

CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH
Volume 3
WORLD IN FRAGMENTS

by Cornelius Castoriadis*



translated from the French
and edited anonymously
as a public service

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

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

NOTICE

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

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

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

Castoriadis, 1 rue de l’Alboni 75016 Paris FRANCE

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

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

* Much Castoriadis material has gone out of print and much more remains to be translated into English, publication projects in which T/E is currently engaged. So far, in addition to the present volume, five other Castoriadis/Cardan volumes (listed below with the electronic publication dates) have been translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service:

■ *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*. <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf>. December 4, 2003.

■ *Figures of the Thinkable, Including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf>. February 2005.

■ *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today*. <http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>. October 2010.

■ *Postscript on Insignificance, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. 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).

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

CONTENTS

<i>Table of Contents</i>	iv
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in English, with Standard Abbreviations</i>	v
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in French, with Standard Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Notice</i>	xii
<i>On the Texts</i>	xiii
<i>Translator/Editor's Foreword</i>	iv
<i>On the Translation</i>	lii

KOINŌNIA

The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism	1
Reflections on Racism	21
Individual, Society, Rationality, History	40
Dead End?	86

POLIS

Intellectuals and History	130
Power, Politics, Autonomy	143
Psychoanalysis and Politics	185
The Idea of Revolution	204
The Revolution Before the Theologians: For a Critical/Political Reflection on Our History	227

LOGOS

The State of the Subject Today	249
The "End of Philosophy"?	303
Time and Creation	331
<i>Appendix: Potential Errata</i>	375

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.

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

Notice*

The world—not only ours—is fragmented.

Yet it does not fall to pieces. To reflect upon this situation seems to me to be one of the primary tasks of philosophy today.

The texts brought together in this volume have attempted to do just that. Written between 1986 and 1989, they were composed in preparation for the works *La Création humaine* and *L'Élément imaginaire* on which I am working.¹ The reader will be able to situate them more readily by referring to the Prefaces to *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (1978) and [*Domaines de l'homme*](#) (1986).²

Paris, December 1989

*Avertissement, [MM](#), 7 (7 of the 2000 reprint).

¹Translator/Editor (hereafter T/E): Neither of these multivolume works was published in Castoriadis's lifetime. In the French Editors' first note for the Preface to [CL2](#), it is explained:

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 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, 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: Now available in English as [CL1](#) and [CL2](#).

On the Texts

T/E: All the texts appearing in this volume are reprinted here in the form in which they were published, aside from the correction of misprints and of a few *lapsus calami*. A few rare additions are indicated by brackets. Relevant publication information for each text now appears in the corresponding publication notes, while footnotes have been numbered consecutively, sometimes preceded by “French Editors,” “Author’s addition,” or “T/E.”

Translator/Editor's Foreword

The text printed below was originally published as the Translator's Foreword for the collection of Castoriadis texts titled *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* ([WIF](#); Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Along with a special *Thesis Eleven* issue I edited that celebrated Castoriadis's 75th birthday, both [WIF](#) and [The Castoriadis Reader](#) appeared approximately six months before Cornelius Castoriadis's death on December 26, 1997. Upon reading this Foreword, Castoriadis kindly pronounced it one of the "best" overall introductions to his work. It is reprinted below upon my sole responsibility. Any defects or errors in this effort to contextualize and elucidate Castoriadis's theme of a "world in fragments" are, of course, my own.

The present volume, [CL3](#), differs from [WIF](#). In the Translator/Editor's Foreword for [CL2](#), I explain this complex and conflictual publication history, which has resulted in not all [CL3](#) texts appearing in [WIF](#) and not all [WIF](#) texts now appearing in [CL3](#).

N.B.: Some slight editorial changes have been introduced into this [WIF](#) Foreword 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

1997 *World in Fragments* Translator's Foreword

The present anthology is titled [World in Fragments](#), my translation of *le monde morcelé*.¹ The French phrase has served as the title for two separate texts by Cornelius Castoriadis: a talk given in the early 1970s and a collection of writings published in 1990. Regardless of whether one's interest in Castoriadis is primarily political or philosophical

¹DAC-2021: With Castoriadis's consent, this 1997 collection was subtitled *Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*.

and whether one's outlook is predominantly "Continental" or "Anglo-American analytical," a discussion of the contexts of these two texts may serve as a useful introduction to the present volume.

Drafted in 1970, "Le Monde morcelé" was completed early the following year for discussion during a colloquium on interdisciplinary studies whose organizers included Claude Lefort and Edgar Morin, Castoriadis's coauthors for *Mai 68: La Brèche* (May '68: The breach). *La Brèche* was the first book published in France about the May 1968 student/worker rebellion, and this rebellion itself had drawn significant inspiration from the journal and group Castoriadis cofounded with Lefort in 1948, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Socialism or barbarism).² Copies of "Le Monde morcelé" were distributed to this 1971 symposium's forty or so participants. Nonetheless, "as was easy to foresee, and as was almost predicted in the text itself, it served no purpose," Castoriadis frankly admitted,³ for the text did not provoke the kind of discussion its author had hoped for concerning the crisis in the human, social, and natural sciences—a crisis closely connected with the overall crisis of contemporary society. When Castoriadis published his text the subsequent year in *Textures*, a journal he edited at the time with Lefort, Marcel Gauchet, and others, he added a new concluding paragraph.

What, indeed, could a calling into question of the social institution of contemporary science be outside

²DAC-2021: The third author, Morin, later participated in public meetings organized by S. ou B. and penned one article for the journal's penultimate issue.

³See Castoriadis's publication note in *Textures*, 4-5 (1972): 3.

of a calling into question of instituted society? ... And how could this institution be abolished in its present form without a radical upheaval in the internal organization of the knowledge and of the scientific labor that is congruent thereto? What could such an upheaval be if it was not at the same time a full resumption of the question of knowledge, of those who know and of what they know, therefore philosophy again and philosophy more than ever, that philosophy whose death a few simple minds believe that they could cause by stating it? The transformation of society our times require proves to be inseparable from the self-surpassing of Reason... [W]hat is at stake is not only the content of what has to change—the tenor and organization of knowledge, the substance and the function of the institution—but just as much and more so our relation with knowledge and the institution; no essential change is henceforth conceivable that would not at the same time be a change of this relation. To have glimpsed this possibility will remain, whatever might happen, the grandeur of our time and the promise of its crisis.⁴

What is one to make of this bold and far-reaching statement? For those inspired by the cofounder of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, by his trenchant critique of “bureaucratic capitalism” and by his advocacy of “workers’ self-management,” a switch to philosophy and science beyond the

⁴“Le Monde morcelé” was expanded into “Science moderne et interrogation philosophique,” which appeared in volume 17 (*Organum*) of the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (1973). The translation appears as “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” [DAC-2021: in [CLI](#)].

confines of a revolutionary group might seem an abrupt, even an unwelcome, change. For those who find Castoriadis's recent philosophical work of interest but regard his earlier political and social writings as ancient history after the demise of Communism, his rhetoric in this now quarter-century-old [DAC-2021: now half-century-old] lecture might, on the contrary, appear at best a holdover from a previous activist self. Both these reactions would seem to share in the idea that there is an "early" and a "later" Castoriadis—a distinction that, if rigidly observed, is one I would challenge.⁵ In fact, to the extent that we take this concluding statement seriously, we glimpse some concrete reasons why Castoriadis came to

⁵See Brian Singer's two excellent introductory articles: "The Early Castoriadis: Socialism, Barbarism and the Bureaucratic Thread," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 3 (Fall 1979): 35-56, and "The Later Castoriadis: Institutions Under Interrogation," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 4 (Winter 1980): 75-101. The model is obviously that of the "early" and "late" Heidegger, although in the latter's case the supposed division is certainly not between an early political stance and later philosophical concerns. Nor, certainly, are Heidegger's brief and disastrous forays into politics comparable in content or character to Castoriadis's long-standing political commitments. I challenged this distinction in my translator's foreword to the [third volume of Castoriadis's Political and Social Writings \(1993\)](#), p. xvi. In his two articles, Singer notes both a "certain bewilderment" some might experience in witnessing this shift from a concentration on politics and economics to a more philosophical orientation and a "certain coherence" to Castoriadis's ongoing work. Singer bases his idea of an early versus a later Castoriadis, however, on the assertion ("The Later Castoriadis," p. 75) that there was "a more or less uninterrupted public silence of almost ten years" between the demise of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1967) and the publication of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society* \(IIS, 1975; tr. Kathleen Blamey, 1987\)](#). It is in exploring this very period—which, as we shall see, was not in fact "silent"—that I attempt to establish connections between the "early" and "later" periods.

emphasize the need to bring both philosophical reflection and political action to bear on the problem of social change.

The other text titled [*Le Monde morcelé*](#) is a book, the third volume in his *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series, the first volume of which has already been published in English as *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* [DAC-2021: in 1984; now available in a new translation as [CLI](#)]. We have taken a large portion of the material for *World in Fragments* from this third volume, adding some articles from the second volume, *Domaines de l'homme* (Domains of man), as well as several texts recently published in the fourth and fifth volumes of this series.⁶ The theme of a “world in fragments” was thus an idea dear enough to the author that he revived it as a title twenty years after first coining it, and we now give it new life in English.

~

It would certainly violate the very spirit of *World in Fragments* to argue that there is a timeless “unity” to Castoriadis’s half-century of writings. I nevertheless believe that a case can be made for the ongoing coherency and fecundity of his thought, a “unity in the making” [DAC-2021: to borrow a phrase from [IIS](#)] that has not ceased to expand its horizons and deepen its questionings and concerns as it has evolved. To appreciate the emergence and significance of the theme of a “world in fragments,” we must retrace briefly

⁶Other texts from *Domaines de l'homme* (1986) and *Le Monde morcelé* (1990) appeared in Castoriadis’s *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, ed. Curtis (1991). [DAC-2021: The present series now translates all six volumes of the *Carrefours* series, separately and in sequential order, as the six-volume *CLI-CL6* set.]

Castoriadis's political and philosophical itinerary.⁷

Castoriadis reports that he became "smitten" by philosophy at the age of thirteen after he purchased a history of philosophy at a used-book sale in Athens. When as a young Trotskyist whose life was threatened by both Stalinists and Fascists Castoriadis left Athens for France a decade later at the end of 1945, he came to Paris with the intention of writing a "doctoral thesis in philosophy whose theme was that every rational philosophical order culminates, from its own point of view, in aporias and impasses."⁸ His other love, politics, proved more attractive at first, however, and practical needs

⁷For Castoriadis's broad overview of his work, see the 1972 General Introduction translated for the first volume of his *Political and Social Writings* (1988; hereafter [PSWI](#)), and my forewords to volumes 1 and 3 of that series. I have contributed an essay on Castoriadis to the textbook *Social Theory: A Guide to Central Thinkers*, ed. Peter Beilharz (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), pp. 46-53. Fabio Ciaramelli offers an estimable introduction to Castoriadis's properly philosophical work in his "Castoriadis" entry to Simon Critchley's *Companion to Continental Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997).

⁸"Fait et à faire," in *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société: La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis*, ed. Giovanni Busino (Geneva and Paris: Droz, 1989), p. 467. This volume, which was originally published as an issue of the *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (1989), contains thirty articles that consider Castoriadis's work. "Fait et à faire" [DAC-2021: translated as "Done and To Be Done" in the [Castoriadis Reader](#) and now reprinted in [CL5](#)] is Castoriadis's reply to his critics. In an interview for *Radical Philosophy*, 56 (Autumn 1990): 38, he explains: "I came to France to do a Ph.D. thesis in philosophy. (The theme of the thesis was that any attempt at a rationally constructed philosophical system leads to blind alleys, to aporias and antinomies. Mostly, what I had in mind was Hegel, but not only.) This remains an unfinished manuscript." [DAC-2021: The interview is reprinted, in two parts, as "Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process: An Introductory Interview" and "Market, Capitalism, Democracy," in *ASA(RPT)*; see: 38.]

led him to a day job at [DAC-2021: what became] the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). After leading an opposition group within the French section of the Fourth International, Castoriadis founded *Socialisme ou Barbarie* with Claude Lefort and other intellectual and working-class revolutionaries who could not accept the Trotskyists' "unconditional defense of the Soviet Union." From the outset, the journal and group maintained that the principal class division in society is between "directors," or order givers, and "executants," or order takers;⁹ that a Marxist analysis of the relations of production in "Soviet" Russia of itself reveals the existence of a separate exploiting bureaucratic stratum;¹⁰ and that a revolution advocating "workers' self-management" could, should, and would take place against this bureaucracy—a prognostication strikingly confirmed by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.¹¹

Castoriadis's early philosophical concerns are nonetheless evident in his initial demonstration of the irrationality of bureaucratic rationalization. As he once modestly put it, he simply pulled at the "bureaucratic thread" so as to unravel the whole system.¹² After undertaking a critique of Marxist economics,¹³ as early as 1955 he expanded

⁹See "Socialism or Barbarism" (1949), now in [PSW1](#).

¹⁰See "The Relations of Production in Russia" (1949), in *ibid*.

¹¹In addition to "Socialism or Barbarism," already cited, see "The Proletarian Revolution Against the Bureaucracy" (1956), in [PSW2](#), and "The Hungarian Source" (1976), in [PSW3](#).

¹²In Dick Howard, "Introduction to Castoriadis," *Telos*, 23 (Spring 1975): 119.

¹³See "Sur la dynamique du capitalisme," *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 12

his revolutionary analysis of the crisis of contemporary society beyond the political and economic spheres proper in order to include man's "cultural and sexual functions," advocating a breakdown in the division between intellectual and manual labor and arguing for an end to patriarchal authority relations as *sine qua non* conditions for any revolutionary transformation of society.¹⁴ In response to the Hungarian Revolution, Castoriadis began to work out a much more detailed account of the operation of a self-managed socialist society,¹⁵ but also at that time, on the basis of his view of the divisive and futile irrationality of bureaucratic rationalization, he was beginning to describe in greater depth the specific character of the class division between directors and executants in "bureaucratic-capitalist" societies, whether of the fragmented Western type or fully totalitarian. Initially at the point of production, but eventually in all spheres of social life, contemporary society simultaneously requires people's complete *exclusion* from the determination of their own activities (since the premise of the system is that everything must be planned for them) and solicits their active *participation* in these same activities (since it is in fact impossible for bureaucracy to plan everything out in advance in people's absence).¹⁶ Indeed, the system necessarily gives

(August 1953): 1-22, and 13 (January 1954): 60-81. [DAC-2021: We hope to translate this two-part text, now reprinted in *EP8*, for the projected eighth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.]

¹⁴See "On the Content of Socialism, I" (1955), in [PSW1](#), in particular the section on "Alienation in Capitalist Society," 305-308.

¹⁵See "On the Content of Socialism, II" (1957), now in [PSW2](#).

¹⁶DAC-2021: In his obituary for a fellow Socialisme ou Barbarie member

rise to the “project of autonomy” and thwarts it at the same time.

Castoriadis argued at the beginning of the 1960s that people in highly developed Western societies—especially those suffering a “double oppression”: women, youth, and minorities—would, as part of a generalized contestation of the irrational “rationality” of the “bureaucratic-capitalist project,” come to invent new forms of living and being together that challenge not just capitalistic economic relations but age-old sexual, familial, and other oppressive social relations.¹⁷ He brought this conclusion one step further in 1964 when he noted that those who perform exclusively directorial or executant functions, now existing only in small numbers at the very top and very bottom of the bureaucratic-hierarchical pyramid, were no longer the key actors in the crisis of contemporary society and that the relevant division had become the one between those who *accept* the system and those who *reject* it.

Above all, we find the permanent effort of people to live their lives, to give their lives a meaning in an era where nothing is certain any longer and where, in any case, nothing from without is accepted at face value. In the course of this effort there tends to be realized for the first time in the history of humanity people's

(“Benno Sternberg-Sarel,” *Les Temps Modernes*, 299-300 [June-July 1971]: 2484-85), Castoriadis—who surreptitiously signed this text simply “C.C.” in order for it to slip unnoticed into Jean-Paul Sartre's journal—seems to be attributing to Sarel, and to the latter's work on the working class in early postwar East Germany, the initial formulation of this “antinomy that runs through the bureaucratic system” ([PSRTI](#), 278).

¹⁷See “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961), now in [PSW2](#).

aspiration for autonomy. For that very reason, this effort is *just as important* for the preparation of the socialist revolution as are the analogous manifestations in the domain of production.¹⁸

It is not surprising that students in May 1968 found central inspiration for their own activities in Castoriadis's and *Socialisme ou Barbarie's* writings.

It was also during this period that Castoriadis expanded even further the political and intellectual concerns of his revolutionary group. In "For a New Orientation" (1962), Castoriadis advocated integrating into the group's work and action the issues and insights of contemporary science and knowledge—anthropology, history, urbanism, "the revolutionary signification of psychoanalysis," "cybernetics and its revolutionary implications."¹⁹ He was highlighting at the same time the growing student and youth revolt and the attendant questioning of authority relations in the realms of work, family relationships, education, and overall values, noting in particular the increasingly open conflict within the university system between its "social function" of the reproduction of knowledge and of society and its "cultural function" of free inquiry.²⁰ In "Marxism and

¹⁸"Recommencing the Revolution" (1964), now in [PSW3](#), 41 (emphasis added). This "just as important" should now be read in light of his 1971 statement, cited above, that "it is impossible henceforth to conceive of any essential change which does not involve a change in this relationship [to knowledge]."

¹⁹"For a New Orientation," in [PSW3](#), 16.

²⁰See "Student Youth" (1963) and "The Crisis of Modern Society" (1966), both now in [PSW3](#).

Revolutionary Theory" (1964-1965), he completed his demolition of Marxism's deterministic theory of history by conducting a thoroughgoing critique of both functionalist and structuralist forms of anthropological, historical, and sociological explanation while conceiving of "history as creation."²¹ This critique, which introduced "the imaginary" into French discourse beyond the narrow psychoanalytic meaning Jacques Lacan had given to the term (in the "mirror stage"), also challenged Louis Althusser's exemption of "scientific knowledge," as well as of university structures and practices, from the Sixties' growing contestation of inherited values and ideas and from the political question of how present-day society can and should transform itself.²²

Nor should it be surprising, then, in light of these developments, that "The Anticipated Revolution"—Castoriadis's text for *La Brèche*, written in the midst of the events of May-June 1968—ends by noting the connections between this student and youth revolt, the overall crisis of contemporary society, and the specific crisis in scientific inquiry and in the transmission of knowledge. Because of the context it provides for [*World in Fragments*](#), it is worth quoting at length from its final pages.

To indulge in endless discussions on the revolution in science and technology is a complete waste of time if one does not comprehend what it entails: first of all, that the education and culture industries are now and henceforth of greater importance, both quantitatively

²¹"Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (1964-1965) now appears as the first part of [*IIS*](#).

²²See, now, "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986), in [*CL4*](#).

and qualitatively, than the steel industry and all other metalworking industries combined. ...Next, and even more significant, are the problems posed on all levels by the profound crisis of contemporary knowledge and science. (The broad mass of scientists has not yet even realized that this crisis exists; they merely undergo this crisis in ways now obscure to them.) So as not to beat around the bush, we may speak of this crisis as the *death* of science in its classically accepted sense and in all hitherto known senses of the term. It is the *death* of a certain way in which knowledge is fabricated and transmitted. It concerns the perpetual uncertainty as to *what* knowledge has been ascertained, what is probable, doubtful, obscure. It involves the indefinitely extended collectivization of the human support network of knowledge and, at the same time, the fragmentation *ad infinitum* of this knowledge just at the moment when the imperious and enigmatic interdependence, or more precisely, the articulated unity, of all fields of knowledge is becoming more apparent than ever. Also in question is the relation of this knowledge to the society that produces it, nourishes it, is nourished by it, and risks dying of it, as well as the issues concerning for whom and for what this knowledge exists. Already at present these problems demand a radical transformation of society, and of the human being, at the same time that they contain its premises. If this monstrous tree of knowledge that modern humanity is cultivating more and more feverishly every day is not to collapse under its own weight and crush its gardener as it falls, the necessary transformation of man and society must go infinitely further than the wildest utopias have ever

dared to imagine.²³

We clearly witness here Castoriadis's explicit continuation of many of the developments in his thought that have already been sketched above.

Some, however, will perhaps be tempted to identify the break between an "early" and a "later" Castoriadis around this point. Indeed, these concluding thoughts were drafted for the published version of *La Brèche* that appeared in June 1968 as a book—his first—not for the shorter, May 1968 mimeographed version of his text, "Reflect, Act, Organize," which marked his unsuccessful attempt to rally together and reestablish a revolutionary group in the midst of events. Similarly, the "Monde morcelé" statement about the crisis of science and the crisis of society, quoted earlier, appeared only with the later *Textures* version, not in the original text distributed to the interdisciplinary group of scholars who remained relatively indifferent to the set of proposals that formed the original conclusion to his talk. One could add Castoriadis's 1966 decision to convince the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group to "commit suicide" when it failed to gain the active response it had hoped for on the part of its readership and as he came to see that the issues he had begun to deal with in "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" could not be addressed within the context and confines of a revolutionary journal.

Again, it certainly is not my intention in this Foreword to [*World in Fragments*](#) to deny the existence of *ruptures*—and, more generally, changes—in Castoriadis's overall work. But, holding to the idea that this work is a coherent and fecund unity in the making relevant for today, I

²³"The Anticipated Revolution" (1968), now in [*PSW3*](#), 153-54.

believe that we can discern an ongoing effort to generalize and expand the revolutionary possibilities of, and prospects for, social change during this particular, indeed crucial, phase in the development of his thought. This “radical...transformation of man and society,” Castoriadis continues prospectively,

will require the individual to develop from the outset in a quite different manner. Through such development, the individual will have to become capable on its own of entertaining another relationship with knowledge, a relationship for which there is no analogy in previous history. It is not simply a question of developing the individual's faculties and capacities. Much more profoundly, it is a matter of the individual's relationship to authority, since knowledge is the first sublimation of the desire for power and therefore of one's relationship to the institution and everything that the institution represents as fixed and final point of reference. All this is obviously inconceivable without an upheaval not only in existing institutions but even in what we intend by institution.²⁴

The events of May 1968, which Castoriadis played such a significant part in catalyzing, had in turn catalyzed his thinking about the breadth and the depth of what was required for a continuation of the process of individual and social self-transformation. The goal of *autonomy*—originally conceived negatively in terms of the baleful consequences of a [DAC-2021: potential] postwar takeover of Greece by Stalinists and

²⁴*Ibid.*, 154.

positively in terms of workers' self-management, and continually expanded since then—was now being expressed in this idea of the individual entertaining “another relationship” (than authoritarian/submissive) to knowledge, as well as to institutions and to the overall process of institutionalization (“the institution,” in Castoriadis's parlance).

~

The “crisis of modern science,” which Castoriadis takes up in “Le Monde morcelé,” is not, he allows, totally unfamiliar to people living today in an age of uncertainty. For, despite an unreasonable confidence in the alleged certainty of their society's scientific knowledge, people know, too, that the “nontotalized and perhaps nontotalizable fragments exist in the possession only of a few corporative entities whose tongues no longer have any relation to [their] own and less and less to one another's.”²⁵ In addition, they know about “the concerning confirmation of the equation $E = mc^2$ by the corpses of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, more recently, the perhaps irreparable destruction it has, with the help of our knowledge, been able to inflict in less than a century on a biosphere that is billions of years old.”²⁶ But this sense of uncertainty being experienced by present-day society in relation to its values, its goals, its ways of living, communicating, interacting, and even dying is now beginning to extend to science itself:

²⁵“Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” [DAC-2021: now in [CLI](#); separate page numbers are not provided for this text, which had not been typeset at the time of the present editing of the [WIF](#) Foreword].

²⁶*Ibid.*

There is no longer any doubt, indeed, about the validity of such and such a particular theory, nor of some acceptable level of obscurity about ultimate concepts—which could continue disdainfully to be given to the philosopher as a present without that troubling actual scientific work. Arising suddenly from this work itself, trammeling it and seeding it at each of its large strides, uncertainty has become a way of calling into question and a crisis for the categorial armature of science, thus bringing the man of science back explicitly to philosophical interrogation.²⁷

In “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” the extended version of “Le Monde morcelé,” Castoriadis appends at this point a clarification that reads as an apt description of his research program in this expanded text and in his subsequent criticisms of the traditional approaches to science and philosophy:

Such interrogation leaves nothing outside its field. For, what is at issue is the metaphysics that has underlain Western science for three centuries—namely, the implicit and nonconscious interpretation of the type of being manifested by mathematical, physical, living, psychical, and social-

²⁷*Ibid.* [DAC-2021: As compared to the Ryle/Soper *Crossroads* translation, the new translation in [CLI](#)] has been altered, here and elsewhere, from “categorical” to “categorial” (the original French is: *catégoriale*); Castoriadis is speaking about historically extant (scientific) categories in the broad sense, not about the timeless categorial divisions of Aristotelian or Kantian philosophy [DAC-2021: though, clearly, the relations between the “categorial” and the “categorial,” thus elucidated, are at the center of his critique of the inherited philosophy].

historical objects—as well as the logic, in whose element these objects had been reflected; the model of knowledge aimed at; the criteria for what has been called the demarcation between science and philosophy; and the situation and social-historical function of science, of the organizations and men who are its bearers. It should at the same time be evident that a just as radical calling into question of philosophy results therefrom.²⁸

What follows is a series of in-depth discussions that are truly impressive in their breadth, when compared to the range and scope of interests exhibited by many Anglo-American analytical, as well as Continental, philosophers. These investigations concern the crises in the natural, social, and human sciences: mathematics, physics, biology, anthropology, economics, law, linguistics, psychoanalysis, sociology, and set theory and logic, to cite these disciplines in the order they are examined in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation.”

It was, however, in his consideration of another discipline that Castoriadis best articulated his initial conception of a “world in fragments”: *the history of science*. In considering both the real *ruptures* that occur between successive theories in the sciences and this succession of ruptures itself, one discovers that “No more than it is diachronically cumulative is scientific truth synchronically additive.”²⁹ It is not enough to note that sets of scientific

²⁸*Ibid.* It is here that Castoriadis attacks Heidegger's idea that the “ontological difference” between Being and beings can be “absolute.”

²⁹*Ibid.*

theories—a (Kuhnian) “paradigm” or a (Foucauldian) “episteme”³⁰—succeed each other, since one would then remain simply on the subjective side of scientific research and thinking and fail to inquire how it is possible for an *objective science* to have a *history* that is something more and other than a series of errors (or “approximations”) that will somehow one day lead, “asymptotically,” to the one final truth concerning everything. The strikingly significant import of this hybrid discipline is especially evident in the history of the “exact” sciences. Newtonian theory, for example, adequately correlates with certain phenomena—including some not known at the time of the theory’s formation—yet fails to correlate with other phenomena that can nonetheless be correlated with a succeeding theory (Einstein’s), whose premises and categories can in no way be characterized as a mere “generalization” of those of the previous theory or as an “addition” of new premises and categories, fully congruent and consistent with the old ones.

What the history of physics (which is, *par excellence*, of interest to us here, for obvious reasons) makes us see is that, at each stage, there is, for a given class of facts, a “description-explanation” that is at once adequate, according to the accepted criteria of rationality, *and* on the one hand *lacunary* in relation to the set of known facts, on the other hand *logically incoherent* from the standpoint of what the “rationality” of the following stage will be. Everything happens therefore as if there existed layers or strata of the physical object that would be “describable-explainable” in correlation with a given

³⁰ *Ibid.*

“categorical system” *and* as if the former and the latter had to be, each time, essentially incomplete or *deficient*.³¹

When one attentively examines the implications of the fact that our knowledge has a history in the strong sense, one is forced “to interrogate oneself about the organization and the content of ‘scientific knowledge’ at each stage and in each era, but it is also, obviously, to interrogate oneself about *what* is thus each time known; in other words, about the organization and the content of what, simply, *is*.”³² In thinking not only, epistemologically speaking, about what is *known* but, ontologically speaking, about what *is*, we must think the latter in terms of “a *stratification* of a hitherto unsuspected type,”³³ a stratification of being that is not simply organized differently according to our theories but *organizable* differently *in itself*.³⁴ The logic of *what is* is susceptible to a plurality of different, and incompatible, theoretical interpretations according to which logical stratum is considered. Or rather, more deeply and ontologically

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Castoriadis contrasts the “in itself” with the “for itself.” (He employs the latter term extensively in [*World in Fragments*](#), stating that the “for itself” is characteristic of all living forms of being.) The resulting contrast with the “for itself” is, however, neither Hegelian nor Sartrean in inspiration, nor does Castoriadis conceive the “in itself” as belonging to an unknowable noumenal realm, *à la* Kant. Instead, it is thought in terms of the Aristotelian *kath’ auto*. He translates this latter term as the *vers soi*, the “toward itself,” in “Done and To Be Done.”

speaking, *what is* itself has a multiplicity of not fully congruous logical facets; it contains different logics.

We are thus enjoined to think what is—and what, each time, we think about what is—in a way that has neither analogy nor precedent in reflection as it has been inherited. We can neither impute to the real *one* logic nor refuse it any sort of logic, just as we can neither impute to our theories of the real, and to their succession, *one* logic nor refuse them any sort of logic.³⁵

In a challenge to traditional (including both “Continental” and “Anglo-American”) philosophy, Castoriadis concludes that it “would perhaps be time to begin to reflect on this extraordinary enterprise that is people’s theoretical making/doing starting from itself, and not starting from representations of the mirror [reflections of nature], of the mason [constructivism], of a crap shoot [probability theory], or storytelling [“narrative”].”³⁶

³⁵“Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” now in [CLI](#). I have [DAC-2021: departed from the Ryle/Soper] translation to reflect accurately the fact that Castoriadis often, and quite properly, uses the French verb *penser*, “to think,” with a simple direct object: for example, *penser ce qui est*, “to think what is,” in the first line of the quotation cited here. (The phrase that follows, “what...we think about what is” is a correct translation of *penser...de ce qui est*.) The *Oxford English Dictionary* accepts such usage of “to think” with a simple direct object, citing Francis Bowen’s *A Treatise on Logic* and William James’s *The Principles of Psychology*. The idea that one can only think thoughts (and not the world) would entail acceptance of a Kantian phenomenalism, a position Castoriadis rejects.

³⁶*Ibid.* The words added within brackets are my explanations.



Let us summarize the foregoing. Beginning with an enquiry that grows out of the specific context of a society that is experiencing uncertainty as to its ways of living and being, its goals, its values, and its knowledge and that has been capable, so far, neither of adequately understanding the crisis it is undergoing nor of revolutionizing the conditions for the emergence and persistence of that crisis, Castoriadis sets as his task the clarification, for people and for their autonomous activity, both of this crisis and of the conditions for that crisis. He proceeds to an examination of the crisis in the various interconnected—but for the most part noncommunicating—disciplines of knowledge, continuing the work he had already begun in the 1960s in integrating the revolutionary implications of these disciplines into people's ongoing effort to transform their society. This crisis could be read in, but not adequately resolved by, a variety of responses that have been designated by such terms as *interdisciplinary studies* and the *multiversity* (or, in another connection, [DAC-2021: Foucauldian] *archaeology*). Along the way, the hybrid discipline of the history of science helps to reveal that the fecund approach is not simply to combine two or more disciplines, or to find their intersection, but to reflect on this crisis itself in all disciplines and to clarify its meaning in a way that goes beyond general epistemological issues in order to raise pertinent ontological questions.

This approach is still driven by the aim of *autonomy* in that it is conducted under the sign of establishing “another relation” between individuals and their knowledge besides the one hitherto promulgated by the inherited philosophy. The problematic contained in the history of the exact sciences showed that we must accept the fact that being itself, not just

our knowledge of it, is itself *stratified* in what it is, in the logics of what it is, and in our knowledge of it (since extant constellations of knowledge, and their historical ruptures, themselves partake of being). Being thus cannot be described as the timeless and unchanging pure unity by which it has been characterized since Parmenides, and the more recent positivistic search for its one true and eternal logical organization, contradicted now by the recognition of a true history of science, must also be abandoned. It would have been meaningless and self-contradictory, however, to extend the notion of "autonomy" *mechanically*, from the political and social meaning it had gained in Castoriadis's previous work, to all of being. The path that will be followed, and that had already been marked out by the assertion that *history is self-creation*, is that the various strata of being *create themselves*. "Autonomy" will retain the more restricted meaning already laid out in "Theory and Revolutionary Project" (the second chapter of "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory") and developed further in subsequent texts—namely, that human autonomy involves explicit knowledge that one makes one's own laws and that one can therefore try to change these laws in a lucid way without reference to extrasocial instances of authority. But the idea of self-creation will extend the challenge to rationalistic determinism, already contained in the idea and project of autonomy, to all forms and strata of being. In "Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation," this assertion is perhaps most explicit in Castoriadis's discussion of the biological sciences: in thinking of the living being in terms of a cybernetic automaton, as has become the fashion, we must realize that this living "automaton can never be thought except from within, that it constitutes its framework of existence and meaning, that it is its own *a priori*, in short, that to be alive is to be for oneself, as certain

philosophers had for a long time stated."³⁷

~

Now, both at the end of his discussion of the history of science in "Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation" and near the end of this same text, Castoriadis speaks not only of the "stratification" of being but of its various *regions*, as they are explored in different domains of study.

It is the absolute separation of regions that is at issue. Not because all of them would be but a single one but because an articulation of them exists that is wholly other than a partition, than a mere juxtaposition, than a gradual specification or a linear, logical, or real hierarchy. Explicitly restoring this articulation in another way than Plato or Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, or Hegel could do seems to me to be the present task of reflection.³⁸

We easily recognize in this statement the antecedent to the epigraph with which Castoriadis introduces *World in Fragments*: "The world—not only ours—is fragmented. Yet it does not fall to pieces. To reflect upon this situation seems to me to be one of the primary tasks of philosophy today."³⁹

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.* I have restored the word "regions," which did not appear in the Ryle/Soper translation.

³⁹This statement originally appeared in the "Avant-propos" to his 1990 book, *Le Monde morcelé*.

The regions of which he speaks in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” will be described and elucidated in much greater detail in “The State of the Subject Today” and other texts contained in the present volume, but the intention animating this elucidation is already evident in the “Monde morcelé” lecture and its expanded versions: negatively speaking, there is an explicit challenge to all forms of determinism and reductionism in the human, social, and natural sciences; more positively speaking, it is argued that each scientific discipline, now informed by a new conception of science, of philosophy, and of their mutual relationship, must learn to articulate itself in relation to all the others and to articulate the region of being to which it refers in terms of the self-creation of that region.

