” of their action. This works, up to a certain point, with the ordinary objects of everyday life; that is how we go about repairing the engine of a car. But the further we go, the clearer it becomes that separability is only a “working hypothesis” with localized and limited validity. Contemporary physicists are beginning to realize the true state of things; they suspect that the apparently insurmountable impasses in theoretical physics are due to the idea that there exist things such as separate and singular “phenomena,” and they are asking themselves if the Universe should not be considered primarily as a unique and unitary entity.¹³ In another way, ecological

¹³See the excellent articles by Eugene Wigner, Bernard d’Espagnat, M. D. Zeh, and David Bohm in *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, ed. B. d’Espagnat (New York and London: Academic Press, 1971). [Author’s

problems force us to recognize a similar situation as regards technique. Here also, beyond certain limits, we cannot think that separability goes without saying, and these limits remain unknown until the moment when a catastrophe threatens.

Pollution and the devices designed to combat it provide a prime illustration—a mundane one, and not easily contestable. For more than twenty years, antipollution devices have been installed on the chimneys of factories, and the like, to trap carbon particles contained in the smoke. These devices proved to be very effective, and actually the atmosphere around industrial cities contains a good deal less carbon dioxide than before. Yet, during the same period, the acidity of the atmosphere has multiplied a thousandfold and the rain falling on certain parts of Europe and North America today [1974] is as acidic as “pure lemon juice”—leading to serious effects on forest growth, already observable—because the sulphur contained in the smoke, which was previously fixed by the carbon, is now freely released and combines with oxygen and hydrogen in the atmosphere to form acids.¹⁴ The fact that the engineers, the men of science, and the administrations should not have thought in advance that this would happen may seem ridiculous: this does not make it any less true. Their response would be: “Next time we will know and do better.” Maybe.

Let us now consider the question of the contraceptive pill. The discussions and anxieties about its possible

addition, not indicated as such: And, in the present volume, see “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), especially 393-95.]

¹⁴*International Herald Tribune*, June 14, 1974. [T/E: This article appeared the previous day in *The New York Times* under the title “Acid in Rain Found Up Sharply in East; Smoke Curb Cited.”]

undesirable side effects have been centered on whether women using it would be susceptible to putting on weight or to contracting cancer. Let us grant for the moment that such effects do not exist, or that they can be countered. But let us also be brave enough to admit that these aspects of the problem are microscopic. Let us put aside that which is perhaps the most important aspect of the pill, the psychical aspect, about which practically nobody talks: What might happen to human beings should they begin to see themselves as absolute masters over the decision to bequeath or not bequeath life, without having to pay a thing for this “power” (beyond two dollars a month)? And what might happen to human beings if they cut themselves off from their animal condition and destiny, in relation to the production of the species? I am not saying that something “bad” will necessarily come of it. I am saying that everyone considers it as self-evident that this supplementary “power” can be nothing but “good”—or even simply, that it *is* really “power.” Let us come now to the strictly biological aspect. The pill is “effective” because it interferes with fundamental regulatory processes, deeply tied to the most important functions of the organism, of which we “know” practically nothing. So with regard to its eventual effects, the relevant question is not: What can happen to a woman if she takes the pill for ten years? The relevant question is: What would happen to the species, if women took the pill for 1,000 generations, that is to say, for 25,000 years? This corresponds to an experiment on a strain of bacteria *for about three months*. Now obviously 25,000 years is for us a “meaningless” time span. Consequently, we act as if not caring about the possible results of what we are doing were “meaningful.” In other words, given linear time and an infinite time horizon, we act as if the only significant interval of time was the very near

future.

In the country of my birth, my grandparents' generation had heard nothing of long-term planning, of externalities, of the continental drift, or of the expansion of the Universe. Yet, even into their old age, they continued to plant olive trees and cypresses, without considering costs or returns. They knew that they would have to die, and that they should leave the Earth in good order for those who would come after them, perhaps simply for the Earth itself. They knew that whatever “power” they had at their disposal could only produce beneficial results if they obeyed the seasons, paid heed to the winds, and respected the unpredictable Mediterranean, if they pruned the trees at the right moment and allowed the year's vintage sufficient time to mature. They did not think in terms of the infinite—perhaps they would not have understood the meaning of the word, but they acted, lived, and died in a time that was truly *without end*. Obviously, the country was not yet developed.

Concluding Questions

It so happened that, on this planet, and in the course of billions of years, a balanced biosystem made up of millions of different living species has unfolded, and that, for some hundreds of thousands of years, human societies have succeeded in creating for themselves a material and mental habitat, a biological and metaphysical niche, by changing the environment without damaging it. Despite misery, ignorance, exploitation, superstition, and cruelty, these societies managed to create for themselves at the same time both well-adapted modes of living and coherent worlds of imaginary significations of astounding richness and variety. Let us settle our gaze upon the life of the thirteenth century,

passing from Chartres to Borobudur and from Venice to the Mayas, from Constantinople to Peking and from Kublai Khan to Dante, from the house of Maimonides at Cordoba to Nara, and from the *Magna Carta* to the Byzantine monks copying Aristotle; let us compare this extraordinary diversity with the present state of the world, where countries are not really different from each other in terms of their present—which, as such, is everywhere *the same*—but only in terms of their past. *That* is what the developed world *is*.

The uses of the past are limited, however. Despite the sympathy one can feel for modern-day “back-to-nature” movements, and for what they are trying to express, it would obviously be illusory to think that we could reestablish a “preindustrial” society, or that those who presently hold power would spontaneously give it up if they found themselves confronted with a hypothetical desertion growing within industrial society. These movements are themselves caught in contradictions. There is scarcely any “commune” without taped music, and a tape recorder implies the totality of modern industry.

It would be equally disastrous to misunderstand, misinterpret, or underestimate what the Western world has brought. Through and beyond its industrial and scientific creations, and the corresponding impact on society and nature, it has destroyed the idea of *phusis* in general and its application to human affairs in particular. The West did this by means of a “theoretical” and “practical” interpretation and realization of “Reason”—a specific interpretation and realization, pushed to their limit. At the end of this process, it has come to the point where there is no longer, and can no longer be, any reference point or fixed state, any “norm.”

Insofar as this situation induces the vertigo of an “absolute freedom,” it could cause a plunge into the abyss of

absolute slavery. Already, the West is a slave to the idea of absolute freedom. Freedom, conceived in the past as "the consciousness of necessity" or as the postulate of a capacity to act according to a pure ethical norm, has become naked freedom, freedom as pure arbitrariness (*Willkür*). Absolute arbitrariness is the absolute void: the void must be filled, and it is filled, with "quantities." But the endless growth of quantities has its end—not only from an external point of view, since the Earth is finite, but from an internal point of view, because "more" and "greater" are henceforth no longer "different," and "more" becomes qualitatively *indifferent*. (Qualitatively, an annual growth in GNP of 5 percent signifies that the economy is in the same state as the year before; people consider that their condition has worsened if their "standard of living" has not been raised, and do not consider that it has been raised if this "standard" only goes up by the "normal" amount.) Aristotle and Hegel knew all this perfectly well. But, as is often the case, reality catches up with thought only after a considerable time lag.

However, barring a religious, mystic, or irrational backlash of some sort—which is improbable, but not impossible—the main result of this destruction of the idea of *physis* cannot henceforth be conjured away. For *it is true* that man is not a "natural" being—though he is not a "rational" animal either. For Hegel, man was "a sick animal." Rather, we must say that man is a mad animal who, by means of his madness, invented reason. Being a mad animal, he naturally made of his invention, reason, the most methodical expression and instrument of his madness. We can now know this, because it has taken place.

To what extent can this knowledge help us in our present plight? Very little, and very much. Very little, because the transformation of the current state of world society is not

a matter of knowledge, of theory, or of philosophy. Very little also because we cannot reject reason—any more than we can freely separate “reason *qua* reason” from its actual historical realization. We would be insane to think, in our turn, that reason could be considered as an “instrument” that could be assigned to better use. A culture is not a menu from which we can choose what we like and ignore all the rest.

But this knowledge could help us very much if it enables us to renounce and destroy the rationalist ideology, the illusion of omnipotence, the supremacy of the economic “calculus,” the absurdity and incoherency of the “rational” organization of society, the new religion of “science,” and the idea of development for development’s sake. This we could do if we do not renounce thought and responsibility, if we view reason and rationality in an appropriate perspective, if we are capable of recognizing them as historical creations of humanity.

For, the present-day crisis is advancing toward a point where, either we will be confronted with a natural or social catastrophe or, before or after this, human beings will react in one way or another and try to establish new forms of social life that make sense to them. We cannot do this for them, or in their place, any more than we can say how it could be done. What we can do is destroy the myths that, more than money or weapons, constitute the most formidable obstacles in the way of the reconstruction of human society.

July 1974

Reflections on “Development” and “Rationality”: *Presentation and Response to Critics**

First of all, let me remark on Candido Mendes’s talk about Domenach’s “imperial language” and about the “absence of language” among barbarians.¹ Such talk reminds me of a beautiful poem of Cavafy’s titled, in fact, “The Barbarians.” Having learned that the barbarians were going to arrive that very day, the townspeople of an Imperial city gathered in the Forum; they awaited the arrival of the barbarians, hoping that, at last, something was going to lift them out of their boredom, their *mal de siècle*. For the occasion, the consuls and praetors wore their embroidered togas and their most beautiful jewelry; it is fair to assume that the old men were expecting to have their throats cut and the women to be raped. But the day passed, night began to fall and, suddenly, the crowd scattered in malaise and confusion. For, messengers had just arrived from the frontier to announce that the barbarians were no longer in the area. “And now, what will become of us, without barbarians? These people were, in a way, a solution.” These are the last two lines of the poem.

If I, too, were waiting for the barbarians—which is not

*This oral presentation to the colloquium is followed by my responses to some remarks formulated by other participants during the discussion period. The reader can easily reconstitute the content of these remarks from my responses.

¹After Jean-Marie Domenach made his oral presentation, Candido Mendès, one of the colloquium’s organizers, reproached him for having adopted an “imperial language” *vis-à-vis* the “marginality of barbarians” and “that of the periphery.”

the case—I would have to say that I do not see them—not here, in any case. I see only Candido Mendès, whom I am unable to distinguish from an ultradecadent Westerner, and who, by means of a language whose preciousness rests upon forty centuries of culture and all of whose resources he learnedly exploits, flatters himself by posing as a barbarian—which is obviously a “civilized” idea. But let us suppose that there are some barbarians around and that they were to present themselves to us here. What could we do? Either the barbarians really want to cut our throats, in which case the only question that would arise is that of the relation of forces—they cut our throats or we cut theirs—or else a discussion is possible, and in that case one must obey certain rules for the use of language, seeking in this discussion not victory via violence, via the violence of one’s discourse, but the elucidation of questions. And “civilization” is nothing other than that.

Candido Mendès was gently teasing Domenach about the West, and Domenach responded that he really thought that, in a certain sense, the West possessed a kind of superiority. For my part, I reject these terms (while noting that those who claim to be barbarians are in fact speaking a Western language). There is *one* peculiarity to the West of import for us; Western culture (Greco-Western, since this begins at least with Herodotus) is the only one to have taken an interest in the existence of other cultures, to have interrogated itself about them and, finally, to have called itself into question, to have relativized itself in terms of this knowledge bearing on other cultures. This is what the Greco-Westerners have done—and it is starting from this that we think. If today we can discuss the problem of development as a world problem—that is to say, one of interest to all those who live on this planet, independent of the particular culture

to which they belong—it is thanks to this; this is, indeed, the *de facto* and *de jure* condition for our discussion. Beyond this, there is, in my view, no superiority, nor any inferiority, to the West. There is simply a fact: namely, that the Earth has been unified by means of Western violence. Factually speaking, the West has been and remains victorious—and not only through the force of its weapons: it remains so through its ideas, through its “models” of growth and development, through the statist and other structures that, having been created by it, are today adopted everywhere.

A second remark, which bears on the relationship between philosophy and “science,” must be made in reference to a statement made by Jacques Attali, who said: “Philosophy accompanies the scientist, who opens the doors.” A seriously grave error. The scientist opens the doors using keys that have been fabricated on the basis of a certain number of ideas, philosophical ideas. If you had told a physicist at the turn of the century that everything he was doing was based on the *idea* of causality, he would have laughed in your face. A few years later, the physicists’ house exploded and the debris is still falling on their heads. The “self-evident” fact of causality has become problematic again, and physicists are obliged once again to discuss philosophy. The same goes for politics. It is painful to see young militants becoming alienated in unreflective activism, proclaiming that what matters for them is action, not philosophy. For, when one looks at what passes for action and what the ideas in their leaflets and wall posters are made of, one realizes that these are only byproducts of the writings of a nineteenth-century German sociological philosopher named Karl Marx. And looking a little closer at Marx’s writings, one finds Hegel and Aristotle.

I come now to the problem of “development.” We must return to the origin of this term and of this idea.

Development is the process by means of which the germ, the egg, the embryo unfolds, opens up, spreads out—whereby the living being in general attains its state of “maturity.” To speak of development is to refer both to a “potential” that is already there *and* to a given, definite, determinate accomplishment, achievement, act, *energeia*; it is to oppose a “matter,” already rich in as yet inexplicit determinations, to the *form* it is going to become—and this form is a norm. Here we have the language of Aristotle, of Aristotelian ontology, but under one form or another this ontology underlies all Western thought. Thus, in the case of the present problem, one speaks of “development” of Third World countries by positing that there exists a definable state of maturity that these countries should attain. Thus also, when Marx spoke of the “faculties that initially lie dormant within man the producer,”² he was speaking Aristotle’s language. Within this language, to say that something is is to say that its form corresponds to a norm, that its *eidos* is defined by its *telos* and that it “truly” or “fully” *is* only to the extent that it is complete, determined, defined. And this is what, even today, guides the scientist when seeking knowledge from nature: the scientist tries to translate, into his/her own domain, this conception, namely, that what is must be perfectly determined.

But the content of this determination has changed from ancient Greece to Modern Times. For the Greeks, “determined” signifies “finite,” “complete,” and “infinite” signifies “less-determined,” “incomplete,” therefore ultimately “less-of-a-being.” With Christianity (and Neo-

²T/E: On p. 177 of the Moore/Aveling translation of the first volume of *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), one finds Marx’s assertion that man “develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.”

Platonism), the signs are reversed: the genuine being is God, and God is infinite. But this infinite God is far off, He is elsewhere: the world down here remains, so to speak, Aristotelian. The real upheaval takes place when the infinite invades the world down here. How then can determinacy, the conception of being as being-determined, be saved if there is “actual” infinity? It can be saved if determinacy is thought in mathematical terms, and, in fact, as quantitative determination: the fixed point of reference is provided by the possibility of calculating what is at hand.

This upheaval is conditioned by the confluence, the convergence, the coincidence of two great historical factors, if indeed they can be separated at all. One is the birth and the development of the bourgeoisie, along with the instauration by the latter of a novel universe of social imaginary significations. The other is the philosophical and scientific revolution, which may be symbolized by citing a few names. For example, Descartes, for whom his philosophy and his mathematics are indissociable, and of whom it must be understood that the goal he assigned to knowledge—to make of us the masters and possessors of nature—is nothing other than the programmatic phantasy of Modern Times. For another example, Leibniz, who said: *Cum Deum calculat fit mundus*—a statement of decisive importance for the new onto-theology, but also for the economy today. Leibniz’s God calculates *maxima* and *minima*, more generally *extrema* that always turn out to be *optima*. He thinks differential calculus and the calculus of variations, and it is while He is thinking them that the world takes form. These are also the *extrema* and the *optima* that modern economists claim to be calculating, these are the brachistochrones of development they are trying to determine.

In this world, which is both infinite and (allegedly)

subject to calculation, no fixed forms/norms remain, save those to which quantity itself, inasmuch as it is calculable, gives rise. Thus, the very evolution of scientific knowledge comes to be seen more and more as a succession of “growing approximations” moving toward greater and greater precision (with respect to laws, universal constants, etc.). Thus, too, in human, in social affairs, growth and expansion, seen from the quantitative point of view, are becoming absolutely decisive: the form/norm that orients social and historical “development” is one of increasing quantities.

Why recall, so hastily and so perfunctorily, all this? In order to emphasize in the strongest possible fashion that the paradigm of “rationality,” upon which everyone relies today and which dominates as well all discussions about “development,” is only a particular, arbitrary, and contingent historical creation. I have tried to show this in a somewhat more detailed fashion in those paragraphs of my written report that relate to the economy, on the one hand, and those relating to technique, on the other. I will add here simply that if this paradigm has been able to “function,” and to do so with a relative—but nevertheless, as one knows, terrifying—“effectiveness,” this is because it is not totally “arbitrary”: there is certainly a nontrivial aspect, in what is, that lends itself to quantification and to calculation, and there is in our language and in every language an ineliminable dimension that is necessarily “logicomathematical,” which in fact embodies what, in its pure mathematical form, is called *set theory*. We cannot think of a society that is incapable of counting, classifying, distinguishing, making use of the excluded middle, etc. And, in a sense, starting from the moment it is understood that one can count beyond any given number, all mathematics is there in virtuality, and thence the possibilities of applying it; in any case, this “virtuality” today

has already been developed, deployed, realized, and we cannot turn back or act as if it had never existed. The problem, however, is to reinsert this into our social life in such a way that it will no longer be the decisive and dominant element, as it is today. We must challenge the grand folly of the modern West, which consists in positing “reason” as sovereign, in understanding rationalization when one hears “reason” and quantification when one hears rationalization. It is this spirit, still operant (even here, as our discussion has shown), that must be destroyed. We must understand that “reason” is only a moment or a dimension of thought, and that it becomes folly when it becomes autonomous.

What is to be done, then? That which is to be done, that which lies before us, is a radical transformation of world society, which does not and cannot concern simply the “underdeveloped” countries. It is illusory to believe that an essential change could ever be brought about in the “underdeveloped” countries if it did not also occur in the “developed” world; this is obvious when one considers raw military and economic relations as well as “ideological” relations. If an essential transformation is to take place, it has to concern both parts of the world. And such a transformation will necessarily be, first and foremost, a *political* transformation—which, for my part, I can only conceive of as the instauration of democracy. The sort of democracy I intend here exists nowhere today, for democracy does not consist in electing, in the best of cases, a president of the Republic every four or seven years. Democracy is the sovereignty of the *dēmos*, of the people, and to be sovereign is to be so twenty-four hours a day. And democracy excludes any delegation of powers; it is the direct power of men and women over all aspects of their social life and organization, beginning with work and production.

Thus conceived, and going beyond the present “national” forms of living, the instauration of democracy can come only from an immense movement of the world population, and it can be conceived of only as extending over an entire historical period. For, such a movement—which goes far beyond everything habitually thought of as “political movement”—will not come about unless it also challenges all instituted significations, the norms and values that dominate the present system and are consubstantial with it. It will come into existence only as a radical transformation in what people consider as important and unimportant, as valid and invalid—to put it briefly, as a profound psychical and anthropological transformation, with the parallel creation of new forms of living and new significations in all domains.

Perhaps we are very far from that. Perhaps not. The most important social and historical transformation of the contemporary era, one that we have all been able to observe over the last decade—since it was in the 1960s that it really became manifest, though it has been underway since the turn of the century—is neither the Russian Revolution nor the bureaucratic revolution in China but the changing situation of woman and of her role in society. This change, which was on no political party’s platform (for the “Marxist” parties, such a change could come about only as the byproduct, one of numerous secondary byproducts, of a socialist revolution), was not brought about by these parties. It has been carried out collectively, anonymously, daily, by women themselves, without their even explicitly representing its goals to themselves; since the turn of the century, twenty-four hours a day, in the home, at work, in the kitchen, in bed, in the street, in relation to their children, to their husbands, they have gradually transformed the situation. Not only have planners, technicians, economists, sociologists, psychologists,

and psychoanalysts not foreseen this, but they were not even able to see it when it began to take shape.

The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the changes brought about in the situation and attitudes of youth—and now even of children—which were the result of no political program and which the politicians were incapable of recognizing when these changes began to explode in their faces. Let me add parenthetically that this is what the utility of our “human sciences” today amounts to. For my part, I believe that in every domain of life, and in the “developed” part of the world as well as in the “undeveloped” part, human beings are presently engaged in the process of liquidating the old significations, and perhaps creating new ones. Our role is to demolish the ideological illusions hindering them in their efforts at creation.

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Response: Of course, mathematics goes beyond mere quantification. This in no way prevents the near-totality of *applications* of mathematics to the real world from being based on those branches of mathematics that relate to quantity and measurement (algebra, analysis, etc.). And it is in these applications—in physics notably, and since Newton—that mathematics has proved what has been called its “unreasonable effectiveness.”³ These successes are what have led social scientists, and above all, economists, astray. For a century now, political economics has tried to imitate mathematical physics—with practically no results. As for

³T/E: Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13:1 (February 1960).

more recent attempts to apply “nonquantitative” mathematical formalization to the social sciences, as in Structuralism, we must note that the results have been extremely meager; the sole domain in which they seem to possess a certain validity is that of the most elementary aspects of language (phonology), where, moreover, one cannot even speak of genuine formalization, but rather of the working application [*mise en œuvre*] of a rudimentary *ars combinatoria*. For my part, I think that the essential dimensions of social and historical phenomena outstrip the power of any mathematical tools, whichever ones they may be; I do not think, for example, that there can be any meaningful mathematization or formalization whatsoever of the Freudian Unconscious.

I am not making, and I have never made, any apology for inaction. *Here*, our action is speech. I am speaking in my own name, and I assert the right to criticize as well as to propose. And it is not because we have criticized the ideology surrounding the term “development” and its actual usage that governments will cease their aid (or their nonaid) to development. Governments will continue to do what they do for reasons of their own, and these reasons have nothing to do with the fact that people are dying of hunger: their reasons are concerned solely with power games on a worldwide scale.

I am not “confounding,” as has been said, science and religion; what is to be understood is that science today is taking the place of religion. You say: “The crisis of development is a crisis of faith.” You call this *faith*, then; that is perhaps your heritage, but it is not mine. Science is taking the place of religion today because religion is collapsing and because belief is becoming belief in science. Such as it exists today, this belief in science is just as irrational as any religious belief. The great majority of people today, including scientists, do not have a rational attitude toward science: they

believe in it; this actually is a sort of faith. And it is this belief, which gains common currency via the idea that doctors, engineers, physicists, and economists have the answer to all the problems humanity faces, that must be shaken.

Finally, an idealization of the so-called underdeveloped world is implicit in several of the speeches given here. For my part, I say: You are like the others, neither better nor worse. You can just as easily cut each other’s throats, and in reality you do so quite often. In France, I belonged to the feeble minority that tried to struggle against the Algerian War. But I always knew that, if the positions had been reversed and if the Algerians had dominated France, they would have behaved, on the whole, like the French behaved in Algeria. I therefore believe that we must abandon this kind of polemic and turn our discussion over to an examination of the basic questions facing us.

Discussion on the “Socialist Model” of Development

Cornelius Castoriadis: I would like to follow up directly on what Bianco said. Without entering into a terminological or lexicographical, let alone philosophical discussion, I want to challenge the terminology being employed.⁴ People seem to be swallowing the idea that there

⁴The preceding speakers (Edgar Morin, René Dumont and Lucien Bianco) had not stopped to consider that the term “socialism” was being applied to Russia, China, etc. [T/E: On Castoriadis’s use of the term “socialism,” see now, however, Castoriadis’s introduction to CS, “Socialism and Autonomous Society” (1979, now in [PSW3](#)), in which he abandons this term to the “really existing socialism” of the Brezhnev era (not that the

exists a “socialist model” of development as embodied in the “socialist countries.” One can do what one wants with words, but ultimately socialism has always signified the abolition of exploitation. My claim is that there still exists, in all these countries called by antiphrasis “socialist,” the exploitation of man by man—or the reverse, as the well-known Czech joke has it. Consequently, I absolutely refuse them use of the qualifier “socialist.” Let the journalists of *Le Monde* and other quite serious newspapers talk on and on about “socialism” and about “revolution” apropos of everything and anything. All a corporal in any country needs to do is to seize power and to call himself a “socialist” (and what else would he say?), and articles on “the new face of Senechadian socialism,” for instance, will appear. The Greek colonels, too, spoke of “*the National Revolution*”—and Greek newspapers have reached the point today [T/E: 1977] where the word “revolution” means the Papadopoulos regime. In the early 1970s, everyone was talking about “Arab socialism” and the “Arab socialist revolution”: in fact, it was a matter of the regime of Citizen Nasser. Now things are somewhat clearer; with Citizen Sadat there is no more talk of “Arab socialism,” and still I am not completely sure what it was.

René Dumont: There is still, with Sadat, a party called the Arab Socialist Union.

C.C.: And also the “socialism” of the “revolution” of Idi Amin Dada. But let us turn to more important matters. The term “model” has also been used; I challenge it as well, for there is no model. There is an ideological/imaginary cluster, the only hard part of its core being the power of a bureaucratic apparatus. This is the sole characteristic that remains constant

Russia of the time was actually socialist), opting instead for the term “autonomous society.”]

across all the countries in question. Without doubt, these bureaucratic apparatuses are structured differently from one country to another: the Russian CP and the Chinese CP are not exactly the same, and the situation is something else again in Cuba and again in Libya. Most often, however, this apparatus forms around a political party, but it can be, at the limit, the army itself. Not the army of Tamerlane, but the army such as we have known it since Roman times, and in any case such as it has been imposed upon all countries by Europe.

Obviously, bureaucracy does not signify “offices” [*bureaux*]¹—still less the employees behind the windows at the Post Office. It is a matter of a highly hierarchized managerial-directorial apparatus, where the area of competence of each authority is delimited, where this competence diminishes as one descends the hierarchal ladder, where, therefore, there is an internal division of labor of direction and command. This ruling [*dirigeant*] apparatus stands opposed to a mass of executants who, theoretically, form its “base” but who in reality remain outside it.

Now, what we can find to be the characteristic common to all the countries in question is, on the one hand, this hard core of a bureaucratic apparatus ruling society, and, on the other hand, the ideology of development. For, we cannot talk as if there were something incontestable about the content of development and about its ultimate goals [*finalités*], which would be all at once the Beautiful, the Good, and the True, and which would be Development with a capital D. What we notice when looking at these allegedly “socialist” countries is that they are pursuing development in a Western capitalist sense—even if this is done via “planning” that is centralized or “decentralized,” etc. What I mean by this is that in these countries the type of civilization in the

broadest sense of the term, their type of culture, if you prefer, the type of individuals society aims at producing, the types of products fabricated or tools utilized, the type of spatiotemporal arrangement of human activities, the type of relationships people have with each other, whatever the ideological/imaginary cluster surrounding them, are the types the capitalist West has been creating for the past five or six centuries.

That there is on the planet an immense problem with hunger and material poverty is an obvious point, a massive and tragic fact; that this is used to speak and to act as if the sole response was to implant in non-Western countries the Western capitalist model, whose substance—productivism, pseudo-“rationalization,” etc.—is masked by a “socialist” phraseology, is an entirely other matter. “Development” is development of a Western-capitalist type; until now there has been no other type, and none other is known.

In this regard, we might add a note about certain aspects of the policy of the Chinese bureaucracy, which at times has seemed to want to follow different paths: fewer large factories, less urbanization, less centralized medicine—this was discussed a year ago with Ivan Illich. The discussion here would have to be deepened; for my part, I note, on the one hand, that, on all these points, the Chinese bureaucracy sooner or later returns to the traditional [T/E: i.e., bureaucratic-capitalist] paths and, on the other hand, that, in all this it is a matter simply of employing more flexible and more efficient methods, from the bureaucracy’s point of view, for mobilizing the population and putting it into the service of a policy and a project that, after all, entail the “development” of China in the sense that the United States and Russia are “developed.” We know, indeed, that even the organization of Chinese concentration camps is much more “intelligent” and

subtle, much less rough and brutal than that of the Russian camps under Stalin. Likewise, the exploitation of the peasantry, the mobilization of citizens in the neighborhoods, etc., are carried out with more flexibility and “efficiency.” The mobilizations of the public in Stalinist Russia during the 1930s, for example, were grotesque theatrical spectacles; in China, they really seem to possess a certain “effectiveness,” provided one adopts the standpoint of the objectives of the regime. But these are in fact the objectives that are to be attained each time—and which are, moreover, the same ones as elsewhere, even if the Chinese bureaucracy allows them to be realized at a slower pace and does so with more astuteness.

R.D.: Now, beware, the society that China is building is thoroughly different from Western society, at least on one fundamental point, that of social inequalities. In China, there still are privileges, inequalities, but their order of grandeur is fundamentally different from our own, and China is being built upon a consciously different model.

Lucien Bianco: Yes, the material inequalities are infinitely smaller in China than in France or in the USSR, for example. But here again one should take the poverty of the country into consideration.

Edgar Morin: In poor countries there has always been the luxury of a tiny minority; that is not a decisive argument.

L.B. : That is true: if one compares India to China, one really must recognize that Chinese society is much more egalitarian. But even in prerevolutionary China, the “big” owners were in fact quite small and their income quite mediocre, to the point that Sun Yat-sen said: “In China there are only two social classes: the very poor and the less poor.”

C.C.: The data I have at my disposal do not lead me to think that the inequalities are “infinitely less” in China than elsewhere. But the basic point does not lie there. When one

speaks of India, a capitalist country—where, it is true, capitalism has had trouble developing—as well as when one speaks of France, it must not be forgotten that income inequalities have, within the framework of capitalism, a nonindividual function, a “social” function: the financing of accumulation, of investments. In Russia or in China, this function is not carried out via private incomes but by means of the direct levy on a part of the social product by the Plan, etc. What should be compared is not what [T/E: a capitalist industrialist in France such as] Monsieur Dassault [T/E: or Mr. Ford] makes and what Messrs. Brezhnev and Mao make; for, most of the income of Monsieur Dassault is invested, whereas Messrs. Brezhnev and Mao invest nothing. What is to be compared is what Monsieur Dassault consumes and what Messrs. Brezhnev and Mao consume. Now, the answer is easy: they consume the same thing, for they consume all that they want to consume.

Juliette Minces: By employing the term “consumption,” when applied to heads of State or of a Party, I think you are mixing up several things. Let me take an example that greatly impressed me when I was in Guinea in 1962. We knew Sékou Touré, who, personally, consumed very little, relatively speaking. That was not of inordinate interest to him. What he consumed was power, and that was what was most important. So when you talk about consumption, that bothers me a great deal. Moreover, there is a distinction you are not making, which is that all state apparatuses are privileged, everywhere. But not all of them are characterized by their parasitic aspect.

C.C. : We were talking about economic inequalities. I do not believe that René Dumont meant that inequality from the standpoint of power is infinitely less in China than in France; on this point, we are all in agreement, I believe. But

we were talking about “material” inequalities, we were trying to see how these inequalities are to be judged, and it is in this regard that I, taking the narrow viewpoint of an economist, said that, whatever political judgment one makes, when one is talking about the income of a capitalist in a liberal-capitalist society, it must not be forgotten that it has two functions, the most important of which concerns accumulation. A capitalist is not essentially someone who consumes, it is someone who invests in factories. In Russia, in China, in the “people’s democracies,” these factories are built on the general budget account; the levy on social revenues is direct, it is not mediated by “individual” income as in the West, and that makes all the difference. What remains to be done, therefore, is to compare Brezhnev’s thirty-seven cars and his dachas to the Rolls Royces and Saint-Tropez villas of the rich here—and, of course, the number of privileged persons there and here.

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But are we not still in the process of postulating what is to be proved?⁵ We are talking about progress in the realm of production. I am quite willing to grant that progress has been more rapid in China than in India. But how can one make of such progress the supreme criterion or an indisputable criterion without swallowing the whole universe of capitalist life and thought? And this brings us to another aspect that has been neglected in these comparisons and that undermines them: people were talking as if the social and

⁵In the meantime, the discussion had turned to the “comparative merits” of development in India and China, in particular to the comparison of their rates of growth.

anthropological structure of the Chinese world and the Hindu world were identical from the start. Now, without entering into a facile culturalism, the immense importance of the difference between these worlds must be taken into account. For deep-seated historical reasons, numerous “undeveloped” countries have been infinitely “closer” to the capitalist world, or more “ready” for capitalist development, than others. For example, even in its poorest periods, Greece has always “belonged” to the West in a certain sense. And Greece is in the process of developing—whereas Turkey has encountered many more difficulties. The same thing goes for Spain. Spain is already almost France; whether one likes it or not, in fifteen years, Franco’s Spain achieved “development” as rapidly as any other country. And I do not think that the situation is essentially different in Latin America, though the difficulties encountered by capitalist “development” are much greater there. I view the present Brazilian regime with horror, but I see, in principle, nothing that would prevent a capitalist “takeoff” from occurring in Brazil; this takeoff is already happening, it has already been accomplished. But it happens that all the countries I have just mentioned belong to a certain anthropological, cultural, social-historical area. Now, in Asia, for example, there is such an area to which the Chinese and the Japanese (and undoubtedly, too, the Indochinese) belong—and another, completely different one, that of the Hindu people (and, moreover, the Indonesians). Three-thousand years of Chinese history cannot so easily be forgotten. The Chinese are people who, as the Greek expression goes, have always known how to extract fat from flies.

R.D.: And to make use of excrement.

C.C. : Yes, and to make use of human excrement, a point which Victor Hugo referred to in his wonderful book,

Les Misérables—where he was already denouncing the fact that the city of Paris alone was each day dumping, via its sewers, the then-equivalent of 500 million gold francs into the sea whereas, as he said, the Chinese soil is as rich as the first day of Creation because the Chinese pour their excrement onto it. Likewise, the Japanese: Does Japan represent a “socialist model”? In the past century, Japan has become the second largest industrial power on Earth.

Jean-Marie Domenach: But Japanese taxi drivers sleep in their cars.

C.C.: That is exactly what I am saying: what matters is “economizing,” “producing,” “saving.” It is the same thing in Hong Kong: arriving at the airport at midnight, you find salesmen from the tailors who will offer you a made-to-order suit, with a fitting at five and delivery at eight in the morning, thus allowing you to continue your flight at nine. These are artisans—and they are not starving. But when I was in India, I hired a Hindu taxi driver to visit the wonderful temples around Madras. After a long friendly conversation on a variety of topics, he happened to mention to me that he had been able to set aside a considerable amount of money. In all innocence, I asked him: “Of course, you are going to buy a second taxi?” “Not at all,” he replied, “For five years we have been preparing a great pilgrimage for the whole family to a great temple” (I think it was Rameswaram), “and this money will be just enough.” This may seem facile to say, but this illustrates in one sentence the anthropological structure of the Hindu people as well as the “obstacles” it places in the way of capitalist “development.” And in this regard, the situation is the same in Africa—though India is a “historical” society and African societies are, as such, “prehistoric” societies.

J.-M. D.: The Chinese anthropological structure was that millions of people were dying of hunger. Now, it is no

longer the same thing. So, what has changed?

C.C.: There was a period during which traditional Chinese society was decomposing, as has occurred periodically, but in an infinitely more aggravated way over the past century due to the invasion by Western imperialism. The new regime has “reorganized” the country, but it has been able to do so as a function of an already existing attitude, one deeply rooted in the Chinese people: produce, economize, arrange things, put them in order, make use of the tiniest bits possible. That is the attitude of the Chinese, that is the attitude of the Japanese; it is not that of the Hindus.

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I wanted to speak on other points, but Bianco’s last statements bring me back to what strikes me about this discussion.⁶ People are talking as if creating a nation were simply “positive.” For my part, I have fought against nationalism as soon as I entered upon political life. Now, what is happening is what Edgar Morin so well described a moment ago when he spoke of the “shame” experienced by Western intellectuals. They feel guilty criticizing Western-style “development” because someone coming from the Third World—and we encountered this at Figline-Valdarno—might say: “Ah, but all that is just criticism coming from well-fed people.” The same goes for the idea of the nation; everything happens as if you were afraid that people might tell you: “For you, perhaps, the nation is an obsolete idea, but for us the nation means no

⁶Lucien Bianco had just said (*Le Mythe du développement*, p. 134), “The creation and consolidation of the Chinese nation are...the most incontestable feature on the balance sheet of this revolution.”

longer being under the heels of some French or English sergeant.” But they remain under the heel of a sergeant right at home: Idi Amin Dada, Muammar Gaddafi, or Houari Boumédiène.

Second, to rid oneself of foreign oppression (which, certainly, also manifests itself as “national” oppression, more precisely as the oppression of the indigenous population *qua* indigenous people) is not at all equivalent to the creation of artificial “nations” such as have been produced these days in Africa—a point I will make in front of any African. One need only look at a map to see the grotesqueness of it all: most of the time, the boundaries of these “nations” follow exactly along the meridians and parallels on the map, these are the frontiers fixed for territories previously conquered by England, France, etc., solely as a function of partition treaties or for the convenience of the respective administrations and thanks to the Cartesian mind, since it is easier to demarcate territories by means of straight lines coinciding with meridians and parallels. What this now gives for the populations in question has been quite visible to see for several years: it has given Nigeria and Biafra, it has given the bloody tribal struggles in the ex-Belgian Congo, or Senegal today, with four or five different ethnic groups, some of them overflowing into neighboring countries, who are ready to kill each other.

The idea of the “nation” is presently one of the essential ingredients of the bureaucratic ideology. By means of it, the struggle against exploitation and imperialist oppression has been confiscated by a nascent bureaucracy. The bureaucratic apparatus presents itself to the indigenous masses as the authority that is going to “create for them” as well as “give to them” a nation and that embodies this nation as well as guarantees its existence. This is also how the mass

struggle against oppression slips into being a “national” struggle, that is to say, into a struggle for the creation of a “national” State, with all that the creation of a State implies. I have spoken at length on this point, for I am struck to see to what extent people like those gathered here today have been able to become saddled with this monstrous dialectic of the past hundred years of history, which has rendered all words and all significations ambiguous, which has made them, in their current usage, instruments of mystification.

E.M.: But this void left by the ebbing of colonialism, or by its being chased out, is filled by the nation, and under present conditions it is hard to see what else could have filled this void.

C.C.: Here we agree. But that something had to fill it does not mean that we have to swallow this something. The last philosopher of history died in 1831. If I were speaking as a philosopher of history, I would have said, as he did: All that has been real has been rational, period, there is nothing else to say. But I am speaking politically; that what has been was so as a function of certain causes may serve for me as part of the discussion, but it does not close it. It was said a moment ago that in politics “illusions” count as much as “reality” does, if not more so—and this is obviously true: otherwise there would not have been, for example, two great wars. Now, to speak today of the so-called socialist so-called model of so-called development and to denounce it is not to do a work of philosophy, it is to do a work of politics, it is to denounce and to try to dissolve these “illusions” that are of such importance in their “real” actions. And this is precisely what one sees when one notes that all these words and all these terms convey representations, motivate activities, and justify realities, radically contrary to those we have in mind or those we—in any case, I—would be ready to defend. Jean-Marie

Domenach asked a minute ago: What are the reasons these countries adopt the “socialist model”? One of these reasons, and not the least of which, is to be found precisely in these “illusions” and their force. The same thing goes for the “nation.”



I return to the question of bureaucracy, and my old quarrel with Edgar⁷ on this score. In my view, there can be no doubt about the specificity, the originality of the contemporary bureaucratic organization, its belonging to the modern world, even if one can find many kernels, many germs in the past—in China, in Imperial Rome, the official Christian Church, etc. But the modern bureaucracy finds its genuine origin, its social-historical sources elsewhere—and these sources are three in number. First, there is the spontaneous evolution, *the internal logic, of Western capitalism*: concentration and centralization, factory organization, the increasingly close ties established between the economy and the State, etc. The second is the *degeneration of working-class organizations themselves* and of the Revolution of 1917: for reasons that cannot be

⁷T/E: Under the cleverly stinging title “Solécisme ou Barbarisme,” Edgar Morin had published a rather negative assessment of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group’s conception of bureaucracy in the April 1957 third issue of his review *Arguments*. In a reply titled “Sur l’article de Morin,” S. ou B. member Claude Lefort defended the group’s views in that same issue. After *Arguments* folded, Morin participated in various public S. ou B. events, penned an article in the penultimate issue of the *S. ou B.* review, and authored, along Lefort and Castoriadis, *La Brèche*, the first book to be published that defended the May 1968 student-worker uprising in France.

discussed right now, the Russian working class did not succeed in assuming, in effectively exercising, power, either in production or in politics; the Bolshevik party, which prepared itself for this task, emerged, seized power for itself, and became the dominant stratum and core around which the new dominant and exploiting class crystallized. The third source—which shows Marxism’s inability to account for contemporary history, since the first two can be, to a greater or lesser extent, interpreted within Marxist bounds—is what I have called *the emergence of the bureaucracy within the void* and from the void: traditional, precapitalist society collapses when it comes into contact with capitalism; imperialism proves incapable of continuing to impose its will, either directly or via an intermediary, a national bourgeoisie; the crisis of society and the struggle of the masses are each amplified under the influence of the other. This situation may last for a long time—it lasted for at least fifty years in China, for example—but if and when it is transcended, we note that it always happens basically in the same way. The apparatus that, in these societies, offered the most appropriate (or the least foreign) “welcoming structures” for the creation of a bureaucratic-capitalist society, that possesses the “organizational” and “informational” elements in the biological sense, the DNA that allows it to carry out a process of social catalysis, this apparatus starts to proliferate and to extend its influence and its power, finally becoming the instance that “resolves” this society’s crisis. The apparatus that is in a privileged position to play this role is quite obviously a “Marxist,” “Communist,” etc., party, since internally it already has a “modern” organization; a “message,” as Edgar says, or an ideology and system of explanation of the world and, lastly, established strategic and tactical models (see Portugal after April 1974); it already

exists, ready made for this role.

But we note, too, that, in other countries, just as numerous, the “primordial soup” created by the decomposition of traditional society does not permit the birth or development of such a party. Such is the case in almost all African societies; such is also the case in India, where the Communist (or Marxist-Leninist) party or parties find themselves faced with a golden opportunity but succeed in accomplishing nothing at all. Why is that? The same goes, indeed, in almost all Muslim countries. I do not want to return to anthropology, but I am certain that this has a lot to do with it. In all these instances, when something happens, we can see that another apparatus plays—generally, of course, with much less effectiveness—the role of the Party apparatus: it is the military apparatus, or, in the extreme case, it is personified by Mr. Amin Dada and his soldiers. Of course, this apparatus, too, has need of a “socialist” ideology—or phraseology—for reasons already discussed, and which, moreover, are quite obvious.

Now, a final word on the “positive” question of politics properly speaking, in the sense of: What is to be done? This is the really decisive question, but there is a preliminary one: From what standpoint are you speaking? In what capacity are you speaking? Are we partners in the firm of “Consultants for Development with Attenuated Horror”? Are we going to draw the curves that would maximize wheat production and minimize the concentration-camp population? For my part, I say that I will not do it. I am not a consultant for development with minimum horror.

E.M.: Aren’t you sometimes forced to be?

C.C.: I do not see what could force me to do so for an instant, and I will not enter into that kind of discussion. But let me return to what Edgar said: perhaps we need a little of

this, a little of that, a little self-management, etc. I am not being ironic, clearly this is not “false,” and it is preferable to be a worker in a Yugoslavian factory than in a Hindu factory. But these little doses of this and that cannot vanquish the terrible power of the totality of society, of society *qua* overall institution and, as things stand now, *qua* bureaucratic society. And this may be seen in Yugoslavia, for example, where the control exercised by the State and Party apparatus is quite effectively complete—precisely because of “decentralized self-management”—via the control of economic mechanisms, of demand, of the world market, etc.

What, in my view, has been for a very long time the key to the whole question of “development” is that the countries of the Third World contained, and perhaps still contain, the possibility of making a positive, original contribution to the necessary transformation of world society. It is this possibility that is totally conjured away in the usual discussions about development; and this is what is destroyed through the bureaucratic-capitalist “development” of these countries—and in this, too, the hate one may feel toward the bureaucracies being created there is so much the greater. Schematically speaking, we may say that in most of these countries traditional cultural forms had not yet and still have not been completely dissolved. It goes without saying that most of the time these traditional forms went hand in hand with exploitation, poverty, a whole series of negative factors; yet, they also preserved something that has been shattered in and through capitalist development in the West: a certain type of sociability and of socialization, and a certain type of human being. It has long been my opinion that the solution to the present-day problems of humanity will have to pass by way of a junction between this element and what the West can contribute; I mean by this a transformation of Western

technique and knowledge so that they will be able to serve in the maintenance and the development of the authentic forms of sociability extant in “underdeveloped” countries—and, in return, the possibility for Western peoples to learn something there that they have forgotten, how to become inspired to revive genuinely communitarian forms of living.

The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain*

I am going to speak about the social-historical domain. However, before embarking on my subject, I must begin with some very dogmatic assertions.

1. “Being” is not a system, is not a system of systems, and is not a “great chain.” Being is Chaos, Abyss, or the Groundless. It is a Chaos with a nonregular stratification: that is, with partial “organizations” that are specific to the various strata we discover (discover/construct, discover/create) in Being.
2. Being is not only “in” Time, but is through (by means of, by virtue of) Time. In essence, Being is Time. [Or else: Being is essentially to-be.]
3. Time is either nothing or it is creation. Time, properly speaking, is unthinkable without creation; otherwise, time would be only a supernumerary fourth spatial dimension. Creation here means of course genuine, ontological creation, the creation of new Forms, of

*Based on a speech given to the International Symposium on “Disorder and Order” at Stanford University, September 14-16, 1981, which was originally published in *Disorder and Order*, ed. Paisley Livingston, Stanford Literature Series, 1 (Saratoga, California: Anna Libri, 1984), pp. 146-61 [T/E: and then reprinted in *Identity—The Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), pp. 39-43]. My own French translation of this lecture appeared in *DH*, 219-37 (272-95 of the 1999 reprint). All author additions in brackets, as well as notes 1 and 3-5, first appeared there. [T/E: To conform with the French translation, which should be considered more definitive because it is of a later date, some additional English words have been italicized and some English phrases adapted for the version printed in *WIF*, 3-18. Some slight editorial changes have also been made in the English version for clarity’s sake.]

new *eidē*, to use the Platonic term. Incidentally, creation as such and proper was never considered in theology. Theological “creation” is just a word; philosophically speaking, it is a misnomer for what is in truth only production, fabrication, or construction. Theological “creation” always follows (and is bound to follow) the model of the *Timaeus*: God is a Maker or a Craftsman who looks at the preexisting *eidē* (Forms) and uses them as models or paradigms in shaping matter. But God does not create *eidos*, neither in Plato nor in any rational theology.¹

4. These fundamental facts about Being, Time, and creation have been veiled by traditional ontology (and, in its wake, by science) because in its dominant stream this ontology worked with the basic hypercategory of *determinacy* (in Greek, *peras*; in German, *Bestimmtheit*). Determinacy leads to the negation of time, to atemporality: if something is truly determined, it is determined since always and forever. If it changes, the ways in which it can change and the

¹ Author’s addition: I say *rational* theology expressly. I am maintaining, in effect, that the idea of the absolute “contingency” of every *eidos* and of every logical relation as well as the affirmation of the created character of “eternal truths” are a desperate recourse on the part of *rational* theology that is incompatible with everything this kind of theology aims at establishing. I shall return to this point in the first part of *La Création humaine* (forthcoming [T/E: see n. 1 in the Preface]). In Plato, God is artisan (*demiurge*) of “intermediary” forms—the “bed” in the *Republic* 10.597a-c, the entire world and all it contains in the *Timaeus*—but He is *not*, and *could not be* the creator of the *eschata*, as Aristotle will say (*Metaphysics* 12.3.1069b37-38): of naked matter and of ultimate forms, *eidē*, of mathematical elements in the *Timaeus*, any more than of “Eternal Living Being.” Nor, moreover, is the God of *Genesis*, who gives form to the *tohubohu* that is already there.

forms this change can bring about are already determined. Then “events” only realize laws and “history” is but the unfolding along a fourth dimension of a “succession” that, for an Absolute Mind (or for the accomplished scientific theory), would only be coexistence. Time is then sheer repetition, if not of “events,” then of the instantiations of laws. It is a question of life and death, so to speak, for this ontology to negate time as the permanent possibility of the emergence of the Other. For reasons deeply connected with this framework of determinacy, traditional ontology has to limit the possible types of being to three and only three categories: substances (in fact, “things”), subjects, and concepts or ideas—and the possible sets, combinations, systems, and hierarchies of sets of substances, subjects, and ideas.

5. From an ultimate point of view, the question—“What is it, in what we know, that comes from the observer (from us), and what is it that comes from what there is?”—is, and will forever remain, undecidable.

The link between what I have to say and the concerns of the “hard” scientists can be found—so, at least, I hope—in my attempt to throw some light on some aspects of these two, and twin, questions: What *is* a form and how does it *emerge*? This I shall try to do by discussing these questions as they appear in the social-historical domain, the domain of man (*anthrōpos*), the species, male as well as female.

Does this stand in need of justification? Man is perhaps no more, but certainly no less of a being than galaxies or the species *Escherichia coli*. The possible “oddities” of man ought not to lessen, but rather to increase the interest in

his ways of being, if only because they may shake or falsify general conceptions about "Being" gathered from other domains. "Two" is no less a prime number because it has the oddity of being the only even prime number. And it is a very precious odd even prime number, if only because, by virtue of its existence, we can falsify a statement that is true in a denumerably infinite number of cases, namely: "every prime number is odd." So perhaps with man.

We are not interested in man only because we are men. We have to be interested in man because, from all we know, the fantastic knot of problems linked with the existence of man, with the ontological type of being that man represents, is not reducible to physics or to biology. If I may attempt what is, to my mind, only half a joke, perhaps the time has come to reverse the traditional way of proceeding. Perhaps, instead of trying to see how far we can explain what happens with man through physics and through biology by, for instance, continuing to assume that an idea, a myth, a dream are but the epiphenomenal results of some state of the nervous system that would itself be reducible to, say, some arrangement of electrons, we may try to reverse the procedure, for heuristic purposes. You remember that philosophers almost always start by saying: "I want to see what Being is, what reality is. Now, here is a table, what does this table show to me as characteristic of a real being?" No philosopher ever started by saying: "I want to see what Being is, what reality is. Now, here is my memory of my dream of last night, what does this show to me as characteristic of a real being?" No philosopher ever starts by saying: "Let Mozart's *Requiem* be a paradigm of Being, let us start from that." Why could we not start by positing a dream, a poem, a symphony as paradigmatic of the fullness of Being, and seeing in the physical world a *deficient* mode of Being, instead of looking

at things the other way round, instead of seeing in the imaginary—that is, human—mode of existence, a deficient or secondary mode of being?

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Man exists only in and through society—and society is always historical. Society as such is a form, and each given society is a particular, even a singular, form. Form entails organization, in other words, order (or, if you wish, order/disorder). I shall not try to define the terms *form*, *organization*, and *order*. Rather, I shall try to show that they acquire a nontrivially *new* meaning in the social-historical domain and that the confrontation of this meaning with the ones given to these terms in mathematics, physics, or biology may be beneficial to all of the parties concerned.

Two fundamental questions arise in the social-historical domain. First, “What is it that holds a society together?” In other words, what is the basis of the unity, cohesion, and organized differentiation of the fantastically complex web of phenomena we observe in any existing society? Yet we are also confronted with the multiplicity and diversity of societies, and with the historical dimension within each society, expressed as an *alteration* of the given social order that possibly leads to a (sudden or not) end of the “old order” and the establishment of a new one. Thus, we have to ask ourselves, secondly: “What is it that brings about other and new forms of society?”

Let me say, parenthetically, that I shall not deal here with the discussion and refutation of the traditional views about society and history, including the most recent ones (e.g., functionalism and structuralism; Marxism is, in fact, a variety of functionalism). These views virtually always conceive of

society as an assembly or collection of “individuals” related to each other and all related to “things.” This is a begging of the question, since individuals and things are social creations—both in general and in the particular form they take in any given society. That which is not social in “things” is the stratum of the “natural world” that a “human ape” would perceive and *as* he would perceive it. Neither do we know this, nor is it relevant to our problem. And that which is not social in the “individual”—apart from a clumsy and unfit-for-life degenerate animal—is the nucleus of the psyche, or the psychical monad, which would also be incapable of surviving (I mean, of surviving psychically) without the violent imposition upon it of the social form “individual.” Neither “permanent” biological “needs,” nor eternal psychical “drives,” “mechanisms,” or “desires” can account for society and history. Constant causes cannot give rise to variable effects.²

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I come now to my first question. That which holds a society together is of course its institution, the whole complex of its particular institutions, what I call “the institution of a society as a whole”—the word *institution* being 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

²For a detailed discussion of these and related points, see my books [*IIS*](#) (1975 [T/E: 1987 in English]) and [*CLI*](#) (1978 [T/E: now in English as the first volume in the present series]).

differentiations: e.g., man/woman) given to it by the society considered.

How do institutions prevail or ensure their effective validity? Superficially, and only in some cases, through coercion and sanctions. Less superficially, and more broadly, through adherence, support, consensus, legitimacy, belief. But, in the last analysis: by and through the formation (fabrication) of the human raw material into a social individual, in which these institutions themselves as well as the “mechanisms” of their perpetuation are embedded. Do not ask yourselves, How is it that most people, even if hungry, do not steal? Do not even ask, How is it that they vote for such or such a party, even after repeated deception? Ask yourselves, rather: Which is the part of all your thinking and all your ways of looking at things and doing things that *is not* to a decisive degree conditioned and codetermined by the structure and the meanings of the English language, the organization of the world it carries with it, your first family environment, school, all the “do”s and “don’t”s to which you have been constantly exposed, the friends you have, the opinions in circulation, the ways forced on you by the innumerable artifacts that surround you, etc.? If you can in all sincerity truly answer, “About 1 percent,” you are certainly the most original thinker ever to have lived. It is certainly not our merit (or demerit) if we do not “see” a nymph inhabiting every tree or every fountain. We are all, in the first place, walking and complementary fragments of the institution of our society—its “total parts,” as a mathematician would say. The institution produces, in conformity with its norms, individuals that by construction are not only able, but bound to reproduce the institution. The “law” produces the “elements” in such a way that their very functioning embodies, reproduces, and perpetuates the “law.”

The institution of society, in this general sense, is of course made out of various particular institutions. And these institutions function as and form a coherent whole. Even in situations of crisis, in the most violent state of internal strife and internal war, a society is still *this one* society; if it were not, there would not and could not be struggle over the same, or common, objects. There is thus a *unity* of the total institution of society. And, upon further examination, we find that this unity is in the last resort the unity and internal cohesion of the immensely complex web of meanings that permeate, orient, and direct the whole life of the society considered, as well as the concrete individuals that bodily constitute society. This web of meanings is what I call the *magma* of *social imaginary significations* that are carried by and embodied in the institution of the given society and that, so to speak, animate it. Such social imaginary significations are, for instance: spirits, gods, God; *polis*, citizen, nation, State, party; commodity, money, capital, interest rate; taboo, virtue, sin, etc. But such are also man/woman/child, as they are specified in a given society; beyond sheer anatomical or biological definitions, man, woman, child are what they are by virtue of the social imaginary significations that make them that. A Roman man and a Roman woman were and are something totally different from today's American man and American woman. "Thing" is a social imaginary signification and so is "tool." The mere and naked "toolness" of the tool is a particular imaginary signification, specific mostly to modern Western societies. Few, if any, other societies have ever seen tools as sheer tools; think of Achilles' arms, or Siegfried's sword.

I call these significations *imaginary* because they do not correspond to, or are not exhausted by, references to "rational" or "real" elements and because it is through a

creation that they are posited. And I call them *social* because they are and they exist only if they are instituted and shared by an impersonal, anonymous collective. I shall return briefly to the term *magma*.

What is the source, the root, the origin of this magma and of its unity? Here we can see clearly the limits of the traditional ontology. No “subject” or “individual” (or “group” of subjects and individuals) could ever be this origin. Not only is the amount of ecological, sociological, psychoanalytical, etc., knowledge, both theoretical and applied, necessary to engineer the organization of a primitive tribe, for instance, of such a quantity as well as complexity that it defies imagination and is, at any rate, far beyond our grasp, but, more radically, “subjects,” “individuals,” and their “groups” are themselves the products of a socialization process, for their existence presupposes the existence of an instituted society. Neither can we find this origin in “things”; the idea that myths or music are the (however roundabout) outcome of the operation of the laws of physics is just meaningless. Nor, finally, can we reduce the various institutions of the known societies and their corresponding significations to “concepts” or “ideas” [Hegel]. We have to recognize that the social-historical field is irreducible to the traditional types of being, that we observe here the works, the creation of what I call the *social imaginary*, or the *instituting society* (as opposed to the instituted society)—being careful not to make of it another “thing,” another “subject,” or another “idea.”

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If we consider how, for a given society, its magma of social imaginary significations and the corresponding

institutions “operate,” we can see a similarity between the social and the biological organization in one respect: in respect to *closure*, to use the term of Francisco Varela.³ Both social and biological organizations exhibit an organizational, informational, and cognitive closure.

Each society, like each living being or species, *establishes, creates its own world*, within which, of course, it includes “*itself*.” In the same way as for the living being, it is the proper “organization” (significations and institution) of society that posits and defines, for example, what is for that society “information,” what is “noise,” and what is nothing at all; or the “weight,” “relevance,” “value,” and “meaning” of the “information”; or the “programs” for elaborating and responding to some given “information,” and so on. In brief, it is the institution of society that determines what is “real” and what is not, what is “meaningful” and what is meaningless. Sorcery was real in Salem three centuries ago, and not now. “The Delphic Apollo was in Greece a force as real as any other” (Marx).⁴ It would even be superficial and insufficient to say that each society “contains” a system of interpretation of the world. Each society *is* a system of

³ Author’s addition: Francisco Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy* (Amsterdam, North Holland: Elsevier, 1979). [T/E: Castoriadis discussed Varela’s *Principles* in a rare book review he wrote that appeared in the first issue of *Le Débat* (May 1980). See the English-language translations of this book review as well as of a 1995 “Interview: Cornelius Castoriadis and Francisco Varela” in [PSRTI](#).] See also “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), in [CLI](#), 233-35. The initial idea is due to Humberto R. Maturana.

⁴ T/E: The question—“Was not the Delphic Apollo a real power in the life of the Greeks?”—comes from the Appendix to Marx’s 1841 doctoral thesis *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*.

interpretation of the world, and again, the term *interpretation* is here flat and inappropriate. Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world, of its own world. Its own identity is nothing but this “system of interpretation,” this world it creates. And that is why (like every individual) it perceives any attack upon this system of interpretation as a mortal threat: it perceives such an attack as an attack upon its identity.

In this sense, the “self” of a society, its *ecceitas* as the scholastics would say, its being *this* society and not any other, can be likened to what Varela has called the “autonomy” of the living being, and to the specifications of this “autonomy.” But the differences are also essential, and not just descriptive. I will list some of them.

1. As is well known, the fixation of the “characters” of a society does not possess a physical basis (like the genome) that could guarantee (even “probabilistically”) their conservation through time, their transmission; there is here no equivalent of any genetic code (even if, as Atlan said before,⁵ this code does not work in the way it was thought ten years ago).
2. For society, there is properly speaking no “noise.” Whatever appears, whatever occurs to a society has to *mean* something for it—or has to explicitly be declared to be “without meaning.”
3. Although there seems to be, in the living being, a nonnegligible redundancy of the processes for

⁵ Author’s addition: Henri Atlan, “Disorder, Complexity, and Meaning,” in *Disorder and Order* (see the publication note to the present chapter), pp. 109-28.

fabricating information, in society this fabrication of information as well as its elaboration appear virtually limitless and go far beyond any characterization in terms of “functionality.”

4. Finality (or, as the recent wave of scientific prudishness would call it, “teleonomy”) seems to be an inescapable category when dealing with the living being as well as with society. But (and without forgetting that the *final* “finality” of the living being is shrouded in a thick mystery) it can be asserted that processes in the living being are governed by the “finality” of its conservation, itself governed by the “finality” of the conservation of the species—itsself governed by the “finality” of the conservation of the biosphere, the biosystem as a whole. In the case of society, although most of the “finalities” we observe are of course governed by a sort of “principle of conservation,” this “conservation” is, ultimately, the conservation of “attributes” that are “arbitrary” and specific to each society—its social imaginary significations.
5. For everything that *is* for a living being, the metaobserver can find a physical correlate. Not so for society, which creates being without physical correlates in a massive and wholesale way: spirits, gods, virtues, sins, “rights of man,” and so on—and for which this type of being is always of a higher order than “sheer physical” being.
6. Society creates a new type of self-reference: it creates its own metaobservers (and all the awkward problems they create).

Of course there is not, and could never be, either biological or social “solipsism.” The living being organizes for itself a part or stratum of the physical world, it reconstructs it to form a world of its own. It cannot transgress the physical laws of nature or ignore them, but it posits new laws of its own. Up to a point, the situation is the same with society. But the type of relation with the “presocial” world (what I call the *first natural stratum*) that society creates and institutes is different. It is an “anaclitic” relation, a “leaning on”—*Anlehnung, étayage*. The “logical/physical” operations through which every society relates itself to the first natural stratum, organizes it, and makes use of it are always under the sway of its social imaginary significations, which are at once “arbitrary” and radically different between different societies. The constraints the physical world imposes on the organization of the living being supply an essential part of our understanding of this organization. That which the natural world as such insuperably dictates that society—and thereby, all societies—do or forbids society from doing is utterly trivial and teaches us nothing.



All this concerns the delineation of society from, and its opposition to, the living being. But the more important task is that of an *intrinsic* characterization of the organization of society.

Let us start with some banal facts. There is no society without arithmetic. There is no society without myth. In today’s society arithmetic is, of course, one of the main myths. There is not and cannot be a “rational” basis for the domination of quantification in contemporary society. Quantification is just the expression of one of its dominant

imaginary significations: whatever cannot be counted does not exist. But we can go one step further. There is no myth without arithmetic—and no arithmetic without myth. Let me add parenthetically that the most important thing about myth is not, as Structuralism holds, that through myth society *logically* organizes the world. Myth is not just “logic” (even if, of course, it contains logic), and even less the binary logic of the Structuralists. Myth is essentially a way for society to vest with meaning both the world and its own life within the world—a world and a life that, otherwise, are obviously meaningless.

These remarks lead us to make a key statement relative to the organization of society, so that we may thereby characterize it in an intrinsic and positive way. The institution of society and the social imaginary significations embedded in it deploy themselves always along two, indissociable dimensions: the “ensemblistic-identitary”⁶ (“set-theoretical,” “logical”) dimension, and the strictly or properly imaginary dimension.

In the ensemblistic-identitary dimension, society operates (“acts” and “thinks”) in and through “elements,” “classes,” “properties,” and “relations” that are posited as “distinct” and “definite.” Here, the sovereign scheme is that of *determination* (determinacy or determinateness, *peras*, *Bestimmtheit*). The requirement here is that everything conceivable be brought under the rubric of determination and the implications or consequences that follow therefrom. From

⁶T/E: In the original English-language text, here and below Castoriadis had actually ventured “identitary-ensemblistic.” For consistency’s sake in the present series, we have changed this phrase to his later formulation “ensemblistic-identitary,” which became the basis for the abbreviated forms “ensidic,” “ensidize,” and so on.

the point of view of this dimension, existence *is* determinacy.

In the imaginary dimension proper, existence *is* signification. Significations, though they can be “pointed to,” are not determinate. They are indefinitely related to each other in the basic mode of *renvoi*. (For this French word, an American friend of mine proposes the translation “referral”: each signification refers to an indefinite number of other significations.) Significations are neither “distinct” nor “definite” (the terms used by Cantor in his “definition” of the elements of a set). They are not connected by necessary and sufficient conditions and reasons. The referral (the relation of referral), which here covers also a “quasi-equivalence” and a “quasi-belonging,” works mostly through a *quid pro quo*, an “*x* stands for *y*,” which in the nontrivial cases is “arbitrary”—that is, instituted. This *quid pro quo* is the kernel of what I call the *signitive relation*—which is the basis of language—the relation between the sign and that of which the sign is sign. As we all know, there is not and could not be any necessary or sufficient reason why “dog” stands for *canis* or why “seven” has to do with God. But the *quid pro quo* relation also goes far beyond language proper.

Let me illustrate what I mean with the example of language. In language, the ensemblistic-identitary dimension corresponds to what I call “code” (not to be confused with the Saussurean “code,” which only means “system”). The imaginary dimension proper manifests itself through what I call “tongue” (*langue*). Thus, in a certain context, sentences like “Give me the hammer” or “In any triangle, the sum of the angles is equal to two right angles” belong to the “code.” Sentences like “In the night of the Absolute, all cows are black” or “I have seated Beauty on my knees, I found her bitter and insulted her” belong to the “tongue.” The distinction between code and tongue—more generally,

between the ensemblistic-identitary dimension and the imaginary dimension proper—is of course not a distinction of “substance,” but one of use and operation. (Ever since I have known them, I have found the statements “All finite fields are commutative” and “The spectrum of any Hermitian operator is necessarily real” among the most beautiful verses ever written.) The two dimensions are, to use a topological metaphor, everywhere dense in language and in social life. That is to say, “arbitrarily near” to every “point” of language there is an “element” belonging to the ensemblistic-identitary dimension—and also an “element” belonging to the imaginary dimension proper. The most “crazy” surrealistic poem still contains an indefinite amount of “logic”—but “through” this “logic,” it materializes the Other of “logic.” Arithmetic and mathematics are everywhere in Bach, but it is not because it contains arithmetic and mathematics that the *Well-Tempered Clavier* is what it is.

Thus, the social imaginary significations in a given society present us with a type of organization unknown until now in other domains. This type is what I call a “magma.” A magma “contains” sets—even an indefinite number of sets—but *is not reducible* to sets or systems, however rich and complex, of sets. (This reduction is the hopeless endeavor of functionalism and structuralism, causalism and finalism, materialism and rationalism in the social-historical domain.) Neither can it be reconstituted “analytically,” that is, by means of set-theoretical categories and operations. Social “order” and “organization” are irreducible to the usual mathematical, physical, or even biological notions of order and organization—at least, as these have been thought of up till now. But the interesting point here is not this negation, but the following positive assertion: The social-historical *creates* a new ontological type of order (unity, coherence, and

organized differentiation).

Let me add a corollary. If one accepts the following (to my eyes obvious) *lemma*, namely, that deterministic theories can exist only as ensemblistic-identitary systems of sentences, capable of inducing an exhaustive ensemblistic-identitary organization of the “object-domain,” then it is clear that no deterministic theory of the social-historical can claim more than a very partial and heavily conditioned validity. (By “deterministic” theories I mean also, of course, “probabilistic” theories in the proper sense, that is, theories that assign *definite* probabilities to occurrences or classes of occurrences.)

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To come now to my second question: the social-historical does not only create, once and for all, a new ontological type of order characteristic of the genus “society.” This type is each time “materialized” through different *forms*, each of which embodies a *creation*, a new *eidos* of society. Apart from the existence everywhere of institutions and of social imaginary significations, and apart from trivialities, there is nothing of substance common to, say, modern capitalist society and a “primitive” society. And if what I said before holds, there is not and cannot be any “law” or determinate “procedure” whereby a given form of society could “produce” another form or cause it to appear. The attempts to “derive” social forms from “physical conditions,” from “antecedents,” or from permanent characteristics of “man” are worse than failures: they are meaningless. Here, inherited ontology and logic are helpless: they are bound to ignore the proper being of the social-historical. Not only is creation for this ontology and logic a dirty word (except in a

theological context, where, as I said before, only a pseudo-“creation” is considered) but also this ontology is inevitably driven to ask, “Creation *by whom?*” Yet creation, as the work of the social imaginary, of the *instituting* society (*societas instituans*, not *societas instituta*), is the mode of being of the social-historical field, by means of which this field *is*. Society is self-creation deployed as history. To recognize this and to stop asking meaningless questions about “subjects” and “substances” or “causes” requires, to be sure, a radical ontological conversion.

This is not to say that historical creation takes place upon a *tabula rasa*—neither need René Thom fear that I am advising laziness. On the contrary, as the very principles of “economy of thought” and “simplicity” show, determinism is *the* methodology of laziness. You do not need to think about this particular occurrence if you are in possession of its general “law.” And if we could write down the ultimate, overall hyperequation of the Universe, we could sleep happily ever after. There is always a fantastic and fantastically complex amount of existing things and partial conditions within which historical creation takes place. And there is also an immense, indeed interminable, useful, and meaningful research around the question: What was there in the “old” that was somehow or other “preparing the new” or related to it? But here again the principle of closure heavily intervenes. Briefly speaking: *the old enters the new with the signification given to it by the new and could not enter it otherwise*. We need only remember how ancient Greek or early Christian ideas and elements have for centuries now been continuously “rediscovered” and remodeled (reinterpreted) in the Western world to fit what we wrongly call the “needs,” that is, in truth, the imaginary schemes, of the “present.” For a long time we had the philologists and researchers of classical antiquity, and

now we have a new scientific discipline [which is sometimes called *historiography*] that is inquiring into the West's changing views of classical antiquity. Needless to say, these inquiries teach us much more about the Western sixteenth, eighteenth, or twentieth centuries than about classical antiquity.

Nor can we refrain from establishing, as far as possible, "causal" or "quasi-causal" connections and regularities that appear in the social-historical domain and are carried by its ensemblistic-identitary dimension. But one needs only to mention, in this respect, the state and fate of economics in order to show the very narrow limits of this type of approach even in what would be its "natural" and privileged domain, and the need to take seriously into account, if one is to understand anything at all, the whole magma of the social-historical reality in which quantifiable and determinate economic relations are immersed.

Our second question was, "How do new social-historical forms emerge?" The answer is, flatly, through creation. To this, the traditionally-minded would respond with a sneer, "You are just supplying a word." I am supplying a word for a fact—a class of facts—that has been, up till now, covered up and that henceforth has to be recognized. Of these facts we do have, up to a point, a "direct" experience: we have been witnessing, so to speak—that is, indirectly or directly—the emergence of new social-historical forms, e.g., the creation of the democratic *polis* in ancient Greece; or, much more, of modern Western capitalism, and even more—*de visu*—of the totalitarian bureaucracy in Russia after 1917. In each of these cases, there are lots of meaningful things to be said, interminable work to be done, on the conditions preceding and surrounding this emergence. We can *elucidate* these processes, not "explain" them. An

“explanation” would entail either the derivation of significations from nonsignifications, which is meaningless, or the reduction of all magmas of significations appearing in history to various combinations of a few “elements of signification” already present “from the start” in human history, which is patently impossible (and would again lead to the question, “How did these ‘first elements’ arise?”).

To take a particular example, that of a specific (and fashionable) explanatory scheme, let us consider the emergence of capitalism, and a possible “neo-Darwinian” approach to it. In Western Europe, between say the twelfth and the eighteenth century, we do *not* observe a “random” production of a huge number of social varieties and the elimination of all but one of them as “unfit,” a selection of capitalism as the only “fit” social form. What we do observe is the emergence of a new social imaginary signification, the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery (instrumented, to begin with, in the unlimited expansion of productive forces), simultaneously with the work of a great number of factors of extreme diversity. *Ex post*, and once we are in possession of the outcome, we cannot help but admire the (incredible and enigmatic) *synergy* of these factors in “producing” a form, capitalism, that was not “intended” by any actor or group of actors and that could certainly not be “constructed” through a random assembly of preexisting “elements.” But once we focus on this new emerging social imaginary signification, the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery, we can understand much more: these “elements” and these “factors” enter the capitalist institution of society if and when they can be “used” by it or become instrumental for it—and this happens as often as not through their being attracted, so to speak, into the capitalist sphere of significations and thereby being invested with a new meaning. A beautiful example is the creation of

the modern, centralized state apparatus by the absolute monarchy, described by Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime et la révolution*: designed and constructed to serve the absolute power of the Monarch, it became the ideal carrier of the impersonal rule of capitalist "rationality."⁷

Similarly, I doubt whether the principles of "order from noise" or of "organization from noise" can help in elucidating the emergence of new social forms. As I said before, I do not think one can properly speak of "noise" in relation to a society. Even the term "disorder" is, if I may say so, out of order here. What appears as "disorder" within a society is, in reality, something internal to its institution, *meaningful and negatively valued*—and that is a totally different thing. The only cases where we could speak genuinely of "disorder" are, I think, those of "old systems that are in crisis" or "crumbling." So, for instance, with the late Roman World—or many Third World societies today. In the first case, a new "unifying principle," a new magma of social imaginary significations eventually emerged with Christianity. I do not see any relation of the preceding "disorder" to this, except that of a "negative condition." In the second case—that of the Third World countries—no new "unifying principle" seems to emerge, and the crumbling of the old order just goes on—except in the cases where "unifying principles" are successfully imported from abroad (which is *not* the most frequent case). To take another example, which sheds light on another aspect of the question: when the protobourgeoisie starts emerging within the general framework of feudal society in the twelfth century, it does not make much sense to treat this phenomenon as "noise" or "disorder"; this would be,

⁷ Author's addition: See my "Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire," in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 37 (July 1964): 32-43; now in *IIS*, pp. 45-54.

at most, legitimate from a “feudal” point of view. For this “noise” or “disorder” is, from its very beginning, a carrier of a (new) order and of (new) significations, and can *materially* exist *only by being* such a carrier.

But what seems to me to establish, above all, the radical difference between the biological and the social-historical world is the emergence, in the latter, of *autonomy*—or of a new meaning of autonomy. In Varela’s use of the word (which, as I have taken the liberty of telling him, I regret), the “autonomy” of the living being *is* its closure—organizational, informational, cognitive closure. Closure here means that the functioning of the living “self” and its correspondence with the various outside “its” or “things” are governed by rules, principles, laws, and meanings that are posited by the living being but that, once posited, are given once and for all and the change of which, whenever it occurs, is presumably “random.” But this is exactly what we would call—and what I call—*heteronomy* in the human and the social-historical domain: the state where laws, principles, norms, values, and meanings are given once and for all and where the society or the individual, as the case may be, has no action upon them. An extreme but very telling example of what would be the fullest “autonomy” in Varela’s sense, and the fullest heteronomy in my sense, is that of the psychotic person suffering from paranoia. This person has created once and for all his own all-encompassing and totally rigid interpretative system, and nothing can ever enter his world without being transformed according to the rules of this system. (Of course, without some dose of paranoia, none of us could survive.) But a much more common and massive example is given by all “primitive” societies, and also by all religious societies, where rules, principles, laws, meanings, etc. are posited as given once and for all and their

unquestioned and unquestionable character is institutionally guaranteed by the instituted representation of an extrasocial source, foundation, and guarantee of law, meaning, etc.: obviously, you cannot change the law of God or say that this law is unjust. (The sentence would just be unthinkable and incomprehensible in such a society—like “Big Brother is ungood” in the final stage of Newspeak.) Here we have (as in totalitarianism) the fullest possible “autonomy,” the fullest possible “closure” of meaning and interpretation—that is, the fullest possible *heteronomy* from our point of view.

And what is the origin of “our point of view”? It is another historical creation, a historical break or rupture that first took place in ancient Greece, then again in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, whereby autonomy in the proper sense is for the first time created: autonomy not as *closure*, but as *openness*. These societies represent again a new form of social-historical being—and, indeed, of being *tout court*: for the first time in the history of humanity, of life, and, for all that we know, of the Universe, we have here a being that brings openly into question its proper law of existence, its proper existing order.

These societies call into question their own institution, their representation of the world, their social imaginary significations. This is, of course, what is entailed by the creation of democracy and philosophy, both of which break up the closure of the instituted society prevailing until then and open up a space where the activities of thinking and of politics lead to calling into question again and again not only the *given* forms of the social institution and of the social representation of the world but also the possible ground for *any* such forms. Autonomy here takes the meaning of a self-institution of society that is, from now on, more or less *explicit*: we make the laws, we know it, and thus we are

responsible for our laws and have to ask ourselves every time, “Why this law rather than another one?” And this, of course, entails the appearance of a new type of historical being on the individual level, that is, of an autonomous individual, who can *ask himself*—and also *say aloud*: “Is this law just?” All this does not go without struggle against the old heteronomous order and orders, a struggle that is, to say the least, far from finished.

It is this historical creation of autonomy and, I repeat, of a new type of being capable of calling into question the very laws of its existence, that has conditioned for us the possibility both of a discussion such as the one we are having today, and, more important, of genuine political action, of action toward a new institution of society, fully realizing the project of autonomy. But that is another story.

September 1981

POLIS

Unending Interrogation*

Emmanuel Terrée: A specter is haunting the Europe of intellectuals: the specter of totalitarianism. Among Europeans who have experienced democracy, this results in a cautious withdrawal into themselves. This is to be contrasted with a Third World that, for a long time, seemed so promising but today is suspected of harboring all kinds of totalitarian temptations and deviations. So, after the engaged intellectual, full of certainties but also sometimes of generosity, comes an intellectual who is more reserved but also more ethically concerned. What do you think about this twofold movement of withdrawal?

Cornelius Castoriadis: You can't fall back upon Europe. That's an illusion. It's ostrich politics. It's not the "withdrawal" of a few intellectuals that will change anything at all in contemporary reality, which is basically worldwide. It is also an entirely "anti-European" attitude. There is one and only one qualitative singularity to Europe, to the Greco-Western world, that counts for us. It's the creation of universality, openness, critical self-questioning and critical questioning of one's own tradition.

"Left-wing intellectuals" have for a long time tried to dodge the genuine political problem. They have constantly sought somewhere a "real entity" that would play the role of the savior of humanity and the redeemer of history. They first believed that they had found it in an ideal and idealized proletariat, then in the Communist Party that would "represent" it. Next, without going into an analysis of the

*Interview with Emmanuel Terrée and Guillaume Malaurie, conducted on July 1, 1979, and published in *Esprit*, September-October 1979: 29-33, 131-33, and 242-48 as "Une interrogation sans fin." Reprinted in [DH](#), 241-60 (299-324 of the 1999 reprint). [T/E: The present translation first appeared in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).]

reasons why the revolutionary workers' movement failed in the capitalist countries, it mattering little whether this failure is temporary or definitive, they crossed those countries off their list and transferred their belief onto the countries of the Third World. Retaining the most mechanical aspects of Marx's schema, they tried to put African or Vietnamese peasants in the place of the industrial proletariat and to make them play the same role therein. Now some, in this yes-to-no movement of the pendulum that masks their absence of thought, spit on the Third World for reasons that are as stupid as those that made them adore it. They explained that democracy, freedom, and so on were Western or bourgeois mystifications the Chinese could do without; at present, they insinuate that these barbarians are not yet mature enough to receive these too-precious goods. All that was needed, however, was a tiny opening in the totalitarian trap in Beijing a few months ago to see, wonder of wonders, that, despite Alain Peyrefitte, Philippe Sollers, and Julia Kristeva,¹ the Chinese were not so different from us in this regard and that they demanded democratic rights as soon as they had the possibility of doing so.

¹T/E: Alain Peyrefitte, author in 1973 of *Quand la Chine s'éveillera...* (When China awakens), a report written up about a 1971 French parliamentary visit to China that became a highly popular book, was, at the time of this interview, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's Minister of Justice. (It is assumed that Castoriadis—who did not supply any first names here—was not referring to the novelist and historical writer Roger Peyrefitte.) In 1960, the novelist Philippe Sollers founded the *Tel Quel* review, which at one time famously held a "pro-Chinese" (i.e., Maoist) position; with his wife, Julia Kristeva, who joined the review's editorial committee in 1971, Sollers and other *Tel Quel* editorial committee members visited Mao's China in 1974. The "tiny opening" refers to the Democracy Wall Movement from November 1978 to December 1979.

E.T.: It seems that the intellectuals have broken with their engagement and are more preoccupied with ethics. How do you think that the intellectuals can establish a tie between themselves and the movement of society?

C.C.: "Falling back upon ethics" is, at best, a "false conclusion" drawn from the experience of totalitarianism and today serves as a mystification. What does the experience of the Third World countries show—what, for a long time now, has it shown? That popular revolts, which, in these countries, provoke or accompany the collapse of traditional societies, have been, until now, channeled and coopted by a bureaucracy (most often of a "Marxist-Leninist" type, although now some might hope that there will also be monotheistic bureaucracies). This bureaucracy profits from the situation in order to come to power and to set up a totalitarian regime. Now, that raises the *political* problem of totalitarianism—just as this problem was posed in Europe on the basis of other evolutions. Quite obviously, when faced with this problem, all the inherited conceptions—Marxism as well as Liberalism—find themselves totally insolvent, over there as well as here. This is the problem we have to face, on the theoretical level as well as on the practical level. The "falling back upon ethics" is in this regard a dodge, and a mockery of ethics itself. There is no ethics that halts at the life of the individual. Starting from the moment the social and political question is posed, ethics communicates with politics. The question "What I am to do?" does not concern and cannot concern my individual existence alone, but also my existence *qua* individual who participates in a society in which there is no historical tranquility but where the problem of its organization, of its institution, is openly posed. And it is posed in the "democratic" countries as well as in the totalitarian countries. It is the very experience of

totalitarianism, and its ever present possibility, that shows the urgency of the political problem *qua* problem of the overall institution of society. Dissolving this problem into allegedly ethical attitudes is tantamount, in fact, to a mystification.

Now, when one speaks of the role and of the function of intellectuals in contemporary society, distinctions must be made and the simplifications and superficialities that are beginning to spread must be avoided. At present, one tends to make intellectuals into a “class” apart and even to claim that they are in the process of coming to power. The hackneyed Marxist schema is taken up once again and is patched up by sticking “intellectuals” therein as the “rising class.” This is a variant of the same platitude as “technocracy” or “technostructure.”² In both cases, one shrugs off the specificity of the modern fact *par excellence* in this regard: the emergence and the domination of the *bureaucratic Apparatus*, which invokes “technicality” or “theory” as a veil for its power, but which has nothing to do with the one or the other.

This can be seen very clearly in the Western countries; it is not technicians who direct the White House, or the Élysée Palace, or the big capitalist firms, or States. When they rise to positions of power, it is not by means of their capacities as technicians but, rather, their capacities for scheming and intrigue (French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing is

²“[Technostructure](#)” (Wikipedia, s.v.) “is the group of technicians, analysts within an organisation (enterprise, administrative body) with considerable influence and control on its economy. The term was coined by the economist John Kenneth Galbraith in *The New Industrial State* (1967). It usually refers to managerial capitalism where the managers and other company leading administrators, scientists, or lawyers retain more power and influence than the shareholders in the decisional and directional process.”

hopeless as an “economist,” but shrewder when it comes to tripping up political opponents).

This can also be seen in all “Marxist”- or “Marxist-Leninist”-influenced parties and countries. One of the multitiered farces of history—which shows how ridiculous it is to replace social and historical analysis by simpleminded searches for precursors of ideas—is the matter of the relations between “theory” and the effectively actual movement of the working class. We all know the Kautsky-Lenin conception, according to which it is the petty-bourgeois intellectuals that, from the outside, introduce socialism into the working class.³ This has rightly been criticized, by myself among others. But what must be seen is that this conception is, paradoxically, at once false and true. False, because what there was of socialism was produced by the proletariat, and not by any sort of “theory,” and that, if socialist conceptions are to be “introduced from the outside” into the proletariat, they would cease, *due to this very fact*, to have any relationship at all with socialism. But “true,” too, if by “socialism” one means Marxism, for the latter really did have to inoculate it, introduce it from the outside, ultimately impose it almost by force on the proletariat. Now—another tier—in the name of this conception, the Marxist parties have always claimed to be *the* parties of the working class, representing it “essentially” or “exclusively,” *but* in the name of their possession of a theory that, *qua* theory, can only be the possession of intellectuals. That’s already rather funny. But the best part of the joke is that in these parties it was neither the workers *nor*

³T/E: In Section II of *What is To Be Done* (1901), Lenin, quoting Karl Kautsky’s statement that “socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without” by the Social-Democratic Party, says that these words are “profoundly true and important.”

the intellectuals as such who dominated and who dominate. This has been a kind of new man, the political *apparatchik*, who was not an intellectual but rather a semi-illiterate—like Maurice Thorez in France, or Nikos Zachariadis in Greece.⁴ There existed in the Third International practically just one intellectual who remains readable today: Georg Lukács. He was nothing therein. Stalin, who wrote infantile and unreadable things, was everything therein. Here we have the *effectively actual* relations between theory and practice through the multiple reversals they undergo in the *camera obscura* of history.

In contemporary society, where the “production” and the utilization of “knowledge” certainly have taken up an enormous place, there is a proliferation of “intellectuals.” But, *qua* participants in this production and utilization, these intellectuals have only a very limited specificity. The great majority of them are integrated into the existing labor and pay structures, most of the time in bureaucratic-hierarchical structures. And they thereby cease to have, whether in fact or by right, a specific position, a specific role, a specific vocation. It isn’t because someone is a computer scientist, a specialist in some branch of biology, algebraic topology, or the history of the Incas that he has something particular to say about society.

Confusion occurs because there is another, numerically very limited category of people who deal, be it on the basis of some specialization, with “general ideas” and, starting from there, lay a claim or can lay a claim to another

⁴T/E: Maurice Thorez, who first became General Secretary of the French Communist Party in 1930, was upon his death in 1964 succeeded by Waldeck Rochet. Nikos Zachariadis was the General Secretary of the Greek Communist Party from 1931 to 1956.

role—a “universal” role. Here we have an enduring tradition, at least on the Continent. Obviously, this tradition began already in Antiquity, when the philosopher ceased to be a “philosopher-citizen” (Socrates) and, “removing himself” from society, talks *about* society (Plato). We know how this tradition was resumed in the West, and we know the apogee it attained during the Age of Enlightenment (but also afterward: Marx). In France, it became a sort of besetting sin of the nation, taking on some laughable forms: every *École normale supérieure* student or teacher candidate in philosophy starts out life with the idea that he has in his schoolbag a baton passed on to him from Voltaire or Rousseau. The years since the war have offered a more than hilarious list of examples.

That said, it is obvious that the problem of society and of history—of politics—cannot be broken down into a list of specialists, that therefore a few people, on the basis or not of some specialization, make it the object of their concern and of their labor. If we are talking about those people, we have to comprehend the strange, ambiguous, contradictory relation they entertain with social and historical reality, which is, moreover, their privileged object. What characterizes this relation is obviously the distance they necessarily have *vis-à-vis* the effectively actual movement of society. This distance keeps them from being submerged in things and enables them to try to make out some broad outlines, some tendencies. At the same time, however, it renders them more or less alien to what is effectively going on. And until now, in this ambiguous, contradictory relation to two antinomic terms, one of the terms has been overloaded as a function of the entire theoreticist heritage that begins with Plato, that has been handed down over the centuries, and that was inherited by Marx himself, despite a few attempts he made to free himself

therefrom. The intellectual who is occupied with general ideas is carried along by his whole tradition and by his entire training to privilege his own theoretical elaborations. He thinks that he can find the truth about society and history in Reason or in theory—not in the effectively actual movement of history itself, and in the living activity of humans. He occults in advance historical movement as creation. He thereby can be extremely dangerous to himself and to others. But I do not think that we have here an absolute impasse. For, he can also *participate* in this movement, on the condition that he understands what that means: not signing up with a party in order to follow docilely its orders, nor simply signing petitions. Rather, *acting qua citizen*.

E.T.: You said in *Esprit* in February 1977: There can be no rigorous knowledge [*savoir rigoureux*] about society.⁵ Since then we have been witnessing the massacre of globalizing forms of knowledge (Marxism, psychoanalysis, the philosophy of desire), which confirms your statement. There remains the question of thinking the present. This present is riddled with crises. Is it possible to think these crises in a nonglobalizing and yet still satisfactory manner? Or must one then accept to think in crisis, but then, in what fashion?

⁵ Author's addition: This interview with Olivier Mongin, Paul Thibaud, and Pierre Rosanvallon, conducted in July 1976 and published in *Esprit*, February 1977, was reprinted in *Le Contenu du socialisme* (Paris: 10/18, 1979): 323-66. [T/E: On p. 228 of this interview now translated as "The Revolutionary Exigency" in [PSW3](#), Castoriadis stated: "When I attempt to show not only that there is no rigorous knowledge about society and history, but that there *cannot* be any, it in no way follows that we are unable to understand anything about them, or that anything whatsoever can happen, that we are immersed in a random night in which all cows would be possible."]

C.C.: Let's avoid misunderstandings. That there is no rigorous knowledge about society does not mean that there is not *any knowledge* of society, that one could say just anything, that anything goes. There exists a series of partial and "inexact" forms of knowledge (in the sense that "inexact" is opposed to "exact"), but these are far from negligible as to the contribution they can make to our attempt to elucidate the social-historical world.

There's another risk of misunderstanding. You clearly are using the term "globalizing" with a critical or pejorative connotation. We are in agreement to condemn the idea of a globalizing knowledge in the sense of an absolute or total knowledge; that said, when we *think* society (I am no longer speaking about knowledge, but of thought), this movement of thought nevertheless intends the whole of society.

The situation is not different in philosophy. Philosophical thought is a kind of thought that necessarily intends the whole in its object. Giving up the illusion of the "system" does not signify giving up thinking being, or knowledge [*la connaissance*], for example. Now, here the idea of a "division of labor" is clearly absurd. Does one see philosophers deciding: You over there, you are going to think this or that aspect of being and I'll think some other one? Does one see a psychoanalyst saying to a patient: You shall talk to me about problems relating to anality—as for orality, I'm going to send you to my colleague X? The same goes for society and history: an effectively actual totality is there, already of itself, and that is what is intended. The first question regarding thought of the social—as I formulated it in [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#)—is: What holds a society together, what makes there be *one* society, and not

scattering or dispersion?⁶ Even when there is scattering or dispersion, this is still a *social* scattering, a *social* dispersion, not that of the molecules of a gas in a container that has burst.

When one thinks society, it is inevitable that one intends the whole; this is *constitutive* of that sort of thought. And intending the whole is just as inevitable when one thinks society, not within a theoretical perspective, but within a political perspective. The political problem is that of the overall [*globale*] institution of society. If one situates oneself at that level, and not at that of the European elections for example, one is obliged to pose the questions of the institution, of instituting society, and of instituted society, of the relationship of the one with the other, of how all that is concretized during the present phase. One must go beyond the opposition between the illusion of an overall knowledge [*savoir global*] about society and the illusion that one could fall back on a series of specialized and fragmentary disciplines. It is the very terrain upon which this opposition exists that is to be destroyed.

Thinking the crisis, or thinking in crisis: certainly, we have to think the crisis of society and, certainly, our thought, not being external to this society, being rooted, can itself only be—if it is worth something—in crisis. It is up to us to *make* something of it.

E.T.: And French society? That is what preoccupies us. According to you, there exists a revolutionary project, two centuries old, and there is a homology of significations among all the revolts that refer back to this project. Where are these revolts at today? The example is always given of the struggle of women, immigrants, social experimentation, the

⁶T/E: See ch. 4 of [IIS](#), “The Social-Historical,” partially reprinted in [CR](#) as “The Social Imaginary and the Institution (1975): Excerpt,” 198-217.

antinuclear struggles. But don't these sites of tension, these terrains of confrontation, correspond to deficiencies in the social system that in the end are likely to be regulated and even to be eliminated?

C.C.: I shall begin with a more general remark. The main lesson we can draw from the experience of the past century, from the fate of Marxism, from the evolution of the workers' movement—which is, moreover, in no way original—is that history is the domain of risk and of tragedy. People have the illusion that they can get out of this, and they express it in the following demand: Produce for me an institutional system that *will guarantee* that things will never go wrong; prove to me that a revolution will never degenerate, or that such and such a movement will never be coopted by the existing regime. To formulate this exigency, however, is to remain in the most complete state of mystification. It is to believe that there could be some provisions written down on paper that would be capable, independent of the effectively actual activity of men and women in society, of assuring a peaceful future, or freedom and justice. It's the same thing—this is the Marxian illusion—when one seeks in history a factor that would be *positive and nothing but positive*, that is to say, in the Marxian dialectic, *negative and nothing but negative*, therefore never cooptable, never able to be rendered positive by the instituted system. This position, which Marx assigned to the proletariat, often continues to dominate people's minds, either positively (thus, certain feminists seem to be saying that there is in the women's movement an untouchable and incorruptible radicality) or negatively (when one says: In order to believe in such and such a movement, we have to be shown that it is by nature uncooptable).

Not only do such movements not exist, but there is

much more. Every partial movement not only can be coopted by the system but, so long as the system is not abolished, also contributes in some way to the continuation of the latter's operation. I was able to show this a long time ago, taking the example of workers' struggles.⁷ Under duress, capitalism was able to function, not *despite* workers' struggles but *thanks to* them. We cannot halt at this observation, however; without these struggles, we would not be living in the society in which we are living, but rather in a society founded upon the labor of industrial slaves. And these struggles have called into question the central social imaginary significations of capitalism: property, hierarchy, and so on.

One can say as much of the women's movement, the youth movement, and, despite its extreme confusion, the ecological movement. They challenge the central imaginary significations of instituted society, and, at the same time, they *create* something. The women's movement tends to destroy the idea of a hierarchical relationship between the sexes; it expresses the struggle of individuals of the female sex for their autonomy. As the relationships between the sexes are of core importance in every society, this movement affects all of social life, and its repercussions remain incalculable. Likewise for the change in intergenerational relationships. And at the same time, women and youth (and thereby men and parents, too) are *obliged* to go on living, therefore to live *otherwise*, to make and to do, to seek, to create something else. Certainly, what they make and do necessarily remains integrated into the system, so long as the system exists: that's

⁷See "On the Content of Socialism, III" (1958), "Proletariat and Organization" (1959), and "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961), all now in [PSW2](#), as well as "The Question of the History of the Workers' Movement" (1974), now in [PSW3](#).

a tautology. (The pharmaceutical industry makes profits on contraceptives; so what?) At the same time, however, the basic props of the system are being undermined: in the concrete forms of domination, and in the very *idea* of domination.

I now come back to the first part of your question: Can these movements be unified? It is obvious, at the abstract level, that they should be unified. And the fact is, and it is a very important one, that they are not. And that is not an accident. If the women's movement, or the ecological movement, chafe so much at what they would probably call their *politicization*, it's that there has been, in contemporary society, a far-reaching experience of the degeneration of political organizations. It's not just a matter of their organizational degeneration, of their bureaucratization; it's also a matter of their practice, of the fact that these "political" organizations have nothing to do with true politics, that their sole concern is to penetrate into or take over the state apparatus. The present-day impossibility of unifying these diverse movements expresses an infinitely more general and weightier problem: that of political activity in contemporary society and of its organization.

Guillaume Malaurie: This can be seen with what is happening on the French Far Left, or with the ecologists, who hesitate to constitute themselves as a party.

C.C.: The ecologists are not being asked to constitute themselves as a party; they are being asked to see clearly that their positions challenge, rightly, the whole of contemporary civilization and that what they hold close to their hearts is possible only at the price of a radical transformation of society. Do they see this or don't they? If they do see it, and they say, *For the moment, all that can be done is to fight against the construction of this or that nuclear-power station,*

that's another matter. Very often, however, one has the impression that they don't see it. Moreover, even if it is a question of one nuclear-power station, the general problem is immediately apparent. Either one must also say that one is against electricity or one must put forward another energy policy, and *that* poses a challenge to the entire economy and the whole culture. Constantly increasing energy wastefulness is, moreover, *organically incorporated* into contemporary capitalism, into its economy, up to and including the psychism of individuals. I know of ecologists who don't turn off the light when leaving a room....

E.T.: You have written that modern society is a society of increasing *privatization* of individuals, who are no longer in solidarity but, rather, atomized. Do privatization and passage from a fecund and lively social sphere to a dull and lifeless [*atone*] one go hand in hand?

G.M.: Has French society not changed too deeply for a global upheaval to remain possible here?

C.C.: To say that a dull and lifeless social sphere has taken the place of a fecund one, that all radical change is henceforth inconceivable, would mean that a whole phase of history, begun, perhaps, in the twelfth century, is in the process of coming to an end, that one is entering into I know not what kind of new Middle Ages, characterized either by historical tranquility (in view of the facts, the idea seems comic) or by violent conflicts and disintegrations, but without any historical productivity: in sum, a closed society that is stagnating or that knows only how to tear itself apart without creating anything. (Let it be said, parenthetically, that this is the meaning I have always given to the term "barbarism," in the expression "socialism or barbarism.")

There's no question of making prophecies. But I absolutely don't think that we are living in a society in which

nothing is happening any longer. First, we must see the deeply antinomic character of the process. The regime is pushing individuals toward privatization, is favoring it, subsidizing it, assisting it. Individuals themselves, to the extent that they see no collective activity that offers them a way out or that simply *retains a meaning*, withdraw into a “private” sphere. But also, it’s the system itself that, beyond a certain limit, can no longer tolerate this privatization, for the complete molecularization of society would culminate in its collapse. Thus, one sees the system giving itself over periodically to attempts to attract people anew toward collective and social activities. And individuals themselves, each time they want to struggle, “collectivize” themselves anew.

Next, questions of this order cannot be judged from a short-term perspective. It was in 1959 that I first formulated this analysis about privatization *and* the antinomy of which we have just spoken.⁸ Several “Marxists,” at the time and since then, saw therein only the idea of privatization, and they hastened to declare that I was liquidating revolutionary positions, then that my analysis had been refuted by the events of the Sixties. Of course, these events *confirmed* those analyses, by their “nonclassical” contents (and their bearers) as well as by the fact that they stumbled, as a matter of fact, over the *overall political problem*. The Seventies—despite the big jolts suffered by the regime—have, once again, been years in which people have fallen back upon themselves and withdrawn into their “private” sphere.

G.M.: You define the self-institution to be achieved as desacralized. It’s a provisional corpus that society can always redefine and transform as it pleases.

In fact, most great civilizations, like great revolts, do

⁸See “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” cited in the previous note.

violence to history on the basis of a myth that reconciles contradictions. Peoples seem to become real and effective forces when an eschatological perspective is sketched out. That seems to render recourse to critical energies a particularly dicey proposition. Can men be mobilized upon the basis of an instituted imaginary that is provisional and brittle? Can a relationship to the institution be grounded solely upon reason?

C.C.: The desacralization of the institution was already achieved by capitalism as early as the nineteenth century. Capitalism is a regime that cuts off virtually every relationship between the institution and an extrasocial instance of authority. The sole instance of authority it invokes is Reason, to which it gives a quite peculiar content. From this point of view, there is a considerable ambiguity to the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the social law is posited as the work of society, *and* at the same time it is allegedly grounded upon a rational “nature” or a natural and transhistorical “reason.” That remains ultimately Marx’s illusion, *too*. This illusion is still another of the masks and forms of heteronomy: whether the law would be dictated to us by God, by nature, or by the “laws of history,” it is still *dictated* to us.

The idea that there is an extrasocial source and grounding of the law is an illusion. The law, the institution is creation of society; every society is self-instituted, but until now it has guaranteed its institution by *instituting* an extrasocial source of itself and of its institution. What I call *explicit* self-institution—the recognition by society that the institution is its work [*œuvre*—in no way implies that the institution or the significations the institution embodies would have a “brittle” character. That I might recognize in *The Art of the Fugue* or in the *Duino Elegies* human works, social-

historical creations, does not lead me to consider them as “brittle.” Human works: simply human? The whole question is what one intends thereby. Is man “simply human”? If he were so, he would not be man; he would be nothing. Each of us is a *bottomless* pit, and this *bottomlessness* [*sans-fond*] is, quite evidently, opened over the *groundlessness* [*sans-fond*] of the world. In normal times, we cling to the rim of the pit, over which we pass the greatest part of our lives. But Plato’s *Symposium*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, and Kafka’s *Castle* come from this *groundlessness* and make us see it. I don’t have a need for a particular myth in order to recognize this fact; the myths themselves, like religions, at once have to do with this *groundlessness* and aim at masking it: they give it a determinate and precise *figure*, which at the same time recognizes the *groundless* and, in truth, tends to occult it by *fixing it in place*. The sacred is the instituted simulacrum of the *groundless*. I don’t need simulacra, and my modesty makes me think that, what I can do in this regard, everyone can do. Now, behind your questions, there is the idea that only a myth could ground society’s adherence to its institutions. You know that this was already Plato’s idea: the “noble lie.”⁹ But it’s a simple matter. As soon as one has spoken of a “divine lie,” the lie has become a lie and the qualification *divine* changes nothing in it.

This may be seen today in the grotesque gesticulations of those who want to fabricate, on command, a renaissance of religiosity for allegedly “political” reasons. I presume that these commercial attempts must render nauseous those who truly remain believers. Some street vendors are trying to hawk this deep philosophy of a libertine police chief: *I know that Heaven is empty, but people have to believe that it is full;*

⁹T/E: *Republic* 413a-415e.

otherwise, they won't obey the law. What poverty! When religion existed, when it was able to exist, it was another sort of affair. I never have been a believer, but still today I cannot listen to *Saint Matthew's Passion* while remaining in a normal state. To bring back to life that by means of which *Saint Matthew's Passion* came into the world is beyond the powers of the Grasset publishing house or the Hachette publishing trust. I think that believers and nonbelievers will be in agreement to add: Happily so.

G.M.: But, apart from the Greek case, which you often take as an example, it is true that, within history, myths have often grounded society's adherence to its institutions.

C.C.: That's certain. And not often, but almost always. If I put forward the Greek case, it is because it was, so far as I know, the first break with this state of things, because it remains exemplary and was resumed in the West only in the eighteenth century, with the Enlightenment and the Revolution.

The important thing in ancient Greece is the effectively actual movement of instauration of the democracy, which is at the same time a philosophy in actuality, and which goes hand in hand with the birth of philosophy in the strict sense. When the *dēmos* instaurated the democracy, it *was doing* philosophy: it opened the question of the origin and the ground of the law. And it opened a public, social, and historical space for thought in which there are philosophers who, over long periods of time (up to and including Socrates), remained *citizens*. And it is starting from the *failure* of democracy, of the Athenian democracy, that Plato became the first to work out a "political philosophy," which is wholly grounded upon the misrecognition and occultation of the historical creativity of the collectivity. (Pericles' *Funeral Oration* in Thucydides expresses this historical creativity of

the collectivity with a depth that is unsurpassable.) That “political philosophy”—like all the “political philosophies” that followed—was already nothing more than a philosophy *about* politics, *external* to politics, to the instituting activity of the collectivity.

In the eighteenth century, there was certainly movement on the part of the collectivity, and this movement took on fantastic proportions in the French Revolution. And there was the rebirth of a political philosophy, which is ambiguous. On the one hand, it was, as one knows, profoundly *critical* and liberating. But at the same time, it remained, as a whole, in the grip of a rationalist metaphysics, both as to its theses about *what is* and as to the grounding of the norm of *what is to be*. Generally, it posited a “substantial individual” with set determinations, and from this individual it tried to derive the social sphere [*le social*]. Moreover, it invoked a kind of reason, Reason with a capital R (it matters little that at times it was named *nature* or *God*), as ultimate, and extrasocial, ground of the social law.

The pursuit of the radically critical, democratic, revolutionary movement, first by the Revolutions of the eighteenth century and during the Age of Enlightenment, then by the socialist workers’ movement, presents some considerable “pluses” and “minuses” in relation to sixth- and fifth-century Greece. The “pluses” are obvious: the contestation of the instituted social imaginary by the workers’ movement goes much further, challenges the *effectively actual* instituted conditions of social existence—economy, labor, and so on—and universalizes itself in intending, by right, all societies and peoples. But one cannot neglect the “minuses”: the moments when the movement succeeded in disengaging itself fully from the grip of instituted society were rare and, above all, starting at a certain moment the movement fell, *qua*

organized movement, under the exclusive or preponderant, even when indirect, influence of Marxism. Now, in its deepest strata, the latter did nothing but resume, and carry to the limit, the social imaginary significations instituted *by capitalism*: centrality of production and of the economy, bland religion of “progress,” social phantasm of the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery. These significations, and the organizational models that correspond to them, were reintroduced into the workers’ movement by means of Marxism. And behind all that, there was always the speculative-theoreticist illusion: every analysis and every perspective appeals to the “laws of history” the theory claims to have discovered once and for all.

But it is time to speak “positively,” too. The prolongation of the emancipatory movements with which we are familiar—workers, women, youth, minorities of all sorts—subtends the project for the instauration of an autonomous—that is to say, self-managed, self-organized, self-governed, self-instituted—society. What I am expressing thus on the level of the institution and of the mode of instituting itself, I can also express in relation to the social imaginary significations this institution will embody. Social and individual autonomy; namely, liberty, equality, justice. Can one call these ideas “*myths*”? No. They are not *forms* or *figures* that are determinate or determinable once and for all. They do not close off questioning; on the contrary, they open it up. They do not aim at filling in the pit of which I was just speaking, while preserving at best a narrow shaft; they insistently remind society of the interminable *groundlessness* that is its ground. Consider, for example, the idea of justice. There is not, and there never will be, a society that would be just once and for all. A just society is a society in which the effectively actual question of effectively actual justice is

always effectively open. There is not, and there never will be, a “law” that settles the question of justice once and for all, that would be forever just. There can be a society that *alienates* itself to its law, once posited. And there can be a society that, recognizing the constantly recreated gap between its “laws” and the exigency of justice, knows that it cannot live without laws, but also that these laws are its own creation and that it can always take them up again. One can say as much about the exigency of equality (which is *strictly equivalent* to that of liberty, once it is universalized).¹⁰ As soon as I exit from the purely “juridical” domain, as soon as I take an interest in *effectively actual* equality, *effectively actual* liberty, I am obliged to take note of the fact that they depend on the *whole* institution of society. How can one be *free* if there is *inequality* of *effectively actual* participation in *power*? And once that is recognized, how is one to leave aside all the dimensions of the institution of society in which *power* differences are rooted and produced? That is why, let it be said parenthetically, the “struggle for human rights,” as important as it might be, not only *is not* a politics but risks, it if remains that, becoming a Sisyphean task, a leaky Danaid jar, Penelope’s ever re-unraveling woven shroud.¹¹

¹⁰T/E: Castoriadis’s speech “The Nature and Value of Equality” (1982), now available below in the present volume, originally appeared in a volume titled *L’Exigence de l’égalité* (The exigency or requirement or demand of equality), which was published by Éditions de la Baconnière (Neuchâtel) in 1982.

¹¹I am summarizing here and in what follows some ideas I am expounding in a work on politics that is now being drafted. [T/E: It is unclear to which projected work Castoriadis might have been referring here, but the first version of what became Castoriadis’s seminal 1983 text, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,” was delivered “during a lecture given on October 29, 1979, to a seminar at the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg

Liberty, equality, and justice are not myths. Neither are they “Kantian ideas,” Pole Stars guiding our navigation that would, however, be impossible, in principle, to approach. They *can* be effectively realized in history; they *have been so*. There is a radical and real difference between the Athenian citizen and the subject of an Asiatic monarchy. To say that they have not been realized “completely” and that they could never be so is to show that one doesn’t understand how the question is being posed, and this because one remains prisoner of the inherited philosophy and ontology, that is to say, of Platonism (in fact, there has never been any other). Is there ever “complete truth”? No. Does this mean that there is never *effectively actual* truth in history; does that abolish the distinction between true and false? Does the poverty of Western democracy abolish the difference between the effectively actual situation of a French, English, or American citizen—and the effectively actual situation of a serf under the Czars, of a German under Hitler, of a Russian or a Chinese under Communist totalitarianism?

Why are liberty, equality, and justice not ideas that are Kantian and therefore in principle unrealizable? When one has understood what’s at issue philosophically, the answer is obvious and immediate: these ideas cannot be “elsewhere,” “external” to history—*because they are social-historical*

led by Jürgen Habermas” (see below, this volume), i.e., just a few months after the present interview was conducted.] The interested reader will find more indications about the subject in “Socialism and Autonomous Society” (1979), [PSW3](#), 314-31. [T/E: As noted in the Translator’s Afterword to Castoriadis’s transcribed seminar, [OPS](#), both “On the Content of Socialism, II” (1957, now in [PSW2](#)) and “Socialism and Autonomous Society” may be read as precursor texts to [OPS](#), which in turn develops in more detail many of the themes articulated in the present paragraph of the interview.]

creations. Here is an illustrative parallel: the *Well-Tempered Clavier* is not a phenomenal and imperfect approximation of an “idea of music.” It *is* music, as much as it can be. And music is a social-historical creation. This parallel is approximate, certainly: art effectively realizes, in the masterpiece, that which lacks nothing and, in a sense, resides within itself. The same doesn’t go for our individual or collective existence. Nevertheless, the parallel is in the main valid: the exigency of truth, or of justice, is *our* creation, the recognition of the gap between this exigency and what we are is so, *too*. Now, of this gap, we would have no *perception*—we would be coral—if we were not *also* capable of responding *effectively* to this exigency to which we have given rise.

Neither can there be a question of these ideas being “grounded rationally”—and this for nearly the same reason as there can be no question of “rationally grounding” the idea of truth: it is already presupposed in every attempt to “ground” it. And more important still, not only is the *idea* of truth presupposed, but also presupposed is an *attitude* toward truth. No more than you can ever, faced with a sophist, a liar, or an imposter, “force him to admit” the truth (to each argument, he will respond with ten new sophisms, lies, and impostures), can you “prove” to a Nazi or a Stalinist the preeminence of liberty, equality, or justice. The bond between the two may appear subtle, but it is solid. And it is quite other than the one supposed by the Kantian-Marxists who are at present reappearing. One cannot “deduce” socialism from the exigency of truth—or from the “ideal communicative situation”—not only because those who combat liberty and equality couldn’t care less about the truth or about the “ideal communicative situation,” but also because these two exigencies, of the truth, of open questioning, on the one hand,

and of liberty and equality, on the other, go hand in hand, are born—are *created*—together and *have no meaning*, ultimately, except together. This meaning exists only for us, we who are downstream from the first creation of this exigency and who want to take it to another level. It exists only in a tradition that is ours (and that has become, now, more or less universal), that has created these significations, these matrices of signification, at the same time, moreover, as the opposite significations. And here appears the whole problem of our relationship to tradition—which, despite appearances, is totally occulted today—a relationship we have to re-create almost completely: within this tradition, we choose, but we do not do only that. We question tradition, and we let ourselves be interrogated by it (which is in no way a passive attitude: letting oneself be interrogated by tradition and submitting to it are two diametrically opposite things). We choose for the *dēmos* and against the tyrants or the *oligoi*, for the workers regrouped in factory committees and against the Bolshevik Party, for the Chinese people and against the bureaucracy of the CCP.

Now, you ask me: Can humans *cathect* these significations, and the institutions that bear and convey them? An important and profound question, which meets up with the one *Esprit* editor Paul Thibaud was posing to me, in a similar discussion, two years ago: a society loves its institutions or detests them.¹² Can men and women be *passionate* about the ideas of liberty, equality, and justice—autonomy? It could be said that today they are not very much so. But it is also incontestable that they have often been so in history—to the point of people sacrificing their own lives. Nevertheless, I would like to take advantage of our discussion in order to

¹²See “The Revolutionary Exigency,” cited above in n. 5.

deepen the problem somewhat.

If truth, liberty, equality, and justice could not be an object of “investment,” could not be cathected, they would not have appeared (or would not have survived in history). The fact is, however, that they have always been tied *also* to something else: to the idea of a “good life” (Aristotle’s *eu zēn*) which is not exhausted in and through them. To put it another way: An autonomous society, a society that self-institutes itself explicitly, yes; but *for the sake of doing what?* For the sake of the autonomy of society and of individuals, certainly; because I want my autonomy and because there is autonomous life only in an autonomous society (here we have a proposition that is very easy to elucidate). But I want my autonomy *both* for its own sake and for the sake of doing something (and for the sake of *making something of it*). We want an autonomous society because we want autonomous individuals and we want ourselves to be autonomous individuals. If we simply remain there, however, we run the risk of drifting toward a formalism that this time truly is Kantian: neither an individual nor a society can live simply by cultivating their autonomy for its own sake. In other words, there is the question of the “material values,” of the “substantive values,” of a new society; which amounts to saying, of a new cultural creation. It’s obviously not up to us to resolve this question. But a few reflections upon it do not seem to me to be futile.

If a traditional society—let’s say, Judaic society, or Christian society—is heteronomous, it does not posit itself as heteronomous *for the sake of* being heteronomous. Its heteronomy—which it obviously doesn’t think as such, in any case not like we do—is there for the sake of something else; it is, in its imaginary, only like an aspect of its central “material value” (and of its central imaginary signification),

God. It is and claims to be the slave of God, by whose grace and for whose service it thinks it exists, because it gives limitless “value” to this projective point, external to itself, that it has created as the signification: God. Or, when democracy appeared in the Greek cities, the ideas of liberty and equality were indissociable from a set of “substantive values” that are “the good and beautiful” citizen (*kalos kagathos*), renown (*kudos* and *kleos*), and especially virtue (*aretē*).

Closer to us, when one observes the long emergence and rise of the bourgeoisie in the West, one notices that it has not only instituted a new economic and political regime. Long before it gained domination over society, the bourgeoisie was the bearer of an immense cultural creation. Let us note in passing one of the points on which Marx remains the most paradoxically blind: Marx sang hymns to the bourgeoisie, because it developed the forces of production, and yet he didn’t pause for a second to see that the entire cultural world in which he was living, the ideas, the methods of thought, the monuments, the paintings, the music, the books, all that, with the exception of a few Greek and Latin authors, is exclusively a creation of the Western bourgeoisie (and the few hints he provides makes one think that he saw “communist society” only as an extension and enlargement of *this same* culture). The “bourgeoisie”—this society decisively codetermined by the emergence, the activity, the rise of the bourgeoisie since the twelfth century—created at once a “mode of production,” capital, modern science, counterpoint, painting in perspective, the novel, profane theater, and so on and so forth. The *Ancien Régime* was not only pregnant with a “new mode of production”; it was also pregnant, and more than pregnant—the bourgeoisie had already given birth to it—with an immense cultural universe.

It is in this regard that one must, in my opinion, admit that things have been, and remain, different for 150 years. No new culture, and no genuine popular culture, opposing the official culture—which seems to be dragging everything along with it into its decomposition. There are, certainly, some things that are still happening, but they are tenuous. There are enormous possibilities; very few of them are actualized. *Counterculture* is but a word. In my view, interrogation on this topic is just as critical as that concerning the willingness and capacity of humans to instaurate an autonomous society. At bottom, this is, in a sense, the same interrogation.¹³

That said, what is underway in contemporary society, both “positively” and “negatively”—searching for new human relations; smashing up against the wall of the finitude of the “available options” [*du “monde disponible”*]¹⁴—seems to me to offer support for what I have always thought about the “value” and the central aim of a new society. We must be done with “world transformations” and external works; we must envisage as our essential goal [*finalité*] our own transformation. We can envisage a society that gives itself as its goal neither the building of pyramids nor the adoration of God nor the mastery and possession of nature, but the human being himself (in the sense, certainly, in which I was saying before that the human would not be human if he were not more than human).

G.M.: Can you be specific?

C.C.: I am convinced that the human being has an immense potential, which until now has remained monstrously confined. The social fabrication of the

¹³See “Social Transformation and Cultural Creation” (1979), [PSW3](#), 300-11.

individual, in all known societies, has consisted until now in a more than mutilating repression of the radical imagination of the psyche, by the forced and violent imposition of a structure of “understanding” that is itself fantastically unilateral and biased. Now, there is here no “intrinsic necessity,” other than the being-thus of society’s heteronomous institutions.

I was talking, in “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,”¹⁴ about autonomy in the individual sense as instauration of another relation between the Conscious and the Unconscious. This relation is not the “domination” of the Conscious over the Unconscious. I was taking back up from Freud his formulation, “Where Id was, Ego shall come to be,” saying that this formulation had to be completed by its symmetrical opposite: “Where Ego is, Id must spring forth.” This has nothing to do with the impostures that have been thriving since then: the “philosophies of desire,” the reign of the libido, and so on. The socialization of the psyche—and, quite simply, its very survival—requires that it be made to recognize and to accept that desire in the genuine sense, originary desire, is unrealizable. Now, that has always been done, in heteronomous societies, by prohibiting representation, by blocking the representational flux, the radical imagination. In sum, society has applied in reverse the same operational schema as that of the originary Unconscious: to the “omnipotence of (unconscious) thought,” it has responded by trying to achieve the *impotence* of this thought, therefore *of thought altogether*, as the sole means of limiting *acts*. This goes much further than Freud’s “severe

¹⁴“Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1964-1965, is now included in [IIS](#) (1975); see pp. 101-106 of the English-language edition (1987).

and cruel Superego”; it has always been done through a *mutilation* of the psyche’s radical imagination. I am certain that, from this point of view, very sizable modifications can be sought after and achieved. There is, within our grasp, infinitely more spontaneity, infinitely more lucidity, to be attained than that of which we are presently capable. And the two things are not only not incompatible; the one requires the other.

G.M.: Are you speaking as a psychoanalyst or on the basis of sociological and historical considerations?

C.C.: Both. Moreover, they’re indissociable. But what I see in my experience as an analyst is pushing me more and more in this direction. I am immensely struck to see how little we make of what we are, as I am amazed to observe, in a psychoanalysis that is really done right, the prisoner gradually releasing the bonds in which he was caught in order finally to rid himself of them.

The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy*

How can we orient ourselves in history and politics? How can we judge and choose? It is from this political interest that I start—and in this spirit that I ask: In ancient Greek democracy is there anything of political relevance for us?

In a sense, Greece is obviously a presupposition of this discussion. The reasoned investigation of what is right and wrong, of the very principles that are the basis of our ever being able to say, beyond trivialities and traditional preconceptions, that something is right or wrong, arises for the first time in Greece. Our political questioning is, *ipso facto*, a continuation of the Greek position, although of course we have transcended it in many important respects and are

*The principal ideas found in this article were presented for the first time during a lecture given on October 29, 1979, to a seminar at the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg led by Jürgen Habermas; Johann Arnason, Ernst Tugendhat, and Albrecht Wellmer were among the main participants. Since then, these ideas have been at the center of my work in my seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, beginning in 1980, and they have provided the substance for a course in August 1982 at the University of Sao Paulo, a seminar in April 1985 at the University of Rio Grande do Sul (Porto Alegre), and several other presentations. The text published here is that of a lecture read on April 15, 1982, in New York, during one of the Hannah Arendt Memorial Symposia in Political Philosophy that was organized by the New School for Social Research and that dealt with “The Origins of Our Institutions.” The original English-language version was published in the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* of the New School, 9:2 (Fall 1983): 79-115. [T/E: This version was reprinted in its entirety in [PPA](#), 81-123, and then excerpted in [CR](#), 267-89.] A French translation, reviewed by me, was done by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, whom I thank for his excellent work. It appeared in [DH](#), 261-306 (325-82 of the 1999 reprint). A long excerpt was published in *Le Débat*, 38 (January 1986).

still trying to transcend it.

Modern discussions of Greece have been plagued by two opposite and symmetrical—thus, in a sense, equivalent—preconceptions. The first, and most frequently encountered over the last four or five centuries, is Greece as eternal model, prototype, or paradigm.¹ (One contemporary outlook merely inverts this preconception: Greece as antimodel, as negative model.) The second and more recent preconception involves the complete “sociologization” or “ethnologization” of the examination of Greece. Thus, the differences between the Greeks, the Nambikwara, and the Bamileke are only descriptive. No doubt, this second attitude is formally correct. Not only, needless to say, is there not nor could there be any difference in “human value,” “worthiness,” or “dignity” between different peoples and cultures, but neither could there be any objection to applying to the Greek world the methods—if there be any—applied to the Aranda or to the Babylonians.

The second approach, however, misses a minute and decisive point. The reasoned investigation of other cultures and the reflection upon them does not begin within the Aranda or the Babylonian cultures. Indeed, one could show that it could not have begun with them. Before Greece and outside the Greco-Western tradition, societies are instituted on a principle of strict closure: our view of the world is the only meaningful one, the “others” are bizarre, inferior, perverse, evil, or unfaithful. As Hannah Arendt has said,

¹Marx himself wrote in the *Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy* that Greek art presented an *inaccessible* model—not insuperable or insurmountable, but *inaccessible*. [T/E: Castoriadis is referring to the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, whose English-language translation (by Martin Nicolaus) has “an unattainable model.”]

impartiality enters this world with Homer.² This is not just “affective” impartiality. It is the impartiality of knowledge and understanding. The keen interest in the other starts with the Greeks.³ This interest is but another side of the critical examination and interrogation of their own institutions. That is to say, it is a component of the democratic and philosophical movement created by the Greeks.

That the ethnologist, the historian, or the philosopher is in a position to reflect upon societies other than his own and, indeed, even upon his own society becomes a possibility and a reality only within this particular historical tradition—the Greco-Western tradition. Now, on one hand, this activity may have no theoretical privilege over any other—say, poison divination by the Azande. Then, for example, the psychoanalyst is but a Western variety of shaman, as Levi-Strauss has written, and Levi-Strauss himself, along with the entire society of ethnologists, is but the local variety of sorcerer within this particular group of tribes exorcizing, if you will, the alien tribes. The only difference is that rather than fumigating them out of existence, they structuralize them out of existence. Or, on the other hand, we may postulate or posit a qualitative difference between our theorizing about other societies and about “savages” and attach to this difference a specific, limited but

²“The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern,” in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961, 1968), p. 51.

³T/E: Concerning Johann Arnason’s false claims about the appearance and use here of the word *keen*, see now: <https://kaloskaisophos.org/rt/rtdac/rtdac-exchange-with-johann-arnason-concerning-his-false-claims.html>.

firm, positive valuation.⁴ Then, a philosophical discussion starts. *Then*, and not before. To start a philosophical discussion is to imply that one has already affirmed that for oneself unrestricted thinking is the way of entering upon problems and tasks. Thus, since we know that this attitude is by no means universal but extremely exceptional in the history of human societies,⁵ we have to ask how, under what conditions, in which ways, human society was capable, in one particular case, of breaking the closure whereby it generally exists.

In this sense, though describing and analyzing Greece is equivalent to describing and analyzing any other randomly chosen culture, thinking and reflecting about Greece is not and cannot be. For, in this latter case, we are reflecting and thinking about the social and historical conditions of thought itself—at least, thought as we know and practice it. One has to eliminate these twin attitudes: there was, once upon a time, a society that remains for us the inaccessible model; *or*, history is essentially flat, there are no significant differences between cultures other than descriptive ones. Greece is the social-historical *locus* where democracy and philosophy have been created, thus, of course, it is our own origin. Insofar as the meaning and the potency of this creation are not exhausted—and I firmly believe that they are not—Greece is for us a *germ*, neither a “model,” nor one specimen among others, but a germ.