We should recall, by way of background information, one additional biographical fact. In 1970, Castoriadis retired from his post as a professional economist at the OECD and started training as a psychoanalyst. He began his clinical practice in 1973 and continues to see patients [DAC-2021: he did so until shortly before his death]. In “From the Monad to Autonomy,” his interview with his elder daughter and Jean-Claude Polack [DAC-2021: which now appears in [CL5](#)], Castoriadis traces his growing interest in psychoanalysis, so there is no need to recount that history here. But let us note that in October 1968 Castoriadis published a key article in a final issue of *L’Inconscient*, soon before a split in the Lacanian *École freudienne* led to the creation of the “Fourth Group,” or French-Language Psychoanalytic Organization, which is distinct from the two French psychoanalytic societies recognized by the International Psychoanalytic Association as well as from the (now-defunct) *École*. In this text, “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul Which Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science,” Castoriadis developed a

conception of psychoanalysis as a “practicopoietic activity” that renews questions philosophy has raised for millennia and that cannot be understood within the confines of a traditional conception of scientific research and theorization. “Epilegomena” was reprinted in [DAC-2021: the first volume of *Carrefours*] along with a later critique of Lacanianism titled “Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation” (1977). The latter text originally appeared in *Topique*, the successor to *L’Inconscient* and the organ of this “Fourth Group”—whose editor, Piera Aulagnier, was Castoriadis’s wife at the time. Aulagnier published her major work, *La Violence de l’interprétation*, the same year (1975) that Castoriadis first published his *magnum opus*, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* in French; each cited the other, and the themes and concerns of their works overlap, especially in the sixth chapter of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#).⁴⁰ In the present volume, Castoriadis discusses *La Violence* in “The Construction of the World in Psychosis,” [DAC-2021: now,

⁴⁰*La Violence de l’interprétation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975) [DAC-2021: Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement*, tr. Alan Sheridan (Philadelphia, PA and East Sussex, UK: Brunner-Routledge, 2001)]. In “Epilegomena,” Castoriadis was already insisting that the discipline of psychoanalysis, whose object is the human psyche, cannot of itself account for or explain *social* phenomena and *social* objects. Quoting Marx to the effect that one must not reproduce “the abstraction that separates and opposes the individual and society,” Castoriadis developed in this 1968 article the idea that, in the human domain, the true opposition is between psyche and society, not the individual and society. Castoriadis’s [DAC-2021: metapsychological] conception of an original “psychical monad” that is socialized only at a subsequent stage of human development will later serve, in chapter 6 of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#), to flesh out this early idea. Aulagnier speaks of “the originary,” which is followed by the “primary” and “secondary” stages.

instead, in [CL5](#),] one of the first published accounts in English of Aulagnier's hitherto untranslated work.

In some respects, [World in Fragments](#) is organized around the theme of "Psychoanalysis and Politics" (the title of one chapter in the present collection), just as his previous English-language collection, [Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy](#), centered on the connections and distinctions between philosophy and politics. Any hard-and-fast distinction between the two collections would certainly be highly artificial, but the prominent role of the psyche and psychoanalysis—not only in the third part of the present collection, "Psyche,"⁴¹ but also in such texts as "Reflections on Racism" in the "Koinōnia" section and "The Discovery of the Imagination" and "Logic, Imagination, Reflection" in the "Logos" section⁴²—is undeniable. In "Psychoanalysis and Politics," Castoriadis also develops his idea that, as forms of praxis, both psychoanalysis and politics aim at autonomy; in the case of psychoanalysis, the aim is to aid the patient in establishing "another relation" between herself and her unconscious, reminiscent of his mention of "another relationship with knowledge" in his May 1968 text and already formulated in "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (1964-1965).

⁴¹DAC-2021: The 1997 edition of [World in Fragments](#) had created a "Psyche" section composed of four chapters: "Psychoanalysis and Politics" and "The State of the Subject Today" (both now the present volume), along with "From the Monad to Autonomy" and "The Construction of the World in Psychosis" (both now in the "Psyche" section of [CL5](#)).

⁴²DAC-2021: "The Discovery of the Imagination" (1978) is now reprinted in [CL2](#). "Logic, Imagination, Reflection" (1991) has been "woven together" with another text to form what has become "Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection" (1997) in [CL5](#).

In *World in Fragments*, it is not just the stratification of regions and the articulations between the disciplines studying these regions that is at issue. The articulations among regions of being themselves, mentioned in "Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation," now become paramount for their continuing study. "The State of the Subject Today," for example, examines both the principal regions with which psychoanalysis must deal when addressing the psychoanalytic subject and an interregionality of the subject that cannot be reduced to a combination of like elements or to a simple unity of disparate ones:

[I]n a first sense, the "subject" presents itself as this strange totality, a totality that is not one and is one at the same time, a paradoxical compound of a biological body, a social being (a socially-defined individual), a more or less conscious "person," and, finally, an unconscious psyche (a psychical reality and a psychical apparatus), the whole being supremely heterogeneous in makeup and yet definitely indissociable in character. Such is how the human phenomenon presents itself to us, and it is in the face of this cloudy cluster [*nebuleuse*] that we have to think the question of the subject.

It is in such rich, even when summary, descriptions, often informed by his psychoanalytic work, that we begin to glimpse what Castoriadis intends today by a "world in fragments" that does not simply fall apart (or become a candidate for deconstruction).

As Castoriadis makes clear, however, the fragmented and fragmentary nature of the world is not simply a *subjective* phenomenon. Not only the Kantian subject but any living

being certainly must recreate an “ensemblistic-identitary” (instrumental-functional) logic of its own in which causality—and phenomena such as gravitation—operate. Nevertheless, Castoriadis adds dryly, in criticizing Kantianism: “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.” We must admit, he reiterates in “The Ontological Import of the History of Science,” that the so-called noumenal realm, the world as it is in itself, is already organized to the minimum degree of being *organizable*. In this written version of a speech he delivered to a Paris seminar conducted by Thomas Kuhn, Castoriadis develops further his ideas on the history of science, laying down the “principle of the undecidability of origins.” Because in science the observed always depends on the theory of what is being observed, and because it nonetheless cannot be said that the theory fully *determines* what is being observed, “the question of knowing, in an ultimate sense, what comes from the observer and what comes from the observed is undecidable.” What is and what is known are neither fully separable nor identical, he argues. This principle, which recalls the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and Gödel’s proof of the existence of undecidable propositions in mathematical logic, but whose philosophical implications far surpass both these immensely important scientific statements, immediately puts “three quarters of all philosophy” out of commission, as Castoriadis quietly and proudly asserted while discussing this section of the translation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s attempts at challenging the Cartesian dualism of subject and object pale in comparison, Castoriadis shows in “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition” [DAC-2021: now in

[CL5](#)], for Merleau-Ponty ultimately restricted himself to the realms of life (“the flesh”) and “perception,” even if the intention was to extend their meaning.

Even within the strictly biological realm, however, Castoriadis glimpses something more. Building on his ontological assertion that the living being not only exists but *is* “for itself,” and taking one of his favorite examples, the existence of color—(some) living beings see *colors*, they do not see wavelengths; they therefore give birth of themselves to an unprecedented subjective realm of experience that itself partakes of being—Castoriadis concludes that

the mere existence of the living being implies the effective actuality of an immense ensidizable stratum of what is. It goes 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.⁴³

The “world in fragments” is not simply made up of a variety of regions and strata (that would otherwise be explicable in terms of a panlogistic application of subjective or objective categories). In its self-creative positing of new forms—natural world, living nature, human psyche, society—and of new and

⁴³DAC-2021: In “The Ontological Import of the History of Science,” now in [CL2](#).

mutually irreducible laws governing these multiple heterogeneous forms, as well as in its ongoing self-alteration of these forms and laws, being itself is *irregularly stratified*. It stratifies itself irregularly, thereby resisting the full application of any one logic because, in its self-alteration, it *makes be* other logics irreducible to previous ones.

~

Has Castoriadis then discovered and described once and for all the nature of the world, a world that happens to be “in fragments”? Reading through the typescript of his English-language lecture on “Time and Creation,” my initial reaction to this insightful discussion of Aristotle and Augustine was to think that he had gone about as far as one could go. But when this text was published, he had thrown out an entire section that he considered flawed and had developed even further his ideas on being, time, and creation. To think that Castoriadis has offered *the* subjective reflection of the one objective world (albeit a world in fragments) that is true for all time would mean that all philosophical questioning should now cease, a position that is certainly not his.⁴⁴ Indeed, it would run counter to the very ideas he has been elaborating: namely, the undecidability concerning the subjective and objective contributions to the “encounter” we call knowledge; the fact that this knowledge itself has a history and the ontological import of this fact; and the decisive importance of the social-historical context in which questions arise and in which knowledge of any sort is acquired, achieved, and applied.

⁴⁴DAC-2021: See “The ‘End of Philosophy’?” (1989), now in the present volume.

To understand the significance of Castoriadis's idea of a "world in fragments," we must recall the central but upsetting place he assigns to the imaginary and to creation. To "discover" the imagination, he shows in his article on Aristotle,⁴⁵ required an enormous effort, one that disrupted Aristotle's entire philosophical ontology and that was covered up immediately upon its discovery. Moreover, Freud's rediscovery of the imagination, situated between rediscoveries and new coverups by both Kant and Heidegger, was strangely accompanied by a near-total refusal of the very term "imagination," as Castoriadis points out in "Logic, Imagination, Reflection." More important, Castoriadis argues in this same text, is Freud's admission that his own conceptual framework is *itself an imaginary construct* (though Freud grants it to be such only in an embarrassed and backhanded way). So, too, therefore are Aristotle's, Kant's, and Heidegger's views on the imagination—and, perforce, Castoriadis's. In other words, a concept, a theory, a philosophical idea is the positing—nay, the creation—of new figures, new representations, new imaginary forms that cannot be deduced from a linear or dialectical history of antecedent subjective formulations or attributed to the real or rational, allegedly timeless nature of the world as such. Castoriadis's conception of a world in fragments is neither a solipsistic or skeptical subjectivism—he rejects, we saw, the idea of a purely phenomenal "world fragment" while refusing to treat the "noumenal" world as wholly unknowable in itself—nor a total objectivism, since the elucidation of this world in fragments depends, too, upon the creation of new imaginary forms...including that of a "world in fragments."

We thus come to understand philosophy in a new way:

⁴⁵DAC-2021: "The Discovery of the Imagination," now in [CL2](#).

it involves the conquering of new and unprecedented standpoints through the questioning of received notions and through the creation of new ideas⁴⁶ that encounter new and different aspects of the world as such. Philosophy itself may be understood as an exemplary creative expression of the project of autonomy; like mathematics in the wake of the great and disturbing discoveries it has made over the last two centuries, philosophy entails the free creation of its own concepts, tools, and methods of argumentation, subject to standards of coherency and rational discussion whose criteria for validity it also posits upon its own responsibility. We do indeed now face, as Castoriadis said, a “perpetual uncertainty as to *what* knowledge has been ascertained, what is probable, doubtful, obscure.” His contribution to philosophy is to have conceived this creation of new philosophical forms in a way that eliminates some of the aporias and contradictions of subjectivism and objectivism (themselves derivative of the traditional subject/object dualism and, more generally, of a division of the world into “ideas,” “subjects,” and “things,” and, behind that, an identification of being with being-determined) while creating new—and, he believes, more fecund—ways of thinking about the world we live in...and about our own thinking. Nevertheless, what the demonstration of the traditional aporias of philosophy leaves us with are new questions, and new aporias—not final immobile truths. He concludes the last chapter of the present volume by remarking that, beyond subjective and objective time and being, “the

⁴⁶DAC-2021: In fact, not just new “ideas,” as I said for shorthand in the text, but new “figures of the thinkable.” I was clearer below: “new...ways of thinking about the world,” though it would have been more felicitous and direct, as well as more in keeping with Castoriadis’s work, to say “new ways of thinking the world.” See now the Translator/Editor’s Foreword for [CL6](#).

overarching question of overarching time and being has to remain a question for the time being, and probably for all times.”

Castoriadis's trenchant critique of the inherited Western philosophy and metaphysics is therefore not a mere ending or an epitaph, and certainly not a final closure, nor does it entail a simplistic and one-sided rejection of that tradition, in the name of the latest trend in a denunciatory academic or identity-oriented “politics.” Instead, it perpetually calls for a new beginning that does not deny but rather scrutinizes its previous history. Castoriadis thus is inviting us to participate in an open-ended process of philosophical creation, some of whose prospects he has already opened up for us. “It would perhaps be time,” as he said, “to begin to reflect on this extraordinary enterprise that is people's theoretical making/doing starting from itself.”⁴⁷



The social and political concerns with which readers of Castoriadis's earlier works are familiar continue to hold a central place in this anthology of his recent writings and are now informed by his deepening conception of a “world in fragments.” But the times have changed. Castoriadis long has spoken of what he considers to be the two central, and antagonistic, “social imaginary significations” of modern times: the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery—the irrational character of which he has denounced in the forms of capitalism, totalitarianism, “technoscience,” and modern

⁴⁷DAC-2021: On the elucidation, over time, of “theory” and “thinking” in Castoriadis's work, again see the Translator/Editor's Foreword for [CL6](#).

ecological devastation⁴⁸—and the project of autonomy, which manifests itself not only in workers' self-management but also in people's efforts to create new ways of living for themselves, as well as in philosophical interrogation, psychoanalysis, pedagogy, historical inquiry, and politics as the secular goal of collective self-governance. In a vigorous critique of Postmodernism and of the conditions under which it has arisen, Castoriadis notes that the project of autonomy itself now seems to be on the wane: "Capitalism developing while forced to face a continuous struggle against the *status quo*, on the floor of the factory as well as in the sphere of ideas or of art, and capitalism expanding without any effective internal opposition are two different social-historical animals." As he has said elsewhere, it seems that since the fall of Communism all hopes for radical social transformation have been placed indefinitely in cold storage.⁴⁹

Even so, Castoriadis is no more definitively pessimistic than blithely optimistic; he is simply discriminating and alert. "The project of autonomy," he continues, "itself is certainly not finished. But its trajectory

⁴⁸See, especially, "From Ecology to Autonomy," now excerpted in [The Castoriadis Reader](#). This 1980 joint talk by Castoriadis was delivered in Belgium along with German Greens party member and former May 1968 student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit. See also "Reflections on 'Development' and 'Rationality'" (1976) [DAC-2021: now in [CL2](#)] and "Dead End?" (1987) [DAC-2021: now in the present volume].

⁴⁹DAC-2021: See "The Theme of 'The Rising Tide of Insignificance' in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis," which now forms the bulk of the Translator/Editor's Foreword for the next volume in the present series, [CL4](#). The quotations from the previous sentence in the present paragraph and from the second sentence in the following paragraph come from the "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism," now in the present volume.

during the last two centuries has proved the radical inadequacy, to say the least, of the programs in which it had been embodied—be it the Liberal republic or Marxist-Leninist ‘socialism.’” An ongoing attack on the contemporary manifestations of the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery must be accompanied by an attentive and self-critical consideration of new ways in which the project of autonomy might come to express itself today and in the future. In “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism,” Castoriadis notes that “the monstrous history of Marxism-Leninism” shows us, at least, “what an emancipatory movement cannot and should not be.” His text on the French Revolution, moreover, highlights the radical and inaugural character of that revolution as the effort of a society to institute and reinstitute itself explicitly, but it equally emphasizes the limitations the Revolution encountered or created for itself along the way—ones that we must now overcome, surpassing them first by critically acknowledging and recognizing them as such.⁵⁰

Ancient Greek democracy and philosophy have been key elements of Castoriadis’s thinking on the project of autonomy at least since “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983).⁵¹ Despite the fact that he explicitly rejected there the idea of Greece as a “model” (or antimodel) for political action today, some have come to see that text as a full summary of Castoriadis’s political thought (so that they

⁵⁰DAC-2021: Reference here is to “The Revolution Before the Theologians: For a Critical/Political Reflection on Our History” (1989), which had been reprinted in [WIF](#) and which now appears in the present volume. Mentioned above, “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism,” also a [WIF](#) text, is now in [CL4](#).

⁵¹Reprinted in [Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy](#) [DAC-2021: and now in [CL2](#)].

might reject it as nostalgic, flawed by imperialism/slavery/sexism, and/or impractical). “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary” offers a balanced appreciation of both the ancient and the modern contributions to the project of autonomy, noting that we ourselves must go further.⁵² Though intensely self-critical and always seeking to broaden or correct his thinking, Castoriadis, unlike many other former Marxists, has never renounced his radical past by “discovering” that capitalism is the guarantor or necessary accompaniment of democracy or by searching for a lulling end to history amid the tumult of questions the present continues to pose for those who still wish to think creatively about the problem of the self-transformation of society.⁵³ In particular, he forcefully criticizes a new generation of French thinkers who make the events of May 1968 and, more generally, “the movements of the Sixties” disappear beneath a rather impoverished reinterpretation of Tocquevillean “democratic individualism.”⁵⁴ The attempt to come to terms with the failure of these movements, with the subsequent waning of genuine political activity, and with the shattering experience of “Communism” by taking refuge in a depoliticized “ethics” (be it individualistic or transcendent) is another symptom of these phenomena, not an adequate response to them, Castoriadis argues in “The Ethicists’ New Clothes.”⁵⁵

⁵²DAC-2021: Reprinted in [WIF](#), this text now appears in [CL4](#).

⁵³DAC-2021: See now “The ‘End of History’?” (1992), in [PSRTI](#).

⁵⁴DAC-2021: See “The Movements of the Sixties” (1986), reprinted in [WIF](#) and now in [CL4](#).

⁵⁵DAC-2021: Reprinted in [WIF](#) and now in the present volume.

The political question as it is raised today by Castoriadis is more radical than before. Castoriadis has been highlighting depoliticization, privatization, and withdrawal, social phenomena with heavy political consequences [DAC-2021: since the late 1950s].⁵⁶ The question now becomes whether society even wants itself as society: "The war cry of early nineteenth-century Liberalism, 'The State is evil,' has become today, 'Society is evil.'"⁵⁷ Or, as former Prime Minister and now Lady Thatcher succinctly expressed it: "There is no society." "How is it," Castoriadis asks in "First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions," that "today most of the imaginary significations that were holding this society together seem to be vanishing, without anything else being put in their place?"⁵⁸ "Progress, growth, material well-being, 'rational' mastery" are increasingly being contested as goals, and rightly so;⁵⁹ by itself, "ever more" is not a goal, for it has no specific content, and control or mastery for its own sake is meaningless and devoid of concrete purpose. But in the absence of any meaningful goal of its own, society today cannot even say what it is, except negatively or in retrospect, employing a series of "post—"

⁵⁶See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," [PSW2](#). [DAC-2021: See now also the Translator/Editor's Foreword for [CL4](#).]

⁵⁷"The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982), tr. David J. Parent, *Telos*, 53 (Fall 1982): 26 [DAC-2021: retranslated for [CR](#) and now reprinted in [CL4](#)].

⁵⁸DAC-2021: This 1985 talk first published in French the next year, which I translated for *Free Associations*, 12 (1988): 39-51, and which was reprinted in *RTI(TBS)*, now appears in [CL6](#).

⁵⁹DAC-2021: From a 1983 interview translated as "Psychoanalysis and Society II" and now in [CL2](#).

prefixes whose vacuousness simply betrays the emptiness and impotence of the society to which they are being applied and from which they emanate. Perhaps “the nameless society” would be the least inaccurate appellation for a culture that, having failed to come to terms with the crisis it is undergoing, expresses that crisis now through a plethora of attempts to flee itself as well as its crises.

It would be quite wrong, however, to think that people are not experiencing the unprecedented crisis of meaning and direction they are undergoing, that they are totally unaware of how pathetic are the alternatives being presented by politicians and by people posing as thinkers, that they are inherently incapable of finding something more worthy to live and to die for. To assist them in clarifying and responding to this fragmented and fragmenting experience of generalized crisis in ways that are not simply fragmentary, not simply reactions and repetitions rooted in the past, is the vast creative goal we might today set for ourselves and for one another. [*World in Fragments*](#), I believe, offers a good start in that direction on a variety of levels.

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 third volume: problem-solving, as a going concern, anything goes (twice), National Institute of Health, regardless, overkill, “the accepted body of beliefs,” Doomsday machine, hopeful and dreadful monster, last but not least, Common Law, one best way (twice), Newspeak, self (several times), be aware of, dog, reckoning (several times), double bind (twice), facilitations, theory of everything, moods.

KOINŌNIA

The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism*

I

The label “postmodernism” certainly does not and cannot define or characterize the present period. But it very adequately *expresses* it. It manifests the pathetic inability of this epoch to conceive of itself as something positive—or as something *tout court*—leading to its self-definition as simply “post-something,” that is, through a reference to that which was but is not anymore, and to its attempts at self-glorification by means of the bizarre contention that its meaning is no-meaning and its style the lack of any style.¹

Nevertheless, a distinction between the terms “postindustrial” and “postmodern” is worth making. Something in reality corresponds to the term “postindustrial.” Briefly speaking, in the rich countries at least (but not only),

*Lecture delivered in English on September 19, 1989, during a Boston University symposium, “A Metaphor for Our Times.” Translated into French by me as “L’Époque du conformisme généralisé” and published in *MM*, 11-24 (11-28 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: In *MM*, Castoriadis dates his text as “August 1989.” The version published here was presented to an August 1991 conference in Melbourne on “Reason and Imagination in Modern Culture” organized by the Australian review *Thesis Eleven*. It was published in *Thesis Eleven*, 31 (February 1992): 14-23. I have made a few changes in and additions to the *Thesis Eleven* text for clarity’s sake and in order to reflect alterations implicit in the French translation. First reprinted in *WIF*, 32-43.]

¹“At last, postmodernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style,” a well-known architect proclaimed at a conference in New York in April 1986.

production (whatever that may mean) is moving away from old dirty factories and blast furnaces toward increasingly automated complexes and various “services.” The process, anticipated at least half a century ago, was considered for quite a time to be bearing extraordinary promises for the future of human work and life. The length of work, one was told, would be dramatically cut, and its nature fundamentally altered. Automation and data processing were supposed to transform the repetitive, alienated industrial toil of old into an open field for the free expansion of the inventiveness and creativity of the worker.

In actuality, none of all this materialized. The possibilities offered by the new technologies are confined to a limited group of clever young specialists. For the bulk of the remaining employees, in industry or in services, the nature of work has not fundamentally changed. Rather, old style “industrialization” has invaded the big firms in the nonindustrial sectors, with rhythm of work and rates of output submitted to impersonal, mechanical control. Employment in industry proper has been declining for decades; “redundant” workers,² and youth, have mostly found employment in second-rate, poorly paid, “service” industries. From 1840, say, to 1940, the length of the working week had been reduced from 72 to 40 hours (minus 45 percent). It remains virtually the same from 1940 onwards, despite a notable acceleration in the rate of increase of output per man-hour. Workers thereby made redundant stay unemployed (mostly in Western Europe), or have to fit themselves into second-rate “services” (mostly in the USA).

²T/E: Castoriadis adds in parentheses, after *redondants* in the French: “an admirable expression from Anglo-Saxon economists” (my translation of the French).

Nonetheless, it remains true that something essential is changing, at least potentially, in humankind's—the rich part of humankind's—relation with material production. For the first time in millennia, “primary” and “secondary” production—agriculture, mining and manufacturing, transportation—is absorbing less than a quarter of total labor input (and of the working population), and could possibly absorb half of that, were it not for the incredible waste built into the system (farmers subsidized *not* to produce, obsolete industries and factories kept in operation, and so on). Were it not for the continuous manufacturing of new “needs” and the built-in obsolescence of most products, “primary” and “secondary” production might even come to absorb a vanishing quantum of human time. In brief, a leisure society is, theoretically, within reach, whereas a society with creative, personal work roles for all seems as remote now as during the nineteenth century.

II

Granted that any designation is conventional, the absurdity of the term “postmodern” is obvious. What is less frequently noted is that this absurdity is derivative. For, the term “modern” itself is very infelicitous, and its inadequacy was bound to appear with the passage of time. What could ever come *after* modernity? A period naming itself modern implies that history has reached its end, and that henceforth humans will live in a perpetual present.

The term “modern” expresses a deeply self- (or ego-) centered attitude. The proclamation that “We are the moderns” preempts any genuine further development. More than this, it contains an intriguing antinomy. The self-conscious imaginary component of the term entails a self-

characterization of modernity as indefinite openness with regard to the future, yet the characterization makes sense only in relation to the past. They were the Ancients, we are the Moderns. Yet, what are we to call the ones coming after us? The term makes sense only on the absurd assumption that the self-proclaimed modern period will last forever, that the future will only be a prolonged present—which in other respects fully contradicts the explicit pretensions of modernity.

A short discussion of two contemporary attempts to give a precise content to the term *modernity* may be a useful starting point. Characteristically, these attempts concern themselves not with changes in social-historical reality but with real or supposed changes in the attitude of the thinkers (philosophers) toward that reality. They are typical of the contemporary tendency of writers toward self-confinement: writers write about writers for other writers. Thus, Michel Foucault³ asserts that modernity starts with Kant, especially with the texts *Streit der Fakultäten* and *Was ist Aufklärung?*, because, with Kant, the philosopher for the first time shows interest in the actual historical present, starts “reading the newspaper,” etc. (cf. Hegel’s phrase about reading the newspaper as one’s “realistic morning prayer”). Thus, modernity would be the consciousness of the historicity of the epoch one is living in. This is, of course, totally inadequate,

³Michel Foucault, “Un cours inédit,” *Magazine Littéraire* (May 1988): 36. [T/E: Actually, the issue in question dates instead from four years earlier: “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?”, *Magazine Littéraire*, 207 (May 1984): 35-39. This text, from the first hour of Foucault’s January 5, 1983 lecture, is now available in translation here: *The Government of Self and Other: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*, tr. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador/Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); see: pp. 13-14. I thank Clare O’Farrell for helping me track down the correct reference.]

since the historicity of one's own epoch was clear for Pericles (as is apparent from the Funeral Oration in Thucydides) and Plato as well as for Tacitus, or Grégoire de Tours in the sixth century ("*mundus senescit*"). The novelty, in Foucault's eyes, would be that, from Kant onwards, the relation to the present is not conceived anymore in terms of value comparisons ("Are we decadent?", "Which model ought we to follow?"), not "longitudinally," but in a "sagittal relationship...to its own present reality." But value comparisons are clearly there in Kant, for whom history can be reflected only in terms of progress, and the *Aufklärung* is a cardinal moment in this progress. And, if a "sagittal" relationship is counterposed to valuation, this can mean only that thought, abandoning its critical function, tends to borrow its criteria from historical reality as it is. Undoubtedly, such a tendency becomes acute in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, even if the last two oppose the reality of today in the name of a more real reality, the reality of tomorrow: communism or the superman). But this tendency is a *problem within* modernity: it could never be taken as summing up the thinking of the *Aufklärung* and post-*Aufklärung* period, and even less the real *social-historical* trend of the past two centuries.

Equally problematic is Jürgen Habermas's identification of modernity with the spirit of Hegel's philosophy: "Hegel was the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity. We have to go back to him...." Actual history is replaced, once again, with the history of ideas, real struggles and conflicts exist only through their pale representation in the antinomies of the system. Thus, when Habermas writes that it is only in Hegel's theory that "the constellation among modernity, time-consciousness, and rationality becomes visible for the first time," what seems to

bother him is that “rationality” is “puffed up into the absolute spirit.”⁴ But this very *unification* is precisely Hegel’s *illusion*. Nor can one forget that, not only Hegel’s *ipsissima verba*, but the whole structure, logic, and dynamic of his philosophy lead to the antimodern theme *par excellence*, that the “end of history” is already with us and that, after Absolute Knowledge has been embodied in Hegel’s system, only some “empirical work” remains to be done.

Hegel represents, in fact, the full opposition to modernity within modernity—or the full opposition, more generally, to the Greco-Western spirit within that spirit—for, it is with him that the illegitimate marriage between Reason and Reality (= the Present construed as the *restlose* (without remainder) recollection of the successive embodiments of Reason) is for the first time solemnly celebrated. Hegel writes that “philosophy is its own (historical) epoch conceptualized in thought.”⁵ Philosophy is the truth of the epoch and philosophy is true only insofar as it is the thought of the epoch. But the peculiarity of the “epoch”—already before Hegel’s times, as well as after—has been the emergence, in thought and in actual historical activity, of an explicit internal *split*, manifest in the self-contestation of the epoch, in the calling into question of existing and instituted forms. The peculiarity of the “epoch” has been the struggle between

⁴Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, (1985), tr. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 4, 43.

⁵T/E: This is Castoriadis’s own English-language translation/paraphrase. In the Preface to G. W. F. Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21, the quotation reads: “Philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*.”

Monarchy and democracy, property and social movements, dogma and critique, Academy and artistic innovation, and so on. Philosophy can be the thought of the epoch either by attempting to reconcile (in words) these oppositions—whereby it is led necessarily to a conservatism of the sort Hegel reached in the *Philosophy of Right*—or by remaining true to its critical function, in which case the idea that it merely conceptualizes the epoch is preposterous. Critique entails a distance relative to the object; if philosophy is to go beyond journalism, this critique presupposes the creation of new ideas, new standards, new forms of thought that establish this distance.

III

I am not able to propose new names for the period that called itself modern, nor for the one succeeding it. But I will attempt to propose a new periodization, or rather a new characterization of the more or less accepted divisions of (Western) European history (which obviously includes American history). It is hardly necessary to remind ourselves of the schematic character of all periodizations, of the risk of neglecting continuities and connections, or of the “subjective” element involved. The latter is to be found specifically in the basis chosen for the division in which the philosophical and theoretical preconceptions underlying the attempt at periodization are condensed. Of course, this is unavoidable and it has to be recognized as such. The best way to deal with it is to make these preconceptions as explicit as possible. My own preconceptions are that the individuality of a period is to be found in the specificity of the imaginary significations created by and dominating it; and that, without neglecting the fantastically rich and polyphonic complexity of the historical

universe unfolding in Western Europe from the twelfth century onwards, the most appropriate way to grasp its specificity is to relate it to the signification and the project of (social and individual) autonomy. The emergence of this project marks the break with the “true” Middle Ages.⁶

In this perspective, one may distinguish three periods: the emergence (constitution) of the West; the critical (“modern”) epoch; and the retreat into conformism.

1. *The emergence (constitution) of the West* (from the twelfth to the early eighteenth century). The self-constitution of the protobourgeoisie, the building and growth of the new cities (or the changing character of existing ones), the demand for some sort of political autonomy (going from communal rights to full self-government, depending on cases and circumstances) were accompanied by new psychical, mental, intellectual, and artistic attitudes that prepared the ground for the explosive results of the rediscovery and reception of Roman Law, Aristotle, and then the whole of the extant Greek legacy. Tradition and authority gradually ceased to be sacred and innovation stopped being a disparaging word (as it typically was during the “true” Middle Ages). Even though it appeared only in embryonic form—and in perpetual accommodation with the powers that be (Church and Monarchy)—the project of political and intellectual

⁶On the question of the “true Middle Ages,” Aron Gurevitch, *The Categories of Medieval Culture* (1972), tr. G. L. Campbell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), and Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), supply material and analyses very close to the point of view adopted here.

autonomy⁷ actually did reemerge after a fifteen-century-long eclipse. An uneasy compromise between this social-historical movement and the (more or less reformed) traditional order was reached in the “classical” seventeenth century.

2. *The critical (“modern”) epoch: autonomy and capitalism.* A decisive turn occurred in the eighteenth century, became self-conscious with the Enlightenment, and lasted until the two World Wars of the twentieth century. The project of autonomy was radicalized, both in the sociopolitical and in the intellectual fields. Instituted political forms were called into question; new ones, entailing radical breaks with the past, were created. As the movement developed, contestation embraced other domains beyond the narrowly political one: property relations, the organization of the economy, family, the position of women and the relations between the sexes, education and the status of the young. For the first time in the Christian period, philosophy definitively broke with theology (up to Leibniz, at least, mainstream philosophers felt obliged to supply “proofs” of the existence of God, etc.). A sweeping acceleration in the work and expansion of the fields of rational science took place. In literature and the arts, the creation of new forms not only proliferated but was self-consciously pursued for its own sake.

At the same time, a new socioeconomic reality—in itself a “total social fact”—was created: capitalism.

⁷T/E: The 1990 French translation instead has (now translated back into English): “social and individual autonomy.”

Capitalism is not just endless accumulation for accumulation's sake: it is the relentless transformation of the conditions and the means of accumulation, the incessant revolutionizing of production, commerce, finance, and consumption. It embodies a new social imaginary signification: the unlimited expansion of "rational mastery." After a while, this signification came to penetrate and tended to shape the whole of social life (e.g., State, armies, education, etc.). With the growth of the core capitalist institution, the firm, it becomes embodied in a new type of bureaucratic-hierarchical organization; gradually, the managerial-technical bureaucracy becomes the proper bearer of the capitalist project.

The "modern" period—let us say 1750 to 1950—is best defined by the fight, but also the mutual contamination and entanglement of two imaginary significations: autonomy, on the one hand, and unlimited expansion of "rational mastery," on the other. They ambiguously coexisted under the common roof of "Reason." In its capitalist acceptance, the meaning of "Reason" is clear: it is "Understanding" (*Verstand* in the Kantian-Hegelian sense) or what I call "ensemblistic-identitary logic," which is essentially embodied in quantification and which leads to the fetishization of "growth" *per se*. On the basis of the hidden but apparently self-evident postulate that economy is just about producing more (outputs) with less (inputs), nothing—physical or human "nature," tradition, or other "values"—ought to stand in the way of the maximization process. Everything is called before the Tribunal of (productive) Reason and must prove its right to exist on the basis of the criterion of the unlimited expansion of "rational mastery." Through the unrestricted use of (pseudo-) rational means with a view toward a single (pseudo-) rational end, capitalism thus became a perpetual

process of supposedly rational but essentially blind self-reinstitution of society.

For the social-historical movements that embodied the project of social and individual autonomy,⁸ on the other hand, “Reason” initially meant the sharp distinction between *factum* and *jus*, which thus became the main weapon in the rejection of the tradition (of the *status quo*’s claim that it should continue to exist just because it happens to be there), and the affirmation of the possibility and the right of the individuals and the collectivity to find in themselves (or to produce) the principles for ordering their lives. Rapidly, however, Reason as the open process of critique and elucidation was transformed, on the one hand, into mechanical uniformizing reckoning (already manifest during the French Revolution), and, on the other hand, into a supposedly all-embracing and universal System (clearly legible in Marx’s intentions, and thereby decisively influencing the socialist movement). This transformation poses complex, deep, and obscure questions, which cannot be discussed here. I shall only note two points. The first is the all-pervading influence of capitalist “rationalism” and “rationalization.” The second concerns a fateful and, apparently, almost inevitable tendency of thought to search for absolute foundations, for absolute certainty, and for exhaustivity. Identitary logic creates the illusions of self-foundation, necessity, and universality. “Reason”—in fact, Understanding—then presents itself as the self-sufficient foundation for human activity, which otherwise would discover that it has no foundation outside itself. And the “objective” counterpart (and guarantee) of this sort of “Reason” has to be discovered in the things themselves. So

⁸T/E: The 1990 French translation instead has (now translated back into English): “social and historical autonomy.”

History *is* Reason, Reason “realizes” itself in human history, either linearly (Kant, Condorcet, Auguste Comte, etc.) or “dialectically” (Hegel, Marx). The final outcome was that capitalism, Liberalism, and the classical revolutionary movement came to share the imaginary of Progress and the belief that technical-material power, as such, is (immediately or, after a delay, in a discounted future) the decisive cause or condition for human happiness or emancipation.