⁴Needless to add, this in itself does not allow any “practical” or “political” conclusions.

⁵Linguists seem to recognize and register some 4,000 languages extant *today*. Though there is of course no one-to-one correspondence between language and total institution of society, this gives a very rough indication of the order of magnitude of different types of society that have existed in the very recent past.



History is creation: the creation of total forms of human life. Social-historical forms are not “determined” by natural or historical “laws.” Society is self-creation. “That which” creates society and history is the instituting society, as opposed to the instituted society. The instituting society is the social imaginary in the radical sense.

The self-institution of society is the creation of a human world: of “things,” “reality,” language, norms, values, ways of life and death, objects for which we live and objects for which we die—and of course, first and foremost, the creation of the human individual in which the institution of society is massively embedded.

Within this wholesale creation of society, each particular, historically given institution represents a particular creation. Creation, as I use the term, means the positing of a new *eidōs*, a new essence, a new form in the full and strong sense: new determinations, new norms, new laws. The Chinese, the classical Hebrew, the ancient Greek, or the modern capitalist institution of society each means the positing of different determinations and laws, not just “juridical” laws but obligatory ways of perceiving and conceiving the social and “physical” world and acting within it. Within, and by virtue of, this overall institution of society emerge specific creations: science, for example, as we know and conceive it, is a particular creation of the Greco-Western world.

There follows a series of crucial questions, about which I can only sketch some reflections here.

First, how can we understand previous or “foreign” institutions of society? (For that matter, how and in what sense can we say that we understand our own society?) We do

not have, in the social-historical domain, “explanation” in the same sense the physical sciences do. Any “explanation” of this sort is either trivial or fragmentary and conditional. The innumerable regularities of social life—without which, of course, this life would not exist—are what they are because the institution of this particular society has posited this particular complex of rules, laws, meanings, values, tools, motivations, etc. And this institution is nothing but the socially sanctioned (sanctioned formally or informally) magma of social imaginary significations created by this particular society. Thus, to understand a society means, first and foremost, to penetrate or reappropriate the social imaginary significations that hold this society together. Is this at all possible? We have to take into account two facts here.

The first, indisputable fact is that *almost all* of the people in a given society do not and cannot understand a “foreign” society. (I am not speaking, of course, about trivial obstacles.) This points to what I have called the cognitive closure of the institution. The second (which can be and is disputed, but to which I nevertheless hold) is that under some very specific social, historical, and personal preconditions, some people can understand something about a foreign society. This points to some sort of “potential universality” in whatever is human for humans. Contrary to inherited commonplaces, the root of this universality is not human “rationality” (if “rationality” were at stake here, nobody would ever have had understood anything about the Hebrew God, or, for that matter, about any religion whatsoever) but creative imagination as the core component of nontrivial thinking.⁶ Whatever has been imagined strongly enough to

⁶Relying on “rationality” alone has led, e.g., to the nineteenth-century characterizations of primitive religion and myth as sheer nonsense (or

shape behavior, speech, or objects can, in principle, be reimagined (rerepresented, *wiedervorgestellt*) by somebody else.

Two significant polarities have to be stressed here.

In this social-historical understanding, there is a distinction between “true” and “false”—and not just in the trivial sense. One can talk sense about “foreign” societies, and one can talk nonsense—of which there is no dearth of examples.

The “true” cannot be subjected in this case (as, more generally, it never can in matters of thought) to the banal “verification” or “falsification” procedures that are currently (platitudinously and wrongly) considered to demarcate “science” from “nonscience.” For instance, Jakob Burckhardt’s realization of the importance of the agonistic element in the Greek world (which looms so large in Hannah Arendt’s thinking about Greece) is *true*—but not in the same sense as $E = mc^2$ is true. What does “true” mean in this former case? That the idea of the agonistic brings together an indefinite class of social and historical phenomena in Greece that would otherwise remain unconnected—not necessarily unconnected in their “causal” or “structural” relation but unconnected in their *meaning*—and that its claim to possess a “real” or “actual” referent (i.e., that is not just a delusion, or

“junk,” as Marx and Engels wrote) [T/E: The French translation provides the reference; in English, accompanied by the quotation, it is as follows: Friedrich Engels to Conrad Schmidt (October 27, 1890): “And even though economic necessity was the main driving force of the progressive knowledge of nature and becomes ever more so, it would surely be pedantic to try and find economic causes for all this primitive nonsense” (*Marx Engels Selected Correspondence* [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968], p. 400)] or to contemporary Structuralism and other Procrustean beds.

convenient fiction, or even an *Idealtypus*, an observer's limiting rational construction)⁷ can be discussed in a fecund way, though this discussion may be and, in the decisive cases, *has to be* interminable. In brief, it *elucidates* and initiates a process of elucidation.

The situation is different, at first glance, when we are speaking about our own history or tradition, about societies that, though "other," are not "foreign" since there is strong genealogical connection between their imaginary significations and ours, since we still somehow "share" the same world, since there is still some active, intrinsic relationship between their institutions and our own. It would seem that since we succeed this creation but fall within the same concatenation, since we find ourselves, so to speak, downstream, since we live, at least partly, within the mental framework and the universe of beings they posited, our understanding of our "ancestral" societies would present no mystery. But of course, other problems arise. This "common belonging" is by necessity partly illusory, but often tends to be taken as fully real. Projective "value judgments" become important and interfere with understanding. The proper distance between ourselves and "our own past" is very difficult to establish; the attitudes toward Greece cited earlier are examples. The illusion of the *Selbstverständlichkeit* can be catastrophic: thus, people today consider democracy or rational inquiry to go without saying, naively projecting onto the whole of history the exceptional situation of their own society, and are unable to understand what democracy or rational inquiry could mean for the society where they were created for the first time.

⁷ Author's addition: A "central limit" one would say in mathematics.



The second question is: If history is creation, how can we judge and choose? It is to be stressed that this question would not arise if history were simply and strictly a causal concatenation, or if it did contain its *phusis* and *telos*. It is precisely because history is creation that the question of judging and choosing emerges as a radical, nontrivial question.

The radicality of the question stems from the fact that, despite a widespread naive illusion, there is not and cannot be a rigorous and ultimate foundation of anything—not of knowledge itself, not even of mathematics. One should remember that this foundational illusion has never been shared by the great philosophers: not by Plato, not by Aristotle, not by Kant, not by Hegel. The first outstanding philosopher who was under the delusion of “foundation” was Descartes, and this is one of the respects in which his influence has been catastrophic. Since Plato, it has been known that every demonstration presupposes something that is not demonstrable. Here I want to stress one other aspect of the question: the judgments and choices we make belong to the history of the society in which we live and depend upon it. I do not mean that they depend upon particular social-historical “contents” (though this is also true). I mean that the sheer fact of judging and choosing in a nontrivial sense presupposes not only that we belong to that particular history, to that particular tradition where judging and choosing first become effectively possible, but that we have already, before any judgment and choice of “contents,” judged affirmatively and chosen this history and this tradition in this respect. For, this activity of judging and choosing, and the very idea of it, is a Greco-Western activity and idea—it has been created

within this world and nowhere else. The idea would not and could not occur to a Hindu, to a classical Hebrew, to a true Christian, or to a Moslem. Classical Hebrews have nothing to choose. They have been given the truth and the Law once and for all by God, and if they started judging and choosing about that, they would no longer be Hebrew. Likewise, true Christians have nothing to judge or choose: they have to believe and to love. For, it is written: *Judge not, that ye be not judged* (Matt. 7.1). Conversely, Greco-Westerners (“Europeans”) who produce rational arguments for rejecting the European tradition confirm *eo ipso* this tradition and that they belong to it.

But neither does this tradition offer us repose. For, while it has produced democracy and philosophy, both the American and the French Revolutions, the Paris Commune and the Hungarian Workers’ Councils, the Parthenon and *Macbeth*, it has produced as well the massacre of the Melians by the Athenians, the Inquisition, Auschwitz, the Gulag, and the H-bomb. It created reason, freedom, and beauty—and it also created massive monstrosity. No animal species could ever create Auschwitz or the Gulag; to create that, you must be a human being. These extreme possibilities of humanity in the field of the monstrous have been realized *par excellence* in our own tradition. The problem of judging and choosing thus also arises within this tradition, which we cannot validate for a moment *en bloc*. And of course, it does not arise as a simple intellectual possibility. The very history of the Greco-Western world can be viewed as the history of the struggle between autonomy and heteronomy.



It is well known that the problem of judging and choosing is the object of Kant's third *Critique*, and that Hannah Arendt in her later years turned toward the third *Critique* in her search for some grounding for these activities of the mind. I feel a form of illusion is spreading among some of Hannah Arendt's followers or commentators (1) that somehow or other Kant "solved" this problem in the third *Critique*, and (2) that his "solution" could be transposed to the political problem or at least facilitate the latter's elaboration. Facilitate, indeed, it does—but in a negative way, as I will try to show briefly.

I submit that the whole affair is a strange (but philosophically commonplace) *chassé-croisé* of correct insights arrived at for the wrong reasons. It begins with Kant himself. Why is Kant, nine years after the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, driven to the question of *Urteil* and *Urteilkraft*?⁸ The apparently watertight answers given to this question in the Preface and Introduction to the third *Critique* I consider to be rational reconstructions or rationalizations, Kant's dressing up in systematic and systematizing garb deeper and not fully conscious philosophical motivations.

First among these, no doubt, is the realization that the whole edifice of the *Critique of Pure Reason* stands on air, that any "given" just is not sufficient to produce *Erfahrung*

⁸ Author's addition: It is true that in his initial plans dating back to 1771, when he projected writing a work to be titled "Limits of Sensibility and Reason," Kant proposed to treat in the same framework theoretical reason, ethics, and taste, but the way in which the last of these objectives was realized in his 1790 book and especially its connection with the "teleology of nature" seems to me to justify the remarks in the text.

(experience), that the organization of a “world” out of the *Mannigfaltigkeit* (diversity) of the given entails that this *Mannigfaltigkeit* already be intrinsically organized to a minimal degree, since it must be at least *organizable*. No category of causality could ever legislate a *Mannigfaltigkeit* that would follow this law: if y once succeeded an x , never again will a y succeed an x .⁹ Of course, in such a “fully chaotic” world the existence of an actual, effective “knowing subject” would be impossible—but this is a second and equally strong argument against the monocracy of subjective transcendentalism. The object of the legislation has to be forthcoming as “legislable,” and the legislator actually has to “exist” as well. Both entail a world that is not completely chaotic.

A worthy philosophical answer is not supplied to this question by the “happy accident” (*glücklicher Zufall*), the “contingent” character of the “systematic unity” of the laws of nature and of their capacity to fulfill the requirements of *Verstand*—which is indeed, in a sense, the truth of the matter. Hence, the turn to a reflective and not constitutive teleology of nature: though we cannot “prove” it, nature works as if it were organized according to ends. For these workings of nature, the human work of art provides an analogy, since in it we can see “imagination in its freedom as determinable by the understanding according to ends” (§59).

The second motivation is precisely the recognition of the specificity of the work of art.¹⁰ Kant has to bring together

⁹The problem is already stated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 653-654. See *Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, V and VI—where the expression “happy accident” (*glücklicher Zufall*) occurs.

¹⁰A useful and informative recent survey of the widespread preoccupation of that period with the work of art and imagination is given by James

his desire (or need) to provide an “aesthetics” in the usual sense, a philosophy of the beautiful and philosophical *locus* for it, and his dim realization of the ontological specificity of art as *creation*. This is, of course, where Kant transcends the classical tradition and its ontology. The great work of art does not follow rules but posits new rules—it is *Muster* and *exemplarisch*. The artist, the genius, is not able to “describe” or “scientifically explain” his product, but posits the norm “as nature” (*als Natur*, §46). Nature of course is here *natura naturans*, not *natura naturata*, not the nature of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but a “living” power of emergence, bringing together matter under form. The genius is *Natur*—and *Natur* is genius!—*qua* free imagination determinable according to finality.

The third motivation is Kant’s increasing preoccupation with the questions of society and history. This is manifest in his numerous writings of the period related to these subjects and expressed in the third *Critique* through the ideas of a *sensus communis* and of the distinction between objective and subjective universal validity (*Allgemeingültigkeit*).

Before addressing the questions arising from the frequent contemporary recourse to the third *Critique* in connection with the activities of judging and choosing, it is necessary to point to a paradox of the first magnitude: Why should one have recourse to the *Critique of Judgment* when the whole of Kant’s *practical* philosophy is explicitly directed toward supplying rules and maxims of judgment and choice

in “practical” matters?¹¹ Why is the apparently firm ground offered by Kant’s practical philosophy in matters of ultimate political judgment neglected in recent discussions while it abundantly inspired, eighty years ago, neo-Kantian socialists and Austro-Marxists, for example? If the categorical imperative as such is an empty, simple form of abstract universality, as Schiller and Hegel rightly saw, if Kant’s attempts to derive substantive injunctions and interdictions from the principle of contradiction are flawed, certainly the same cannot be said about Kant’s maxims. “Be a person and respect others as persons”; “respect humanity in every human being”; “treat others as ends and never simply as means”—if these principles hold, one may certainly still be shocked by Eichmann and what he represents, but one will not wonder about the possibility of judging him. Then Hans Jonas would not have to worry about being able to say to a Hitler “I will kill you,” but not “you are wrong.”¹²

But of course the matter does not end here. First, Hitler would be right in answering: You cannot *demonstrate* to me the validity of your maxims. Second, he would answer nothing of the sort. Nazis and Stalinists do not discuss, they just draw their guns. Third, the maxims escape the flaw of

¹¹Richard Bernstein has rightly and clearly stressed this point in “Judging—the Actor and the Spectator,” a paper delivered in the Conference on the Work of Hannah Arendt held in New York in October 1981. [T/E: This paper appeared as the eighth chapter in Bernstein’s *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, 2015), pp. 221-37.]

¹²See Michael Denny, “The Privilege of Ourselves: Hannah Arendt on Judgment,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. M. A. Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), pp. 259 and 273. See also, *ibid.*, the exchange between Hans Jonas and Hannah Arendt, pp. 311-15.

indeterminacy only because we are used to giving a more or less determinate content to the terms “person,” “humanity,” etc. This is not philosophical hairsplitting. Not so long ago, the Church was burning people at the stake in order to save their “humanity”—their souls. Maxims (or any similar rules) are of value only within and for a community where (1) reasonable (not “rational”) discussion is accepted as a means of overcoming differences, (2) it is recognized that everything cannot be “demonstrated,” and (3) there is a sufficient (even if tacit) degree of consensus beyond logical definition about the meaning of terms like “person,” “humanity”—or for that matter, “liberty,” “equality,” and “justice.” It will be noted that these terms refer to social imaginary significations *par excellence*.

The similarities between these prerequisites and those of any discussion about art are obvious. This of course does not mean that political and aesthetic judgments are species of the same genus—but that it is not, *prima facie*, unreasonable to explore the conditions under which a community can discuss and agree upon matters beyond those accessible through procedures of strict demonstration.

It is equally obvious, however, that these conditions are so restrictive as to be of no use when we come to ultimate questions. Kant’s third *Critique* in fact presents a description of rather than a “solution” to the problem of judging. Significant as this description is, it offers no help in the search for “foundations.” As a “solution,” from a logician’s point of view, it only begs the question; in the terms of my framework, it describes the primitive circle of social-historical creation without actually understanding it. To this I now turn briefly.



Let us note from the outset that, as far as I know, the invocation of the *Critique of Judgment* in regard to the issue of social-historical creation refers only to the idea of “taste” and “reflective judgment,” and not at all to the idea that the great work of art is a creation. In this way, a central and fatal *aporia* in Kant’s work is ignored or concealed.

For Kant, the aesthetic “reflective judgment” possesses a *subjektive Allgemeingültigkeit* (a subjective universal validity)—as opposed to the objective universal validity of, e.g., determinative judgments in the theoretical field. It appeals to *taste* and is founded upon the possibility of the subject’s placing itself “in the other’s place.” No such condition is required for judgments of objective universal validity. Where “the other” is, from the point of view of *quid juris*, is irrelevant.

Where does this subjective universal validity of the judgment of taste derive from? From the fact that in aesthetic judgment I do not say “It pleases me,” or, “I find this beautiful,” but “This *is* beautiful.” I claim universality for my judgment. But this of course will not do. It is perfectly possible that I give (or that I am bound to give) the form of universality to a class of my judgments without any content corresponding to this form in a valid way. It is perfectly possible that I formulate a claim to universality, and that this claim remain frustrated and vacuous.

*A velle ad esse non valet consequentia.*¹³ The

¹³T/E: This Latin phrase—a variation on *A posse ad esse non valet consequentia* (the mere possibility of something does not infer its existence), with *velle* (wish) replacing *posse* (possibility)—was inserted into the French translation, to start a new paragraph.

logical-transcendental trap does not work here. When I say not “I believe P to be true,” but “P is true,” the question of the objective universal validity of my judgment can be settled in principle by rules and procedures. And if someone tells me, “nothing is ever true,” or “truth is a matter of whim,” he walks, *de jure*, out of the room of rational discussion. I need not worry about him, and more generally (in Kant’s eyes), in theoretical matters I do not even need the approval of “the other,” nor need I look at things “from his point of view.”¹⁴ Not so for the reflective judgment, where I *do* need to introduce the other’s point of view. Now, if the other were “pure taste”—if such a thing as “pure taste” exists, *even* “transcendentally,” that is, in the same way *reiner Verstand* must “exist”—the judgment would be mere wordplay. The other would be just another concrete instance of the same “universal” (though of course not a logical or “discursive” universal) of which I would also be an instance. For, if “pure taste” exists, this would entail that it owe nothing to the “empirical particularities” of the subjects concerned nor be affected by them (just as in the cases of knowledge and ethics). But in the domain of the aesthetic judgment, the other has to be taken into consideration precisely *qua other*. He does not differ from me “numerically,” as the scholastics

¹⁴In fact even in the theoretical field this is not so, but I cannot enter here into the question of the social-historical conditions of thought. Suffice it to say that “objective universal validity,” as Kant conceives of it, is virtually equivalent to the perfect isolation or disembodiment of “theoretical consciousness,” and thus to some sort of solipsism. For instance, Kant completely ignores the inseparability of thought and language, as a *theoretical* (not “psychological”) problem. At the same time, he asserts (in the third *Critique*), strangely enough from the “transcendental” point of view, that without communication there is no knowledge.

would say, but substantively. Despite the connotations of the term “reflective,” in reflective judgment the other is not a mirror. It is *because* he is other (nontrivially different) that he can function where Kant locates him. It is because *different* people *can* agree on matters of beauty that the aesthetic judgment exists and is of a nature other than theoretical or pure practical (ethical) judgments. In the latter cases, the agreement is both necessary and superfluous. Universality, there, is identity through or across indefinite and indifferent numerical “instantiations.” But the “subjective universal validity” of the aesthetic judgment is commonality through or across nonidentity. The other has to find—or does find—*The Night Watch* beautiful even though he is nontrivially different from me.

But different how, to what extent, up to what point? Different just enough, not too much, and not too little. Would my judgment of *Oedipus Rex* become shaky if a throng of very refined Tang, Song, or Ming mandarins found the play repugnant? Should I think of Hokusai’s point of view when looking at *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*? Kant speaks repeatedly, of course, about the “education of taste.” But education of taste gives rise to two intractable philosophical problems (intractable at least from *this* perspective). First, education of taste is impossible unless (1) beauty is already there, and (2) it is rightly recognized as such. Whence, by whom, and on what basis? Who shall educate the educators? Either education of taste is a meaningless expression, or beauty is a historical *Faktum* (as, indeed, *Erfahrung* also is) and its “recognition” or “reception” cannot be “explained” or “understood” (let alone *be* founded) any more than its creation (Kant says “production,” *Erzeugung*) can. What we discover here again is the primitive, originary circle of creation: *creation presupposes itself*. Second, if we think of

historically effective education, then we would have (as indeed we do) the *imposition* of a given “taste” in a particular culture. Uniformity of taste will then be more or less “obligatory,” and reflective judgment will provide [as output] no more than the inputs already injected into the historical subjects.

Now if beauty is a historical *Faktum*, there is not only one history of this *Faktum*, but a vast plurality of such histories—and thus also of tastes. We have been educated and continue educating our offspring in and through the creations of our own particular history. It is also our own history—and *this history alone*—that has educated us so that we find beauty in the sculpture of the Mayas, the painting of the Chinese, or the music and dance of the Balinese, while the reverse is not true. To be sure, some of the best interpreters of Mozart today are Japanese. But they attain to this insofar as they have been “Westernized”—not so much in that they have learned the piano, Mozart, and so forth, but in that they have accepted this very opening, this movement of acculturation, with its corollary: that the music of some barbarians is not to be rejected beforehand but may be worth the effort of appropriation.¹⁵

If the other is not a shadow or a mannequin, he belongs to a definite and concrete social-historical commonality. Concrete means particular: a particular community, and its particular “education”—that is, tradition. But then, the appeal to the other’s point of view floats uneasily between vacuousness and tautology. It is vacuous if

¹⁵ A well-known story reports that two centuries ago the Chinese emperor turned down the proposal of an English embassy for a trade treaty with the remark: I can well see why the barbarians would wish to have our products, but I do not see how they could offer a worthwhile equivalent.

the addressee is supposedly to be found in each and every particular community. It is tautologous if it is an appeal to our own community: for, then it is an appeal to go on judging as beautiful what has already been so judged.

That this should be so is, of course, the consequence of what I called the cognitive closure between the different social-historical worlds. This applies to art as well as to “science,” to sufficient reasons for dying as well as to table manners. To be sure, there is a distinction to be drawn between “science” and the rest, or at any rate between science and art. Even if we disdain pragmatic arguments of the sort “the universal validity of our science over against savage magic is ‘proven’ by the fact that we kill savages much more effectively than their magic can kill us,” it remains that the chances for effective “universal validity” in science are much greater than those in art. For in the case of science, the component that supplies the identity among its variations (*legein* and *teukhein*) is paramount, and this component is less variable among different cultures.¹⁶ For instance, insofar as causality is recognized everywhere (magic itself operates on some sort of causality postulate), you can convince any savage with a few operations that *X* causes *Y*. The chances that you could bring him to love *Tristan und Isolde* are immeasurably less: for this you would have to educate him in and through several centuries of European culture. This is of course no accident: “art”—which has never been just “art,” except for a short and recent historical period—is much more strongly and deeply linked to the kernel of a society’s imaginary significations than is “knowledge of things.”

Of course, to all this there is a Kantian answer, and at

¹⁶On these terms and the problem itself, see my *Imaginary Institution of Society*, ch. 5.

least a threefold one. First, the work of art addresses itself “to the subjective element, which one can presuppose in all men (insofar as it is required for possible knowledge in general)” (§38). This is to be found in the combination of the free play of imagination with the legality (*Gesetzmäßigkeit*) of understanding (§35), in a proper proportion (§21). Second, the foundation of the “necessity” of the judgment of taste must lie in an “indeterminate concept,” the concept “of a supersensible substratum of phenomena” (§57). Third, there exists a historical process, equivalent to a progress in education of taste—and certainly to an actualization of effective universality through convergence—and this is manifest in the development of civilization in general and in *Aufklärung* in particular (§41).

It is neither possible nor necessary to discuss these points here. I will only note regarding the first one that it implies much more than it initially appears to do. One can easily grant that imagination, understanding, and a “productive” interplay of the two are present in all humans: but the question of taste entails much more than such abstract universal “faculties,” it pertains to their concrete historical specification (and Kant is well aware of this, as the third point shows; cf. also the Remark to §38). Of much greater importance, however, these ideas imply the whole of Kant’s philosophy—both “pure philosophy” and “philosophy of history.” Without it, the third *Critique* hangs in the air. I find it puzzling that those who today advocate recourse to the third *Critique* do not seem to realize that they have to take into the bargain as well the idea of a “supersensible substratum of phenomena,” and of “humanity” (in the *Kantian* sense of “supersensible”). Nor do they seem to realize that beauty is “the symbol of the moral good” (§59). I find it even more puzzling that they are able to disregard the essential link

between Kant's theory of taste and judgment and the historical world, which is Kant's unequivocal and firm position on the *Aufklärung*. If all the human tribes, after long wanderings in the wild forests of precivilization, were to gather now in the glades of the *Aufklärung*, where, we, the first comers, were to greet them as they arrive, the problems would surely be quite different. But have we not been told that it was precisely because of the shattering crisis within the *Aufklärung*'s ideas and standards that the whole discussion began?



Consider now the other kernel of the third *Critique*. The fine arts are arts of genius, and the work of genius is a *creation*—though Kant does not use the term.¹⁷ It is new, not “numerically,” but essentially, in that it posits new norms: it is a new *eidos*. Thus it is a “model” or “prototype” (*Muster*).

But a model of what, and for what? The term is strange, since one would naturally expect it to be a model for imitation—and Kant rejects and severely and rightly condemns imitation and insists strongly on essential originality as the distinctive character of the work of art, that is, of genius.

The work of genius is a prototype of nothing and for

¹⁷Only once (§49) does he speak of *schöpferische Einbildungskraft*, “creative imagination.” As this last expression was current in the eighteenth century, Kant's insistence on always calling the imagination *productive* cannot be fortuitous. [Author's addition, not indicated as such: Quite evidently, the term *Schöpfung* (creation) is widely used apropos of the “creation of the world” by “God” in the final paragraphs of the third *Critique*, for example §84, §87, etc.]

nothing—if we take “prototype” in the formal sense.¹⁸ Yet it is indeed a prototype in two other ways. It is a prototype of the “fact” of creation: it proposes itself as an “example” not for imitation (*Nachahmung* or *Nachmachen*), but for “succession” or “continuation” (*Nachfolge*), for the fact and feat of creation to be reenacted. And it is a model for the education of taste. In both respects, however, the circle of historical creation is present, and no “logical,” “analytical”

¹⁸Of course, the work of art is also a “presentation” of the Ideal of morality. But in the present context, this notion is irrelevant. Moreover, it can be taken into consideration only if one accepts Kant’s metaphysics. This follows from the supersensible character of that which is to be presented (*dargestellt*). Finally, we have an apparent aporia:

- any *Darstellung* (by artistic genius) is adequate;
- any *series of Darstellungen* is insufficient, since it never “exhausts,” so to speak, that which is to be presented.

One can see here another important ground of the dependence of Kant’s aesthetics (and theory of judgment) on his metaphysics—comparable to the one in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: the infinite or insuperable distance between humanity and the Idea—and the (vain) attempt at once to maintain *and* cover it through some sort of infinite walk. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* this leads, *inter alia*, to the nonsensical argumentation on the immortality of the soul. In the *Critique of Judgment* (where an “immanent” historical progression is clearly envisaged) it leads to the idea of an unending series of *Darstellungen*. The difference is that in the first case (moral action) we are permanently deficient (nobody is ever a saint, says the *Critique of Practical Reason*); in the second case (art) the work of genius is certainly not deficient.

The point bears further elaboration, which should take into account Kant’s *Anthropologie*, and which cannot be given here. Let me only add that, in truth, the absolute adequacy of the *chef d’œuvre* is nothing but its presentation of the Abyss (the Chaos, the Groundless), and that the inexhaustibility of art is rooted in the ontological character of the Abyss as well as the fact that each culture (and each individual genius) creates its own way into the Abyss—the second being again a manifestation of the first.

construction allows us to escape this paradoxical situation. The *chef d'œuvre* can only be a model for taste if there is already taste enough to recognize it as a *chef d'œuvre*. And it is a model for the reenactment of the creative act if it is already recognized as the embodiment of such an act.

Behind Kant's apparently watertight construction and beyond the realization of its precariousness, we find a deep intuition of the truth of the matter. Art as creation cannot be "explained." Nor can the reception of the great work of art be "explained." The "educative" function of the new, of the original, is both a fact and a paradox.¹⁹ It is an instance of the fact and the paradox of each and every historical creation.

Kant's theory of aesthetics is the only part of his fundamental writing in which he is forced to go beyond his strictly dualistic approach and to consider what later neo-Kantians (e.g., Heinrich Rickert) would call *das Zwischenreich des immanenten Sinnes* (the in-between realm of immanent meaning). It is also the part in which he comes closest to recognizing creation in history—at least in substance, though he does not and could not name it. Beauty is created. But it is characteristic, first, that Kant would have an "exceptionalist" view of creation: only genius creates, and it does so "as nature." (This "nature" of course has nothing to do with the "nature" of his theoretical philosophy. It is easy to see that it is an uneasy pseudonym for God; "genius" is a fragmented offshoot of the creative intelligent power that reflection on the teleology of "nature" must posit.) Second, that creation has to be restricted to the ontologically weightless domain of art. What Kant has to say about scientific work in the third *Critique* shows that it is

¹⁹See also my text "The Sayable and the Unsayable" (1971) in [CLL](#), in particular 172-74.

intrinsically necessary for him to trivialize and reduce it to a cumulative process. In the domain of art, the effective validity, recognition, and reception of the norms (meanings, or “values” in neo-Kantian parlance) must take on decisive importance. Hence the move from “objective” to “subjective universal validity,” and from “determinative” to “reflective”: determination does not depend upon the opinion of the other, while reflection does indeed involve it. Thus, the irreducible character of creation and the commonality/community of humans acquire, however half-heartedly, some philosophical status, even if only as problems.

Kant believes that he answers the question of the essence of beauty (of what beauty *is*) and of the “necessity” of its common recognition. Of course he does no such thing. We have to recognize the decisive importance of the third *Critique*, not for the question of judging but for its insights into creation and human commonality. We also have to recognize the limitations of these insights—and the necessary origin of these limitations in the “main body” of Kant’s philosophy (the two other *Critiques*). To remove these limitations, this main body must be exploded, but then, the insights of the third *Critique* gain a completely different meaning, and lead in unexpected directions. Because of these limitations—which are, in fact, common to the mainstream of the inherited philosophical tradition—it is not possible for Kant to think the radical social imaginary or instituting society; he cannot really think the sociality of history, even the historicity of society.²⁰ Hence the restriction to “genius” and to “art”: the creation of institutions is ignored, or, at best,

²⁰This is also why he has to confine his insights on imagination to its strictly “individual-subjective” dimension. See my text, “The Discovery of the Imagination” (1978), now below in the present volume.

has to be presented as a purely “rational” affair (cf. the “nation of devils” in *Zum ewigen Frieden*).²¹ This is why the primitive circle of creation (that creation presupposes itself) can only loom confusedly and indistinctly between the lines and behind the aporias of Kant’s treatment: beauty is recognized because there is taste, and taste is there because men have been educated, and men have been educated because they have already been in touch with beauty—in other words, because they recognize beauty before being, in principle, capable of doing so.

In the field of art, the social-historical consists in self-institution. “Genius” is here both a particular case of, and a pseudonym for, historical creation in general. The reception of the work of art is a particular case of the active and self-creative participation and cooperation of human communities in the institution of the new—in the institution *tout court*. “Reception” is no less paradoxical—and no less creative—than creation. And of course, nothing in all of this brings us any closer to deciding how to judge and choose. The generalization and radicalization of Kant’s insights can only bring about a generalization and radicalization of the aporias involved. For, everybody always judges and chooses not only within but by means of the particular social-historical institution—the culture, the tradition—which formed him. Indeed, without this he would not be *able* to judge and choose anything. That Kant is both capable of knowing this and ignoring it is typical of his essential stand as an *Aufklärer*: in truth, there is but *one* history—and for all that really matters, this one history coincides with our own (or, our own history is the “transcendentally obligatory” meeting point of all particular histories). One might be tempted to treat this stand

²¹T/E: Kant’s 1795 book, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*.

as “empirical” and dispensable, but that would be a mistake. For, this postulate—the “transcendentalization” of the historical fact of the *Aufklärung*—is necessary, if the semblance of an answer is to be given in “universal” terms to the original question. If all of us belonged substantially to the same tradition—if one tradition was, *de jure*, the “true” one—we could appeal to the “same” taste (but even then, only on the counterfactual supposition that creative breaks within that tradition remain within some sort of indefinable bounds).

We can now conclude on the *chassé-croisé* of correct insights and wrong reasons that occur within the contemporary invocation of the third *Critique*. Kant’s theory of judgment is appealed to because of the delusion that it could contribute an answer to the question of judging and choosing—which it does not. And the third *Critique* is *not* appreciated for what is, in truth, its most precious germ: the insight into the fact of creation. But this is no accident. For, contemporaries repudiate (at least tacitly) the main body of Kant’s philosophy; if they did not, there would be no need to resort to the third *Critique* in matters of practical-political judgment. Now, when liberated from the transcendental scaffolding,²² and from the postulates referring to the supersensible, the idea of creation becomes uncontrollable. If norms themselves are created, how is one to escape the abhorrent thought that Right and Wrong themselves are social-historical creations? Consequently, refuge is taken instead in some vaguely perceived *sensus communis* regarding matters of Right and Wrong—forgetting again that it was the actual breakdown of this *sensus communis* that initiated the very discussion in the first place.

²²T/E: The French here adds, parenthetically: “(ou de la cage),” which may be translated as “(or cage).”



Can we go farther than stating the obvious facts—that judging and choosing always take place within and by means of an already existing social-historical institution or else spring out of a new creation in the face of which no criteria are available except the ones this new creation establishes for the first time? And how can we confront reasonably, if not “rationally,” the question of judging and choosing between different institutions of society—the political question *par excellence*?

I will not discuss this problem here. I will only repeat: the absolute singularity of our Greco-Western or European tradition lies in its being the only tradition wherein this problem arises and becomes thinkable. (This does *not* mean that it becomes “soluble”—*pace* Descartes and Marx.) Politics and philosophy *and* the link between them have been created here and only here. Of course, this *does not* mean that this tradition can be “rationally” imposed upon—or defended against—another tradition that ignores or rejects this setting. Any rational argumentation presupposes the common acceptance of rationality as a criterion. It is not so much pragmatically ineffectual as it is logically absurd to argue “rationally” with Hitler, Andropov, Khomeini, or Idi Amin Dada. Indeed, “pragmatically,” such argumentation can be defended as a political (“pedagogical”) activity: there is always a chance that some followers of these men may be or become inconsistent and thus permeable to “rational” arguments. But to take a more dignified example, can argumentation invoking rationality, the equal value of all humans *qua* humans, for example, carry any weight against a deeply held belief that God has revealed himself and his will—the latter entailing, for instance, the forced conversion

and/or extermination of the infidels, sorcerers, heretics, etc.? Silly, modern parochialism is capable of laughing at this idea as “exotic”—even though it was central to all “civilized” societies as recently as two centuries ago.

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Judging and choosing, in a radical sense, were created in Greece, and this is one of the meanings of the Greek creation of politics and philosophy. By politics I do not mean court intrigues or fighting among social groups over interest or position (both of which existed elsewhere), but a collective activity whose object is the institution of society as such. In Greece we have the first instance of a community explicitly deliberating about its laws and changing those laws.²³ Elsewhere laws are inherited from the ancestors or given by gods or by the One True God, but they are not posited as created by men after a collective confrontation and discussion about right and wrong law. This position leads to other questions, which also originated in Greece: not only, “Is *this* law right or wrong?” but “What is it for a law to be right or wrong, that is, what is justice?” Just as in Greek political activity the existing institution of society is called into question and altered for the first time, similarly Greece is the first society where we find the explicit questioning of the instituted collective representation of the world—that is, where we find philosophy. Further, just as political activity in

²³I cannot agree with Hannah Arendt’s idea that in Greece legislative activity was a secondary aspect of politics. This would hold only in a limited sense of the term ‘legislative’. Aristotle counts eleven “revolutions” in Athens, that is, changes in the fundamental (“constitutional”) legislation.

Greece leads to the question not merely of whether this particular law is right or wrong, just or unjust, but of what justice is in general, so philosophical interrogation leads rapidly to the question not only of whether this or that representation of the world is true, but of what truth is. Both questions are genuine questions—that is, they must remain open forever.

The creation of democracy and philosophy and the link between them has its essential precondition in the Greek vision of the world and human life, the nucleus of the Greek imaginary. This can perhaps best be clarified by the three questions in which Kant summarizes the interests of man. About the first two—What can I know? What ought I to do?—an endless discussion begins in Greece, and there is no “Greek answer” to them. But to the third question—What am I allowed to hope?—there is a definite and clear Greek answer, and this is a massive and resounding *nothing*. And evidently it is the true answer. “Hope” is not to be taken here in the everyday trivial sense—that the sun will again shine tomorrow, or that a child will be born alive. The hope to which Kant refers is the hope of the Christian or religious tradition, the hope corresponding to that central human wish and delusion that there be some essential correspondence, some consonance, some *adequatio* between our desires and decisions, on the one hand, and the world, the nature of being, on the other. Hope is the ontological, cosmological, and ethical assumption that the world is not just something out there, but *cosmos* in the archaic and proper sense, a total order that includes us, our wishes, and our strivings as its organic and central components. The philosophical translation of this assumption is that being is ultimately good. As is well known, the first one who dared to proclaim this philosophical monstrosity clearly was Plato—after the classical period had

ended. This remained the fundamental tenet of theological philosophy in Kant, of course, but in Marx as well. The Greek view is expressed as early as the myth of Pandora. For Hesiod hope is forever imprisoned in Pandora's box. In preclassical and classical Greek religion, there is no hope for an afterlife: either there is no afterlife, or if there is one, it is worse than the worst life on earth—as Achilles reveals to Odysseus in the Land of the Dead. Having nothing to hope from an afterlife or from a caring and benevolent God, man is liberated for action and thought in *this* world.

This is intimately linked with the fundamental Greek idea of *chaos*. For Hesiod, in the beginning there is chaos. In the proper, initial sense “chaos” in Greek means void, nothingness. It is out of the total void that the world emerges.²⁴ But already in Hesiod, the world is also chaos in the sense that there is no complete order in it, that it is not subject to meaningful laws. First there is total disorder, and then order, *cosmos*, is created. But at the “roots” of the world, beyond the familiar landscape, chaos always reigns supreme. The order of the world has no “meaning” for man: it posits the blind necessity of genesis and birth, on one hand, of corruption and catastrophe—death of the forms—on the other. In Anaximander, the first philosopher for whom we possess reliable testimony, the “element” of being is the *apeiron*, the indeterminate, indefinite—another way of thinking chaos. Form, the particularized and determinate existence of the various beings, is *adikia*, injustice—one may well call it *hubris*. That is why the particular beings have to render justice to one another and pay compensation for their

²⁴ Author's addition: As Olof Gigon has clearly established in *Der Ursprung der griechischen Philosophie von Hesiod bis Parmenides* (Basel, 1945).

injustice through their decay and disappearance.²⁵ There is a strong though implicit connection between the two pairs of opposite terms, *chaos/cosmos* and *hubris/dikē*. In a sense, the latter is the transposition of the former into the human domain.

This vision conditions, so to speak, the creation of philosophy. Philosophy, as the Greeks created and practiced it, is possible because the world is not fully ordered. If it were, there would not be any philosophy, but only one, final system of knowledge. And if the world were sheer chaos, there would be no possibility of thinking at all. But this vision of the world also conditions the creation of politics. If the human world were fully ordered, either externally or through its own “spontaneous operation,” if human laws were given by God or by nature or by the “nature of society” or by the “laws of history,” then there would be no room for political thinking and no field for political action and no sense in asking what the proper law is or what justice is (cf. Friedrich Hayek). But furthermore, if human beings could not create some order for themselves by positing laws, then again there would be no possibility of political, instituting action. If a full and certain knowledge (*epistēmē*) of the human domain were possible, politics would immediately come to an end, and democracy would be both impossible and absurd: democracy

²⁵The meaning of Anaximander’s fragment (Diels B1) is clear, and “classical” historians of philosophy have, for once, interpreted it correctly. Heidegger’s “interpretation” of it (“Der Spruch des Anaximander,” in *Holzwege* [T/E: “Anaximander’s Saying” (1946), in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and tr. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002)]) is, as usual, Heidegger dressed up as Anaximander. [French Editors: Castoriadis came back to Anaximander’s philosophy in his 1982-1983 seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. T/E: See now *CFG1*.]

implies that all citizens have the possibility of attaining a correct *doxa* and that nobody possesses an *epistēmē* of things political.

I think it is important to stress these connections because a great many of the difficulties of modern political thinking are related to the persisting dominant influence of theological (that is, Platonic) philosophy. The operative postulate that there is a total and “rational” (and therefore “meaningful”) order in the world, along with the necessary implication that there is an order of human affairs linked to the order of the world—what one could call unitary ontology—has plagued political philosophy from Plato through modern Liberalism and Marxism. The postulate conceals the fundamental fact that human history is creation—without which there would be no genuine question of judging and choosing, either “objectively” or “subjectively.” By the same token, it conceals or eliminates the question of responsibility. Unitary ontology, in whatever disguise, is essentially linked to heteronomy. The emergence of autonomy in Greece was conditioned by the nonunitary Greek view of the world that is expressed from the beginning in the Greek “myths.”



A curious but inevitable consequence of the “model/antimodel” mentality employed when examining Greece, and in particular Greek political institutions, is that these are taken, so to speak, “statically,” as if there were *one* “constitution,” with its various “articles” fixed once and for all, that could and must be “judged” or “evaluated” as such. This is an approach for people who seek recipes—whose number, indeed, does not seem to be on the decrease. But, of

course, what is important in ancient Greek political life—the *germ*—is the *historical instituting process*: the activity and struggle around the change of the institutions, the explicit (even if partial) self-institution of the *polis* as a permanent process. This process goes on for almost four centuries. The annual election of the *thesmothetai* in Athens is established in 683/2 BCE, and it is probably around the same time that the citizens in Sparta (9,000 of them) are instated as *homoioi* (“similar,” i.e., equals) and the rule of *nomos* (law) affirmed. The widening of democracy in Athens continues well into the fourth century. The *poleis*—at any rate Athens, about which our information is most complete—do not stop questioning their respective institutions; the *dēmos* goes on modifying the rules under which it lives. This is, of course, inseparable from the hectic pace of creation during this period in all fields beyond the strictly political one.

This movement is a movement of explicit self-institution. The cardinal meaning of explicit self-institution is autonomy: we posit our own laws. Of all the questions arising out of this movement, I will briefly survey three: “Who” is the “subject” of this autonomy? What are the limits of his action? What is the “object” of autonomous self-institution?²⁶

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The community of citizens—the *dēmos*—proclaims that it is absolutely sovereign (*autonomos*, *autodikos*, *autotelēs*, self-legislating, self-judging, self-governing, in Thucydides’ words). It also affirms the political equality

²⁶Given the constraints of space, I will have to speak “statically” myself, ignoring the movement and considering only some of its most significant “results.” I beg the reader to bear in mind this inevitable limitation.

(equal sharing of activity and power) of all free men. This is the self-position, self-definition, of the political body, which contains an element of arbitrariness—and always will. *Who* posits the *Grundnorm*—in Hans Kelsen’s terminology, the norm ruling the positing of norms—is a *fact*. For the Greeks, this “who” is the body of adult, male, free citizens (which means, in principle, those men born of other citizens, though naturalization is known and practiced). Of course, the exclusion of women, foreigners, and slaves from citizenship is a limitation we do not accept. This limitation was never lifted in practice in ancient Greece (at the level of ideas, things are less simple, but I will not discuss this aspect here). But indulging for a moment in the absurd “comparative merits” game, let us remember that slavery was present in the United States until 1865 and in Brazil until the end of the nineteenth century; further, that in most “democratic” countries, voting rights were granted to women only after World War II; that no country today grants political rights to foreigners, and that in most cases naturalization of resident foreigners is by no means automatic (a quarter of the resident population of very “democratic” Switzerland are *metoikoi*).

Equality of the citizens is of course equality in respect of the law (*isonomia*), but it is essentially much more than that. It is not the granting of equal passive “rights,” but active general participation in public affairs. This participation is not left to chance, but actively promoted both through formal rules and through the general *ethos* of the *polis*. According to Athenian law, a citizen who will not take sides while the city is in civil strife becomes *atimos*—deprived of political rights.²⁷

Participation materializes in the *ekklēsia*, the

²⁷ Aristotle *Constitution of the Athenians* 8.5.

Assembly of the people, which is the acting sovereign body. All citizens have the right to speak (*isēgoria*), their votes carry the same weight (*isopsēphia*), and they are under moral obligation to speak their minds (*parrhēsia*). Participation also materializes in the courts. There are no professional judges, virtually all courts are juries with their jurors chosen by lot.

The *ekklēsia*, assisted by the *boulē* (Council), legislates and governs. This is *direct democracy*. Three of its aspects deserve further comment.

1. *The people versus “representatives.”* Direct democracy has been rediscovered or reinvented in modern history every time a political collectivity has entered a process of radical self-constitution and self-activity: town meetings during the American Revolution, *sections* during the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Workers’ Councils, or the Soviets in their original form. Hannah Arendt has repeatedly stressed the importance of these forms. In all these cases, the sovereign body is the totality of those concerned; whenever delegation is inevitable, delegates are not just elected but subject to permanent recall. One should remember that for classical political philosophy, the notion of “representation” is unknown. For Herodotus as well as for Aristotle, democracy is the power of the *dēmos*, unmitigated in matters of legislation, and the designation of magistrates (not “representatives”!) by sortition or rotation. Scholars merely repeat today that Aristotle’s preferred constitution, what he calls *politeia*, is a mixture of democracy and aristocracy, and forget to add that for Aristotle the “aristocratic” element in this *politeia* is the *election* of the magistrates—for,

Aristotle clearly and repeatedly defines election as an aristocratic principle. This is also clear for Montesquieu and Rousseau. It is Rousseau, not Marx or Lenin, who writes that Englishmen believe that they are free because they elect their Parliament, but in reality are only free one day every five years. When Rousseau says that democracy is a regime too perfect for men, suitable only for a people of gods, what he means by democracy is the identity of the *souverain* and the *prince*—that is, there are no *magistrates*. Serious modern Liberals—in contradistinction to contemporary “political philosophers”—knew all this perfectly well. Benjamin Constant did not glorify elections and “representation” as such; he defended them as lesser evils on the grounds that democracy was impossible in modern nations because of their size *and* because people were not interested in public affairs. Whatever the value of these arguments, they are based upon the explicit recognition that representation is a principle alien to democracy. This hardly bears discussion. Once permanent “representatives” are present, political authority, activity, and initiative are expropriated from the body of citizens and transferred to the restricted body of “representatives,” who also use it to consolidate their position and create the conditions whereby the next “election” becomes biased in many ways.

2. *The people versus the “experts.”* Linked to the principle of direct democracy is the Greek view of “experts.” Not only legislative decisions but important political ones—on matters of *government*—are made by the *ekklēsia* after it has listened to various speakers, possibly including those who claim some

specific knowledge about the affairs at hand. There are not and cannot be “experts” on political affairs. Political expertise—or political “wisdom”—belongs to the political community, for expertise, *technē*, in the strict sense, is always related to a specific, “technical” occupation, and is, of course, recognized in its proper field. Thus, Plato says in the *Protagoras*, the Athenians will listen to technicians when the building of proper walls or ships is discussed, but will listen to anybody when it comes to matters of politics. (The popular courts embody the same idea in the domain of justice.) War is, of course, a specific field entailing a proper *technē*, and thus the war chiefs, the *stratēgoi*, are elected—as are the technicians in other fields charged by the *polis* with a particular task. So Athens was, after all, a *politeia* in Aristotle’s sense since some (and very important) magistrates were elected.

Now the *election* of the experts entails another principle central to the Greek view, clearly formulated and accepted not only by Aristotle but, despite its massive democratic implications, even by that archenemy of democracy, Plato. The proper judge of the expert is not another expert, but the *user*: the warrior and not the blacksmith for the sword, the horseman and not the saddler for the saddle. And evidently, for all public (common) affairs, the user, and thus the best judge, is the *polis*. From the results—the Acropolis, or the tragedy prizes—the judgment of this user appears to have been quite sound.

One can hardly overemphasize the contrast between this view and the modern one. The dominant

idea that experts can be judged only by other experts is one of the conditions for the expansion and the growing irresponsibility of the modern hierarchical-bureaucratic apparatus. The prevalent idea that there exist “experts” in politics, that is, specialists of the universal and technicians of the totality, makes a mockery of the idea of democracy: the power of the politicians is justified by the “expertise” they would alone possess, and the, inexpert by definition, populace is called upon periodically to pass judgment on these “experts.” It also—given the emptiness of the notion of a specialization in the universal—contains the seeds of the growing divorce between the capacity to attain power and the capacity to govern—which plagues Western societies more and more.

3. *The community versus the “State.”* The Greek polis is not a “State” in the modern sense. The very term “State” does not exist in ancient Greek (characteristically, modern Greeks had to invent a word, and they used the ancient *kratos*, which means “sheer force”). *Politeia* (e.g., in the title of Plato’s work) does not mean *der Staat* as in the standard German translation (the Latin *respublica* is less opposed to the meaning of *politeia*).²⁸ It means both the political institution/constitution and the way people go about common affairs. It is a scandal of modern philology that the title of Aristotle’s treatise, *Athēnaiōn Politeia*, is everywhere translated “The Constitution of Athens,” both a straightforward linguistic error and the inexplicable sign of ignorance

²⁸T/E: The French adds here, with German thrown in: “est moins *sinnwidrig*” (is less *sinnwidrig*, or senseless).

or incomprehension on the part of very erudite men. Aristotle wrote *The Constitution of the Athenians*. Thucydides is perfectly explicit about this: *Andres gar polis*, “for, the polis is the men.” For example, before the Battle of Salamis, when Themistocles has to resort to a last-ditch argument to impose his tactics, he threatens the other allied chiefs that the Athenians will take their families and their fleet and found anew their city in the West. This notwithstanding the fact that for the Athenians—even more than for the other Greeks—their land was sacred and they took pride in their claim to autochthony.

The idea of a “State” as an institution distinct and separated from the body of citizens would not have been understandable to a Greek. Of course, the political community exists at a level that is not identical with the concrete, “empirical” reality of so many thousands of people assembled in a given place at a given time. The political community of the Athenians, the *polis*, has an existence of its own: for example, treaties are honored irrespective of their age, responsibility for past acts is accepted, etc. But the distinction is not between a “State” and a “population”; it is between the continuous corporate body of perennial and impersonal Athenians and the living and breathing ones.

No “State” and no “state apparatus.” There is, of course, in ancient Athens a technical-administrative mechanism, but it does not possess any political function. Characteristically, this administration, up to and including its higher echelons—police, keepers of the public archives, public finance—is composed of slaves (possibly Treasury Secretary Donald Regan and

certainly Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker would have been slaves in Athens). These slaves were supervised by citizen magistrates usually drawn by lot. “Permanent bureaucracy,” the task of *execution* in the strictest sense, is left to the slaves.²⁹

The designation of magistrates through lot or rotation in most cases insures participation by a great number of citizens in official tasks—and knowledge of those tasks. That the *ekklēsia* decides all important governmental matters insures the control of the political body over elected magistrates, as does the fact that they are subject to what amounts in practice to the possibility of recall at any time: conviction in a judicial procedure entails, *inter alia*, that they lose their office. Of course all magistrates are responsible for their performance in office as a matter of routine (*euthunē*); accounts are given, in the classical period, to the *boulē*.

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In a sense, the unity and very existence of the political body is “prepolitical,” at least insofar as explicit political self-institution is concerned. The community “receives itself,” as it were, from its own past, with all that this past entails. (In part, this is what the Moderns call the question of “civil society” versus the “State.”) Elements of this given may be politically irrelevant or nontransformable. But *de jure*, “civil society” is itself an object of instituting political action. This

²⁹T/E: The French here adds, parenthetically, a phrase that may be translated as follows: “(and, to extend Aristotle’s thinking, could be eliminated only when machines...)”

is strikingly exemplified by some aspects of Cleisthenes' reform in Athens (506 BCE). The traditional division of the population among tribes is superseded by a redivision having two main objects. First, the number of tribes is changed. The traditional (Ionian) four *phulai* become ten, each subdivided into three *trittues*, all sharing equally in all magistratures through rotation (which entails what is in fact the creation of a new, "political" year and calendar). Second, each tribe is formed by a balanced composition of agricultural, maritime, and urban people. Thus, the tribes—which henceforth have their "headquarters" in the city of Athens—become neutral as to territorial or professional particularities; they are clearly political units.

What we have here is the creation of a properly political social space, founded on social (economic) and geographical elements, but not *determined* by these. No phantasm of "homogeneity" here: an articulation of the citizen body within a political perspective is created and superimposed on the "prepolitical" articulations without crushing them. This articulation obeys strictly political imperatives: equality of power-sharing on the one hand, unity of the body politic (as against "particular interests") on the other.

The same spirit is exemplified by a most striking Athenian disposition (Aristotle *Politics* 1330a20): when the *ekklēsia* deliberates on matters entailing the possibility of a conflict such as a war with a neighboring *polis*, the inhabitants of the frontier zone are excluded from the vote. For, they could not vote without their particular interests overwhelming their motives, while the decision must be made on general grounds only.

This again shows a conception of politics diametrically opposed to the modern mentality of defense and

assertion of “interests.” Interests have, as far as possible, to be kept at bay when political decisions are made. (Imagine the following disposition in the U.S. Constitution: “Whenever questions pertaining to agriculture are to be decided, senators and representatives from predominantly agricultural States cannot participate in the vote.”)

At this point one may comment on the ambiguity of Hannah Arendt’s position concerning what she calls “the social.” She rightly saw that politics is destroyed when it becomes a mask for the defense and assertion of “interests.” The political space is then hopelessly fragmented. But *if* society is, in reality, strongly divided along conflicting “interests”—as it is today—insistence on the autonomy of politics becomes gratuitous. The answer, then, is not to ignore the “social,” but to change it so that the conflict of “social”—that is, economic—interests ceases to be the dominant factor in shaping political attitudes. If this is not done, the present situation among Western societies results: the decomposition of the body politic and its fragmentation into lobbies. In this case, as the “algebraic sum” of opposing interests is very often zero, the consequence is political impotence and aimless drift, such as is observed today.

The unity of the body politic has to be preserved even against extreme forms of *political* strife. This is, to my mind, the meaning of the Athenian law on ostracism (not the usual interpretation, which sees in it a safeguard against would-be tyrants). In Athens political division and antagonism should not be allowed to tear the community apart; one of the two opposing leaders must go into temporary exile.



General participation in politics entails the creation for the first time in history of a *public space*. The emphasis Hannah Arendt has put on this, her elucidation of its meaning, is one of her outstanding contributions to the understanding of Greek institutional creation. I will confine myself, therefore, to a few additional points.

The emergence of a public space means that a political domain is created that “belongs to all” (*ta koina*).³⁰ The “public” ceases to be a “*private*” affair—of the king, the priests, the bureaucracy, the politicians, and the experts. Decisions on common affairs have to be made by the community.

But the essence of the public space does not refer only to “final decisions”; if it did, it would be more or less empty. It refers as well to the presuppositions of the decisions, to everything that leads to them. Whatever is of importance has to appear publicly. This is, for example, effectively realized in the *presentation* of the law: laws are engraved in marble and publicly exposed for everybody to see. But much more importantly, law materializes in the discourse of the people, freely talking to each other in the *agora* about politics and about everything they care about before deliberating in the *ekklēsia*. To understand the tremendous historical change involved, one only has to contrast this with the typical “Asiatic” situation.

This is equivalent to the creation of the possibility—and actuality—of free speech, free thinking, free

³⁰Something similar can be found in some savage societies, but it is confined to the handling of “current” affairs, since in these societies the “traditional” law cannot be called into question.

examination and questioning without restraint. It establishes *logos* as circulation of speech and thought within the community. It accompanies the two basic traits of the citizen already mentioned: *isēgoria*, the right for all equally to speak their minds, and *parrhēsia*, the commitment for all to really speak their minds concerning public affairs.

It is important to stress here the distinction between the “formal” and the “real.” The existence of a public space is not just a matter of legal provisions guaranteeing rights of free speech, etc. Such provisions are but conditions for a public space to exist. The important question is: What are the people actually doing with these rights? The decisive traits in this respect are courage, responsibility, and shame (*aidōs*, *aischunē*). Lacking these, the “public space” becomes just an open space for advertising, mystification, and pornography—as is, increasingly, the case today. Against such development, legal provisions are of no avail, or produce evils worse than the ones they pretend to cure. Only the education (*paideia*) of the citizens as citizens can give valuable, substantive content to the “public space.” This *paideia* is not primarily a matter of books and academic credits. First and foremost, it involves becoming conscious that the *polis* is also oneself and that its fate also depends upon one’s mind, behavior, and decisions; in other words, it is participation in political life.

Equally important, hand in hand with the creation of a public space goes the creation of a *public time*. By this I do not mean just “social,” “calendar” time, a system of sociotemporal benchmarks that, of course, already exists everywhere. I mean the emergence of a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as domain for its activities. This is the meaning of the creation

of historiography in Greece. It is a striking fact that historiography properly speaking has existed only during two periods of human history: in ancient Greece, and in modern Europe—that is, in the cases of the two societies where questioning of the existing institutions has occurred. In other societies, there is only the undisputed reign of tradition, and/or simple “recording of events” by the priests or the chroniclers of the kings. But Herodotus starts with the declaration that the traditions of the Greeks are not trustworthy. The disruption of tradition and critical inquiry into “true causes” of course go together. Moreover, this knowledge of the past is open to all. Herodotus, for example, is reported to have read his *Histories* to the Greeks assembled for the Olympic games (*si non e vero, e ben trovato*). And the Funeral Speech of Pericles contains a survey of the history of the Athenians from the viewpoint of the spirit of the activities of the successive generations—a survey leading up to the present and clearly pointing toward new things to be done in the future.



What are the limits of political action—the limits of autonomy? If the law is God-given, or if there is a philosophical or scientific “grounding” of substantive political truths (with Nature, Reason, or History as ultimate “principle”), then there exists an extrasocial standard for society. There is a norm of the norm, a law of the law, a criterion on the basis of which the question of whether a particular law (or state of affairs) is just or unjust, proper or improper, can be discussed and decided. This criterion is given once and for all and, *ex hypothesi*, does not depend upon human action.

Once it is recognized that no such ground exists, either because there is a separation between religion and politics, as is, imperfectly, the case in modern societies, or because, as in Greece, religion is kept strictly at bay by political activities, and once it is also recognized that there is no “science,” no *epistēmē* or *technē*, of political matters, the question of what a just law is, what justice is—what “the proper” institution of society is—opens up as a genuine, that is, interminable, question.

Autonomy is possible only if society recognizes itself as the source of its norms. Thus, society cannot evade the question: Why this norm rather than that?—in other words, it cannot evade the question of justice by answering, for example, that justice is the will of God, or the will of the Czar, or the reflection of the relations of production. Neither can it evade the question of *limits* to its actions. In a democracy, people *can* do anything—and must know that they *ought not* to do just anything. Democracy is the regime of self-limitation; therefore it is also the regime of historical risk—another way of saying that it is the regime of freedom—and a tragic regime. The fate of Athenian democracy offers an illustration of this. The fall of Athens—its defeat in the Peloponnesian War—was the result of the *hubris* of the Athenians. *Hubris* does not simply presuppose freedom, it presupposes the absence of fixed norms, the essential vagueness of the ultimate bearings of our actions. (Christian sin is, of course, a heteronomous concept.) Transgressing the law is not *hubris*, it is a definite and limited misdemeanor. *Hubris* exists where self-limitation is the only “norm,” where “limits” are transgressed that were nowhere defined.

The question of the limits to the self-instituting activity of a community unfolds in two moments. Is there any

intrinsic criterion of and for the law? Can there be an effective guarantee that this criterion, however defined, will not be transgressed?

With the move to fundamentals, the answer to both questions is a definite *no*. There is no norm of norms that would not itself be a historical creation. And there is no way of eliminating the risks of collective *hubris*. Nobody can protect humanity from folly or suicide.

Moderns have thought—have pretended—that they have found the answer to these two questions by fusing them into one. This answer would be the “Constitution” as a fundamental Charter embodying the norms of norms and defining particularly stringent provisions for its revision. It is hardly necessary to recall that this “answer” does not hold water either logically or effectively, that modern history has for two centuries now in all conceivable ways made a mockery of this notion of a “Constitution”; or that the oldest “democracy” in the liberal West, Britain, has no “Constitution” at all. It is sufficient to point to the shallowness and duplicity of modern thinking in this respect, as exemplified both in the field of international relations and in the arena of changes in political regimes. At the international level, despite the rhetoric of professors of “International Public Law,” there is in fact no law but the “law of force,” that is, there is a “law” as long as matters are not really important—as long as you hardly need a law. The “law of force” also rules concerning the establishment of a new “legal order” within a country: “A victorious revolution creates right” is the dictum almost all teachers of international public law avow, and all countries follow in practice. (This “revolution” need not be, and usually is not, a revolution properly speaking; most of the time, it is a successful *Putsch*.) And, in the European experience of the last sixty years, the

legislation introduced by “illegal” and even “monstrous” regimes has always been maintained in its bulk after their overthrow.