Despite these mutual contaminations, the essential character of this epoch is the opposition and the tension between the two core significations: individual and social autonomy, on the one hand, and unlimited expansion of “rational mastery,” on the other. The real expression of this tension is the development and the persistence of social, political, and ideological conflict. As I have tried to show elsewhere,⁹ this conflict has been, in itself, the central motor force of the dynamic development of Western society during this epoch, and a condition *sine qua non* for the expansion of capitalism and for the containment of the irrationalities of capitalist “rationalization.” This restless society—intellectually and spiritually restless—has been the milieu for the hectic cultural and artistic creation of the “modern” epoch.

3. *The retreat into conformism.* The two World Wars, the emergence of totalitarianism, the collapse of the workers’ movement (both result and condition of the catastrophic slide into Leninism-Stalinism), and the decay of the mythology of progress mark the entry of the Western societies into a third phase.

Viewed from the vantage point of the close of the 1980s, the period after 1950 is characterized mainly by the

⁹See “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961), now in [PSW2](#).

waning of social, political, and ideological conflict.¹⁰ To be sure, the last forty years have witnessed important movements with lasting effects (those of women, minorities, students, and youth). Yet, not only have these movements ended with semifailures, none of them have been able to propose a new vision of society and to face the overall political problem as such. After the movements of the 1960s, the project of autonomy seems totally eclipsed. One may take this to be a very short-term, conjunctural development. But the growing weight, in contemporary societies, of privatization, depoliticization, and “individualism” makes such an interpretation most unlikely. A grave concomitant and related symptom is the complete atrophy of political imagination. The intellectual pauperization of “socialists” and conservatives alike is staggering. “Socialists” have nothing to say, and the intellectual quality of the output of the advocates of economic Liberalism¹¹ over the last fifteen years would have made Adam Smith, Benjamin Constant, and John Stuart Mill turn in their graves. Ronald Reagan was a *chef d’œuvre* of historical symbolism.

The condition for there being a vast audience for this “neoliberal” discourse is a widespread and rising collective amnesia. Two striking instances of this tendency are offered (1) by the disappearance of any critique of “representative

¹⁰T/E: In the French translation, published in 1990, of this talk originally presented in English in September 1989, Castoriadis included a phrase we translate back into English as follows: “To be sure, Communist totalitarianism is still there, but it appears more and more as an external threat, and its ‘ideology’ is undergoing an unprecedented pulverization.” See “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism,” now in [CL4](#). What is now the second “To be sure” should then have “, too,” added after it.

¹¹T/E: In the Continental sense of conservative free-market ideology.

democracy” and (2) by the total disappearance of the devastating criticism the best academic economists of the 1930s—Piero Sraffa, Joan Violet Robinson, Richard Ferdinand Kahn, John Maynard Keynes, Michał Kalecki, George Lennox Sharman Shackle—had previously directed at the would-be “rationality” of twentieth-century capitalism. We live in a period of appalling ideological regression among the *litterati*. As for the society at large, beneath the celebrated *consensus* all investigations and polls show a deep distrust and cynicism regarding *all* the instituted powers (politicians, business, trade unions, and churches).¹²

Without attempting to establish “causal” links (which, anyhow, would be meaningless), I have noted above the concomitancy between the social, political, and ideological restlessness of the 1750-1950 epoch and the creative outbursts in the fields of art and culture. For the present phase also, it suffices to note the facts. The post-1950 situation goes together with a visible decadence in the field of spiritual creation. In philosophy, historical and textual commentary on and interpretation of past authors have become the substitute for thinking. This starts already with the second Heidegger, and has been theorized—in ways apparently opposed but leading to the same results—as “hermeneutics” and “deconstruction.” A further step has been the recent glorification of “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*).¹³ Any criticism here would be out of place; one would be forced to admire this candid confession of radical impotence, were it

¹²T/E: Perhaps by inadvertence, this paragraph, which has now been slightly edited for clarity, was not translated for the 1990 French version.

¹³T/E: *Weak Thought* (1983), ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, tr. with an intro. Peter Carravetta (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

not accompanied by woolly “theorizing.” The expansion of science continues, of course—but one wonders whether this is not just a sort of inertial movement. Theoretical achievements like those of the first third of the century—relativity, quanta—have no parallel over the last fifty years. (A possible exception may be the triad of fractals, catastrophe, and chaos theories.) One of the most active fields of contemporary science, where results of paramount significance are expected, is cosmology;¹⁴ its theoretical framework is relativity and Friedmann’s equations, which were written in the early 1920s. Equally striking is the poverty of the theoretical-philosophical exploration of the tremendous implications of modern physics (which call into question, as is well known, most of the postulates of inherited thinking). Technical progress, on the other hand, continues unabated, if it has not even accelerated.

If the “modern” period as defined above can be characterized, in the field of art, as the self-conscious pursuit of new forms, this pursuit has now explicitly and emphatically been abandoned. Eclecticism and the recombining and reprocessing of the achievements of the past have now gained pride of program. Donald Barthelme got the dates wrong, but the sense right, when he wrote “Collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century”¹⁵ (Proust, Kafka, Rilke, and Matisse had nothing to do with “collage”).

¹⁴T/E: Missing from the August 1991 English-language version first published the next year is this half sentence (now translated into English): “but the motor for this activity is the explosion in observational techniques, whereas”.

¹⁵T/E: This may be Castoriadis’s paraphrase or translation from a French version to English. The full quotation is: “The principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century in all media.”

“Postmodern” art has rendered an enormous service, indeed: it shows how really great modern art had been.

IV

From the various attempts to define and defend “postmodernism,” and from some familiarity with the *Zeitgeist*, one can derive a summary description of the theoretical or philosophical tenets of the present trend. In Johann Arnason’s excellent formulation¹⁶ these tenets are:

1. The rejection of an overall vision of history as progress or liberation. In itself, this rejection is correct. It is not new, but it serves, in the hands of the Postmodernists, to eliminate the question: Are, therefore, all historical periods and all social-historical regimes equivalent? This, in turn, leads to political agnosticism, or to the funny acrobatics performed by the Postmodernists or their brethren when they feel obliged to defend freedom, democracy, human rights, and so on.
2. The rejection of the idea of a uniform and universal reason. Here again, in itself the rejection is right; it is by far not new; and it serves to cover up the question that opened up the Greco-Western creation of Logos and Reason: What are we to think? Are all ways of thinking equivalent or indifferent?

¹⁶Johann Arnason, “The Imaginary Constitution of Modernity,” in *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (December 1989). [T/E: This Castoriadis *Festschrift*, edited by Giovanni Busino, was reprinted the same year by Droz (Geneva) as *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis*.]

3. The rejection of the strict differentiation of cultural spheres (philosophy and art, say) on the basis of a single underlying principle of rationality or functionality. This is at best muddled, and cuts through many important questions. To name but one: the differentiation of cultural spheres (or the lack of it) is, each time, a social-historical creation, part and parcel of the whole institution of life in the society considered. It can be neither approved nor rejected in the abstract. And neither has the process of differentiation of the cultural spheres in, say, the Greco-Western stretch of human history, expressed the implications of a single underlying principle of rationality, whatever that may mean. This would be, strictly speaking, the Hegelian construction.¹⁷ The unity of the differentiated cultural spheres, in ancient Athens as well as in Western Europe, is not to be found in any underlying principle of rationality or functionality but in the fact that all spheres embody, in their own way and in the very guise of their differentiation, the same core of imaginary significations of the given society.

What we have here is a collection of half-truths perverted into stratagems of evasion. The value of postmodernism as “theory” is that it mirrors the prevailing trends.¹⁸ Its misery is that it simply rationalizes them through

¹⁷T/E: Castoriadis had added parenthetically in the French (now translated into English): “(illusory and arbitrary)” before “Hegelian construction.”

¹⁸T/E: Castoriadis had added here in French (now translated into English): “servilely and therefore faithfully.”

a highbrow apologetics of conformity and banality. Complacently mixed up with loose but fashionable talk about “pluralism” and “respect for the difference of the other,” it ends up glorifying eclecticism, covering up sterility, and providing a generalized version of the “anything goes” principle, so fittingly celebrated in another field by Paul Feyerabend. To be sure, conformity, sterility, banality, and “anything goes” are the characteristic traits of the period. Postmodernism, the ideology adorning them with a “solemn complement of justification,”¹⁹ is the latest case of intellectuals abandoning their critical function and enthusiastically adhering to that which is there just because it is there. Postmodernism, both as an effective historical trend and as a theory, truly is the negation of modernism.

I say this because, as a function of the antinomy outlined above between the two core imaginary significations of autonomy and “rational mastery,” and despite their mutual contaminations, the critique of existing instituted realities never stopped during the “modern” period. And this is exactly what is rapidly disappearing at present, with the “philosophical” blessing of the Postmodernists. The waning of social and political conflict in the “real” sphere finds its appropriate counterpart in the intellectual and artistic fields with the evanescence of a genuine critical spirit. This spirit, as was said above, can exist only in and through the establishment of distance with respect to what there is, which entails the conquest of a point of view beyond the given,

¹⁹T/E: This is Castoriadis’s condensed version (also found in [IIS](#), 11) of Marx’s statement, in the 1843 Introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* (*Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3 [New York: International Publishers, 1975], p. 175), that “Religion is the general theory of that world, ...its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification.”

therefore a work of creation. The present period is thus best defined as the general retreat into conformism. This conformism is typically realized when hundreds of millions of TV viewers all over the world daily absorb the same inanities but also when theorists go around repeating that one cannot “break the closure of Greco-Western metaphysics.”

V

It is thus not sufficient to say that “modernity is an unfinished project” (Habermas).²⁰ Insofar as modernity embodied the capitalist imaginary signification of the unlimited expansion of (pseudo-) rational (pseudo-) mastery, it is more alive than ever, and it is engaged in a frantic course pregnant with the severest dangers for humankind. But insofar as the development of capitalism has been decisively conditioned by the simultaneous deployment of the project of social and individual autonomy, modernity *is* finished. Capitalism developing while forced to face a continuous struggle against the *status quo*, on the floor of the factory as well as in the sphere of ideas or of art, and capitalism expanding without any effective internal opposition are two different social-historical animals. The project of autonomy itself is certainly not finished. But its trajectory during the last two centuries has proved the radical inadequacy, to say the least, of the programs in which it had been embodied—be it

²⁰T/E: With a title that translates as “Modernity—An Unfinished Project,” Habermas gave his September 1980 acceptance speech in German for the city of Frankfurt’s Theodor W. Adorno Prize; it was then delivered as a James Lecture of the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University and published as “Modernity versus Postmodernity” in *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter 1981): 3-14.

the Liberal republic or Marxist-Leninist “socialism.” That the demonstration of this inadequacy in actual historical fact is one of the roots of present political apathy and privatization hardly needs stressing. For the resurgence of the project of autonomy, new political objectives and new human attitudes are required. For the time being, however, there are but few signs of such changes. Meanwhile, it would be absurd to try to decide whether we are living through a long parenthesis or we are witnessing the beginning of the end of Western history as a history essentially linked with the project of autonomy and codetermined by it.

August 1989

Reflections on Racism*

We are here, it goes without saying, because we want to combat racism, xenophobia, chauvinism, and everything relating to them. We do this in the name of a basic stand: we recognize the equal value of all human beings *qua* human beings and we affirm the duty of the collectivity to grant them all the same effective opportunities to develop their faculties. Far from being able to remain comfortably ensconced on some alleged self-evident set of “human rights” or a transcendental necessity of the “rights of man,” this affirmation engenders paradoxes of the first magnitude, and notably an antinomy I have already emphasized a thousand times, which we may define in abstract terms as the antinomy between universalism as regards human beings and universalism as regards human beings’ “cultures” (their imaginary institutions of society). I shall return to this point at the end of my presentation.

This combat, however, like all the other ones, has in our epoch often been deflected and twisted round in the most incredibly cynical ways. To take just one example, the Russian State proclaims that it is against racism and chauvinism, whereas in fact anti-Semitism, underhandedly encouraged by the powers that be, is alive and kicking in Russia and dozens of nations and ethnic groups still remain, by force, within the great prison of peoples. There is still talk—and rightly so—about the extermination of the

*Lecture presented March 9, 1987, at the Association pour la recherche et l'intervention psychosociologiques (ARIP) colloquium on “The Unconscious and Social Change.” Originally published as “Notations sur le racisme,” in *Connexions*, 48 (1987): 107-18. Reprinted as “Réflexions sur le racisme,” *MM*, 25-38 (29-46 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: The present translation originally appeared in *Thesis Eleven*, 32 (1992): 1-12. First reprinted in *WIF*, 19-31.]

American Indians. I have never seen anyone pose the question, “How has one language, which five centuries ago was spoken only from Moscow to Nizhni-Novgorod, been able to reach the shores of the Pacific? Has this occurred with the enthusiastic applause of Tatars, Buryats, Samoyeds, Tunguses, and various other peoples?” Here we have an initial reason for us to be, on the level of reflection, particularly rigorous and exacting. A second, and equally important reason is that here, as in all questions bearing on a general social-historical category—the Nation, Power, the State, Religion, the Family, etc.—it is almost inevitable that one will slip up somewhere along the way. For every thesis that one might put forth, it is disconcertingly easy to find counterexamples—the pet vice of authors in these domains is to lack the reflex that prevails in all other disciplines: Is not what I am saying possibly contradicted by a counterexample? Every few months one reads of theories on these themes, supported by grandiose scaffolding, and one is surprised to find oneself once again having to exclaim in astonishment: Has the author, then, never heard anyone talk about Switzerland or China? Byzantium or the Christian monarchies on the Iberian peninsula? Athens or New England? Eskimos or the !Kung? After four, or twenty-five, centuries of self-critical thought, one continues to witness the flourishing of complacent generalizations that have been made on the basis of some idea or other that simply has come across the author’s mind.

To conclude these preliminary remarks, let me add one thing: what I have to say will often be in the interrogative and almost as often disagreeable.



An anecdote, perhaps amusing, leads me to one of the centers of the question. As you saw in the announcement for this colloquium, my first name is Cornelius—in old French, and for my friends, *Corneille*. I was baptized in the Orthodox Christian religion, and in order for me to be baptized, there had to be a holy eponym. Indeed, there was an *aghios Kornēlios*, the Greek transliteration of the Latin Cornelius—from the *gens Cornelia*, which had lent its name to hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of the Empire—the *Kornēlios* in question having been sanctified as a result of a story recounted in Acts (10-11), which I shall summarize. This Cornelius, centurion of an Italic cohort, lived in Caesarea, gave much alms to the people, and feared God, to whom he prayed unceasingly. After being visited by an angel, he invited Simon, called Peter, to his house. The latter, en route, also had a vision, the meaning of which was that there no longer was any common, and any unclean, food. After arriving in Caesarea, Peter dined at Cornelius's—dining at the house of a *goy* is, according to the Law, an abomination—and as he spoke there, the Holy Ghost fell on all those who were listening to his words. This greatly surprised Peter's Jewish companions, since the Holy Ghost had also poured on the uncircumcised, who had begun to speak in tongues and to magnify God. Later, upon his return to Jerusalem, Peter had to answer the bitter reproaches of his other circumcised companions. After he explained himself, however, they held their peace, saying that God had granted repentance unto life for the “nations” as well.

This story evidently has multiple significations. It is the first time in the New Testament that the equality of “nations” before God, and the nonnecessity of passing

through Judaism to become Christian, was affirmed. What is of even more importance, for me, is the contraposition of these propositions. Peter's companions "were astonished" (*exestēsan*) says the original Greek of the Acts: *ex-istamai*, ek-sister, to go out of oneself) that the Holy Ghost would really want to pour upon all "nations." Why? Because, obviously, until then the Holy Ghost had dealt only with Jews—and at best with this particular sect of Jews who believed in Jesus of Nazareth. It also, however, refers us back, by negative implication, to key characteristics of Hebraic culture—here I am beginning to become disagreeable—which for others do not go without saying, this being the least that can be said. Not to agree to eat with the *goyim*, when one knows the place the common meal holds in the socialization and the history of humanity? So then one rereads the Old Testament attentively, notably the books relating to the conquest of the Promised Land, and one sees that the "chosen people" is not simply a theological notion but eminently practical as well. The literal expressions of the Old Testament are, moreover, very beautiful, if one may say so. (Unfortunately, I am able to read it only in the Greek Septuagint version, from the period soon after Alexander's conquest. I know there are problems, but I do not think that they affect what I am going to say.) One sees there that all people inhabiting the "perimeter" of the Promised Land were "smote with the edge of the sword" (*dia stomatos rhomphaias*), and this without discrimination as to sex or age; that no attempt at "converting" them was made; that their temples were destroyed, their sacred forests cut down, all under direct orders from Yahweh. As if that were not enough, prohibitions abound concerning adoption of their customs (*bdelygma*, abomination; *miasma*, defilement) and concerning sexual relations with them (*porneia*, prostitution, a word that

returns obsessively in the first books of the Old Testament). Simple honesty obliges one to say that the Old Testament is the first written racist document in history that we possess. Hebraic racism is the first one of which we have written traces—which certainly does not mean that it is first in absolute terms. Everything would lead us to suppose rather the contrary. Simply, and happily, if I dare say so, the Chosen People are a people like the others.¹

I find it necessary to recall this, if only because the idea that racism, or simply hatred of the other, is a specific invention of the West is one of the asinities currently enjoying broad circulation.

Without being able to dwell on the various aspects of the historical changes involved or on their enormous complexity, let me note simply the following:

A. That among the peoples with a monotheistic religion, the Hebrews nevertheless enjoy the following ambiguous distinction: once Palestine was conquered (three-thousand years ago—I know nothing about today) and the previous inhabitants were “normalized” in one fashion or another, the Hebrews left the world alone. They were the Chosen People, their belief was too good for the others, no effort at systematic conversion was made (but there was *no rejection* of conversion either);²

B. The two other monotheistic religions, inspired by the Old Testament and the historical “successors” to Hebraism, were unfortunately not so aristocratic: their God

¹See Exodus 23.22-33, 33.11-17, Leviticus 18.24-28, Joshua 6.21-22, 8.24-29, 10.28, 31-32, 36-37, etc.

²The few efforts at Jewish proselytism under the Roman Empire were belated, marginal, and without sequel.

was good for everybody; if the others did not want Him, they were to have Him shoved down their throats by force or they would be exterminated. It would be useless to belabor this point about the history of Christianity—or rather impossible: on the contrary, not only would it be useful but it is urgent to recommence this work, for since the end of the nineteenth century and the great “critics,” everything seems to have been forgotten, and rosy versions of the spread of Christianity are being propagated. It is forgotten that when, via Constantine, the Christians seized the Roman Empire they were a minority; that they became a majority only through persecution, extortion, the massive destruction of temples, statues, religious sites, and ancient manuscripts, and finally through legal provisions (Theodosius the Great) forbidding non-Christians from inhabiting the Empire. This ardor on the part of true Christians to defend the true God by means of iron, fire, and blood is constantly present in the history of Eastern as well as Western Christianity (heretics, Saxons, crusades, Jews, the Indians of America, the objects of the charity of the Holy Inquisition, etc.). Likewise, in the face of the ambient flattery the true history of the near-incredible spread of Islam would have to be reestablished. It was certainly not the charm of the Prophet’s words that Islamized (and most of the time Arabized) populations extending from the Ebro to Sarawak and from Zanzibar to Tashkent. The superiority of Islam over Christianity, from the standpoint of the conquered, was that under the former one could survive by accepting exploitation and the deprivation of most of one’s rights without converting, whereas in Christian lands the allodox, *even when Christian*, were in general not to be tolerated (see the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries);

C. Contrary to what some have found themselves able to say (as a result of one of those aftershocks that have

occurred in response to the “rebirth” of monotheism), *it is not polytheism as such* that assures equal respect for the other. It is true that in Greece, or in Rome, there was almost perfect tolerance for the religion or the “race” of others, but that concerns Greece and Rome—not polytheism as such. To take only one example, Hinduism is not only intrinsically and internally “racist” (castes) but has also fed as many bloody massacres in the course of its history as any monotheistic religion, and continues to do so today.



The idea that to me seems central is that racism participates in something much more universal than one usually in fact wants to admit. Racism is an offspring, or a particularly acute and exacerbated avatar—I would even be tempted to say: a monstrous specification—of what, empirically, is an almost universal trait of human societies. What is at issue is an apparent incapacity to constitute oneself as oneself without excluding the other, *and* this coupled with an apparent inability to exclude others without devaluing and, ultimately, hating them.

As is always the case when it comes to the institution of society, the theme necessarily is two-sided: there is the instituting social imaginary, the imaginary significations and the institutions this imaginary creates; and, on the other hand, there is the psychism of singular human beings and what this psychism imposes on the institution of society in the way of constraints and is itself subjected to by the institution of society.

I shall not dwell very long on the case of the

institution of society, as I have often spoken of it elsewhere.³ Society—*each* society—institutes itself in creating its own world. This does not signify only “representations,” “values,” etc. At the basis of all these there are a *mode* of representing, a categorization of the world, an aesthetics and a logic, as well as a *mode* of valuation—and without doubt, too, a mode, each time particular to the society under consideration, of *being affected*. In this creation of the world, the existence of *other* human beings, and of *other* societies, one way or another always finds a place. One must distinguish between, on the one hand, the constitution of others who are mythical, whether wholly so or in part (the white Saviors for the Aztecs, the Ethiopians for the Homeric Greeks), who can be “superior” or “inferior,” even monstrous, and, on the other hand, the constitution of real others, of societies really encountered. I will present a very rudimentary schema for thinking the second case. In an initial mythical (or, what boils down to the same thing, “logically first”) time, there are no others. These others are then *encountered* (the mythical or “logically first” time is that of the self-positing of society). As concerns us here, three possibilities, trivially speaking, open up: the institutions of these others (and therefore, these others themselves!) can be considered superior (to “ours”), inferior, or “equivalent.” Let us note straight off that the first case would entail both a logical contradiction and a real suicide. To consider “foreign” institutions to be superior *as to the very institution* of a society (not as to the existence of such and such an individual) has no room to exist: this institution would have to yield its place to the other one. If French law

³See “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984) and “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982) both of which now appear in [CL2](#).

enjoined the courts: "In all cases, apply German law," it would abolish itself as French law. It is possible for this or that institution, in the secondary sense of the term, to be considered worthy of adoption, and actually to be adopted, but the wholesale adoption of the core institutions of another society without any basic reservations would imply the dissolution, as such, of the borrower-society.

The encounter between different societies therefore leaves only two possibilities: the others are inferior, or the others are equal to us. Experience proves, as one says, that the first path is followed almost always, the second almost never. There is an apparent "reason" for this. To say that the others are "equal to us" could not signify *equal* in an undifferentiated way, for that would imply, for example, that it is the same [*égal*] whether I eat pork or not, whether I cut off the hands of thieves or not, and so on. Everything would then become indifferent and would be disinvested. That the others are "equal to us" therefore has to mean that the others are simply *others*; in other words, that not only languages, or folklore, or table manners, but also institutions taken globally, as a whole and in detail, are *incomparable*. This—which in one sense, but only in one sense, is the truth—cannot appear "naturally" in history, and it should not be difficult to understand why. Such "incomparability" would amount, for the subjects of the culture under consideration, to toleration among the others of what for them is abomination; despite the easy time today's defenders of the "rights of man" give themselves, this attitude gives rise to theoretically insoluble questions in the case of conflicts between cultures, as the examples already cited demonstrate and as I shall endeavor to show again at the end of these reflections.

This idea that the others are quite simply others, which in words is so simple and so true, is a historical creation that

goes against the inclinations of the “spontaneous” tendencies of the institution of society. The others have almost always been instituted as inferior. This is not something fated, or a logical necessity; it is simply the extreme probability, the “natural inclination,” of human institutions. The simplest mode in which subjects value their institutions evidently comes in the form of the affirmation (which need not be explicit) that these institutions are the only “true” ones, and that *therefore* the gods, beliefs, customs, etc., of the others are false. In this sense, the inferiority of the others is only the flip side of the affirmation of the *proper truth* of the institutions of the society-Ego (in the sense in which one speaks of Ego in describing kinship systems), “proper truth” taken as excluding everything else, rendering all the rest as positive error and, in the most lovely cases, diabolically pernicious (the case of monotheisms and Marxisms-Leninisms is obvious, but not unique).

Why speak of extreme probability and of a natural inclination? Because there can be no genuine *foundation* for the institution (no “rational” or “real” foundation). Its sole foundation being belief in it and, more specifically, its claim to render the world and life coherent (sensible), the institution finds itself in mortal danger as soon as proof is produced that other ways of rendering life and the world coherent and sensible exist. Here our question overlaps with that of religion in the most general sense, which I have discussed elsewhere.⁴

Extreme probability, yes; but not necessity or fatality: the contrary, though highly improbable (as democracy is also highly improbable in history), is nevertheless possible. The index of this probability is the relative and modest, but nonetheless real, transformation in this regard that certain

⁴Again, see “Institution of Society and Religion.”

modern societies have undergone, and the combat that has been conducted in these societies against *misoxeny* (and that is certainly far from over, even within each one of us).

All that concerns the *exclusion of external alterity* in general. The question of racism, however, is much more specific: Why does that which could have remained a mere affirmation of the “inferiority” of others become discrimination, contempt, confinement, so as to be exacerbated ultimately into rage, hatred, and murderous folly?

Despite all the attempts made from various quarters, I do not think that we can find a general “explanation” for this fact; I do not think that there is a response to this question other than a *historical* one in the strong sense. The exclusion of the other has not always and everywhere—far from it—taken the form of racism. Anti-Semitism and its history in Christian countries are well enough known for us to be able to say that no “general law” can explain the spatial and temporal localizations of the explosions of this delirium. Another, perhaps even more telling example comes from the Ottoman Empire. Once its period of conquest was over, this empire always conducted a policy of assimilation, then of exploitation and of *capitis diminutio*, of the unassimilated vanquished; without this massive assimilation, there would not be a Turkish nation today. Then suddenly, on two occasions—1895-1896, then 1915-1916—the Armenians (always subject, it is true, to much more cruel repression than the other nationalities of the empire) became the object of two monstrous massacres *en masse*, whereas the empire’s other alien peoples—notably the Greeks, who were still quite numerous in Asia Minor in 1915-16 and whose State was practically at war with Turkey—were not persecuted.



As we know, from the moment a racist fixation occurs the “others” are not only excluded and inferior; they become, as individuals and as collectivity, the point of support for a second-order imaginary crystallization whereby they are endowed with a series of attributes and, behind these attributes, an evil and perverse essence justifying in advance everything one might propose to subject them to. Concerning this imaginary, notably in its anti-Jewish form in Europe, the literature is immense, and I have nothing to add to it,⁵ except to say that in my view it appears more than superficial to present this imaginary—baptized, moreover, “ideology”—as something wholly fabricated by classes or by political groups for the purpose of assuring or achieving their position of dominance. In Europe, a diffuse and “rampant” anti-Jewish sentiment no doubt has been circulating at all times since at least the eleventh century. Sometimes it has been reanimated and revived at moments when the social body felt, with a stronger intensity than usual, the need to find an evil “internal-external” object—the “enemy within” is so convenient—a scapegoat allegedly already marked on its own as being a scapegoat. These revivals of sentiment, however, do not obey laws or rules; it is impossible, for example, to relate the profound economic crises England has undergone over the past 150 years to any explosion of anti-Semitism, whereas for the past fifteen years such explosions, but now directed against Blacks, are beginning to take place.

Here, let us open a parenthesis. What commonsense opinion as well as the most remarkable authors—I am

⁵See, for example, the abundant indications given by Eugène Enriquez in *De la horde à l'État* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 396-438.

thinking, for example, of Hannah Arendt—seem to find intolerable in racism is the fact that someone is hated for something for which that someone is not responsible, that person's "birth" or "race." This is certainly abominable, but the preceding remarks show that this view is erroneous, or inadequate, as it does not grasp the essence and the specificity of racism. Faced with the set of phenomena of which racism is the keenest point, a combination of vertigo and a horror of horror leads even the best of minds to vacillate. To maintain that someone is guilty because that person belongs to a collectivity to which she has not "chosen" to belong is not the defining characteristic of racism. Every robust nationalism, or at least in any case all chauvinism, always considers the others (certain others, and in any case the "hereditary enemies") to be guilty of being what they are, of belonging to a collectivity to which they have not chosen to belong. Ilya Ehrenburg formulated this sentiment with the brutal clarity that is characteristic of the grand Stalinist era: "The only good Germans are dead Germans" (= to be born German is already to deserve death). The same thing goes for religious persecutions or wars with a religious component. Among all the conquerors who massacred the infidels to the glory of the God of the day, I see not a single one who asked those massacred if they had "voluntarily" chosen their faith.

Here again, logic forces us to say something disagreeable. The only true specificity of racism (in relation to the diverse varieties of hatred of others), the sole one that is decisive, as the logicians say, is this: *true racism does not permit others to recant* (either persecute them, or suspect them, even when they have recanted: Marranos). The disagreeable thing is that we have to acknowledge that we would find racism less abominable were it content to obtain forced conversions (as in Christianity, Islam, etc.). Racism,

however, does not want the conversion of the others, it wants their death. At the origin of Islam's expansion, there were a few hundred thousand Arabs; at the origin of the Turkish Empire, there were a few thousand Ottomans. The rest were the products of the conversions of conquered populations (forced or induced conversions, it matters little). *For racism, however, the other is inconvertible.* Immediately, one sees that the racist imaginary must almost of necessity lean on constant or allegedly constant physical (therefore irreversible) traits. An instrumentally-rational French or German nationalist with "enlightened" self-interests (that is to say, someone freed from the imaginary outgrowth of racism) could not but feel enchanted if Germans or the French demanded, by the hundreds of thousands, to be naturalized in the adjoining country. Sometimes the enemies' glorious dead are posthumously naturalized. Soon after my arrival in France—in 1946, I believe—a long article in *Le Monde* celebrated "Bach, Latin Genius." (Less refined, the Russians removed factories from their zone to Russia and, in place of inventing a Russian ancestry for Kant, they had him be born and die in Kaliningrad.) Hitler, however, had no desire to appropriate Marx, Einstein, or Freud as Germanic geniuses, and the most assimilated Jews were sent to Auschwitz along with the others.

~

Rejection of the other as other: this is not a necessary, but an extremely likely, component of the institution of society. It is "natural" in the sense in which a society's heteronomy is "natural." Overcoming it requires a creation that goes against one's inclinations—therefore, a creation that is unlikely.

We can find the counterpart to—I am in no way saying the “cause of”—this rejection on the level of the psychism of the singular human being. I shall be brief. One side of the hatred of the other as other is immediately understandable; it is, one can say, simply the flip side of self-love, of one’s cathexis of or investment in one’s self. Little matter the fallacy it contains, the syllogism of the subject faced with the other is also always as follows: If I affirm the value of *A*, I also have to affirm the nonvalue of non-*A*. The fallacy obviously consists in this, that the value of *A* presents itself as exclusive of any other: *A* (what I am) is valid—and what is valid is *A*. What is, at best, inclusion or belonging (*A* belongs to the class of objects having a value) fallaciously becomes an equivalence or representativeness: *A* is the very type of that which is valid. The fallacy certainly appears in a different light, let us not forget, in extreme situations—when one is in pain, faced with death—but that is not our subject.

Such pseudoreasoning (which is universally widespread) would leave room only for different forms of devaluation or rejection, to which we have already alluded. Another side of hatred of the other, however, is more interesting and, I believe, not evoked as often: hatred of the other as other side of an unconscious self-hatred.⁶

Let us take up the question again from the other end. Can the existence of the other as such place *me* in danger? (We are obviously talking here of the unconscious world, where the elementary fact that the “I,” the Ego, exists, in an

⁶Micheline Enriquez (*Aux Carrefours de la haine* [Paris: Epi, 1985]) has recently provided an important contribution to the question of hatred in psychoanalysis. From the point of view of interest to us here, see especially pp. 269-70.

infinity of ways, only along with the other and with others, is glaringly absent—as is also the case in contemporary theories of “individualism.”) It can, under one condition: that, in the deepest recesses of one’s egocentric fortress, a voice softly but tirelessly repeats “Our walls are made of plastic, our acropolis of paper mâché.” And what could make audible and credible these words, which are opposed to all the mechanisms that have permitted the human being *to be something* (a French Christian peasant, an Arab Moslem poet, what have you)? Certainly not an “intellectual doubt,” which hardly has any existence and, in any case, no force of its own in the deep-seated layers here in question, but instead a factor situated in the immediate vicinity of the origins of the psyche, in what remains of the psychical monad and of its relentless refusal of reality, now become refusal, rejection, and detestation of the individual into which the psychical monad has had to be transformed and which it continues, phantomlike, to haunt. This is what makes the visible, “diurnal,” constructed, speaking side of the subject always be the object of a double and contradictory cathexis: positive inasmuch as the subject is a self-substitute for the psychical monad; negative inasmuch as it is the visible and real trace of its breakup.

In this way, self-hatred—far from being the characteristic typical of the Jewish people, as is said—is a component of every human being, and, like all else, the object of an uninterrupted psychical elaboration. I think that it is this hatred of the self, usually intolerable under its overt form for obvious reasons, that nourishes the most driven forms of the hatred of the other and is discharged in its cruelest and most archaic manifestations.

From this standpoint, it can be said that the extreme expressions of the hatred of the other—and racism is,

sociologically speaking, its most extreme expression for the reason already given concerning *inconvertibility*—constitute monstrous psychical displacements by means of which the subject becomes able to *save the affect in changing its object*. This is why, above all, the subject does not want to rediscover *himself* in the object (he does not want the Jew to be converted or to know German philosophy better than himself), whereas the primary form of rejection, the devaluation of the other, is generally satisfied with “recognition” by the other, which constitutes the other’s defeat or conversion.



Overcoming of the first psychical form of the hatred of the other appears not to require, in the end, much more than what is already involved in living within society: the existence of carpenters does not challenge the value of plumbers, and the existence of the Japanese should not challenge the value of the Chinese.

Overcoming of the second form would involve, no doubt, much more profound psychical and social elaborations. It requires—as, moreover, does democracy, in the sense of autonomy—an acceptance of our “real” and total mortality, of our second death coming after the death of our imaginary totality, of our omnipotence, of our inclusion of the whole universe within ourselves.

To remain there, however, would be to remain in the euphoric schizophrenia of the intellectual boy scouts of the past few decades, who preach both the rights of man *and* the idea that there is a radical difference among cultures that forbids us from making any value judgments about other cultures. How could one then judge (and, should the occasion

arise, oppose) Nazi or Stalinist culture, the regimes of Pinochet, Mengistu, and Khomeini? Are these not different, incomparable, equally interesting historical “structures”?

Human rights discourse has, in reality, relied on the tacit traditional hypotheses of Liberalism and Marxism: the steamroller of “progress” was to lead all peoples to the same culture (in fact, to our own—which was of enormous political convenience for the pseudophilosophies of history). The questions I raised above would then be resolved automatically—at most after one or two “unhappy accidents” (world wars, for example).