The very simple point here is of course that in the face of a historical movement that marshals *force*—be it by actively mobilizing a large majority or a passionate and ruthless minority in the forefront of a passive or indifferent population, or be it even just brute force in the hands of a group of colonels—legal provisions are of no avail. If we can be reasonably certain that the reestablishment of slavery tomorrow in the United States or in a European country is extremely improbable, the “reasonable” character of our forecast is based *not* on the existing laws or constitutions (for, then we would be simply idiotic) but on a judgment concerning the active response of a huge majority of the people to such an attempt.

In Greek practice and thinking the distinction between “constitution” and “law” does not exist. The Athenian distinction between laws and decrees of the *ekklēsia* (*psēphismata*) did not have the same formal character and in fact disappeared during the fourth century. But the question of self-limitation was dealt with in a different (and, I think, more profound) way. I will only consider two institutions related to this problem.

The first is an apparently strange but fascinating procedure called *graphē paranomōn* (accusation of unlawfulness).³¹ The procedure can be briefly described as

³¹M. I. Finley has recently stressed the importance and elucidated the spirit of this procedure: *Democracy, Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973). See also Victor Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 73, 79, 267—where two other important procedures or provisions similar in spirit are also discussed: *apatē tou dēmou* (deceit of the *dēmos*) and the exception *ton nomon mē*

follows. You have made a proposal to the *ekklēsia*, and this proposal has been voted for. Then another citizen can bring you before a court, accusing you of inducing the people to vote for an unlawful law. You can be acquitted or convicted—and in the latter case, the law is annulled. Thus, you have the right to propose anything you please, but you have to think carefully before proposing something on the basis of a momentary fit of popular mood and having it approved by a bare majority. For, the action would be judged by a popular court of considerable dimensions (501, sometimes 1,001 or even 1,501 citizens sitting as judges), drawn by lot. Thus, the *dēmos* was appealing against itself in front of itself: the appeal was from the whole body of citizens (or whichever part of it was present when the proposal in question was adopted) to a huge random sample of the same body sitting after passions had calmed, listening again to contradictory arguments, and assessing the matter from a relative distance. Since the source of the law is the people, “control of constitutionality” could not be entrusted to “professionals”—in any case, the idea would have sounded ridiculous to a Greek—but only to the people themselves acting in a different guise. The people say what the law is; the people can err; the people can correct themselves. This is a magnificent example of an effective institution of self-limitation.

Tragedy is another institution of self-limitation. People usually speak of “Greek tragedy,” but there is no such thing. There is only *Athenian* tragedy. Only in the city where the democratic process, the process of self-institution, reached its climax, only there could tragedy (as opposed to simple “theater”) be created.

epitēdeion theinai (inappropriateness of a law).

Tragedy has, of course, many layers of signification, and there can be no question of reducing it to a narrow “political” function. But there is certainly a cardinal political dimension to tragedy, not to be confused with the “political positions” taken by the poets, not even with the much commented upon (rightly, if insufficiently) Aeschylean vindication of public justice against private vengeance in the *Oresteia*.

The political dimension of tragedy lies first and foremost in its ontological grounding. What tragedy, not “discursively” but through *presentation*, gives to all to see, is that Being is Chaos. Chaos is exhibited here, first, as the absence of order *for* man, the lack of positive correspondence between human intentions and actions, on one hand, and their result or outcome, on the other. More than that, tragedy shows not only that we are not masters of the consequences of our actions but that we are not even masters of their *meaning*. Chaos is also presented as Chaos *in* man, that is, as his *hubris*. And the ultimately prevailing order is, as in Anaximander, order through catastrophe—a “meaningless” order. From the universal experience of catastrophe stems the fundamental *Einstellung* of tragedy: universality and impartiality.

Hannah Arendt has rightly said that impartiality enters this world through the Greeks. This is already fully apparent in Homer. Not only can one not find in the Homeric poems any disparagement of the “enemy,” the Trojans, for example, but the truly central figure in the *Iliad* is Hector, not Achilles, and the most moving characters are Hector and Andromache. The same is true for Aeschylus’ *Persians*—a play performed in 472 BCE, seven years after the battle at Plataea, with the war still going on. In this tragedy, there is not a single word of hatred or contempt for the Persians; the Persian Queen, Atossa, is a majestic and venerable figure, and the defeat and

ruin of the Persians are ascribed exclusively to the *hubris* of Xerxes. And in his *Trojan Women* (415 BCE), Euripides presents the Greeks as the cruelest and most monstrous beasts—as if he were saying to the Athenians: this is what you are. Indeed, the play was performed a year after the horrible massacre of the Melians by the Athenians (416 BCE).

But perhaps the most profound play, from the point of view of tragedy's political dimension, is *Antigone* (442 BCE). The play has been persistently interpreted as a tract against human law and in favor of divine law, or at least as depicting an insurmountable conflict between these two principles (or between “family” and “State,” as in Hegel). This is indeed the manifest content of the text, repeated again and again. Since the spectators cannot fail to “identify” with the pure, heroic, helpless, and desperate Antigone against the hardheaded, authoritarian, arrogant, and suspicious Creon, they find the “thesis” of the play clear. But the meaning of the play is multilayered and the standard interpretation misses what I think is most important. A full justification of the interpretation I propose would require a complete analysis of the play, which is out of the question here. I will only draw attention to a few points. The insistence on the obvious—and rather shallow—opposition between human law and divine law forgets that for the Greeks to bury their dead is *also* a human law, as to defend one's country is *also* divine law (Creon mentions this explicitly). The chorus oscillates from beginning to end between the two positions, always putting them on the same plane. The famous hymn (332-375) to the glory of man, the builder of cities and creator of institutions, ends with praise for the one who is able to *weave together* (*pareirein*) “the laws of the land and the justice of gods to which he has sworn” (cf. also 725: “well said from both sides”). Antigone's upholding of “divine law” is remarkably

weakened by her argument that she did what she did because a brother is irreplaceable when one's parents are dead, and that with a husband or a son the situation would have been different. To be sure, neither the divine law nor the human law regarding the burial of the dead recognizes such a distinction. Moreover, what speaks through Antigone, here and throughout the play, more than respect for the divine law, is her passionate love for her brother. We need not go to the extremes of interpretation and invoke incestuous attraction, but we certainly must remember that the play would not be the masterpiece it is if Antigone and Creon were bloodless representatives of principles and not moved by strong passions—love for her brother, in Antigone's case, love for the city *and* for his own power, in Creon's case. Against this passionate background, the characters' arguments appear additionally as rationalizations. Finally, to present Creon as unilaterally "wrong" goes against the deepest spirit of tragedy, and certainly of Sophoclean tragedy.

What the final lines of the chorus (1348-1355) glorify is not divine law, but *phronein*, an untranslatable word, unbearably flattened in its Latin rendering by *prudentia*. The chorus lauds *phronein*, advises against impiety, and reverts again to *phronein*, warning against "big words" and the "*huperauchoi*," the excessively proud.³² Now, the content of

³²I must leave open here the question raised by Hannah Arendt's (and Hölderlin's) interpretation of these last lines (*The Human Condition* [1958], 2nd ed. [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998], pp. 25-26, n. 8), which does not, in any case, create difficulties for my comment. Curiously, Michael Denny in his excellent paper ("The Privilege of Ourselves: Hannah Arendt on Judgment," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, pp. 268-69 and 274) does not mention the translation offered in *The Human Condition* and supplies instead a different (oral) rendering by Hannah Arendt, which is totally unacceptable,

this *phronein* is clearly indicated in the play. The catastrophe is brought about because *both* Creon *and* Antigone insist on their own reasons, without listening to the reasons of the other. No need to repeat here Antigone's reasons; let us only remember that Creon's reasons are irrefutable. No city can exist—and therefore, no gods can be worshiped—without *nomoi*; no city can tolerate treason and bearing arms against one's own country in alliance with foreigners out of pure greed for power, as Polynices did. Creon's own son, Haemon, clearly says that he cannot prove his father wrong (685-686); he voices the play's main idea when he begs Creon not to *monos phronein*, "not to be wise alone" (707-709).

Creon's is a political decision, taken on very solid grounds. But very solid political grounds can turn out to be very shaky, if they are only "political." To put it in another way, precisely because of the totalistic character of the domain of politics (in this case, inclusive of decisions about burial and about life and death), a correct political decision must take into account all factors, beyond the strictly "political" ones. Even when we think, on the best of rational grounds, that we have made the right decision, this decision may turn out to be wrong, and catastrophically so. Nothing can guarantee *a priori* the correctness of action—not even reason. And above all, it is folly to insist on *monos phronein*, "being wise alone."

Antigone addresses itself to the problem of political action in terms that acquire their acute relevance in the democratic framework more than in any other. It exhibits the uncertainty pervading the field, it sketches the impurity of motives, it exposes the inconclusive character of the

both philologically and from the point of view of the play's whole meaning.

reasoning upon which we base our decisions. It shows that *hubris* has nothing to do with the transgression of definite norms, that it can take the form of the adamant will to apply the norms, disguise itself behind noble and worthy motivations, be they rational or pious. With its denunciation of the *monos phronein*, it formulates the fundamental maxim of democratic politics.³³

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What is the “object” of autonomous self-institution? This question may be rejected at the outset if one thinks that autonomy—collective and individual freedom—is an end in itself, or that once significant autonomy has been established in and through the political institution of society, the rest is no more a matter of politics but a field for the free activity of individuals, groups, and “civil society.”

I do not share these points of view. The idea of

³³An additional support for my interpretation can be found at the end (1065-1075) of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. This is certainly an addition to the initial text, probably dating from 409-405 BCE (according to Mazon, in the Budé edition, p. 103). This addition has been inserted to prepare for the performance of *Antigone* immediately afterward. It makes the *Seven* end with the two halves of the chorus divided, the one chanting that they will support those who are united with their blood (*genea*), because what the *polis* holds to be right is different at different times, i.e., the *polis*'s laws change though blood right is perennial, and the other asserting their support for the *polis* and *dikaion*, i.e., right. [Author's addition, not indicated as such: The first half chorus makes no mention of a “divine law”; the second mentions, in contrast, the “blessed,” no doubt the patron heroes of the city, and Zeus himself. Once again, all this appertains to the *manifest* text.] A nonnegligible testimony of how Athenians at the end of the fifth century viewed the matter and the meaning of *Antigone*.

autonomy as an end in itself would lead to a purely formal, “Kantian” conception. We will autonomy both for itself and in order to be able *to do*. But to do what? Further, political autonomy cannot be separated from “the rest,” from the “substance” of life in society. Finally, a very important part of that life concerns common objectives and works, which have to be decided in common and therefore become objects of political discussion and activity.

Hannah Arendt did have a substantive conception of what democracy—the *polis*—was about. For her, the value of democracy derived from the fact that it is the political regime in which humans can reveal who they are through deeds and speech. To be sure, this element was present and important in Greece—but not only in democracy. Hannah Arendt (after Burckhardt) rightly emphasized the agonistic character of Greek culture in general—not only in politics but in all spheres, and one should add, not only in democracy but in all cities, Greeks cared above all for *kleos* and *kudos* and the elusive immortality they represented.

However, the reduction of the meaning and purposes of politics and of democracy in Greece to this element is impossible, as the foregoing brief account, I hope, makes clear. Moreover, it is surely very difficult to defend or support democracy on this basis. First, though of course democracy more than any other regime allows people to “manifest” themselves, this “manifestation” cannot involve everybody—in fact not even anybody apart from a tiny number of people who are active and deploy initiative in the political field as narrowly defined. Second, and more importantly, Hannah Arendt’s position defers the crucial question of the content, the substance, of this “manifestation.” To take it to extremes, surely Hitler and Stalin and their infamous companions have revealed who they were through

deeds and speech. The difference between Themistocles and Pericles, on the one hand, and Cleon and Alcibiades on the other, between the builders and the gravediggers of democracy, cannot be found in the sheer fact of “manifestation,” but in the content of this manifestation. Even more so, it is precisely because for Cleon and Alcibiades, the only thing that mattered was “manifestation” as such, sheer “appearance in the public space,” that they brought about catastrophe.

The substantive conception of democracy in Greece can be seen clearly in the entirety of the *works* of the *polis* in general. It has been explicitly formulated with unsurpassed depth and intensity in the most important political monument of political thought I have ever read, the Funeral Speech of Pericles (Thuc. 2.35-46). It will always remain puzzling to me that Hannah Arendt, who admired this text and supplied brilliant clues for its interpretation, did not see that it offers a *substantive* conception of democracy hardly compatible with her own.

In the Funeral Speech, Pericles describes the ways of the Athenians (2.37-41) and presents in a half-sentence (beginning of 2.40) a definition of what is, in fact, the “object” of this life. The half-sentence in question is the famous *Philokaloumen gar met’euteleias kai philosophoumen aneu malakias*. In “The Crisis in Culture,”³⁴ Hannah Arendt offers a rich and penetrating commentary of this phrase. But I fail to find in her text what is, to my mind, the most important point.

Pericles’ sentence is impossible to translate into a modern language. The two verbs of the phrase can be

³⁴T/E: “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance,” the last chapter of *Between Past and Future*, pp. 213ff.

rendered literally by “we love beauty...and we love wisdom...,” but the essential would be lost (as Hannah Arendt correctly saw). The verbs do not allow this separation of the “we” and the “object”—beauty or wisdom—external to this “we.” The verbs are not “transitive,” and they are not even simply “active”: they are at the same time “verbs of state.” Like the verb *to live*, they point to an “activity” that is at the same time a way of being or rather *the* way by means of which the subject of the verb *is*. Pericles does not say we love beautiful things (and put them in museums), we love wisdom (and pay professors or buy books). He says we *are* in and by the love of beauty and wisdom and the activity this love brings forth, we live by and with and through them—but far from extravagance, and far from flabbiness.³⁵ This is why he feels able to call Athens *paideusis*—the education and educator—of Greece.

In the Funeral Speech, Pericles implicitly shows the futility of the false dilemmas that plague modern political philosophy and the modern mentality in general: the “individual” versus “society,” or “civil society” versus “the State.” The object of the institution of the *polis* is for him the creation of a human being, the Athenian citizen, who exists and lives in and through the unity of these three: the love and “practice” of beauty, the love and “practice” of wisdom, the care and responsibility for the common good, the collectivity, the *polis* (“they died bravely in battle rightly pretending not to be deprived of such a *polis*, and it is understandable that everyone among those living is willing to suffer for her”

³⁵I follow the usual translation of *euteleia*. Hannah Arendt’s rendering of this word, ending with the interpretation “we love beauty within the limits of political judgment” [T/E: *ibid.*, p. 214], while not strictly impossible, is extremely improbable.

2.41). Among the three, there can be no separation; beauty and wisdom such as the Athenians loved them and lived them could exist only in Athens. The Athenian citizen is not a “private philosopher,” or a “private artist,” he is a citizen for whom philosophy and art have become ways of life. This, I think, is the real, materialized, answer of ancient democracy to the question about the “object” of the political institution.

When I say that the Greeks are for us a germ, I mean, first, that they never stopped thinking about this question: What is it that the institution of society ought to achieve? And second, I mean that in the paradigmatic case, Athens, they gave this answer: the creation of human beings living with beauty, living with wisdom, and loving the common good.

Paris and New York, March 1982—June 1983

The Nature and Value of Equality*

I would first like to thank Mr. Busino for such a kind introduction, thanking, too, Bernard Ducret and Jean Starobinski, thanks to whom I have the pleasure to speak before you. And I would like to send along with you my best wishes for the speedy recovery of Jean Starobinski's health.

In his invitation to this conference, Jean Starobinski noted quite rightly: "The question of equality is concerned with the representation we ourselves make of human nature; it is connected therefore with a philosophical and religious interrogation. But this interrogation also is concerned with the model we have in view for a just society: it therefore has a socio-political dimension." And one of the indices of the difficulty of our question, the question of the nature and value of equality, is the very existence of these two dimensions, the philosophical dimension and the political dimension, with their relative independence and at the same time their solidarity.

Philosophy and politics are born together, at the same moment, in the same country, and they are brought forth by the same movement, the movement toward individual and collective autonomy. Philosophy is not a matter of systems, of books, of scholastic arguments. It is a matter first and foremost of calling into question the instituted representation

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of the world, the idols of the tribe, within the horizon of an unlimited interrogation. Politics is not a matter of municipal elections, nor even presidential ones. Politics, in the true sense of the term, calls into question the effectively actual institution of society; it is the activity that tries to aim lucidly at the social institution as such.

These two dimensions are born together, as I said, in Greece of course, and they are reborn together in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. These two coincidences are in truth much more than coincidences. It is a matter of an essential cobirth, of a consubstantiality.

Consubstantiality, however, does not signify identity and still less a dependence of one of the terms on the other. It happens, in my view, that the inherited ontology, the central core of philosophy, has remained crippled and this infirmity has brought with it momentous consequences for what is called *political philosophy*, which itself really has never been anything but a philosophy talking *about* politics and *external* to the latter. This begins already with Plato.

But even if it had been otherwise, it still would not have been possible to draw a politics from philosophy. There is no passage from ontology to politics. A banal affirmation, indeed. Yet we must repeat it in face of the confusion that is perpetually reborn between the two domains. It is not simply that one could never legitimately pass from facts to laws, which is true. Much more is at stake: the ultimate schemata employed in philosophy and in politics, as well as their respective positions in relation to the world, are in the two cases radically different despite the fact that, as I said, both proceed from the same movement of calling into question the established order of society.

Let us try briefly to explicate this difference. Philosophy cannot found a politics—indeed, it cannot

“found” anything at all. In political matters in particular, all that philosophy can say is: If you want philosophy, you also must will a society in which philosophy is possible. This is quite true, and there are societies—they exist today—where philosophy is not possible, where, at best, it can be practiced only in secret. In order to accept this line of reasoning, however, we still must want philosophy. And we are not able to justify this will for philosophy rationally since such a rational justification would again presuppose philosophy: it would invoke as a premise that which is to be demonstrated.

We also know that philosophy cannot, as it often wanted to do, “found” itself. Every “foundation” of philosophy proves to be either straightforwardly fallacious or else based upon circular arguments. These circles are vicious from the point of view of simple formal logic, but in another respect they are the circles entailed by genuine social-historical creation. I speak of creation here as an idea whose absence as a matter of fact marks what I have just called the *infirmity* of the inherited ontology. Creation in general, as well as social-historical creation, is incomprehensible for the established logic quite simply because in creation the result, the effect of the operations in question, is presupposed by these operations themselves.

Let us take an example from our domain: society’s self-creation—I will come back to this right away—is possible only if *social* individuals exist. Its self-transformation is possible only if there exist some individuals who aim at this transformation and are able to effectuate it. But where then do these individuals come from?

Philosophical creation, as well as political creation, has a meaning only for those who are downstream from this creation. This is why we encounter the following limit: not only is it impossible for philosophy to be grounded in logic

but also it could not prevail against the attitudes and beliefs that are unaware of this philosophical world, that are upstream from this world. Likewise, and I also will come back to this right away, the political ideas to which we appeal are not demonstrable counter to individuals who are brought up in other societies and for whom these ideas do not represent a part of their tradition or of their representation of the world.

Philosophy, itself a social-historical creation, depends of course upon the social-historical world in which it is created: this does not mean, however, that it is determined by this world. This dependence, in the same way as the freedom of philosophical creation, finds its limit as well as its counterweight in the existence of a referent of thought, of a term to which thought refers itself, at which it aims, and which is other than thought itself. To philosophize or to think, in the strong sense of the word, is this supremely paradoxical enterprise that consists in creating forms of thought in order to think that which is beyond thought—that which, simply, *is*. To think is to aim at the other of thought, knowing all along that this other can never be grasped except in and by thought and knowing that the question—What, in that which is thought, comes from the one who thinks, and what comes from that which is thought?—will forever remain undecidable as an ultimate question. And this paradox is itself, paradoxically, the ballast, the only ballast, of thought.

But political thinking/willing, the thinking/willing of another institution of society, does not have a referent external to itself. Certainly, if it is not delirious, it also finds its ballast or a certain ballast, in any case certainly its source, in the will and activity of a collectivity to which it addresses itself and from which it proceeds. As it happens, however, the collectivity, or the part of the collectivity that acts politically,

deals in this context only with itself. Thought and philosophy have no assured foundation, but they find some bearings in that which is, in a certain manner, external to themselves. No bearings of this type exist for political thinking/willing. Thought *ought* to aim at its independence—paradoxical and finally impossible—with respect to its social-historical rootedness. But political thinking/willing *cannot* aim at such an independence, in an absolute way. The peculiarity of thought is its will to encounter something other than itself. The peculiarity of politics is its will to make itself other than it is, starting from itself.

There is an infirmity in the inherited ontology, as I said. It consists, briefly speaking, in the occultation of the question, or rather of the *fact*, of creation and of the radical imaginary at work in history. And it is this ontology that has to be surpassed since it continues to overdetermine, consciously or not, what is thought in all domains. This ontology is what has to be surpassed if we want to confront the question of politics on its own terrain. And this is manifestly clear in the question that concerns us today, the question of equality, just as it is with another question closely tied to the first, that of freedom.

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Indeed, ever since they first occurred, discussions on equality as well as those on freedom have been mortgaged to an anthropological ontology, to a metaphysics of the human being that makes of this human being—of this singular example of the species *Homo sapiens*—an *individual-substance*, an individual of divine right, of natural law, or of rational law. God, Nature, Reason, posited in each case as supreme and paradigmatic existing beings

[*êtres-étants*], which function at one and the same time as being and meaning, always also have been posited within the framework of the inherited ontology as sources of a being/meaning of society, a derived and inferior being/meaning. And they have been parceled out in each case in the guise of shreds or molecules of the divine, the natural, or the reasonable, which in turn define, or ought to define, the human as individual.

These metaphysical foundations of equality among humans are untenable in themselves, and, in fact, we no longer hear them spoken of that much. We hardly ever hear it said anymore that the exigency of equality or the exigency of freedom is founded upon the will of God, who created us all equal, or upon the fact that we are naturally equal, or that reason requires [*exige*] that.... And it is entirely characteristic, in this regard, that all the contemporary discussions on the rights of man are marked by a bashfulness, not to say false modesty, not to say philosophical pusillanimity, which is altogether clear cut.

Yet also, these philosophical or metaphysical “foundations” of equality are, or become in their utilization, more than equivocal. By means of a few logical slips or a few hidden, supplementary premises, the defense of equality as well as its contrary can be derived.

Christianity, for example, in proper theology, is concerned only with equality before God, not social and political equality. Similarly, in its proper historical practice, Christianity almost always has accepted and justified terrestrial inequalities. The metaphysically equal status of all humans insofar as they are children of God who are promised redemption, etc., is concerned only with a single important matter: the “eternal” destiny of souls. This says nothing, and *ought* to say nothing, of the lot of human beings down here

during this infinitesimal fraction of earthly time of their life that is, as a mathematician would say, of null measure in the face of eternity. Christianity, at least original and primitive Christianity, was completely consistent and coherent on this subject: Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, my Kingdom is not of this world, all power comes from God (Paul, Epistle to the Romans), etc. This attitude was formulated when Christianity still was a firmly acosmic faith. When it ceased to be so in order to become an instituted religion, and even legally obligatory for the inhabitants of the Empire (with the decree of Theodosius the Great), it perfectly accommodated itself to the existence of social hierarchies and it justified them. Such was its social role for the overwhelming majority of countries and epochs.

It is strange sometimes to see otherwise serious thinkers wanting to make of the transcendent equality of souls as professed by Christianity the precursor of modern ideas about social and political equality. To do this, one must forget, or erase in the most incredible fashion, twelve centuries of Byzantium, ten centuries in Russia, sixteen Iberian centuries, the sanctification of serfdom in Europe (and that beautiful German name for serfdom, *Leibeigenschaft*, the ownership of the body: evidently, the soul is the property of God), the sanctification of slavery outside of Europe, Luther's postures during the Peasant War, and I omit many other examples.

It is certain that our equality inasmuch as we are all descendants of the same Adam and Eve could be evoked frequently by some sects and socioreligious movements and, indeed, by these very same sixteenth-century peasants. But this shows only that we finally have entered once again, and after 1,000 years of a religiously confirmed and ratified reign of social hierarchy, into a new period of calling into question

the institution of society, a calling into question that at its start made use of whatever was at hand and utilized whatever seemed useful in the established representations while giving to it a *new* signification. The rise of the democratic and egalitarian movement, starting from the seventeenth century and especially from the eighteenth century onward, did not occur in all Christian countries; far from it. This movement took place only in a few countries, and in those ones it was dependent upon other factors; it expresses the action of new historical elements, requires fresh expenditures, represents a new social creation. It is in this context that the celebrated statement by Grotius from the beginning of the seventeenth century acquires its genuine meaning (I cite it from memory), “Even to grant what could not be expressed without the greatest blasphemy, that God does not exist, or that He is not at all interested in human affairs, it still would be possible to ground the Social Contract upon natural law.”¹ What Grotius thus said, with these precautions—which for him certainly were not just oratorical, because he was a believer, a good Protestant—is that in the end divine law is not needed in order to ground human law. And besides, we hardly need recall that, in this town of Geneva, even the metaphysical status of the “equality” of souls is in itself more than equivocal, since Christianity is perfectly compatible with the most extreme doctrine of predestination, which creates social-metaphysical classes, or social-transcendental ones, in the beyond and for eternity.

Just as equivocal in this domain are the invocations of

¹T/E: Hugo Grotius, *On the Rights of War and Peace* (1625), Prolegomena §11; the part here about the “social contract” seems to be Castoriadis’s interpolation of Grotius’s “natural law” viewpoint (“And what we have said” begins Grotius’s sentence).

“nature” and “reason.” It is characteristic that the only Greek philosopher who undertook the task of “founding” slavery (which was for the Greeks a pure *fact* resulting from an unequal power and which no one had tried to *justify*), I mean Aristotle, invokes at the same time “nature” and “reason” in order to do so. When Aristotle says that there exist *phusei douloi*,² slaves by nature, the *phusis* for him here, as always, is not a “nature” in the modern scientific sense; it is the form, the norm, the destination, the *telos*, the finality, the essence of a thing. A slave “by nature” is, according to Aristotle, one who is incapable of governing himself; this is, when one reflects upon it, almost a tautology on the level of *concepts*, and we continue to apply it, for example, in the cases of the legal deprivation of civil rights or of psychiatric confinement. And it is striking to discover that one of the most eminent representatives of modern Liberalism, Benjamin Constant, in his defense of a restricted and censitary suffrage, restated almost word for word Aristotle’s argument, which leads to depriving those who practice the banausic professions (the *banausoi*) of their political rights.³

Modern scientific arguments are just as inadequate and equivocal. The “nature” of “natural science” (in the case of biology) creates at the same time an “equality” of humans in certain respects—for example, save in the case of an abnormality, all men and women are capable of intraspecies

²T/E: Aristotle *Politics* 1254a15.

³T/E: A “censitary suffrage” based voting on having a sufficient amount of income to pay a certain minimum amount of taxes or weighted votes in proportion to taxed income. The “banausic professions” are those devoted to the making of money and are engaged in by those who practice artisanal trades (formerly designated *mechanicks* in the English-speaking world). A *banausos* is, simply, an artisan.

fertilization—and an “inequality” in other respects, in a multitude of somatic characteristics, for example. Not only racism, but also even “biological” antiracism seems to me to rest upon some logical slips. That there are human traits that are genetically transmitted is a truism; it is incontestable. Beyond this truism, the question of knowing *which* traits are genetically transmitted is an empirical question. The answer to this question, however, will never tell us what *we want* and what *we should want*. If we thought that the supreme goal [*valeur*] of society, the goal to which all others should be subordinated, was to run the 100-meter dash in less than nine seconds, or to weightlift 300 kilograms, we would breed pure human clones capable of performing these feats—as we breed Leghorn hens for their prolific egg-laying capacities or Rhode Island hens for their very tender meat.

Similar confusions usually surround discussions about the “intelligence quotient.” I won’t touch on this question; I believe that Albert Jacquard will be speaking about it. I simply will make two remarks. First, even if IQ heritability were successfully “demonstrated,” for me there would be neither a scientific scandal nor a motive for changing my political attitude one iota. For, if the “intelligence quotient” measures something—which may be seriously doubted—and if we suppose that what it measures is separable from all the postnatal influences experienced by the individual—which appears to me still more doubtful—it would measure in the end man’s intelligence only insofar as he is purely an *animal*. Indeed, it would measure rather the “intelligence” that consists in the capacity to combine and integrate facts, you might as well say the more or less lofty perfection of the individual inasmuch as the individual is examined as an ensemblistic-identitarian automaton, that is, in that which the individual shares with the monkey, it would measure the

degree to which the individual is a particularly successful hyper-monkey. No test measures or ever will be able to measure what makes up properly human intelligence, what marks our departure from pure animality: the creative imagination, the capacity to posit or to bring into being something new. Such a “measure” would be, by definition, deprived of any sense.

On the other hand, no *political* conclusions could be drawn from any measurement like an intelligence quotient. To do that, one would have to add some supplementary premises, which generally one makes no mention of, and perfectly arbitrary if not frankly absurd ones at that, such as, for example: The most intelligent should have more money (one wonders if Einstein was less intelligent than Henry Ford or if, in case he had been given more money, he would have made additional scientific discoveries). Or else: The most intelligent should govern. This conclusion seems at first to run contrary to the consensus of contemporary societies, which demonstrate repeatedly during elections that they do not deem it especially important to have very intelligent governors. And, on the other hand, this would involve taking a political position that is at once very specific and supremely vague: the most intelligent should govern with a view to what? And in order to do what?

We cannot draw political conclusions from these kinds of considerations. We belong to a tradition that takes its roots in the will to freedom, to a tradition of individual and collective autonomy—the two being inseparable. We assume this tradition explicitly (and critically) by a *political choice* whose nondelirious character is demonstrated by the occasions in our European tradition where the movement toward equality and toward freedom has forged ahead, as well as, indeed, by the simple fact that we are able today to hold

this discussion here freely. Despite the provisional inequality of our positions—me speaking to you, you simply listening—it is in our power to reverse these roles, and to have a discussion, for example, tomorrow morning with no one being allowed to speak more than anyone else. This tradition and this political choice have an anchorage in the anthropological structure of Greco-Western man, of European man such as he has created himself. This choice finds expression under the circumstances found in the following affirmation: we want everyone to be autonomous, that is to say, we want all people to learn to govern *themselves*, individually and collectively. And one is able to develop one's capacity to govern oneself only by participating on an equal footing, in an equal manner, in the governance of common business, of common affairs. The second affirmation certainly contains an important factual or "empirical" component—but seems to be one that is not easily contestable. Every human being has in his genes the capacity to talk—which serves no purpose if he does not learn a language.



The attempt to found equality as well as freedom, that is, human *autonomy*, on an extrasocial basis [*fondement*], is intrinsically antinomic. It even is a manifestation of heteronomy. If God, Nature, or Reason have decreed freedom (or, moreover, slavery), we always will be, in this case, submissive and enslaved to this pretended decree.

Society is self-creation. Until now, however, its institution has been a self-occulted self-institution. This self-occultation is, as a matter of fact, the fundamental characteristic of heteronomy in societies. In heteronomous

societies, that is to say, in the overwhelming majority of societies that have existed up to the present time—almost all of them—we find, institutionally established and sanctioned, the representation of a source of the institution of society that only can be found *outside* of this society: among the gods, in God, among the ancestors, in the laws of Nature, in the laws of Reason, in the laws of History. In other words, we find imposed upon individuals in these societies a representation to the effect that the institution of society does not depend upon them, that they cannot lay down for themselves their own law—for, that would mean *autonomy*—but rather that this law already is given by someone else. There is therefore a self-occultation of the self-institution of society and this is an integral part of the society's heteronomy.

But there also is considerable confusion in contemporary discussions, and already in those since the eighteenth century, about the idea or the category of the individual. The individual that is always being talked about in this context is itself social creation. The individual is a total part, as mathematicians say, of the institution of society. The individual embodies an imposition of this institution on the psyche that is, by its nature, asocial. The individual is social creation as form in general: in the savage forest, the individual does not develop if not tended to by someone; the result will be a wolf-child, a wild child, a crazed person, or whatever you like, but not an individual. But the individual also is, in each period and in each given type of society, a fabrication. I say *fabrication* expressly, a specific social production—almost a mass production. This creation is always going on. Every society in the process of becoming instituted presupposes the individual as an instituted form and no society, even if it were to practice the most extreme form of “totemism,” really confuses a human individual, whatever

its social status, with a leopard or a jaguar. Each time, however, this creation also is creation of a historically *specific type (eidos)* of individual and “mass fabrication” of exemplars of this type: what French, Swiss, American, or Russian society fabricates as individual has very little relation, apart from characteristics so general that they are empty, to the individual that Roman, Athenian, Babylonian, or Egyptian societies, not to mention primitive societies, fabricate.

This creation and this fabrication always involve the abstract and partial form of equality because the institution always operates in and through the universal, or what I call *the ensemblistic-identitarian*: it operates by classes, properties, and relations. As soon as society first is instituted, it creates straight off a supernatural “equality” among human beings that is something other than their biological similarity, for society cannot become instituted without establishing relations of equivalence. Society has to say: *the men, the women, those who* are between 18 and 20 years old, *those who* live in such and such a village...; society operates necessarily by classes, relations, properties. But this segmentary and logical “equality” is compatible with the most acute substantive inequalities. It is always an equivalence with respect to a *certain* criterion, or as mathematicians say, to the *modulus* of something. In an archaic society, the members of a given “age class” are “equal” among themselves—*insofar as* they are members of this class. In a slave society, slaves are “equal” among themselves—*insofar as* they are slaves.

What is there beyond all this? Aside from their biological animal constitution, do human beings have a universal endowment that asserts itself [*s'impose*] in all societies? The sole universal endowment human beings have is the psyche insofar as it is radical imagination. But this

psyche can neither manifest itself, nor even subsist and survive if the form of the social individual is not imposed [*imposée*] upon it. And this individual is “endowed” with whatever the institution of the society to which it belongs in each case grants to it.

To see this, it suffices to reflect upon this shocking fact: in the majority of instances and in the majority of historical periods, the individual is fabricated by society in such a manner that it carries within itself the exigency of *inequality* in relation to others, and not of equality. And this is no accident. For, an institution of society that institutes inequality corresponds much more “naturally”—though the term here is completely misplaced—to the exigencies of the originary psychical core, of the psychical monad that we carry within us and that always dreams, whatever our age, of being all-powerful and at the center of the world. Of course, this feeling of all-powerfulness and of centeredness in relation to the universe is not realizable; a simulacrum of it can be found, however, in a petty power and in a centeredness relative to a petty universe. And it is obvious that a fundamental correlate of the exigencies of the individual’s psychical economy is created, invented by society precisely in the form of social hierarchy and inequality.

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The idea of a substantive social and political equality of individuals is not, and cannot be, either a scientific thesis or a philosophical thesis. It is a *social imaginary signification*, and more precisely an idea and a political will, an idea that concerns the institution of society as political community. It is itself historical creation and a creation, if it may be said, that is extremely improbable. Contemporary Europeans

(“European” here is not a geographical expression, it is an expression of civilization) do not take account of the enormous historical improbability of their existence. In relation to the general history of humanity, this history, this tradition, philosophy itself, the struggle for democracy, equality, and freedom are as completely improbable as the existence of life on Earth is in relation to the existence of solar systems in the Universe. Still today, the caste system remains extremely powerful for people in India: no one contests this system. Recently, newspaper articles told how, in a State of India, pariahs who wanted to free themselves from their situation did not set in motion a political movement for equal rights for pariahs, but began to convert to Islam because Islam does not recognize castes.

The exigency of equality is a creation of *our* history, this segment of history to which we belong. It is a historical fact, or better a *meta-fact*, which is born in this history and which, starting from there, tends to transform history, including also the history of *other* peoples. It is absurd to want to found equality upon any particular accepted sense of the term since it is equality that founds us inasmuch as we are Europeans.

The situation in this regard is profoundly analogous to the exigencies of rational inquiry, of unlimited interrogation, of *logon didonai*—giving an account of and reason for. If I try to “ground” equality rationally, I am able to do this only in and through a discourse that addresses itself to all and refuses all “authority,” a discourse therefore that has *already presupposed* the equality of humans as reasonable beings. And the latter obviously is not an empirical fact; it is the hypothesis of all rational discourse since such a discourse presupposes a public space for thought and a public time for thinking, both of which are open to anybody and everybody.



Just like the ideas—the social imaginary significations—of freedom and justice, the idea of equality also has for centuries animated the social and political struggles of European countries (in the broad sense just indicated) and their process of self-transformation. The culmination of this process is the project of instaurating an *autonomous society*: that is to say, a society capable of explicitly self-instituting itself, capable therefore of calling into question its already given institutions, its already established representation of the world. This society also could be described as one that, in living entirely under laws and knowing that it cannot live without law, does not become a slave to its own laws; a society, therefore, in which the question, “What is a just law?”, always remains effectively open.

Such an autonomous society is inconceivable without autonomous individuals and *vice versa*. It is a gross fallacy to oppose here, once again, society and individual, autonomy of the individual and social autonomy, since when we say *individual*, we speak of an inclination [*versant*] of the social institution and when we speak of *social institution*, we speak of something whose sole effective, efficient, and concrete support is the collectivity of individuals. Free individuals cannot exist in a serf society. Perhaps there may be some philosophers who reflect in their garret, but these philosophers were made possible in this historical space because autonomous collectivities preceding them already had created, in the same stroke, both philosophy and democracy. Descartes can say to himself expressly that he prefers to

change himself rather than the order of the world.⁴ To be able to say this to himself, however, he needs the tradition of philosophy. And this philosophical tradition *was not* founded by people who thought that it would be better to change themselves rather than the order of the world. It was founded by people who began by changing the order of the world, rendering possible by that very act the existence, in this changed world, of philosophers. Descartes, as a philosopher who “retires from society,” or any other philosopher, is possible only in a society in which freedom and autonomy already are open options. A Babylonian Socrates is inconceivable. This he knew and he says it in the *Crito*, or Plato has him say it: he cannot transgress the laws that made him what he is. In the same way, an Egyptian Kant (pharaonic, I mean) is completely impossible, although we may doubt whether Kant himself really knew that.

The autonomy of individuals, their freedom (which involves, of course, their capacity to call themselves back into question) also and especially has as a context the *equal participation of all* in power, without which there is obviously no freedom, just as there is no equality without freedom. How could I be free if other people than myself decide on what concerns me and yet in this decision I cannot take part? It must be affirmed vigorously, against the platitudes of a certain Liberal tradition, that there is not an antinomy but rather reciprocal implications between the exigencies of freedom and of equality. These platitudes, which continue to

⁴T/E: From Part 3 of René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*: “My third maxim was to endeavor always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world, and in general, accustom myself to the persuasion that, except our own thoughts, there is nothing absolutely in our power.”

be repeated every day, acquire a semblance of substance only by starting off with a degraded conception of freedom as restrained, defensive, and passive freedom. In this conception, it is a matter simply of “defending” the individual against power: this presupposes that one already has accepted alienation or political heteronomy, that one is resigned in the face of the existence of a statist sphere *separated* from the collectivity, and, ultimately, that one has adopted a view of power (and even of society) as a “necessary evil.” This view is not only false: it represents a distressing ethical degradation. No one has expressed this degradation better than Benjamin Constant, one of the greatest spokesmen for Liberalism, when he wrote that, in contrast to the individual of antiquity, all that the modern individual asks of the law and of the State is, I quote, “the guarantee of his enjoyments [*jouissances*].”⁵ We may admire the elevation of his thought and his ethics. But must we recall that this idea so sublime—the guarantee of our enjoyments—even *that* is impossible to realize if we maintain a passive attitude toward power? And need we recall, since there necessarily are in our social life some rules that affect everyone and that are indispensable for everyone, that there is only one guarantee for this famous freedom to choose which has again been drummed into our ears for some time now,⁶ and this is the active participation in the formation and definition of these rules?

⁵T/E: In his 1819 speech at the Royal Athenaeum of Paris, “The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns.”

⁶T/E: Economists Milton and Rose D. Friedman’s *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* had come out the previous year. It became a bestseller in the United States and was accompanied by a ten-part public-television series.

There is another monstrous circular fallacy current today. Some people pretend to demonstrate that freedom and equality are completely separable, and even antinomic, by invoking the example of Russia or the countries called, by antiphrasis, *socialist*. We hear it said: You easily can see that total equality is incompatible with freedom and goes hand in hand with slavery. As if there were any equality whatsoever in a regime like that of Russia! As if, in this regime, there were not a portion of the population that is privileged in every way, that manages production, that, especially, has in its hands the leadership of the Party, of the State, of the Army, etc. What sort of "equality" exists when I can put you in prison without you being able to do likewise?

We can, we should even, go further. Let us make a quick allusion to Tocqueville and point out that the "despotic democracy" he feared and of which he prophesied the possibility if not even the probability, cannot be realized. "Despotic democracy" cannot exist. Tocqueville caught a glimpse, in effect, of something that prepared the way for what was later on to become totalitarianism: he saw in his time something that went on to furnish one of the components of totalitarianism and he called this "democracy" in a language that was his own and that is quite nebulous, the limit of which he named the equality of conditions, of the tendency toward equality. But, to tell the truth, the idea of a "despotic democracy" is a nonconcept, it is a *nichtiges Nichts* as Kant would say. There can be no "despotic democracy," a total equality of all in servitude, which would be realized for the particular profit of nobody (*personne, niemand*). This "despotic democracy" is always realized for the benefit at least of someone, and this someone never can rule all alone in society. Therefore, it always is established for the benefit of some portion of society; it implies inequality. Let us avail

ourselves of this remark in order to emphasize that the traditional distinctions between equality of rights, equality of opportunities, and equality of conditions should be extremely relativized. It is vain to want a democratic society if the possibility of equal participation in political power is not treated by the collectivity as a task whose realization concerns it. And this takes us from equal rights to the equality of conditions for the *effective exercise* and even *assumption* of these rights. This, in turn, sends us right back to the problem of the total institution of society.

I take again the same example from Constant already cited. When Constant says, repeating in fact an idea of Aristotle's, that modern industry renders those who work therein unfit to occupy themselves with politics, that therefore a censitary suffrage is absolutely indispensable, the question for us to answer is whether we want this modern industry such as it is and with its supposed consequences, among which is political oligarchy, because this is what is in fact at stake and this, indeed, is what exists. Or else, do we want a genuine democracy, an autonomous society? In the second hypothesis, we take the organization of modern industry, and this type of industry itself, not as a natural fatality or an effect of a divine will, but as one component, among others, of social life that, in principle, can and should itself also be transformed in terms of our political and social aims and exigencies.

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Quite obviously the question of knowing what is implied and required in each case by the equal participation of all in power remains open. There is nothing astonishing about this: it is the very essence of genuine political debate

and struggle. For, like justice, like freedom, like social and individual autonomy, equality is not an answer, a solution that could be given once and for all to the question of the institution of society. It is a signification, an idea, a will that opens up questions and that does not go without question.

Aristotle defined the just, or justice, as the legal and the fair [*le légal et l'égal*]. But he also knew that these terms, the legal and the fair, open up the interrogation process rather than closing it. What is fair [*l'égal*]? Is it the “arithmetically” equal [*égal*], to give the same thing to everyone—or the “geometrically” equal, to give to each *according to...*, *in proportion to....* In proportion to what? According to what? What is the criterion? These questions are always with us. In fact, even in the contemporary situation of society, these two types of equality are, in part at least, recognized and applied. For example, there is an “arithmetical” equality of adults in the right to vote, but there is also, somehow or other, and whatever may be the reservations that can be made on top of that, a “geometrical” equality according to our health expense needs, at least in countries where social security at least roughly functions.

What line can we draw here, between the “arithmetical” and the “geometrical,” and starting with what criterion? These questions cannot be dodged. The idea that there could be an institution of society in which they would disappear or would be automatically resolved once and for all, as in the mythic phase of Marx’s higher communism, is worse than fallacious. It is a profoundly mystifying idea, for the shining light of a promised land becomes, as we have been able to confirm for half a century, the source of the most profound alienations.

It is vain to try to evade our own will and responsibility in the face of these questions. This is apparent

again, and it is still another facet of the question of equality, as found in the problem of the *constitutive positing* of the political community. When it is said that all people should be equal as regards participation in power, it still has not been said *who* these “all” are, nor *what* they are. The body politic, such as it is in each case, self-defines itself [*s’ autodéfinit*] on a basis that must recognize that it exists *in fact* and that in a certain sense it rests upon *force*. Who *decides* who the *equal ones* are? Those who, in each case, have *posited* themselves *as equals*. We should not dodge the importance of the principle of this question. We are taking upon ourselves, for example, to settle upon an age of majority starting from which alone political rights can be exercised; we take upon ourselves, also, to declare that such and such individuals are—for valid, conjectured, or false medical reasons and with the possibility of who-knows-what possible deceptions—incapable of exercising their political rights. We cannot shun doing it. But we must not forget that it is *we* who do it.

Likewise we cannot ignore—it’s the least that can be said—that *what* these equal individuals, whom we want to participate equally in power, are is in each case codetermined in a decisive manner by society and by its institution, by means of what I called before the *social fabrication* of individuals, or to utilize a more classical term, their *paideia*, their education in the largest sense of the word. What are the implications of an education that aims at rendering all individuals fit, to the greatest extent possible, to participate in a common government? We must come back once again to Aristotle, who was acquainted quite well with this form of education, calling it the *paideia pros ta koina*—education with a view to common affairs—and considered it the

essential dimension of justice.⁷

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I do not want to close without alluding to another enormous problem that appears in the context of equality and that is not simply concerned with the relations among the individuals of a given community and with their connections to political power in this community, but that is also concerned with the relations between communities, that is, in the contemporary world, between nations. It is useless to recall the hypocrisy that reigns in this domain when one declares that all nations are equal. There is hypocrisy from the point of view of the brute and brutal relations of force, of the possibility of certain nations imposing their will on others, but there is hypocrisy, too, in the flight before a much more substantial problem, much more difficult from the point of view of ideas, of thought. This is the problem of the necessity and the impossibility of reconciling what follows from our exigency of equality, namely: the affirmation that all human cultures are, from a certain point of view, equivalent; and the discovery from another point of view that they are not since a great number among them *actively deny* equality between individuals as well as the idea of an equivalence between differing cultures (in any case, they do so in their deeds). This is, in its substance, a paradox analogous to the one that confronts us in the existence of totalitarian parties in more or less democratic regimes. Here, the paradox consists in the

⁷T/E: Castoriadis provides the full quotation and reference in “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us” (1975), now in [CLI](#): *peri paideian tēn pros to koinon* (Nicomachean Ethics 5.2.1130b26).

following: we affirm that all cultures have equal rights whereas we also must recognize that there are cultures that, themselves, do not admit that all cultures have equal rights and affirm their right to *impose* their “right” on others. It is a paradox to affirm that the point of view of Islam, for example, is as worthy of being valued as any other culture—when the main point of view of Islam is to affirm that the point of view of Islam *alone* is worthy of being valued. And we ourselves do the same thing: we affirm that only our point of view, according to which there is an equivalence of cultures, is worthy of being valued—denying in the same way, from an eventually “imperialist” point of view, the value of such another culture.

There is therefore this paradoxical peculiarity of European culture and tradition (again, in a nongeographical sense), which consists in affirming the equal rights of all cultures when other cultures reject this equivalence and when European culture itself rejects it in a certain sense by the very fact that it alone affirms it. And this paradox is not simply theoretical and philosophical. It poses a political problem of the first order since there exist, in superabundance, societies, regimes, States that constantly, systematically, and massively violate the principles we consider as constitutive of a human society. Should we consider the excision and infibulation of women, the mutilation of thieves, police tortures, concentration camps, and “psychiatric” confinement for political reasons as some interesting ethnological peculiarities of the societies that practice them?

It is obvious, as Robespierre said, that “peoples do not like armed missionaries.”⁸ It is obvious that the answer to

⁸T/E: This statement was made by Maximilien Robespierre in a January 2, 1792 speech at the Jacobin Club opposing the Girondin-led effort to

these kinds of questions cannot be given by force. But it also is obvious that these questions, at an international and world level, not only remain but acquire at the present time a renewed importance that runs the risk of becoming critical.

To all these questions we must, in each case, give a response that does not have and cannot have a scientific basis but that is based, rather, upon our political opinion, our political *doxa*, our political will, our political responsibility. And in this responsibility, whatever it is that we do, we *all* share *equally*. The exigency of equality implies also an equality in our responsibilities for the formation of our collective life. The exigency of equality would undergo a radical perversion if it concerned itself with passive “rights” alone. Its meaning is also and especially one of an equal activity, of an equal participation, of an equal responsibility.

declare war on the Austrian Empire. Translated into English, the correct quotation begins not with Castoriadis’s paraphrased or remembered “peoples” (*les peuples*) but with “no one” (*personne*).

LOGOS

The Discovery of the Imagination*

Author's note: The following pages are excerpted from a work in progress, *L'Élément imaginaire* [The imaginary element], whose first volume, "historical" in nature, includes a section devoted to Aristotle's discovery of the imagination in his treatise *De Anima* (*Peri Psuches*, *On the Soul*). A few, more than schematic remarks on the direction and themes of this work might facilitate the task of the reader.

Despite the risk of one-sidedness, it is illuminating to think the history of the mainstream of philosophy as the elaboration of Reason, homologous to the positing of being as being-determined, or determinacy (*peras*, *Bestimmtheit*). The risk involved, which may be reduced when one is aware of it, is indeed in itself quite low. For, what does not pertain to Reason and determined Being has always been assigned, in this central channel, to the infrathinkable or to the suprathinkable, to indetermination as mere privation, a deficit of determination, that is to say, of being, or to an absolutely transcendent and inaccessible origin of all determination.

This position has, at all times, entailed the covering back over of alterity and of its source, of the positive rupture of already-given determinations, of creation not simply as indeterminate but as *determining*, or as the positing of new determinations. In other words, it has at all times entailed the occultation of the radical imaginary and, correlatively, that of time as time of creation and not of repetition.

This occultation is total and patent as concerns the social-historical dimension of the radical imaginary, that is, the social imaginary or instituting society. In this case, the motivations, if one may express oneself thus, are clear. It appertains intrinsically and constitutively to the known institution of society, as heteronomous institution, to exclude the idea that it might be self-institution, the work [*œuvre*] of society as

*"La Découverte de l'imagination" was originally published in *Libre*, 3 (1978): 151-89. It was reprinted in *DH*, 327-63 (409-54 of the 1999 reprint). [T/E: A first version, "Le Double Découverte de l'imagination par Aristote," was presented at a conference in Thessaloniki, Greece (August 7-14, 1978) and printed in the *Proceedings of the World Congress on Aristotle*, vol. 4 (Athens: Ministry of Culture and Sciences, 1983), pp. 210-14. The present translation first appeared in *Constellations*, 1:2 (1994): 183-213, and was reprinted in *WIF*, 213-45. The projected volume mentioned in the Notice and in n. 7 and n. 9 ("The imaginary element") was never published; see the French Editors' n. 1 in the Preface to the present volume.]

instituting. At most (in Modern Times), the self-institution of society will be seen as the implementation [*mise en œuvre*] or application to human affairs of Reason in its finally understood form.

Philosophy could not avoid, however, an encounter with the other dimension of the radical imaginary, its psychical dimension, the radical imagination of the subject. Here, the occultation could not be radical. It has been the occultation of the radical character of the imagination, the reduction of the latter to a second-order role, sometimes a perturbing and negative one, sometimes auxiliary and instrumental: the question has always been posed in terms of the role the imagination plays in our relation to a True/False, Beauty/Ugliness, Good/Bad posited as already given and determined elsewhere. What mattered, indeed, was to assure the *theory*—the view or the constitution—of what is, of what is to be done, of what is valid, in its necessity, in its very determinacy. The imagination is, however, in its essence rebellious against determinacy. To this extent, it most of the time will simply be scotomized, or relegated to “psychology,” or “interpreted” and “explained” in terms of its products, using flagrantly superficial ideas such as “compensation” for some unsatisfied need or desire. (The imagination is obviously not effect of, but condition for desire, as Aristotle already knew: “There is no desiring without imagination,” *De Anima* 433b29.) And even where the creative role of the imagination will be recognized, when Kant sees in the work of art “produced” by genius the indeterminate and indeterminable positing of new determinations, there will still be an “instrumentality” of a higher order, a subordination of the imagination to something else that allows one to gauge its works. In the *Critique of Judgment*, the ontological status of the work of art is a reflection or a derivative of its value status, which consists in the presentation within intuition of the Ideas for which Reason cannot, in principle, furnish a discursive representation.

Nevertheless, this coverup will be interrupted twice in the history of philosophy. Each time the rupture will be difficult to achieve, antinomical in character, and creative of insoluble aporias. What is thereby discovered, the imagination, does not allow itself to be held and contained, nor put into place or in its place in a clear, univocal, and assignable relationship with sensibility and thought. And each time the rupture will be followed immediately by a strange and total forgetting.

It is Aristotle who first discovers the imagination—and he discovers it twice, that is, he discovers two imaginations. He discovers first (*De Anima* 3.3) the imagination in the sense that later became banal, which I shall henceforth call the *second imagination*, and he lays down the

doctrine of the imagination that has since his time become the conventional one and that still reigns today in fact and in substance. He then discovers another imagination, one with a much more radical function, that enjoys almost nothing but a homonymic relation to the previous one, and which I shall henceforth call the *first imagination*. This discovery takes place in the middle of book 3 of *De Anima*; it is neither made explicit nor thematized as such, it interrupts the logical order of the treatise and, of infinitely greater importance, it virtually bursts apart Aristotelian ontology—which amounts to saying, ontology, period. And it will be ignored in interpretations and commentaries, as well as in the history of philosophy, which will use the discovery of the second imagination to cover up the discovery of the first imagination.

One will have to wait until Kant (and, following him, Fichte) for the question of the imagination again to be posed, renewed, and opened in a much more explicit and much broader fashion—though just as antinomical, untenable, and uncontainable. And again in this case, a new coverup will rapidly supervene. In his youthful writings, Hegel pursued and, at times, radicalized the movement initiated by Kant and Fichte: the imagination, he writes in *Faith and Knowledge*, is not a “middle term” but “what is primary and original.”¹ These writings, however, will remain unpublished and unknown. Things went in an entirely other direction in his published work. No trace of the theme or the term “imagination” will be found in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. And later on, Hegel will switch the emphasis from imagination to *memory*, to which he will transfer the “objectifiable” works of the imagination (reproaching the Ancients for having lowered memory to the rank of the imagination: *Encyclopaedia*, §462 *Zusatz*). And what he will again call, in the *Propaedeutic* and the *Encyclopaedia*, “active imagination” and “creative imagination” will in fact be only a selective recombination of empirical data guided by the Idea—an appalling banality, after the Kantian *Critiques*. Thus, with regard to this question, Hegel restores and reestablishes the vulgar tradition, still dominant today, which merely reproduces the first exposition of the imagination in Aristotle’s treatise: relegating the imagination to the realm of “psychology,” fixing its place between sensation and intellection (which completely obliterates the admirable ninth chapter of book 3 of *De Anima* and its refutation in advance of the *Encyclopaedia*’s apothecary storage

¹T/E: G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith & Knowledge*, tr. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 73.

system), making it merely reproductive in character and recombinatory in its activity, and thereby granting its works a deficient, illusory, deceptive, or suspect status.

No doubt it is to Martin Heidegger, with his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), that we owe both the restoration of the question of the imagination as a philosophical question and the possibility of an approach to Kant that breaks with the somnolence and aridity of the neo-Kantians. No doubt, too, that Heidegger reintroduces in his turn and completely on his own—an impressive spectacle—the successive movements of discovery and covering back over that have marked the history of the question of the imagination. I shall speak elsewhere of Heidegger's rediscovery of the Kantian discovery of the imagination, and the—in my view—partial and biased character of this rediscovery. Let me simply note here, with respect to the “recoil” Heidegger imputes to Kant when faced with the “bottomless abyss” opened by the discovery of the transcendental imagination,² that it is Heidegger himself who in effect “recoils” after writing his book on Kant. A new forgetting, covering-over, and effacement of the question of the imagination intervene. For, no further traces of the question will be found in any of his subsequent writings; there is a suppression of what this question unsettles for every ontology (and for every “thinking of Being”).

Nearer to us, the trace of the difficulties and aporias to which the question of the imagination and the imaginary gives birth persists in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*. How else can we comprehend the hesitation that sometimes, in this work, makes of the imaginary a synonym for irreal fiction, for the nonexistent without further ado, and sometimes goes almost so far as to dissolve the distinction between the imaginary and the real? Here we see Merleau-Ponty striving very far toward his goal of effacing the “ancient cleavages”;³ yet at the same time, something draws him back: undoubtedly, this is the persistence

²T/E: See §31, “The Basic Originality of the Established Ground and Kant's Recoil from Transcendental Imagination,” pp. 166-78, in Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), tr. James S. Churchill, Foreword by Thomas Langan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962). Churchill translates *Abgrund* simply as “abyss.”

³T/E: In *The Visible and the Invisible*, one finds the phrase “cleavages of our acquired culture (*clivages de notre culture acquise*).”

of the *schema* of perception in the broadest sense, from which he will never completely succeed in freeing himself, perception having become now experience or ontological *reception*.

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Fragments of this text have been published in Greek under the title “Never Does the Soul Think Without Phantasm,” in the Athenian review *Tomes*, January 1977.

The translations of passages from Aristotle are my own.⁴ Often they diverge considerably (and sometimes on “elementary” points of meaning) from existing translations. I have worried little about elegance.

Whenever there has been no risk of misunderstanding, I have retained the modern derivatives of Greek terms (for example, *noēma*). Thus, too, I have translated *phantasma* by phantasm. To translate this word, as one does, by image, representation, etc., is both unfaithful and highly interpretive; it is a source for arbitrariness, the translator rendering *phantasma* sometimes by image, sometimes by representation, sometimes by something else in its stead or according to what the translator has decided is a “meaning” indicated by the context, and without the reader even being able to suspect that there might be a problem. We need not fear confusion with the Freudian word “phantasy.” Phantasm here is the work of the *phantasia*, of the imagination. As for knowing what *phantasia* is, this is the question the present article addresses.

On my translation of *sumbebēkos* by *comitant* (instead of the usual, “accident”) and of *ti ēn einai* by *what it was to be*, I have explained myself elsewhere (see [IIS](#), 395, n. 22, and 328; [CLI](#), 421-24).

January 1978

⁴T/E: I have translated Castoriadis’s French into English, trying to be faithful to his distinctive translations of Aristotle from the original Greek. I have also consulted and made extensive use of Hugh Lawson-Tancred’s 1986 Penguin translation of *De Anima* and of “On the Soul” in Oxford University Press’s *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (revised edition, 1984), as well as of the original Greek text.

“Never Does the Soul Think Without Phantasm”

From the outset, the question of the imagination has been marked by the perplexing obstacles [*embarras*], aporias, and impossibilities that will always accompany it. A first sign, already: it is not where Aristotle explicitly proposes to talk about it and does talk about it *ex professo* (*De Anima* 3.3), but elsewhere, fragmentarily and incidentally, that he speaks the essence of what he has to say about it (*De Anima*. 3.7 and 3.8). Here are the weightiest passages:

And for the thinking soul the phantasms are like sensations. ...This is why the soul never thinks without phantasm. ...Therefore, the noetic [of the soul] thinks the forms (*eidē*) in the phantasms, and as it is in them that what is to be sought or avoided is determined for it, it moves even in the absence of sensation when it has to do with phantasms. ...Other times it is through the phantasms or noemata in the soul that, as though it were seeing, it calculates and deliberates about things to come in relation to present things. ...And thought (*nous*), such as it is in actuality, is totally the things. But whether or not it is possible for it to think some having-been-separated (*kekhōrismenon*) object itself having-not-been-separated from magnitude, we shall have to examine later. (from 3.7)

And now summing up what we have said about the soul, let us say again that the soul is in a certain fashion (*pōs*) all the beings; for, the beings are either sensible or intelligible, and knowledge (*epistēmē*) is, in a certain fashion, the knowables (*epistēta*) and sensation the sensibles; how that is, we

must seek to find out.

Knowledge and sensation are divided according to the objects, [relating] inasmuch as they are in potentiality to the objects in potentiality, and inasmuch as they are in actuality to the objects in actuality. But the sensitive and the knowing [elements] of the soul are potentially that very thing, the knowable and the sensible. And they necessarily are either those very things [namely, the knowable and the sensible] or else their forms (*eidē*). But they are not those very things, for it is not the rock that is in the soul, but the form, so that the soul is like the hand, for the hand too is a tool of tools, and thought form of forms and sensation form of sensibles. And since there is nothing, it seems, having-been-separated and apart from sensible magnitudes, the intelligibles (*noēta*) are in the sensible forms, both those that are said by abstraction and those that are dispositions and affections (*hexeis kai pathē*) of sensibles. And this is the reason why if one sensed nothing one could learn and understand nothing; and why, when one thinks (*theōrei*), it is necessary that at the same time (*hama*) one contemplate (*theōrein*) some phantasm; for, phantasms are like sensations, but without matter. The imagination, however, is other than affirmation and negation; for, it is a complexion of noemata that is the true or the error. But what then will differentiate the first noemata from [make them not be] phantasms? Or [should it be said that] they are not phantasms, but neither are they without phantasms (3.8.431a14-432a14).

Here we witness the invasion of the intractable, of the *aporon*—the essence of philosophy. All the aporias of the imagination are indicated here, either implicitly or explicitly. What the imagination is, and the saying of what it is, is not “coherent” in the sense of any sort of logic or dialectic. Not only is it not “clear,” the *phantasia*—correlate of *phainesthai*, to make oneself seen in the light, connected with *phaos* (429a3-4)—does not let itself so easily be seen, let alone said (*apophainesthai*). It takes flight in all directions, does not contract into *eidos*, cannot be-held-together [*être-tenu-ensemble*] (*concipere, erfassen, be-greifen*). Still less can it be put into place and in its place beside *aisthēsis* (sensibility), beside *noēsis* (thought). This situation will not essentially change for the sole author who, twenty-one centuries later, will be able to see more and say more about the imagination than did Aristotle. What Kant will discover of essence beyond what Aristotle does about the imagination will only make things still more untenable [*intenable*] and radically uncontainable [*in-contenables*].

Vacillation of the Sensible and of the Intelligible

For Aristotle, as well as for the philosophical tradition he already inherits, two terms seem to be and are assured: the *aisthēton* and the *noēton*, the sensible and the intelligible. Central to *De Anima*, they alone have some ontological weight, they give access to two great types of beings [*étants*] and provide, as far as possible, determination for their mode of being [*être*]. “For, the beings are either sensible or intelligible,” and, “in a certain fashion,” *epistēmē* (knowledge both true and certain of its object) is the *epistēta*, just as *aisthēsis*, “in a certain fashion,” is the *aisthēta*. “How that is,” Aristotle adds, “we must seek to find out.” We must seek to

find out—a surprising statement, for we are almost at the end of the third and last book of the treatise, and, above all, because this is all that he has been doing; that is to say, seeking the relationship between *nous* and the *noēta*, *aisthēsis* and the *aisthēta*, is all that he has been doing, in one way or another, since the beginning of the second book. Does this statement serve as a preface for new and extended developments that would be proportionate to the decisive importance of the question; does it announce in advance the solution? No. The “solution” is dismissed in two short phrases: the soul is potentially (*dunamei*) the sensible and the intelligible—not themselves (*auta*), but their forms (*eidē*). But above all, the question is immediately deported toward something else: a new and unexpected invasion of the question of the *phantasia* (though apparently exhaustively treated already in 3.3), marked by the assertion that all thought (*theōrein*) must also be contemplation (*theōrein*) of a phantasm. This leads to the statement that, truly speaking, one cannot know whether and how the first noemata—the irreducible, originary, elementary noemata—are not pure and simple phantasms. What is certain, in any case, is that they could *not be without* phantasms.

What then is, and what then can be, the bipartition *noēton-aisthēton*, *noesis-aisthēsis*? How can we think that it is exhaustive, that it exhausts whatever could be said to be? The phantasm is not “nothing,” since not only do “we have it,” but it is necessarily implicated in thinking, as it is impossible to think without phantasm. (If you want to employ modern terminology, it is not “empirical given” but “transcendental condition.”) It is not nothing—but one does not know *what* it is. It is obviously not sensible: it is “like the sensible,” but *without matter*, and that makes all the difference in the world for Aristotelian ontology, and for all

ontology.⁵ It is also impossible to reduce the phantasm in question here to the definition of the imagination given in 3.3, “movement engendered by a sensation in actuality.” This is the definition of the *second imagination*, the only kind treated in 3.3. And it is on this imagination that his interpreters and the whole of the post-Aristotelian philosophical and psychological tradition have been fixed, even though it cannot be jibed with the imagination as discussed in 3.7 and 3.8, this latter kind of imagination being at the origin of the phantasms that either *are* the “first noemata” or else are *that without which* the first noemata could not be. Nor, however, is the phantasm intelligible in the strict sense, as the following sentence shows: “The imagination, however, is other than affirmation or negation, for it is a complexion of noemata that is the true or the error.”

No sooner than it is reaffirmed, the thoroughgoing division of what is into sensible and intelligible is thoroughly shaken. A Third surges forth that escapes division and challenges its foundation. This Third, moreover, does not appear as something that would have been left out, that would point to an insufficiency in this division for exhausting the given, that would invite its completion or overcoming. It is from and within the division that it acts, and it seems to render this division impossible since this Third sometimes finds itself in the One and sometimes in the Other, without being the One or the Other. It is in being *like* a sensible that the phantasm is *what* is thought, at least what is “necessarily also and in the same stroke” (*anankē hama*) thought when

⁵ Author’s addition: For Aristotle, nothing *is* truly without matter, save thought thinking itself, *noēsis noēseōs*, pure activity (*energeia*), the supreme Being/being—what he also names God. [T/E: The phrase appears in Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1074b34.]

there is thought. This means that the *nous* cannot be truly, in actuality, *energeia*, that is to say, in the act of thinking, except by means of this problematical being/nonbeing, the phantasm. Conversely, it is inasmuch as [*en tant que*] and to the extent that the phantasm distinguishes itself from what makes the sensible be *as* the sensible—the effective indissociation of *eidos* and *hulē*, of form and matter—in being, therefore, in a certain fashion, itself also a having-been-separated, like the intelligible, that it can “be like” (function as) the sensible at the very time when and even where the latter *is* not.

The Order of *De Anima* and the Rupture of Book 3

Undoubtedly, the treatise *De Anima*, along with several of the *Short Treatises on Natural History* (*Parva Naturalia*)—“Short Treatises on Psychical History” would in fact be the correct title—that are directly connected with it and that constitute almost appendices to it, is one of Aristotle’s last writings. Whatever the great philologists say about it (see Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 331-34; 1st German ed., 1923], and W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* [London: Methuen, 1923/1964], pp. 17-19; Jaeger will go so far as to write that book 3 of the treatise is “peculiarly Platonic and not very scientific”), the unity of its composition is evident. The movement of the treatise is clear and orderly—much more so than that of other writings by Aristotle as they have come down to us—up to the middle of Book 3.

Book 1 is devoted, as is often the case in Aristotle, to the definition of the problem and of its difficulties and aporias, as well as to the exposition and criticism of previous

theories. The formulas used here prepare or usher in the ideas that will be laid out and defended further on, notably in book 3. Book 2 gives the Aristotelian definition of the soul—"the soul is essence as *eidos* of a natural body that potentially has life. And the essence is entelechy" (412a19-21)—and then discusses the potentialities (*dunameis*) of the soul: nutritive (or vegetative), desiderative, sensitive, locomotive, dianoetic. This discussion is in full agreement with what will be said in the insuperable ninth chapter of book 3, where Aristotle challenges and refutes any separation of the soul into "parts" or "faculties" (Aristotle's *dunameis* is translated, most of the time, as "faculties"; it is clear, nonetheless, that for Aristotle it is a matter of powers or potentialities that become actualized differently but never actually exist except as *one*). We must note that there appears here—as, moreover, in book 1—an uncertainty as to the status and the place of the imagination, as it is not counted among these *dunameis* (414a31-32) and yet often finds itself mentioned as situated on the same level as them (413a22, 414b16, 415a10-11; cf. in book 1, 402b22-403a2, 403a7-10). Book 2 continues with the detailed examination of the nutritive (vegetative) potentiality, then the sensitive potentiality, as such and of the five senses. There is no interruption of the movement of the investigation between the end of book 2, which resumes the examination of certain general problems of sensation, and the first two chapters of book 3, which, after having dismissed the possibility of a sixth sense, undertake to discuss in a more profound way the "common sense," or the sensation of common sensibles (movement, rest, number, shape, magnitude), already defined in 2.6.

The question of the imagination is introduced, discussed *ex professo*, and, in appearance, "resolved" in the third chapter of book 3. This discussion, which is shorter

(427a17-429a9) than the one previously devoted to the sensation of commons (424b22-427a16), culminates in a good and proper Aristotelian definition of the imagination: “imagination would be the movement that comes about from sensation in actuality” (429a1-2). The chapter ends with the remark that, as images endure and resemble sensations, animals often act in accordance with them, sometimes, as in the case of beasts, because they are lacking thought, sometimes, as in the case of men, because their thought is obscured by illness or sleep. “For what is then of the imagination, what it is and for what [*pour quoi*] it is, let what has been said suffice” (429a4-9).

The question is settled, and Aristotle proceeds to attack the supreme and sublime problem: knowledge and thought. Chapters 4 and 6 and the bulk of chapter 7 of book 3 are devoted to *nous*, its mode of being, its attributes or determinations, its manner of operation, its intellection of divisibles and indivisibles, its access to truth (429a10-431a14, then 431b12-19). Nothing is said in these passages about *phantasia*, nothing leaves one to suspect that *phantasia* might have to do, in any manner whatsoever, with thought.

The treatise would nevertheless be incomplete if it ended on these considerations. What remains to be discussed is this essential potentiality of a great portion of living beings, including man, the potential for local movement (or, action). It is therefore to this that chapters 9 to 11 (432a15-434a21) are devoted, and it is there, too, that the digression designed to refute the idea that the soul has “parts” is contained (432a22-432b7). The treatise ends with two chapters (12 and 13) that are rather like an appendix. Bearing on the relative importance of the senses for life, the necessarily composite character of the living body, and the basic priority of touch, they could just as well have found their place somewhere in

book 2, except to the—quite small—extent that they presuppose somewhat the discussion of local movement.

There is an orderliness to the movement of the investigation, which is not disproved by the fact that the examination of the potential for local movement comes after that of *nous*, contrary to the hierarchy implied by Aristotle's ontology and reaffirmed in the passage already mentioned (414a31-32). Indeed, local movement presupposes at least sensation and imagination (among beasts) and also intellection (in man); these belong to the potentialities by which the soul has knowledge. It is therefore logical and necessary for the clarity of the exposition that the examination of cognitive potentialities—sensation, imagination, intellection—be brought to an end first, before the examination of the potential for local movement is undertaken.

Now, this ordering of the third book of the Treatise is brutally shattered on two occasions: first, by the sudden reappearance of the question of *phantasia* right in the middle of the examination of the dianoetic potentiality (3.7.431a14-b12, and 3.8.431b20-432a14; these are the passages cited at the beginning of my text); then, by an insistent return of *phantasia* throughout the examination of the potential for movement (3.9-11.432b14-434a21).

The rupture is not situated on the level of literary composition. The invasion of *phantasia* in 3.7 and 3.8 could very well have been a digression, an *excursus*—it is not the first time Aristotle, like every author who thinks, that is, who is carried along by his thought, has done that; he does so as much as Plato and infinitely more than modern authors do—and there is nothing surprising about the use of the term and the idea during his discussion of local movement in 3.9-11. The rupture is situated at a much more profound level.

The *phantasia* in question here has, so to speak, nothing to do with the one defined *ex professo* in the apparent *sedes materiae*, in 3.3. Its relationship to the latter is homonymic; its determinations and its functions not only exceed those of the other but appear incompatible with them; both its “place” and its “essence” become uncertain; and, finally, what is said about it appears irreconcilable not only with what the treatise has attempted to determine as the soul’s potentialities but also with what the whole of Aristotle’s work has striven to sift out as determination of being.

The Conventional Doctrine of the Second Imagination

The treatment of the imagination in 3.3 can be called, anachronistically, conventional; in discovering the second imagination, Aristotle sets down at the same time what will become the conventions by which the imagination will, in the aftermath of this discovery, be thought, that is to say, will not be thought. This treatment may also seem banal and naive to the contemporary reader, to the extent that he remains ignorant of the origin of the “self-evident facts” with which his mind is filled, what was required for them to be discovered, and above all the superabundant richness in which their discovery took place and whose tradition has been one of impoverishment, distortion, and misrecognition.

In the present case, two remarks will perhaps allow us better to gauge what was required for even the second imagination to be able to be discovered and thematized. It may be doubted that there ever was a tongue completely ignorant of the category of the “fictive” in the trivial sense—a tongue in which it would be impossible to say to someone, not “you are mistaken” or “you are lying,” but “you are

making it up [*tu inventes*].” At the same time, however, the “fictive” in a trivial or minor sense has no status in ontology or in the preontology implicit in one’s native tongue; it delimits no region of beings; it is only an inconsistent, enfeebled variant of what is not. And that seems to be connected with the nonrecognition of the imaginary as such, with the *reality* status almost always accorded, in archaic representation, to dreams or to delirium, up to and including the terms employed to describe them (“Tonight *I was* at such and such a place” or “*I saw* such and such”).

Moreover, it must be recalled that, right before Aristotle, Plato himself, who was constantly preoccupied by *phantasia*, nonetheless did not succeed in thinking it as such; for him, it is a “mixture of sensation and opinion” taken within the more general class of *eikōn*, of icon-images, essentially an *imitation* to which is adjoined a false belief bearing on the reality-type of its products (see Jean-Pierre Vernant’s excellent discussion, “Image et apparence dans la théorie platonicienne de la *mimēsis*,” *Journal de Psychologie*, 2 [April-June 1975]: 133-60 [T/E: reprinted as “Naissance d’images,” in his book *Religions, Histoires, Raisons* (Paris: Maspero, 1979), pp. 105-37])).

Plato’s conception will explicitly be criticized and rejected by Aristotle. In beginning the exposition of his doctrine (of the “conventional” doctrine), Aristotle immediately places the imagination among the potentialities by which “the soul judges (separates, *krinei*) and knows any being whatsoever” (427a20-21, 428a1-4). He declares from the outset that “the imagination is other than sensation and thought (*dianoia*)” (427b14-15). The distinction between sensation and thought is taken to be evident: the sensation of proper sensibles is always true and appertains to all animals, while thought can just as well be false and appertains only to

beings endowed with *logos* (427b6-14). Now, the imagination differs from sensation, since sensation is always potentiality or actuality (sight or vision), while there are apparitions (*phainetai ti*) independent of this potentiality or actuality—as in dreams, or visions one can have “with eyes closed.” Sensation is always present, but not the imagination. Lastly, sensations are always true, whereas most of the products of the imagination are false (428a5-16). But neither is imagination thought and conviction (*noēsis kai hupolēpsis*). It cannot appertain to the type of thought that is always true, *nous* and *epistēmē*, since false imaginations exist. Nor can it be the type of thinking that is liable to truth and error, namely opinion (*doxa*). For, it depends on us (*eph’ hēmin*). We can produce it at will, like those who fabricate effigies (*eidōlopoiountes*),⁶ while it is not in our power to have or not have opinions since “it is always necessary to be in the true or the false.” And opinion, which is always necessarily accompanied by belief (*pistis*), immediately provokes passion or emotion, which is not the case with the imagination (to believe that something is terrible provokes terror, simply to imagine it does not do so). Finally, it cannot be, as Plato thought, a complexion of sensation and opinion (*doxa*), since sensation and *doxa* bearing on the same object can be such that one is false and the other true (the Sun appears to be a foot across, but we believe it to be larger than the inhabited Earth).

It is at the conclusion of this discussion—when he

⁶ Author’s addition: The reading of all the manuscripts is, word for word, “...(for, it is possible to make an image be before the eyes, like those who put [images] in mnemonic order and fabricate effigies)” (*De Anima* 3.3.427b18-20). The sentence’s redundancy is avoided if one reads *kai hoi eidōlopoiountes*, “and those who fabricate effigies”—an idea that, moreover, is obvious.

states that the imagination is a kind of movement that is impossible without sensation and possible only for sentient beings and for objects of which there is sensation and that the act of sensation can engender a movement that will necessarily be similar to the sensation—that Aristotle arrives at the definition of the imagination mentioned above, namely, “movement that comes about from sensation in actuality.” As such, it can be the cause of many actions and passions for the being that has it, and it will be liable to both truth and error. This last possibility is a direct consequence of imagination’s dependence, clearly presupposed here, upon sensation. There is the sensation of proper sensibles (white, sweet), which is “always true” (and on this occasion, for the *only* time in the treatise, Aristotle adds: “or else involves only minimal error,” 428b19). There is the sensation of the object *with which* proper sensibles go, of which proper sensibles are the comitants: this white object is perceived as the son of Cleon. That it is a question of a white object is certain, but perhaps it is not the son of Cleon. Lastly, there is sensation of commons (for example, movement, magnitude), apropos of which the possibilities for error are the most considerable (cf. the issue of apparent magnitude). Now, says Aristotle, the possibility of truth/error for the imagination will differ according to the kind of sensation that is at its origin. If it is a question of the first kind of sensation (that of proper sensibles), the imagination will be true if the sensation is present. If it is a matter of the two others, and whether sensation is present or absent, the imagination will be (or: could be [*eien*]) false, and all the more so the further removed the sensible object is (428b17-30).

Thus at the end of this discussion, the imagination appears to be placed under the complete dependence of sensation, in a homogeneous relation with the latter and

caused by it (these two determinations being, as is known, metaphysically related in Aristotle's work). It appears as its superfluous doublet. And, as presented here, it seems to possess only one, quite strange, function: to multiply considerably the possibilities of error inherent in the sensation of the comitant object and in those of commons.

The Difficulties With the Conventional Doctrine

Of course, we cannot forget the text's complexity (which the preceding summary necessarily tramples upon), its waverings and its contradictions. These are clearly apparent in two truly crucial questions. In the first place—and this is completely independent of the discussion and the criticism of any conception of the soul having “parts” or “faculties”—here already the imagination both appertains to thought (427b28-30: “Thought, being other than sensation, is on the one hand imagination, on the other hand conviction”; cf. 1.1.403a7-10) and, as we have seen, is *other* than *any* kind of thought. At the same time, as we have also seen, it is other than sensation, than *any* kind of sensation, and ultimately turns out in fact to be determined as being nothing other than *persistence* (*emmenein*, 429a4-5) of sensation, a feeble and distorted echo, the retention of an “image” that adds to it, strangely, only a positive negativity, an increased possibility of error. This view of the imagination as persistence of sensation is affirmed still more clearly in the short treatise *On Dreams* (459a23-459b24 and 460a31-b27), which is contemporary with or posterior to *De Anima* (Aristotle explicitly refers there [459a14-18] to the definition of the imagination given in 3.3). Here, he formulates the idea that the imagination “appertains” to sensation by having recourse to his own distinction between *esti* and *to d'einai*: “In their effective existence (*esti*)

the imagination and sensation are the same, but their essence (*to d'einai*) is other...the dream appears as some kind of phantasm...clearly, dreaming appertains to sensibility, and it appertains to the latter inasmuch as (*hēi*) it is imagination" (459a15-22). Heading in the same direction are such formulations as the following: "It is not in accordance with the same potentiality that the principal instance [namely, of the soul, *to kurion*] judges and phantasms arise" (460b16-18 and 461b5-8).

In the second place, we cannot be silent about the implications of the criteria put forth for distinguishing sensation from the imagination, and the imagination from thought—criteria I have recalled above. Aristotle opposes sensation, which is "always true," to the products of the imagination, which are "for the most part false" (428a11-12). Now, that might distinguish the imagination from the sensation of proper sensibles (the sole kind that is always true), but not from the sensation of the object as comitant or from the sensation of commons. And in fact, there are numerous formulations in which imagination and sensation of commons become practically indiscernible and sometimes are even treated as identical. Moreover, the argument according to which sensation would always be present, whereas imagination would not (the meaning of this passage, it is true, is not very clear), is not easily compatible with the main definition of the imagination in 3.3. If sensation is always present, it can be so only in potentiality, and that would establish a distinction not between sensation and imagination but between sensation in potentiality and what can be in actuality, whether it be sensation or imagination. And it is unclear why sensation in actuality would not always engender this "movement" that is the imagination—at least in animals that can have it in principle, and leaving aside "ants, bees, or

grubs” (428a10-11). Finally, how can the definition of the imagination, as movement engendered by sensation in actuality, be reconciled with the argument invoked to distinguish it from *doxa*, according to which argument the former would be, contrary to the latter, “in our power”? It is in my power to open or close my eyes. But the movement engendered by sensation in actuality in no way explains, and seems rather to exclude, my power to evoke, once my eyes are closed, sometimes the lagoon at Missolonghi and sometimes that of Venice.

These oscillations and contradictions can be explained when we come to understand that Aristotle is thinking here simultaneously or alternatively of *two* manifestations or realizations of the *second* imagination without being explicit about and thematizing the difference between them. On the one hand, he is thinking of a resonance, a generally deformed doublet of sensation or *aura* surrounding it that is indiscernible from the sensation of commons if not even identical with it (*On Memory* 450a10-11: “the phantasm is an affection of the common sense”), retention and persistence of sensible “images” and therefore at the foundation of memory—which would be only “part” of it; imagination in this sense can undoubtedly be thought as being “determined” from sensibility. On the other hand, he is thinking of the capacity to evoke such images independent of all present sensation, including a certain power of recombination (cf. the *eidōlopoiountes*, the fabricators of effigies,⁷ but Aristotle

⁷ Author’s addition: Or the inventors and users of mnemotechnical processes, etc., cited in the same passage. It is of fundamental importance to note that at no moment in the entire enquiry (with the near exception, perhaps, of the phrase discussed in the previous note) does Aristotle, apropos of *phantasia*, evoke “art,” *technē* in the most general sense, whether it is a question of the *technē* of building houses or of the *technē*

hardly touches upon this), which is “in our power” and therefore pertains, to employ modern language, to a freedom or a spontaneity, and which, should one even want to think of it as “determined,” for example, by “psychological laws” of any sort (let us recall that it is Aristotle who first laid down what later were to be called the “laws of association of ideas” through similarity, opposition, or proximity: *On Memory* 451b18-20), would certainly not have its emergence [*surgissement*] be determined by the “movement of sensation in actuality” that it would reproduce. And quite obviously, it is to the products of the latter (of the capacity to evoke) and not of the former (of the persistence of sensation) that lack of belief (*pistis*) refers.

The First Imagination

All this already constitutes a decisive advance in relation to Plato, a change of the space in which the *phantasia* and *phantasma* are thought. Nevertheless, this advance appears almost negligible when one tries to gauge the importance of the upheaval Aristotle brings about, implicitly,

poiētikē par excellence, of the poetical art, as we say. Nevertheless, he will say, in the *Poetics* in fact, that it is the capacity to “create myths,” more than versification, that *par excellence* makes the tragic poet (1451b26-27; cf. also 1450a21-22). This—like, moreover, what is essential to all *technē*—hardly allows itself to be imprisoned within *mimēsis*. And yet, from Aristotle’s “main” ontological point of view, this imprisonment is necessary. See also, on this point, my articles “Technique” (1973) in *CLI*, 295-97, and “Value, Equality, Justice Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us” (1975), now in *ibid.*, 419-28. The explicit connection of imagination with art will be worked out particularly in the eighteenth century—and will culminate, here again, in a strange fashion, in Kant. I shall return to all this at length in *L’Élément imaginaire*.

in chapters 7 and 8, then 9 to 11, of book 3. Here, the imagination Aristotle is thinking about, which he discovers without naming it and without thematizing it, is of a radically different order. (In the pages that follow, my discussion will be limited to chapters 7 and 8 of book 3 and will appeal to chapters 9 to 11 only occasionally.)

If “the soul never thinks without phantasm,” it is clear that one can no longer say that imagining is in our power, nor that, in the imagination, it is a question of a movement engendered by sensation in actuality. Is thinking “in our power”? No, we are thinking—or we have an opinion, *doxazein*—always (except in sleep or, perhaps, illness): “To have an opinion is not in our power, for it is necessary to be in error or in truth” (427b21). Therefore, there is *always* phantasm, we are *always* imagining. And certainly at the same time we can be thinking of such and such an object rather than another. We can therefore also mobilize such and such a phantasm (or such and such a kind of phantasm) rather than another. Therefore we can always have, and we indeed always necessarily have, phantasm, independent of a “movement of sensation in actuality.” The affirmation that the soul never thinks without phantasm pulverizes the conventional determinations of the imagination (those of 3.3) and renders insignificant the horizon in which they had been posited.

But what does the idea that the soul never thinks without phantasm signify? And without *what* phantasm?

The Presentation of the Object of Thought

To this question, the eighth chapter of book 3 gives a first response—one that in truth is double. “It is not the rock that is in the soul, but the form”; “phantasms are like

sensations, but without matter”; “each time one thinks one must contemplate at the same time some phantasm.” Here the phantasm, image *in absentia* of the sensible object, functions as the latter’s substitute or representative. In modern language, thought implies the *re-presentation* (*Vertretung*) of the object thought by its representation (*Vorstellung*), which is like sensation but without the actuality of the effective presence of the object. This is a presentation in and through which everything that appertains to the *form* of the object, in the most general sense of the word *form*, can be given, or, everything of the object can be thought; therefore, the whole of the object, *save* its “matter,” which is, in any case, the limit of the thinkable, for when it is taken absolutely as matter there is nothing to be thought.

The Presentation of Abstracts: Separation and Composition

Yet also, “since there is nothing, it seems, having-been-separated and apart from sensible magnitudes, the intelligibles are in the sensible forms,” the abstracts as well as relations (*hexeis kai pathē*); nothing can be learned or comprehended without sensation, and “each time one thinks one must consider at the same time some phantasm.” Consequently, phantasm and imagination are what permit *separation*—and also *composition*, or synthesis. Intelligibles are in the sensible forms; the intellection of intelligibles presupposes that such and such a sensible form is given as separate (that is to say, as it is never given in reality and in actuality). Analysis and synthesis, abstraction and construction, presuppose the imagination. This is not some kind of “interpretation” of the text: Aristotle had already explained that “the forms are thought in the phantasms”

(431b2), and he explicated what he intended thereby. How does one think abstracts? When one thinks the snub [nose] as snub [nose], one does not separate it from its matter, but when one thinks in actuality concavity—concavity as such—one thinks it without the flesh in which it exists. The same goes for mathematical objects—which are never separated from matter; one thinks them as separate when one thinks abstractions (431b12-19). One can never *sense* the curve without matter. Now, to think the curve *as* curve is to separate it from the matter in which it is realized and which has nothing to do with the curve as such, but one cannot think the curve without “sensing” the curve, without presence or presentation of the curve; the *phantasia* assures this presentation—which is “like a sensation, but without matter”—and the presentation is realized in and through the *phantasma*. The kind of imagination Aristotle has in mind here is therefore *sensible abstraction*, abstraction *within* the sensible furnishing the intelligible.

Abstraction is *aphairēsis*, subtraction or separation. The *phantasma* is an abstracted—that is, separated—sensation; it is subtracted or separated from the matter of the object, but also separated or separable from the other “moments” of the form of the object (I can represent to myself a set of balls inasmuch as they are balls, inasmuch as they are arranged in this or that way, inasmuch as they form [*figurent*] some number). *Phantasia* is therefore separative power within the sensible, abstractive potential presentifying the abstract, universalizing or “genericizing” factor of the given (but always in its shape [*figure*]). (And it is evidently because it is separative that it is universalizing.) The same idea is expressed in the short writing *On Memory*: “We have already spoken of the imagination in the writings on the soul. We said there that it is not possible to think without

phantasm, for the same thing happens in thought as in the drawing [of a figure]; indeed, in this case too, although there is no need at all for the magnitude of the triangle to be determinate, we draw [a triangle] that is determinate as to its magnitude; and the same thing goes for someone who is thinking, even if he is not thinking of a magnitude, he sets before his eyes a magnitude and does not think it *qua* magnitude. And if it is a question of the nature of quantities, but indeterminate quantities, he posits a determinate quantity, but thinks it only as quantity” (449b30-450a6).

At the level of these considerations, such separation is indissociable from composition, abstraction from construction, division from unification. Speaking previously of intellection, Aristotle had said: “where there are error and truth, there is already a certain composition of noemata as being one,” and, after having discussed this idea and noted that “error is always in the composition,” he added: “It is equally possible to call all that [namely, the operations of composition] division” (3.6.430a27-b3). And this is evident. Not only does the order in which we traverse the chain of separations and compositions have no intrinsic importance, but, on a much more essential level, every positing of the one is at the same time division and every division posits the one anew, and in multiple ways. Nevertheless, he concluded at that point in this sixth chapter that “it is thought (*nous*) that each time makes the one” (430b5-6). Now, speaking of local movement, of desire, and of action in chapter 11, Aristotle also imputes to the imagination the power of unification: “It can make one phantasm from many” (434a9-10). And in this last passage, certainly, it is a question of the deliberative imagination (*bouleutikē*), which is identical to the rational/calculating imagination (*logistikē*, 433b29) and opposed to the sensible imagination (*aisthētikē*, *ibid.*). The

quite late introduction of this new distinction, which cannot but be taken to be of capital importance, is, however, neither argued for nor even specified, and two different terms (*bouleutikē/logistikē*), close in meaning but in no way synonymous, are employed to signify it, testifying once again to the rupture that occurs in the middle of book 3 as concerns the imagination. Just beforehand, at the beginning of the discussion of what, in animals, is at the origin of movement, Aristotle had again placed imagination on the side of *nous*: “It appears that those two are origins of movement, either desire or *nous*, if we posit the imagination as a sort of thought” (*noēsin tina*, 3.10.433a9-10). As for the unifying function of the imagination, however, the implication is clear: it is impossible to talk of action without “deliberation” concerning the future, and of “deliberation” without imagination—that is, without the positing/presentation of several (at least two: 434a8) sets of composite or unified “images” of what is not there.

The Aristotelian Schematism

Phantasia is therefore the condition for thought insofar as it alone can present to thought the object as sensible without matter. It is equally so insofar as it separates, within the form of the object, the different “moments” of this form and can present them as abstracts, subtracted from the rest: triangularity separated not only from the “matter” of the triangle but from its dimension; quantity separated from that of which it is quantity and from its being-determinate-quantity (the “how much”). This separative, abstractive function is indissociable from (is only the other side of) its unifying, compositional function. But there is more in the sentence that reads: “and when one thinks (*theōrei*) one must contemplate

(*theōrein*) at the same time some phantasm.” This *more* is considerable; ignoring the risk of being charged with reading through hindsight, it is what we must call the Aristotelian Schematism. The passage just cited yields the meaning it potentially contains only when we understand that it forms the intermediate link between the discussion of the thinking of indivisibles according to their form, or of essences (conducted in 3.6), and the formulations found in his writing *On Memory*, part of which I have already cited.

Before the question of the imagination invades the text anew, Aristotle, in speaking of *nous* and of the problems posed by the thinking of indivisibles, writes:

What is indivisible, not according to quantity but according to its *eidos*, it [the *nous*] thinks it in an indivisible time and through the indivisible [element] of the soul. And that by which it thinks it and the time in which it thinks are divisible by comitance, and not as continuous; it thinks, in effect, insofar as they are indivisible, for even in those [namely, the time in which it is thought and the power by which it is thought], there is something indivisible, though undoubtedly not separated, that makes them one time and one length. And the same goes for every continuum, time as well as length (3.6.430b14-20).

Let us limit ourselves solely to the problem of time. The thinking of the indivisible as to its form, its *eidos*, is performed [*faite*], has to be performed, in an indivisible time. To think an *ousia* is not to inspect in succession some terms or elements into which it could be decomposed, and this is so precisely because it does not allow itself thus to be decomposed. Nevertheless, the “effective” time in and

through which the soul thinks is always a continuous and (potentially) indefinitely divisible time.

Aristotle first tries to reduce, if one may say so, the difficulty by means of his fundamental idea of comitancy: *it happens that* the soul thinks only in and through time and that time is divisible, but *that* is comitant, here therefore extrinsic; it does not affect the essence of what is at issue—the thinking of the essence. That, however, does not suffice for him, and rightly so. If time (or length) were *only* continuity and divisibility in potentiality (let us recall that for Aristotle continuity signifies indefinite divisibility: *Physics* 6.1.231a24-25), the enigma of an indivisible thought in and through a divisible time would remain in its entirety. The *inasmuch as* or *qua* or *insofar as* [*en tant que*] (*nous* thinks indivisibles through a power of the soul and in a time *insofar as* these latter are indivisible) has to have a point of support somewhere. He therefore introduces the idea that there is something indivisible (of course, indivisible even potentially) in time—but not separated. This something is *ho poiei hena ton chronon kai to mēkos*—that which makes the time one and the length one.

But does the solution lie there? That which makes the time have unity, that by which the time is one, of course has to be there in all its parts, all the time and in all time, since it is that which makes there never be, in everything and for everything, but a single time. Likewise, that which makes the indefinite divisibility of time has to be there all the time. Now, this same time has to function sometimes *qua* that which allows the thinking of divisibles, sometimes *qua* that which allows the thinking of indivisibles. There remains then, here too, a basic question as to how it is possible that abstraction/separation allows one to “subtract” from time sometimes the one, sometimes the other, of these two

nonseparate components. Yet there is still more. The catholic component of all “particular” times, at the basis of the unity and the unicity of time, the unifier of time, cannot, as such, serve as the foundation for the undividedness of the intellection of indivisibles. What is required for this lack of division is a unity of the *segments* of time—of *such and such a segment* of time—allowing one to posit such and such a segment *qua* essentially one and indivisible, and to consider its “internal” divisibility *as well as* its logically and really infrangible inclusion in the One of time as simply comitant, extrinsic, nonessential. Such a unity that goes beyond two contradictions or impossibilities will be found neither in physics nor in logic—nor in sensation as such, nor in reasoning.

The question is not, in truth, resolved, and we can see here the limit to the possibilities of what the “intellectualist” outlook, if I dare call it that, found in chapters 4 and 6 of book 3 (which deal with *nous*) allows. We see, too, the mute motive driving Aristotle, in the two succeeding chapters (7 and 8), to reintroduce *phantasia*. In fact, elements of the answer are to be found in the key passage of 3.8, cited at the beginning of my article, and in the writing *On Memory*.

“Never does the soul think without phantasm.” “The noetic thinks the eidē in phantasms.” “When one thinks, one must at the same time contemplate some phantasm.” “But then, what differentiates the first noemata from phantasms? Or else, [these first noemata] are not phantasms, but neither are they without phantasms” (De Anima 3.7 and 3.8).

It is impossible to think without phantasm, for the same thing happens in thought as in the drawing [namely, of a figure]; indeed, in this case too,

although there is no need at all for the magnitude of the triangle to be determinate, we draw [a triangle] that is determinate as to its magnitude; and the same thing goes for someone who is thinking, even if he is not thinking of a magnitude, he sets before his eyes a magnitude and does not think it *qua* magnitude. And if it is a question of the nature of quantities, but indeterminate quantities, he posits a determinate quantity, but thinks it only *qua* quantity. And the reason why it is not possible to think anything whatsoever without the continuous, or to think without time what is not in time is another discussion (*allos logos*). But we must know magnitude and movement in the same way that we also know time; and the phantasm is an affection of the common sense, it is therefore clear that knowledge of these [namely, of magnitude, movement, and time] comes about [*se fait*] through the first sensibility (*tōi prōtōi aisthētikōi*), and memory, even that of the intelligibles, is not without phantasm, so that it [memory] would appertain to the noetic by comitance, but in itself (*kath' auto*) it would appertain to the first sensibility (*On Memory* 449b31-450a14).

It may be remarked that, in this last passage, Aristotle identifies, as I have already noted above, the imagination with “the common sense” (sensation of commons) and includes both in the “first” (or elementary or originary) sensibility. As in each of the two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and throughout them both, the “place” of the imagination never ends up being determined. The importance of this passage, however, lies elsewhere.

“It is not possible to think without time what is not in

time.” Aristotle does not say that it is impossible to think what is not in time without *being* oneself in time—an obvious and uninteresting assertion. He says that it is impossible to think what is not in time *without time*—without something of time having put in a contribution [*mise à contribution*], without some support being derived from something of the thought of time. Why this is so pertains, he says, to another discussion (*allos logos*). This other discussion is conducted nowhere else. If we are able, without arrogance, to run the risk of broaching this discussion in his wake, we have to gather together these scattered elements and try to bring to *energeia* what we perceive (perhaps wrongly, perhaps because we have read Kant, whom Aristotle had not read, but who had read Aristotle) as the *dunamis* of the text.

By means of the “first” (elementary, originary) sensibility, the soul knows time, magnitude, movement. This “first sensibility,” like all sensibility for Aristotle, is not “passivity” or “receptivity,” but *potentiality*. It may be remarked, on a superficial level, that for Aristotle this is not the *a priori* in Kant’s sense (or *anamnēsis* in Plato’s), but it must be recalled above all that, at this level, the *a priori/a posteriori* distinction has no meaning from the Aristotelian perspective. Everything is *a posteriori* (since “nothing can be learned or comprehended without sensation”), and everything is *a priori* (since “the soul is in potentiality all the beings” and since “sensation is, in a certain manner, the sensibles”). The sensible *is*, fully, only in and through sensation, which is actualization of two potentialities, those of the soul as sentient and of the object as sensible—just as the intelligence in actuality is *holōs*, fully, the intelligibles (431b16-17; cf. also 431a1-2).

It is by means of the first sensibility, therefore, that the soul knows time, magnitude, movement. And without them

it is not possible to think anything. Now, these *too* are phantasms. This assertion, which is implicit in the text, has to be made explicit in order to make sense of the enthymeme⁸ of 450a9-12: “But we must know magnitude and movement in the same way that we also know time [*namely, by what makes phantasms be*]; and the phantasm is an affection of the common sense; it is therefore clear that the knowledge of these [i.e., magnitude, movement, and time] comes about through the first sensibility.” Without the phantasm of a time, it is impossible to think the outside-time. Without the phantasm of the continuous, it is impossible to think that which, indivisible as to its *eidos*, has nothing to do with the continuous/discontinuous.

There is no thought without something “phantasmed.” To think intelligibles requires that one contemplate some phantasm. But this also requires one to think time as well—therefore to hold before one’s eyes some phantasm of time. This is equally true of indivisibles. Thinking about them implies a phantasm, no doubt each time specific to the indivisible under consideration, but also some phantasm of the time that presentifies—or renders sensible, to remain as close as possible to Aristotle’s expressions—*undividedness*, even though time is essentially divisible *and* “what makes it one” is not “separated” from time, and has to be here contemplated-thought by means of both a separation-abstraction-subtraction *and* a fracture, the kind that allows one to make of the figure of *one segment* of time the figure of

⁸ Author’s addition: Here, as below, I use the term *enthymēme* in the modern sense (which has prevailed since Boethius): a syllogism, several of whose propositions remain implicit or understood, and not in the sense Aristotle himself had given it: “syllogism from probabilities (*eikotōn*)” (*Prior Analytics* 2.27.70a10-11).

undividedness as such. (The situation, and the problems, are analogous when the phantasm of a determinate quantity allows one to think quantity as such and as indeterminate.)

We are certainly at the limit of the implications of the text—some will say, well beyond the limit—and it is hardly possible to continue to advance under the guise of commentary or interpretation. Let us simply note that Aristotle's text includes the requirement [*exigence*] that there be a phantasm of time that has to be unification of a given, definite time as presentation of the undividedness of what is not in time. *We* can think this only as phantasm/figure presentifying permanence as such. What presentifies—and the term now becomes frankly inadequate: what represents, what *is there for*—the outside-time has to do with the phantasm/figure of what is there *all the time*, the unifier of time. For Aristotle, the thinking of intelligibles, of immutables, of outside-times, cannot be “without time”—without taking shape [*se figurer*] in and through the continuous and time (and undoubtedly also, in the discrete: the continuous and the discrete are indissociable). Let us not forget that, not only on the level of thought but also on the level of being, Plato assigned to time an analogous function in what can be called his Ontological Schematism. To imprint on the world “the greatest possible similarity” to his Eternal Paradigm, to approach “as much as possible” “the eternal nature” of the Living Being, the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* (37c-38b) invents time as “moving image of eternity...of the immobile eternity that rests in the one, image moving according to number.” In Plato, too, though at another level, nontime is presented/given figure by time, and of course time “is” only as this presentation/figuration of nontime. This is why, since then and until now, its content can only be Repetition.

Phantasm and Noema

In the Aristotelian Schematism, the role and the function of the imagination are much less precise, but also much vaster, than in the Kantian Schematism. The phantasm is not simply mediation between the categories and the *empirical* given. It is support for all thought, including the thought of abstracts, relatives, intelligibles, indivisible forms.⁹ And this creates a crucial aporia in relation to the affirmation, central and fundamental for Aristotle, that *nous* has direct and immediate access to essences. This assertion is formulated forcefully in *De Anima* at the end of 3.6, right before the passages in which the question of the imagination invades the text anew:

And every statement says something about something (*ti kata tinos*); like the affirmation, it is always true or false. And *nous* is true, not always, but when it thinks the *what is* according to the *what it was to be*, not when it thinks something about something; and as the sight of the proper [visible] is true, while as to whether the white thing is a man or not, the response is not always true, the same goes for all that is without matter (430b26-31).

This aporia is borne out directly by the text of the Treatise, and the sentences from chapters 7 and 8 quoted at the beginning of my article stunningly attest to it. “Never does

⁹ Author’s addition: All I can do here is indicate that this remark, which is like the limit or horizon for Aristotle’s text, is the point of departure for the enquiry concerning the *radical* (subjective) *imagination* in *L’Élément imaginaire*.

the soul think without phantasm”: therefore, even the thought of “*what is* according to the *what it was to be*,” of the *ousia*, cannot occur [*se faire*] without phantasm. The last lines of chapter 8 show that Aristotle is fully aware of the difficulty and that, here too, he is not trying to dodge it. “The imagination is other than affirmation and negation, for it is a complexio of noemata that is the true or the error. But what then differentiates the first noemata from phantasms? Or else [should it be said that] they are not phantasms, but neither are they without phantasms.”

The true and the false are complexio of noemata. More precisely, *this* truth and *this* falsehood of which it is here a question, being properties of the statement (*phasis*), result from the complexio of noemata. Undoubtedly too, a complexio of noemata is a (is another) noema. Discursive thought produces noemata by complexio of noemata. Conversely, a given noema can be analyzed into other noemata. This analysis has to come to an end, has to arrive at unanalyzable noemata, first noemata. In what way, then, are these latter noemata different from phantasms? Or should it rather be said that they are not phantasms, but neither can they be without phantasms?

Why might the first noemata be phantasms? But what else could they be? What are the first noemata? Some interpreters (like Ross) have wanted to see in the “first noemata” the noemata that are the “least abstract,” the closest to sensation. If, however, it were a question of that, would Aristotle have sensed the need to add that they could not exist without phantasms, which becomes, in this case, almost a platitude, and would merely serve to repeat, without adding anything, what he had already said ten lines earlier? After having written that the intelligibles are in the sensible forms, so that nothing can be learned or comprehended without

sensation, and so that, phantasms being like sensations but without their matter, when one thinks one must always contemplate some phantasm, would he have returned to the question to affirm that the noema “red” cannot exist without the phantasm “red”?

In any case, whether they be less abstract or more abstract, noemata are nevertheless complexions of noemata. And every noema I think, says Aristotle, I think it in considering “some phantasm” at the same time. I know that it is not only a phantasm—but why? Because I can analyze it into noemata. Take a triangle. I cannot think it without a phantasm—an image, representation, or “pure intuition” of the triangle. But the triangle is not *only* this phantasm. It is also a noema, which may be expressed by this, that it can be “analyzed” into other noemata (or “composed” by means of them), that is, be defined: plane rectilinear figure closed on three sides. Three: one and one and one. But are *figure* and *one* analyzable (or composable)? In what way does the noema *figure* differ from the phantasm *figure*? In what way does the noema *one* differ from the phantasm *one*?

Intelligibles are in the sensible forms. There is no access to the intelligible except upon the body of the sensible. The soul, however, has no need for the sensible to be there “in person” in order to think the intelligible within it: the presence in actuality of the matter of the sensation as such brings nothing to thought. Still more, “matter is unknowable in itself” (*Metaphysics* 7.10.1036a8), it is not the matter of the sensation as such that could be thought. The solution is furnished by the imagination: it is necessary and sufficient that it be there “as (*hōsper*)” sensation, and that it be without matter. It is necessary and sufficient that the sensible be represented by the phantasm. Thus, the phantasm is necessarily (*anankēi*) there, when there is thought; thought is

at the same time and in the same stroke (*hama*) contemplation of the phantasm. Thus, upon the incorporeal body of the phantasm the soul can proceed to the separation of intelligibles—starting from which thought can begin its proper work of complexion, synthesis, attribution, *ti kata tinous*. Obviously, that through which thought actually began has hardly any importance; it may discover that such and such a noema, “abstracted” (= separated) directly from the phantasm, can and should be recomposed starting from more elementary noemata. In any case, it will have to stop somewhere, to culminate in first, or last, noemata.

What are these noemata, and in what way do they differ from phantasms? The question acquires meaning only if we assume that we know in what way the intermediary noemata are not phantasms. Now, these too are always accompanied by phantasms—but they are analyzable into other noemata. That is the sole difference. Under penalty of becoming lost in the infinite, namely, in the indeterminate, this analysis has to stop somewhere. There *have to be* unanalyzable noemata, which means, too, indefinable ones. How then to differentiate them from phantasms? Of these terms, no definition and no discursive thought are possible.

And it is indeed of *terms* [*horoi*] that Aristotle speaks in the well-known passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Of first terms and last ones, there is *nous* and not *logos*” (6.12.1143a36-1143b1), which I translate as: grasping through thought and not by discursive intellection. He calls these terms *simples* [*hapla*] in the *Metaphysics*: “It is therefore clear that neither research nor teaching can be brought to bear on the simples, and that inquiry about them is of another kind” (7.17.1041b9). *Logos* is in and through complexion (*sumplokē*), it *is* complexion. The first terms and the last ones cannot be engendered by complexion. Synthesis

and analysis cannot take place except in the middle of the chain of the *logos*; its two extremities have to be fixed, and given, in another way. *Logos* cannot provide the extreme terms, since its operation presupposes them. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle relates the possibility of these extreme terms to *nous*. In *De Anima*, their situation has become more obscure. Certainly, the principal part of the treatise, which expounds the conventional doctrine, clarifies and specifies in a manner perfectly consistent with the teachings found in the rest of the *Corpus* the nature of these extreme terms and the correlative powers of the soul: at one of the extremities lies the sensation of proper sensibles, which are always true; at the other, *nous*, thought when it has to do with what I have elsewhere called its *proper thinkable*, essence, the “*what is according to the what it was to be*,” thought which is itself also always true. Between these two rocks beat the uncertain waves of sensation of commons, of the imagination, of attributive thought (*ti kata tinous*), where the true and the false are equally possible. However, in the eccentric and explosive passages of the treatise I am discussing here, the organization is of an entirely other sort. “Never does the soul think without phantasm.” The proposition is universal, absolute, without restriction. One necessarily always contemplates some phantasm when one thinks. The question of the nature of the extreme terms, of the terms that precede all discursiveness, all complexion of noemata, unavoidably arises then anew, and within another horizon, where the preceding response no longer would have, no longer does have, any meaning.

In *this* context, the extreme terms can no longer be colors or sounds on the one hand, essences on the other. What remains certain is that these terms “precede” all discursiveness. Either they are phantasms, or else they cannot

be without phantasms. In any case, the grasping has to be performed at the same time, *hama*, in universality—or better, “genericity”—and in the figure. And is that not, after all, obvious? That the *one*, for example (or the *figure*), is not truly thinkable (try to “think” it and to say what thinking the one means), but rather is figurable/imaginable/representable, the unthinkable condition for all thought, which is given only as figuring figure, scarcely bears discussion. Plato knew it already, but he called it “visible”—visible “outside,” “beyond,” “over there” (*ekei*). Aristotle says in fact: Yes, the one is “visible,” but “within,” *in* the soul—by means of a phantasm, with a phantasm, or *like* a phantasm. *Is* the *one* phantasm? Perhaps. But what is the reader to make, then, of Aristotle’s repeated affirmation that the one and being is the same?

We must note in passing that here again the problematic of the Schematism arises anew, and much more strongly. That the first noemata are not without phantasms cannot mean: without any phantasms whatsoever, without just any phantasms. The first noemata cannot be without *homologous* or *corresponding* phantasms. But what is a phantasm that corresponds to a “first noema,” or is homologous to it? What can the “homology” or the “correspondence” of a phantasm and of a “first noema” signify?

Duplication and Vacillation of the True

Is a white that is not opposed to the black the same white as the one that is opposed to the black? Is a light that would never produce shadow the same light as the one that cannot shed light upon anything without immediately giving rise to a shadow?

In *De Anima* (and elsewhere, but here I am talking about this treatise), the supreme word *alēthēs* (true) bears two significations, each almost unrelated to the other.

The sensation of proper sensibles is “always true.” This true sensation is not opposed to a false sensation: *there cannot be* any sensation (of proper sensibles) that is false (it is easy to show that “pathological” sensation creates no problem in this regard from Aristotle’s perspective). The thinking, by *nous*, of proper thinkables, of essences, is “always true,” it is not opposed to a false thinking of essences; *there cannot be* any false thinking of essences.¹⁰ Sensation of props and thinking of props are always true; they are or they are not, but if they are, their being has only one modality, and it can be said indifferently that they are or that they are true. Their being is coactualization of a power of the soul and of a potentiality of the object, which occurs or does not occur, but, being unique, cannot be done “badly” or “falsely.”

It is another case entirely with the sensation of commons, the sensation of the comitant object, the second imagination, opinion, attributive intellection (*ti kata tinos*). They can *always* be either true or false, and they are necessarily one or the other. This true-or-false is not, like the trueness of the sensation or the thought of props, simple *being* or *being* of simples (*hapla*); it is a *property* of composition, of complexion, of synthesis. “Therefore, the thinking of indivisibles concerns those things apropos of which there is no error. But where there is error and truth, there is already a certain composition of noemata as being one. ...For, the error is always in the composition”

¹⁰ Author’s addition: Essence is indivisible. See the quotation of Aristotle in the following paragraph.

(3.6.430a26-b2). “For, it is a complexion of noemata that is the true or the error” (3.8.432a11-12).

Before going any further, let us settle two minor points. At the same time that he says that it is in the composition of *noēmata* that the true-or-false is to be found, Aristotle talks very frequently of the sensation of commons or of the imagination as true-or-false. Clearly, this use of the term is very broad, and one would call it an abuse of language. The perception of the Sun as being a foot in diameter becomes “error” only when translated into noemata and by adjoining to it *pistis*, belief, the thesis: It is so. In saying that some product of the commons or of the imagination is false, Aristotle means that to affirm the complexion of the corresponding noemata would be an error.

Moreover, we are not discussing here the criterion of the truth and of the error of that which can be true-or-false, and the correlative problems. What matters to us is the differing “nature” of the two truths, or their “consistency.” The first—truth of being or ontological truth—“consists” in the coactualization in a simple, which is in actuality, of the soul and of its object. The second—attributive truth or logical truth—consists in the complexion of products of the other cognitive powers of the soul (more exactly, of their equivalents or noematic expressions).

Now, if the second imagination discussed in 3.3 appertains to these cognitive powers whose products are true-or-false in the sense I have just specified (and its own are “for the most part false,” says Aristotle 428a12), it is absolutely not the same as the first imagination of 3.7 and 3.8. The latter does not have to do with the true-or-false. This Aristotle affirms beyond all possible doubt in the passage cited from 3.8 (431b10-12): “And the imagination is other than affirmation and negation, for it is a complexion of noemata

that is the true or the error.” An enigmatic passage, and incomprehensible if one is still thinking of the second imagination, which is necessarily true-or-false. After what I just have said, however, it is easy to develop the enthymeme and to see clearly its signification: “And the imagination is other than affirmation and negation; [*which means that it is not complexion of noemata. Therefore, it is not true-or-false*]; for, it is a complexion of noemata that is the true or the error.” Or, if you prefer:

The true-or-false is [in the] complexion of noemata;
 [every complexion of noemata is affirmation or negation];
 the imagination is other than affirmation or negation;
 [therefore, the imagination is not complexion of noemata];
 [therefore, the imagination is not true-or-false].

The first imagination is beyond or on the near side of the true-or-false. And, independent of the passage cited, this clearly results from what has been retraced above concerning its function in thought. If the soul never thinks without phantasm, the idea that most of the products of the imagination are false becomes insignificant. The true-or-false is uninteresting when it is a question of those functions of the first imagination that are the presentation of the object, separation and composition, and, finally and above all, the Schematism. It is not just that these are prerequisites for there even to be a question of a true-or-false; it is that, as we have seen in commenting the Aristotelian Schematism as it is sketched in *On Memory*, the “true” is thought starting from and by means of the presentation of its contradictory: the indeterminate from the determinate, the discontinuous with the continuous, the outside-time with time. What sense would there be in saying that the temporal figure furnished by the imagination, upon whose basis the outside-time is thought, is

“false” (or, moreover, “true”), when, without this figure, there would be no thought of the outside-time? This figure itself, as well as its relation to the thought whose support it is, entirely escapes the determinations of the true-or-false. The possibility, the *necessity* of thinking A by means of the non-A (which is found again, at the level of the social-historical institution, as constitutive of symbolism in general and of language in particular) empties of meaning both the question: Is non-A true-or-false? as well as the question: Is the relation between A and non-A true-or-false? Is the name Callisthenes true-or-false? Is the relation of the name Callisthenes to the man who bears it true-or-false?

The first imagination cannot be brought into relation with attributive truth or logical truth, nor can it be placed under its sway. It does not belong to the realm of *logos*, which presupposes it. Neither, however, can it be brought into relation with the truth of being or ontological truth. Concerning what it furnishes, one could not say within the Aristotelian horizon either that it is, in the sense of *ousia*, or that it absolutely is not. Much more still, it calls into question, retroactively, *nous*’s mode of access to its proper thinkables, to essences, as well as the fundamental determinations of every being [*étant*] and, lastly, ontology as such. Never does the soul think without phantasm. There is therefore phantasm of essence, of the *what is according to the what it was to be*. Aristotle says so explicitly: indivisibles are thought by means of the continuous, the outside-time with time. This always-true thought therefore can no longer be conceived simply as pure coactualization, through which *nous* would become *that very same thing*, the *noēton*. The “that very same thing,” the *noēton* is necessarily accompanied and borne by, grasped in the *not-same not-that-very-thing*: the outside-time with time, in and through a figure of time. We have also seen that the

first imagination upsets the bipartition of beings [*étants*] into sensibles and intelligibles as well as this very distinction. Indeed, what is to be said about the ontological status of the imagination and of its works? The canonical definition of the imagination in 3.3—“movement engendered by the sensation in actuality”—in its spirit and its letter in conformity with Aristotle’s ontology, leaves standing considerable problems even in relation to the second imagination; I hope to have shown that this definition is unrelated to the first imagination.

Certainly, one can make up for this lack. The imagination in general, and the first imagination in particular, can be defined as one of the potentialities (or powers) of the soul that permits the latter to know, to judge, and to think—as well as to move in terms of local movement (cf. 3.9.432a15-18). Its being thus allows itself to be determined starting from the teleological-ontological determinations of the being of the soul, which is destined to know and to move. This, however, does not erase the fact that it is impossible to set any ontological status whatsoever for its *works*, to say *what* they are, to bring them (other than “in a logical and empty way,” as Aristotle himself would say)¹¹ under the determinations of form and of matter, of potentiality and of actuality. Sensibility is a potentiality; its actuality is sensation, which *is* because it is at the same time actualization of the sensible in the object. The imagination is a potentiality; its actuality is the phantasm—which *is what*? And undoubtedly an analogous problem is to be found again in the case of this other potentiality of the soul, attributive intellection; its actuality is the complexion of noemata, of which one may ask what it *is*.

¹¹ T/E: This is Castoriadis’s translation (now translated into English) of Aristotle’s phrase *logikōs kai kenōs*, found for example in the *Eudemean Ethics* 1217b21.

Let no one rush to say that this question has no meaning within Aristotle's horizon, for Aristotle himself affirms that intelligibles *are not* as separate and apart from sensibles, but *are* in the sensible forms. The ontological consistency, if we may express ourselves in this way, of the statement, of the complexio of noemata, is due to the fact that it *can* be brought into relation to the effectively actual composition of intelligibles within the sensible, in other words, that it can be brought under the standpoint of the true-or-false. (*Metaphysics* 1051b6-8: "It is not because we believe you with truth to be white that you are white, but because you are white that we, in saying that you are so, are in the truth.") A true attributive statement "is" something, in a weakened sense of the term "is," because this statement is ruled by the effectively actual being-thus of a thing that simply *is*, and because this kind of statement "corresponds" to it. Such a statement is reproduction, one could almost say imitation. Obviously, this leaves entirely open the immense problem of the *false* statement, or of the origin of error, which I cannot broach here (except to note that Aristotle assigns to error the imagination as its privileged source, and that in this he will be followed by the entire philosophical tradition, which will not, any more than he does, worry about elucidating the imagination's strange capacity to *create nonbeing*, which is thereby given recognition). Finally, even this (the false statement), through its determination of the true-or-false, does not break loose the ontological moorings; it retains a relation to being, as negation or privation. The same cannot be said of the phantasm as work of the first imagination, for which, as we have seen, the determination of the true-or-false lacks all relevance. Of the works of the first imagination, therefore also finally of the first imagination itself, it is impossible to say *what they are* and *how they are* so.

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It is not difficult to understand why the movement that seizes hold of Aristotle in the second half of the final book of the treatise *De Anima* and carries him toward the discovery of another imagination situated at a much more profound stratum than the one he had already spoken about had to remain without sequel, not only in the treatise itself but also in the history of philosophy, until the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. Aristotle recognized here an element that does not allow itself to be grasped either in the space defined by the sensible and the intelligible or, what is much more important, in the space defined by the true and the false, and behind them, by being and nonbeing. He recognized it not as a monstrosity, as a pathological phenomenon, scoria, accident, deficient form (dreams, for example, whatever might be the immense problems they should have raised in other contexts, allow themselves to be philosophically scotomized in an incomparably easier fashion) but as condition and essential dimension of the activity of the soul when it is, in his view, soul *par excellence*: *psuchē dianoētikē*, thinking soul. He saw that the soul's ability to think, therefore also to differentiate the sensible from the intelligible, rests on something that is neither truly sensible nor truly intelligible and that thought's capacity to distinguish the true and the false—and, behind them, being and nonbeing—rests on something that does not fall under the determinations of the true and the false and that, in its mode of being as in the mode of being of its works—the *phantasmata*—has no place in the regions of being that in other respects appear surely established.

Of course, this movement remains essentially limited. Aristotle does not, and could not, recognize—any more than

Kant could—in the imagination a source of *creation*. The first imagination in Aristotle, like the transcendental imagination of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (the *Critique of Judgment* poses still other problems), is invariant in itself and fixed in its works. To accomplish what both are likewise destined to do and to carry out their function—to furnish an access, be it by paradoxical means, to *what* intemporally *is*—they have to be posited implicitly (Aristotle) or explicitly (Kant) as always producing the Stable and the Same. There is nothing more deprived of imagination than the transcendental imagination of Kant. And, of course, this position is inevitable so long as the problem of the imagination and of the imaginary is thought solely in relation to the *subject*, within a psychological or ego-logical horizon. Indeed, insofar as one remains confined within this horizon, recognition of the radical imagination as creation could lead only to universal dislocation. If the transcendental imagination set itself the task of imagining anything whatsoever, the world would collapse immediately. This is why, later on, the “creative imagination” will remain, philosophically, a mere word and the role that will be recognized for it will be limited to domains that seem ontologically gratuitous (art). A full recognition of the radical imagination is possible only if it goes hand in hand with the discovery of the other dimension of the radical imaginary, the social-historical imaginary, instituting society as source of ontological creation deploying itself as history.

These limitations do not prevent the Aristotelian discovery of the imagination from calling into question, and in truth from bursting apart, both the theory of the determinations of being and that of the determinations of knowledge—and this, for the benefit not of a transcendental instance but of a potentiality of the soul, an indeterminate and

indeterminable, and, at the same time, a determining potentiality. How is one truly to bring this discovery into relation with everything that has been said elsewhere—unless one begins all over again? Aristotle too, in the evening of his life, did not even try to do so. With his relentless and heroic honesty, and without worrying about the contradictions and antinomies he thus gives rise to in his text, he shows what he saw in its profound necessity, and in this he leaves us, if we can do so, to see further. Less profound, or less courageous interpreters and philosophers who succeeded him will try relentlessly and repeatedly to smother the scandal of the imagination.

Institution of Society and Religion^{*}

Humanity emerges from the Chaos, the Abyss, the Groundless. It emerges therefrom as psyche: rupture of the living being's regulated organization, representational/affective/intentional flux that tends to relate everything to itself and to live everything as constantly sought-after meaning. This meaning is essentially solipsistic, monadic; or, in other words, it is the pleasure of relating everything to oneself. If this search for meaning remains absolute and radical, it cannot but fail and will lead to the death of the psyche's living support and of the psyche itself. Diverted from its original total demand [*exigence*], essentially altered, formed/deformed, and channeled, it is half satisfied by the social fabrication of the individual. The human species is radically unfit for life; it survives by creating society, and the institution. The institution permits the psyche to survive by imposing on it the social form that is the individual, by proposing to it and by imposing on it another source and another modality of meaning: the social imaginary signification, the mediated identification with this signification (with its articulations), the possibility of relating everything to signification.

The question of meaning was to be gratified in this

^{*}This text, which is excerpted from a work in progress on the institution of society and historical creation, continues research I began with "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (*Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 36-40 [1964-1965]) and pursued in *IIS* (1975; English translation, 1987). A few references to these texts are indicated here by the abbreviations *MRT* (now the first part of *IIS*) and *IIS*, followed by the page number(s). First published in *Esprit* (May 1982): 116-31, and then in *Mélanges Jacques Ellul* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), pp. 3-17, "Institution de la société et religion" was reprinted in *DH*, 364-384 (455-80 of the 1999 reprint). The present translation first appeared in *Thesis Eleven*, 35 (1993): 1-17, and was reprinted in *WIF*, 311-30.

way, and the psyche's quest was to come to an end. In truth, such is never the case.