It is principally the contrary that has taken place. Most of the time, the “others” have somehow or other assimilated certain instruments of Western culture, part of what pertains to the ensemblistic-identitarian it has created—but in no way the imaginary significations of liberty, equality, law, unending interrogation. The planetwide victory of the West is a victory of machine guns, jeeps, and television, not of *habeas corpus*, popular sovereignty, and citizen responsibility.

Thus, what was previously a mere “theoretical” problem—which certainly spilled oceans of blood in history and which I have alluded to above by asking, How could a culture grant existence to *other* cultures that are incomparable to it and when what for them is food is for it defilement?—is becoming one of the *major practical political* problems of our era and is reaching the point of paroxysm in the apparent antinomy that exists within our own culture. We claim both that we are one culture among others *and that* this culture is unique, inasmuch as it recognizes the alterity of others (which never had been done before, and which other cultures do not do in return) *and* inasmuch as it has posited social imaginary significations, and rules following therefrom, that have *universal value*: to take the easiest example, human rights.

And what do you do with cultures that explicitly reject the “rights of man” (see Khomeini’s Iran)—not to mention those, the overwhelming majority, that in reality daily trample these rights underfoot while subscribing to hypocritical and cynical declarations?

I end with one simple example. People used to talk at length a few years ago—less so now, and I know not why—about the excision and infibulation of young girls, which is practiced as a general rule in a host of African Muslim countries (the affected populations, it seems to me, are much broader than is generally admitted). “All that occurs over there,” in Africa, *in der Turkei*, as the bourgeois philistines of *Faust* say. You become indignant, you protest—but you can do nothing. Then one day, here in Paris, you discover that your house servant (worker, collaborator, colleague), whom you hold in high esteem, is preparing for the ceremony of his little daughter’s excision-infibulation. If you say nothing, you mock the “rights of man” (this little girl’s right to *habeas corpus*). If you try to change the father’s ideas, you engage in a process of deculturation, you violate the principle of the incomparability of cultures.

The combat against racism is always essential. It must not serve as a pretext for abdicating the defense of values that have been created “at home,” “among us,” ones that we think are valid *for everyone*, that have nothing to do with race or skin color, and to which we want, yes, to *reasonably to convert* all humanity.

Individual, Society, Rationality, History*

Philippe Raynaud has just published a book of precious value. Through a polyphonic multiplicity of well-organized themes, *Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne* weaves together and works out two tasks of major importance. On the one hand, he has written the best introduction I know of to the overall work of Max Weber, combining a rigorous exposition of Weber's antecedents, his method, and his results with an extremely attentive accounting of his difficulties, his ambiguities, and his impasses. Raynaud's proximity to Weber and the sympathy he clearly and rightly feels for this German thinker of immense stature do not prevent him from firmly pointing out, each time needed, the difficulties, the antinomies, and the aporias to which Weber's effort leads or the blank spaces Weber has to allow to appear. Raynaud also, however—and here the book's interest goes beyond the previously mentioned one—clearly and constantly shows—in a task that is much more complex and difficult to carry out—that the discussion of Weber's capital contribution calls into question some of the central figures of “modern Reason.” We cannot help but express our admiration that, in a book of some 200 pages, all this might be accomplished without making any concessions to complacency and with a concision that is conjoined with clarity.

*Originally published as “Individu, société, rationalité, histoire,” in *Esprit* (February 1988): 89-113. Reprinted in [MM](#), 39-69 (47-86 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: The translation originally appeared in *Thesis Eleven*, 25 (1990): 59-90. Reprinted in [PPA](#), 47-80. Now restored are several references to Philippe Raynaud and his *Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), which, for reasons of space, had not been translated for the previous versions in English.]

As an old admirer of Max Weber,¹ I have been both forced and enchanted to read Philippe Raynaud, pen in hand. The acuity of his text has incited me to reexamine a series of questions that, as far as I am concerned, have been settled for a long time but which the “spirit of the times” has raised again in a fashion I find to be regressive, and whose decisive elucidation a critical confrontation with Weber, it seems to me, would allow.²

I. The Question of Individualism

We all know that Max Weber taught what he called an

¹My first published writings in Greece (1944), which Ypsilon has just republished in Athens (1988) under the title *Protēs Dokimēs* (First essays), included among other things a translation with extensive commentary of Weber’s “Methodological Foundations” in *Economy and Society* and an “Introduction to Theory in the Social Sciences,” the composition of which was heavily influenced by Weber.

²I will cite Philippe Raynaud’s book by the abbreviation PhR; *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) will be indicated by *E&S* followed by a page number, and by a section number in those cases where the “Methodological Foundations” section is cited. [T/E: I have in many instances altered this translation of Weber’s posthumous work in order to make the English conform more closely to Castoriadis’s original French translation from the German (Castoriadis cites the Mohr [Tübingen] edition of 1956).] As I have treated these questions at length elsewhere, the reader may, if interested, consult my 1964–1965 essay, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” which now appears as the first part of my 1975 book, *IIS* (English translation 1987), and is cited as *MRT*; the second half of *IIS*; also, *CL2*; and finally my 1986 essay, “The State of the Subject Today,” cited as “Subject” and now available below in the present volume. All italicized words and passages are in the original, unless stated to the contrary.

individualist method (PhR, 93-121). The ultimate goal of sociological and historical inquiry—for Weber, and rightly so, there is at bottom no distinction between these two objects of inquiry—would be to refer all phenomena investigated back to the effects of the acts and behavior (*Verhalten*) of “one, few, or many” determinate—that is to say, separate and definite—individuals. As he himself says in *Economy & Society* (p. 15, sect. 9), it is only in this way that “something more” becomes accessible, something “never attained in the natural sciences”: “the understanding of the behavior of the singular individuals that participate in these social structures.” This is certainly a very important point: all physical processes are describable, and they are often explainable, that is to say, they lead us back to “laws” that govern them. But they are not understandable, and in truth there is nothing there to be understood. On the other hand, various instances of human behavior are—at least partially, at least virtually—understandable. Squabbles between children, a fit of jealousy, most often these sorts of behavior can be understood as such and as they unfold, even in extraordinary and improbable ways (whereas it would be, strictly speaking, impossible to provide an “explanation” in the sense of the exact sciences). This task of the understanding is conditioned by the possibility that we can have what Weber calls *sympathisches Nacherleben*, a sympathetic (or empathic) reliving or recapturing of the behaviors and motivations of another.³ This “empathic reliving,” however, is not, as we

³Let us note in passing that not so long ago this possibility of a sympathetic or empathic reliving of experience provoked bursts of laughter from vanguard Parisian psychoanalysts. Quite clearly, without this possibility, social life itself would quite simply be impossible. [T/E: The phrase *sympathisches Nacherleben* seems to be Castoriadis’s not quite fitting reformulation for *emfühlendes Nacherleben* (see the text below).]

shall see, the basic characteristic of “the understanding.”

What Max Weber calls the individualist method seems to be opposed to a substantialist or ontological individualism. The sociology Weber wants to promote proceeds by constructing (or restituting) a subjectively understandable *meaning* of the behavior (*Verhalten*) of single (*einzelnen*, “one or more”; *E&S*, p. 13, sect. 9) individuals. It accedes to this meaning all the better, or rather it can attain it only to the extent that this meaning is “rational.” This attainment of meaning is accomplished via the construction of ideal types (of individuals, or of instances of behavior). I shall return to these as well as to the enormous questions of whether “the *signification* of social phenomena is *constructed* by the social scientist starting from a particular standpoint” (PhR, 51) and of whether *no* presuppositions are made during this construction relative to its object.

Fully anticipating the possible perversions of this view, Weber characterized in advance as a “monstrous misunderstanding” (*ungeheures Mißverständnis*) the attempt to draw from this “individualist *method*” an “individualist system of values” in any sense, as well as every attempt to draw from “the unavoidable tendency of sociological *concepts* to assume a rationalist character” any conclusions concerning the “*predominance* of rational motives” in human action or even a “positive *valuation* of rationalism” (*E&S*, p. 18, sect. 9, emphasis added; see also *E&S*, pp. 6-7, sect. 3). Those who are familiar with his violent and obsessively repeated criticisms of Rudolph Stammler can easily imagine the harsh sarcasm he would have heaped upon the “individualism” and “rationalism” found in the social sciences today—not to speak of the pseudopolitical conclusions that have been drawn therefrom, using arguments that resemble nothing so much as the syllogism that “unicorns exist, therefore the universe is

made of quince preserves.” Upon such arguments Friedrich von Hayek made his reputation.

From this perspective, what can be said of “social collectivities” or “social formations”? Weber’s expressions are, in these cases, so categorical that it can immediately be seen that while the individualist method does not involve taking an “evaluative,” and still less a political, position, it is nevertheless tantamount to an ontological decision concerning the Being of the social-historical: “For the interpretive understanding of behavior...these social collectivities must be treated as solely [*lediglich*] the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of *individual* persons since, for us, these alone can be treated as comprehensible agents of meaning-oriented action” (or “bearers of meaningful behavior”: *sinnhaft orientierten Handelns*; *E&S*, p. 13, sect. 9).

This powerfully worded statement is accompanied by three remarks concerning the relation between “the subjective interpretation of action” and “these collective concepts”:

1. It is often necessary to use expressions such as “State,” “family,” and so on—but one must avoid confusing them with the corresponding juridical concepts by imputing to them a “collective personality.”
2. The process of understanding must take into account that these “collective formations” are also “*representations* in the minds of real men,” and that they thus can “have a powerful, often a decisive [*dominant, beherrschende*] causal influence on the course of action of real individuals.” But clearly, in this context such “representations” can be thought of only as the *result* of the action of other “real individuals.”

3. There is an “organic” school of sociology that tries to explain social behavior on the basis of “functional” considerations, the “parts” accomplishing the functions necessary for the existence of the “whole.” These kinds of considerations may have value, says Weber, as a “practical illustration,” for they may establish a “provisional orientation” for one’s investigations (but beware of the risk of “reifying concepts”!) or they can be heuristically useful (allowing one, for example, to detect the most important actions within a given context). But all this is just a prelude to the work of sociology proper, which alone accomplishes the true task: the understanding of the behavior of individual participants (*E&S*, pp. 13-14, sect. 9; see also the remarks on Othmar Spann’s “universalistic method” or “holism,” *ibid.*, pp. 17-18).

These remarks clearly have no import on the level of basic principles. Weber’s individualist method does not prevent him from ultimately deciding the ontological question in the most categorical of terms: “The real empirical sociological investigation begins with the question: What motives *have determined* and *do determine* the singular [*einzelnen*] members and participants in this ‘collectivity’ to behave in such a way that this community came into being [was formed, created: *entstand*] in the first place and that it *continues to exist*?” (*E&S*, p. 18, sect. 9, emphases added).

Only individual acts, therefore, would be “understandable” or “interpretable.” But in what does this comprehensibility of theirs consist? Weber’s “initial” formulations are broad and exhibit his prudence in this matter: “The basis for certainty in understanding can be either

rational...or it can consist of an emotionally or artistically appreciative empathic reliving [*empfindendes Nacherleben*]; at the same time, he speaks of how difficult it is for us to understand “many ultimate ‘ends’ or ‘values’ toward which experience shows that human action may be oriented” if, when we “relive them in the empathic imagination” [*empfindende Phantasie*], they depart too radically “from our own ultimate values” (*E&S*, p. 5, sect. 3). He thus seems to maintain a balance between the two opposing poles, and their difference arises only from the relative difficulties involved in understanding each one. Let us note in passing, however, the underlying imprecision of this opposition: we understand more easily an action oriented toward ends or values that are near to our own and/or that unfold according to a rationality of means relating to ends; we have more trouble understanding, and sometimes we do not understand at all, actions that occur in conformity with ends that are not our own and/or whose application appreciably departs from the rationality of means relating to ends. (In line with what is becoming more and more the current usage, I will call the later “instrumental rationality.” Weber’s term, *Zweckrationalität*, which in this one case is rather unfortunate, really means *Mittelrationalität*, “rationality of means used,” which obviously can be adjudged only in relation to an end that an actor has set forth and intended, whereas the literal translations, “end-related rationality” or “rationality according to ends,” create an intolerable ambiguity.)

In reality, however, if one attentively rereads the section of *Economy and Society* titled “Methodological Foundations” while keeping this problem in mind, there is little possible doubt about the double movement being made there. On the one hand, the “understanding” is reduced more

and more to the understanding of instrumentally rational action. On this point, let me quote at length from this section, for the passage (*E&S*, pp. 18-19, sect. 10, emphases added) sheds light on almost all aspects of the entire matter at hand:

These laws [which interpretive sociology tries to establish] are both comprehensible and univocal to the highest degree insofar as at the foundation of the typically observed course of action lie pure instrumentally-rational motivations, ...and insofar as the relations of means and end are, according to the rules laid down by experience, also univocal. ...In such cases one may assert that *insofar as* the action was rigorously rational in an instrumental way, it *would have had to* [*müsste*, in the sense of necessity and not obligation] occur *in this way and no other....*

The examples cited (arithmetical calculation, insertion of such and such a proposition in such and such a place in a proof, rational decision of a man acting according to the determinate interests involved in undertaking an action corresponding to the results he would expect) are clear cut. On the other hand, Weber amasses a series of examples of behavior that are not instrumentally rational: *all* traditional activity, many aspects of charismatic actions—and of course, reactions (*E&S*, p. 17, sect. 9)—then (*E&S*, pp. 21-22, sect. 11) the quasitotality of “real action,” which “goes on in the great majority of cases in a state of apathetic [vague, numb: *dumpf*] semiconsciousness or unconsciousness of the ‘meaning one intends.’” “In most cases the individual’s action is governed by impulse or habit.... Really effective meaningful behavior [*sinnhaftes Handeln*], where the meaning is fully conscious and explicit [whether it be “rational or irrational”] is a marginal case.”

Whence the conclusion, already formulated: “All these facts do not discharge interpretive sociology from the obligation, in full awareness of the narrow limits to which it is confined, to accomplish what it alone *can* do” (*E&S*, p. 17, sect. 9, emphasis added).

So that no one hastens to object that within the very depths of traditional, habitual, semiconscious, or unconscious behavior can nevertheless be found a sort of “rationality,” let us note that there are two unsatisfactory options: either we know nothing about it or, in order to establish its existence, we would have to have recourse to ideas of “objective rationality” that Weber had dismissed in advance—and rightly so, given the horizon of his philosophical views—for, as he says, “we shall speak of ‘action’ insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective *meaning* to his behavior.” Such meaning “may refer first to the actual or effective (*tatsächlich*) existing meaning in the given concrete case of a particular actor, or to the average or approximate meaning attributable to a given plurality of actors; or second, to the meaning subjectively *intended* by the actor or actors *thought of* as types within a conceptually constructed *pure type*” (*E&S*, p. 4, sect. 1, emphases added). And in any case, a mystery would remain: Why and how do the great majority of individuals in the great majority of their acts act simply because they have become habituated to act in this way, what does it signify in relation to the *very being* of human individuals, and what can we say of the *instauration* (each time pristine) of these “habits” or of “tradition”? What can we say, too, of the prospects and chances for interpretive sociology if the latter, when faced with 95 percent of human history, must confine itself to saying: that is not understandable, but it is traditional?



We will have to criticize the philosophical foundations of Weber's position. Before doing that, however, we must understand the logic (and, arising from these foundations, the necessity) of his attitude.

Sociology must understand, and not (or not simply) explain. (I will return later to the mistaken idea that one can *separate absolutely* these two moments.) What can one understand? Meaning. And, according to Weber, there is no meaning except "in," "through," and "for" effectively actual individuals (even if it is simply for the social scientist who "constructs" this meaning)—in any case, as an *intended* meaning (*gemeinter*; the German word strongly suggests the "subjective" side, and it is quite close to the Greek *doxazo*). But what sociology is to understand is not simply an "isolated" meaning, supposing that such a thing could exist. It has to understand the linkages of people's acts—the socially oriented behavior of individuals—and not "explain" them, as physics does, by mere acknowledgment of incomprehensible irregularities. And as far as possible, sociology has to understand these linkages as *necessary*. It is thus, and thus alone, according to Weber, that it can be a science. Its task is to furnish "a *correct* causal *interpretation*," and this requires that "the process which is claimed to be typical must appear adequately grasped on the level of meaning and at the same time that its interpretation must to some degree be shown to be causally adequate" (*E&S*, p. 12, sect. 7, emphases added). For Weber, causality is essential. Now, what must really be called, in the last analysis, Weber's rationalistic (methodological, but also ontological) individualism depends entirely upon this connection between causality (necessity) and understanding, which is inevitably represented (we shall

soon see why) by rational intelligibility. Indeed, in opposition to the “stupid regularities” of physical nature, a rationally connected concatenation of acts is bound to appear to us as both intelligible and necessary—intelligible in each of its moments and in their connection, and likewise necessary. (To Weber’s chosen examples, cited earlier, one can add that of the military general who, under given circumstances and with given means at his disposal, would have made those decisions that were instrumentally rational in view of the end he had set for himself; here we would be able to “*explain* in causal terms” the distance, the margin of deviation of his effectively actual acts, by the intervention of “misinformation, strategical errors, logical fallacies, personal temperament, or considerations outside the realm of strategy”; *E&S*, p. 21, sect. 11.)

Now, causality signifies neither “irreversibility” nor any kind of temporal ordering and still less, quite clearly, a mere, empirically established, regular sequencing from one phenomenon to another. Causality signifies the regularity of a sequencing whose necessity is *expressed by a universal law*. In the case of the physical sciences, the universality of the law, *formaliter spectata*, is a prerequisite for scientific thought and, *materialiter spectata*, it is represented by the (in principle indefinite) reproducibility of the particular sequencing under investigation. (I am leaving aside here such distinctions as experimentation, observation, indirect inference, and so on, which are of only secondary importance in relation to my theme.) But in the case of social-historical phenomena (I repeat that for Weber there is in this regard, and rightly so, no essential distinction between society and history), both reproducibility and even nontrivial repetition properly speaking are beyond our grasp, for a thousand reasons that have been stated many times and that still could

be enlarged upon. Now, it is precisely this absence of reproducibility that, from his causalist perspective, gives substance to Weber's remarks on "rationality" and intelligibility. The intrinsic intelligibility of a concatenation of motivations and acts is precisely what effectively substitutes for the kind of reproducibility found in the experimental sciences (as it increases, moreover, our "understanding"). Experimental reproducibility is replaced, in effect, by a *statement of potentially indefinite reproducibility* of the sort: "Every other rational individual in X's place would have decided, when faced with the same circumstances, to employ the same means, Y." Or, if you prefer: *Qua* rational individuals, we are all substitutable for one another and each of us "would have to reproduce" the same sorts of behavior when confronted with the same conditions. (Let us note that under these conditions the very singularity of historical events is dissolved, except in the form of a numerical singularity, or of irrational deviation: "What would you have done under these conditions?" "Exactly what he did." "And why didn't you do it?" "I drank too much champagne.")

If such potential reproducibility, itself issuing from considerations of "rationality," is, however, lacking, what Weber calls the *Fehlen an Sinnadäquanz*—a lack or shortage of adequation of meaning—comes into play, thus reducing the observed regularity to an "incomprehensible" or "statistical" regularity (*E&S*, p. 12, sect. 7)—that is to say, it makes us retreat to the side of the observational physical sciences. And this is true even for "psychical elements": "the more precisely they are formulated from the point of view of natural science, the less does one understand them. This is never the road to interpretation in terms of an intended *meaning*" (*E&S*, p. 13, sect. 9, emphasis added). Certainly, as Weber adds,

incomprehensible processes and regularities are not for all that any less “valuable.” But for sociology, their role is the same as that of all factual situations established by other scientific disciplines (from physics to physiology). They belong to the conditions, incitements, obstacles, requirements, and so on that the nonsocial world presents to people in their capacity as social actors.

~

Is there not then beneath all of this any philosophy (other than a “theory of knowledge of the social sciences”)? Oh, indeed there is! It is not even worthwhile entering into discussion over the untenable idea of the existence of some “method” (or “theory of knowledge”) that would involve *no* ontology. Without the two interconnected [*conjointes et solidaires*] assertions, that is, that *there is* something comprehensible in society and history and that what is understandable *is* (*par excellence*, if one wants to insist on the point) the “rational” dimension of *individual* action, Weber’s method would no longer possess an object of investigation (and one would no longer understand why he has chosen to apply this method to society and history rather than to the expansion of galaxies). There is no point in adding such phrases as “we do as if...” (Why not use this same “as if” in molecular biology?) or “we are speaking of the parts covered by our method without making any judgments about the totality” (therefore *there very well are* parts your method takes in, and this fact cannot depend upon your method *alone* since the other parts resist its application). Raynaud (PhR, 71-81) excellently retraces the origin of the idea that the comprehensible is the product of individual action back to Giambattista Vico and his celebrated statement, *verum et*

factum convertuntur—truth and (human) deeds/facts are interchangeable, or, more freely but still faithfully: only that which we have done is intelligible and everything that we have done is intelligible—and upstream from Vico, all the way back to Hobbes. Of course, the origin of this idea is to be found in theological philosophy: when, in the *Timaeus*, Plato wants to “explain” the world, he makes its constitution *understandable* “as much as possible” by putting himself in the place, so to speak, of a “rational” demiurge (indeed, one placed at the summit of “rationality”: a mathematician and geometer) who works on the basis of a model that is itself “rational.” (If the world is not, for him, completely “rational,” that is because Plato, who in spite of everything remains Greek, has contrived for his demiurge to work upon matter that is itself irrational and independent. This option is not open for the Christian theology of an omnipotent God.) Clearly, the same schema predominates in German idealism (the intelligible is correlative to the action of a subject—finite in Kant, infinite according to Hegel). In all events, Weber’s Kantian and neo-Kantian roots are well known and quite evident, especially in this regard.

To air out the discussion a bit and to expose more clearly the stakes involved, let us take our distance in the most brutal terms possible. Without prejudicing the moment of partial truth it contains, Vico’s statement as well as the whole constellation of ideas denoted by it are false. We would not be living in the world we live in, but in another, if everything we did was intelligible and if what we did was alone intelligible to us (as individuals or as a collection of individuals designatable by name). It hardly is worth recalling that not all of what we do or of what others do or have done is intelligible (or, oftentimes, even understandable, however broadly we expand the meaning of this term). And many

things—the most decisive—are intelligible to us without us having done them or without us being able to “redo” them, to reproduce them. I have not made up the idea of a norm or law (in the effective, sociological sense, not in the “transcendental” one); I might invent a particular law but not the *idea* of a social law (the idea of institution). In vain will it be said that concrete, designatable persons have taught me language; to teach me language, they had to possess it already. Will one go so far as to maintain that “rational individuals,” driven by their “interests” or their “ideas,” have *consciously* made up language (language in general, or some particular language)? Will one go even further and maintain that it is only to the extent that language has been made *consciously* that it is intelligible? Let us stop laughing, and simply ask: *Without language*, is a “rational” and “conscious” individual conceivable as an effectively actual individual (*and even as a “transcendental subject”*)?

Raynaud shows well (PhR, 81-12) how Wilhelm Dilthey, starting from a perspective of “individualistic” (and, at the beginning, “psychological”) understanding and borrowing from Hegel while rejecting Hegelian metaphysics, was led to take into account the manifestations of what he calls, following Hegel, but with a meaning much larger than what is found in the latter’s philosophy, the “objective spirit” (which practically overlaps completely with what I call the institution): language, custom, forms of life, family, society, State, law, and so on. He also notes, quite rightly, the persistence in Dilthey—even though, as early as 1883, he had characterized the individual as an abstraction—of the principle of *verum factum*: “The field [of the sciences of the mind] is identical to that of the understanding and consequently the object of understanding is the objectivation of life. Thus, the field of the sciences of the mind is

determined by the objectivation of life in the outer world. *The mind can understand only what it has created*" (from Dilthey's *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* in *Gesammelte Schriften* [1915], vol. 7, emphasis added; cited by PhR, 86). Dilthey's philosophical position here is clearly confused (Raynaud speaks of "speculative clumsiness"). *Something* is objectivated that is not Hegelian Reason or the World Spirit; it is called, incidentally, "life" or "mind [*esprit*]"—and that in which it objectivates "itself" is *de jure* understandable to us (across differences in times and places). In addition, the conditions for this understanding remain obscure: it could be said that we participate in this "life" and in this "mind"—but is that a sufficient condition, especially once it is no longer a matter of understanding "rational" activities alone but also the totality of human experience *and above all* its "objectivated" forms?

This was not a problem for Max Weber—since, as we have seen, collective entities "appear anew as simple givens which the understanding must seek to reduce to the activity of individuals" (PhR, 121). But at what a cost! One must endorse an ontology (that of critical philosophy) that affirms: *If there is* meaning, it is because *there is* a subject (an ego) who posits it (intends it, constitutes it, constructs it, etc.). And *if there is* a subject, it is because this subject *is* either the sole source and unique origin of meaning or meaning's necessary correlate. That this subject is named, in philosophy, "ego" or "consciousness" in general and, in sociology, the "individual" undoubtedly creates serious questions (notably the problem of how to pass from the transcendental subject of critical philosophy to the individual effectively acting in society, which, according to the principles of Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy, can only be the "psychological," "empirical," "phenomenal" subject), but it basically changes nothing. In

both cases, the postulates and intentions of thought are clearly *egological*. Whatever one then does, there is one thing one cannot avoid doing: namely, presenting the social-historical as the “product” of the cooperation (or of the conflict) between “individuals” (or claiming, in an attenuation of this individualist methodology, that we can think it only to the extent that it is individual).

What are these “individuals”? Two paths open up, and both lead to untenable conclusions:

1. Either it will be said that the essential aspect of individual behavior is “rational” (or progress toward “rationality”)—and if I can understand the individual, it is because I participate in the same “rationality.” We immediately proceed, full steam ahead, toward a (Hegelian) absolute idealism as concerns history, even if this is labeled “reconstruction of historical materialism,” as it is in Habermas.⁴ That one might happen, within this “rationality,” to distinguish between a “logic of interests” and a “logic of ideas” (or “representations”) changes nothing: it is still a matter of logic; and if there were any conflict, it would be a conflict between two logics. Everything that does not come under this heading, everything that cannot be rationally reconstructed in a philosophy seminar—not much, really, just the totality of human history—is scoria, a gap to be filled in progressively, a learning stage, a passing failure in the “problem

⁴T/E: In English, see Jürgen Habermas, “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,” *Theory and Society* 2:3 (Autumn 1975): 287-300. Reprinted, e.g., as the sixth chapter of *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader*, ed. Steven Seidman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

solving” exercises assigned to humanity (by whom and for what purpose?) or—why not?—“primitive nonsense,” as old Engels said.⁵

2. Or, following Terence (*humani nihil alienum puto*)⁶ and the great classical philosophers, I take the “individual” in its fullness, with its capacity for “rationality” but also with its passions, affects, desires, and so on. I then find myself faced with a “human nature” that is more or less determined but assuredly identical across space and time—and whose latest avatar is a pseudopschoanalytical marionette that, it must be said, Freud himself had a substantial hand in fabricating. Even supposing that, following the path that leads from *The Republic*, *The Leviathan*, *Totem and Taboo*, and so on, I might be able to understand why and, above all, how this being could produce a society, I remain with the following enigma: Why and how has it produced so many different societies, and why has it produced a history (and indeed many of them)?

Two things fill me with an ever-renewed sense of wonderment: the starry sky above me and the ineradicable hold these schemata have on my contemporary fellow authors.

⁵T/E: 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).

⁶T/E: Terence *Heauton Timorumenos* Act 1, Scene 1, line 25: *Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto*.

Learning, we are being told once again today, is the basic motor of human history. Considering the ease with which people “forget” psychoanalysis, ethnology, prehistory, history—or, more concretely, two world wars, gas chambers, the Gulag, Pol Pot, Khomeini, and so on and so forth—we must concede that learning is not a motive force, not even a secondary one, for contemporary reflection in this domain.

II. The Social-Historical and the Psychical

We do not “understand” all individual acts of behavior, not even our own—far from it—and we can understand “objects” that are irreducible to individual acts of behavior when they belong to the field of the social-historical. The social-historical world is the world of meaning—of significations—and of effectively actual meaning. This world cannot be thought of as a mere “intended ideality,” it must be borne by *instituted forms*, and it penetrates into the very depths of the human psychism, decisively fashioning it in almost all of its discernible [*repérables*] manifestations. “Effectively actual meaning” does not necessarily mean (and, moreover: *never* exhaustively means) meaning for an individual. The dividing line between “nature” as the object of the “experimental” sciences and the social-historical does not have to do with the existence or nonexistence of individual behavior. Whether it is a matter of acts of individuals, collective phenomena, artifacts, or institutions, I am always dealing with something that is constituted as such by the *immanent actuality of a meaning*—or of a *signification*—and this is sufficient for me to place the object within a horizon of social-historical apprehension. That there may be limit cases (Is this stone “natural,” or has it been worked upon?) does not weaken our assertion any more than

does the fact that we might have trouble deciding whether someone is trembling with rage or shaking because she is suffering from a neurological condition. The understanding is our mode of access to this world—and it does not necessarily, nor by its essence, require reference to the individual. If, in reading the *Parmenides* or the *Lex duodecim tabularum*, I understand these writings, it is not because I am sympathetically reliving someone's behavior. Faced with a social-historical phenomenon I have the (in the immense majority of cases, enigmatic) *possibility* of "sympathetically reliving" or "reconstituting" a meaning *for* an individual. But I am *always* gripped by the presence, the "incarnation" of meaning. That I might try to make understandable as well the "intentions" of an author, the possible "reactions" of her potential readership, changes nothing. The social-historical object is co-constituted by the activities of individuals, which incarnate or concretely realize the society in which they live. And in extreme cases I can take account of these activities only "nominally." A dead language studied as a no-longer-evolving corpus, Roman law as a system—these are *institutions* that are accessible as such; they do not refer back to individual actors except "at the margin" or in a wholly abstract manner. And, far from considering tongue [*la langue*] as the "product" of cooperation between individual thoughts, it is the tongue that tells me, first of all, what was thinkable for individuals and how it was so.

In opposition to a substantialist or ontological individualism, a methodological individualism would be an approach that refuses (as Weber does explicitly) to ask questions of the kind: "Is it the individual or society that comes 'first?'" "Is it society that produces individuals or individuals that produce society?" while asserting that we are not obliged to answer such "ontological" questions, the only

thing that we might (come to) understand being the behavior of the (effectively actual or ideal-typical) individual—this behavior itself being all the more comprehensible when it is “rational” (or at least “instrumentally rational”). But what is the effectively actual individual—and what is *effectively actual* rationality?

The individual is not, to begin with and in the main, anything other than society. The individual/society opposition, when its terms are taken rigorously, is a total fallacy. The opposition, the irreducible and unbreakable polarity, is the one between *psyche* and society. Now, the *psyche is not* the individual; the *psyche becomes* individual solely to the extent that it undergoes a process of socialization (without which, moreover, neither it nor the body it animates would be able to survive an instant). We need not pretend that we do not know when we do. Surely, Heraclitus has not been “surpassed”: we will not reach the limits of the *psyche*, even after having traversed its entire path (or all its paths).⁷ We know, however, that human beings are born with a given biological constitution (which is extremely complex, rigid in certain respects, and endowed with an incredible plasticity in others) and that its makeup includes, so long as it is functioning, a *psyche*. Though we are far from knowing everything about the latter, we nevertheless know quite a lot. The more we explore it, the more we discover that it is essentially alogical, that in this regard the terms “ambivalent” and “contradictory” give us an idea of its mode of being only to an immensely attenuated degree. Yet we also know when exploring the *psyche* that we encounter on all its strata the

⁷T/E: See Heraclitus, Diels fr. 45. This fragment appears engraved on a plaque in Greek and French that is set on Castoriadis’s grave in the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris.

effects of a process of socialization that it undergoes as soon as it comes into the world—and this is so not only because the patient of psychoanalysis must put his dreams into words or because the psychoanalyst must think on the basis of certain categories.

This process itself is certainly a social activity. And, as such, it is always necessarily mediated by identifiable [*repérables*] individuals, the mother for example—but *not only* by them. Not only are these individuals always already themselves socialized, but what they “transmit” goes far beyond them: let us say, roughly speaking and so as to point out merely one feature, that they provide the means and the modes of access to virtually the whole of the social world as it is instituted in each instance, this whole being a totality they in no way need to possess in effective actuality (and which, moreover, they *could not* in fact “possess” in effective actuality). Moreover, there are not only individuals: tongue *as such* is an “instrument” of socialization (though it certainly is not only that!) whose *effects* go immeasurably beyond everything the mother who teaches it to her child could “intend.” And as Plato already knew, children (and youths and adults) are socialized by the very walls of their city well beyond any explicit “intention” of those who constructed them.

I will not repeat here what I have set forth at length elsewhere on many occasions.⁸ I will simply summarize my views by saying that the socialization of individuals—itsself a socially instituted process, and in each case a different one—opens up these individuals, giving them access to a *world* of social imaginary significations whose instauration as well as incredible *coherence* (the differentiated and

⁸ *IIS* ch. 6; “Subject,” *passim*.

articulated homology of its parts as well as their synergy) go unimaginably beyond everything that “one or several individuals” could ever produce.⁹ These significations owe their effectively actual (social-historical) existence to the fact that they are *instituted*. They are not reducible to the transubstantiation of psychical drives: sublimation is the psychical side of the process whose social side is the fabrication of the individual. And they are obviously not reducible to “rationality,” whatever breadth one grants to the meaning of this term. To state that they are is to oblige oneself to produce, here and now, a “rational dialectic” of history and even of histories in the plural; one would have to explain, for instance, in what way and how during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas, Chinese, Japanese, Mongols, Hindus, Persians, Arabs, Byzantines, and Western Europeans, *plus* everything that could be enumerated from other cultures on the African, Australian, Asian, and American continents, represent simply different “figures of rationality” and, above all, how a “synthesis” of them could be made—here’s the state of the World Spirit in 1453, for example, and here’s why, in and through this diversity on the phenomenal level, the underlying unity of Reason, whether human or not, manifests itself—or, lacking this, here’s how these civilizations could be *ordered* rationally (for, a Reason that could not, even “dialectically,” give order to and establish a hierarchy for its manifestations should be put out to pasture). The thickheadedness displayed in the various versions of contemporary rationalism when confronted with these questions—which themselves could be multiplied indefinitely and which are as basic as they are incapable of being circumvented—clearly shows that it

⁹MRT, in [IIS](#), 135-56.

represents much less a stage in the history of thought than a regression of an *ideological* nature (the motivations behind this ideology cannot detain us here). The philosophy of history does not begin with a reading of Kant but with a study of human sacrifices among the Aztecs, the massive conversions of Christian peoples to Islam in half of the Eastern empire, or Nazism and Stalinism, to take a few examples.

On the other hand, if we grant the existence of a level of Being unknown to inherited ontology, which is the social-historical *qua* anonymous collective, and its mode of being *qua* radical imaginary in its capacity as *instituting* and *creative of significations*, we will be able to keep in mind the weighty evidence social-historical phenomena themselves present to us: that is, the irreducibility of the institution and of social significations to “individual activity”; society’s coherence, beyond the functional level, in matters relating to *meaning*; the mutual irreducibility of different social-historical formations and the irreducibility of all of them to some sort of “progress of Reason.” The existence of this level is shocking only because people do not wish to depart from settled habits of thought; in itself, there is nothing more (or less) astonishing about it than that other level of being whose existence everyone stupidly accepts, if I dare say so, because they believe they have always “seen” it: namely, life itself. The existence of the social-historical is revealed (and even “proven”) by its irreducible effects; if we do not grant its existence then we must, in no uncertain terms, make of language, and of languages in the plural (and this is only *one* example), a biological phenomenon (as Habermas practically does). These same effects reveal its creative character: Where else does one see a *form of Being* like the institution? It is a creation that manifests itself, *inter alia*, by

the enormous diversity of social forms as well as in their historical succession. And this creation is *ex nihilo*: when humanity creates the institution and signification, it does not “combine” some “elements” it would have found scattered about before it. It creates the *form* institution, and in and through this form it creates *itself* as *humanity* (which is something other than an assembly of bipeds). “Creation *ex nihilo*,” “creation of form,” does not mean “creation *cum nihilo*,” that is to say, without “means,” unconditionally, on a *tabula rasa*. Apart from one (or perhaps several) point(s) of origin that is (are) inaccessible and unfathomable and that itself (themselves) *lean(s) on* properties of the first natural stratum, of the human being as biological being, *and* of the psyche, all historical creation takes place upon, in, and through the already instituted (not to mention whatever surrounding “concrete” conditions there may be). This conditions it and limits it, but does not *determine* it. And quite clearly, still less does it do so in a “rational” manner since in major instances what occurs is a passage from one magma of social imaginary significations to another.¹⁰ Thus it is a mere rhetorical objection to state that, if there is creation in history, then Homer could have been located somewhere between Shakespeare and Goethe. None of these “phenomena” (authors) can be detached from its own social-historical world—and it just so happens that, in *this* case, these worlds succeed one another by “being conscious,” more or less, of those that preceded them in *this* segment of human history. The existence of conditions during a succession of such phases does not suffice to make such a succession “rationally causal.” My reading of Hegel enters into the conditions for

¹⁰ *IIS*, ch. 7; “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in *CL2*.

my thinking at this moment; if, against all odds, I succeeded in thinking something *new*, Hegel will not have been the “cause” of such an occurrence. The world built upon the ruins of the Roman Empire from the fifth century onward is inconceivable without Greece, Rome, the New Testament, and the Germanic barbarians. This in no way signifies that it springs from an “addition,” “combination,” or “synthesis” of elements from these four sources (and others one could think of). It is a creation of new social-historical forms (which are, moreover, radically other in the Eastern empire and in the Western barbarian kingdoms); they confer an essentially new meaning upon the very elements that preexisted them, and which they “utilize.”¹¹ To speak of a “synthesis” in such instances is pure mental laziness and a dreary repetition of old clichés; they blind one, for example, to the fact that the “utilization” of Greek philosophy by Christian theology would have been impossible without a huge distortion of this philosophy (whose effects, moreover, are still making themselves felt) or that the institutionalization (and already the spread) of Christianity has required the abandonment of essential elements of the New Testament faith, such as its acosmic outlook and the purported imminence of Parousia (the Second Coming). Far from being able to “explain” or “understand” the Byzantine world on the basis of these elements, I must, quite to the contrary, understand the Byzantine world as a form for itself and a new magma of instituted significations in order to “explain” and “understand” what its preexisting elements have become through the new meaning they have acquired. In the actual practice of such an investigation, there is certainly always a

¹¹“The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984), now in [CL2](#), 164-66.

give-and-take between the two approaches, but this in no way alters the main point on the level of principle.¹²

Of this, at least, Weber was thoroughly convinced *as well*—even if his terminology differs from ours. The true referent for the “incomparability” or “incommensurability” of “values” and ultimate “ends” of “men’s social acts” and for the “war of the gods” is the otherness or *alterity* of different social-historical worlds and of the imaginary significations that animate these worlds. They express his acute perception of the problem created by the irreducible multiplicity of the forms through which the social-historical deploys itself as well as his profound awareness of the impossibility of giving these forms, when considered in themselves, any hierarchical ordering (PhR, 145-54, 176-92). However—and in this I differ from Raynaud—this allows an ineradicable antinomy to remain in his thought. As clear as is his refusal to consider modern “rationality” and “rationalization” as *de jure* “superior” to other forms of social existence (and I will add, for my own part, that from *other* points of view, notably philosophical and political, this refusal is highly criticizable and ultimately unacceptable), his “violent rejection [*refus*] of historical irrationalism”¹³ *compels him*, due to the irreducibility of “ultimate values” (i.e., of other imaginary significations), to set up a rationalist individualism (which, we have seen, cannot simply be “methodological” in character) and to establish instrumental rationality as the horizon of intelligibility for the social-historical. We should

¹²For a sketch of the problems involved in, and the means available to, this understanding, see “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in [CL2](#), 206-28.

¹³T/E: Philippe Raynaud informs me that he was unable to find this exact phrase within this book of his under review by Castoriadis.

now be capable of seeing how the two terms of the antinomy feed each other: the more people's acts are motivated "in the last analysis" by adherence to mutually irreducible "ultimate values" (and, of course, to "Reason"), the more "scientific" analysis has to fall back on instrumental rationality as the sole solid field of investigation; and the more "rationality" is postulated as the ultimate horizon of the understanding, the more the "ultimate values" of different cultures become *de facto* inaccessible and the understanding of the social-historical world finds itself reduced to the reconstitution of a few fragments, or instrumentally rational dimensions, of human action.

~

But what is this "instrumental rationality" itself?

The "instrumental rationality" of human individuals is, each time, socially instituted and imposed. (That this imposition encounters in the psyche what, through a difficult and painful process, makes it possible, is another question).¹⁴ It is, for example, impossible without language. Now, every language conveys the totality of the social world to which it belongs. There are, of course, some "elements" of this rationality that, in the abstract, are transhistorical: $2 + 2 = 4$ is undoubtedly valid in every society. These are the elements that belong at the intersection (the common part) of the ensidic (the ensemblistic-identitary) understanding, which every society must, at minimum, institute and which also corresponds, sufficiently as to need, to the ensidic component

¹⁴See "Subject."

of the first natural stratum upon which every society lives.¹⁵ These elements, however, are *always* codetermined to a great extent by the magma of social imaginary significations in which they are immersed, and which each time they instrument. Without such instrumentation, these significations could not even be *voiced*. But without these significations, the “rational” (ensidic) elements would have *no meaning*. A book in mathematics written entirely in formalized terms and containing *no* explanation of its symbols, its axioms, and its rules of deduction, is totally incomprehensible. Thus, if one cannot avoid taking these transhistorical ensidic elements into consideration (a condition that does not take us very far, however), it is impossible to have a *correct* access to these same elements as they are realized in a certain society unless one first has viewed the imaginary institution of this society. I must know something of the Christian religion to avoid seeing in the statement “ $1 = 3$,” as propounded by a believer in or a theologian of the Holy Trinity, a pure and simple instance of absurdity. It is therefore impossible for me, in trying to carry out the Weberian “methodological” program, to consider individual behavior as composed of a central “rational” (ensidic) component that is supposed to be (if only “methodologically”) *everywhere and always the same* and of *individual* deviations [*écarts*] from this “rationality.” The understanding is instituted social-historically, and it is each time immersed in the overall imaginary institution of society. To speak in crude but clear terms: What is different in another society and another epoch is its very “rationality,” for it is “caught” each time in another imaginary world. This does not mean that it is inaccessible to us. But this access must pass by

¹⁵ [IIS](#), ch. 5. [T/E: Castoriadis takes the phrase “sufficiently as to need” from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.]

way of an attempt (certainly always problematical—but how could it be otherwise?) to reconstitute the imaginary significations of the society under study.

In the second place—and this is another aspect of the same thing—the difference, the alterity, the gap [*écart*] through which the object of social-historical enquiry is presented—and which constitutes the principal difficulty for this inquiry—is of an entirely other order than the gap between an instrumentally rational form of behavior and the effectively actual behavior observed. Marc Antony gave up the battle of Actium when he saw Cleopatra's vessel depart—though, “rationally speaking,” he still had a chance of winning; this interference of passion in the application of instrumental rationality offers us no great enigma to resolve. What really astonishes us, and what constitutes the difficulty involved in the attainment of social-historical knowledge, is the enormous and massive alterity separating the representations, affects, motivations, and intentions of the subjects of another society from our own. How can we begin to understand the behavior of Arab warriors during Islam's great period of expansion, Christian soldiers during the Crusades, participants in the religious wars that tore apart Europe from 1530 until the Treaty of Westphalia, if the only instrument we have at our disposal is the ridiculous comparison between the instrumentally rational component involved in each of these cases and that which deviates [*s'en écarte*] from this component? I will have understood nothing if I have not tried to penetrate an entirely other *world* of significations, motivations, and affects; these certainly contain an ensidic component of *legein* and *teukhein*, but they are irreducible to it. Nearer to us, or rather closer to home: What good would it do me if I tried to understand the behavior of Hitler, the SS, and members of the Nazi party or Stalin and

members of Stalinist parties as instances of instrumentally rational behavior that, on certain precise points, have deviated [*dévié*] from this rationality (the two parts of this statement being, moreover, quite true)? What would I have understood then of totalitarianism? And how can one avoid seeing that in this case the very implementation of such a demented “instrumental rationality,” sometimes applied down to its tiniest details, has been dependent to a massive degree upon the imaginary of totalitarianism as well as decisively codetermined by it? Once again, one cannot avoid thinking that the return in force of such a “rationalist” individualism, and even of a certain rationalism, is actually motivated today as well by the desire to put an end (in words and philosophically) to the horrors of the twentieth century, even while these horrors continue to happen and diversify before our very eyes.

The situation is reversed, but the question is rendered no more solvable, in the opposite case: alterity tends toward a minimum—and ideally toward zero—when the object of investigation is the researcher’s own society. In this case, the risk is that the researcher will consider the “rationality” of his society (and his very own rationality) as going without saying, as unquestionable, and that, for this very reason, he will fail to recognize the imaginary that lies at the basis of his society and finds it in its singularity. Need we recall to what extent this risk has trapped some of the greatest thinkers—from Hegel and Marx to Freud and Max Weber himself, not to mention those among our contemporaries who are legion? It is in this way that the Prussian monarchy, capitalist technique and the capitalist organization of production, the patriarchal family and the modern bureaucracy have, each in their turn, appeared as the incarnations of an unquestionable (“instrumental” or substantive) rationality.

III. Ideal Types

As conceived by Weber, the intended purpose of the (“scientific”) construction of ideal types is to establish “typical” linkages of individual motivations and acts (which ought, in the “perfect” case, to be both “adequate as to meaning” and “causally adequate”) and thereby also to establish ideal types *of individuals*, at least with regard to an aspect of their activity (“king,” “official,” “entrepreneur,” “magician,” to take the examples Weber cites in *E&S*, p. 18, sect. 9). Now, one of the paradoxes of his work is that several of the ideal types he has constructed (or elucidated)—and among these, some of the most important are terms that were formerly imprecise or vague and to which he has given a much more rigorous content—do not refer to individual behaviors or to individuals but to great collective artifacts; that is to say, they refer in fact to institutions and types of institutions: the city, the market, varieties of authority, bureaucracy, the patrimonial or legal State, and so on. Of course, Weber was seeking to find out to what extent in each case a specific instance of a class of phenomena, taken as belonging to the same term, approaches or diverges [*s’écarter*] from its ideal type (see what he says about “the market,” *E&S*, pp. 82-85), which is not of interest to us here, and on the other hand, to reduce these artifacts each time, ideally, to “individual behaviors”—an objective that is in truth rarely, not to say never, attained, given that it is intrinsically unattainable. To reduce, for example, the “market” to the maximizing behavior of “rational individuals” is both to make individuals of that type fall down into place from the sky and to neglect the social-historical conditions by which the “market” as institution has been genuinely *imposed* upon people (Karl Polanyi has already said a good deal of what

there is to say about this). What is constructed in each case is the ideal type of an *institution* that certainly has to accommodate “individuals”—no institution can survive if it does not—but that also concerns another level of being than “purely individual” existence and that, still more strongly, is the general and specific *presupposition* for our being able to speak about the “rational behavior” of individuals. It is because there is, *already there*, a bureaucratic universe that my behavior *qua bureaucrat* would or would not be “rational”; even in modern bureaucracy, to be a bureaucrat with instrumentally rational behavior signifies behaving according to “rational” (and just as often, “absurd”) rules instaurated by the bureaucracy in general and by the particular bureaucratic corps to which I belong.

Yet there is much more. The social-historical world is a world of effective and immanent meaning. And it is a world that has not waited around for the theorist in order to come into existence as a world *of meaning*, nor in order to be, to a fantastic degree, *coherent*, for without coherence it would not exist. (“Coherent” means neither “systematic” nor “transparent.”) This sets requirements on the construction of ideal types; to an extent, these requirements were tacitly admitted by Weber; to another extent, he ignored them.

Ideal types have a *referent*, which is the effective social meaning of the observed “phenomena” (behaviors, etc.). And their validity cannot be discussed except with regard to this effective meaning. That this effective meaning is never “given immediately,” that there is always necessarily a (*de jure* interminable) circulation back and forth between the theoretical construct and its confrontation with the (significant) “facts” changes nothing on the level of principle. Contrary to what Karl Popper believes, one can say idiotic things about ancient Greece (I am not speaking here in terms

of geography or demography) or about any other society—and one can show, with the aid, for example, of an ancient Greek text, that they are indeed idiotic. There are an infinity of absurd “interpretations” and few *prima facie* plausible ones relating to the historical “material” at hand. The validity of an ideal type can be judged only by its capacity to “make sense [*faire sens*]” of the historical phenomena, which are already *in themselves and for themselves* bearers of meaning [*sens*].

Now, such meaning is never “isolated.” It always participates in the overall institution of society as institution of imaginary significations, and it is of a piece [*solidaire*] with it. This is also why—and independently of all “empirical” and “vulgar” refutations—I cannot insert the ideal type “shaman,” for example, in a capitalist society or the ideal type “financial speculator” among the Aranda. *It just won’t stick*. More generally speaking, the ideal types I construct for a given society under study have to be *coherent*, *complementary*, and (ideally) *complete* or *exhaustive*. If I construct an ideal type of “Roman patrician,” for example, it must be able to *hold together* with the ideal type “Roman plebeian,” the two with that of “Roman slave,” Roman “*pater familias*” and “*mater familias*,” and so on. But none of these ideal types can be constructed without reference to Roman law, Roman religion, the Roman army, the possibilities of the Latin tongue, and so on. It is not that, *at the end* of this work, I will have reconstructed Roman society in its entirety; rather, it is that I cannot undertake *the first step* in this task unless I have this society *as such* in view. “Social facts” and “individual behaviors” are *effectively* possible (as “facts” *and* as meaning) only because there is, each time, a society that “functions,” as is said in English, “as a going concern.” (This has nothing to do with any sort of “functionalism.” I simply mean that society exists, that it reproduces itself, changes,

etc.) It is not because the ideal types constructed in order to grasp a given society have been constructed with an eye toward its coherence that they “produce” a coherent society—it is because society *is* coherent (even during civil war and in concentration camps) that the theorist can try to construct ideal types that hold together somehow or other. I do not “freely” construct the Athenians’ relation to their *polis*; it is because this relation has existed in effective actuality, in its historical singularity, in its coherence, and in its relative permanence, that I have before me the *polis* and the Athenian as objects of knowledge. As a coherent totality, society exists first of all in and for itself; it is not a “regulative Idea.” “Total understanding” of it is, of course, an inaccessible ideal—but that is something else entirely.

IV. Rationality and Politics

In order to appreciate the *constraint* that Weber’s idea of “rationalization” as a *historically active factor* (and therefore one that is immanent to history and not “constructed” by the theorist in order to better understand it) imposes, we should have discussed in precise detail Weber’s immense work on the question of religion (the three volumes of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* as well as chapter 5 of *Economy and Society*, pp. 399-634, in particular the paragraph on “theodicy,” *ibid.*, pp. 518-26). It is impossible to do so here: given the intrinsic importance of the subject and its revival in contemporary discourse, I hope to be able to return to this topic very shortly. Nevertheless, in the meantime I want to note that I consider completely false Weber’s idea, which has been revived and expanded by Habermas, that “all religions have to resolve the problem of theodicy” and that there is an “*internal logic of religious*

representations” that drives them toward a *movement* of “rationalization,” whatever qualifications one will add to fix up this thesis (PhR, 138-45).

I will conclude with a few remarks prompted by the rich and subtle discussion Raynaud offers concerning Weber’s political views and their relation to his philosophy and theory of society, especially with regard to what must be called Weber’s “decisionism” in matters political, or the idea of a “politics of the will” (PhR, 183).

Ultimately, Weber’s “decisionism” boils down to noting that just as in the social-historical world the ultimate “values” orienting human activity are mutually irreducible and incommensurable, so the action of the politician (and of each of us, inasmuch as we are political subjects) rests on ultimate values that no amount of “rational” argumentation can impose upon those who do not share them. Let us note, first of all, that while Weber did not free himself, as we have seen, from Kantian rationalism in the domain of knowledge, he breaks with it in the domain of action. Second, that this position (the “politics of the will”) is in reality hardly attenuated at all by Weber’s marked preference for an “ethics of responsibility” (which takes the results of action into account) as against an “ethics of conviction” (which enjoins one to act according to certain principles or “for the greatness of the cause,” whatever the real consequences of one’s actions might be). The distinction is itself untenable, if not on the (descriptive) sociological plane, then in any case on the logical and normative one, the only one of interest to us here. All “responsibility” is responsibility with regard to certain *ends*. If my “ethic of responsibility” prevents me from undertaking some political action—because, for example, it might entail the sacrifice of human lives—it is quite obviously because I posit human life as the absolute value, or

at least superior to all others, this being a “conviction.” And if I want to promote the “greatness of a cause” by any means possible, come what may, I greatly run the risk of destroying this cause. (One can think in terms of an absolute “ethic of conviction” without contradicting oneself only if this ethic is oriented in a completely acosmic fashion.) Third, quite obviously the choice to take on “responsibility” itself follows from a “conviction.” Finally, as Philippe Raynaud notes, “the ethic of responsibility itself presupposes the limits of its own validity *and can thus grant the irreducibility of conviction*” (PhR, 184, emphasis added).

The irreducibility of conviction to anything else is another way of saying that nothing allows one to provide a “foundation” for ultimate choices and to escape the “combat of the gods.” Nothing can save us from our *ultimate responsibility*: to choose and to will in view of the consequences. Not even Reason, that latest historical figure of a Grace that would shower upon those who entreat her with sufficient ardor.

There are two ways to attempt to go beyond—I would rather say, avoid—this situation discussed by Raynaud, and both appear to me untenable.

Raymond Aron thought he could “escape from the circle within which he [Weber] enclosed himself” by invoking “universal rationality” as exemplified by “scientific truth.” But “scientific truth” (and even the fact that “it addresses itself to all men”) is a value and criterion only for those who have *already accepted* the value of “universal rationality” *and* who (this additional condition is absolutely essential) have passed from the latter to a practical and political/ethical universality. The first condition makes this argument into a tautology, the second reveals the fallacy that lies within. I see no incompatibility between the acceptance

of " $2 \times 2 = 4$ " (Aron's example) or quantum theory, and a call to kill the infidels, to convert them by force, or to exterminate the Jews. Quite the contrary, the *compatibility* of these two classes of assertions is the massive fact of human history. And it is particularly striking to witness the fact that it is in the twentieth century—the century that, more than any other, has monstrosly demonstrated, and continues to demonstrate, that it is possible to dissociate the technoscientifically "rational" from the politically reasonable—and *after* the experiences of Stalinism and Nazism, that people have begun again to whistle in the dark the tune of universal rationality as a way of building up their courage.

We must again, we must always make distinctions. An ensidic "rationality" exists, it is universal up to a certain point, and it can take us very far (up to the point of manufacturing H-bombs). It was there before Greco-Western science and philosophy, it does not commit anybody to anything, and it could continue, for an indefinite period of time, upon an inertial course even if philosophy and science in the strong sense were to suffer a temporary or definitive eclipse. And Khomeini can, without any contradiction, consider Western science null and void—since all truth is in the Book—and buy from Satan such effective products as Stinger missiles so as to put them in the service of the One True God. And even if this were a contradiction it would change nothing. Contradicting oneself never prevented anyone from existing. But scientific *truth*—which is of the same nature as philosophical *truth*: namely, it perpetually puts to the test the closure in which thought each time finds itself caught—contains the possibility of a *historically effective* universality only by effecting a *rupture* with the world of traditional or authoritarian instituted representations. (It is effectively historical universality with which we are

concerned when we confront the political question, not “transcendental universality.”) Now, to “give oneself” this rupture as something already effectuated—which is what Aron does when he speaks of a “community of minds across boundaries and centuries”—is to assume that the problem is already resolved. In this effective sense, scientific or philosophical universality presupposes subjects who have *in effective actuality* called into question their belonging to some particular social-historical world. In a sense, it is, even, just that. It is therefore tied to the exigency of a universal ethics and politics only *at its root*: both of them express and try to realize the project of autonomy. This project, therefore, has to be posited *before* one might draw out any argument whatsoever in favor of scientific universality—and the latter will be valid only for those for whom this project is valid. *Downstream* from this project, everything becomes effectively an object of reasonable debate from which gains may be expected in all domains. But these gains, this debate, this project itself, what value have they then for a genius like Pascal, who renounces, so to speak, the invention of infinitesimal calculus because everything that *distracts* the soul from its relation to God is pure diversion or *distractio*? (“Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful,” Luke 10:41-42.) And upon what basis other than personal faith (“conviction”!) or a parochial cosmohistorical prejudice will one judge Pascal’s and Kierkegaard’s God worthy of respect while saying that of Khomeini is not?

Certainly, the term (or idea) of “authenticity” is not useful at all for this debate, and the idea that an “autonomous” individual is one that, in its actions, “obeys values” is untenable (PhR, 136-38, 190). In what way is a religious fanatic who drives an explosives-filled truck against an

embassy's gates "inauthentic," and how could it be said that he does not obey "values"? Either "values" are arbitrary and mutually equivalent or else not all values are the same, and to say this already means that one has already accepted the reasonable debatability of values as one's value and supreme criterion. It is impossible to circumvent the necessity of affirming the project of autonomy as the primary position, one that can be elucidated but that cannot be "founded," since the very intention of founding it presupposes it.

I cannot take up here again the discussion of the idea of autonomy.¹⁶ But we must reiterate that the question will remain intractable so long as autonomy is understood in the Kantian sense, that is, as a fictively autarchic subject's conformity to a "Law of Reason," in complete misrecognition of the social-historical conditions for, and the social-historical dimension of, the project of autonomy.

Let us now take up the normative standpoint (the political/ethical one, the two being at bottom indissociable). There is a goal [*fin*], which a few of us have set for ourselves: the autonomy of human beings, which is inconceivable except as the autonomy of *society* as well as the autonomy of *individuals*—the two being inseparably linked, and this link being in fact an analytic judgment (a tautology) when we understand what the individual is. We set autonomy in this sense as the end [*fin*] for each among us, both with respect to each one of us and with respect to all the others (without the autonomy of others there is no collective autonomy—and outside such a collectivity I cannot be *effectively*

¹⁶See *MRT*, in [IIS](#), 101-14; "Unending Interrogation" (1979 interview), "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), and "The Nature and Value of Equality" (1982) all now in [CL2](#), and "Subject," in the present volume.

autonomous). Since 1964,¹⁷ I have called the activity that aims at autonomy *praxis*: this activity aims at others as (potentially) autonomous subjects and tries to contribute to their efforts to attain full autonomy. (The term “*praxis*” therefore has here only a homonymic relation to the meaning Aristotle assigns to it.) This activity may take on an intersubjective form in the precise sense of unfolding in a concrete relation to determinate beings *intended as such*. Its most obvious cases are then pedagogy (also and especially “informal” pedagogy, which occurs everywhere and always) and psychoanalysis. But it also has to, under penalty of lapsing into total incoherence, take a form that goes far beyond all “intersubjectivity”: *politics*, namely, the activity that aims at the *transformation* of society’s institutions in order to make them conform to the norm of the autonomy of the collectivity (that is to say, in such a way as to permit the *explicit*, reflective, and deliberate self-institution and self-governance of this collectivity).

It is by starting with this position that we can understand why, contrary to what Raynaud thinks, Habermas’ efforts to found a theory of action on the ideas of “communicative action,” “interpretive understanding,” and “ideal speech situations” (PhR, 171-92) do not really go beyond “the mere critique of Max Weber’s subjective convictions” and cannot “culminate in a fruitful attempt to redefine the tasks of social theory” (contrary to PhR, 190). There certainly is a “communicative” dimension (more simply put: there is communication) almost everywhere in social action (just as there is, everywhere, “instrumental,” that is, ensidic, activity, a *legein* and a *teukhein*). Communication, however, is hardly ever an “end in itself,” and it is totally

¹⁷MRT, in [IIS](#), 71-79.

inadequate as a way of bringing out criteria for action.

Let us consider the simplest cases, those apparently most favorable to Habermas' thesis. Both in pedagogy and in psychoanalysis, "communicative action" and "interpretive understanding" are certainly important *moments* of these activities. But in no way do they define either their *meaning* or their *end*. The *end* of psychoanalysis is not "interpretive understanding" between the analyst and the patient (which in no way is intended as such, and which is highly asymmetrical, as also is the case in pedagogy), but rather a contribution to the patient's access to her *own* autonomy (her capacity to challenge herself and lucidly to transform herself).

And again, these are (the most important) instances of "intersubjective" action. Now, activities that aim at autonomy have to (under penalty of succumbing to an annihilating incoherence) take on a *social*—that is to say, a *political*—form. And here we must dispel a radical misunderstanding and expose an ideologically-based terminology that has reigned in philosophy at least since Edmund Husserl. The philosophers do not know (or rather, what is worse, do not *want* to know) what *the social* [*le social*] is. The term "intersubjective" systematically serves to evacuate the genuine (theoretical as well as practical) question of society and to mask their inability to think it. The term "intersubjectivity" expresses their continued enslavement to a metaphysics of the "substantive individual" (of the "subject") and the desperate attempt (already found in Husserl) to escape from the solipsistic cage to which egological philosophy leads—an attempt that, moreover, fails, the "other" always remaining in this perspective an incomprehensible prodigy.

But the social is something entirely other than "many, many, many" "subjects"—and also something entirely other

than “many, many, many” “intersubjectivities.” It is only in and through the social that a “subject” and an “intersubjectivity” become possible (even “transcendentally”!). The social is the always-already instituted anonymous collective in and through which “subjects” can appear, it goes indefinitely beyond them (they are always replaceable and being replaced), and it contains in itself a creative potential that is irreducible to “cooperation” among subjects or to the effects of “intersubjectivity.”

It is the *institution* of this social sphere [*ce social*] that is the aim of politics, which therefore has nothing to do with “intersubjectivity” or even with “interpretive understanding.” Politics intends the institution as such, or the grand options affecting society as a whole. It “addresses itself” to the anonymous collective, both present and to come. Certainly, it always acts through a determinate public, but it does not *aim for* interpretive understanding between the political actor and this public; rather, it aims at the fate of the collectivity for a period of time that is, in principle, indeterminate. The fact that the orator has to express himself in a comprehensible way, or even that we want the decision to result from the most reasonable discussion possible, and consider this of capital importance, is not even worth mentioning here. The intended end, and the effectively actual result, are something else entirely, these being the adoption of a new law, or engagement in some important common endeavor. In important cases, all these decisions *modify* not only present individuals but also those to come. All this goes far beyond “communicative action” and “interpretive understanding.” These latter are, so to speak, only the atmosphere indispensable to *political* life and *political* creativity—and their very existence depends upon instituting acts. The *end* or *goal* of these acts goes far beyond the establishment of an

ideal communication situation, which is only part of that end, and really just a mere *means*.

If one now adopts not a *normative* standpoint (we want autonomy, what it presupposes and what it entails)—as is, in reality, the case with Habermas—but rather a descriptive-analytic one concerning society and history in their effective actuality, then Habermas's attempt to elicit, from the *very fact* that “communicative action” occurs everywhere and always, some sort of *exigency* can be seen only as an enormous logical blunder. As “reproducing product” of society, “interpretive understanding” is everywhere: among fifth-century BCE Athenians, New Yorkers and French people today, the Communards of 1871—as well as among the oligarchic Spartans, the Waffen-SS, or Khomeini's Pasdarans. What distinguishes for us the second group from the first does not relate in any way to some kind of deficiency in the capacity for intersubjective communication (which is, perhaps, at a maximum within a homogeneous group of fanatics of any sort), but to the fact that such communication is *always already structured* exhaustively by the given institution of society in such a way that it is *effectively impossible*, from the social-historical point of view, for the participants to call back into question this institution (which they are doomed to reproduce indefinitely) and, *by this very fact*, to open themselves to the reasons of others. It is the institution as it is given each time that always assures communication and traces the limits of the humanity with which one can, in principle, “communicate.” It is therefore this *institution* as such that has to be aimed at if the field of such communication is to be enlarged. And if we will to enlarge it, it is not because we will communication for itself, rather we will it in order that all humanity be put in a position where it would be able to work in common toward

the creation of institutions that will advance its freedom of thought and of making/doing [*faire*].

Habermas's attempt "rationally" to educe, once again, right from fact—the idea of a "good" society from the *reality* of the conditions of social life—appears to me just as untenable as the other attempts of the same kind that have been made in the past and that he repeats. It leads him, in a totally characteristic way, to seek a mythical *biological* foundation for the questions of social theory and political action. The following passage, one among many others, bears witness to this: "The utopian perspective of reconciliation and liberty is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species."¹⁸ Since when has biology (the "linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species") ever "built into" it a "utopian perspective"? Why would such a "mechanism" not be compatible with the preservation of closed societies—which it has, on the contrary, safeguarded almost everywhere, almost always, throughout history? And why would freedom be "utopian"? Freedom is neither a "utopia" nor a fatality. It is a social-historical project without whose already occurring, yet still partial, realization Habermas would not be in a position to write what he writes nor would I to object to it. (Here, as in all contemporary parlance, "utopia" clearly is a replacement for the Kantian "regulative Idea"; it removes the disagreeable "idealist" connotations as it confers upon it, now that Marxism has gone bankrupt, an agreeable "pre-Marxist revolutionary" scent.) To found the project of freedom

¹⁸*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, vol. 1, pp. 532-33 (*The Theory of Communicative Action*, tr. Thomas McCarthy [Boston: Beacon Press, 1984], p. 398); PhR, 192.

philosophically in reason is already a bad usage of reason, for the very decision to philosophize is but a manifestation of freedom; to philosophize is to try to be free in the domain of thought. To want to “found” it on “the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species” is to revert to a biological positivism that leads to an incoherent paradox: it makes of freedom both a fatality inscribed in our genes and a “utopia.”

From the moment we have left the closure of the sacred institution; from the time when the Greeks posed the questions: “What ought we to think?” and “What ought we to do?” in a world they had built in such a way that the gods had nothing to say about those questions, there is no longer any possible evasion of responsibility, choice, and decision. We have decided that we want to be free—and this decision *is already* the first realization of this freedom.

Tinos, August 1987—Paris, January 1988

Dead End?*

Everything has already been said.¹ Everything remains to be said. This massive fact might, by itself, bring us to despair. Humanity would seem deaf; it is so, for the most part. This is what is most at issue when basic political questions are raised. And such is, for modern humanity, the question of the relationship it maintains between its knowledge and its power, or, more precisely, between the constantly growing potential of technoscience and the manifest powerlessness of contemporary human communities.

The word “relationship” here is already a bad choice. There is no relationship. This *power* is basically *powerlessness* in the face of contemporary technoscience; it is a power that is anonymous in all respects, irresponsible and uncontrollable (because unattributable), which, for the moment—a very long moment, indeed—goes with a complete passivity of human beings today (including scientists and technicians themselves in their capacity as citizens). This passivity is not only total, it exhibits a complacency toward a rush of events people still want to believe is beneficial for them without their being fully convinced any longer that it

*Originally published as “Voie sans issue?”, in *Les Scientifiques parlent*, ed. Albert Jacquard (Paris: Hachette, 1987), pp. 261-98. Reprinted in [MM](#), 71-100 (87-124 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: Translation first published in [PPA](#), 243-75.]

¹Reasons of space and time have led me on several occasions simply to state in the text ideas I have developed elsewhere for a long time. Permit me to refer the reader to the following articles: “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973) and “Technique” (1973), both in [CLI](#); “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality’” (1976), “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), and “Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1986), all three now in [CL2](#); and, finally, “From Ecology to Autonomy” (1981), now excerpted in [CR](#).

will be so in the long run.²

Every term used in this debate will have to be reexamined, reinterrogated, reelucidated. In this essay I will try to do so for some of them. But before going any further, and to justify my argument, let me pose a few very specific questions: *Who* decided about *in vitro* fertilization and embryo transplants? *Who* decided that the path was open for gene manipulation and genetic “engineering”? And who decided about those “*anti*”-pollution devices (which retain the carbon dioxide) that have produced acid rain?

For a long time now we have been unable and unwilling—we *should* be unwilling—to give up rational questioning, this excavation of the world, of our being, of the very mystery that drives us tirelessly to seek out answers and to ask questions. We can allow ourselves—and society should exist in such a way that anyone who would want to should be able—to become engrossed in the proof of a mathematical theorem, in the riddles of basic physics and cosmology, in the intricate and inextricable meanderings and retromanderings of the interreactions of the nervous, hormonal, and immune systems, and to do so with a joy that differs qualitatively from, but whose intensity yields nothing to, what we might feel when listening to Bach’s *Musical Offering*, contemplating Van Eyck’s *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami*, or reading Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*. The author of the present essay, in his joy as a humble amateur (i.e., a lover; the Greek *erastēs* is the true word) gazing from afar on these vast fields of endeavor, can bear witness thereto. So too can he testify to the fact that he owes his very survival as well as that of those who

²There are certainly exceptions to this passivity, as in the case of the ecology movements—not to mention, of course, a few isolated individuals.

are dear to him to the technical efficacy of modern medicine—and this several times over. And he has, on countless occasions, criticized the inconsistencies so widespread among the members of certain ecology groups, whereby one verbally rejects modern industry upon a background of electronically recorded music and expects miracles from the omnipotence of technomedicine just as everybody else does when one is sick.³ It is therefore not some antiscientific or antitechnical prejudice that is being voiced here; the prejudice frankly pushes me in the opposite direction.