On the one hand, the socially fabricated individual, as solid and structured as it is in other respects, is never but a thin film covering [*recouvrant*] the Chaos, the Abyss, the Groundlessness of the psyche itself, which never ceases, under one form or another, to announce itself to the individual and to be present for it. Here may be recognized a partial and deformed truth found in certain contemporary psychoanalytic conceptions that see in the entire structure of the individual (the "conscious Ego") a defense against psychosis. This structure is certainly, by its very construction, a defense against psychical Chaos—but it would be improper to call the latter "psychotic." It is incontestable that the psyche's successively formed strata present, each in itself and all of them together in their almost impossible coexistence, traits and modes of operation very closely resembling psychosis—in the sense that the latter tends to preserve large portions of these traits and modes. (One of the great contributions of Melanie Klein is to have seen this.) Psychosis, however, is neither the mere preservation nor even the predominance of these traits and modes of operation; it is, as Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier has quite rightly shown,¹ the construction or creation of a delusional form of thought with its own traits and its own postulates, which is something else entirely.

On the other hand, the institution of society cannot, as far as individuals are concerned, totally cover over the Chaos. It can, somehow or other, do away with Chance roughly, but

¹ See Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement* (1975), tr. Alan Sheridan (Philadelphia, PA and East Sussex, UK: Brunner-Routledge, 2001).

not in detail. For example, from the standpoint of society a singular event (a unique one, one affecting the whole society: a war or natural disaster) will never escape from the investment by signification through which it is tamed or domesticated, and it will be incapable of destroying on its own the magma of imaginary significations holding this society together—unless it destroys the society body and soul. Jewish history offers the purest and most striking example: the hardest trials, the most tragic catastrophes are continually being reinterpreted and invested with signification as signs of the election of the Jewish people and of its permanency. These same events, however, are also necessarily minted [*se monnayent*] as particular consequences for particular individuals: it is someone's son, husband, brother who has been killed in war or drowned by a flood. The difference in these consequences, which cannot be reduced except on the level of formal and empty ("statistical") reasoning, refers each individual back to the nonsensicalness of its own particular destiny. Compensating social elaborations are possible in many cases, but only with difficulty in all. The Spartan mother can boast, or even rejoice, at the valiant death of her son in battle: she would no longer do so if all her children were stillborn or thrown into the *Kaiadas*. Elsewhere, everything is covered by the will of God; experience shows, however, that, as soon as their personal fate is at stake, individuals do not generally abide by the loftiness of this idea.

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The institution of society is institution of social imaginary significations. In principle, this institution has to confer meaning on everything that might present itself, "in" society as well as "outside" it. Social imaginary signification

brings into being things as *these-here* things, posits them as being *what* they are—the *what* being posited by signification, which is indissociably principle of existence, principle of thought, principle of value, and principle of action. This labor of signification is, however, perpetually menaced (and, from an ultimate point of view, always already put in check) by the Chaos it encounters, by the Chaos it itself dredges up [*fait resurgir*]. This threat manifests itself, in full reality and with all its gravity, at the two extremities of the edifice of significations: by the absence of any keystone for this edifice and by the sand that lies in place of what ought to have supported it as its foundation.

Its foundation should have been the hold significations have over the world, over everything that presents itself and could ever present itself. This hold, however, is always partial and always precarious. It could have been secured only if each thing were only *what* it is, if the world were always only *what* it is—what they are posited by signification to be. Now, on the one hand, the signification imposed on the world (and on society, which institutes itself by positing itself as part of the world it institutes) is in its essence “arbitrary.” Society’s self-creation, which is expressed each time as the positing/institution of a particular magma of imaginary significations, escapes from determination precisely because it is self-positing; it can be neither founded on universal Reason nor reduced to correspondence with an alleged being—thus of the world. Signification constitutes the world and organizes social life in a correlative fashion; it does so by enslaving the latter in each particular instance to specific “ends”: to live as our ancestors did and to honor them, to adore God and to carry out his commandments, to serve the Great King, to be *kalos kagathos*, to accumulate the forces of production, to build socialism. All these ends are

supranatural; they also lie beyond discussion, or, more exactly, discussion of them is possible and meaningful only when we presuppose the value of this particular “end” that has been created by a particular institution of society, the Greco-Western institution, namely, the search for truth.

On the other hand, as fine, subtle, and powerful as signification may be, for it to attain a complete hold over things and over the world—over being—would require that being be entirely settled and be so once and for all, which means that it would have to be already concluded, terminated, determined, identity. Now, the world—being—is essentially Chaos, Abyss, Groundlessness. It is alteration and self-alteration. It *is* only inasmuch as it is always also *to-be*; it is creative-destructive temporality. In positing itself as total, in covering everything—which it is obliged to do in order to respond to the exigencies of the psyche, which it socializes—signification has renounced creating for itself that narrow ontological niche in and through which an animal lives its life, the animal giving being and meaning only to that whose being and meaning are already functionally guaranteed for it. Thus, signification always faces the risk of finding itself without a foothold before the Chaos, of not being able to mend the tears in its covering of being. (For a religion such as Christianity, which was born and which developed in a social-historical space in which unlimited interrogation had already arisen [*surgi*], this situation underlies the insoluble question of theodicy.)

The absent keystone to the edifice of significations is represented by this obvious and supremely mysterious point: the question of the signification of signification. Formulated in this way, it seems a mere arrangement of words. It ceases to be so when given detailed expression in and through the questions signification itself brings into being as well as those

to which it gives meaning and through which it organizes meaning in general and the meaning of each particular thing. The question of origin, the question of cause, the question of foundation, the question of end; in short, the question of the *why* and the *wherefore*. Since signification instaurates these questions as catholic and universal, it always runs the risk of them rebounding upon itself—as questions of the origin, the cause, the foundation, the end of society, of the institution, of signification.

Now, these questions are irresistibly summoned forth by the institution of signification, and quite particularly by the potentialities of language. And yet at the same time, they cannot receive a response, for they really “have no meaning.” It is impossible to see on what basis they could receive meaning and a response: every question on the *why* and *wherefore* of signification is *already* situated in a space created by signification and can be formulated only if this space is presupposed as unquestionable. This is not just the result of some “logical” argument; it renders explicit the very idea of creation, the emergence of an ontological level that presupposes itself and that provides its own means of being. The living being presupposes the living being: the “genetic program” can function only if the products of its functioning are already at its disposal. The institution presupposes the institution: it can exist only if individuals fabricated by the institution make the institution exist. This primitive circle is the circle of creation.

The surging forth [*surgissement*] of signification—of the institution, of society—is creation and self-creation. It is manifestation of being as *to-be*. The questions of origin, foundation, cause, and end are posed in and through society, but society, like signification, “has” no origin, foundation, cause, or end other than itself. It is its own origin—that is

what self-creation means; it does not have its genuine, essential origin in *something* that would be external to it, and it has no end other than its own existence as society positing *those* ends—which is merely a formal and ultimately an abusive use of the term *end*.

Signification emerges to cover over the Chaos, thus bringing into being a mode of being that posits itself as negation of the Chaos. But it is still the Chaos that manifests itself in and through this very emergence, inasmuch as the latter has no “*raison d’être*,” inasmuch as signification is ultimately a pure fact that in itself does not and cannot “have any signification,” inasmuch as it cannot double back upon itself. To put this in logical terms: for something to “have signification,” it has to be situated on the near side of absolute necessity as well as beyond absolute contingency. What is absolutely necessary has as little signification as that which is absolutely contingent. Now, social imaginary signification—the magma of social imaginary significations—is both of an absolute necessity, when one remains within it, and of a radical contingency, when one is on the outside. This amounts to saying that social signification is both beyond and on the near side of necessity and contingency—it is *elsewhere*. It is at the same time *metanecessary* and *metacontingent*.

Let it be said, parenthetically, that the preceding discussion shows why all the talk about the “meaning of history” is ridiculous. History is that in and through which meaning emerges; it is where meaning is conferred upon things, acts, and so on. History cannot itself “have meaning” (or, moreover, “not have meaning”)—any more than a gravitational field can have (or not have) weight, or an economic space can have (or not have) a price.

Under two forms, therefore, humanity continues,

prolongs, recreates the Chaos, the Abyss, the Groundlessness from which it emerges: psychical Chaos, the Groundlessness of the psyche's radical imagination; social Abyss, the Groundlessness of the social imaginary, itself creative of signification and of the institution. And at the same time, it has to stand up and face the Chaos, the Abyss, the Groundlessness of the world. Of this situation, it is obscurely aware from the outset, without being aware of it and while deploying an immense effort not to be aware of it, doing so in a mode that is original, ultraparadoxical, so to speak inconceivable. What it does is cover over that which announces itself and asserts itself in and through this very effort at covering over. This mode of affirmation/negation of the Chaos for humanity could not be called either repression, foreclosure, misrecognition, scotomization, rationalization, or idealization. Rather, all these mechanisms appear as derivatives or descendants of this fundamental *presentation/occultation* that is the modality of humanity's relation to the Chaos that surrounds it and that it contains.

This presentation/occultation of the Chaos by means of social signification can, in its essence, be carried out in one way only: the Chaos itself, as such, has to be taken into signification—has *to be* signification—and also, and in this way, it has to confer a signification on the emergence and on the being of signification as such.

Now, this is precisely what the institution of society always tries to affirm. It posits, in effect, that being is signification and that (*social*) signification belongs to being. Such is the meaning of the *religious* core of the institution of all known societies—except for two imperfect and incomplete interruptions, Greece and the modern Western world, with which we shall deal at length elsewhere. The social imaginary signification of *mana*, for example, as well as, more

generally, all significations involved in archaic beliefs, posits the entire world as a society of beings animated and motivated by the same modalities as human society. It matters little, in this regard, whether the “representation *mana*,” Ernst Cassirer’s *die Mana-Vorstellung*, is, as Cassirer claimed, a category by means of which “mythic thought” thinks being [*l’être*] in general, or whether *mana* is for such a way of thinking, as Martin Heidegger stated in his criticism of Cassirer, a being [*un étant*].² Whatever Heidegger says about it, the very distinction—the “ontological difference”—between a thought that thinks being [*l’être*] as such and a thought that thinks beings [*les étants*] as such cannot be made. For mythic thought, *mana is*, which means that this being [*cet étant*] concentrates within itself, it “represents” that by which *every* being [*étant*] *is*: it is ontological determination *presentified* by that which is, in every being [*étant*], *effectively actual* (*Wirklichkeit-wirken, energeia-energein, actualitas-actus-agere*) principle of existence. The situation is the same in every philosophical ontology that does not limit itself to drawing up a list of the “general characteristics” of beings [*des étants*], that does not remain formal ontology but tries to say *what* being [*l’être*] is, what *makes it that X* can be said *truly to be*. Thus, for Plato, the *eidos* (or the *agathon*) truly *is* and every thing *is* only to the extent that it “participates” in the *eidos* (and/or, thus,

²Heidegger’s critique of *Das mythische Denken* (1925), the second volume of Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, was published in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, 21 (1928): 1000-12. I thank Marcel Gauchet for having brought this text to my attention. [T/E: In English, “Davos Disputation Between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger,” in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 5th ed., enlarged, tr. Richard Taft (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 193-207.]

mediately, in the *agathon*). This *type* of thought does not differ from the one that presides in the case of the *Mana-Vorstellung*. This is in no way to “ethnologize” Plato—any more than it is to “ontologize” in a superficial way archaic beliefs; rather, it goes to show the profound necessities immanent in the effort to identify being [*l’être*] with signification, which effort dominates both religion and the mainstream of philosophy from Parmenides to Hegel.

The institution of society is always also, nonconsciously, general and special ontology. It posits, it always has to posit, *what* each particular thing, every relation and every assemblage of things, is, as well as what “contains” and renders possible the totality of relations and assemblages—the world. The determination, by each society, of *what* everything is is, *ipso facto*, donation of meaning to each thing and insertion of each thing into meaningful relations; it is, each time, creation of a world correlative to social imaginary significations and dependent upon these significations. But the world *tout court* does not allow itself to be reduced to such a state of dependency. It is always also something else and more than *what* it is (posited as being [*étant*]). Somehow or other, signification in its instituted form succeeds in facing up to this something else, this something more. It cannot face up in the same way, however, to the Abyss that it itself represents, to the manifestation of the Chaos that its own creation constitutes. Here the “solution” has been to *tie together* [*lier ensemble*] the origin of the world and the origin of society, the signification of being and the being of signification. Such is the essence of religion: everything that is becomes subsumable to the same significations. (Even when a principle of evil is opposed to a principle of goodness, Ahriman to Ormuzd, the second remains the privileged pole from which the first borrows, by

negation, its meaning.) And even in modern (traditional capitalist or bureaucratic capitalist) society, which claims to be established [*s'instituer*] at a distance from religion, the persistence of a quasi- or pseudo-religious dimension of the institution enunciates itself and denounces itself in the same fashion: the origin of the world and the origin of society, the operation of the one and of the other are *tied together* in and through "rationality," the "laws of nature," and "the laws of history."

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Of course, this *tying together* of the origin of the world and of the origin of society always has to recognize the specificity of society without interrupting the homogeneity of the world. It has to both differentiate between and give closely-knit articulation to the human institution and the order imputed to things, culture, and nature. That the homogeneity of the world and of society, or the homogeneity of being from the point of view of signification, should not be interrupted is one practically irresistible consequence of the *unlimitedness* of the exigency of signification: a response to Chaos, signification is simultaneously the latter's negation. Now, this postulate of the homogeneity of being—unitary ontology—is consubstantial with the *heteronomy* of society. It necessarily entails in effect the positing of an extrasocial source for the institution (and for signification), therefore the occultation of the self-institution of society, the covering over by humanity of its own being as self-creation. Inversely, this position, and the postulate of homogeneity from which it springs, is equivalent to the denial of the "contingency" of signification and of the institution, more exactly of what we have designated as the *elsewhere* of signification relative to

necessity and contingency, and which we call the *metacontingency* (or the *metanecessity*) of signification. This denial evidently is consubstantial with the supreme *hubris* of human existence, ontological *hubris*. More than anywhere else, this *hubris* is manifest in the institution of religion, even when admirably disguised therein under the appearance of its contrary.

It would be more than superficial to say that there is always a “relationship” between religion and the institution of society. As Émile Durkheim has seen quite well, religion is at the outset “identical” to society and remains so for a very long time afterward: in fact, it is so in nearly all known societies. Almost everywhere, almost always, the entire organization of the social world is essentially “religious” in character. Religion does not “accompany,” does not “explain,” does not “justify” the organization of society: in the nontrivial parts of its core, it *is* this organization (an organization that, to be sure, always includes its own “explanation” and “justification”). It is religion that sets down what is pertinent and nonpertinent. To be more precise, as everything is pertinent for society, signification, and religion, it is religion that organizes, polarizes, and gives value to the pertinent, that *hierarchizes* it, to use the term so as to restore to it its initial meaning.³

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To tie together: “world-image” and society’s own “society-image”—therefore, also, the image of its “place in the world”—have always been two sides of the same coin.

³T/E: That is, as the rule of the holy or of the sacred.

They have belonged to the same magma of social imaginary significations in and through which each society makes itself be in making this magma be. "Image" here obviously does not mean copy or reflection, but work [*œuvre*] and operation of the radical imaginary, organizing and constituting imaginary schema.⁴ The imaginary significations organizing society cannot but "cohere" with those that organize the world. *At least, such is the fundamental fact that, until now, characterizes the institution of society.* Formulated in this way and paired with the question "Why, then, *must it* be so?", this fact reveals to us what both has been the apparent *necessity* of the institution of society in its being-thus and what manifests itself to us, *after the fact*, as the radical "arbitrariness" of this modality of the institution.

In particular, the origin of the existence and of the institution of society has always been defined in and through religious beliefs. Religion's profound and organic connection with the heteronomy of society is expressed in the following twofold relationship: every religion includes in its system of beliefs the origin of the institution; and the institution of society always includes the interpretation of its origin as extrasocial, and thereby refers to religion. (I am speaking of socially effective religions, not sects or certain religious movements such as Christianity or Buddhism at their origins, before they were transformed into instituted religions. This transformation, notably in the case of Christianity, has entailed, from the standpoint discussed here, some very weighty consequences: the social institution, at the outset ignored or placed at a distance, later was literally sacralized.)

⁴On all these aspects, see *MRT* (= *IIS*), 118-19, 128-32, 136-40, 142-44, 149, 161-63. (These texts were first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1965.)

Religion and the heteronomous institution of society are of identical essence. Both intend the same thing and do so by the same means. They do not intend merely the organization of society. They aim at giving *one and the same* signification to being, to the world, *and* to society. They *have* to mask the Chaos, and in particular the Chaos that is society itself. They mask it in falsely recognizing it, through its presentation/occultation, in furnishing it with an Image, a Figure, a Simulacrum.

Chaos: the Groundless, the generative-destructive Abyss, the life-giving and death-dealing Gangue, the Inside [*Envers*] of every Outside [*Endroit*] and of every Inside. I do not intend by these expressions an unknown or unknowable residue, or what is called *transcendence*. The separation of transcendence and of immanence is an artificial construction whose *raison d'être* is to permit the very covering over I am discussing here.⁵ Alleged transcendence—the Chaos, the Abyss, the Groundless—is constantly invading alleged immanence—the given, the familiar, the apparently domesticated. Without this perpetual invasion there would quite simply be no “immanence.” This invasion is manifested both through the emergence of the irreducibly new, of radical alterity, without which what is would be only the Identical, absolutely undifferentiated—that is to say, Nothing—and through destruction, nihilation, death. Death is the death of forms, of figures, of essences—not simply of their concrete exemplars—without which, once again, what is would be only repetition, indefinitely prolonged or merely cyclical, eternal return. We hardly need emphasize that ontological destruction gives rise to [*fait surgir*] questions as weighty as those raised by ontological creation. It is through the same

⁵See [IIS](#), 331.

movement and the same necessities that the two have always been, both in actual fact and beyond words, misrecognized by inherited thought though the suppression of time, ideality as timeless preservation, the dialectic as cumulative overcoming and full recuperation of Becoming in the Absolute. And it is through these same necessities that traditional philosophy has always denied the possibility of destruction of what *truly is*. The destructible and the perishable have always been for traditional philosophy (since Parmenides and Plato) the very names for lesser-being, for non-being, for illusion, or mere decompositions-recompositions of collective units, behind which always remain the permanent or the atemporal, whether under the form of ultimate inalterable constituent elements or under the form of ideal laws.

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[Author's addition: I read in an article by Jan Patočka, recently published in French ("Les fondements spirituels de la vie contemporaine," *Études Phénoménologiques*, 1:1 [Brussels: Ousia, 1985]: 84) [T/E: reprinted in *Liberté et sacrifice: écrits politiques*, tr. Erika Abrams, (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1990), pp. 215-42], that, in a posthumous text (I know not which one), Husserl stated: "Although man is naturally finite and mortal, the very foundation of the human being, transcendental consciousness, which never ceases to function within man and which is responsible for his experience, is infinite and immortal." What matters for me here is not the thesis in itself (which is in no way new), but the argument. There is also nothing new about it either, but what is striking is, on the one hand, the persistence, within Husserl himself, of archaic modes of argumentation and, on the other hand, the stunning illustration

it provides of what I have said above about inherited thought's inability to recognize ontological destruction for reasons strictly identical to those that have always rendered it incapable of recognizing ontological creation. Here is how Patočka summarizes Husserl's argument:

The only thing that is unthinkable is total disappearance. Pure passivity is not a disappearance. Husserl bases his argument here on the *impossibility of thinking death* [emphasis in the original]. Death, disappearance in general, is something we are incapable of thinking. No mode of philosophy could effectively thematize pure disappearance. In evoking it, we think either of a change (which presupposes the persistence of something that changes) or of a continuum of extinction that, through infinitesimal taperings off, would never come to a total end; or again, we conceive it in dialectical terms, stating: "Being and nothingness are identical," but in this case the passage is effectuated both from nothingness to being and from being to nothingness.

The first argument is the old one of the *hupokeimenon*: in every alteration, there is *something* that is altered that itself does not alter. Logical and empty, it is particularly specious in the case under consideration, for it assumes what is to be proved, namely, that the transcendental consciousness is a *hupokeimenon* in this sense, failing which, no *quality*, for example, could ever change, or else it would be excluded, to take another example, that the soul be the *form* of a living being, as Aristotle had thought. The second argument is only a restatement of the Eleatic proof of the impossibility of movement. The third argument, however, is the most

interesting, for it says nothing other and nothing more than this: it is impossible to accept disappearance (the passage from being to nothingness), for it then would be necessary to accept creation as well (the passage from nothingness to being). Now (it is taken for granted), this last hypothesis is unacceptable. Therefore.... Added up, what do these arguments tell us? This: that what does not conform to a *certain mode of thinking*—the mode according to which *there are* substances that are inalterable in themselves, all change can be only “quantitative” (“*continuum*...infinitesimal taperings off”), and neither the passage from “nothingness to being” nor the reverse is conceivable—cannot be. The conclusion is clear: Either “that” indeed cannot be, or one must change one’s mode of thinking. Let us also remark, to conclude, that Husserl’s arguments are valid—and are valid *only*—in the case of *personal* immortality—whereas at the outset it was a question of a “transcendental consciousness” that is “responsible for man’s experience.”]



The idea of transcendence implies the idea of an absolute separation—which is, moreover, a redundant expression: the absolute is the totally separated. Chaos, however, is not separate. There is an unfathomable underside [*envers*] to everything, and this underside is not passive, simply resistant, yielding or not yielding ground, to our efforts at understanding and mastery. It is perpetual source, ever-imminent alteration, origin that is not relegated outside time or to a moment in the setting into motion of time, but rather is constantly present in and through time. It is literally temporality—on the condition that we understand that the kind of time at issue here is not clock time but rather the time

that is creation/destruction, time as alterity/alteration. Creation is *already* destruction—destruction of what was in its apparent “completeness” henceforth interrupted. The time of creation is at the antipodes of the time of repetition, which alone, by definition, allows itself to be “measured”—namely, to be transformed into its contrary. Time is not only the excess of being [*l'être*] over every determination we might conceive of or furnish for it. Time is the excess of being over itself, that by which being is always essentially to-be.

Of this Abyss, humanity no doubt has had obscure experience since Day One. And it is, no doubt, this experience that has signed and sealed its exit from mere animality. “Man is an unconsciously philosophical animal who has posed the questions of philosophy in actual fact long before philosophy existed as explicit reflection; and he is a poetic animal, who has provided answers to these questions in the imaginary.”⁶ Birth, death, dreams, desire, chance, indefinite proliferation of beings [*étants*], identity and alterity of subjects, immensity of space, return of the seasons, and irreversibility of time: in one sense, these have been named, designated, grasped since all time in and through language; in another sense, they are always also new, also other, also beyond. Itself manifestation of the emergence of being, humanity interrupts from the outset mere biological regulation, which in appearance and to our view is “closed upon itself.” Man is the sole living being to break the informational/representational/cognitive closure in and through which every other living being exists. Simultaneously arise, in an absolute scission and in absolute solidarity, the psychical monad—essentially “mad,” a-real, once-and-for-all creation and source of a perpetually continued creation, the Abyss within us, indeterminate and

⁶MRT (= [IIS](#)), 147.

unmasterable representational/affective/intentional flux, psyche in itself radically unfit for life—and the social-historical—once-and-for-all creation of signification and of the institution and source of a continued creation, the Abyss as social imaginary or instituting society, origin of creation as history, of the creation/destruction of significations and of particular institutions. The psychical monad could not survive an instant if it did not undergo violent and forced socialization; it is through the social fabrication of the individual that the institution renders possible the life of the human subject and its own life as institution. And the sap of the psychical monad—which never runs dry once it is caught in a socially instituted space and formed by a language, objects, ideas, and norms that it could never produce by itself—contributes to the nourishment of historical creation.

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Humanity constitutes itself in giving rise to the question of signification and in furnishing responses from the very outset. (In fact, it is upon these responses that we read the question.) Society exists in instaurating a space of representations in which all its members participate; it is they that give common currency to [*monnayent*] the magma of social imaginary significations as they are each time instituted. And these social significations are imaginary in the strict and strong sense. No system of instrumental, functional determinations, exhausting themselves in their reference to “reality” and to “rationality,” can be self-sufficient. Inasmuch as it poses the question of signification, society can never shut itself up on the “near side” of its “real existence.” Contrary to what Marx—and, at times, Freud—believed, it is not that society has long sought imaginary compensations for its

unsatisfying “real existence” (one wonders whether the existence of cows is completely satisfying and, if not, what their religion is). It is that this “real existence” is impossible and inconceivable, as existence of a *society*, without the positing of *ends* for individual and social life, of *norms* and *values* regulating and orienting this life, of the *identity* of the society considered, of the *why* and the *wherefore* of its existence, of its *place* in the world, of the *nature* of this world—and that none of all this allows itself to be deduced from “reality” or “rationality,” or to be “determined” by the operations of ensemblistic-identitary logic.⁷

Humanity cannot be enclosed within its “real” existence. This means that it experiences the Abyss, or that the Abyss imposes itself upon humanity. At the same time, humanity has remained till now incapable simply of accepting this experience. This may seem paradoxical, but it becomes obvious once one reflects on it: from its origins and always, religion responds to human beings’ incapacity to accept what has poorly been named “transcendence”; that is to say, they cannot accept the Chaos and accept it *as* Chaos, they cannot stand up straight and confront the Abyss. What some have called the *need for religion* corresponds to the refusal on the part of human beings to recognize absolute alterity, the limit of all established signification, the inaccessible underside constituted for every place [*endroit*] to which one has access, the death dwelling within every life, the non-sense bordering on and penetrating all sense.

In all known societies, and up to the moment when the decomposition of capitalist society began, social imaginary significations have been in the main and in their essence “religious”: they have united recognition of the Abyss with its

⁷See *MRT* and [IIS](#), in particular chapters 3, 5, and 7.

covering over. Recognition, inasmuch as they grant the experience of the Underside, of the Surging Forth, of the sudden strangeness of the Familiar, of the revolt of the Domesticated, of the evanescence of the Given. Covering over, inasmuch as these social imaginary significations always provide for the Abyss a Simulacrum, a Figure, an Image—at the limit, a Name or a Word—which “re-present” it and which are its instituted presentation: the Sacred. By means of the Sacred, the Abyss is allegedly circumscribed, localized, and, as it were, present in “immanent” social life.

Religion provides a name for the unnameable, a representation of the unrepresentable, a place for the unlocalizable. In circumscribing the Abyss—in claiming to circumscribe it—in giving it one or several figures, in designating the places it inhabits, the moments it privileges, the persons who incarnate it, the words and texts that reveal it, religion realizes and satisfies both the experience of the Abyss and the refusal to accept it. Religion is, *par excellence*, the presentation/occultation of the Chaos. It constitutes a *compromise formation* that reconciles the impossibility for human beings to remain shuttered within the here-and-now of their “real existence” with the almost equal impossibility for them to accept their experience of the Abyss. The religious compromise consists in a false recognition of the Abyss through its circumscribed and, somehow or other, “immanentized” re-presentation (*Vertretung*).

This obligatory re-presentation—the “delegation by representation,” the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* of the Abyss in “reality,” of the Underside within the Social Site [*Endroit social*—constitutes religion’s necessary idolatry. All religion is idolatry. No effectively actual, historically instituted and socially functional religion truly has or can have anything to do with the Abyss—which it calls “transcendence” when it

calls the Abyss anything at all. At once enigma, limit, underside, origin, death, source, excess of what *is* over *what* is, the Abyss is always there and always elsewhere, everywhere and nowhere, the no-place against which every place stands out. And every religion fictively condenses it, reifies it—or personifies it, which amounts to the same thing—exports it in one manner or another into an “elsewhere” and reimports it anew into this world under the form of the Sacred. The Sacred is the reified and instituted simulacrum of the Abyss: it gives itself out as “immanent,” separate, localized presence of the “transcendent.” The “mystical” relation to the Abyss, whether it be “authentic” or hallucinatory phenomenon, does not matter here: there never was and there never will be mystical religion or a religion of mystics. The true mystic can exist only in separation from society. In its socially effective actuality, religion furnishes and always has to furnish instituted simulacra of the Abyss. The “lives of the mystics” themselves function as such simulacra. Every religion is idolatry—or is not socially effective religion. In religion, words themselves—sacred words—function, and can only function, as idols.

A compromise formation, religion is false recognition, it is presentation/occultation of the Abyss. It provides determined, figured, reified “responses” to questions in which the question of signification is articulated and given common currency. Among these questions is always found the question of origin, foundation, cause, end—and it addresses itself just as much and above all to society itself and to its institution. This same recognition/re-covering [*recouvrement*] of the Abyss that religion effectuates relative to all things, religion also and especially effectuates it—that is to say, society by means of its religion effectuates it—relative to the being of society itself. In assigning an extrasocial, “transcendent”

origin to the institution as well as to the being of society, religion realizes, here again, a compromise formation. Religion recognizes that society is never reduced to *what* it is, that society's "real," "empirical" existence does not exhaust it; religion recognizes that, for example, neither can the functioning of instituted society ever account for its own institution, since this functioning presupposes its institution, nor can any immanent, determinate, "intraworldly" (therefore, "intrasocial," in the sense of instituted society) "cause," "reason," or "factor" explain, and still less found, the why and wherefore of the institution of society in general and of its each-time-specific being-thus. At the same time, however, religion covers over the Abyss, the Chaos, the Groundlessness that society itself is for itself; it occults society as self-creation, as source and unmotivated origin of its institution. Religion denies the radical imaginary and puts in its place a particular imaginary creation. In imputing to society itself a signification that would come to it from elsewhere, religion veils the enigma of the demand [*exigence*] for signification—to which society gives birth and which gives birth to society.

What is the origin, the cause, the foundation of the institution (that is to say, of society)? What is its *wherefore*, its *raison d'être*? To this question, religion has, since all time, provided a response in affirming that the institution of society proceeds from the same "origin" as everything else, that it possesses, therefore, the same solidity and the same foundation as the entire world and the things with which the world is filled, and a finality that is articulated in conjunction with their own finality. Thus does it contrive an exit or a window on the near side, recognizing that society is not, any more than anything else whatsoever, exhausted in *what* it is. And at the same time, it closes the question, it assigns to the being and to the being-thus of society a determinate cause and

a determinate *raison d'être*. Cornerstone of the institution of society, vehicle for the ultimate significations and guarantor of all the others, religion must sanctify, in one manner or another, *both its own origin and the origin of the institution of society whose core it forms.*



Now, no more than the individual is generally able to recognize the Abyss within can society, could it until now recognize itself as matrix and as Abyss. The social institution each time imaginarily assigns to the individual an origin or cause and a *wherefore* that is end or destination. The social institution assigns to the individual as its origin a genealogy, a family, its very social milieu—so that it might cover over and misrecognize the abyssal core that it is within itself and might forget that it cannot be reduced to any origin, that it always also *is* other than *what* it is, “an effect that goes beyond its causes, a cause that its effects do not exhaust,”⁸ that its social fabrication as individual will never be able to reduce what it will be to what it already has been. The social institution assigns to the individual a *wherefore*—a social and cosmic function, end, destination—in order to make it forget that its existence is without *wherefore* and without end. It is this assignment of an origin and of an end *outside* itself, tearing it out of the world of the psychical monad (which is, for itself, origin and end of itself), that makes of the individual something socially determined, that permits it to function as social individual, compels it to reproduce, in principle indefinitely, the same form of society as the one that

⁸“Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968), [*CLI*](#), 23.

made it be *what* it is.

The origin, the cause, the foundation of society is society itself, as instituting society. And until now, that has not been able to be recognized. Society has not been able to recognize in itself its own origin; to recognize itself as giving rise to the question of signification, engendering unmotivated responses to this question, responses embodied in and instrumented through its institution; to see itself as creation, source of its institution, ever-present possibility of alteration of this institution; to recognize itself as always more and always also something other than *what* it is. Such recognition is, without doubt, extremely difficult. It is characteristic that philosophical thought has known, from its origin, more or less how to recognize the generative/destructive Chaos of the psyche, the Abyss in the singular subject, be it under awkward or inappropriate headings, but it is also characteristic that nothing analogous has been able to be thought until now in the domain of the social-historical, the alteration, instauration, and very existence of which have always been considered by inherited thought as effect or consequence of causes external to society.

This relentless occultation, this uninterrupted misrecognition raises a question, one to which I have tried to furnish some elements of a response elsewhere.⁹ The basic point boils down to this: the self-occultation of society, the misrecognition by society of its own being as creation and creativity, allows it to posit its institution as out of reach, escaping its own action. This amounts to saying that it allows society to instaurate itself as *heteronomous* society in a cleavage, itself henceforth instituted, between instituting society and instituted society, in the covering over of the fact

⁹ [IIS](#), 212-15.

that the institution of society is self-institution, or self-creation. Here, of course, a new question arises, “Why, then, does society institute itself as heteronomous society?” We know that there have been authors to state that social heteronomy is the essence or structure of society. The political humility they urge upon us ill conceals the metaphysical arrogance of their response, namely, that the essentials of the essence of the social would already be known—which is hardly anything but an empirical (already debatable) statement dressed up [*travestie*] in an ontological tautology.

Within this traditional framework, the question not only does not allow of any response; the question cannot even be thought. Society *creates itself*—and, to begin with, *creates itself as* heteronomous society. These facts do not allow of any “explanation.” What ever could be the place in which the person who furnished this explanation would stand, and how could the plumb line that would sound this particular site in the Abyss be fabricated? We can certainly elucidate the matter in part by noting—as I have elsewhere explained¹⁰—that an almost necessary condition for the existence of the institution *such as it has been created, such as we have known it till now*, is that it affirms its own inalterability in order to stabilize itself; that, as product of the creative activity of society, it gives itself an origin external to society, attempting thus to avoid alteration. But only absent-mindedness [*distraction*] could make us forget that, in saying this, we are moving within the circle of already accomplished creation, we are explaining merely that its points hold together. In positing its institution as something imposed on it by a source external to itself, society covers over the Chaos, or establishes a

¹⁰ [IIS](#), 212-15 and 371-73.

compromise with it; it defends itself against the Abyss that it is in itself. This is surely not the only way to live over the Abyss. And only absent-mindedness could make us forget that this very questioning refutes the idea of an essential or structural heteronomy, since such interrogation is itself possible only as an effective—be it only partial—rupture of this heteronomy.

We cannot “explain” the heteronomy of society, or why religion has been, until now, a central component of the institution of society. Nevertheless, we have elucidated certain aspects of this capital fact, namely, that, at its center and in its essence, every heteronomous institution of society has been religious. In other words: *The enigma of heteronomous society and the enigma of religion are, in very large part, one and the same enigma.*¹¹

No need to add, after saying this, that the idea that religion might belong to “ideology,” to “superstructure,” or that it would be an “inverted reflection” of the “real world” is beneath ridicule. The “real world” is defined and organized each time by means of a magma of social imaginary significations, that is, significations relating to questions for which no “real” or “rational” response ever could be furnished. The response, like the manner of implicitly articulating the questions, has been furnished each time by this ensemble of instituted beliefs we call *religion*. And, in situating the origin of the institution obligatorily in the same place as its own origin—external to society—religion has always been central expression, essential vehicle, and ultimate guarantor of the heteronomy of society.

¹¹ On this question, see also Marcel Gauchet’s important text, “La dette du sens et les racines de l’État,” in *Libre*, 2 (1977): 5-43 [T/E: reprinted in *La Condition politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 45-89].



The *autonomy* of society presupposes, obviously, explicit recognition that the institution of society is self-institution. Autonomy signifies literally and profoundly: positing one's own law for oneself. Here self-institution is explicit and is recognized: recognition by society of itself as source and origin, acceptance of the absence of any extrasocial Norm or Law that would impose itself on society. It is, thereby, permanent opening of the abyssal question, "What can be the *measure* of society if no extrasocial *standard* exists, what can and what should be the law if no external norm can serve for it as a term of comparison, what can life over the Abyss be once it is understood that it is absurd to assign to the Abyss a precise figure, be it that of an Idea, a Value, or a Meaning determined once and for all?"

The question of autonomous society is also this, "Until when will humanity have the need to conceal the Abyss of the world and of itself behind instituted simulacra?" The response, if response there be, can come only on the collective level and the individual level simultaneously. On both levels, it presupposes a radical alteration of one's relation to signification. I am autonomous only if I am origin of what will be (*archē tōn esomenōn*, as Aristotle said)¹² and I know myself as such. Understood nontrivially, what will be—what I will do—does not concern the haystack toward which I head in preference over another one equidistant¹³ but

¹²T/E: Aristotle *De Interpretatione* 9.18b31-19a8.

¹³T/E: The reference is to a paradox in moral determinism, illustrated by [Buridan's ass \(Wikipedia, s.v.\)](#): unable to choose which equidistant haystack (or between one stack of hay and one pail of water) to approach,

rather the *meaning* of what I will do, of my acts, of my life. Meaning here is neither contingent nor necessary, it is beyond, or elsewhere; it would be necessary only in absolute solipsism and contingent only if I were to place myself, in relation to myself, in a position of total exteriority.

The analogy—which is not just an analogy—is valid for society. An autonomous society is origin of the significations it creates—of its institution—and it knows itself as such. An autonomous society is a society that self-institutes itself explicitly. This amounts to saying: it knows that the significations in and through which it lives and exists as society are its work [*œuvre*] and that they are neither necessary nor contingent. And here again, the idea that social significations are, in their definite being-thus, necessary goes hand in hand, historically, with the equivalent of a social-historical form of solipsism: the true Revelation is the one from which we have benefitted, our society is the sole true society or is society *par excellence*, the other ones do not truly exist, are lesser, are in limbo, are in expectation of being—of evangelization. Likewise, the idea that social significations are *simply* contingent very much seems to be the basis for the progressive decomposition of the social fabric in the contemporary world.

August 1978—May 1980

the animal thus dies of hunger (or of thirst).

The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy*

In memory of Claude Chevalley

What I have to say may appear disordered and heterogeneous, and I beg your forgiveness. I hope that the discussion will allow one to see the strong connections that tie together the six points I have decided to treat: ensembles; magmas; the power of ensemblistic-identitary logic; ontological theses; questions about the living being [*le vivant*]; the question of social and individual autonomy.

Ensembles

In a letter from Cantor to Dedekind dated July 28, 1899, one comes across this striking and important sentence: “Every multiplicity is either an inconsistent multiplicity or it is a set [*ensemble*].”¹ To say of a multiplicity that it is inconsistent obviously implies that this multiplicity *is*, it *is* in

*The main part of this text was first presented at a seminar led by Claude Chevalley, Norbert Borgel, and Denis Guedj at the University of Paris-VIII in May 1981, then at the Cerisy colloquium on “Self-Organization” (June 10-17, 1981). For the version published in the record of the proceedings of this colloquium (*L’Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique* [Paris: Seuil, 1983], pp. 421-43), I had to remove, for reasons of space and time, a few paragraphs that later were restored within brackets when the article, “La Logique des magmas et la question de l’autonomie,” was reprinted in *DH*, 385-418 (481-523 of the 1999 reprint). [T/E: “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” first appeared in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 20: 1/2 (1994): 123-54. It was reprinted in *CR*, 290-318.]

¹Georg Cantor, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962), p. 444.

a certain fashion that remains to be specified and that Cantor does not specify. Clearly, we are not dealing here with an empty set, which is a set in full right, with its place in set theory.

It is toward these inconsistent multiplicities—inconsistent from the standpoint of a logic that claims to be consistent or rigorous—that I turned, starting from the moment, in 1964-1965, when the importance of what I have called the *radical imaginary* in the human world became apparent to me. Noting that the human psychism cannot be “explained” by biological factors or considered as a logical automaton of no-matter-what richness and complexity and, also and especially, that society cannot be reduced to any rational-functional determinations whatsoever (for example, economic/productive, or “sexual,” in a narrow view of the “sexual”) indicated that one had to think something else and to think otherwise in order to be able to comprehend the nature and specific mode of being of these two domains, the psychical on the one hand, the social-historical on the other. Simply to posit a new type of being, unprecedented and previously unthought of, which would be that of the psyche and the social-historical, did not suffice. Only if one succeeded in saying something about the specificity of these two strata, the psychical and the social-historical, not only in phenomenological and descriptive terms, but also in logical and ontological ones, could this position have acquired some content. Let us note in passing that their specificity is already indicated in their unique mode of coexistence: the psychical and the social are radically irreducible each to the other and yet at the same time absolutely indissociable, the one being impossible without the other.

After various terminological peregrinations—cluster [*amas*], conglomerate, and others—for this mode of being, as

well as the logico-ontological organization it bears, I have ended up with the term *magma*. I was later to discover that from 1970 on the editions of Nicolas Bourbaki's *Algèbre* utilized the term with an acceptation that bears no relation at all to the one I have tried to give it and that is, of course, strictly ensemblistic-identitary in character. As the term, by its connotations, admirably lends itself to what I want to express, and as, dare I say, its utilization by Bourbaki seems to me both rare and superfluous, I have decided to retain it.²

Before going any further, it seems to me useful to provide an intuitive benchmark [*repère*] with the help of two illustrations. Let each person think of the totality of representations she is capable of making: everything that can present itself, and be represented, as present perception of "reality," as memory, as fantasy, as reverie, as dream. And let each try to reflect upon this question: Could one, within this totality, truly go about the task of separation, of carving up, arranging, putting in order, counting up—or are these operations both impossible and absurd with regard to what we are dealing with here? Or: Let each person think of the totality of significations that could be conveyed by statements in contemporary English. These statements are in themselves certainly finite in number: they correspond to combinations of elements of a finite set, themselves each time having a finite number of terms. Let us note in passing that it is wrong to say—as Noam Chomsky does—that the "creativity of native speakers" may be expressed in the fact that they can form an

²In the 1951 edition of the *Algèbre* (ch. 1), the term "magma" does not appear. It is worked out in detail in the 1970 edition (chapters 2 and 3). [T/E: Magmas are discussed on the first page of ch. 1 in the 1974 English-language edition, *Elements of Mathematics. Algebra I* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1974). Nicolas Bourbaki is the collective pseudonym for a group of French mathematicians.]

infinity of statements. In the first place, in this fact as such there is no “creativity”: it is a matter of a purely combinatory activity (which, precisely because the *semantic* dimension is absent, has been, for years, reproducible in a trivial way by a computer). Secondly, it is false to talk in this regard about an *infinite* number of statements. There could be an infinite number of statements only if statements of an arbitrarily great length could be made, which neither exists nor can exist in any natural language (or even in any system with a physical basis). The statements of a language (even if an upper bound for their permissible length cannot be fixed) are arrangements, with repetition, of a finite (and relative small) number of finite terms, terms themselves taken up in a finite (and relatively small) set. No matter how great their number might be, it is finite.³ This aspect, however, is still of secondary importance in relation to what really matters here. For what I have to say about magmas, the relevant opposition is not finite/infinite, but determinate/indeterminate. Now, all mathematical entities are perfectly determinate. Within the set of real numbers, for example, any number whatsoever—be it rational, algebraic, transcendental—is perfectly determinate; there exists not the least ambiguity concerning what it is, where it is, between what other numbers it is, etc. And the discrete/continuous (or digital/continuous) opposition, with which one has attempted to “soften” traditional logic, is no more relevant here than the finite/infinite opposition. From *this* standpoint, there is no essential difference between topology and arithmetic. The two belong to ensemblistic-identitary logic. Both elaborate the world of the determinate and of determination, the world of categorical distinctions (even if they are “probabilistic”: a probability is determinate

³See [IIS](#), 253.

or is nothing), the world of separation (in the everyday sense of the term *separation*, of course, not in the topological sense).

Let us recall the definition of sets given by set theory's founder, Cantor: "A set is a collection into a whole of definite and distinct objects of our intuition or of our thought. These objects are called the elements of the set."⁴ (Intuition here is *Anschauung*: not Bergsonian intuition but what one can "see" or inspect.) This definition, which one would now label "naive," is fantastically profound and illuminating, for it exhibits the indefinable within the definition of the definite, the ineliminable circularity within every attempt at foundation.

As one knows, the elaboration of set theory very quickly brought out antinomies and paradoxes (of which Russell's Paradox is only the most famous). To avoid them, there were attempts at formalizing the theory. This has led to various systems of axioms, which, at the price of an ever-more unwieldy formalism, have suppressed the clear intuitive content of Cantor's definition, and this, in my opinion, without any genuine gain on the formal level.⁵ This may be illustrated through two examples.

In a relatively recent monograph on the axiomatic theory of sets, the theory appears to make intensive and very heavy use of mathematics in its presently constituted state; enormous chunks of other branches of mathematics

⁴*Beiträge zur Begründung der transfiniten Mengenlehre. I. Math. Annalen*, 46 (1895): 481.

⁵In fact, the genuine gain, both on the formal and substantive levels, produced by the work of formalization has been that it has led to various theorems of undecidability and incompleteness, which evidently signify the failure of the initial intention of formalization.

(themselves bringing into play, obviously, a host of presuppositions) are drawn upon. The existence of a vicious circle is manifest. The author is certainly perfectly conscious of this, and his response boils down to saying that the axiomatic theory of sets does not come “at the beginning” of mathematics, though that would, “perhaps,” be true for the “naive theory.”⁶ Of this “perhaps,” one could easily make lots of fun. Let us retain simply the admission that one does not know with *certitude* what should come “at the beginning” of mathematics—namely, on what basis and by what means one proves anything at all in mathematics.

For my part, I dare believe that the “naive” theory of sets does indeed come “at the beginning,” that it is ineliminable, and that it must be posited *from the outset*, with its circularities and its axioms tying together between them indefinable terms that acquire the consistency they will have only later on, in their effectively actual utilization. The axiomatic circle is only the formalized manifestation of the originary circle implied by all *creation*.

This point may be illustrated, if need be, by the pseudodefinition of the term “set” Bourbaki furnished at a moment when his courage weakened and when, thinking perhaps of his grandmother, he deigned to express himself in French, recalling that there can be no “definition” of this term. “A *set* consists of *elements* which are capable of possessing certain *properties* and of having certain *relations* between themselves or with elements of other sets.”⁷ Are the four

⁶Jean-Louis Krivine, *Théorie axiomatique des ensembles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), p. 6.

⁷Nicolas Bourbaki, *Elements of Mathematics: Theory of Sets* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1968), p. 347.

words that are italicized in the original—set, elements, properties, relations—italicized because they introduce terms specific to this theory, or because they are considered indefinable, or else again because they are considered to be still more indefinable than other terms in this sentence? But are the terms “consist,” “capable of possessing,” “having,” or “other,” any less mysterious than “set,” “property,” etc.?

Of course, from the standpoint of mathematics the genuine “definition” of sets is to be found in the groups of axioms furnished by the various formalizations of the theory. It is not my intention to discuss them here. Rather, I will try to sift out what I consider the basic traits or, still better, the “categories” or logico-ontological operators that necessarily are put to work [*mis en œuvre*] by ensemblistic-identitary logic, whether the latter functions in the activity of a mathematician or in that of a savage who classifies birds, fish, and the clans of his society. The principal ones among these operators are: the principles of identity, noncontradiction, and the excluded middle; the property \equiv class equivalence; the existence, strongly stated, of relations of equivalence; the existence, strongly stated, of well-ordered relations; determinacy. A brief commentary on these terms may be useful.

In place of the excluded middle or third, one may speak of the excluded n^{th} ; there is no essential difference. The property \equiv class equivalence has been challenged, as we know, because, taken absolutely, it leads to Russell’s Paradox. In fact, however, one could not function for a second either in mathematics or in everyday life without constantly positing that a property defines a class and that a class defines a property of its elements (to belong to this class). To infer from such and such a property of an element that it belongs or does not belong to such and such a set, or the inverse, is the

daily bread of every mathematical proof.

The existence, strongly stated, of relations of equivalence poses more complex questions. We know that, in formalized theories, the relation of equivalence is a concept defined at a rather advanced stage in their construction. In fact, however, from the very first step taken by mathematics (as well as with ordinary thought), the relation of equivalence is presupposed, as is, with the strongest content possible, that of absolute identicalness of self to self. Paradoxically, it is even posited as (implicit) counterfactual postulate. The x that appears at two different places in any proof *has to* be taken as *the same* x —though, “materially,” it is quite obviously *not the same*. There is no mathematics without *signs*, and to use signs one must be able to posit that two different “realizations” of x are *absolutely* the same x . Certainly, from the standpoint of formalized mathematics it will be said that this absolute identicalness of self to self imposed upon what is “materially” different is simply an equivalence *modulo* every relation that could be defined. Here we have the definition of identity in mathematics; it is the same as the one already given by Leibniz, when he said: *eadem sunt quae substitui possunt salva veritate*, “they are identical, those things that can be substituted the ones for the others while saving *the* truth”—while saving *all* truths. But it is clear that one cannot substitute one thing for *another* while saving *all* truths; that would happen only if it were a matter of absolutely indiscernible things—in which case there could be no question of *substitution*. We remain then—beyond the identicalness of self to self—simply with equivalence *modulo* such and such a relation, relative equivalence, equivalence *as to*....

The well-ordered relation, too, appears in formalized mathematics as a construction that comes at an advanced

stage of development. In fact, it is utilized and is operant from the very first moment. No matter what formula, no matter what proof presupposes well-orderedness as well as applies it [*le mettent en œuvre*]. As one knows, there is no equivalence between the statements “Whatever x is there exists y such that $R(x,y)$ ” and “There exists y such that whatever x is $R(x,y)$,” which differ from each other only in the order of the signs (terms).⁸ Certainly, here too—as also in the case, previously mentioned, of the relation of equivalence that is presupposed before it is “constructed”—the formalist objection is well known. The formalist would reproach us—rightly, in a certain sense—for confusing the levels; she would assert that the well-orderedness that reigns over the signs of a formula or of a proof is not the well-orderedness that is defined within mathematics, just as the equivalence of different occurrences of a sign is not mathematical equivalence; in both cases it would be a matter of metamathematical notions. The objection is irrefutable—and lacking in all interest. Likewise, it is simply “logical and empty,” as Aristotle would say⁹ (“logical,” here, meaning, in Aristotle’s vocabulary, in fact *eristical*), to assert that in a stratified theory (such as Russell’s theory of types) “equivalence” does not have the same meaning at the first level, at the second level, at the n^{th} level, etc. For, to say that equivalence does not have the same meaning across the various levels implies already that one is given, as inspectable from the outset and simultaneously

⁸T/E: “Signs” is retained here for Castoriadis’s broad use of the French *signes*. Normally, for mathematical terms in both English and French, “symbols” would be used, “signs” referring more restrictively to plus and minus signs in an equation.

⁹T/E: This is Castoriadis’s translation of Aristotle’s phrase *logikōs kai kenōs*, found in the *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b21.

(from the logical point of view), the (enumerable) totality of these levels *and* that there exists a category of equivalence outside any level (or valid across and for all levels) that is applied (and, in some cases, is not applied) to “equivalences” encountered on particular levels. We are interested here in the logicomathematical operators (categories) involved, from the first step, in the construction of mathematics itself. The formalization of set theory, and of ensemblistic-identitary logic, absolutely presupposes the application of categories and operators of “natural logic,” that is to say, of the ensemblistic-identitary logic already immanent in language as one of its dimensions. The “construction” of ensemblistic-identitary logic *presupposes* ensemblistic-identitary logic (and certainly also something else: the radical imaginary).

Lastly, by means of all these terms there operates a hypercategory, this originary schema of ensemblistic-identitary logic that is *determinacy*. In the entire history of philosophy (and of logic) determinacy has functioned as a supreme, but more or less implicit or hidden requirement. It is relatively less hidden among the ancient Greeks: the *peras* (“limit,” “determination”) that they opposed to the *apeiron* (“indeterminate”) was, for them, the decisive characteristic of every thing that one can truly speak of, that is to say, that truly is. At the other end of the history of philosophy, in Hegel, the same schema operates just as powerfully, but in a much more implicit manner: it is *Bestimmtheit*, determinacy, that one encounters on every page of the *Science of Logic*, but that is nowhere thematized or made explicit. Here we are speaking about the dominant tendency, the main stream of philosophical thought. One will find, certainly, among the great philosophers, qualifications or restrictions added to this thesis. Already the Pythagorean Philolaos affirmed that all that is is made of *peras* and of *apeiron*, an idea that Plato will

take up and enrich when he writes: "All that can be said to be is made of one and many, and includes growing with it from the outset the *peras* and the *apeiron*."¹⁰ But the dominant current of philosophy's fixation on determinacy and the determinate is expressed by this, that while it recognizes a place for the indeterminate, for the *apeiron*, the latter is posited as hierarchically "inferior": what truly is is what is determined, and what is not determined is not, or is less, or has an inferior quality of being.

In all this, there is not only a "logic." There is an *ontological decision*—clearly affirmed, from philosophy's beginnings, by Parmenides—and a constitution/creation. By means of the categories or operators mentioned, a region of being is constituted—and, at the same time, it is decided either that it exhausts being (full-scale rationalism, absolute idealism, and mechanistic-materialistic reductionism are merely some of its forms) or that it represents the paradigm of truly being (*ontōs on*), the rest being accident, illusion and error, or deficient imitation, or amorphous and essentially "passive" "matter." Even for Kant it is the being \equiv being-determined equivalence that remains the ontological polar star:

Everything is subject, in its possibility, to the principle of *complete determination*, according to which one of *all* the possible predicates of things, as compared to their opposites, must be applicable to it. ...The proposition, that *everything which exists is completely determined*, does not signify only that one of every pair of *given* contradictory predicates, but that one of

¹⁰Deils Frs 1, 3, 4; *Philebus* 16c-d. [T/E: Castoriadis's own French translation from the Greek has been translated into English.]

all *possible* predicates must always belong to a thing.¹¹

One will note the very profound and in no way accidental proximity of this idea to the mathematical concept of an ultrafilter.¹² One will also note that this properly metaphysical decision [author's addition: being \equiv being-determined] remains central in contemporary science, despite the upheavals the latter has undergone during the past sixty years as a result of its very evolution.

¹¹ *Critique of Pure Reason* (Second Division, bk 2, ch. 3, sec. 2: "Of the Transcendental Ideal"), tr. F. Max Müller (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1966), pp. 386 and 387.

¹² Author's addition: Let it be recalled that a *filter* F is a family of parts of a set S such that: (1) the empty set does not belong as a part of F ; (2) every intersection of elements of F belongs to F ; (3) every part of S containing an element of F belongs to F . An *ultrafilter* U is a filter such that, whatever may be part A of S , either A belongs to U or the complement of A belongs to U . I cannot pursue here the discussion of this analogy, as it would take us too far afield. No need to recall, either, that for Kant this definition of "everything which exists" leads to the "Transcendental Ideal" as *omnitudo realitatis* and *ens realissimum*—namely, God—which, *from the standpoint of theoretical reason*, however, has to remain "idea of such a being" and must not be transformed into "hypostasis" (for, "such an employment" would "be overstepping the limits of its purpose and admissibility," *ibid.*, pp. 392-93). And yet it must be noted: (a) that it is nevertheless, therefore, the idea of God as "being completely determined" that gives meaning to "being," and (b) that it is the continued validity of this metaphysical decision (being \equiv being-determined) that indicates, in a Kantian perspective, the origin of the deficit of being of *our* objects and constitutes one of the sources of Kantian phenomenalism.

Magmas

Magmas can be spoken of only in ordinary language. This implies that they can be spoken of only in using the ensemblistic-identitary logic of this language. This is what I am going to do in what follows. The situation is even going to be aggravated to the extent that, in trying to speak of them in a rigorous manner, we will have to appeal to terms and notions that either belong to logic and mathematics in their constituted states or refer to them. The situation is even more unwieldy than that encountered in the case of the “foundation” of set theory [*la théorie des ensembles*] or mathematics, since here it is a question not only of a “vicious circle” but of an undertaking that can be qualified as antinomic or inconsistent. We are going to use language and, to a certain extent, the resources of ensemblistic-identitary logic in order to define, illuminate, and even justify the positing of something that goes beyond ensemblistic-identitary logic and even transgresses it. We are going to try to describe magmas by using ensembles. And, ideally, starting from magmas, we should try to describe ensembles as “immersed in” magmas. At the most, we can take a moral precaution by attracting the reader’s attention to the fact that all the logical and mathematical terms being used in what follows are ideally placed within an arbitrarily large number of quotation marks.

To begin with, let me recall the “definition” of the magma I gave in [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) (p. 343):

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.

Thus, if one once again takes the totality of significations contemporary English conveys or can convey, one can extract therefrom an arbitrary number of ensemblistic organizations. One would not be able, however, to refabricate this totality starting from any ensemblistic elements whatsoever.

I note in passing that Jean-Pierre Dupuy remarked to me that the “definition” cited above is unsatisfactory, for it would cover just as well what, to avoid Russell’s Paradox, has been called in mathematics a “class.” The objection is formally correct. It does not trouble me much, for I have always thought, and still think, that the “class,” in this acceptance of the word, is a logical artifact constructed *ad hoc* to get around Russell’s Paradox, and that it succeeds in doing so only by means of an infinite regress.

Rather than comment on this “definition,” however, we are going to try here to illuminate other aspects of the idea of magma by exploring the paths (and the impasses) of a more “formal” language.

For this, one must introduce a primitive (indefinable and undecomposable) term/relation: the *marking* [repérer] term/relation, whose valence is at once unary and binary. So, let us suppose that the reader unambiguously understands the expressions: “to mark X”; “X marks Y”; “to mark X in Y” (to mark a dog; the collar marks the dog; to mark or locate the dog in the field).¹³ In using this term/relation, I “define” a

¹³T/E: The verb *repérer* in French includes the actions of marking, indicating, identifying, spotting, and locating. For convenience’s sake, I use the English verb “to mark” in order, so to speak, to mark all these connotations.

magma by the following properties:

M1: If *M* is a magma, one can mark, in *M*, an indefinite number of ensembles.

M2: If *M* is a magma, one can mark, in *M*, magmas other than *M*.

M3: If *M* is a magma, *M* cannot be partitioned into magmas.

M4: If *M* is a magma, every decomposition of *M* into ensembles leaves a magma as residue.

M5: What is not a magma is an ensemble or is nothing.

The first property (*M1*) secures the indispensable bridge to the domains that are formalizable, as well as their applications, that is to say, “exact” knowledge. It equally allows an illumination of the term/relation (or operation) of marking [*repérage*]. Indeed, to be able to speak of *M*, I have to be able, at the outset, to mark *M* vaguely “as such”—*and* the marking *in M* of a “series” of definite ensembles allows me to render the identification of *M* progressively less “vague.”

The second property (*M2*) expresses an inexhaustibility, or an indefinite potentiality. What it expresses implicitly, however, and what especially matters here, is that it is not only and not so much a matter of quantitative inexhaustibility. It is not cardinality that is at stake here, the “number of objects” that a magma can “contain” (on this level one can go no further than existing mathematics), but the inexhaustibility of modes of being (and of types of organization) that can be discovered therein (and that obviously remain, each time, to be specified as far as possible).

The formulation of this second property (*M2*) gives rise to a question: “When is a magma *other* than an (other) magma—or: How do you know it?” We can answer with another question: “When is a sign of a mathematical theory

other than an (other) sign, and how do you know it?" What is brought into play by property *M2* pertains to the same thing as that which is brought into play, *non-* or *pre-mathematically*, in every mathematical theory and, more simply, in every language act: to posit, originarily and simultaneously, the sign and that of which it is sign in their identicalness to themselves and their difference relative to everything else.¹⁴

The third property (*M3*) is undoubtedly the most decisive. It expresses the impossibility of applying here the schema/operator of *separation*—and, above all, its irrelevance in this domain. In the magma of my representations, I cannot rigorously separate out those that “refer to my family” from the others. (In other words, in the representations that at first sight “do not refer to my family,” there always originates at least one associative chain that, itself, leads to “my family.” This amounts to saying that a representation is not a “distinct and well-defined being,” but is everything that it brings along with it.) In the significations conveyed by contemporary English, I cannot rigorously separate out those that (not in my representation, but in this tongue [*langue*] itself) refer in any way at all to mathematics from the others. A weaker formulation may be given: the “intersections” of submagmas are almost never empty. (Let us note that in this respect the language we would have to use would have to be full of such expressions as “almost everywhere,” “almost never,” “strongly,” “weakly,” etc.)

The fourth property (*M4*) is especially useful via its “complement”: if *X* is exhaustively decomposable into ensembles, then *X* is an ensemble and not a magma. For example, a mathematical being as monstrous as $\mathcal{F}(\mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}}, \mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}})$,

¹⁴See [IIS](#), ch. 5, *passim*.

the ensemble of applications of \mathbb{R}^N in itself, is decomposable into ensembles to an exhaustive degree, and this in an infinity of ways.

The fifth property (*M5*) amounts to affirming that the idea of magma is absolutely universal—or, more pragmatically speaking, that we call *magmatic* every non-ensemblistic-identitary mode of being/mode of organization we encounter or can think of. (This boils down to saying that everything that is/everything that is conceivable, and that wherein we ourselves are, is a supermagma.)