No genuine question would be raised, but instead just a “practical”—though certainly immense—problem, if we could really say (as some actually do when they examine the apocalyptic potential of technoscience): “Let’s prohibit science, let’s stop technical advancements,” or: “Let’s set precise limits on them.” When all is said and done, we cannot—at least so long as we do not want to surrender our freedom. We cannot, not because we would be imposing legal restrictions on a form of activity (after all, killing is outlawed), but because, in Greco-Western history, the creation of freedom is indissociable from the emergence of questioning and rational research. And it is because we cannot do so that the question leads toward an antinomy, one that cannot be surpassed on the strictly theoretical level but that cannot be settled practically either, *except* through the political action and judgment of human communities acting collectively. I will return later to this point.

It also must be emphasized, however, that we remain unaware of this question when we claim that the “good” and

³See “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality’” and “From Ecology to Autonomy.”

“bad” sides of science and technique today are perfectly separable, and that all we would need to do, in order to separate them, would be to exercise greater care, devise a few technoscientific ethical rules, eliminate capitalist profiteering, or abolish the managerial bureaucracy. Let the following point be understood as clearly as possible: It is not at the level of inventing this or that superficial device or even of altering formal institutions that reflection can be brought to bear upon this question; a truly democratic society, rid of all economic, political, and other sorts of oligarchies, would still collide into this question just as hard. What is at issue here is one of the core significations of the modern Western imaginary, the imaginary of “rational” mastery and of an artificialized rationality that has become not only impersonal (nonindividual) but also inhuman (“objective”). Before going any further, however, we need to grapple with some of the outer layers of this question.

The Effectively Actual Reality of Technoscience

Everyone knows about the tremendous achievements of modern technique. Behind them, obviously, lies scientific knowledge. These achievements imply an equally tremendous capacity for *doing* things. Why then talk about powerlessness? Why say that this enormous scientific potential goes hand in hand with increasing impotence?

What do we mean by “power,” or even “potential”? Do we really have to change the meaning of these words now, by referendum or by some other means? Have we not always intended by “power” the possibility for someone, given the appropriate instrumental means and devices, to do what he wants when he wants? But listen carefully: for *someone* who *wants*. Where and who is this someone today—be it an

individual, group, institution, or community acting collectively? In what sense does this someone *want* something and *what* does he want? Or again: *Who* decides, and *for what purpose*?

Take the biologists who discovered/invented the facts and methods upon which genetic engineering is based. Undoubtedly, they *wanted* (?) to do *what* they did. But to what extent did they truly want these *results*? How could they want them when they did not know what these results were and when no one to this day knows what they are—no more than anyone knew about Hiroshima and Chernobyl when Otto Hahn, Fritz Strassmann, and Frédéric Joliot-Curie, at the end of the year 1938, succeeded in producing the first fissions of uranium atoms? Five years earlier Lord Rutherford had described the possibility of atomic power as the “merest moonshine.”⁴ And Rutherford was not only one of the greatest physicists of the century, he was also the one who initiated some of the most important experiments in the new physics.

This illusion of power also conceals an illusion relating to our knowledge: that we might be able to know all the results of what we do (or at least those results that matter to us). Such is obviously not the case. The results of our acts do not cease to trail behind us and—most importantly and much more concretely—we are aware even of the most immediate results only within the tiny vicinity of the moment of the act, a vicinity that itself is torn and fragmentary. No agnosticism or sense of ethical and practical indifference follows from this. In daily life, in our familiar world, we know enough—we can and *should* know enough—about the

⁴*Nature*, 132 (September 16, 1933): 432-33. Cited by Peter Pringle and James Spigelman, *The Nuclear Barons* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), p. 6 [T/E: see *ibid.*, p. 23, for the Rutherford quotation].

humanly foreseeable results of our actions so that they are, for most intents and purposes, dependent upon what we do; therefore, it is both possible for us to undertake reasonable action and to require a sense of responsibility *vis-à-vis* our acts and their consequences. That does not mean that we can draw a geometrical line at the frontiers of the foreseeable. Computers will never replace juries. What we do is sketch a boundary at the limit of what may be required in terms of foresight—a boundary that itself is in some way tacitly instituted by each society—and it is within this boundary that we raise the question of responsibility.

That already is an achievement of civilization. There are cultures in which the fact that someone is placed, really or even imaginarily, at some point in the chain of occurrences leading to an injurious event was enough to mark this person as guilty. As the Biblical saying goes, “Woe unto the man by whom the offence cometh” (Matt. 18:7): not necessarily the authentic author of the offense, but all those who have, even blindly, allowed it to occur.

It should be granted that, in daily life and in our familiar world, in those landscapes that have been explored from time immemorial, we can act in full knowledge of the relevant facts—first and foremost because, for the most part, this is really the case. The difference between the work of a good and a bad artisan is almost always immediately recognizable; failing that, we would have no social life. But this is also so because the contrary hypothesis would lead to a conclusion that is directly opposed to all communication and living: “anything goes.” But it is more than problematical that crossing over to a state in which the very phrase, “in full knowledge of the relevant facts,” has lost all meaning, is legitimate.

This, humanity has always known. From the fruit of

the Tree of Knowledge to the Sorcerer's Apprentice, myths dealing with what is—without any “reasonable” reason—to be forbidden, and especially with the “secrets” a hero or heroine *must* not try to uncover, are to be found in the imaginary of all peoples. True, such ideas as “there is something that *must* not be known unless we want to court catastrophe or commit radical sin” or “there is something upon which human eyes should never gaze”—these ideas must be placed among the pillars of a heteronomous (as opposed to an autonomous) institution of society.

There is in our tradition, however, another myth, one that cannot play this role. It is a Greek myth, a beautiful image of the truth. Ulysses—whom some people recently have tried naively and stupidly to make into a hero heralding the rise of capitalism—succeeds in outwitting the Cyclops, taking advantage of the Sirens, foiling Circe, and descending into Hell where he learns the ultimate secret: that life after death is infinitely worse than life on Earth. It is after having learned this that he rejects Calypso's offers of immortality, choosing instead to return to Ithaca to be able to die like a man without equal and yet mortal.

But what need have we for myths? Do we not have before our very eyes the great atomic scientists who produced the bomb for Hiroshima and later repented at length (with the exceptions of Edward Teller and a few others)? Do we not still witness the obliviousness of their successors and of those who today venture into other fields (such as genetic engineering) whose risks are potentially much more dangerous? What need have we for myths when the environment, and Earth's biosphere, are being destroyed at as fast a rate as we are now destroying them? “We don't want that! We don't know the consequences!”, it is said. Why then do you continue to do things now whose consequences no one

can foresee and that are profoundly analogous to others whose horrible results we already know?

“Would you tell me, please,” said Alice to the Cheshire Cat, “which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t care much where—,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

If you do not know where you want to go, how could you choose one road rather than another, and for what reason would you do so? Who among the protagonists of technoscience today really knows where they want to go—not from the standpoint of “pure knowledge” but with regard both to the kind of society they would wish to live in and to the paths that will take them there? And under such conditions, how could you refuse to take a broad path that apparently is right there for the taking, and upon what grounds would you refuse to do so?

This path—quite paradoxically, considering the amount of money and effort being expended—is less and less that of the *desirable* in any sense, and more and more that of the simply doable. We do not try to do what “would be necessary” or what we judge “desirable.” More and more, we do what we can, we work on what is deemed *doable* in the approximate short term. To put it more pointedly: We go after

what we think we can achieve technically, and then we see what “applications” we can invent. No one asked if there truly was a real “need” for family computers; they could be made at an affordable price for people in certain income brackets, they were then manufactured, the corresponding “need” was manufactured along with them—and now they are even being *imposed* upon the populace, as in France where the State phone company’s *Minitel* system is replacing other means of obtaining information.⁵ What is technically feasible will be done regardless. Likewise, embryo transplants, *in vitro* fertilization, fetal surgery, and so on have been put into practice as soon as the respective techniques were mastered. At present, many years later, questions about these techniques are not even really discussed, despite the courageous and commendable efforts of Professor Jacques Testart;⁶ and in France, a book that insanely advocates, with its dime-store ideas, things like male “pregnancy,” has long been on the bestseller list.

The best image is that of a World-War-I-style trench warfare against Mother Nature. Machine guns are constantly being fired across the entire front, but huge battalions are sent into action wherever and whenever a breach seems to open

⁵“Family computers” (which should not be confused with minicomputers as such) may well prove to have some usefulness. The point I want to emphasize is that amazing sums of money have been invested in something that is, for the moment, no more than a gadget.

⁶See his interview in *Le Monde*, September 10, 1986. Also, he said a year before in *Libération*, apropos of male “pregnancy”: “Don’t worry; if it is technically feasible, someone will do it someday in the United States.” See also the statements by Dr. Fredric D. Frigoletto of Harvard on fetal surgery: “The efficacy and the innocuousness of fetal surgery have not been established” (*Le Monde*, October 10, 1986, p. 12). In fact, such operations are already being performed.

up; one takes advantage of any breakthroughs that may result but does so without any overall strategy.

Here again, logic leads to the illogical. It is perfectly reasonable to concentrate one's efforts and investments where it seems most profitable to do so. When the mathematician David Hilbert was asked why he did not attack Fermat's last theorem, he responded that it would take him three or four years of preparatory work without there being any guarantee of success. Indeed, we often see this: some great physicist has been able to advance scientific knowledge and to make an important discovery by concentrating not on problems that are great in absolute terms but rather on those the scientist in question had the flair to see were "ripe" for the taking. How can we criticize this attitude? But how, too, can we remain blind to the overall unexpected result, when it embraces nearly everything?



The results would have to be known. We would also have to want them. To want them, goals would have to be laid out and *choices* made. Besides the issue of feasibility and certain instances of "pressing social demand" (e.g., medical research, notably concerning cancer—but here, too, the problem is less simple than it at first appears, as we shall see later), genuine choice would require the establishment of *criteria* and *priorities*. What criteria, what priorities, and upon what basis? Not only is it impossible in the last analysis to provide an indisputable *foundation* for criteria in these matters, but even if we possessed them, a somewhat consistent (I am not even saying rigorous) application of such criteria would itself raise tremendous problems. For, they could be applied only in a highly uncertain and

multiply-varying situation.

Let us take a highly topical example. The United States National Institute of Health (NIH) has promulgated a set of scientific-laboratory guidelines aimed at eliminating (or just limiting?) the risks inherent in genetic engineering. If you believe that such regulations settle the issue, then you are granting the NIH a kind of omniscience.

Let us also note that governments certainly are not “subject to the rules” of the NIH. For example, Field Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, head of the General Staff of the Soviet armed forces, does not seem overly concerned about the rules promulgated by NIH. In his January 18, 1986, speech⁷—during which he clarified Mr. Gorbachev’s allusion, a few days earlier, to “nonnuclear arms based upon new principles in physics”—he indicated that, among other things, these arms included “genetic weapons.” Dominique Dhombres, *Le Monde*’s Moscow correspondent, comments: this area “did not seem of interest to the military before now.” As far as I am concerned, I would gladly bet a few bucks that as soon as the possibilities of genetic engineering became apparent, at least the two superpowers (and why not others?) began earmarking some money and a few experts for research work in this field. Moreover, we know that research on what not so long ago used to be called the ABC weapons (atomic, bacteriological, and chemical) has never omitted the second term of this triad. And in Russia at least, we know that an explosion occurred at the Sverdlovsk plant in April 1979 and that, in June of that same year, another accident took place in a plant on the southern outskirts of Novosibirsk; in both

⁷As reported in *Le Monde*, January 21, 1986, p. 3. [T/E: Akhromeyev committed suicide after the failure of his and others high-level officials’ 1991 coup against Gorbachev.]

cases, these factories were manufacturing or processing bacteriological weapons. At Novosibirsk, anthrax was involved; at Sverdlovsk, a “V-21” or “U-21” virus. In both cases, the dead could be counted in the thousands.⁸ More recently, when speaking of chemical arms the president of the French Republic, François Mitterrand, declared that he saw no reason why France should be deprived of the full panoply of defensive weapons. Why then should France be deprived of biological arms?

As things stand right now with the potentialities of genetic engineering, “bacteriological” weapons take on a quaint nostalgic hue. Anthrax is to genetic engineering as gunpowder is to the H-bomb. If research and storage facilities remain limited in this area (we have no hard data, except in the case of Russia, where we can assume the opposite), it is because of our existing overkill capacity in nuclear weapons, and perhaps also because, as in the case of nuclear arms, biological weapons can have a boomerang effect, creating once again the same two-scorpions-in-a-bottle situation.⁹

⁸Marie Samatan, *Droits de l'homme et repression en URSS* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 143; Boris Komarov, *Le Rouge et le Vert: La destruction de la nature en URSS* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), see Leonid Plyushch's postscript, p. 207. [T/E: The English-language translation of Komarov's book, *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union*, tr. Michel Vale and Joe Hollander (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1980), does not include the postscript found in the French edition.]

⁹As in the case of nuclear weapons, dissuasion here is not an absolute, and it seems even more unilateral than in the former case. Russia does not have interests in the New World in any way comparable to those of the United States in the Old. Russia would therefore be less affected if the New World were to be placed under quarantine. The relatively small cost of such weapons and the unsettling ease with which they could be delivered to their targets must also be taken into account. Let us note that in this



The chemical weapons the French president would like to have (and probably already has) will not be manufactured by plumbers; they will be manufactured by chemical scientists. When physicists and mathematicians were needed to manufacture nuclear weapons (without John von Neumann and Stanislaw Ulam, there probably would not have been an American A-bomb) they were easily found—in the United States, in Russia, in Great Britain, in France, in China, in India, and perhaps elsewhere. When the KGB needs psychiatrists, it finds them as easily as the Argentine police found doctors willing to keep torture victims alive so that their torture could continue. Experience shows, if there was any need, that scientists as a group are not better and no worse than other human beings—and, one might add, no wiser or less wise (I did not say any more “knowledgeable” or full of “expertise”).

Many considerations are at work here, and they cannot easily be disentangled. We may leave aside simple greed—against which training in the principles of science provides no more protection than the training in any other discipline; nor does it shield scientists against political and national (not necessarily even “chauvinistic”) motivations—as has been proved on a grand scale during two world wars. Yet there are also some more specific motivations. Everything else being equal, a career in military research is much easier than a career in “civilian” research. I am speaking here of a

case, too, there are, in theory, the equivalent of a surgical first strike and a “defensive strategy”: the pathogenic agent is to be delivered once one has made sure that one possesses enough of the antidote to protect one’s friendly populations.

“career” not from a financial standpoint but from the point of view of being able to “do more interesting things,” to do them “in one’s own way,” to direct a lab instead of just working in one as a subordinate. And above all, there is the “research virus,” which in itself is neutral or even praiseworthy. In the last analysis, this was the “virus” that infected Stalin’s prisoners in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle* and that led them to collaborate enthusiastically in a project aimed at helping the KGB locate and identify suspects. All of them thought that Stalin was a monster, that the KGB was his most monstrous tool. But the desire to solve a scientific problem—identification of an individual by use of a voice spectrogram—went beyond all other considerations. There is nothing to criticize in that. From the scientific point of view, the question of how to destroy humanity is as valid as the question of how to save it.¹⁰

We could also show quite easily that—like its best buddy, arms policy—military research itself, which is supposed to be based on straightforward [*univoques*] criteria,

¹⁰The argument that, in destroying humanity, the scientist “acts in contradiction with himself” because without humanity there would be no science, does not hold. I have yet to see a scientific proof to the effect that science itself *should* exist. A scientist who would destroy humanity would act in contradiction, perhaps, with himself as a person—or with ethical values, if he has some—but not with any scientific proposition that would place a value on science.

To value science is in no way obligatory; cf. Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters, to take the example closest to hand. Likewise, one could maintain that the proof of Goldbach’s conjecture would have, *scientifically speaking*, more interest than the discovery of a treatment for cancer: it would have bearing upon a class of objects whose universality is much vaster. The strictly scientific point of view *may* lead to this conclusion—and in any case it has no means, *as such*, to evaluate the relative worth of two types of research.

is, in fact, in no way ruled, trivialities apart, by any sort of instrumental rationality (Max Weber's famed *Zweckrationalität* notwithstanding). But military applications are, even in the worst of cases, only a tiny aspect of the problem, if I may dare say so. Permit me two quotations:

The worst thing that can happen—will happen—in the 1980's [they are now over—C.C.] is not energy-resource depletion, economic collapse, limited nuclear war, or conquest by a totalitarian government. As terrible as these catastrophes would be for us, they can be repaired within a few generations. The one process ongoing in the 1980's that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us.

Few problems are less recognized but more important than the accelerating disappearance of Earth's biological resources. In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busily sawing off the limb on which it is perched.¹¹

Such environmental destruction is not for the most part the result of hunting, DDT spraying, or even the horrible practice of whaling, which has, however, monopolized the energies of "environmentalists." It has a name: the near-certain disappearance of the tropical forests within the next thirty years. It is the result of the intensive deforestation and agricultural exploitation to which countries in the tropical

¹¹The quotations are from E. O. Wilson of Harvard and Paul Ehrlich of Stanford in *Scientific American*, February 1986, p. 97.

and equatorial zones of the world have become, by necessity, committed (something has to be done in order to make it look like something is being done to feed the starving, and the developed world's lending nations are driving them to do it). The catastrophic results of this chain of events will make themselves felt not only in the form of the certain extinction of dozens, perhaps hundreds and thousands, of species, but also in the form of a very serious disturbance in the Earth's thermal balance, in its hydrological and meteorological systems, and in the great cycles of its biochemical metabolism. An Earth whose land surface is covered by forests and an Earth whose land surface is covered with grain crops are two completely different planets.

Chernobyl, which impressed people so much, is obviously, in this scheme of things, a very tiny affair. People shouted so much about it because it allowed them to stir up the population, exploiting its immediate fears in order to direct it toward an apparently achievable political objective: the closing of nuclear power plants (which is both impossible under present circumstances and woefully inadequate as a solution). But how can we mobilize the population against the destruction of the tropical forests? Those people need to eat. If you reply that we could begin by giving them the industrialized countries' surpluses (which are, as is known, principally agricultural surpluses) and then stop penalizing farmers who could produce much more if given the opportunity, you will be accused of wanting to maintain Third World countries in a state of neocolonial dependence. If you then reply that, obviously, you are well aware that this could not be accomplished except through radical changes in the political and social structure of the "developed" countries, that will be the end of the conversation: you will be called an incorrigible "utopian"—whereas those who are incapable of

seeing anything two years down the road are obviously the “realists.”

Who will maintain that this whole chain of events and changes corresponds in any degree to actual *choices*? And these choices, were they to exist, would be choices by *whom*? As such, scientists do not decide; *as such*, scientists would have no qualifications to decide (it is not *as* a laser specialist that a physicist can decide whether or not laser research has some priority over immunological research.) Inasmuch as they participate in decision-making processes, scientists can have an influence only by allying themselves with some clan or by winning the confidence of one politicobureaucratic clique or another during power struggles in which these cliques use scientific or technical issues as emblems or rallying points, or—as happens much more frequently—in which they need “experts” to dress up in scientific clothing options that have already been decided upon for other reasons. (The well-documented history of Winston Churchill and Frederick A. Lindemann, later Lord Cherwell, on one side, and Henry Tizard, on the other,¹² belongs to the simple, epic, and “honest” era of these kinds of disputes.) Let us add to what has been said earlier about motivations relating to the funding of one’s own projects when they are placed in competition with those of others, that it is not only a question of career advancement and personal prestige; for each scientist, his idea is his “brainchild,” and “objectivity” here is, on the subjective level, almost impossible.

As for the politicians who have final control over research budgets, charity requires one not to scrutinize the

¹²For example, by C. P. Snow in *Science and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and *A Postscript to Science and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

issue too closely. When they are not downright ignorant, they have their personal whims. And this is perhaps the worst of cases. We recently heard a former president of the French Republic angrily defending the funding of “sniffing airplanes,” which supposedly could detect oil underground, by invoking Galileo’s condemnation by the Church. Moreover, this affair involved recognized experts and specialists. And when the politicians are ignorant and know it (not at all the same thing), they are coached by advisors who as a general rule went into careers in administration and politic cabinets because their personal scientific performance was negligible; they are to scientific truth what critics are to literary and philosophical creation. To a great extent their motivations are tied to the survival of the clan into which they have managed to insinuate themselves.

It will be said that we are in a democracy and that the public or public opinion can, or should, control what is going on. A pale abstraction. It is no longer sufficient merely to repeat what was, not so long ago, quite well known but which now seems strangely and overwhelmingly forgotten these past years with the rediscovery of “free-market values”: namely, that public opinion accepts the information it is given, that it is manipulated in all sorts of ways, that it must make enormous efforts—and then it does so only after the fact and in small part—just to stand up to what State, political, and economic bureaucratic apparatuses perpetrate twenty-four hours a day. The question goes much deeper: it concerns the formation of modern man’s representations and will.

It can be said, at a first level, that these representations and this will are constantly being formed by the entirety of the contemporary instituted world, including its weighty component of technoscience. In turn, the latter has endowed the world out of which it arises with an instrument that is

intrinsically adaptable not only to the scope but also to the very substance of the manipulation to be carried out, that is, the mass media. This is quite true, but it does not exhaust the question. Let us also ask: Who has willed modern technoscience in its present state, and who wills its indefinite continuation and proliferation? No one and everyone. We must stop doing to humanity as a whole what Marxism did to the proletariat: making of it an all-powerful subject, and yet totally innocent of anything that might happen to it, as if it were beyond all influence. If ever a nuclear winter comes to pass, if ever the polar icecaps melt, if ever a quick-spreading lethal virus escapes from a genetic-engineering laboratory—and if ever the shaggy, starving survivors haul the remaining physicists or biologists into a court, the resulting paradoxes and aporias will be as acute and as intense as when one recalls the Nuremberg trials, the presence of Soviet prosecutors at these trials, and the recent election of Mr. Kurt Waldheim to the Austrian presidency. For, just as no totalitarian regime could do what it has done without millions of Eichmanns and Waldheims (I accept, in the latter's case, the most recent official version of his conduct, namely, that he had served as an interpreter for an armed unit charged with exterminating Yugoslavian and Greek partisans)—and they would be nothing without the tolerance of their respective peoples—so is, even more clearly, the avalanche of contemporary technoscience fed not by mere tolerance but by peoples' active support. Can we haul entire peoples into court? What kind of tribunal would that be, and who would bring them there? But perhaps they are in the process of bringing themselves to trial, taking with them the thirty-nine righteous ones of the Jewish parable.

Everyone—Liberal Free-Marketeers, Marxists, the rich, the poor, the educated, the illiterate—has believed, has

wanted to believe, still believes, and still wants to believe that technoscience is quasiomniscient, quasiomnipotent, that it would also be almost entirely beneficial were it not for some bad people who divert it from its true ends. The question therefore goes far beyond any idea of “particular interests” or underhanded “manipulation.” It concerns the core imaginary of modern man, of the society and institutions he creates, and which create him. I will return to this point at the end of the present essay. Let us recall now simply that, if this is truly the case, the transformations we will have to undertake are infinitely vaster and deeper than what, until now, we might have imagined they would be. Human beings’ creation of a sedentary lifestyle or their domestication of living species offers merely pale analogies.



This last statement will seem excessive only to those who have little understanding both of how vast the stakes are and, above all, of the agonizing character of the virtual choices, rooted as they are in basic, antinomic interrogations.

From an abstract point of view, we may state: No one wants—no one should want—a return to the Stone Age (though it seems that we have already made this choice without knowing it or wanting it), and no one should continue to harbor any illusions about technoscience being “a good tool that has fallen into bad hands.”

More concretely speaking, let us ask: *From the standpoint of humanity as a whole*, who has made and who could make a cost/benefit analysis between the money spent on cancer research and the amount that would be needed to come to the aid of the starving people of the Third World? What “rational” option can there be between the admirable

results of the European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN) experiments (along with the millions of dollars spent on them) and the living corpses on the streets of Bombay and Calcutta? I will not say anything about the debate—which, indeed, has not even begun—over the “right of sterile individuals to have children of their own” and the research time and money spent on it, as this question seems to me a sinister farce when the living skeletons of Ethiopian and Eritrean children are being shown on television at the same time. The choice has already been made: Mr. and Mrs. Smith will have *their own child*—at a cost in dollars and labor time that could have kept perhaps fifty African children alive.

I am not even saying that all these choices, and the thousands of others that could be mentioned, are “wrong.” They are, as a first approximation, completely “arbitrary,” and, as a second approximation, not arbitrary at all. They are determined by something altogether different from “rational” or human priorities. When it is claimed that this or that option serves the ongoing and universal interests of humanity (every human being might one day be stricken with cancer, for example), this universal turns out to be empty (a good proportion of humanity does not even have the opportunity to reach the age at which there is a significant incidence of cancer). The choices are “determined” by a process—“random” in its details, but moving overall in a clear-cut direction—through which technoscience develops and grows; a hammer without a hand guiding it, its mass constantly increasing, its pace ever swifter.

On the Social Representations of Science

As has been said a thousand times, the situation of contemporary man is supremely paradoxical. The more he is

“powerful,” the more he is impotent. The more he knows, the less he knows. And, despite the fantastically arrogant claims of a few men of science, the more he knows, the less he knows what knowing might be.

The more one knows, the less one knows. It is not difficult to illustrate this idea both within knowledge itself, considered “intrinsically” (I will speak briefly about this aspect in the third part of my essay), and in the relationship between knowledge and the subject of knowledge.

First, the individual subject, who knows ever more about ever less; less, not only in scope—each particular field is continually shrinking—but also and especially with regard to the meaning and the conditions of his knowledge. As for the collective subject—that is, as regards scientific communities, for whom three decades of talk about multi- or transdisciplinary studies have not been enough to counterbalance either the reality of an acceleration of specialization or its consequences, but also as regards the human community itself—let us note that, long before anyone spoke of “two cultures” and of their mutual separation within contemporary society,¹³ Max Weber noted that a savage knew infinitely more about the practical world around him than someone today knows about his. As for the “theoretical” world, the religious faith of yesteryear has given way to a vague belief in science and technique. This is an abstract belief, a container that most often includes only a few stale crumbs fallen from the table of the vulgar popularizers of science (who often are scientists themselves). As this belief is itself only a weak and watery filtrate of representations issuing from scientists themselves, it would be better to talk

¹³T/E: See C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959, 2001).

directly about these representations.

I have neither the intention nor the opportunity to do so here: that would fill up a book. Rather, I am going to speak of two fallacies that seem to me extremely widespread, highly representative (in themselves and in their various, more or less incoherent combinations), and worthwhile noting—even when those who hold such views are not in the majority—for, they serve to reveal the underlying problems.

The first, the least plausible, and certainly one that is almost never defended openly, denies that science has any truth value at all, or—what amounts to the same thing—assigns to the term “truth” only the most narrowly pragmatic sense of “it works.” *What* works? As it should, pragmatism gives birth to the skepticism contained in it: everything works, anything works, or as the philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, says, “anything goes.” This outcome is inevitable. The pragmatist’s thesis is this: We accept as true those theories that “work.” But a question arises: How do we know when a theory works? My argument here is designed not to recapitulate the philosophical “refutation” of skepticism but to note that this borderline idea of “epistemological anarchism” starts from a statement of fact that it neither understands nor expresses correctly: *the history of science does not constitute a system that deploys itself over time*. And it forgets another, equally massive fact: far from our being able to say “everything works,” the theories capable of providing competing explanations of “the accepted facts” at a given moment are rather small in number.

The second fallacy, by far the most widespread—and which I believe to be held by the large majority of scientists—is a version of nineteenth-century progressivism. In this view, it is claimed that our knowledge, as it evolves over time, approaches truth asymptotically; that our successive scientific

theories constitute less and less inexact expressions of reality; and that, if there be a succession of these theories, it is because previous theories represent “particular cases” of subsequent theories, which, in turn, are “generalizations” of the earlier ones. This untenable view unconsciously carries with it a weighty metaphysics that implies, among other things, that there is a preestablished harmony between an arrangement of strata of Being and a process of development in our thought, or that what is most “profound” and the least immediately accessible in terms of phenomena is necessarily universal. In order to give some basis to this belief, people obstinately go on invoking the case of the Einsteinian succession of Newtonian theory (which is in no way typical of the history of science), thereby obliterating the upheaval of changes in categories, axioms, and representations separating the two theories. And it leads quite naturally to a triumphal dogmatism—a dogmatism in which the almost-last-word is always promised for tomorrow, and this promise is reiterated every day. Examples of this dogmatism abound. Already in 1898, at the opening of a conference of physicists, Lord Kelvin stated that the edifice of physics was almost complete, except for two tiny problems whose solutions would be found during the next few years. One wonders what is most amazing, the megalomaniacal arrogance or the unfailing instincts of the brilliant physicist who pointed precisely to what was going to topple the edifice whose near completion he was then celebrating (i.e., the Michelson experiment and black-body radiation) among so many of the questions that were then and sometimes still today open to scientific inquiry. Since then, similar proclamations have often been heard, and they have been immediately rebroadcast by vulgarizers and journalists who keep on repeating every few weeks that the ultimate riddle of the Universe has finally been solved.

These two fallacies have political implications: that we scientists know, that we know everything, and that therefore we should be left alone to do what we will [*laissez-nous faire*]. Or, that we know nothing and that no one knows anything, that coherent discourse is impossible (or that an infinite variety of discourses concerning the same object can exist, which boils down to the same thing), that, therefore, the existing order of things is as good or bad as any other.

The resulting two conclusions have one thing in common: they both want to bar philosophical interrogation, which not only lies at the origin of Western science but is, today more than ever, needed by science, faced as it is with unprecedented theoretical difficulties.

Sociologically and historically speaking, what is perhaps most interesting is that there clearly is a group of scientists (I am not speaking here of their statistical weight, which I believe to be great) who think with divided minds and who live on two different levels of “self-consciousness” or “self-representation” at once without being able to say that one of these two levels is paramount, or more profound than the other.

At one of these levels, a scientist representative of this group will think and will state that we possess the truth or that we are going to possess the most humanly feasible approximation thereof. At another level, this scientist will state: It is stupid (“metaphysical”) to ask questions about the truth, this question has no meaning, science examines not the *what* but the *how*; it does not interrogate the object, it simply manipulates it and predicts its behavior. There are computations and experiments that work, others that do not; these results are to be polished to perfection or else rejected in favor of other hypotheses. If this scientist is epistemologically more sophisticated, he will gladly accept a

view that manages to effect a strange synthesis between the two preceding ones and will state that a theory is never true but only “falsifiable,” that it is provisionally accepted so long as it has not been refuted. Of course, this clever scientist will never pose the question of what makes the refutation of a theory “true” or valid. And still less will he examine all that is presupposed, both on the side of the subject as well as on that of the object of science, for procedures like the positing of hypotheses and then their “falsification” or “refutation” to be possible.

But even more serious is that, for this type of scientist, the two levels described are completely concealed by his real attitude, which is, in a sense, the most authentic one. In this attitude, the question of truth is not posed; it is not even asked to the extent that one could reply, “This question has no meaning.” Of course, a question of *correctness* or *exactitude* is still raised: Are the results correct? Are the observations accurate? And, most especially: Are these observations consistent with, and do they correspond to, what one was looking for? Do they meet and advance “the accepted body of beliefs,” the body of scientific beliefs considered in each instance as established (whether provisionally or not). At this real, effectively actual level, scientific activity becomes a technopragmatic activity designed to manipulate objects, instruments, algorithms, and concepts and to assure itself that all this “works” somehow or other as it forbids any kind of self-interrogation or any questions about the conditions for its success, *even its pragmatic success*.

In order for this technopragmatic activity to be sociologically possible and for technoknowledge to develop; in order for the scientific enterprise, with its generally huge but not rationally justified costs (which does not mean that they are positively *unjustified*), to be funded adequately; in

order for it to attract gifted young people and to build up its authority and prestige; and in order to ensure that the many and varied risks it creates will remain outside the public eye, a certain image of modern science must be presented to the public—exactly the same image, as it turns out, that the public, in the grip of the imaginary signification of the unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery, expects of science and demands of it. This image is that of a triumphal march during which theoretical uncertainties within science itself as well as basic questions relating to its object and to its relation to society must at all costs be evacuated. In addition, science must give assurances, counter to what scientific evidence itself tells us, that no problem or major risk is involved in the utilization or application of scientific discoveries—or that a few rules of good behavior on the part of the laboratories concerned are all that are needed in order to counter any such risk.

Thus, of all human activities, science would be the sole one simply to resolve questions without raising any. It would be released from the need for questioning as well as from any burden of responsibility. A divine innocence it would possess, a marvelous form of extraterritoriality.

At the same time, all communication between science and philosophy—or more simply put, all thought, reflection, and interrogation—would also have to be abolished. The questions raised by the successive crises of science as well as by its very history, but also by the conditions and the foundations of scientific activity and, lastly and most especially, by what it says or does not say about *what is* and its mode of being as well as about *the one who knows* and about her mode of being—these questions too all have to be forgotten. This happens to such a degree that I have to ask myself whether what I am saying here (and have said

elsewhere for a long time), the language I employ, these concerns (which have been, in their time, if I am permitted to quote these names, those of such feeble-minded people as Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Newton, Kant, Maxwell, Einstein, Poincaré, Bohr, Weyl, Eddington, Hilbert, Broglie, Heisenberg, etc.), this very sense of wonder—what Aristotle called *thaumazein*—that cannot but immensely grow in scope and intensity with the very success, itself in a sense *unreasonable*, of modern science, will have any meaning at all, even as something considered ridiculous, for the scientist thirty years from now, or whether these words will appear to him simply unintelligible.

Contemporary Science as Theory: Some Aspects

As I said, the more one knows, the less one knows. This certainly may seem like just a clever way of playing on the difference between the reality of knowledge and the idea one has of it, between what one knows and what one thinks one knows. But in truth, that is not the case. The “classical” scientific worlds were, so to speak, complete (in a “topological” sense). For Newton (or Laplace) there were no gaping holes in his (or Laplace’s) system of the world, nor were there any in Euclid’s mathematics *for* Euclid. In both cases, there obviously were problems—which is something else entirely. The Euclidian world (with Hilbert’s reform of it) is complete—once you “exile” therefrom the question of whether it is valid to postulate the existence of parallel lines; it is complete with the indisputable validity of this proposition taken as a point at infinity. The Newtonian world is complete so long as we leave aside one or two apparently “peripheral” questions (e.g.: What does it mean for two distant observers to make simultaneous observations? Or, How can this

simultaneity be verified?). And the miraculous dovetailing between Euclidian geometry and Newtonian physics was “complete,” too. In other words, the “gaps” were at the “edges” of the system, and there was only one or there were only a very few; it was therefore possible to cover them up or, in any case, to “isolate” them. Today such isolation and covering up are no longer possible, they *should* no longer be possible.

In order to show their importance both for science and for philosophy, I wish I had the space here to sketch out more clearly those aporias that seem to me to spring from within contemporary science itself.¹⁴ Lacking this opportunity, and in order to shake up what seems to me a certain epistemological torpidity that has taken hold of our age, I will attempt simply to provide a series of key examples, ones that seem to me to justify scientists taking some interest in the foundations of their activity and renewing their ties with the process of philosophical interrogation.