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Let us now attempt to “reascend above” magmas—or to “descend below” magmas—in order to “construct” them, at the same time as ensembles, starting from something else. This attempt fails, but I believe this failure is instructive.

We take again the term/relation/operation “to mark” and, as before, the notion of ensemble. A *diversity* (*polueidēs*, in Plato; *Mannigfaltigkeit*, in Kant) may be defined as follows:

D1: If in *D* one can mark a family of nonempty ensembles, *D* is called a diversity.

D2: Let *N* be the union of ensembles marked in *D*. If $D - N = \emptyset$, *D* is an ensemble. If $D - N \neq \emptyset$, *D* is a magma.

Let us add to *D1* and *D2* the properties *M1* to *M4*. We hardly need recall the multiple abuses of language and of notation committed in the foregoing. ($D - N$ has meaning only if *N* is a part of an *ensemble* *D*; $X \neq \emptyset$ has meaning only if *X* is an ensemble, etc.) Let us note simply this: if $D - N \neq \emptyset$, $D - N$ is a magma according to *D2* and *M4*; therefore (*M1*), there exist ensembles that can be marked in $D - N$. Therefore, *N* defined

as the union of markable ensembles in D does not contain all these ensembles: contradiction.

This example “proves” nothing, certainly. Beyond illustrating that it is impossible to “reascend above” magmas, however, it perhaps also indicates something else. The fruitful path is perhaps not the “constructive” or “finitary” one, the one that proceeds through the positing of “elements” and “inclusions,” but rather another. Magmas exceed ensembles not from the standpoint of the “wealth of cardinality” (from this standpoint, nothing can exceed the Cantorian scale of transfinite numbers), but from the standpoint of the “nature of their constitution.” The latter is reflected only very imperfectly, and in a very impoverished manner, in properties $M1$ to $M4$ and, I believe, in all other properties of *the same type* that one might invent. And this, once again, independent of the circles and *petitio principii* that necessarily make their appearance there.

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This is why, while conserving properties $M1$ to $M4$ as “descriptive” or “intuitive,” we will try another path.

Let us take mathematics in its constituted state, and another “primitive” term: the classes of statements bearing on a domain D . It will be said that a class of statements possesses an ensemblistic-identitary organization if all its statements are axioms, theorems, or undecidable propositions in Gödel’s sense (which boils down to saying that all its statements are formally constructible and that they are “locally decidable” almost everywhere). It will be said that a class of statements C is referred to D if there exists a biunivocal (one-to-one) correspondence (bijection) between a (nonempty) part of the signs of C and a (nonempty) family of parts of D . It will be

said, lastly, that a statement s in C is *significant* in the ensemblistic-identitary sense if the metastatement “There exist objects of D that satisfy s or *non- s* ; or s (or *non- s*) belongs to a deductive chain wherein s is connected to an s' that satisfies the preceding condition” is true.

If the statements that are significant in the ensemblistic-identitary sense exhaust the class of significant statements referred to D , then D is an ensemble. If there exist significant statements referred to D and these statements are not significant in the ensemblistic-identitary sense, then D is a magma.

It will be noted that the distinction thus made seems to include (and actually does include) an “empirical,” “historical,” or “contingent” dimension: one cannot say in advance whether a domain D that for a long time has appeared nonensemblizable will not, later on, be ensembled (this is, as we know, what has progressively happened with some considerable domains). The question is then posed whether the distinction we are trying to establish is not simply historical or relative—relative to a stage in the process of formalization/ensemblization. In other words, do irreducible magmas exist?

The answer is “Yes,” and we can immediately show an example of such a magma: the activity of formalization itself is not formalizable. Every formalization presupposes an activity of formalization and the latter is not formalizable (save, perhaps, in trivial cases). Every formalization rests upon originary operations of the *institution* of signs, of a syntax and even of a semantics (without which such formalization is vain and void of interest). These operations are the presupposition for all formalization; every attempt at pseudoformalization would only push them back a notch. This is what Bourbaki’s Preface is finally obliged to admit: We are

not claiming to teach mathematics to “beings that would not know how to read, write, and count.”¹⁵

From this, interesting consequences follow. For example, if it is admitted (as seems to me evident) that every deterministic theory has to correspond to a chain of statements that are significant in the ensemblistic-identitary sense, the result is that there exist domains to which significant statements can be referred, but which satisfy no deterministic theory. (Of course, the usual distinction between the deterministic and the probabilistic is of no interest here: probabilistic statements are deterministic statements, for they assign determinate probabilities to classes of determinate events. Probability theory fully pertains to ensemblistic-identitary logic.) In other words, every deterministic theory is formed by chains of statements that are significant in the ensemblistic-identitary sense, and, consequently, no deterministic theory can have a validity other than “local.” Quite obviously, this settles nothing about the question whether some particular domain—the domain of “physics,” for example—does or does not satisfy one or several deterministic theories.

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[Author’s addition: I do not wish to close this aspect of my examination without mentioning the happy theoretical accident I experienced in encountering one of the participants in the colloquium, Ms. Mioara Mugur-Schächter, who was kind enough to offer me an offprint of a text she had published in *Einstein 1879-1955* (Colloque du Centenaire,

¹⁵Bourbaki, *Elements of Mathematics: Theory of Sets*, p. 10.

Collège de France, June 6-9, 1979 [Paris: CNRS, 1980], pp. 249-64). Presented at a round-table discussion at this colloquium devoted to what is called the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen Paradox (the EPR Paradox for short)—which ceased to be a “paradox” after the experiments of Stuart Freedman and John Clauser, Edward S. Fry and Randall C. Thompson, and finally Alain Aspect and his colleagues—this text contains a host of formulations that I find enchanting. I recall first the tragic irony contained in the definition and the history of this “paradox”: formulated in 1935 by Einstein and his two colleagues at the time to show, on the basis of a mental experiment, that the hypothesis of the completeness of quantum mechanics is incompatible with the idea of an “objective reality,” it led, via the formulation of “Bell’s inequalities” (1965), to the experiments mentioned above, which, it very well seems, can only be interpreted as requiring the abandonment of the idea of a “reality with local determinism,” or of the *separability* of “elementary phenomena.” (See also my text, “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” [1973], in [CLI](#), 202-208; for more recent bibliographical references, beyond those furnished by Ms. Mugur-Schächter in her article cited above, see those in Bernard d’Espagnat, *À la Recherche du réel* [Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1979], p. 175¹⁶ and *Reality and the Physicist: Knowledge, Duration, and the Quantum World*, tr. Dr. J. C. Whitehouse and Bernard d’Espagnat [New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], pp. 271-74; for previous discussions of the “paradox,” see Abraham Pais, *“Subtle is the Lord”: Science and Life of Albert Einstein* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1982], pp. 455-59, with bibliography.)

¹⁶T/E: The English-language edition, *In Search of Reality*, does not include the bibliography found in the French edition.

This nonseparability undoubtedly possesses a capital philosophical importance that, it seems to me, is far from having been worked out. What matters to me here, however, is the admirable description by Ms. Mugur-Schächter of the manner in which the physicist extracts from (or imposes upon) what I will call *the magma of physical Being/being* [*être/étant physique*] an ensemblistic-identitary grid—which she designates respectively by “semantic mud” and “syntactical organization.” It is worth citing *in extenso*, however, the lines where, after a series of formulas, she looks back upon her own activity:

I stop an instant and look at what I have just written. What a mixture of “necessities” and arbitrariness, signs and words that have the appearance of pointing toward a specified *designatum* and yet beneath which one finds only fuzzy, moving images hung on these words and these signs in an *unseparated* way [emphasis added—C.C.]. I write “time value” in quotation marks, for example, because each time I reflect on the degree of unexploredness still found in the concepts of duration and time and their relation, I feel a reticence to write anything beyond an algorithm that sets a rule of the game. The setting of parameters for the fundamental property of duration with the aid of time variable *t*, as this setting of parameters is practiced in existing theories—and even in Relativity—is still certainly very much of a simplification and often a falsification; it is rigidifying, mechanistic in a sort of way. Changes are not always displacements of internally stable entities. [Author’s addition: Not to forget that *all* physics since Galileo is founded on the postulate that *everything* is

reducible to displacements of *internally stable* “elementary” entities. Here I am speaking of theoretical physics, not of cooking up some numerical predictions.] To be able to take fully into account the whole diversity of types and intensities of changes, one would need a sort of vectorial magnitude, a field of processual time defined in each point of abstract space framed by the axis of duration and by the axes of the changes envisioned. But would such a time be transformable along Lorenzian lines? What role would the speed of a *light* “signal” play in relation to the propagational speeds of “influences” (?) in such a processual space? What does Relativity genuinely impose upon *any* process, and what does it leave out? When it is a matter of a process that is (relatively) very intense locally, “catastrophic,” as is probably the case with “pair creation,” what does time become? In the general relativity theory of gravitation, for example, a non-null gradient of the gravitational field [author’s addition: or more simply put, the mere *existence* of a gravitational field, without which real “observers” are obviously impossible] is tied to the nondefinability of *one* unique time for observers of the same frame of reference, if these observers are spatially distant from each other. [Author’s addition: In other terms: in general relativity, for real distant observers *there is no* unique time, nor, contrary to special relativity, any possibility of univocal transformation between the times of different observers.] As to the invariance of the *speed of light* itself (and not the speed of other sorts of “influences”) when one passes from one frame of reference to another, it is postulated only locally, for no univocal

definition of distances and times exists in variable gravitational fields (Weinberg, *Gravitation and Cosmology* [New York: J. Wiley Sons, 1975]) (curvature of space-time). How can we know what sort of local “curvature” of space-time produces (or does not produce) an—essentially variable—process of pair creation? [Author’s addition: Obviously, the “local” is a *nonlocal stratum*.] Finally, Relativity introduces no quantification, its description is continuous. When one writes speed = distance/time, time is a continuous parameter.

If we then ask ourselves how one finds the value of t , we notice that it is of the form NT_H , where N is an integer and T_H a (*supposedly* constant!) “period of clock time,” which brings us back to the discrete. Macroscopically or in cosmology, this can be of negligible importance both on the level of principle and on the numerical level. However, when we consider microscopic processes that, like pair creation, are essentially quantum and relatively quite brief, what is the degree of significance of a condition like

$$V = \frac{\text{distance}}{\text{time}} = \frac{\text{distance}}{NT_H} = \text{const.}?$$

What clock should be chosen, with what T_H , and how, moreover, can one be assured that, when one writes $\Delta t = 10^x$, one is doing anything more than a meaningless calculation?

Faced with such questions, we comprehend better the positivist displays of prudence and the norms that counsel us to remain within the wholesome

zone of the operationally defined and of the well syntaxed, where thought circulates on well-laid-out and reinforced pathways. Beyond, we sink into a genuine semantic mud. *Nevertheless, it is only here, in this mud, and when we force our gaze to make out the moving forms, that we can perceive the contacts between what is not done and what is partially done and thus initiate something anew* [author's addition: *Einstein 1879-1955*, pp. 256-57; emphasis added in the final sentence].

I do not wish to comment on this excerpt, which seems to speak adequately well for itself. I note simply that what Ms. Mugur-Schächter calls the *semantic mud* could just as well be called the *humus* or the *limus* in which significations are born; it is this limus—the radical imaginary—that engenders the schemata that permit the physicist to proceed further precisely *in the ensemblization of physical Being/being*—which, moreover, lends itself indefinitely to this ensemblization, *and* not just anyhow, as the entire history of physics shows. Furthermore, starting from these formulations the determinist's thesis (whose *logicist* substance now appears in striking fashion) can be illustrated once again: the "mud"—the magma—is "provisional," it is illusion or residue, due to the state of our ignorance; *tomorrow*, it will be completely dried up (a well-known sign in the window of a dishonest and deterministic barber).^{17]}

¹⁷T/E: The reference here is to the French joke about the barber who places a sign in his window announcing "Free Shaves Tomorrow." When a patron who has seen the sign comes in the next day for his free shave, he is told by the barber at the end of the shave that he must pay, for it is not

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We must return to the question of signification. We have tried to specify what a significant statement in the ensemblistic-identitary sense might be. Can we go further?

We can interpret the term “sense [*sens*]” in its *two* basic acceptations. These, I believe, exhaust the sense of “sense” for ensemblistic-identitary logic (and, perhaps, for the “logic of living beings”—of the living being *as such*).

1. “*Sinn*” in German does not have completely the same meaning [*sens*] as “sense” in English. Here, sense has the acceptation of “valued as” or “standing for” [*valoir comme*] = “exchange-value” = equivalence = “class.”
2. “What you are doing makes no sense,” “to treat pneumonia with hot and cold showers makes no sense.” Here, sense has the acceptation of “valued for,” “serving for” [*valoir pour*] = “use-value” = adaptation, adequation, belonging = “relation.”

Quite obviously, each of the two acceptations refers [*renvoie*] to the other, both horizontally and “stepwise.”¹⁸

Thesis: Signification in the ensemblistic-identitary sense is reducible to combinations of these two acceptations of “sense”—and, reciprocally: Every signification reducible to combinations of these two acceptations of “sense” is ensemblistic-identitary. In other words: Significant statements in the ensemblistic-identitary sense always concern inclusions

until “tomorrow” (that is, never) that free shaves will be given.

¹⁸ [IIS](#), ch. 5, 252-55.

within classes, insertions within relations, and the combinatory constructible thereupon.

Another formulation of the thesis: Significations in the ensemblistic-identitary sense are constructible by classes, properties, and relations (“by figures and movements,” Descartes would have said).

Corollary of the thesis: Significations exist that cannot be constructed by classes, properties, and relations.

The immediate example is, obviously, that of the significations that “primitively” constitute a domain of classes, properties, and relations (such as, for example, the minimal domain of signs, syntax, and semantics necessary to begin doing mathematics). This is also undoubtedly the most constraining for formalists and positivists. But the essential domain (and the one of which the preceding example is, in fact, only a particular case) is that of social imaginary significations and of those significations that can be designated, by an abuse of language, as psychical significations.¹⁹

For, in fact, as one should have glimpsed already, we have given ourselves another “primitive term”: the significant statement. This amounts to saying: one has given oneself natural language, as well as a class of speakers of this language, for whom there exist criteria—perhaps changing and fuzzy, but sufficient as to need/usage²⁰—for discriminating between significant and nonsignificant statements. And, quite obviously, every attempt to “begin” mathematics, in whatever fashion, is obliged to presuppose this natural language, to “give itself” natural language, as well

¹⁹*Ibid.*, ch. 6 and ch. 7.

²⁰T/E: A phrase from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.

as the capacity of its speakers to distinguish significant statements from nonsignificant statements.

Now, this “natural language”—which obviously has nothing “natural” about it—is each time socially instituted and exists only by means of its social institution. By this very fact, it bears—it conveys—significations that are not ensemblistic-identitary, namely: social imaginary significations. But we know too—and we have discovered it anew—that it is impossible to speak, in any context [*cadre*] whatsoever, without utilizing ensemblistic-identitary operators (and, for example, the operators class, relation, property). Whence: *The ensemblistic “part” is “everywhere dense” in natural language.*

Here is not the place to try to advance our elucidation of the mode of being and of the organization of social imaginary significations. I have limited myself to jotting down a few notes.

Undoubtedly, we must distinguish a first stratum, in an originary and founding sense, of the signifier. It may be called, in memory of Kant, *transcendental* and it presupposes *radical imagining*. Radical imagining is the *positing*, *ex nihilo*, of something that “is” not and the connection (without previous determination, or “arbitrarily” made) between this something that “is” not and something that, in another connection, “is” or “is” not. Every signitive relation²¹ and every language obviously *presuppose* this positing and this connection. The latter thereby are founders of the ensemblistic-identitary domain, as well as of every other humanly conceivable domain. Thus, to write (or to read or to understand) “ $0 \neq 1$ ” presupposes the positing of “material-abstract” “rounds” and “bars” (always identical to themselves,

²¹ [IIS](#), 244-52.

whatever their concrete “realization”) as “signs” (which, as such, “are” not “naturally”), but also the positing of “notions,” “ideas,” “concepts,” or, as you wish, *zero, one, different*, which, themselves too, as such “are” not naturally, as well as the connection of each of them with the others. It is by means of this connection that “ $0 \neq 1$ ” *signifies*—and for it to signify, one must have the capacity to see in “ $0 \neq 1$ ” what “is” not there, *zeros* and *ones* where “there are only” rounds and bars.

At the other extreme, there are core or central social imaginary significations, which we do not have to worry about here. Let it suffice to recall, once again, that these significations constantly involve ensemblistic-identitary operations but are not exhausted thereby. They always are “instrumented” in classes, relations, and properties—but are not *constructible* therefrom.

On the contrary: it is by means of social imaginary significations that the *positing* of classes, properties, and relations operates in the world created by society. The imaginary institution of society boils down to the constitution of “arbitrary” points of view, starting from which “equivalences” and “relations” are established. (For instance, specific words pronounced by a particular individual in a specific place and context [*contexte*] establish the equivalence between a scrap of bread and the body of a God—or bring some object into the circle of relations that are characteristic of the “sacred.”) And, certainly, one of the fields to be explored here would be the way in which “equivalence” and “relation” are transformed when they function no longer in the ensemblistic-identitary domain but in the imaginary domain in the proper and strong sense of the term.

Power of Ensemblistic-Identitary Logic

Why the fantastic power of ensemblistic-identitary logic (what Hegel called the “terrible power of the understanding”)?²²

First of all, without doubt this logic *leans on* a stratum of what is—in other words, it does indeed “correspond” to a dimension of being. One can go even further: either there exists an ensemblizable part of being that is “everywhere dense,” or being is “locally” (or “piecewise”; or by strata) ensemblizable. I will return briefly to this below.

This leaning of ensemblistic-identitary logic on what is appears to us in two forms—which, moreover, are indissociable. The first, ensemblistic-identitary logic, repeats, prolongs, elaborates the logic of the living being. Incontestably, for an enormous part of its operations—for *all* its operations?—the living being works by means of classes, properties, and relations. The living being constitutes a world—*itself* constitutes *its* world²³—that is organized, and whose organization is obviously correlative to (is only the other side of) the proper organization of the living being. Equivalence and relation are its everywhere-present ingredients. The living being creates *for itself* its own

²²T/E: “The action of separating the elements is the exercise of the force of Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power [*die absolute und verwundersamste Macht*]” (G. W. F. Hegel, Preface, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 2nd ed. rev. and corr., tr. J. B. Baillie [London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd and New York: Humanities Press, 1966], p. 93).

²³See my text, “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), in [CL1](#), 233-35. [T/E: See also “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), now in [CL3](#).]

universality and its own order. This universality and this order we ourselves inherit *qua* living beings. I will have to return to this below.

But could the living being organize an *absolutely chaotic* world? For the living being to be able to organize, for itself, a world, starting from *X*, *X* would still have to be *organizable*. This is the old problem of Kantian criticism, which one could never glide over.²⁴ All organizational forms immanent to the transcendental consciousness—or within the genome: the logical position of the problem remains strictly identical in the two cases—cannot yield anything if the “material” they are to “form” did not already include in itself the “minimal form” of being *formable*. Let it be noted in passing that the idea of an *absolutely* disordered universe is for us unthinkable, and we can liken this to the impossibility of proving that an infinite series is random.²⁵

We are therefore obliged to postulate that there is something in the world “independent of the living being” that corresponds to the organization (by classes, properties, and relations) by means of which the living being constitutes *its* world—which amounts to saying that there exists *in itself* a *stratum* of total being [*étant total*] that “possesses” an ensemblistic-identitary organization (in the minimal sense that it can *lend itself* to such an organization). But we are also obliged to state, further, that this organization goes far beyond the simple *ex post* (and apparently tautological) implications that may be drawn from the fact that the living being exists,

²⁴See [IIS](#), 341-42.

²⁵Author’s addition: This question and those that follow are discussed again at length in “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1986), the last text of the present volume.

that it really presents a universality *in itself*. Perhaps the existence of terrestrial living beings as we know them would not have been possible without the fall of apples. But there is not only the fall of apples: the rotation of galaxies or the expansion of star clusters are ruled by the same law. If the living being exists in parasitizing, or in ontological symbiosis with, a stratum of total being that is locally ensemblistic-identitary, this stratum extends even where the living being does not. And obviously, this is what accounts both for the extraordinary success of modern Western science and for the “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics” (Wigner).²⁶

But the power of ensemblistic-identitary logic also sinks its roots into the institution of society. It expresses a functional-instrumental necessity for the social institution in all domains: any society whatsoever must have the determinate and the necessary in order for it to function—and even for it to be able to presentify, to itself, its properly imaginary significations. There is no society without myth, and there is no society without arithmetic. And still more important, there is no myth (or poems or music) without arithmetic—and certainly, too, there is no arithmetic without myth (be it the myth of the “pure rationality” of arithmetic).

To this (transhistorical) necessity is added, for us, a particular historical development, one that may be thought to be surpassable: the specific turn that philosophy has taken since Parmenides, and especially since Plato, as ontology of determinacy or as exorbitant dilation of the ensemblistic-identitary, covering almost the entire domain of thought, thus also constituting a “rational political philosophy,” to

²⁶T/E: Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13:1 (February 1960).

culminate ultimately—of course also with the help of other contributions—in the reign of pseudorationality that we know today in the modern world.

Ontological Theses

What is is not ensemble or system of ensembles. What is is not fully determined.

What is is Chaos, or Abyss, or Groundlessness. What is is Chaos with nonregular stratification.

What is bears with it [*comporte*] an ensemblistic-identitary dimension—or an ensemblistic-identitary part everywhere dense. Question: Does it bear this dimension with it or do we impose this dimension on it? Answer (to be done with constructivism, reflections [*reflets*], and *tabulae rasae*):

For the “near-perfect” observer, the question of knowing, in an ultimate sense, what comes from the observer and what comes from the observed is undecidable. (Nothing absolutely chaotic is observable. No absolutely unorganized observer can exist. The observation is a not fully decomposable coproduct.)

The nondetermination of what is is not mere “indetermination” in the privative and ultimately trivial sense. It is creation, namely emergence of *other* determinations, new laws, new domains of lawfulness. “Indetermination” (if it does not simply signify “our state of ignorance” or a “statistical situation”) has a precise meaning: no state of being is such that it renders impossible the emergence of *other* determinations than those already existing.

If being is not creation, then there is no time (“time”

would be, in that case, only the fourth dimension of a fully spatialized \mathbb{R}^4 —an ontologically supernumerary fourth dimension).

Questions about the Living Being

That the living being is fundamentally characterized by the constitution of a world of its own, including [*comportant*] its own organization, of a world *for itself* in which nothing can be given or appear except insofar as it is sampled (from an “external” *X*) and transformed, that is to say, formed/informed by this organization of the living being itself—all this has seemed evident to me for a long time.²⁷ In this regard, Francisco Varela, with his idea of the living being’s operational, informational, and cognitive closure offers, I believe, clarifications of decisive importance.

I am less happy with his use of the term “biological autonomy,” which he uses to characterize this situation. For, the term autonomy has been used for a long time—and anew by me since 1949—to designate, in the human domain, a radically different state of affairs: briefly speaking, the state in which “someone”—singular subject or collectivity—is explicitly and, as far as possible, lucidly (not “blindly”) author of its own law. This implies (I shall return to this in the last section of this paper) that this “someone” instaurates a new relation with “its law,” which signifies, among other things, that this singular or collective “someone” can modify that law, knowing that it is doing so. To identify autonomy, as Varela’s usage of the term entails, with cognitive closure leads to paradoxical results. A paranoiac—who immediately

²⁷ See again “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” as well as [IIS](#), 332-37.

transforms every datum in order to adapt it to his perfectly sealed and watertight system of interpretation—would then be the paradigm for a (psychically) autonomous being. Likewise, a society whose system of the world is totally closed and rigid—whether it be a matter of an archaic society or the society of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*—would be “autonomous.” To avoid this polysemic situation, which leaves us in sum with a strict equivocal (the same term to designate two contradictories), I would prefer the word *self-constitution*. (“Self-organization,” a term more and more in use, does not seem to me radical enough.) Neither do I think, let it be said in passing, that the “second level” Paul Dumouchel has tried to distinguish—an “autonomy of the social” that would be situated between what he calls “autonomy in Varela’s sense” and “autonomy in Castoriadis’s sense”—is truly an independent level.²⁸

I come now to the questions I ask myself and that I would like to put in particular to Henri Atlan and to Varela. The living being can be considered as an *automaton*, in the true and etymological sense of the term. Automaton signifies not “robot” but that which moves of itself (a meaning already to be found in Homer). This clarification is useful: indeed, Aristotle defined the animal [author’s addition: and natural being in general] as that which “has within itself the principle of movement” (*archēn kinēseōs*).²⁹ Now, Aristotle is obviously pre-Cartesian and pre-Galilean: movement, for him, is not simply local movement; local movement is only one of the species of movement; among the others, generation and corruption, on the one hand, alteration, on the other, are to be

²⁸ Author’s addition: See *L’Auto-organization*, p. 354.

²⁹ T/E: *Physics* 2.1.192b14.

counted. In other words, in this place Aristotle speaks as if he considered the animal as having in itself the principle of its generation and corruption, as well as of its alteration; this is, in fact, very close to what we are saying.

Now, can one think the living being as a *fully* ensemblistic-identitary automaton? And can one think that an automaton that is fully ensemblistic-identitary, but also *fully automatic*, namely, one that has within itself the principles of its generation and corruption as well as of its alteration—or, in still other words, capable not only of self-preservation but also of self-reproduction and self-alteration—can one really think that such an automaton is “producible” by strictly ensemblistic-identitary (in other words, “deterministic”) procedures? I do not know the answer to these two questions. Let me simply comment on a few aspects of them.

To say that the living being is “autonomous” (in Varela’s sense) or “self-constituting,” in the terminology I prefer, means that the living being posits its own “significations,” namely, that it itself primitively constitutes its domains of classes, properties, and relations. That seems to me evident. But to what extent can we say that the being of the living being is exhausted in and through this functioning by classes, properties, and relations? And to what extent does a primitive “self-constitution” make sense in a strictly ensemblistic-identitary system? Various criteria could be examined. For example, one could say that the living being is only an ensemblistic-identitary automaton if the “primitive significations” for a given living species (those that constitute its organization and its closure) can be constructed by classes, properties, and relations in another ensemblistic-identitary system. Thus, a dog would be such an automaton if one could construct the forms and the partitions that constitute the world of the dog by ensemblistic-identitary operations in a system

that would be external to the dog and that would not itself be that of the living being. But is this satisfactory and sufficient? It does not seem so to me; it seems to me that, formally, one could perhaps perform this construction, but one would have neither the reason nor the *criterion* for doing so *if the dog did not already exist*. It seems to me that the effective, already realized being-thus of the dog is the *a-priori logic* of its ensemblistic-identitary “recomposition”; that the latter is (perhaps!) always formally possible does not signify anything more, at the limit, than this: to every “dog state” corresponds, biunivocally, a physically realizable state of a cloud of elementary particles. From the “prebiological” point of view, however, this state has no privilege and no characteristic of its own; nothing allows us physically to distinguish it from the infinity of other possible states of the same cloud of particles (nothing that is not trivially descriptive). In brief: to fabricate a dog, one would have to have the idea of a dog. Idea: *eidōs*, “form” in the full sense of the term (union of the organization and of the organized).

I think that the existence, the emergence of this *eidōs* is an instance, a manifestation of being as creation. I think that the living being represents a self-creation (though certainly a “blind” one). How could this view be refuted? It could be said: We will prove that the living being does not represent an example of self-creation when its existence—its necessity, its extreme probability?—will have become a theorem in a deterministic theory of a vaster domain. That would imply, first of all, that the following question has already been settled in the affirmative: “Is the living being a fully ensemblistic-identitary automaton?” It would also imply that one accepts the idea that the self is rigorously deducible from the nonself and according to the laws of the nonself—an idea that, I am convinced, is devoid of meaning.

The Question of Social and Individual Autonomy

Autonomy is not closure, but rather opening: ontological opening, the possibility of going beyond the informational, cognitive, and organizational closure characteristic of self-constituting, but *heteronomous* beings. It is ontological opening, since to go beyond this closure signifies altering the already existing cognitive and organizational “system,” *therefore* constituting one’s world and one’s self according to *other* laws, *therefore* creating a new ontological *eidos*, another self in another world.

This possibility appears, as far as I know, only with the human. It appears as possibility of challenging—not by chance or blindly, but knowing that one is doing so—one’s own laws, one’s own institution when society is involved.

The human domain appears, at the start, as a highly heteronomous domain (“autonomous” in Varela’s sense). Archaic societies, like traditional societies, are very highly closed societies informationally, cognitively, and organizationally. In fact, this is the state of almost all societies we know of, almost everywhere, almost always. And not only does nothing in this type of society prepare such a society to challenge established institutions and significations (which, in this case, represent the principles and bearers of closure), but everything is constituted therein so as to render impossible and unthinkable this sort of challenging (this is in fact a tautology).

This is why one can conceive only as a radical rupture, an ontological creation, the emergence of societies that call into question their own institutions and significations—their “organization” in the most profound sense of the term. In these societies, ideas such as, “Our gods are perhaps false gods, our laws are perhaps unjust,” not only cease to be

unthinkable and unpronounceable but become the active ingredient [*ferment*] in a self-alteration of society. And, as always, this creation occurs “circularly”; its “elements,” which presuppose each other and have no meaning except through each other, are posited straight off. Concretely speaking, the existence of societies that call themselves into question means that there are individuals capable of calling existing laws into question—and the appearance of such individuals is possible only if something has changed at the same time at the level of the overall institution of society. This rupture, you know my thesis, has taken place only two times in history: in ancient Greece and then, in a related and profoundly other manner, in Western Europe.

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[Author’s addition: Should we say more about the relationship between the idea of *magma* as I have developed it at the beginning of the present text, the ontological theses formulated above, and the ontological rupture that the human creation of autonomy represents? If ensemblistic-identitary logic thoroughly [*de part en part*] exhausts what is, there could never be any question of a “rupture” of any kind, or of any autonomy. Everything would be deducible/producible from the “already given,” and even our contemplation of the effects of eternal causes (or of laws given once and for all) would be merely an inevitable effect, coupled here with the inexplicable illusion that we are able to tend toward the true and to try to avoid the false. Far from being able to change something therein, a subject totally caught in an ensemblistic-identitary universe could not even *know* that it was caught in such a universe. It could, in effect, *know* only in the ensemblistic-identitary mode, that is to say, it could only try

eternally and always in vain to prove as theorems the axioms of its universe, for, of course, from the ensemblistic-identitary standpoint *meta*considerations have no meaning. It is into this absurd situation, let it be said in passing, that determinists of every ilk still place themselves today; they rigorously oblige themselves to produce, *starting from nothing*, the “initial conditions” of the universe (its number of dimensions, the numerical value of universal constants, “total quantity” of energy-matter, etc.) as *necessary*.³⁰

At the same time, as I have recalled above, society (*every* society) has a functional-instrumental need whereby its social-historical being can exist only by *positing*, by *instituting* an ensemblistic-identitary dimension.³¹ Likewise, all thought must constantly rest on the ensemblistic-identitarian. In our historical tradition—basically since Plato—these two facts ultimately have conspired together to lead to various so-called political philosophies, as well as to a diffuse political imaginary (expressed and “rationalized” by “ideologies”), placed under the sign of “rationality” (or of its pure and simple negation, though this remains, by far, a marginal phenomenon). Favored also by the retreat of religion and by a thousand other factors, this pseudorationality ultimately functions as the sole explicit and “explicitable” imaginary signification today capable of cementing the institution, of legitimating it, of holding society together. It is perhaps not God that has willed the existing social order, but it is the Reason of things, and you can do nothing about it.

³⁰See “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” in [CL1](#), 207-208.

³¹See [IIS](#), ch. 4 and ch. 6, *passim*, and “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984), above in the present volume.

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.]



We are the inheritors of this rupture. It is this that continues to live on and to act within the democratic and revolutionary movement that has animated the European world for centuries. And the historical ups and downs of this movement, known as they are, permit us today—also and especially via its failures—to give a new formulation to its objectives, namely, the instauration of an autonomous society.

Permit me here to make a detour by way of my personal history. In my work, the idea of autonomy appears very early on, in fact from the outset, and not as a “philosophical” or “epistemological” idea, but as an essentially political one. Its origin is my constant preoccupation, along with the revolutionary question, the question of the self-transformation of society.

Greece, December 1944: my political ideas were then, at bottom, the same as they are today. The Communist Party, the Stalinist party, tried to seize power. The masses were with it. The masses were with it, therefore it was not a putsch; it was a revolution. But it was not a revolution. The masses were led around by the nose and constantly watched over by the Stalinist party, there was no creation of *autonomous* mass organs—organs that do not receive their directives from the outside, that are not subjected to the domination and control

of a separate, outside authority, a party or a State. Question: When does a revolutionary period begin? Answer: When the population forms *its own autonomous* organs—when it enters into activity in order to give to itself its own organizational forms and its own norms.

And where does this Stalinist party come from? In a sense, “from Russia.” In Russia, however, such a revolution had in fact occurred in 1917, and autonomous organs such as I have described (soviets, factory committees) were created. Question: When does a revolution end, when does it “degenerate,” when does it cease to be a revolution? Answer: When the population’s autonomous organs cease to exist and to act, either because they are eliminated outright or because they have been domesticated, enslaved, used by a new *separate* power as mere instruments or decorative elements. This is how it was in Russia; the soviets and the factory committees created by the population in 1917 were gradually domesticated by the Bolshevik Party and finally deprived of all power during the period from 1917 to 1921. The crushing of the Kronstadt Commune in March 1921 put the final touch on this process, which was henceforth irreversible in the sense that, after this date, nothing less than a full revolution would have been needed to dislodge the Bolshevik Party from power. This at the same time settled the question of the nature of the Russian regime, at least negatively: one thing was certain, this regime was not “socialist” nor was it preparing “socialism.”³²

If therefore a new society is to emerge from the revolution, it can be constituted only on the power of the population’s autonomous organs, extended to all spheres of collective activity and existence: not only “politics” in the

³²See General Introduction (1973), in [*PSWI*](#).

narrow sense, but production and the economy, daily life, etc. Therefore, self-government and self-management [*autogestion*] (what at that time I called workers' management and collective management) resting on the self-organization of the collectivities concerned.³³

But self-management and self-government of what? Would it be a matter of the self-management of prisons by the prisoners, of assembly lines by compartmentalized [*parcellisés*] workers? [Author's addition: Would the object of self-organization be simply the decoration of the factories?] Self-organization, self-management, has no meaning except when it comes to grips with the instituted conditions of heteronomy. Marx saw in technique only something positive, and others have seen in it a "neutral" means capable of being put into the service of any ends whatsoever. We know that there is nothing of the sort, that contemporary technics [*technique*] is an integral part of the heteronomous institution of society. The same goes for the educational system, and so on. If therefore self-management, self-government, is not to become a mystification, or merely a mask for something else, all the conditions of social life have to be called into question. This is not a matter of making a *tabula rasa*, still less of doing so from one day to the next; rather, it is a matter of comprehending the solidarity of all the elements of social life and drawing therefrom the following conclusion: Nothing can, in principle, be excluded from the instituting activity of an autonomous society.

We thus arrive at the idea that what defines an autonomous society is its activity of explicit and lucid self-institution—the fact that it itself gives itself its own law, knowing that it is doing so. This has nothing to do with the

³³See "Socialism or Barbarism" (1949), now in [*PSW1*](#).

fiction of some sort of social “transparency.”³⁴ Even less than an individual, a society will never be able to become “transparent” to itself. It can, however, be free and reflective—and this freedom and this reflection can themselves be objects and objectives of its instituting activity.

Starting from this idea, a look back upon the overall conception of society and history became unavoidable. Indeed, this instituting activity we would like to liberate in our society has always been self-institution; the laws have not been given by the gods, by God, or imposed by the “state of the forces of production” (these “productive forces” being, in themselves, only one of the faces of the institution of society); they have been created by the Assyrians, the Jews, the Greeks, etc. In this sense, society has always been “autonomous in Varela’s sense.” This self-institution, however, has always been occulted, covered over by the representation, itself highly instituted, of an extrasocial source of the institution (the gods, the ancestors—or “Reason,” “Nature,” etc.). And this representation aimed, and still aims, at quashing the process of calling the existing institution into question; it locks in, as a matter of fact, its *closure*. In this sense, these societies are heteronomous. For, they are enslaved to their own creation, their law, which they posit as intangible, as it proceeds from a qualitatively other origin than living men and women. In this sense, too, the emergence of societies that call their own “organization” into question, in the broadest and most profound sense of “organization,” represents an ontological creation: the advent of a “form” (*eidōs*) that itself explicitly alters itself *qua form*. This signifies that, in the case

³⁴ Author’s addition: I have denounced the absurdity of such fictional “transparency” since 1965, in the fourth installment of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” now in [IIS](#), 110-14.

of these societies, representational-cognitive “closure” has been “in part,” “in some sort,” *shattered*. In other words, man is the only animal capable of breaking the closure in and through which every other living being *is*.

Autonomy is therefore, for us, at the social level, explicit self-institution, knowing itself as such. And this idea animates the political project of the instauration of an autonomous society.

Starting from here there begins, certainly, a host of political as well as philosophical questions. I will evoke, very briefly, only a few of them that are connected with our discussion here.

Autonomy as objective: Yes, but is that enough? Autonomy is an objective we want [*voulons*] for itself—but also for something else. Without that, we fall back into Kantian formalism, as well as into its impasses. We will [*voulons*] the autonomy of society—as well as of individuals—both for itself and in order to be able to *make/do* things. To make/do *what*? This is perhaps the weightiest interrogation to which the contemporary situation gives rise: this *what* is related to *contents*, to substantive values—and this is what appears to be in crisis in the society in which we live. We are not seeing—or are seeing very little of—the emergence of new contents for people’s lives, new orientations that would be synchronous with the tendency—which, itself, actually appears in many sectors of society—toward an autonomy, a liberation *vis-à-vis* simply inherited rules. Nevertheless, it is permitted think that, without the emergence of such new contents, these tendencies will be able neither to expand nor to deepen and to become universalized.³⁵

³⁵ Author’s addition: I have discussed this question at length in “Social

Let us go further. What are the “functions” of the institution? The social institution is, first of all, the end of itself, which also means that one of its essential functions is self-preservation. The institution contains devices it has incorporated that tend to reproduce it through time and across generations and that even, generally speaking, impose this reproductive process with an effectiveness that, when we really reflect upon it, appears like it is miraculous. This the institution can do, however, only if it carries out another of its “functions,” namely the socialization of the psyche, the fabrication of adapted and true-to-form [*appropriés et conformes*] social individuals. In the process of the psyche’s socialization, the institution of society can, trivialities apart, do nearly anything, yet there is a minimum of things it cannot do that are imposed upon it by the nature of the psyche. Clearly, it has to furnish the psyche with “objects” that divert the psyche from its own drives and desires; it also has to provide the psyche with poles of identification. Above all, however, it has to provide the psyche with *meaning* [*sens*]. This implies, in particular, that the institution of society has always aimed at—and to a greater or lesser extent has succeeded in—covering over what I have called above Chaos, the Groundless, the Abyss; Abyss of the world, of the psyche itself for itself, of society itself for itself. This *meaning-giving*, which has been at the same time a covering over of the Abyss, has been the “role” of the most central, core social imaginary significations: religious significations. Religion is at once presentation and occultation of the Abyss. The Abyss is announced, presentified in and through religion—and at the

Transformation and Cultural Creation” (1979), now in [PSW3](#). [T/E: See, now, an updated version of this text, *The Crisis of Culture and the State* (1987), now in [PPA](#).]

same time, it is essentially occulted. Thus, for example, Death in Christianity: obsessive presence, interminable lamentation—and, at the same time, absolute denial, since this Death is not truly a death, it is access to another life. The sacred is the instituted simulacrum of the Abyss: religion confers a figure or figuration upon the Abyss—and this figure is presented as both Ultimate Meaning and source of all meaning. To take the clearest example, the God of rational Christian theology is both ultimate meaning and source of all meaning. It is also, therefore, both source and guarantee of the being of society and of its institution. The result is—the result has always been, under different forms—the occultation of the *metacontingency* of meaning, namely of the fact that meaning is society's creation, that it is radically contingent for anyone who stands on the outside, and absolutely necessary for those who stand on the inside—therefore, neither necessary nor contingent. This boils down to saying that this occultation is occultation of society's self-institution and of this twofold piece of evidence, namely, that society cannot be without the institutions and significations it creates—and that the latter cannot have any “absolute” foundation.³⁶

However, if autonomous society is that society which self-institutes itself [*s'auto-institue*] explicitly and lucidly, the one that knows that it itself posits its institutions and its significations, this means that it knows as well that they have no other source than its own instituting and signification-giving activity, no extrasocial “guarantee.” We thereby encounter once again the radical problem of democracy. Democracy, when it is true democracy, is the regime that explicitly renounces all ultimate “guarantees” and knows no

³⁶ Author's addition: See “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), above in the present volume.

other limitation than its self-limitation. It certainly can transgress such self-limitation, as has so often been the case in history; it thereby can sink into oblivion [*s'abîmer*] or turn into its contrary. This amounts to saying that democracy is the only tragic political regime—it is the sole regime that *takes risks*, that faces the possibility of its self-destruction openly. Tyranny or totalitarianism “risk” nothing, for they have already made reality everything that can exist as risk in historical life. Democracy always lives [*est*] within the problem of its self-limitation, and nothing can “resolve” this problem in advance. One cannot draw up a constitution that would prevent, for example, 67 percent of the individuals from one day making the “democratic” decision to deprive the other 33 percent of their rights. Imprescriptible rights of individuals can be written into the Constitution; one cannot inscribe within it a clause that absolutely forbids any revision of the Constitution—and were one to do so, this provision would sooner or later prove impotent. The sole essential limitation democracy can know is self-limitation. And this form of limitation, in turn, can be only the task of individuals educated in, through, and for democracy.³⁷

Such an education, however, necessarily includes acceptance of the fact that institutions, such as they are, are neither “necessary” nor “contingent,” which amounts to saying: acceptance of the fact that there is no meaning given as a gift nor any guarantee of meaning, that there is no other meaning than that created in and through history. And this amounts to saying that democracy thrusts aside the sacred, or that—and this is the same thing—human beings finally accept what they have never, until now, truly wanted to accept (and

³⁷ Author's addition: See “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), above in the present volume.

which deep down within ourselves we never truly accept): that they are mortal, that nothing lies “beyond.” It is only starting from this profound and impossible conviction of the mortality of each and every one of us, and of all that we do, that one can truly live as an autonomous being—and that an autonomous society becomes possible.

Ontological Import of the History of Science*

Our subject is philosophical—not “epistemological,” as contemporary prudery and pusillanimity would call it. No “epistemology” holds good if it does not involve an enquiry into both the object of knowledge and the subject of knowledge. And this sort of enquiry has been a central part of the work of philosophy since its inception.

A few affirmations may serve as our point of departure:

- A certain knowledge of being [*l'étant*] exists (in the case under discussion here: of what is called natural being). This statement is open to challenge, but one would then have to give up discussion, and one would be wasting one's time staying in this room (or reading this text). Discussion has meaning only if I recognize in the other a being both natural and supranatural: I know that the other is there *qua* natural being—and I know, or I presume, that the other is capable of discussion, something that simply natural beings do

*Originally published as “Portée ontologique de l'histoire de la science” in [DH](#), 419-55 (524-70 of the 1999 reprint), a part of this text was used for a talk, “Social Imaginary and Scientific Change,” which was given on May 23, 1985, as one of the lecture-debates that have been organized since 1983 by the Bellevue Local Action chapter of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) under the general rubric of “Interrogations on the Meaning and the Place of Knowledge in Society.” [T/E: Castoriadis's text, “Imaginaire social et changement scientifique,” has since been published in *Sens et place des connaissances dans la société* (Paris: CNRS, 1987), pp. 161-83. The present translation first appeared in [WIF](#), 342-73.] Some of the ideas contained in this paper have also been presented as part of my participation in three seminars given by Thomas S. Kuhn at the École des Hautes Études (Paris), June 1, 11, and 14, 1985.

not do. I know, too, or I presume, that the other in turn knows all that about me. We therefore postulate our common capacity to know, and to know ourselves, at least to a certain minimum degree. Being a skeptic is a completely respectable option—that is, so long as the skeptic does not open her mouth with the intention of saying something. This amounts to saying that the sole possible refutation of skepticism is the human community—or the very life of the skeptic; if, however, one reflects on this, one sees that it is the same thing.

- This knowledge (in what is certain for it *as well as* in what is uncertain for it) changes [*s'altère*] over the course of time; it is not a matter of a state, of a sum or completed system of truths, but rather of a process.
- This process is essentially social-historical. In truth, this affirmation would be superfluous, so much does it go without saying, were not the *egology* of the dominant philosophical tradition constantly being reborn without having learned anything or forgot anything. Let us recall, therefore, that there is no process of knowing without language, for example (this being true even of mathematics), and that language is much more than language, for it is, each time, “total part” of the social-historical world in question. *No* thought without language, no language that is pure *code* (pure formal system), no knowledge reducible to the handling of algorithms; and no language whose organization and tenor would not be consubstantial with the imaginary significations of the society under consideration, with its grasp on and organization of the world, with its own manner of *making sense* of what is given—and, to begin with, to

the roughest and most decisive of degrees, of *making* “the given” *be* for it, doing so already through its language operations—for, there certainly are no gatherings of any sort of “information,” binary or otherwise, that would be scattered throughout nature as if it had been waiting there merely for the first humans to come along to harvest and store it.¹

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Social: the term does not refer to Social Security, or to “the social question,” the existence of rich and poor, or to the question of knowing whether science is or is not a tool of the dominant class, or whether scientists form a stratum, a body, a confraternity within overall society with particular rules, interests, customs, and jargons, or to the “sociology” of science and of scientists. Among other things, what the social signifies is this: the human individual, be that individual scientific (or philosophic)—and what is called in philosophy its understanding—exists only as the product of a perpetual process of socialization; the individual is first and foremost a walking fragment of the institution of society in general and of *its* particular society. (The human individual is certainly not *only* that, a point to which we shall return.)

There is, however, also the properly historical dimension of knowledge—and of science. Here again, “historical” does not refer to battles, invasions, changes in government—or to the slow evolution in the forces of production, customs, or daily life. *Every* society (therefore also every individual) is essentially historical—even if it is

¹On these different aspects, see ch. 5 and ch. 6 of [IIS](#), and “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), in [CLI](#), 267-79.

“prehistorical” or “without history”—in the sense that it itself alters itself [*elle s’altère elle-même*], that it is not only self-creation once and for all but continued self-creation, manifested both as incessant, imperceptible self-alteration *and* as possibility, and actuality, of ruptures that posit new forms of society. And in the last case, the case of rupture, this mode is eminently historical; without analogy to anything else we know of in nature or in life, this mode of alteration alters what it maintains at the very moment that it alters it. Historical, too, is the mode by which this rupture relates to tradition, as is the mode by which the socially instituted relates to what is going to destroy it. To understand the historical requires that we contemplate (without stopping at some “explanation,” beyond “explanations”) the abyss that opens when we ask ourselves what relation the France of the *Ancien Régime* has with France after the Revolution, of contemporary Russia with the Russia of the Czars, of quantum physics with the physics of the eighteenth century. Our knowledge in general, and our science in particular, are also and especially in this sense *historical*—which, as a matter of fact, signifies something quite the contrary of “cumulative,” another point to which we shall return.



The position whose main lines I am going to sketch here is that the mere existence of this process of knowing says something about *what* is—therefore, about what *is*—as well as about *the one who knows*—therefore about another aspect of being. It is paradoxical to hear it said so often: We know nothing of being; all that we know concerns only the knowing subject—as if one could exclude this knowing subject from

being.² And that has to be understood in the least trivial way possible. That *there should be* science (independent of the “concrete,” “particular” *content* of scientific claims) signifies something *about the world*. And that this science should have a *history* in the strong sense signifies, apropos of this world, the existence of some particularly strong properties. And these two assertions may be transposed into the subject of science: through the history of science is manifested a subject capable of knowing this world in a certain manner and of altering this knowledge of the world as it itself alters itself. The two aspects—the “objective” and the “subjective”—are absolutely indissociable.

In such a congested domain, what matters is that one do everything possible (without holding too many illusions) to render misunderstandings as difficult as possible. What we are saying here goes beyond “Kantianism.” We understand, and take as our presuppositions, that all knowledge is knowledge *of (by)* a subject—that, therefore, such knowledge is the deed of the subject, and that this knowledge is, in its organization, decisively affected by the organization of the subject as knowing subject, and moreover, that, if such knowledge has to have validity for every subject, other

²Undoubtedly, Kantians and neo-Kantians would respond: The knowing subject does not have *being* [*n'est pas*], it has *validity* [*il vaut*] (*es ist nicht, es gilt*). The response itself is null and void. To have validity, to be valid [*Valoir*] is a mode of being as this term is understood here, and as it almost always has been understood. And if a subject is limited to having validity without having being (in the usual sense, this time), a series of unpleasant consequences follows. First, we would not be able to talk to each other. Second, the *Critique of Pure Reason* would become both superfluous and impossible. For, what matters to us is *our* knowledge, not that of a fictive *constructum*. And I am not aware that Kant's pen was held by a transcendental hand.

requirements also appear (though at that point the situation becomes incomparably more complex). The physicist of today (and even of the time of Niels Bohr) is to be fully welcomed into the house of philosophy when he repeats, for example, that there are phenomena only with reference to “observations obtained under specified circumstances, including an account of the whole experimental arrangement” and that “the quantum systems we call ‘particles’...have no properties (indeed, in relativistic physics, scarcely any existence) *in themselves*. These they have solely *for us*, and this in ways that depend on the kind of instrument by means of which they are observed.” The philosopher would request only that the physicist in question repeat these evident points even louder for the benefit of his colleagues, the biologists or even the mathematicians.³ But it is also important not to lose

³Bernard d’Espagnat, who comments on the first of the statements quoted in the text (from Niels Bohr) with the aid of the second one (*Une incertaine réalité. Le monde quantique, la connaissance et la durée* [Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1985], p. 7), did so in a remarkable manner during a radio program broadcast on the France-Culture network in the early Seventies, observing that Jacques Monod clearly remained within the confines of nineteenth-century physics. Reading Jean-Pierre Changeux’s *Neuronal Man: The Biology of the Mind* (1983), tr. Laurence Garey (New York: Pantheon, 1985), one has the pleasure to discover that the flame of this venerable tradition is still carried high at the Collège de France. [T/E: *Une incertaine réalité* was reprinted by Fayard in 1993. On p. 14 of J. C. Whitehouse’s English-language translation, *Reality and the Physicist: Knowledge, Duration, and the Quantum World* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Bohr’s statement, which had appeared in French in *Une incertaine réalité*, is merely retranslated into English. This statement originally appeared in Bohr’s text “Discussions with Einstein on Epistemological Problems in Atomic Physics,” in *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist* (Cambridge University Press, 1949), p. 238. Whitehouse had supplied an English-language reference for Bohr’s reprint, in *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge* (New York: Science

sight—among philosophers, it is on this side, rather, that the danger lies—of the fact, for example, that no “experimental arrangement” could make a lamb give birth to a cow, or even, at the level of quantum mechanics, make particles appear (“create” them) without their having some relation to the available levels of energy in use. As Bernard d’Espagnat says (following here Wilhelm Dilthey), *reality resists*.⁴

There is no way of getting around the solidarity of these two dimensions—the “subjective” and the “objective”—their perpetual intertwining. Each new step in one of these directions refers us back once again to the other—and *vice versa*. All knowledge is a coproduction. And, in nontrivial cases, we cannot truly separate out what “comes from” the subject and what “comes from” the object. This is what I would like to call the “principle of the undecidability of origins.” For the near-perfect observer, the question of knowing, in an ultimate sense, what comes from the observer and what comes from the observed is undecidable.⁵ *We* play this game—but we cannot play it all alone, neither all alone as “individuals” nor all alone as a “collectivity of subjects.”

That a philosophy was able to affirm that it could furnish the “conditions of possibility for experience” by

Editions, 1968), but with no page number. The correct page number for the correct quotation is p. 64 of *Atomic Physics*. Monod—criticized by d’Espagnat as a nineteenth-century thinker, just as Castoriadis criticizes Changeux—was the 1965 winner of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.]

⁴T/E: “Reality resists us—which proves that it exists” (*Reality and the Physicist*, p. 91).

⁵See “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984) and “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), both now in the present volume.

looking *uniquely* at the “subject”—claiming, therefore, that what it says would and does have validity *in any world whatsoever*, is one of the most astonishing absurdities ever registered in the history of great thought. It is this absurdity that is at the foundation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*—which, in a paradox familiar within the history of philosophy, does not prevent the *Critique* from remaining an inexhaustible source for reflection.

Prima facie, one might think that two paths open for the conduct of this enquiry: starting from an analysis of the subject and going toward the elucidation of the experience of which a subject would be capable; or else, starting from the fact of experience (of the *Faktum der Erfahrung*) and asking how the subject must be for it to be able to accede to this experience. As one knows (*Prolegomena*, §4 *in fine*), Kant sometimes follows the first course (in his *Critique*), sometimes the other (in the *Prolegomena*). In truth, both steps are lame. Both of them neglect—*ignore* in the simultaneously French and English sense of this word⁶—the *object*; both ignore the *history* (the alterations) of experience; and, finally, both ignore (this is in part, but in part only, tied to the second point) the enormous charge of indetermination affecting the term (and the idea) of experience (or knowledge). To say, for example, *there is Erfahrung, therefore* the subject connects phenomena according to the category of causality; *or*, the subject can think phenomena only by connecting them in causal terms, *therefore Erfahrung* is, among other things, the causal connection of phenomena, is not simply circular or tautological. The entire circle *is* tautological in relation to a

⁶T/E: In French, *ignorer* can mean “not knowing,” “to be ignorant of”; the English sense of *ignore* is synonymous, rather, with “neglecting” or “not paying attention to” something.

preconceived idea of knowledge, Kant's. What Kant intends, in effect, by knowledge (or experience) is *deterministic* knowledge, knowledge of *a certain style*, of *certain phenomena* ("physical" or "psychical"). Therefore, this tautology is admissible—in more noble terms: it is an *Explikation*—as a simple explanation of a certain social imaginary signification conveyed historically by the term "experience" or "knowledge." At the end of the eighteenth century, a European philosopher could reasonably think that. And that—a remarkable fact for us, but certainly not for Kant—goes beyond his era. *There is*, in effect, also for us such a knowledge—it can even be shown that in a certain sense, for half of all possible paths, *there always also has to be* such a knowledge—a connection of certain phenomena or of certain aspects of phenomena, in accordance with a necessary relationship of before-after. I shall not do so here. But is there *only* that? Do we do *only* that? Ought we to do *only* that? If the answer were in the affirmative, we would have to relegate basic physics today to the status of nonknowledge. Moreover, we would have to forbid ourselves from reflecting on the immense work—not "experimental" or "empirical" but categorial—involved in today's basic physics. Lastly, we would *in fact* have to leave aside any thinking about the living being *qua living being*—and even more so, obviously, any thought about the psychical and about the social-historical *as such*.⁷

Kant says at the same time too much and not enough.

⁷I shall discuss the apparent exception that is the *Critique of Judgment in Time and Creation* [T/E: this book was never published, though a talk titled "Time and Creation" (1990) can now be found in [CL3](#)]. In the meantime, see "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in the present volume, especially 212-28.

Too much, because he posits “*his*” science (his mathematics and his physics) as (mathematical and physical) *science itself*, which it certainly is not. And not enough, because he does not reflect, or does not do so truly, on the conditions and the contents of an experience that does not pertain to mathematical and physical science. As we shall see below, the explosion and the alterations in the nature of mathematical knowledge (which involves infinitely more than just “non-Euclidean geometries”) alone tear down what was built up in the *Critique*, unless the latter is taken (and this perhaps would be, in the eyes of a dogmatic Kantian, the supreme insult) not for what it gives itself out to be—*fundamentum inconcussum* of rigorous science—but as a (certainly inadequate) idealization and “transcendentalization” of the Husserlian *Lebenswelt*. As Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and others—or, from another perspective, David Hilbert—knew quite well indeed, *I have to have* a sort of Euclidean geometry in order to discover and “prove” the non-Euclidean character of space-time; I have to have a sort of “rule of causality” (connecting “what happens” with “instrument readings”) in order to discover noncausality at a quantum level; I have to have an intuition, an ordinary spatial *Anschauung*, with the before-after couplet, in order to write a formalized proof for a radically nonintuitable mathematical object (for example, to prove that $2 \times \mathbb{N} = \mathbb{N} \times \mathbb{N}$). All this, however, is just an *ingredient* of science—not *science itself*. And within *this* perspective, as Husserl said, the Earth itself, as originary ark, does not move.⁸ In other terms, the *Critique* provides us with

⁸T/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

an excessive and incomplete “epistemology” of everyday life.

And of course, Kant’s *Critique* remains—it has to remain, given its initial choices—silent about what, in the object, renders possible the nonempty, *inhaltsvoll*, application of categories: Kant limits himself to calling it (in the *Critique of Judgment*) a “happy accident,” *glücklicher Zufall*. So here, then, is the necessary foundation that ensures that our necessary forms of knowing are not pure paranoid delirium (all paranoid delusions being perfectly watertight, coherent, and irrefutable): It is all a happy accident. Kantians often respond that this expression (or, worse, the problem to which it is supposed to respond) pertains not to the “constitutive” domain, which would be that of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but to the reflection that turns its attention back on this constitution. As I shall take up elsewhere at length the question of what lies at the bottom of this problem, I limit myself here to noting the diriment impediments that render this response completely inadmissible.

First of all, the very distinction between the constitutive and the reflective is ultimately untenable. Obviously, there is no reflection without constitution, but constitution is never achieved, *qua* constitution, without the moment of reflection intervening. A simple glance backward upon the history of German idealism after Kant (and independent of the “content” of the positions taken) should have made people attentive to this fact. Next and above all, certain conditions relating *to the object itself* are required for there to be any *constitution* of knowledge concerning the object. Form cannot be completely indifferent to its matter,

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]).

and *vice versa*, otherwise “the art of the carpenter could embody itself in flutes,” as Aristotle already knew.⁹ Lastly, as is very well known, a “Hegelianism” (hesitant and masked, but little matter) is already there in the second part of the *Critique of Judgment*, in relation to the organization of nature and to the signification of the existence of the living being, as it also is, in relation to human history, in the *First Supplement Concerning the Guarantee of Perpetual Peace*. Given the similarity in *content*, protests over the form appear for what they are: what in psychoanalysis is called “denial.” “That woman I saw in my dream was not my mother.” Why then do you say that in such an unexpected and vehement way? Undoubtedly because it *was* your mother.



We shall begin our discussion here on the factual, concrete, and, in a sense, genetic plane. We shall conclude with a summary at a more abstract level.

Take any living being whatsoever. Its mere existence shows (demonstrates), *ex post facto*, the existence of a certain kind of relationship between the organization of this living being and that of the world. Of course, this discovery as such implies the presence of a metaobserver (us, or the scientific subject). The aspect of most importance to us here is that this relationship is not simply “material.” We want to highlight not only the fact that, the living being being composed largely of carbon, it happens therefore that there is carbon in the world, or even simply the fact (certainly also important) that carbon could not have played the role it has played in the

⁹*De Anima* 1.3.407b24ff. Most of the time, this marvelously limpid and profound remark has appeared mysterious to translators and interpreters.

constitution of the living being had it not possessed certain specific properties. The aspect that matters to us here is above all “formal” in character. For example: the relative *permanence* (duration) of the living being presupposes and entails the relative *stability* of certain sorts of relations *in the world*.¹⁰

Furthermore, the *organization* of the living being presupposes and entails the *organizability* of (at least) certain parts of the world. (Living beings [*les êtres vivants*] are not imported into “our” world from an outside “paraworld.”) Now, the living being [*le vivant*] itself, in itself, on the inside, testifies first of all to this *organizability*, but—separation itself being, moreover, highly enigmatic from the point of view that matters to us here—“the outside world” of the living being also manifests this “organizability.” Indeed, the living being cannot function (that is to say, it simply cannot live, cannot be what it is) without “classifying,” without “categorizing,” therefore also without “distinguishing,” “separating,” and even “enumerating,” but also without bringing into relation the elements it distinguishes—and, finally, it must also be able to form and “inform” a part of the

¹⁰Of course, the whole fundamental problem of induction also is to be reexamined on this basis. While I return to it, indirectly, below, I shall treat it *in extenso* elsewhere. Let us note simply that, at least since Aristotle, it has been known that “some *x* are *p*” does not imply “all *x* are *p*,” and that the negation of this implication is in fact a tautology. It is distressing to think that a huge part of classical and contemporary European philosophy has tried to build up systems on the basis of this empty tautology, which, as is often the case with tautologies in these contexts, serves to mask a cardinal nontautology. This nontautology concerns, quite simply, the existence of an immanent quasi-universal. There are trees. There are stars. *Anthrōpos anthrōpon gennai* [T/E: Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1070a28: “man (in the sense of humans) begets man”]. And so on, endlessly.

world. This would be impossible if there were no *formable* and “*informable*” parts of the world—in other words, separable, enumerable, classifiable, categorizable—and if their “elements” and their “classes” could not, in certain respects, be brought into relation.