First things first. Let us begin with a few examples relating to mathematics. After Gödel proved his two incompleteness theorems (1931), other undecidability theorems arose (notably, Church’s 1936, and Turing’s 1936). Taken together, these theorems imply that, except for trivial (finite) cases, undecidable propositions exist in mathematics, that the consistency of formal systems is never provable within these same systems, and that we can never devise a machine (or algorithm) that will tell us in advance whether a proposition is or is not provable.

Discussion about these theorems seems to have become confined more and more, since the time they were

¹⁴I did it fifteen years ago in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation,” in [CLI](#).

first published, within a narrow circle of specialists in mathematical logic. This was, in a sense, natural: these theorems did not affect the current work of mathematicians, whatever the “depth” of the subject matter. Their importance instead lies elsewhere. They destroy the idea that we can have rigorous hypothetico-deductive knowledge in the sole nontrivial domain wherein it seemed as if we were approaching that goal. Not only am I unaware of any genuine philosophical elaboration of these theorems but, to my knowledge, no one has tried to examine their implications for *real physics* (which, of course, is supposed to relate only to finite quantities but which constantly makes use of infinite sets in the formal procedures it employs).

On the other hand, since Cantor, mathematics has been progressively reconstructed from the bottom up on the basis of set theory—and, in any case (apart from all “foundational” questions), it contains this theory as one of its essential parts. Now, in set theory an (apparently secondary) question necessarily arises that bears upon the sequence of cardinal numbers of infinite sets. Roughly speaking, the question is the following: Between the infinity of natural numbers (1, 2, 3...) and the infinity of real numbers (those that correspond to the points of a line), is there or is there not an infinity of another “type of multiplicity” (of another cardinal)? Cantor’s hypothesis, called the continuum hypothesis, answers in the negative: from the infinity of natural numbers the infinity of real numbers follows immediately (from the standpoint of cardinality). Now, Gödel first demonstrated in 1940 that the continuum hypothesis (and even a stronger hypothesis, called the generalized continuum hypothesis) is compatible with the usual axioms of set theory, notably the Zermelo-Fraenkel system of axioms. Then, in 1963, Paul J. Cohen demonstrated that the *negation* of the

continuum hypothesis is equally compatible with set theory. It follows, first of all, that set theory is incomplete; second and especially, that it could be completed by the addition of a supplementary axiom—which would lead to a situation comparable to that of Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries. It does not seem that the (probably considerable) implications of a plurality of set theories have been worked out yet.

In the third place, an enormous portion of the conclusions of twentieth-century mathematics relies upon the axiom of choice as formulated by Ernst Zermelo, which is tantamount to saying: Every set can be well ordered. Now, it can be shown that this axiom—which appeared entirely counterintuitive to great mathematicians such as Émile Borel and Hermann Weyl and the entire intuitionist school—is both equivalent to propositions that seem intuitively obvious (e.g., that the Cartesian product of a family of nonempty sets is not empty) and incompatible with other propositions that seem just as intuitively obvious, like Jan Mycielsky's axiom of determinacy (1964; this axiom states that all infinite games with perfect information are determined, in the sense that there is always a winning strategy for one or the other player). Here the question concerns not only the possible fragility of a large portion of the results of modern mathematics (which had led the collective author Nicolas Bourbaki to mark with an asterisk those theorems whose proof depends upon acceptance of the axiom of choice) but the vacillations of mathematical intuition in its attempts to come to terms with its more outlandish creations.

At the intersection of mathematics and physics, and as we pass now from one to the other, let us recall that the question of the extraordinary effectiveness of mathematics when applied to the physical world remains as open today as

it was when the first who raised it, Pythagoras, was at work. And let it not be said that the issue of applied mathematics' extraordinary effectiveness has been resolved by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. For, on the one hand, most of these applications presuppose the mathematical theory of measure of the set of real numbers, which remains obscure even from the strictly mathematical point of view. On the other hand and above all, the *explicandum* is the applicability to a physical world that is *not* that of our current experience of "tools" (or forms, if you prefer) coming from parts of mathematics as complex and mutually distant as, for example, absolute differential calculus and the theory of distributions—whose relation to Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" is highly improbable, to say the least.

In physics, properly speaking, the work, the great work, is constantly being taken back to the shop for further elaboration. Thus, for example—and despite the relentless, one-sided publicity given to one theory at least since the mid-1950s—it would be inexact to say that we can at the present hour decide between the various extant cosmological models, and in particular between those of an "open" and those of a "closed" Universe. If, in the present state of our knowledge, an "explosive" singularity in the history of the Universe fifteen or twenty billion years ago cannot seriously be challenged, the model of an "open" Universe (in indefinite expansion, starting from a *unique* event marking an absolute origin) is being called into question more and more by scientists' constantly rising, revised estimates of the average density of the Universe. (This situation was not, *a priori*, so hard to foresee!) If these estimations of average density should one day exceed a certain critical level (and current estimates appear to be rather close already), we would be obliged to accept a "cyclical" model of the Universe, one that

is alternatively in expansion and in contraction and during whose history the Big Bang would have been simply one important event in a perhaps indefinite series of events of the same type. But in this last model, energy-matter is not conserved (it would “increase” with each cycle, during the contraction phase). Let us simply note here that, beyond the basic intrinsic importance of cosmology and of making a choice between these models (or other ones), the mere existence of a coherent model (as derived from the theory of general relativity and Friedmann’s equations)—one that is compatible, in principle, with possible observations and within which the basic laws of present-day physics concerning conservation do not hold—suffices to show how extravagant it would be to think that our physics is really standing on solid theoretical grounds.

At the other end of physics (and intimately connected with the first), the “zoology” of elementary particles, about which Heisenberg complained, has changed form but perhaps not substance. Though some order has been established among the hundreds of “elementary” particles, there remain a good thirty “really basic” particles—which themselves “result” from the combination of a more limited number of subatomic characteristics. This leads us to think that the genuine question concerns less the multiplicity of particles than the plurality of basic characteristics; why charge, spin, “up,” “down,” “bottom,” “top,” and all the rest? Moreover, the attempts to construct a really unified theory still collide with the problem of the incompatibility between the structure of general relativity and that of quantum theory—both of which are constantly being “confirmed” by observation and experimentation. But if, as seems to be the case, the quantum position is unshakeable (see, not so long ago, the fate of the “Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen (EPR) paradox” and the question

of inseparability), a unification (of general relativity and quantum theory) would require a quantification of space-time—an expression to which it seems impossible to attach any meaning at all. The situation of basic physics is still in flux and new basic concepts are periodically being introduced, such as “supersymmetry” recently, or “strings” and “superstrings” that would take the place of particles in a “real” underlying Universe of ten dimensions.

In the domain of biology, a large misunderstanding has dominated thinking practically ever since we went beyond Darwin’s original insights. People are talking all the time about *evolutionary* theory. Both in common parlance and in Darwin’s mind (see, to mention only two examples, the terms “selection” and “survival of the fittest”), the word “evolution” has undeniably had the sense of an unfolding of possibilities, of a progression, or, at least, of an increasing complexity. Now, while the *fact* of evolution is incontestable, no *genuine theory* of evolution really exists. Clearly, neo-Darwinian theory (the “modern synthesis”) is a theory of species *differentiation*, not one of the *evolution* of species. For, not only would the same theory “explain” just as well an Earth history that would have led to the existence of a completely different set of species than now exists, but nothing in this alleged “theory” would render intelligible to us why evolution would proceed in a “direction” that goes from a few primitive organisms to hominids; nothing in it tells us why differentiation occurs in the direction of increasing complexity and not, so to speak, “laterally.” Why these millions of present-day species, and not, to take one example, just a few million single-celled species?

After a torrent of exaggerated claims lasting twenty years, it has finally been admitted, it seems, that DNA and the genetic code—fundamental discoveries though they were, as

no one would deny—are far from providing us with everything we would need to render intelligible the self-production and even the reproduction of living beings. We need only recall that the majority of neurologists as well as immunologists reject the idea of complete genetic predetermination (as coded in the DNA molecules) for the specialized development of nerve cells and cells of the immune system. They prefer “epigenetic” hypotheses (which make this process of specialization the result of the “history” of each cell, to a large extent codetermined by the “surroundings” in which it finds itself: namely, its “neighborhood”). More likely than not, these hypotheses contain a great deal of truth (in any case, the predetermination hypothesis is untenable for the types of cells mentioned). But we may also ask whether the epigenetic view does not bring us back, at another level, to the same problem it was supposed to have addressed at the outset: one would still have to hypothesize a genetic predetermination that makes such cells capable of a particular sort of epigenetic development and not another, a particular sort of reaction to its “history” and not another, and so on. And, on the other hand, that view leads us to reexamine the most basic capacities and properties of living beings; of these, there are still no signs of theoretical comprehension. It is one thing to say that a gene determines a specific characteristic. It is something else again to say that a gene determines the capacity to produce an indefinite number of characteristics (about whose existence, moreover, we are certain, given the example of the language abilities of human beings).

What does all this mean if not that science is, rather fortunately, more open than ever, more questioning than ever, less comforting to the inquiring mind than ever? What does all this mean, for genuine scientists and for those who cannot

remain indifferent to their vast work, if not an appeal for the renewal of human thought?

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Science is, ought to be, contrary to what has happened since Hegel, an object of passion for philosophy. Not as a set of certainties but as an inexhaustible well of enigmas, an inextricable mixture of light and darkness, the evident testimony to an incomprehensible meeting, ever assured and ever fugitive, between our imaginary creations and what exists, and also as an outstanding affirmation of our autonomy, of the rejection of simply inherited or instituted beliefs, of our capacity constantly to weave the new into a tradition, to transform ourselves by using our past transformations as supports.

Yet we should distinguish the philosophical import and the abstract practical possibilities of science from its social-historical reality, from the effectively actual role it plays in the contemporary world, and in the massive drift our world is experiencing. Considered as a whole, this role is far from univocally positive. The destruction of the environment, with its incalculable and largely unknown consequences, perhaps already began with the end of the Neolithic era (the beginning of the elimination of a variety of living species, deforestation). It has taken qualitatively different dimensions since then: not so much in the industrial revolution but in the scientific revolution of industry, what Marx called “the conscious (!) technical application of science”;¹⁵ in short, ever

¹⁵T/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

since we ceased living with a “naive” (!) technology and instead began living with a scientific technology. What worth (for those who may enjoy them) would the comforts of modern life have when weighed against the prospect of the polar icecaps melting? And how many pennies would all the conquests of modern medicine be worth if World War III were to explode?

These accounts cannot be added up in any particular field—the pluses and the minuses are inextricably entangled. Even less can a balance sheet be drawn up in all fields at once—unless reality does it for us one day. To add things up you need separable elements, which do not exist in this case. The fallacy of separation—for instance, let’s keep modern medicine and reject (the military consequences of) nuclear physics—contains an illogical premise identical to that of the young ecologists who were fleeing from an industrial world by establishing rural communes—within which they could not do without industrial products. Modern medicine and (theoretical and applied) nuclear physics are not different plants but two branches of the same tree, if not to say two substances in the same fruit. The existence and development of the one like the other presuppose the same anthropological type, the same attitudes toward the world and human existence, the same modes of thought, of technicality, and of instrumentation.

All this does not mean that scientific research is “bad” in itself—far from it—or that we would have to stop it (in any case, we could not and should not). It simply reminds us of a few obvious points, some banal, others less so.

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*].”

Let us start with the obvious and banal: beyond the doors of their laboratories, scientists are men and women like any others, as vulnerable to ambition, desire for power, flattery, vanity, influences, prejudices, greed, errors of judgment, and unreflective stands as anyone else. In addition, and as could have been foreseen, the immense progress in the attainment of positive knowledge and in its applications has not been accompanied by an inch of moral progress, either among the protagonists of science or among their fellow citizens.

Obvious, but less banal: the fantastic autonomization of technoscience, which Jacques Ellul has the imprescriptible merit of having formulated as early as 1947 and which scientists and nonscientists alike mask under the illusion of the separability of “means” and “ends,” thereby purveying the false idea that another “master” might be able to direct technoscientific evolution in another direction. But this set of practices, potentialities, and forms of knowledge that fabricates laboratories and lab assistants, imitators, inventors, discoverers, apocalyptic weapons, test-tube babies, real-live monsters, poisons, and medicines—this Supermegamachine¹⁶ is dominated by no one. No one controls it, and, in the present state of things, the question whether someone would be able to control it is not even raised. With technoscience, modern man believes he has been granted mastery. In reality, while he “masters” a growing number of limited areas of interest, he is less powerful than ever over the totality of the effects of his actions, precisely because these actions have multiplied to such a great extent and because they affect strata of physical

¹⁶T/E: The reference is to the concept of the “Megamachine” in Lewis Mumford’s two-volume work, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (1967) and *Pentagon of Power* (1970).

and biological Being about which he knows nothing—which does not prevent him from poking around with an ever-growing stick into an ant hill that is also without doubt a hornet's nest.

We must be done with the idea that science and technics confer upon humanity a power that might at present simply be “badly utilized.” On the one hand, technoscience constantly produces “power” in the limited sense of an effectively actual ability to do things; on the other hand, with the way contemporary society is evolving (cf. *infra*), this power could not be “utilized” in any other fashion than the way in which it now is, and by no one else than the one who now utilizes it, that is to say, Nobody. There is no “technocracy” or “scientocracy.” Far from forming a dominant ruling group, scientists and technicians serve the existing Power Apparatuses (strictly speaking, they are part of it). And these Apparatuses exploit, certainly, and also oppress almost everybody, but they do not really direct anything.

~

At the heart of the modern era, and ever since the end of the “Dark Ages,” two intrinsically antinomic but connected social imaginary significations have arisen. (We will not dwell on this connection here.) On the one hand, *autonomy* has animated the emancipatory and democratic movements that traverse the history of the West as well as the rebirth of questioning and rational inquiry. The *unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery*, on the other hand, is at the basis of the institution of capitalism through its various phases (including, by a monstrous inversion, totalitarianism). It undoubtedly culminates in the unfurling of technoscience.

For reasons I have developed at length elsewhere,

rational “mastery,” when indefinitely expanded, can in reality be only a *pseudorational* mastery. But another dimension also is of importance here. As soon as “rationality” was seen to be perfectly “objectifiable” (which quickly came to mean: capable of being put in the form of an algorithm and susceptible to impersonal mastery), “rational mastery” came to imply, and in truth requires, impersonal mastery. But impersonal mastery, when extended to everything, obviously becomes the mastery of Nobody, of *outis*—and it becomes, thereby, complete nonmastery, impotence. (In a democracy, there is of course an impersonal rational rule, the law—thought without desire, as Aristotle said—but there are also flesh-and-blood governors and judges.)

Completely symptomatic in this regard is the present-day tendency toward the “automatization of decisions.” This goal is already being implemented in a large number of secondary cases, but it is beginning to take on a new appearance with the introduction of “expert systems.” And still more illustrative is the idea, which is in some way its achievement, of a “Doomsday” machine, an expert system that would automatically send missiles from one camp to the other as soon as those from the other side have been computed or assumed to have been fired, thereby eliminating from deterrence policy all “subjective” (and therefore fallible as well as influenceable) politicopsychological factors. Are we really so far away from that point now?

~

In the societies preceding our own, human mortality could be negated by religion in the broadest sense of the term. This negation has always taken the form of denial, in the Freudian sense of the term: a negation that, in the very act of

being formulated, demonstrates the contrary of what it explicitly affirms. (If man was immortal, he would not need all these proofs of immortality and all these articles of faith.) This role is today played, as much as it can be, by technoscience. It is not enough for us to go on repeating that, in the modern world, science has taken the place of religion. What must be understood are both the limits of this substitution (which do not concern us here) and the element of truth it contains. Science offers a substitute for religion inasmuch as it now embodies the illusion of omniscience and omnipotence—the illusion of mastery. This illusion is minted in an infinite variety of ways—from the hope for a “miracle” drug, passing through the belief that society’s “experts” and governors know what is good, to the voicing of the ultimate consolation: “I am weak and mortal, but Power exists.” Modern man’s difficulty in admitting the potential harmfulness of technoscience is analogous to the sense of absurdity a believer would experience when hearing someone say: “God is bad.”

From valuing the power of doing as such to the adoration of naked force, there is just a single tiny step.



The phantasy of being all-powerful has undoubtedly existed ever since man became man. It has been coined into some power and it took refuge in magic, or military conquest. With its fecundation by its own offspring—rationality—it has, for the first time, been able to become effectively actual historical power, the social imaginary signification dominating an entire world. If this has been possible, it is not only that the human imaginary has taken this turn and has provided itself with means other than magic or elementary

military technology. It is also that the world—the “prehuman” world—lends itself to this happenstance and that this world is knowable and even manipulable.

The world is knowable to an apparently unlimited degree. It unveils to us, through our work, one after another of its connected yet heterogeneous strata. And yet, it clearly is not limitlessly manipulable—and this, not simply from the standpoint of “extent” (we cannot change the direction in which our galaxy rotates, for example), but also from a qualitative standpoint. We have clearly attained this limit, and we are in the process of crossing it at several points at once. Moreover, as I have tried to show, the most intimate sort of connection exists between the limitless unfolding of our knowledge and the limits we ought to impose upon our manipulations.

Now, at the same time that the rage for “power,” the fetishism for “rational mastery,” waxes triumphant, the other great imaginary signification of Greco-Western history—that of autonomy, notably in its political manifestations—seems to be suffering an eclipse. The present-day crisis of humanity is a crisis of politics in the grand sense, a crisis of political creativity and of the political imagination as well as of political participation by individuals. The reigning conditions of privatization and “individualism” give free rein, in the first place, to the arbitrariness of the Apparatuses and, at a deeper level, to the autonomized march of technoscience.

This is the ultimate point of the question at hand. The enormous dangers, the very absurdity contained in the all-out, directionless development of technoscience, cannot be avoided simply by promulgating a few “rules” set forth once and for all, or by installing a “panel of wise men” that would become merely a tool, if not itself the actual subject, of a tyranny. What is required is more than a “reform of the

human understanding”; it is a reform of the human being as social-historical being, an ethos of mortality, a self-surpassing of Reason. We have no need for a few “wise men.” What we need is for the greatest number of people to acquire and exercise wisdom—which in turn requires a radical transformation of society as political society, thereby instaurating not simply formal participation but also actual passion on the part of all for the common affairs of humanity. Wise human beings, however, are the very last thing that present-day culture produces.

“What is it that you want, then? To change humanity?”

“No, something infinitely more modest: simply that humanity change, as it has already done two or three times.”

POLIS

Intellectuals and History^{*}

An old philosophical habit: I feel obliged to begin by dwelling upon the terms in which the question is posed.

First of all, the term *history*. I do not understand by it merely history-already-made but also history-in-the-making and history-to-be-made.

In this sense, history is essentially creation—creation *and* destruction. Creation signifies something entirely other than the objective indeterminacy or the subjective unforeseeability of events and of the course of history. It is ridiculous to say, for example, that the advent of tragedy was unforeseeable, and it is stupid to see in *St. Matthew's Passion* an effect of the indeterminacy of history.

History is the domain in which human beings create ontological forms—history and society themselves being the first of these forms. Creation does not necessarily—nor even generally—signify “good” creation or the creation of “positive values.” Auschwitz and the Gulag are creations just as much as the Parthenon and the *Principia Mathematica*. But among the creations in our history, Greco-Western history, there is one that *we* judge positively and take credit for: calling things into question, criticizing them, requiring a

^{*}Published as “Les Intellectuels et l’histoire” in *Lettre Internationale*, 15 (December 1987): 14-16, and reprinted in [MM](#), 103-11 (127-36 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: Speech given to the “Intellectuals and History” round-table discussion at the International Conference of Intellectuals and Artists in Valencia (June 16, 1987), commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the 1937 Congress of Antifascist Writers in Valencia. Translated as “Intellectuals and History” in *Salmagundi*, 80 (Fall 1988): 161-69. That translation was reprinted in [PPA](#), 127-36, and then in *The New Salmagundi Reader*, ed. Robert Boyers and Peggy Boyers (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pp. 468-77, without the prior knowledge and approval of the translator. These English-language versions retain the subheading titles found in the *Lettre Internationale* version.]

logon didonai—accounting for something and giving a reason for it—which is the presupposition for both philosophy and politics.

Now, *this* is a fundamental human posture—and, at the outset, it is in no way universally given. It implies that there is no extrahuman authority responsible, in the last instance, for what occurs in history, that there is no true cause or author of history. In other words, it means that history is not made by God or by *phusis* or by “laws” of any kind. It is because they did not believe in such extrahistorical determinations (besides the ultimate limit of *Anankē*) that the Greeks were able to create democracy and philosophy.

We ourselves resume, reaffirm, and will to prolong this creation. We are and will to be in a tradition of radical criticism, which also implies both responsibility (we cannot put the blame on an omnipotent God, etc.) and self-limitation (we cannot invoke any extrahistorical norm for our conduct, which nevertheless must be provided with norms). As a result, we situate ourselves as critical actors in relation to what is, what could and should be, and even what has been. We can contribute to the character of “what is” so that it may be otherwise. We cannot change what has been, but we can change how we gaze upon it—and this gazing is an essential ingredient of our present attitudes (even if it is most often done unconsciously). In particular, we do not grant, in a first approximation, any philosophical privilege to historical reality, past or present. Past and present are nothing other than masses of brute facts (or empirical materials) except insofar as they have been critically reapproved by us. Since we are downstream from this past and since it therefore has been able to enter into the presuppositions of what we think and what we are, we may say, as a second approximation, that this past acquires a sort of transcendental importance, for our

knowledge and criticism of it form a part of our self-reflective activity. And this is so not only because it clearly shows the relativity of the present, through our knowledge of other epochs, but also because it allows us to glimpse the relativity of effectively actual history, through reflection upon other histories that were effectively possible, even if they have not been realized.

Second, the term *intellectual*. I have never liked it or accepted it, for reasons that are at once aesthetic—the miserable and defensive arrogance implied therein—and logical: Who is not intellectual? Without entering into questions of basic biophysiology, let us observe that if one intends by the term *intellectual* someone who works almost exclusively with his head and nearly not at all with his hands, one leaves out people whom one would clearly want to include (sculptors and other categories of artists), and one includes people who certainly were not intended thereby (computer specialists, bankers and brokers, etc.).

It is unclear why a talented Egyptologist or mathematician who wanted to know nothing outside their respective disciplines would particularly interest us here. From this remark one might conclude that, for purposes of the present discussion, we ought to include all those who, irrespective of their profession, try to go beyond their sphere of specialization and actively interest themselves in what is going on in society. But this is, and ought to be, the very definition of the democratic citizen, irrespective of his occupation. (And let us note that this is the exact opposite of Plato's definition of justice: minding one's own business and not getting mixed up in everyone else's—which is not at all surprising, since one of Plato's aims is to show that democratic societies are unjust.)

I will not try to respond to this question here. My

remarks are aimed at those who, by their use of speech and through their explicit formulation of general ideas, have been able or are now able to attempt to have an influence on how their society evolves and on the course of history. The list is immense, and the questions raised by their words and deeds are endless. Therefore, I will also confine myself to a brief discussion of three points.

The first concerns two different kinds of relationship between the thinker and the political community, as exemplified in the radical opposition between Socrates, the philosopher in the city, and Plato, the philosopher who claims to be above the city. The second relates to a tendency that began to take hold of philosophers during a certain phase of history—namely, the tendency to rationalize the real, that is, to legitimate it. The era that is just now coming to a close has witnessed some particularly grievous instances of this tendency, with the fellow travelers of Stalinism, of course, but also, in an “empirically” different but philosophically equivalent fashion, with Heidegger and Nazism. I will conclude on a third point: the question raised by the relationship between, on the one hand, the criticism and the vision of the philosopher-citizen and, on the other, the fact that, from the standpoint of a project of autonomy and democracy, the great majority of men and women living in society are the source of creation, the principal bearers of the instituting imaginary, and that they should become the active subjects of an explicit politics.

Socrates and Plato

In Greece, the philosopher was, during a long initial period, just as much a citizen as a philosopher. It is for this reason too that he was sometimes called upon to “give laws,”

either to his city or to another one. Solon offers the most celebrated example of this role played by the philosopher-citizen. But still in 443 BCE, when the Athenians established in Italy a pan-Hellenic colony called Thurioi, it was Protagoras whom they asked to establish a set of laws.

The last in this line—the last great one, at any rate—is Socrates. Socrates is a philosopher, but he is also a citizen. He discusses matters with all his fellow citizens in the agora. He has a family and children. He takes part in three military expeditions. He takes up the supreme magistracy, and he is the epistates of the prytaneis (president of the Republic for a day) at perhaps the most tragic moment in the history of the Athenian democracy: the day of the trial of the victorious generals of the battle of Arginusae, when, as president of the people's assembly, he braves the furious crowd and refuses to initiate illegal proceedings against these generals. Similarly, a few years later he will refuse to obey the order of the Thirty Tyrants to arrest a citizen illegally.

His trial and conviction are a tragedy in the proper sense of the term. It would be inane to search for the innocent and the guilty here. Certainly the *dēmos* of 399 BCE is no longer that of the sixth or the fifth centuries, and certainly too, the city could have continued to accept Socrates as it had accepted him for decades. But we must also understand that Socrates' practices transgress the limit of what, strictly speaking, a democracy can tolerate.

Democracy is the regime founded explicitly upon *doxa*, opinion, the confrontation of opinions, the formation of a common opinion. The refutation of another's opinions is more than permitted and legitimate there; it is the very breath of public life. But Socrates does not limit himself to showing that this or that *doxa* is erroneous, nor does he offer a *doxa* of his own in its stead. He shows that all *doxae* are erroneous,

and still more, that those who defend these *doxae* do not know what they are talking about. Now, no life in society, and no political regime—democracy least of all—can continue to exist based upon the hypothesis that all its participants live in a world of incoherent mirages—which is precisely what Socrates is constantly demonstrating.

The city certainly should have accepted even this; it had done so for a long time, with Socrates as well as with others. Yet Socrates himself knew perfectly well that sooner or later he would have to account for his practices. He did not need anyone to prepare his apology, he said, because he had spent his life reflecting upon the apology he would offer, were he ever accused. And Socrates not only accepts the judgment of the tribunal made up of his fellow citizens; his speech in the *Crito*, which is so often taken as a moralizing and edifying harangue, is a magnificent development of the fundamental Greek idea that the individual is formed by the city: *polis andra didaskei*, it is the city that educates the man, as Simonides wrote.¹ Socrates knows that he was brought up by Athens and that he could not have been so brought up anywhere else.

It is hard to think of a disciple who has, in practice, betrayed the spirit of his master more than Plato. Plato withdraws from the city, and it is at its gates that he establishes a school for his chosen disciples. One knows of no military campaign in which he would have participated. One knows not of a family he would have reared. He furnishes to the city that raised him and made him what he is none of those things that every citizen owes it: neither military service nor children nor acceptance of public responsibilities. He

¹T/E: Simonides, quoted in Plutarch *Moralia* 784b = Bergk, *Poet. Lyr. Graec.*, vol. 3, p. 418, no. 67 (109).

calumniates Athens to the most extreme degree, and, thanks to his immense genius as a stage director, a rhetorician, a Sophist, and a demagogue, he will succeed in imposing, for centuries to come, an image of the politicians of Athens—Themistocles and Pericles—as demagogues, of its thinkers as “Sophists” (in the sense imposed by him), its poets as corruptors of the city, and its people as a vile herd given over to their passions and illusions. He knowingly falsifies history—and in this domain he is the first inventor of Stalinist methods. If one knew the history of Athens only through Plato (from the third book of the *Laws*), one would know nothing of the battle of Salamis, the victory of Themistocles and of that despicable *dēmos* of oarsmen.²

What he wants to do is to establish a city removed from time and history, governed not by its own people but by “philosophers.” He is also, however—contrary to all of previous Greek experience, in which the philosophers have shown an exemplary *phronēsis*, a wisdom in their actions—the first to display the basic ineptitude that has, since then, so often characterized philosophers and intellectuals when faced with political reality. He wants to be the counselor to the prince, in fact a tyrant—this has never stopped since—and he fails miserably because he, the subtle psychologist and admirable portraitist, cannot tell apples from oranges and takes Dionysius the Younger, tyrant of Syracuse, for a potential philosopher-king—as, twenty-three centuries later, Heidegger will take Hitler and Nazism for the incarnations of the spirit [*esprit*] of the German people and of historical resistance against the reign of technics. It is Plato who inaugurates the era of philosophers who wriggle out of

²Pierre Vidal-Naquet has reminded me of this last point during friendly conversations.

the city, but who, as possessors of the truth, want to dictate to it laws while completely failing to recognize the people's instituting creativity and, at the same time being politically impotent, have as their supreme ambition to become counselors to the prince.

The Adoration of the *Fait Accompli*

Nevertheless, Plato is not at the source of this other deplorable aspect of the activity of intellectuals when confronted with history: the rationalization of the real, that is to say, in fact, the legitimation of the powers-that-be. And for good reason. In Greece, at least, adoration of the *fait accompli* is unknown and impossible as an attitude of the mind [*esprit*]. We must move ahead to the Stoics to begin to find its first seeds. Though it is impossible for us to discuss its origins here and now, it is evident that, after an enormous detour, this attitude harks back to the archaic and traditional phases of human history, when the institutions extant at each time were considered sacred, and accomplishes the amazing feat of putting philosophy, born as an integral part of calling the established order into question, into the service of the conservation of this very order.

However, it is impossible not to see that Christianity, from its very inception, was the explicit creator of the spiritual, affective, and existential postures that will, for eighteen centuries and more, provide a basis for the sanctification of the powers-that-be. The dictum, "Render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's," can only be interpreted along with the statement that "There is no power

but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.”³ The true Christian kingdom is not of this world and, moreover, the history of this world, by becoming the history of Salvation, is immediately sanctified in its existence and in its “direction,” that is to say, in its essential “sense.”⁴ Exploiting for its own ends the Greek philosophical *instrumentarium*, Christianity will furnish, for fifteen centuries, the conditions required for acceptance of the “real,” such as it is—up to Descartes’s “Better to change oneself than the order of the world”⁵ and, obviously, to the literal apotheosis of reality in the Hegelian system (“All that is real is rational”). Despite appearances, it is this same universe—an essentially theological, apolitical, acritical universe—to which belong both Nietzsche, when he proclaims the “innocence of becoming,” and Heidegger, when he presents history as *Ereignis* and *Geschick*, advent of Being and donation/destination of and through the latter.

Let us be done with this ecclesiastical, academic, and literary “obsequiousness.” Let us finally speak of syphilis in this family, half of whose members are clearly suffering in general paralysis. We should take by the ear the theologian, the Hegelian, the Nietzschean, the Heideggerian, bring them to Kolyma in Siberia, to Auschwitz, into a Russian psychiatric hospital, into the torture chambers of the Argentine police,

³T/E: Romans 13.1.

⁴T/E: In French, the word *sens* means both “direction” and “meaning” or “sense.”

⁵T/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.”

and require that they explain, on the spot and without subterfuges, the meaning of the expressions “There is no power but of God,” “All that is real is rational,” “the innocence of becoming,” or “releasement toward things.”⁶

But we encounter the most extraordinary *mélange* when the intellectual, in a supreme *tour de force*, succeeds in tying the critique of reality to the adoration of force and power. This *tour de force* becomes elementary once a “revolutionary power” arises somewhere or other. Then begins the golden age of fellow travelers, who were able to afford the luxury of an apparently intransigent opposition to a part of reality—reality “at home”—by paying for it with the glorification of another part of this same reality—over there, elsewhere, in Russia, in China, in Cuba, in Algeria, in Vietnam, or, if worse came to worst, in Albania. Rare are those among the great names in the Western intelligentsia who have not, at some moment between 1920 and 1970, made this “sacrifice of conscience,” sometimes (the least often) in

⁶[T/E: I have followed the actual English translation of the German phrase, “Die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen.” (Martin Heidegger, “Memorial Address,” in *Discourse on Thinking*, tr. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund [New York: Harper and Row, 1966], p. 54. The original German title of this book is *Gelassenheit*.) The French translation reads: *l’âme égale en présence des choses*, which could be translated as “the soul unruffled in the presence of things.”] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52, where Heidegger says, “No single man, no group of men, ...no merely human organization [?!] is up to the task of taking in hand the governance of our atomic age” [T/E: translation slightly altered to accommodate both French and English translations]. And: “We are to do nothing but wait” (“Conversation on a Country Path,” *ibid.*, p. 62). [T/E: This “Conversation” between a “scientist,” a “scholar,” and a “teacher” was noted down in writing by Heidegger circa 1944-1945, i.e., at the end of the Nazi regime in Germany. The statement quoted here is made by the “teacher” who expounds upon the meaning of “releasement.”]

the most infantile kind of credulity, other times (most often) with the most paltry sort of trickery. Sartre, stating in a menacing tone: "You cannot discuss what Stalin is doing, since he alone has the information that explains his motives," will remain, no doubt, the most instructive specimen of the intellectual's tendency to make himself look ridiculous.

Faced with this debauchery of pious perversity and of fraudulent use of reason, we must forcefully state the following, deeply buried evident truth: *reality possesses no privilege*, neither philosophical nor normative; the past has no more value than the present, and the latter exists not as model but as material. The past history of the world is in no way sanctified—and it might be rather that it is damned, for it has shunted aside other, effectively possible histories. These latter have as much importance for the mind [*esprit*]*—and perhaps more value for our practical attitudes—than "real" history.* Our daily paper does not contain, as Hegel believed, "our morning realist prayer" but rather our daily surrealist farce. More than ever, perhaps, this is so today. If something should appear in the present year, it should create in us, initially and until there is proof to the contrary, the strong presumption that it incarnates stupidity, ugliness, maleficence, and vulgarity.

The Citizen

Certainly, to restore, to restitute, to reinstitute an authentic task for the intellectual in history is, first and foremost, to restore, restitute, and reinstitute his critical function. Because history is always both creation and destruction at once, and because creation (like destruction) concerns the sublime as much as the monstrous, elucidation and criticism are, more than anybody else's, in the custody of those who, by occupation and by position, can place

themselves at a distance from the everyday and from the real. That is to say, in the custody of the intellectual.

At a distance, too, and as far as it is possible, from oneself. This takes the form not only of “objectivity” but also of an ongoing effort to go beyond one’s specialty, to remain concerned by all that matters to men and women.

Such attitudes would certainly tend to separate the subject from the great mass of his contemporaries. But there is separation and there is separation. We will not leave behind us the perversion of the intellectual’s role that has characterized it since Plato’s time, and again for the past seventy years, unless the intellectual genuinely becomes a *citizen* again. A citizen is not (not necessarily) a “party activist,” but someone who actively claims participation in public life and in the common affairs of the city on the same footing as everyone else.

Here, quite evidently, appears an antinomy that has no theoretical solution; only *phronēsis*, effective wisdom, can permit one to surmount it. The intellectual should want to be a citizen like the others; she also wants to be spokesperson, *de jure*, for universality and objectivity. She can abide in this space only by recognizing the *limits* of that which her supposed objectivity and universality permit of her; she should recognize, and not just through lip service, that what she is trying to get people to listen to is still a *doxa*, an opinion, not an *epistēmē*, a science. Above all, she must recognize that history is the domain in which there unfolds the creativity of all people, both men and women, the learned and the illiterate, a humanity in which she is only one atom.