Obviously, in all this we are not presupposing, in the living being, any “subjectivity” of the kind familiar to us. We are presupposing, however, the evident fact that each living being (each living species, at least—an olive tree, a starfish, a cicada) forms and informs, organizes the world, after *its own* fashion.¹¹



Let us now assume on our part a minimum (“scientific”) knowledge of the world. This knowledge leads

¹¹In my case, this line of thought was blazed in ch. 5 and ch. 6 of *IIS* (written between 1968 and 1974 and published for the first time in French in 1975); in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973, now available in *CLI*; see notably 230-40); and in some other texts contained in the present volume. What I designated, in “Modern Science,” as “an essentially subjective system,” showing that the living being “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” (235), has since been called, by Francisco Varela, in a precise and felicitous way, the living being’s *closure* (*Principles of Biological Autonomy* [North Holland: Elsevier, 1979]), a term that, following him, I have often been led to use as well. Pursuing this same line of thought, I also encountered Henri Atlan (see, in particular, *Entre le cristal et la fumée. Essai sur l’organisation de vivant* [Paris: Seuil, 1979]) and, once again, Edgar Morin, whose *La Vie de la vie* (the second volume of *La Méthode* [Paris: Seuil, 1980]) contains reflections on the living being that are of an extraordinary richness and relevancy.

us to discover that this (*prima facie* relative and partial) stability, organizability, formability of the world is not limited to the “needs of the living being.” Life on Earth as we know it would be impossible and inconceivable without gravitation: that is, without the fall of apples, the tides, the apparent movement of the sun, and so on. *It happens (sumbainei)*, however, that an even greater host of phenomena that are of no relevancy for the living being—such as, for example, the expansion of stellar nebulas, the rotation and the very structures of galaxies—are ruled (in part) by gravitation. In other words, the hypothesis that living beings construct, on the basis of their “needs” and of a totally chaotic *X*, a “world fragment” wherein everything happens as if there were gravitation proves to exceed the acceptable limits of eristic gratuitousness. It is, moreover, intrinsically contradictory. It presupposes the universality and the closure of these needs of the living being *as* constitutive of this world—whose total *X*-ness it elsewhere claims to affirm. Much more than that, this *constructibility* of the world as a virtuality goes infinitely beyond the “epistemological circle” of the living being—and, in fact, beyond any assignable limit. This amounts to saying that there is some *immanent universal*, or something immanently ensemblistic-identitarian—and this, independent of the existence of the living being itself.¹²

That admission certainly does not signify that this “stability,” this “organizability,” this “separability”—“formability” in general—exhausts the world. From what we know about it, the situation is quite the contrary: these characteristics concern only one (or some) of its parts. At least one thing, however, is certain: there exists

¹²On the notion of the ensemblistic-identitarian, see “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983) and *IIS*, ch. 5, *passim*.

a stratum of natural being that is *organizable*, sufficiently so for the living being to exist therein; and the essential part of the organization that the living being imposes (or constructs) upon this stratum is ensemblistic-identitary—*ensidic*, for short.¹³ I call this stratum, with the living being included therein, the “first natural stratum.” Itself part of the first natural stratum, the living being nourishes itself upon it, one can say, not only by making use of its energy-matter, and not just by drawing upon “negative entropy” (Erwin Schrödinger): it nourishes itself upon it, one can say, ontologically and logically, inasmuch as this stratum allows the living being, each time, to construct its own living world, inasmuch as it finds there not “information” (the expression would have no meaning) but rather the formable.

Let us linger for a moment on the signification of this “construction of the world” by and for the living being. The term “construction” is ill chosen, for it implies that the “builder” merely assembles elements that already were there in their “form,” that this “builder” gives itself over to a combinatory and merely juxtapositional sort of activity according to a plan. Such is certainly not the case for the living being. This is also the reason why the term “self-organization,” used so much over the past fifteen years, seems to me ill chosen. In normal language, it would signify that the living being, existing already in a certain—mysterious—fashion, would proceed to carry out its own “organization,” would rearrange itself in another way. It

¹³I now use this handy and transparent neologism (from ensemblistic-identitary), as well as its derivatives: “ensidize,” “ensidizable,” “ensidization,” the meaning of which is immediately apparent [T/E: for French speakers, at least; English speakers should keep in mind that the French word “*ensemble*” also means “set” in mathematics].

is not by chance that this terminology is so often tied, in the biological domain, to a persistent use of information theory, which is here a genuine *leipsis tou zētoumenou*, a begging of the question, a way of giving oneself in advance the solution to the problem along with the problem. In nonliving “nature,” there is no “information” *for* the living being. It is the living being that *creates* even the “bits” of what, *for it*, is information. Likewise, in the social and political domain, the term “self-organization” is used by those who, in ignoring the radicality of the *self-creation* of the social-historical, persist in thinking (whether they know it or not) in terms of, and starting from, an “individual” (possessing from birth, one knows not how, language, understanding, real and articulate aims, etc.; a fictitious being next to which Centaurs and Chimeras would blush in shame at their realism) that, multiplied to a sufficient number of exemplars, would make “the social” appear as simple effect of coexistence or juxtaposition. Or else, this term is used by those who want to reduce the profundity of the political question, as question of the explicit self-institution of society—therefore of its radical self-transformation—to a patch-up job during the course of which the members of society would be allowed to “organize themselves”—getting their two cents in, no doubt, about what should be on the menu in the factory lunch room.

Leaning on an organizable—that is to say, ensidizable—being-thus of nonliving nature, the living being self-creates itself [*s'autocrée*] *qua* living being by creating in the same stroke a world, its world, the living world *for it*. It is important to distinguish (an “abstract” distinction and separation, to be sure) a “positive” and a “negative” of, or an “inside” and an “outside” to, this creation. The living being creates new forms, and, first of all, itself creates itself [*se crée lui-même*] *qua form* or rather *superform* that integrates, and

deploys itself in, an innumerable multiplicity of categorial forms specific to the living being (nutrition, metabolism, homeostasis and homeorhesis, reproduction, sexuation, etc.) at the same time that it multiplies itself while differentiating itself into species. From another point of view, however, one can say that, in existing, it creates entire “materially” graspable and assignable strata of “reality.” Thus, for example, color and colors: colored-being in general is a pure creation of the living being (of certain species of living being). *There are no colors* in nonliving nature—a fact whose immense significance is, not by chance, constantly ignored or passed over in silence by the great majority of philosophers and scientists, obsessed as they are with the desire to eliminate “secondary qualities” and to “reduce” them to properties, relations, etc., of nonliving nature. Quite obviously, “secondary” qualities are more primary than the others, it is within them that living beings (and we ourselves) live, and the idea that they can be made to disappear by “explaining” them away is an unfathomable stupidity. Colors cannot be made to disappear by “explaining” them away with the help of correlations between wavelengths and some structure of receptors paired with the central nervous system. And above all, nothing at all is *explained* thereby; one simply is noting a regular correlation. The fact and the being-thus of the *subjective* sensation of color are absolutely *irreducible* (as are those of odor, of taste—or of pleasure, of pain, etc.).

The living being thus creates irreducible strata of being—this is the “positive” and “internal” aspect—and it creates them within a *closure*—this is the “negative” and “external” aspect: they are for it *alone*, and each time (for each class, or species, or even singular exemplars of the living being) *what* they are (the *ti estin*) and their charge of being—what information theory is condemned to ignore:

“pertinence, weight, value, signification”¹⁴—is other *according to* the living being in question. Thus, for us humans *qua* simple living beings, polarized light does not exist (whereas it has an immense charge of being for bees and sea turtles) any more than radio waves exist for any terrestrial living being.

Let me recall, for present purposes, some of what are, for us, the *limitations* of the living being and of this creation:¹⁵

- this creation takes place, at least for each species, *once and for all* (relatively speaking and “in the main [*pour l’essentiel*]”);
- this creation occurs [*se fait*] at the same time under a fundamental (“in the main”: *exclusive*) restriction or constraint: that of *functionality* or *instrumental finality*.¹⁶

Let it be said, parenthetically, that we cannot conceive of the living being’s capacity to make something be *for itself within closure* without a minimal equivalent, in it, of *representational spontaneity* in the sense of the creation/positing of a *qualified* world, a world full of qualities, some of which have correlates, though not outside “equivalents,” while others do not. In other words, once

¹⁴“Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), in [CLI](#), 233.

¹⁵See [IIS](#), ch. 5, and “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984), now available above in the present volume, in particular 156-60.

¹⁶On the abysses this expression covers over, see “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” in [CLI](#), 235-36.

again, even for the qualities that have regular “outside” correlates, their specific *being-thus* for the living being pertains to a spontaneity (and *not* to a “passivity” or “receptivity”) on the latter’s part. Of course, representation (*Vorstellung*) in its elementary sense does not imply reflection (dreams are usually unreflective representations). Now, to the extent that there is, necessarily, a plurality of representations and that each one of them is intrinsically multiple in character, this representational spontaneity implies an *in-sensible* potentiality (*dunamis*) that is creative of the all-inclusive conditions for sensibility, either of a Receptacle or, again, of a “space” and a “time” as pure *ensidic* receptacles. This is nothing other than the possibility of the “pure forms of intuition” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In other words, the *Transcendental Aesthetic* holds good for dogs—and of course for us, too, to the (great) extent that we are related to dogs. The same thing goes for Martin Heidegger’s “transcendental imagination” (in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*). The imagination from the *Critique*, as well as the one from *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, produce, and produce only, the same thing once and for all; they are only the one-dimensional shadows of the radical imagination and of the radical imaginary, without which there neither is nor could be any knowledge and *history* of knowledge. (The same can be said, moreover, of the elementary and necessary forms of connection: “categories.”) I shall return to all these topics in *The Imaginary Element*.¹⁷

We may conclude, therefore, that the mere existence of the living being implies the effective actuality of an immense ensidizable stratum of what is. It goes

¹⁷T/E: See the French Editors’ n. 1 in the Preface to the present volume about this never published book.

incommensurably beyond the living being at the same time that it implies the possibility and the effective actuality of a surging forth, within Being/being [*être/étant*], of new and irreducible forms (such as the living being itself, and its works). It therefore implies (since the living being belongs to Being/being) an essential *ontological heterogeneity*: either an irregular stratification of what is or else a radical incompleteness of every determination *between* strata of Being/being.¹⁸



Let us now continue down the concrete or factual path. We are considering the human being—and also the question of its specificity in relation to the simple living being. We are concentrating, to be begin with, on one dimension, the psychical dimension (which is certainly a separatory abstraction). We have always known—and psychoanalysis in its theory and practice confirms, amplifies on, and greatly elucidates this knowledge—that the human psychism is what it is only by means of a radical rupture with the animal “psychism,” or what we can think about the latter. I shall highlight here only a few—but decisive—traits of this rupture. There is in the human being a defunctionalization of psychical functioning, and this is expressed in particular by the defunctionalization of the imagination and the defunctionalization (which often becomes, as is known, the

¹⁸I shall discuss these matters in detail, the attitude of “positive science” included, in *Time and Creation*. I shall do so, however, solely as a matter of conscience and in conformity with my politico-pedagogical temperament. For anyone who reflects on it, the fact of color ought to be enough to establish what is being said in the text.

counterfunctionalization) of “pleasure,” and, in particular, the *domination of representational pleasure over organ pleasure*.

Why this has been so is not our problem. (One cannot fail to connect this development to the considerable quantitative growth of the central nervous system in *homo sapiens*, but also, and perhaps especially, to changes in the organization of this nervous system.)¹⁹ In the human being, the functional loop that exists in the simple living being is always broken. Moreover, this rupture always occurs under pressure from an exorbitant, in fact monstrous, development of the psychism—analogue to a pathological neoformation—and, in particular, of the imagination as radical imagination, incessant representational flux unrelated to “vital needs” and even contrary to them, unmotivated surging forth of representations and a centering upon them. Fragments of the “previous,” essentially ensidic psychical organization certainly remain—the logic of dreams shows them to be constantly at work, and, later, the social fabrication of the individual will also lean on them—but they subsist like floating debris after a shipwreck on a raging sea.

Speaking strictly in biological terms, the human species proves, therefore, to be a monstrosity made up of specimens that are, as such, absolutely unfit for life. This species would probably have disappeared had something else not arisen at the level of the anonymous collective with society’s self-creation as instituting society. I have spoken sufficiently about this elsewhere. It suffices to recall here some evident facts. The monadic psyche of the singular specimen of *homo sapiens*, mad as it is, is transformed into a

¹⁹It seems quite clear that, for certain marine mammals, their brain weight/total weight ratio is of the same magnitude as, if not superior to, that of *homo sapiens*.

social individual by undergoing the imposition of a language, behaviors, and realizable aims. It is made capable of coexisting with others. And, finally, it has imposed on it concretely coinable aspects of the magma of social imaginary significations. It is only such a magma, as it is each time instituted, that is capable of furnishing the psyche with a meaning for “individual” and collective existence and for reality. And this existence and this reality can lend themselves to this cathexis of meaning only because they are, each time, constructed in an appropriate fashion by the institution of society.

The institution of society occurs [*se fait*], *also*, through reconstitution of an explicit ensidic (ensemblistic-identitary) dimension. It is this dimension that deploys itself in the *legein* and the *teukhein*—language as pseudo-univocal code, practice in its functional-instrumental aspects—of each society.²⁰ This reconstitution leans on the being-thus of the first natural stratum—though it is far from “reproducing” purely and simply, and even from reproducing at all, the ensidic logic of the living being. For, it should be pointed out, the ensidic dimension of society is, each time, decisively codetermined by what, in the institution of this society, *is not* ensidic: the properly imaginary, or poietic, dimension.

Here again, we have to think an irreducible multiplicity. On the one hand, the institution of society, of every society, has to, under penalty of death, establish a “functional” relationship with the first natural stratum. (Whatever its religion, for example, a pastoral society can *never* kid itself into believing that cows, sheep, and goats are impregnated *solely* by the action of spirits, etc.) Inasmuch as, on Earth, this first natural stratum is everywhere “the same,”

²⁰See [IIS](#), ch. 5.

there will be, due to this very fact, some “common elements” in at least certain articulations of the *legein* and the *teukhein* across diverse societies (in time and in space). The presence of these common elements is of capital importance: it is one of the mainstays for a virtual universality of human history. For *there is*, everywhere, the signitive relation—as *there are*, everywhere, words for the primary elements at least of the set [*ensemble*] of natural integers, or for the sky and the stars, or for hot and cold, and so on.²¹ I can therefore, if I want—and if the other person does not kill me first—begin to “speak” (to show by pointing, for purposes of a mutual teaching of the rudiments of our respective languages) with another human, whatever tribe that human comes from. This necessary condition is, however, totally inadequate (as is shown by the interminable difficulties encountered by ethnologists and historians when they are faced with societies different from their own). For, as instituted by each society, this ensidic dimension is totally immersed in the magma of imaginary significations of that society. At the limit, “one” signifies *one* (and yet, *what* does *one* signify?) throughout different languages *only* in its usage as an element of a code, flattened upon pure *legein*. And this is easy to see with an example from our own society. The pious Christian shopkeeper would never accept one dollar instead of three—whereas he confesses the equality of one = three at least every Sunday, and he does so with no “split” in his psyche. And of course, these imaginary significations, in which the ensidic in its instituted form itself takes part, are in no way superimposable, congruent, or mutually reducible between different societies (for example, Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu have no relation at

²¹ See “The Sayable and the Unsayable” (1971), in [CLL](#), notably 156-62; and, on the signitive relation in particular, see ch. 5 of [IIS](#), 244ff.

all to the Christian Trinity.) Presuppositions of an entirely other order stand behind the possibility of genuine communication between societies that are mutually *other*, and notably of their genuine comprehension and elucidation. Far beyond the level of the ensidic, these presuppositions are never “naturally” *given*, they are always to be conquered.²²

Moreover, independent of its solidarity with social imaginary significations, the ensidic as it is reconstituted and instituted by society seems quite different from the ensidic as we encounter it in nature, and in particular in the functioning and the organization of the living being. That, in my opinion, is the profound truth von Neumann glimpsed when he wrote, as early as 1955-1956, that “the language of the mind is not the language of mathematics.”²³ At least not *our* mathematics, *up till now*. And this is probably also what is behind what can roughly but very well be called the failure of “artificial intelligence,” or, more exactly, the coexistence within the latter of advances that go incommensurably beyond anything the living being is capable of and an apparently insurmountable, congenital infirmity when “artificial intelligence” is faced with a host of tasks that, for the living being, are more than trivial. And there appears to be at least one main reason for this. In and for the human (and, no doubt, also animal) central nervous system, there is certainly no

²²See, for example, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), above in the present volume, in particular 206-209. [T/E: See, also, “The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge” (1991), now in [CL6](#).]

²³John von Neumann, *The Computer and the Brain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 80-82. The same ideas may be found in *The Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata* (Urbana and London: University of Illinois, 1966), pp. 31-80.

separation of strictly logical functions from thymic (affective) and orectic (intentional or desiderative) ones. There is, therefore, at first glance nothing astonishing about the fact that one cannot, by means of a stripped-down and impoverished logic—that of calculators, that of “artificial intelligence”—reconstitute a *magmatic* organization at its highest point, the point at which, for example, not only the thymic (the affective) is not and cannot be separated from the noetic or the logical, but also at which the thymic itself cannot exist (and thereby, for example, “perturb”—from the engineer’s point of view—the logical) without itself being, in part, intrinsically “determined”—therefore ensidic, the converse being no doubt true, though infinitely more difficult to formulate.

I have taken this example, for, in what other domain, if not mathematics, could we claim to have created or produced a structure as neutral, as indifferent—once it is *hypothesized*—to the particularities of our society and of every society? Now, it really seems that, even in this case, the ensidic logic created by society *is not the same* as the one involved in the operations carried out by the living being—whereas there exist other strata of nature in which they coincide completely (everything in nature, for example, that pertains to rational mechanics). In other words—and to develop a conclusion whose import goes far beyond the example discussed here—society has to create *de novo* and at new expense something that *resembles* the basic natural data (those of life) but in no way is the copy or the replica thereof.

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That society should be, and that there should be a diversity of societies, refers back to a *sui generis* organization

of the first natural stratum. The latter has to be such that it is able to support (and lend itself to) an indefinite multitude of organizations that, each time, correspond to an *other* institution of society, each with an ensidic dimension particular to it.

And these same facts refer back to the social-historical field and to instituting society, in that they exemplify the existence of *potentialities* (*dunameis*) that cannot be imputed to determinate “subjects.”

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Nevertheless, this *sui generis* organization, this multitude of organizations that are potential and effectively actual *in re*, each one being almost exhaustively ensidizable, does not halt at the first natural stratum. It really seems to concern the totality of “natural” Being/being accessible to us. This is what is shown by the *history*, in strong sense, of science: of our science, of Greco-Western science. To grasp well the signification of this history, we must situate its birth within the more general context of the ensidic organization of all societies.

No society can function (or even pronounce and profess [*dire et se dire*] its own imaginary significations) without an ensidic dimension. Nevertheless, in almost all known societies the deployment of this dimension remains *bounded* (in the mathematical sense of the term). So-called savage societies already possess an immense amount of knowledge—and when one really thinks about it, knowledge much more astonishing than our own—that is incorporated into their activities and into their functioning, and that can, in principle, be made explicit within their language. Other societies, so-called traditional ones—ranging from Egypt and

China to the Mayas and Aztecs, not to forget Mesopotamia, Iran, or India—have, in addition, cultivated this knowledge as such and for its own sake, independent of its functional use or of its importance as armature for their imaginary in the narrow sense.

In the first instance, some have tried to define “savage thought” as a “*bricolage*”—and, in truth, with the same arguments this term could also be used to describe the thought of the traditional societies mentioned above.²⁴ This characterization is not false, it is simply superficial. What appears to the Western observer as “*bricolage*” is the lack of unity and systematicity of this thought according to the observer’s own Western criteria. These criteria have no pertinence here. Savages “rationalize” what matters to them, interests them, or imposes itself upon them; they are not possessed by the folly of extending rationalization indefinitely. This refers to—and, in truth, depends on—another, much more decisive trait that concerns no longer only knowledge but also the totality of social making/doing and representing in all these savage and traditional societies: *the halt to interrogation is instituted, is sealed by myth* (or religion, but in the sense in which I am taking the term *myth* here, it amounts to the same thing). The fact that savages work with the means at their disposal and with available “odds and ends” appears then to be clearly secondary and derivative. The “*bricoleur*” is he who does not himself fabricate his own tools and materials but limits himself to reusing and recombining what is already available. In the domain of knowledge (as well as in other domains, moreover), to fabricate tools and materials requires that one

²⁴Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1962; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

begin to make a *tabula rasa* of what is inherited, to challenge and to call into question the representations and the words of the tribe, that is, in the last analysis, the established institution of society. The very definition of traditional (“savage” or “historical”) society is the instituted impossibility—and the psychical inconceivability—of doing precisely that.

Even in these cases, to be sure, society continues to self-create itself, therefore to self-alter itself, even though it does not know that it is doing this and even while it does everything it can in order that this not be known. Thus is there in savage and traditional societies an at-best slow—though immense, in the long and hyperlong term—cumulation of knowledge, fully comparable to the cumulation of technical know-how [*technique*]²⁵—which, moreover, is rather understandable, seeing that it is most often merely the flip side of the first sort. And yet, this cumulation is unobservable when placed on the scale of generations and even of centuries, and it must remain so. Ensadic knowledge, especially its development, has to remain implicit, and even buried, just as had to be the case, and for the same reason, with the knowledge involved in stone-tool work, the fabrication of arms, the invention and improvement of pottery and agriculture.²⁵

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The break, the first one, as we know, occurred in ancient Greece. Here, something becomes detached from “common knowledge”—or from the “secret knowledge” of priests and magicians—and tries to become human *epistēmē*,

²⁵See [IIS](#), 268-72.

and *public epistēmē*, open to all those who are willing and able to work at it. Here are born two exigencies, along with the exploration of the possibility of satisfying them, which characterize what we understand by rational thought: unlimited interrogation, on the one hand; proof, whatever its means may be, on the other. Obviously, this interrogation turns on and *also*, almost immediately, turns to [*porte et se porte*] the *means* and the very *idea* of proof. Together, they form what the Greeks called *logon didonai*, giving an account of and a reason for.²⁶

²⁶Periodically we witness the return, accompanied by great clamor, of talk about near-Eastern or other “influences” on the Greek creation. On certain points, these “influences” are incontestable and important (Herodotus had already spoken about them!); on others, they are trivial or fabricated out of thin air. What, in any case, these discourses are missing, however, is the very nature of a historical creation. “Influences” there were and influences there practically always will be; perfect historical isolates are extremely rare. In important cases, they are taken up, metabolized, and incorporated into another, into a new *form*, which is self-sufficient. Furthermore, the discourses in question express a lamentable misunderstanding of the most elementary logic of the enquiry: Why then did the Egyptian “influence” not give rise to an Ethiopian mathematics? And while we are on this topic, what did the Hebrew people do with the mathematical and astronomical “influence” of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, who were much closer to them than the Greeks? And why was the Greek “influence” itself unable to prevent there from being not a *single*—and I mean a single—Roman mathematician whose name we might cite? Finally, in this case as in others, it would be better to try to understand what one is talking about. It is not a question of the “content” of certain ideas, or of their “results.” It is a question of the creation of a space for *logos* and of the means to move within it. No one, so far as I know, has credited the Greeks with the (capital) invention of the tape measure. They are credited with the *proof* of the theorem of the hypotenuse. Let us take our point to its ultimate conclusion: Should one discover tomorrow, on a piece of papyrus or on some clay tablets, in Egypt or in Mesopotamia, the complete *results* of Nicolas Bourbaki’s work, that would change *nothing* in what is at issue

The profound connections, the consubstantiality of this creation with the Greeks' political creation, and notably with the surging forth of democracy, cannot occupy us here,²⁷ any more than can the conditions under which the two movements—the emancipatory movement of men in the city, the emancipatory movement of thought—arose once again in Western Europe after having been covered over for many centuries. For what follows, we need only recall two profoundly different—and interrelated—traits that mark as *other* the magmas of imaginary significations in and through which this creation of rational thought in Greece, and its recreation much later in Western Europe, occurred. Each refers back, through all its fibers, to the totality of the imaginary of each of these two societies. What I want to examine now, to designate them briefly, is the place of the *infinite*, on the one hand, and of *artificiality*, on the other. These are well-known themes. One of their aspects—which has never before, to my knowledge, been highlighted—is in my view of importance for what follows.

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The infinite. Let us begin with the well-known catastrophe that was brought about by the discovery of irrational numbers. It may be recalled how the theorem attributed to Pythagoras leads immediately to the proof of the irrationality of the square root of 2 (as it will ultimately be

here and *nothing* about what I am saying. There was mathematics, as we intend it, from the moment there was *proof*.

²⁷For a brief overview, see “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy.”

formulated in Euclid, the proof of this irrationality is potentially the proof of the irrationality of *all* roots, of any order whatsoever, of *every* rational number that is not the perfect power of this order). The catastrophe is found in the fact that irrational numbers (in Greek: *arrhētoi*, unsayable; “surd” is still the English word, from *surdus*, mute and therefore silent) cannot be *determined* (in a *finite* number of terms, we would say) as exhibitable or as a ratio of two exhibitable numbers; they are *apeiroi*, unlimited, indeterminate. Now, that which is *apeiron*, that which has no *peras*, term, limit, determination, both contravenes the central interpretation of being as determinacy and, in Greek, *says on its own* that it is unknowable. It matters little here to know how Eudoxus (ca. 390-340 BCE), in extending the theory of proportions (which will be found in the fifth book of Euclid) and in inventing the indefinite approximation of the limit (which the Moderns have called the method of exhaustion), at one and the same time resolved this problem and created the Greek solution to the question of infinitesimals (Euclid, book 10, proposition 1). The essential point is that in mathematics the Greeks never accepted proofs other than those that today would be called *finitist* or *constructivist*. Similarly, Antiphon the “Sophist” (a contemporary of Socrates) had “in fact” resolved the famous squaring of the circle, as *we* now resolve it: he made the circumference the limit of the perimeter of the inscribed polygons, when their number of sides increases indefinitely. (And as was already known, for every polygon there is an equivalent square—subsequently: Euclid, book 2, proposition 14.) However, Aristotle severely rebuked him: *ton tetragōnismōn...*, *ton Antiphōntos ou geōmetrikou*, Antiphon’s quadrature is not geometry (but would be, rather, “dialectic”); geometry must proceed through “resolution into

parts.”²⁸

Another extremely instructive example concerns the apparent “absurdity” of Aristotle’s theory of movement. Thomas Kuhn has already said what should instead be thought about the obtuse incomprehension of the Moderns and about its signification.²⁹ To be is to be determined; what then enters into the essential determinations of things? For the Ancients in general, and Aristotle in particular, its *place*: the answer to *Where?* (*pou?*) is categorial. And for Aristotle, everything has its finality, its *telos* which is its nature; a “material” thing consequently has a *natural place*—where it finds itself, or else where it is of itself naturally carried (which we determine by observation: the low for heavy things; the high for light ones). Force, like cause, is therefore that which provokes a change of *place*—whether it be “natural,” and leads the thing to its natural place, or it be “nonnatural,” “violent,” and leads the thing elsewhere than to its natural place. To change all that, some strange ideas will have to be granted: that it is not place that belongs to the essential determinations of a thing, but rather its state of movement, and that the “natural state” of this movement, if one may

²⁸ Antiphon: Diels 2B13 = Simplicius *ad Phys.* 54.12; Aristotle *Physics* 1.2.185a14ff. On Archimedes: the use of extrageometrical (mechanical) methods may be permitted as a heuristic procedure, *on the condition that* the true rigorous geometrical proof follows (*Pros Eratosthenēn Ephodos*, la *Méthode à Eratosthène*, ed. Charles Mugler [Budé], vol. 3 [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971], pp. 82-84).

²⁹ I am really saying those *Moderns* who believe they are so knowledgeable and intelligent; I am not talking about the pioneers who, from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, struggled to create the new theory of movement. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Essential Tension* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1977), pp. 11-13, and his (unpublished) seminars mentioned at the beginning of the present text.

phrase things thus, is not the zero of movement but rectilinear and uniform movement, of which zero movement is only a particular case. The obvious result is that there can be no “natural place” for anything whatsoever, and that force is cause not of movement but of *change* of the state of movement.³⁰ Another result is that infinite uniform rectilinear movement had to be possible—and so, too, an infinite space. (Let us note that for us today this last idea is, strictly speaking, false.)

What prevented Aristotle from thinking all that? Why was he “naturally” led to thinking what he thought? Kuhn has recalled why: because, for him, “qualities” are very important; because his notion of movement is not only that of “local movement,” but includes also alteration, growth and decay, and, lastly, generation and corruption (“qualitative” movements); because “local movement” appears to him in a sense, too, as a change of quality; and because, these changes being, as a general rule, “natural,” there should also be natural *place*. (One can say just as well that there should be *local finality* for things.)

To all these elements rightly highlighted by Kuhn, another one may be added: if, against all possibility, Aristotle had thought movement in another way, he perhaps (and even probably) would have been led to accept the infinity of space. Now, that was impossible: for Aristotle, space *has to be* finite, the world closed and spherical. Was there an absolute boundary here to Aristotle’s thought, or ancient Greek thought, something unthought and unthinkable? Not at all: Aristotle repeats *ad nauseam* that there can be no infinity *in actuality*, and he does so precisely *because* a host of prior and contemporary thinkers had affirmed *the contrary*. To name

³⁰See [IIS](#), 396, n. 37.

only the most important one, someone with whom Aristotle was discussing matters all the time: the great Democritus, for whom there were only “atoms and the void,” taught, if the doxographers are to be believed, *the infinity of space and of worlds*. The bifurcation was already there: Greek thought had, among all the other things it did, *also* created the notion of infinity, in mathematics as well as in physics. Nevertheless, the one person who became its culminating and privileged representative for centuries to come, Aristotle, while not completely rejecting this idea, put it back, so to speak, “in its place”: infinity is only *virtual*, the series of whole numbers or the subdivision of the line into segments *does not stop*—but they can never be *given* together all at once (*hama*). This is also what explains how Aristotle (and ancient Greeks generally) can both reject spatial infinity and accept temporal infinity: an infinite past, an infinite future “are” only virtually; an infinite space (and infinite worlds) would signify an infinite totality given in actuality. If there always is (as is said in the fourth book of the *Physics*) time “other and other,” it arises as it occurs. But if there were space “other and other,” it would not arise from the moment we visit it, it would always already have been there.

The step from the “closed world” to the “infinite universe,” following Alexandre Koyré’s beautiful characterization,³¹ therefore put into play [*en jeu*] two *worlds* of signification. The difficulty lay not in “recognizing” the infinite but in *placing it at the center*. (And the Hebraic or Christian God has *nothing to do* with it: He was there for fifteen centuries, and the world remained spherical.) This is also why Bourbaki is a bit hasty when he speaks of this “step,

³¹T/E: Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957).

so natural (once engaged on this path), already announced by Fermat, ...from the plane and from 'ordinary' space to n -dimensional space." This ever "so natural" step "took more than two centuries to penetrate into men's minds"; it appears only "obscurely" in Carl Friedrich Gauss and one must wait for Arthur Cayley and Hermann Grassmann, "around 1846," to see it practiced "with the greatest of ease."³² It was certainly not that Archimedes or Gauss was troubled by the step from 3 to 4—it is that much more profound significations and schemata were at stake [*en jeu*]. The same thing may be said about non-Euclidean geometries: the construction of spherical trigonometry between Hipparchus and Menelaus (from the second century BCE to the first century CE) could have led to an *intrinsic* examination of the properties of a spherical—that is, curved—space.

For lack of space, I shall be much more brief about *artificiality*. A few facts: not only was there Hero of Alexandria's "steam engine" (first century CE), there were analog calculators ("the Antikythera mechanism," first century BCE; the "London calendar," between 330 and 640 CE, no doubt with much more ancient antecedents),³³ and, also and especially, the extraordinary machinery of war. There was also, however, a lack of interest in the "artificial" beyond, as a matter of fact, this last category (a rather easily understood exception). Now, this lack of interest weighs especially hard on the *theoretically artificial*. Aristotle already used letters "algebraically" in his writings. This usage will

³²Nicolas Bourbaki, *Algebra*, vol. 1, ch. 1 to ch. 4, Historical Note to ch. 2 and ch. 3, pp. 657, 660.

³³See, lately, Pierre Thuillier, "Les Mechanismes grecs sortent de l'ombre," *La Recherche* (December 1985): 1540-44.

find hardly any echoes. And even in Diophantus's work, much later on, "artificial" symbols (artificial, obviously, to the second degree) remained rare. Since Cardan's time,³⁴ at least, Europe has never stopped inventing them.

For the Greeks, there is *phusis* and there is *nomos*, but for what among them became, against Democritus and against Protagoras, the mainstream, the *knowing* of *phusis* does not pertain to *nomos*. Nor will the Moderns accept, as a general rule and *de jure*, the idea of the artificiality of knowledge: *in fact*, however, they will indulge in it unrestrainedly.

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Whatever ones says about it, *there really is* a unity to the theoretical project between ancient Greece and Western Europe. It is expressed by the resumption of the exigency of *logon didonai*, which has become fully active ever since, at least, William of Occam. It is symbolized by the, in a sense, unitary development of mathematics, from Hippocrates of Chios and from Eudoxus to the great modern inventions. Nevertheless, this exigency is essentially overdetermined, in both cases, by the magma of imaginary significations from which it gushes forth; it thus leads in different directions.

One can try to characterize this difference via these two ideas: the *infinite* and *artificiality*. Modern science appears as the subjectively and objectively unlimited (and, without any doubt, interminable) elaboration of ensidic logic and of the strata the latter discovers/constructs within the

³⁴T/E: Castoriadis is speaking here, of course, of the Italian polymath Gerolamo Cardano ("Jérôme Cardan" in French; "Hieronymus Cardanus" in Latin), not of himself under his post-1958 pseudonym, "Paul Cardan," chosen in Cardano's honor.

“real.” The *unlimitedness* of modern enquiry no doubt itself depends on an imaginary schema of the *thoroughgoing* [de part en part] *rationality* of physical Being/being—a schema foreign to the Greeks (in any case, up to and including Aristotle). *Artificiality* leads to a transformation of the very essence of the mathematical “object,” culminating in the “free positing” of axioms—unthinkable for the Greeks, for whom (as again for Kant) these axioms expressed intrinsic or “natural” (be they “subjective”) properties of space, not arbitrary positions subject [*soumises*] simply to the constraints of independence, noncontradiction, and, possibly, completeness.

Of course, it is difficult not to relate this unlimitedness, and this artificiality, to the central imaginary signification of capitalism: the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery.³⁵ What matters to us here, however, is what this deployment of modern science (“modern” in the “old” sense of this word, that is: “since the end of the Middle Ages”) discloses both in the being of its object and in the being of its subject—precisely as a function of its unlimitedness and its artificiality. One will have guessed what this is, if one has understood our preceding mode of argumentation: a deployment of science of the kind displayed by Western science, since, let us say, Galileo, would not be possible *either* “in any universe whatsoever” *or* for “no matter what society” formed by the accidental and inessential incarnations of a consciousness in general.

The deployment of Western science reveals in its object two key features. On the one hand, it offers a confirmation of the extraordinary immanent universality of

³⁵See “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality’” (1976), above in the present volume.

the laws discovered/created by us on the basis of narrowly “local” considerations (or else their “unlimited” but “bounded” extensibility, practically without modification: we have already spoken about this above, apropos of the living being). These laws appear as “locally universal” or “universal by strata,” “local” signifying here not a ball or a compact set in \mathbb{R}^4 , but instead one or several folia or leaves of a transversal layering. On the other hand, in what is by far the most important aspect—though it proves contrary to the initial, and for many people still valid, program of the Western scientific project—this deployment of Western science reveals an enormous irregularity *in profundo*, the absence of “systematic unity”—at least, such as we can or even could conceive it—fractures, canyons, or cosmic crevices, which nevertheless—another subject of unending astonishment—do not signify any positive “incoherency.”

We already knew—though this knowledge certainly is for many still a subject of controversy—that there is no *genuine* bridge running from the physicochemical to the living being, nor from the living being to the psychical and to the social-historical. The reductionists will cry “obscurantism”; the sole response these barbers, who are always willing to give a free shave, but tomorrow,³⁶ merit is this: *hic Rhodus, hic salta*. Even less. You are not being asked to give the “explanation” of the *sensation* “red,” but only to say *in what it might consist*, what the syntax and the

³⁶T/E: Castoriadis is making reference again here, as he did in “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy,” to an old French joke. A barber hangs a sign in his window stating, “Free Shaves Tomorrow.” When a customer who had seen the sign comes in the next day, expecting a free shave, he is told at the end of the shave that the only free shaves to be given are still for “tomorrow.” The sign is (potentially) eternally valid, yet never applicable or realizable.

semantics of the sentence that would furnish this explanation would be. Would they instead be of the kind:

$$\frac{a+b^n}{n} = X \text{ therefore God exists}$$

(Leonhard Euler to Denis Diderot, Saint Petersburg, 1774) or else, rather: “400 nanometers sensitize some of your receptors while 780 sensitize others, therefore that is why your daughter is mute and you sometimes see violet and sometimes see red”? Of course, once again, this irreducibility of varying strata of being does not signify any “positive” incoherency—nor does it mean that the living being can “violate” physicochemical laws or the human being biological laws (in the latter case, the meaning of the term “law” has to be revised from the bottom up, but that is another story). They do not violate laws; they content themselves with creating *other* ones. *What*, at the level of the living being, these laws, these connections, etc., are *has no meaning for the physicist*, just as the neurophysiologist, *as* neurophysiologist, does not see and is incapable of seeing anything more in *L’Enterrement du Comte d’Orgaz* than in any other colored surface.

The foregoing discussion, moreover, is of no utility except in relation to backward biologists and physicists (though, it is true, they are legion). Those who do not wish to blind themselves voluntarily recognize that rupture and heterogeneity are lodged at the very heart of the citadel, that the enemy has already been ensconced for at least fifty years inside the principal bastion, theoretical physics. The nucleus to the fiction of the homogeneity of the physical universe—which lies at the basis of the idea of *reducibility*—has been dislodged. The strata of physical

Being/being are obviously “compatible,” but they do not let themselves be integrated into a unitary and homogeneous system. Ordinary macrophysics, quantum physics, and supermacrophysics (to use the term already employed by Werner Heisenberg in 1935) exemplify, at the present stage of our ignorance, three mutually irreducible strata at the theoretical level. Between these three strata, the passageways are “negotiable”: *there is* a world. They are not, however, rigorous; they are simply “numerical,” not theoretically constructible: this world is not a “system” or a system of systems.³⁷

If it is necessary to illustrate further the theoretical situation of fundamental physics today, let us recall that structures so profound that they in fact remained wholly implicit and perfectly classical in the most subversive conceptions of the previous period (general relativity and quantum physics, as well as the *topology* of space-time), have been called into question since the early 1960s and really seem in fact as if they must be abandoned. John Wheeler’s conceptual model, for instance, would seem to allow for several “scales” of space-time whose various topologies would differ essentially. To borrow his image, in ordinary life (and physics) we “see” and “live” a space-time that is smooth like the surface of the Ocean seen from a plane—whereas, at a lesser distance, this surface is covered with waves and, from

³⁷I have long insisted on this point (“Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” [1973], in [CLI](#), 199-224), which always seems incomprehensible to the run-of-the-mill physicist when it comes to the relationship between Newtonian theory and relativity. To present the first as a “less good approximation” than the second is to ignore the heterogeneity of the postulates and theoretical structures of the two conceptual models, and to speak not as a theoretical physicist but as a decimals cook.

quite close up, one notices that it includes currents, turbulences, foam, etc. This “foam” of space-time—which introduces at one and the same time both discontinuities *and* perpetual changes in its very topology—would appear on the scale of Planck’s length, or 2×10^{-33} cm.³⁸

And it might be that quantum fluctuations in the topology of space-time on the aforementioned scale would give rise to the birth and the disappearance of “elementary” particles. There would be no point in stating that this is only a theory. If Wheeler’s conceptual model is not accepted, there will be other, still “worse” ones, perhaps—like Roger Penrose’s twistor space—for, it will really be necessary to try to get out of the absolutely chaotic situation in which fundamental physics finds itself today. Nor would there be any point in stating that these are only “effects of scale” of no theoretical or philosophical import. Let us note, first of all, that such alleged “effects of scale” already exist in general

³⁸Topology is, summarily speaking, the study of homeomorphisms, namely biunivocal and bicontinuous transformations. In more ordinary, and more humorous, language, a topologist is someone who is incapable of seeing the difference between an air-chamber and a cup of tea or a cube and a sphere—whereas he sees innumerable abysses separating a woven wicker basket from another basket of the same form and dimensions made in a poured-plastic mold. Topology concerns spatial properties that are, in a sense, more “profound” and (thus) more hidden than its number of dimensions or even its Euclidean or non-Euclidean character. For example, in Wheeler’s conceptual model, cited in the text, changes in topology come from the *foam*. One passes from a smooth to an agitated sea by continuous transformation (same topology), whereas the foam spoils the topological unity of this surface. For a very clear summary of Wheeler’s thesis (and other, even stranger contemporary conceptual models), see the article by Abhay Ashtekar (professor at the Pierre-and-Marie Curie University in Paris and at Syracuse University in New York), “La Gravitation quantique,” *La Recherche* (November 1984): 1400-1410.

relativity, where, quite to the contrary, the condition for “smoothness” or “usual regularity” is the inverse: the space-time that is not Euclidean in its totality (whatever that may mean) is “locally Euclidean” (“local” here signifying, of course, a \mathbb{R}^4 sphere of “sufficiently” small diameter). Now, already in general relativity, differences in scale are not differences of “aspect” or “perspective,” but rather are really expressed by *other laws* in each of the two domains. And quite evidently, but even more strongly, such is the case with Wheeler’s “foam”: it is not sufficient that the “grains” behave in a certain way when one is right over the water; all of that must still appear to behave with regularity for an observer situated fifteen miles above. Now, as I have already said and as I shall now repeat: It is radically out of the question for the “eye” of this observer to impose such a regularity on something that does not so lend itself, or that, “intrinsically,” is completely amorphous.³⁹

The conclusion is unavoidable: There exist heterogeneous strata of physical Being/being. Each of these strata includes an ensidic dimension—or lends itself, indefinitely, to an ensidic elaboration, to an ensidization.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, their *relationship* does not so lend itself. “Empirically,” there is no positive incoherency: we still land

³⁹This is why what is said in the text is *totally and strictly independent* of the success or failure of “grand unification” theories or of Sheldon Glashow’s “snake biting its own tail” (gravitation again becoming the dominant force at the scale of Planck’s length). What one would then have would be a unity of the “substrate,” which would explain nothing about the *regular existence* of the Newtonian world, or of the *near*-totality of the visible world.

⁴⁰It is clear that this alone suffices to eliminate absurdities like P. K. Feyerabend’s “anything goes.”

on our feet when making calculations; for sufficiently small v/c , Lorentz formulae are unneeded. Theoretically and logically speaking, however, there is a lack of relationship. The axioms, the basic concepts, and logical structure of the corresponding theories are other. One does not pass from Newton to Einstein by continuous transition. To make the passage, one must replace “it is true that P ” with “it is not true that P .”⁴¹ This change in axioms, at the level of theory, corresponds to a fracture at the level of the object.

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The term “axiom” recalls for us the domain of mathematics. Without mathematics—without its immense development—Western physics quite simply would not exist. Following so many others, I too am astonished by the “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics,” to borrow Wigner’s phrase.⁴² I remain so. But, in view of what we have already said, I believe that the question is finally becoming thinkable. What is mathematics, as it has unfolded in Modern Times (and once it was liberated from Greek “naturalness”—which is still there, even if now it is in the naturalness of the Kantian “subject”)? It is, on the one hand, a proliferating elaboration or working out of ensemblistic-identitary logic—and it is an elaboration that, while

⁴¹ P being, for example, the proposition: “There exist signals propagated at infinite speed”—or even: “There exist instantaneous actions at a distance.”

⁴²See the preface to [CLL](#), xiv-xix. [T/E: Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13:1 (February 1960).]

continuing this logic interminably, would long ago have reached the limits of triviality and insignificance, had it not been for the creative imagination of mathematicians (which expresses itself first and foremost in the positing of *new axioms*), who are founders of branches (arborescences of theorems) other than those that already exist. Of course, the *liberation* of this creative imagination requires a set of social-historical conditions that, themselves, pertain to the social imaginary (and that have been met in modern Western Europe only). On the other hand, the freedom of the mathematician's imagination—which is fully comparable in this respect to the freedom of the imagination of the creator of a work of art—yields of itself to exigencies that we may formulate—though, in themselves, such requirements provide no *rule*, not only for “inventing” axioms but even for judging immediately and with certainty their *importance*. We can say, in effect, that a system of axioms can be anything whatsoever (i.e., arbitrary), *provided that* the axioms are independent and noncontradictory (their “completeness” is yet another question). And yet, this in no way prevents one from positing systems of axioms that offer no interest—or no genuine “fecundity.” But what interest? What fecundity? Who is to sit in judgment upon them?

Now, without for an instant insinuating that this importance or fecundity is to be gauged by the applicability of mathematical theories to physical phenomena (which would be intrinsically absurd *and*, we shall see straight away, would only push the question back a notch), the fascinating, really significant fact, which is fully acknowledged but which is generally not reflected upon from this angle, is the strange interrelationship between the deployment of mathematics and the history of modern physics. What I mean is this interminable game of leapfrog in which sometimes

mathematics would seem to be “preparing” in advance the forms physics “will have need of,” sometimes physics “forces” the invention of hitherto nonexistent mathematical forms, sometimes both of these occur together, and sometimes, finally, physics remains at an impasse because no one has succeeded in creating the required mathematical tools. There can be no question of treating this immense subject here. I shall limit myself to providing a few clear examples of the four principal cases I have just mentioned.

One classic example of the first case is provided by general relativity. Riemannian geometry and the absolute differential calculus of Gregorio Ricci and Tullio Levi-Civita were already there at Einstein’s “disposal” for fifty and twenty years, respectively.⁴³ On the contrary—this is the second case—for the requirements of quantum physics, Paul Dirac had to invent (1926) what Laurent Schwartz was going to make into distribution theory. The classic illustration of the third case is to be found in Newton, with the invention of analysis and its application to physics (this more or less parallel progress in the development of rational mechanics continued, moreover, throughout the eighteenth century until Joseph-Louis Lagrange and Pierre-Simon Laplace, if not until William Rowan Hamilton and Carl Gustav Jacob Jacobi in the middle of the nineteenth century). The fourth and final case may be illustrated by the obstacles the hydrodynamics of turbulent flows encounters for lack of adequate mathematical “tools.” A fifth case could be added: a mathematical theory is

⁴³Einstein, moreover, had to reinvent some parts of mathematics that had remained unknown to physicists (and even to Hilbert himself!), such as Bianchi identities (Abraham Pais, *“Subtle is the Lord”: Science and Life of Albert Einstein* [Oxford and New York: Clarendon, 1982], pp. 221-23, 256, 258).

developed and improved indefinitely without there being any “real world” correlate. Strictly speaking, these cases are innumerable—but no one can ever say whether or not they are just “temporary.” This is the case for the queen (pure number theory) of the queen (mathematics) of the sciences. Nevertheless, the recent use of prime number theory in cryptography encourages us to consider this case with prudence from the point of view of interest to us here (even though it involves a technical utilization, rather than correspondence with a “reality”).

Now, *this* relationship, this *type* of relationship between mathematics and physical reality, this *history* of the two, in the strong sense of the word, their intertwining and the history of this intertwining raise a new question *and* radically displace the space in which this question has been posed as well as the possible responses. A minute of reflection suffices to show one that, in light of these enormous *facts*, in light of their certainly inexhaustible, but not arbitrarily malleable signification, the inherited philosophy (as “theory of knowledge”—though there is no theory of knowledge that does not presuppose and entail an ontology) appears totally devoid of interest, for it lacks an object. It is not just that empiricism or rationalism, critical idealism or absolute idealism, appear desperately naive; they are irrelevant, beside the point. They exist in a dream world where the presuppositions of knowledge are not social-historical and where this knowledge has no genuine *history*: this is so either because history has been reduced to a cumulation (Kant) or because it is made to depend on a “dialectic” (Hegel) that is in truth its very *negation* (and which, furthermore, never is, in this case, *durchgeführt*, put to work and applied).



This relationship itself *says* something *about the world*. The physical world *is* ensidizable (mathematizable). It is not so “in various ways” (supposedly arbitrary ones, so that “anything goes”); there are not two gravitational theories for ordinary phenomena, from the molecule to the galaxy, there is one and only one. Rather, it is so *in other ways*, and thus *according to* which *stratum* of this world one considers (or one “discovers”—one “constructs”—one “creates”). The relationship between these strata *is not* itself ensidizable, it is not constructible. And the “subject” of knowledge—that is to say, in fact, indissociably the society/individual, whether “scientific” or other—in any case *recreates* this ensidic organization, relative to the first natural stratum in and through which it lives. In addition, however, and starting from a twofold rupture in history, this “subject” first calls into question this ensidic organization’s dependence on its own imaginary significations and then freely creates under certain minimal constraints, in and through mathematics, apparently gratuitous ensidic systems or quasi-systems, a great number of which nevertheless *are found* or *happen* to correspond, in one manner or another, to the organization of this or that other stratum of physical Being/being.

The history of science therefore has two aspects. On the one hand, there is the deployment, the elaboration of ensidic logic. This fact, which has not adequately been reflected upon, has nourished the illusions associated with ideas of progress, the fiction of an asymptotic approach, the naiveties (still found in Kant) about the cumulativeness and additivity of science. To be sure, there is—as soon as hominization begins, and even before!—a “progression” of a certain sort of knowledge; we have spoken about this above.

If, however, one does not view it solely from a “pragmatic” standpoint as growth of an instrumental mastery, of the means for increased domination over the environment, one will see that this “progression” has in truth been a re-creation and reconquest of the organization of the first natural stratum. On the other hand, it has been dependent, each time, on the magma of imaginary significations of the society being considered. Thus, what today *we* call science is clearly one vein of the Western imaginary magma, for it is *here alone* that people have tried (almost successfully) to detach the ensidic from all else and that the simply logical, the simply instrumental, the simply formalizable have become dominant imaginary significations. Even *within* this historical period, however, advances do not and cannot occur by simple elaboration of the ensidic—still less, of course, by accumulation of experimental results and observations. Which experiments does one decide to perform and why, what can be seen in that which is observed, and by means of what does one see it? Such advances occur, in the great cases, through *ruptures*, or by the emergence/creation of new schemata or imaginary matrices that refer to the “real world” (*or not*, as in the case of mathematics). In this regard, there is a radical difference between what, to take the most incontestable cases, can be symbolized by the names of Newton and Einstein, on the one hand, and Pierre Louis Dulong and Alexis Thérèse Petit, or Johann Jakob Balmer, on the other. What Kant says in §47 of the *Critique of Judgment* (the distinction would only be one “of degree”) shows his incomprehension of what is in question here and the inability of his conception to grant a place to an *idea-related imagination*. Ten-thousand Balmers working ten-thousand years would not have been able to write the *Principia Philosophiae Naturalis*.

The imaginary and the imagination thus intervene quadruply in our question:

- as re-creation and construction, by society, of an ensidic dimension that actually reaches [*atteint*] the first natural stratum without in any way being a “copy” thereof;
- as first questioning of this ensidic dimension’s permeation by the inherited/instituted imaginary, and creation of *logos* and of *logon didonai*;
- as the goal of detaching the ensidic from everything else, and emergence/dominance of the imaginary ideas of *unlimitedness* and of *artificiality*, thus giving rise to the birth of modern Western science, properly speaking; and
- as continued work of the imaginary within the latter, manifested in and through the creation of new theories touching upon [*atteignant*] other strata of Being/being.

In this affair, the naive notion of “progress” is as ridiculous as the incredibly superficial idea of the simple “elimination of falsehoods,” of “falsification.” Apparently, Sir Karl and his proselytes are incapable of thinking two things at the same time: namely, that Newton’s theory is false with regard both to its own pretensions to unqualified truth *and* to the incarnation of these pretensions in its axioms; and that Newton’s theory is true (or, I really mean, accurate) in a domain of validity Newton could never even have dreamed of when he created it (not because of the *dimensions*, but because of the *very nature* of the objects involved in this domain). This is also what, in an inverse and identical way, Feyerabend and others like him cannot comprehend. What we

have here is *history*. Not cumulation, addition, or simple progress. Any alleged gains are real gains only when they have been, as they must be, re-taken, re-conquered, re-interpreted. After all, this is what Goethe already said—of every inheritance.

Within this history (the history of science), the number of great ruptures that have occurred is therefore, once again, two: the Greek one, which is inaugural, and the modern European one, which is far from being a mere resumption and continuation of the first. In this sense, we should be wary of every generalization about the history of science: we cannot talk about it as if our statements could be verified in an indefinite number of cases; in a sense, our object is hardly more than four centuries old, and it includes, perhaps, four or five genuine “revolutions,” to use Kuhn’s term. Nevertheless, this history itself also should no longer be presented as a series of chess games—or, inversely, as a series of steps taken by a sleepwalker. We would have to reconstitute the internal logic of this history: the logic of imaginary creation under the twin constraints of reference to the “real,” on the one hand, and of “continuity,” on the other,⁴⁴ with this imaginary itself encompassed by the imaginary of society and of the historical period in which it is anchored.

At the same time, however, we cannot fail to recognize the *sui generis* continuity that connects our science with its Greek origins. For, through and beyond the rupture of which I have spoken, there remains the common ground first

⁴⁴On this path, which was opened by the great—and, in France, almost forgotten—Pierre Duhem, the wonderful book by Thomas Kuhn, *Black-Body Theory and the Quantum Discontinuity, 1894-1912* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon, 1978), represents a model that will be difficult to surpass.

broken by the Greeks. *Logon didonai* is still there—and *nowhere but there*, that is to say, today, *here*. It is also expressed, however, through its central, shared exigencies. On the one hand, the *ultimate internal criteria* remain the same. One may sometimes be surprised or disappointed by some argument Aristotle puts forth in his treatises on biology, or even in the *Physics*; we never doubt (and, if we did, we would be stupid) that Aristotle would have accepted, as much as we would, perhaps even better than we would, being refuted by a valid logical argument, or by a pertinent empirical counterexample. We no longer can speak his language, but we are thoroughly convinced—rightly, I believe—that we could easily bring him around to speaking ours. On the other hand, the *external referent* or the object nevertheless still overlaps to a large extent. It is not identical: Aristotle's definition of *physis*, the ensemble of Beings/beings that have *in themselves* the *principle* of their movement (still true in my view), would not be accepted by the overwhelming majority of scientists over the past four centuries, either because of their theism or deism or, more humorous still, because of their materialism. Nevertheless, both he and we would agree that we should consider this Being/being, whatever it may be (*hoti pot' estin, ce qu'il peut bien être, was immer es sein mag*), *in and for itself*, and not as a dream of Brahma or a manifestation of Yahweh.



We had begun with a series of affirmations, which contained, in virtuality, our questions. Let us reformulate them clearly, near to this evidently temporary end we are now approaching:

- How does the world have to be for a certain science (beyond the mere survival of the living being, therefore also of ourselves) to be possible?
- How does *this very same world* have to be for a genuine (*non*-“cumulative,” *non*-“additive,” *non*-“progressive”) *history* of science to be possible?
- How, finally, does the “knowing subject” have to be for it to be able, first of all to create, then to overthrow/conservate, this science and its history?

By virtue of what has been elaborated here, we can contribute a few elements of an answer. The physical world has to be “locally” ensidic—or: in this world, the ensidic has to be “everywhere dense.” Nevertheless, this world does not form an ensidic “system”; it is stratified, and this stratification is irregular, heterogeneous. (We obviously are not talking here about the “ultimate constituents of matter”; we are talking about what *truly is*, namely: *forms* and *laws*.) The history of science shows that the world is not ensidizable *in its totality*, but that it is so almost indefinitely *in fragments*, and that, in the decisive cases, the linkup [*raccord*] between these fragments is simply *de facto* (as is expressed, on our scale, by numerical agreements [*accords*] “to the second order”). This is already true of the strictly “physical” world—not to speak of the gaps of another nature that separate the physical from the biological and both of them from the psychical and from the social-historical.

Lastly, the “knowing subject” is not and cannot be *ego*—and still less *ego-logical*. Language and understanding are social-historical creations, imaginary institutions that have to be imposed upon the singular psyche and permit the latter to make something of the debris of its prehuman ensidic organization. There is no *ego-language* any more than some

mono-understanding; social-historical existence is an *absolute* condition for subjectivity. And this subjectivity is far from being “simply logical,” *even* in its “logical” and “knowing” operation. There is a creative potentiality to the subject—to the singular subject—also *in the domain of knowledge*, which is source of innovation. In altering its knowledge—the social-historical knowledge each time established—the subject does not “adapt” itself; it *posits* new *thinkable figures* of Being/being as knowable and thinkable. And this it can do only because it is also and especially *radical imagination*, a virtually communicable—figurable and sayable—presentational potentiality. It could not do this through its “reason” or through its “understanding.” The one and the other can contrive and corroborate, systematize or deduce—neither the one nor the other can *posit* anything that is *new* and has a *content*.⁴⁵ But without language, without understanding, without reference to a “reality” and even to the tradition of research, this imagination would produce only private phantasms; with them and through them, it can create a *knowledge*.

We have to understand that being is essentially stratified—and that it is so, not once and for all but “diachronically”: the stratification of being is also an expression of its self-creation, of its essential temporality, or of being as incessant *to-be*.

We have to understand, too, that *there is* truth—and that *it is to be made/to be done*, that to attain [*atteindre*] it we

⁴⁵Kantianism is, immediately, just an ordinary and relativistic empiricism when it comes to the content of knowledge. I shall return in *The Imaginary Element* to the deep-seated reasons why, in the Kantian context, a thinking *phantasia* is impossible (which was not the case for Aristotle; see “The Discovery of the Imagination” [1978], above in the present volume).

have to *create* it, which means, first and foremost, to *imagine* it. Here again, the great poet is more profound and more philosophical than the philosopher. “What is now proved was once only imagin’d,” wrote William Blake.⁴⁶

Paris, December 9, 1985

⁴⁶This evident and dazzling phrase (cited by Abhay Ashtekar in his previously cited article, p. 1404) is Proverb 33 of the “Proverbs of Hell” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. I thank Cliff Berry and David Ames Curtis for having located for me the exact reference.

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 October 1999 reprint of [*Domaines de l'homme*](#), the (uncorrected) French source for the present [*CL2*](#) translation.

[Highlighted version of the French original of *Carrefours du labyrinthe*, tome 2.](#)

- | | |
|--------|---|
| 173 | la maturité la capacité = la maturité, la capacité |
| 174 | 1974 = 1973 |
| 175 | rapidement il = rapidement. Il |
| 208 | Boumedienne = Boumédiène |
| 281n.c | p. 191-195]. = p. 236-237]. |
| 347 | <i>Nachmachung</i> = <i>Nachmachen</i> |
| 348 | p. 161-189]. = p. 182-183]. |
| 369 | ajouter une ligne blanche avant “Quelles sont les limites...” {voir p. 296, édition de 1986} |
| 371 | telles qu'ils se manifestent = tels qu'ils se manifestent |
| 373n22 | <i>ton nomon mè epitèdeion einai</i> = <i>ton nomon mè epitèdeion theinai</i> |
| 404 | les peuples = personne
https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Maximilien_Robespierre |
| 418n.a | <i>noèsis noèseôs</i> = <i>noèsis noèseôs</i> {1074b34} |
| 419 | <i>anankèi hama</i> = <i>anankè hama</i> {voir: 432a8} |
| 420 | D. Ross = W. D. Ross |
| 425 | <i>hupolepsis</i>). = <i>hupolèpsis</i>). |

- 425 et la note b. et 429 *eidolopoioountes* = *eidôlopoiountes*
 429n.c 289-324] = 294-95]
 428n.c 325-413]. = 401-409].
 437 *logos allos* = *allos logos* {450a9}
 439 Premiers Analytiques L. II, 2770a 10 = *Premiers Analytiques* L.
 II, 27 70a 10
 447 Ne faut-il pas garder la première phrase de la note f (p. 357 de
 l'édition de 1986) : « L'essence est indivisible. » ? La citation, par
 contre, se trouve plus loin dans le corps du texte.
 473 *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* =
Vorstellungsrepräsentanz
 490 *ontos on* = *ontôs on*
 499 p. 160-164 = p. 160- 164; réédition, p. 208-214
 509,556,559 $\mathbb{R}^4 = \mathbb{R}^4$
 511 *archên kinéseôs* = *archên kinéseôs* {192b14}
 515 p. 163-164 = p. 160- 164; réédition, p. 213-214
 531 p. 334-355. = p. 334-352.
 534 *genna.* = *gennai.* {1070a28}
 550 *Antiphontos ou geometrikou,* = *Antiphôntos ou géômetrikou,*
 567n37 *Black Body Theory* = *Black-Body Theory*
 568 *oti pot' estin* = *hoti pot' estin*