Nor should this become a pretext for swallowing uncritically the decisions of the majority, for bowing down before force because it is the force of numbers. To be a democrat and to be able, if this be one’s judgment, to say to

the people, “You are mistaken,” this too is what should be required of her. Socrates was able to do it during the Arginusae trial. After the fact, the case seems clear cut, and Socrates was able to rely upon a rule in formal law. Things are often much hazier. Here again, only wisdom, *phronēsis*, and *taste*, can permit one to separate the recognition of people’s creativity from blind adoration of “the power of facts.” And be not surprised to find the word *taste* at the end of these remarks. One had only to read five lines of Stalin to understand that the revolution could not be *that*.

Power, Politics, Autonomy*

The Social-Historical, the Psyche, the Individual

The radical imaginary deploys itself as society and as history: as the social-historical. This it does, and it can only do, in and through the two dimensions of the *instituting* and the *instituted*.¹ The *institution* is an originary creation of the social-historical field—of the collective-

*First published in French as “Pouvoir, politique, autonomie,” in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 93 (January 1988). Reprinted in [MM](#), 113-39 (137-71 of the 2000 reprint). My English-language translation first appeared in *Zwischenbetrachtungen Im Prozess der Aufklärung. Jürgen Habermas zum 60. Geburtstag*, Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe, Albrecht Wellmer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989). [T/E: Reprint of this abridged version published in *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer, eds. (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 269-97. I have reedited Castoriadis’s typescript English translation, restoring footnotes omitted from the published English versions and translating passages left out of the abridged typescript and published versions while consulting a hand-correction version of the *Zwischenbetrachtungen* book Castoriadis gave to me. This new version was first published in [PPA](#), 143-74. In many passages, it is to be noted, Castoriadis’s 1989 English-language translation is more expansive than the 1988 version published in French and reprinted in [MM](#). Retained, too, are the subheading titles found in the English-language version but absent from the earlier French version. Also, Castoriadis seemed to be experimenting in his 1989 translation with nonsexist pronouns (him/her, himself/herself, his/her), but in an inconsistent way. We have retained the neutral pronoun forms (it, itself, its) he uses elsewhere in his translation to designate either the psyche or the individual.]

¹Cornelius Castoriadis, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 36-40 (April 1964-June 1965), since reprinted as the first part of [IIS](#). Cited here as *MRT* for the first part and [IIS](#) for the second part. See in particular *MRT*, 111-14 as well as [IIS](#), *passim*.

anonymous—transcending, as form (*eidos*), any possible “production” of individuals or of subjectivity. The individual, and individuals, is an institution, both once and for all and different in each different society. It is the pole of regulated social imputation and allocation, without which society is impossible.² Subjectivity, as agent of reflection and deliberation (as thought and will), is a social-historical *project*; its origins, repeated twice with different modalities in Greece and in Western Europe, can be dated and located.³ The nucleus of both, of the individual and of subjectivity, is the psyche or psychical monad, which is irreducible to the social-historical but susceptible to almost limitless shaping by it, on condition that the institution satisfies certain minimal requirements of the psyche. Chief among these is that the institution must offer to the psyche *meaning for its waking life*. This is done by inducing and forcing the singular human being, during a period of schooling that starts with birth and that is reinforced till death, to invest (cathect) and make meaningful for herself the emerged parts of the magma of social imaginary significations instituted each time by society, and which hold society together.⁴

Manifestly, the social-historical immensely transcends any “intersubjectivity.” This term is the fig leaf used to conceal the nudity of inherited thought and its inability to confront the question of the social-historical. It fails in this task. Society is irreducible to “intersubjectivity”—or to any

²[IIS](#), ch. 6.

³Cornelius Castoriadis, “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), now below in the present volume.

⁴[IIS](#), ch. 6 and *passim*; also, “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), now in [CL2](#).

sort of common action by individuals. Society is not a huge accumulation of face-to-face situations. Only already socialized individuals can enter into face-to-face, or back-to-back, situations. No conceivable “cooperation,” or “communicative action” of individuals could ever create language, for instance. Language, though leaning on biological properties of the human being, is not a biological datum either, it is a fundamental institution. And an assembly of unsocialized human beings, acting solely according to their deep psychical drives, would be unimaginably more Boschian than any ward for the mentally disturbed in an old psychiatric asylum. Society, as *always already instituted*, is self-creation and capacity for self-alteration. It is the work of the radical imaginary as instituting, which brings itself into being as instituted society and as a given, and each time specified, social imaginary.

The individual as such is not, however, “contingent” in relation to society. Society can exist concretely only through the fragmentary and complementary incarnation and incorporation of its institution and its imaginary significations in the living, talking, and acting individuals of that society. Athenian society is, in a sense, nothing but the Athenians; without them, it is only the remnants of a transformed landscape, debris of marble and vases, indecipherable inscriptions, worn statues fished out some place in the Mediterranean. But the Athenians are Athenians only by means of the *nomos* of the *polis*. In this relationship between an instituted society—which infinitely transcends the totality of the individuals that “compose” it, but which can actually exist only by being “realized” in the individuals it manufactures—on the one hand, and these individuals, on the other hand, we witness an original, unprecedented type of relationship that cannot be thought under the categories of the

whole and its parts, the set and its elements, the universal and the particular, and so on. In and through its own creation, society creates the individual as such and the individuals in and through which alone it can actually exist. But society is not a property of composition; neither is it a whole containing something more than and different from its parts, if only because these “parts” are made to be, and to be thus and not otherwise, by this “whole” that, nevertheless, can be only in and through its “parts.” This type of relationship, which has no analogy elsewhere, has to be reflected upon for itself, as principle and model of itself.⁵

In this respect, one can never be too careful. This state of affairs has nothing to do with “systems theory” or with “self-organization,” “order from noise,” and so on. And it would be erroneous to say, as some do, that society produces individuals, which in turn produce society. Society is the work of the *instituting* imaginary. The individuals are made by the *instituted* society, at the same time as they make and remake it; in a sense, they *are* that society. The two mutually irreducible poles are the radical instituting imaginary—the field of social-historical creation—on the one hand, the singular psyche, on the other. Starting with the psyche, using it, as it were, as a material, the instituted society each time makes the individuals—which, as such, can henceforth only make the society that has made them. It is only insofar as the radical imagination of the psyche seeps through the successive layers of the social armor, which cover and penetrate it up to an unfathomable limit-point, and which constitute the individual, that the singular human being can have, in return, an independent action on society. Let me note, in anticipation of what follows, that such an action is

⁵MRT; and [IIS](#), ch. 4.

extremely rare and, at any rate, imperceptible wherever *instituted heteronomy*⁶ prevails—that is, in fact, in almost all known societies. In this case, apart from the bundle of predefined social roles, the only *ascertainable* ways in which the singular psyche can manifest itself are transgression and pathology. Things are different in the rare case of societies in which the bursting of complete heteronomy makes a true *individuation of the individual* possible and thus allows the radical imagination of the singular psyche to find or create the social means of publicly expressing itself in an original manner and to contribute perceptibly to the self-alteration of the social world. A third aspect of this relation appears during manifest and marked epochs of social-historical alteration when society and individuals alter themselves together, those alterations entailing each other in this case.

Validity of Institutions and Primordial Power

The institution, and the imaginary significations borne by it and animating it, create a world. This is the world of the particular society considered: it is established in and through the articulation it performs between a “natural” and “supranatural”—more generally, an “extrasocial”—world and a “human” world in a narrow sense. This articulation can take on an extraordinary variety of forms: from an imaginary virtual fusion of the two to their utmost separation, from the submission of society to the cosmic order, or to God, to the utmost frenzy of control of and domination over nature. In all cases, “nature” and the “supranatural” are instituted in their meaning as such and in the innumerable articulations of this

⁶*MRT*, 108-10; and “Institution of Society and Religion.”

meaning. And these articulations maintain a complex network of relations with the articulations of society itself as they are posited each time by its institution.⁷

Society creates itself as form (*eidos*) and each time as a singular form. (To be sure, influences, historical transmissions, continuities, similarities, and so on are always there. They are tremendous, and so are the questions they raise. But they do not modify in the least the essence of the situation, and their discussion need not detain us here.) In creating itself, society deploys itself in and through a multiplicity of particular organizing and organized forms. It deploys itself as creation of its own space and its own time (of its own spatiality and temporality), populated by innumerable objects and entities of “natural,” “supranatural,” and “human” character, all of them categorized and brought into relations posited each time by the given society. This work always leans on immanent properties of the being-thus of *the* world. But these properties are recreated, isolated, chosen, filtered, brought into relation, and, above all, *endowed with meaning* by the institution and the imaginary significations of the given society.⁸

Trivialities apart, a general discourse about these articulations is almost impossible. They are, each time, the work of the given society and permeated by its imaginary significations. In its “materiality,” or “concreteness,” this or that institution as found in two different societies may appear identical or highly similar; however, this apparent material identity is each time *immersed* in a different magma of different significations, and this suffices to transform such an

⁷*MRT*, 149-50; and *IIS*, ch. 5.

⁸*Ibid.*

apparent identity into an effectively actual alterity from the social-historical point of view (for example, writing, with the same alphabet, in Athens, 450 BCE, and in Constantinople, 750 CE). Universals stretching across the boundaries of different societies—such as language, the production of material life, the regulation of sexual life and reproduction, norms and values, etc.—certainly do exist; by no means, however, can their existence found a “theory” of society and history with substantive content. And, within these “formal” universals, more specific universals also exist (e.g., concerning language and certain phonological laws). But, like writing with the same alphabet, they work only at the border of the being of society, which deploys itself as meaning and signification. As soon as one considers “grammatical” or “syntactic” universals, much more redoubtable questions arise. For instance, Noam Chomsky’s enterprise must face this impossible dilemma: either grammatical (syntactical) forms are totally indifferent as to meaning—a statement whose absurdity any translator would readily acknowledge—or they contain and carry with them potentially,⁹ God knows how, all the significations that will ever appear in history—which entails a metaphysics of history both overlaid and naive. To say that in each and every language it must be possible to express the idea “John gave an apple to Mary” is certainly true but also regrettably meager.

There is, however, one universal we can “deduce,” *once we know what society is and what the psyche is*. It concerns the effective validity (*Geltung*), the positive validity (in the sense of “positive law”) of the immense instituted

⁹Instead of “potentially” here, the French has an italicized phrase that, translated into English, reads: “*since the advent of the first human language*.”

edifice of society. How is it possible for the institution and for institutions (language, the definition of “reality” and “truth,” ways of doing things, work, sexual regulation, licit/illicit, calls to die for the tribe or the nation which are almost always greeted with enthusiasm, and so on) to compel recognition and acceptance on the part of the psyche, which in its essence can only ignore all this hodgepodge and would, if ever it perceived it, find it highly inimical and repugnant? There are two sides to this question: the psychical and the social.

From the psychical point of view, the social fabrication of the individual is the historical process by means of which the psyche is coerced (smoothly or brutally; in fact, the process always entails violence against the proper nature of the psyche) into giving up its initial objects and its initial world (this renunciation is never total, but almost always sufficient to fulfill social requirements) and into investing (cathecting) socially instituted objects, rules, and the world. This is the true meaning of the process of sublimation.¹⁰ The minimal requirement for this process to unfold is that the institution provide the psyche with *meaning*—another type of meaning than the protomeaning of the psychical monad. The social individual is thus constituted by means of the internalization of the world and the imaginary significations created by society; it internalizes explicitly vast fragments of this world, it internalizes implicitly its virtual totality by virtue of the interminable reciprocal referrals that link, magmatically, each fragment of this social world to the rest of it.

The social side of this process concerns the whole complex of institutions in which the human being is steeped

¹⁰“Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968), in [CLI](#); see 46-56, and also [IIS](#), 311-20.

as soon as it is born and, first of all, the Other—generally, but not inevitably, the mother—who, already socialized in a determinate manner, takes care of the newborn and speaks a determinate language. More abstractly speaking, there is a “part” of almost all institutions that aims at the nurturing, the rearing, the education of the newcomers—what the Greeks called *paideia*: family, age groups, rites, school, customs, laws, and so on.

The effective validity of the institutions is thus ensured, first and foremost, by the very process that makes a social individual out of the little screaming monster. The latter can become an individual only if it internalizes the institutions of its society.

If we define *power* as the capacity for a personal or impersonal instance (*Inстанz*) to bring someone to do (or to abstain from doing) that which, left to himself, he would not necessarily have done (or would possibly have done), it is immediately obvious that the greatest conceivable power lies in the possibility of preforming someone in such a way that, *of his own accord*, he does what one wants him to do, without any need for domination (*Herrschaft*) or of *explicit power* (*Macht/Gewalt*) to bring him to...(do or abstain from doing something). Equally obvious, a being subject to such shaping will present at the same time the appearances of the fullest possible spontaneity, and the reality of a total heteronomy. Compared to this absolute power, any explicit power and any form of domination can be seen as deficient, for they betray the markings of an irreparable failure. (Henceforth, I will speak of “*explicit power*”; the term “domination” is better used for the specific social-historical situations in which an *asymmetric and antagonistic division* of the social body is instituted.)

Thus, before any explicit power and, even more,

before any “domination,” the institution of society wields over the individuals it produces a *radical ground-power*. This ground-power, or primordial power, as manifestation of the instituting power of the radical imaginary, is not locatable. It is never the power of an individual or of a nameable instance. It is carried out by the instituted society, but in the background stands the instituting society. And “once this institution is set in place, the social as instituting slips away, puts itself at a distance, is already somewhere else.”¹¹ In turn, the instituting society, however radical its creation may be, always works by starting from something already instituted and on the basis of what is already there. It is always historical—save for an inaccessible point of origin. It is always, and to an unmeasurable degree, also recovery of the given, and therefore burdened with an inheritance, even if under *beneficium inventorii*, the limits of which cannot be fixed either. We will discuss later the implications of this fundamental situation for the project of autonomy and for the idea of *effective* human freedom. Before that, however, we must come to understand that, to begin with, the institution of society wields a radical power over the individuals making it up, and that this power itself is grounded upon the instituting power of the radical imaginary and of the whole preceding history, which finds, each time, in the institution as it is posited its transient outcome. Ultimately, therefore, we are dealing with the power of the social-historical field itself, the power of *outis*, of Nobody.¹²

¹¹*MRT*, 112; [IIS](#), 369-73.

¹²“Epilegomena,” in [CLI](#), 56.

Limits of the Instituting Ground-Power

Considered in itself, therefore, the instituting ground-power and its realization by the institution should be absolute and should shape the individuals in such a fashion that they are bound to reproduce eternally the regime that has produced them. And this is, almost always, almost everywhere, manifestly the strict intention (or finality) of existing institutions. If this finality were strictly fulfilled, there would be no history. We know, however, that this is not true. Instituted society never succeeds in wielding its ground-power in an absolute fashion. The most it can attain—as we see in primitive societies and, more generally, in the whole class of what we must call traditional societies—is the instauration of a temporality of apparently essential repetition, beneath which its insurmountable historicity continues to work imperceptibly and over very long periods.¹³ Seen as absolute and total, the ground-power of the instituted society and of tradition is therefore, sooner or later, bound to fail. This is a sheer fact, which we are compelled to recognize: *there is* history, *there is* a plurality of essentially different societies. Nevertheless, we can try to elucidate it.

For this elucidation, four factors have to be taken into account.

1. Society creates its world; it invests it with meaning; it provides itself with a store of significations designed in advance to deal with whatever may occur. The magma of the socially instituted imaginary significations resorbs, potentially, whatever may

¹³ [IIS](#), 185-86 and 202-15.

present itself, and it could not, in principle, be taken unawares or find itself helpless. In this respect, the role of religion and the essential function it fulfills for the *closure of meaning* have always been central.¹⁴ (For instance, the Holocaust becomes a proof of the singularity and the divine election of the Jewish people.) The “world in itself” bears within itself an ensemblistic-identitary organization that is sufficiently stable and “systematic” in its first layer to allow humans to live socially and at the same time sufficiently lacunar and incomplete to bear an indefinite number of social-historical creations of signification. *Both* aspects relate to ontological dimensions of the world in itself, which no transcendental subjectivity, no language, no pragmatics of communication could ever bring into existence.¹⁵ But also the world *qua* “presocial world”—a limit for any thought—though in itself signifying nothing, is always there as inexhaustible provision of alterity and as the always-imminent risk of laceration of the web of significations with which society has lined it. The *a-meaning* of the world is always a possible threat for the meaning of society. Thus the ever-present risk that the social edifice of significations will totter.

2. Society fabricates individuals with the psyche as raw material. I do not know which of the two is more

¹⁴*MRT*, 130-31, 139-40, 143-44, and 147-48; *IIS*, 361-62; and “Institution of Society and Religion.”

¹⁵*IIS*, ch. 5; also, “Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1986), in *CL2*.

amazing: the almost total plasticity of the psyche with respect to the social formation that shapes it or its invincible capacity to preserve its monadic core and its radical imagination and to thwart, at least partially, the incessant schooling imposed upon it. However rigid or watertight the type of individual into which it has been transformed, the irreducible being proper to the singular psyche always manifests itself in the form of dreams, “psychical” illnesses, transgressions, contentions, and querulent expressions, but also in the form of singular contributions to the more than slow alteration of our social modes of making/doing and representing. (In traditional societies, these singular contributions are rarely, if ever, locatable.)

3. Society is but exceptionally—or never—unique or isolated. *It just so happens (sumbainei)* that *there is* an indefinite plurality of human societies as well as synchronic coexistence and contact among them. The institution and the significations of the others are always a deadly threat to our own; what is sacred for us is for them abominable, what is meaning for us is for them the very figure of nonsense.¹⁶
4. Finally, and principally, society can never escape itself. The instituted society is always subject to the subterranean pressure of instituting society. Beneath the established social imaginary, the flow of the radical imaginary continues steadily. Indeed, this primordial and raw fact of the radical imaginary allows us not to “solve,” but to phrase differently, the question implied by our previous expressions, *it just*

¹⁶Cornelius Castoriadis, “Reflections on Racism” (1987), above in the present volume.

so happens, and there is. That there is an essential plurality, synchronic and diachronic, of societies means just that: there is an instituting imaginary.

All these factors threaten society's stability and self-perpetuation. And against all of them, the institution of society establishes in advance, and contains, defenses and protections. Principal among these is the virtual omnipotence, the capacity of universal covering, of its magma of significations. Any irruption of the raw world becomes for it a *sign of* something, is interpreted away and thereby exorcized. Dreams, illnesses, transgressions, and deviance are also explained away. Alien societies and people are posited as strange, savage, impious. The enemy against which the defenses of society are feeblest is its own instituting imaginary, its own creativity. This is also why it is against this danger that the strongest protection has been set up—strongest, that is, as long as it lasts, and for all we know it has lasted at least 100,000 years. It is the denial and the covering up of the instituting dimension of society through the imputation of the origin of the institution and of its social significations to an extrasocial source.¹⁷ "Extrasocial" here means external to the effectively actual, living society: gods or God, but also founding heroes or ancestors who are continually reincarnated in the newborn humans; in the latter case, society posits itself as literally *possessed* by another "itself," one infinitely close and infinitely distant. In more agitated historical worlds, supplementary lines of defense are established. The denial of the alteration of society, or the covering up of the new by means of its attribution to mythical origins, may become impossible. In such cases, the new can

¹⁷*MRT*, 131; [IIS](#), 213-15 and 371-73.

be subjected to a fictitious but nevertheless efficient reduction with the help of “commentary” on and “interpretation” of the tradition. This is, typically, the case of the *Weltreligionen*, in particular of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worlds.

Explicit Power and the Political Dimension of the Institution of Society

All these defenses can fail, and, in a sense, they always eventually fail. Crimes, violent insuperable contentions, natural calamities destroying the functionality of existing institutions, wars are always there. This fact is one of the roots of *explicit power*. There always has been, and there always will be, a dimension of the social institution in charge of this essential function: to reestablish order, to ensure the life and the operation of society against whatever, actually or potentially, endangers them.

There is another, perhaps even more important, root of explicit power. The social institution, and the magma of imaginary significations it embodies, are much more than a heap of representations (or of “ideas”). Society institutes itself in and through the three inseparable dimensions of representation, affect, and intention. The “representational” (not necessarily representable and expressible) part of the magma of social imaginary significations is the least difficult to approach. But this approach would remain critically inadequate (as is, indeed, the case in almost all philosophies and theories of history and even in historiography) if, aiming only at a history and a hermeneutics of “representations” and “ideas,” it ignored the *magma of affects* proper to each society—its *Stimmung*, its way of living itself and of living the world and life itself—or if it ignored the *intentional vectors* that weave together the institution and the life of

society, what one may call its proper and characteristic *push and drive*, which are never reducible to its simple conservation.¹⁸ It is by means of this push and drive that the past/present of society is always inhabited by a future that is, perpetually, *to be made* and *to be done*. It is this push and drive that invest with meaning the biggest unknown of all: that which is not yet but will be, the future, by giving to those who are living the means to participate in the preservation or the constitution of a world that perpetuates the established meaning. It is also because of this push and drive that the innumerable plurality of social activities always transcends the simple biological “preservation” of the species and is, at the same time, subject to a hierarchization.

This unavoidable dimension of push and drive toward that which is to be made and done introduces another type of “disorder” within the social order. Even within the most rigid and repetitive setup, the facts of ignorance and uncertainty as to the future forbid a complete prior codification of *decisions*. *Explicit power* is thus also rooted in the necessity to decide what is and is not to be done with respect to the more or less explicit ends that are the objects of the push and drive of the society considered.

Therefore, what we call “legislative” and “executive” power can be buried in the institution as custom and internalization of supposedly intangible norms. “Judicial” power and “governmental” power, however, must be explicitly present, under whatever form, as soon as there is society. The question of *nomos* (and of its, so to speak, “mechanical” implementation, the so-called executive power) may be covered up by a society. But this cannot be done as regards *dikē*—the judiciary—and *telos*—the governmental.

¹⁸ *IIS*, *passim*.

Whatever its explicit articulation, explicit power can never, therefore, be thought exclusively in terms of “friend-foe” (Carl Schmitt). Neither can it (nor can domination) be reduced to the “monopoly of legitimate violence.”¹⁹ Beneath the monopoly of legitimate violence lies the monopoly of the legitimate word, and this is, in turn, ruled by the monopoly of the valid signification. The throne of the Lord of signification stands above the throne of the Lord of violence.²⁰ The voice of arms can begin to be heard only amid the crash of the collapsing edifice of institutions. And for violence to manifest itself effectively, the word—the injunctions of the existing power—has to keep its magic over the “groups of armed men” (Engels). The fourth company of the Pavlovsky Regiment, guards to His Majesty the Czar, and the Semenovskiy Regiment, were the strongest pillars of the throne, until those days of February 26 and 27, 1917, when they fraternized with the crowd and turned their guns against their own officers. The mightiest army in the world will not protect you if it is not loyal to you—and the ultimate foundation of its loyalty is its imaginary belief in your imaginary legitimacy.

There always is, thus, and there always will be, an *explicit power*, that is, unless a society were to succeed in transforming its subjects into automata that had completely internalized the instituted order and in constructing a temporality that took into account, in advance, all future time. Both aims are impossible to achieve, given what we know

¹⁹T/E: Max Weber’s idea of the State having a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” first appeared in his 1919 lecture “Politics as a Vocation.”

²⁰[*IIS*](#), 308-309.

about the psyche, the instituting imaginary, the world.

On Some Confusions: “The Political”

There is, thus, a dimension of the institution of society pertaining to *explicit power*, that is, to the existence of *instances capable of formulating explicitly sanctionable injunctions*. This dimension is to be called the dimension of “*the political*.” It matters little, at this level, whether the instances in question are embodied by the whole tribe, by the elders, by the warriors, by a chief, by the *dēmos*, by a bureaucratic apparatus, and so on.

We must try here to clear up three confusions.

The first is the identification of explicit power with the State. “Societies without the State” are by no means “societies without power.” Not only can we observe in these societies, as everywhere, the enormous ground-power of the established institution (which becomes that much the greater as explicit power is reduced), we also always find an explicit power of the collectivity (or of the males, the warriors, etc.) pertaining to *dikē* and *telos*—to jurisdiction and to decisions. Explicit power *is not* identical to the State. We have to restrict the term and the notion of State to a specific *eidos*, the historical creation of which can almost be dated and localized. The State is an instance separated from the collectivity and it is instituted in a way that it continuously ensures this separation. The State is, typically, what I call an *institution of the second order*, belonging to a specific class of societies.²¹

I would insist, moreover, that the term “State” be restricted to the cases where there is an institution of a *State*

²¹On this term, see [IIS](#), 371, and “The First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions” (1986), now in [CL6](#).

Apparatus, which entails a separate civilian, military, or priestly “bureaucracy,” even if it be rudimentary, that is, a hierarchal organization with a delimitation of regions of competence. This definition can cover the immense majority of known State-like organizations; there are of course some rare borderline cases, which can be left to the quibblings of those who forget that, in the social-historical domain, definitions are valid only *hōs epi to polu*, as Aristotle would say, only “for the most part and in most cases.”²² In this sense, the Greek democratic *polis* is not a “State,” since in it explicit power—the positing of *nomos*, *dikē*, and *telos*—belongs to the whole body of citizens. This explains also the difficulties encountered by a mind as powerful as Max Weber’s when faced with the democratic *polis*, difficulties rightly underlined and correctly commented upon in one of M. I. Finley’s last writings.²³ Hence the impossibility of grasping Athenian democracy by means of the ideal types of “traditional” or “rational” domination (remember that for Max Weber “rational domination” and “bureaucratic domination” are almost interchangeable terms), and his infelicitous attempts to present the Athenian “demagogues” as holders of charismatic power. Marxists and feminists would, no doubt, reply that the *dēmos* wielded power over slaves and women, and therefore “was the State.” Should one then say that in the South of the United States whites “were the State” *vis-à-vis* blacks until 1865? Or that French adult males “were the

²²T/E: This Aristotelian phrase is to be found at *Metaphysics* 6.2.1027a21 and *Posterior Analytics* 87b20.

²³M. I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), ch. 6: “Max Weber and the Greek City-State,” pp. 88-103, and Epilogue, pp. 106-108. See also my article, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in [CL2](#), 239-42.

State” *vis-à-vis* women until 1945? Or that today, everywhere, adults “are the State” *vis-à-vis* nonadults? Neither explicit power, nor domination need take the form of the State.

The second confusion involves mixing up *the political*, the dimension of explicit power, with the overall institution of society. As is well known, the term “the political” was introduced by Carl Schmitt (*Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1928) with a restricted meaning that, if we accept the foregoing, should be found wanting. We witness today an attempt in the opposite direction, an attempt to expand the meaning of the term until it resorbs the overall institution of society. The distinguishing of the political from other “social phenomena” would stem, it seems, from a positivist attitude. (Of course, what we are dealing with here are not “phenomena” but rather ineliminable dimensions of the social institution: language, work, sexual reproduction, the raising of new generations, religion, mores, “culture” in the narrow sense, etc.) In this attempt, “the political” is presented as that which generates the relations of humans among themselves and with the world, the representation of nature and time, the mutual positions of religion and power. This is, of course, exactly what I have defined since 1965 as the imaginary institution of society.²⁴ Personal tastes aside, the gains to be made by calling the overall institution of society “the political” are hard to see, but the damages are obvious. Either, in calling “the political” that which everybody would naturally call the institution of society, one merely attempts a change in vocabulary without substantive content, creating only confusion and violating the maxim *nomina non sunt praeter necessitatem multiplicanda*, or one attempts to preserve in this substitution the connotations linked with the

²⁴*MRT*, 115-64; and *IIS*, *passim*.

word “political” since its creation by the Greeks, that is, whatever pertains to explicit and at least partially conscious and reflective decisions concerning the fate of the collectivity. But then, through a strange reversal, language, economy, religion, representation of the world, family, and so on have to be said to depend upon political decisions in a way that would win the approval of Charles Maurras as well as of Pol Pot. “Everything is political” either means nothing, or it means: Everything ought to be political, ought to flow from an explicit decision of the Sovereign.

Politics

The root of the second confusion is perhaps to be found in a third one. One frequently hears it said nowadays: the Greeks invented (or “discovered”) the political.²⁵ One may credit the Greeks with many things—and, mostly, with things other than the ones they are usually credited with—but certainly not with the invention of the institution of society, or even of explicit power. The Greeks did not invent “the” political, in the sense of the dimension of explicit power always present in any society. They invented—or, better, created—politics, which is something entirely different. People sometimes argue about whether and to what extent politics existed before the Greeks. A vain argument, framed in vague terms, muddled thinking. Before the Greeks (and after them) one sees intrigues, plots, machinations, conspiracies, influence peddling, silent or open struggles over

²⁵The French translator of M. I. Finley’s *Politics in the Ancient World* was quite right not to give in to facile fashion, when she titled her translation *L’Invention de la politique*—“the invention of politics,” not “the invention of the political.”

explicit power. One observes an art of managing, or of “improving,” established power (fantastically developed in many places, e.g., in China). One can even observe explicit and deliberate changes in some institutions—or even, in rare cases, radical reinstitutions (“Moses,” or, certainly, Mohammed), but in these cases, the legislator, whether prophet or king, invokes an instituting power of divine origin, he produces or exhibits sacred books. Now, if the Greeks were able to create politics, democracy, and philosophy, it is also because they had neither sacred books nor prophets. They had poets, philosophers, legislators, and *politai*—citizens.

Politics, such as it was created by the Greeks, amounts to the explicit calling into question of the established institution of society. This presupposes²⁶ that at least important parts of this institution had nothing “sacred” or “natural” about them, but rather that they represented *nomos*. The democratic movement in the Greek cities took aim at the explicit power and tried to reinstitute it. As is known, in about half the *poleis* it failed (or did not succeed even in making a real start). Despite this, its emergence acted upon the totality of the *poleis*, since even the oligarchical or tyrannical regimes, in being confronted with it, had to define themselves as such and therefore *appear such as they were*. But the democratic movement is not confined to the struggle around explicit power, it aims potentially at the overall reinstitution of society, and this is materialized through the creation of philosophy. Greek thought is not a commentary on or an interpretation of sacred texts, it amounts *ipso facto* to the calling into question of the most important dimension of the

²⁶T/E: Castoriadis, perhaps inadvertently, omits here from the English a phrase, set off by commas, that may be translated from the French as: “and that was clearly affirmed in the fifth century BCE.”

institution of society: the representations and the norms of the tribe, and the very notion of *truth*. To be sure, there is in all societies a socially instituted “truth,” which amounts to the canonical conformity of representations and statements with what is socially instituted as the equivalent of “axioms” and “procedures of validation.” This “truth” ought, properly speaking, to be called *correctness* (*Richtigkeit*). But the Greeks *create the truth* as the interminable movement of thought that constantly tests its bounds and looks back upon itself (reflectiveness), and they create it as democratic philosophy. Thinking ceases to be the business of rabbis, of priests, of mullahs, of courtiers, or of solitary monks, and becomes the business of citizens who want to discuss within a public space created by this very movement.

Greek politics, and politics properly conceived, can be defined as the explicit collective activity which aims at being lucid (reflective and deliberate) and whose object is the institution of society as such. It is, therefore, a *coming into light*, though certainly partial, of the instituting in person; a dramatic, though by no means exclusive, illustration of this is presented by the moments of revolution.²⁷ The creation of politics takes place when the established institution of society is called into question as such and in its various aspects and dimensions (which rapidly leads to the discovery and the explicit elaboration, but also *a new and different articulation*, of solidarity), that is to say, when *another relation*, previously unknown, is created between the instituting and the instituted.²⁸

²⁷*MRT*, 112.

²⁸*MRT*, 95-114. See also the General Introduction (1973) in [PSW1](#), 29-36; and [IIS](#), 214-15 and 371-73.

True politics, therefore, is from the start potentially radical as well as global, and the same is true about its offspring, classical “political philosophy.” I say “potentially” because, as is known, many explicit institutions in the democratic *poleis*, including some particularly repugnant to us (slavery, the inferior status of women), were never called into question on a practical basis. But this is irrelevant to our discussion. The creation of democracy and philosophy is truly the creation of *historical movement* in the strong sense—a movement that, in this phase, deploys itself from the eighth to the fifth century, and is in fact brought to an end with the defeat of Athens in 404 BCE.

The radicality of this movement should not be underestimated. Leaving aside the activity of the legislators (*nomothetēs*), on which trustworthy information is scant (though many reasonable inferences about it, especially in relation to the founding of colonies, starting in the eighth century, remain to be drawn), suffice it to mention the boldness of the Cleisthenean revolution, which subjected the traditional Athenian society to a far-going reorganization aimed at the equal and balanced participation of all citizens in political power. The discussions and projects to which the dispersed and mutilated torsos of the sixth and fifth century bear witness (Solon, Hippodamos, the Sophists, Democritus, Thucydides, Aristophanes, etc.) present a dazzling picture of this radicality. The institution of society is clearly seen in the fifth century as a human work (Democritus, the *Mikros Diakosmos* as handed down to us by Tzetzes, the Sophists, Sophocles in *Antigone*). The Greeks also know from very early on that the human being will be such as the *nomoi* of the *polis* will make it (the idea, clearly formulated by the poet Simonides, is still repeated many times as obvious by Aristotle). They know, therefore, that there is no worthy

human being without a worthy *polis*, without a *polis* ruled by the proper *nomos*. They also know, contrary to Leo Strauss, that there is no “natural” law (the expression would be self-contradictory in Greek). And the discovery of the “arbitrariness” of the *nomos* as well as of its constitutive character for the human being opens the interminable discussion about right, wrong, justice, and the “correct *politeia*.”²⁹

This same radicality, along with the awareness of the fabrication of the individual by the society in which it lives, stands behind the philosophical works of the period of decadence—of the fourth century, those of Plato and Aristotle—commands them as self-evident, and nourishes them. Thanks to it, Plato is able to think a radical utopia; because of it, Plato as well as Aristotle emphasize the importance of *paideia* even more than of the “political constitution” in the narrow sense. And it is no accident that the renewal of political thought in Western Europe is quickly accompanied by the resurgence of radical “utopias.” These utopias manifest, first and foremost, awareness of this fundamental fact: institutions are human works. And it is no accident either that, contrary to the poverty, in this respect, of contemporary “political philosophy,” grand political philosophy from Plato to Rousseau has placed the question of *paideia* at the center of its interests. Even if, practically considered, the question of education has always remained a concern of Modern Times, this great tradition dies in fact with the French Revolution. And it takes a good deal of philistinism and hypocrisy to display surprise at the fact that Plato thought it proper to legislate about the musical *nomoi* or

²⁹“Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us” (1975), now in [CLI](#), 359-432.

about poetry—forgetting that the State today decides about the poems children will learn in school. We will discuss later whether Plato was right to do it as he did and *to the degree* that he did.

The Greeks' creation of politics and philosophy is the first historical emergence of the project of collective and individual autonomy. If we want to be free, we have to make our own *nomos*. If we want to be free, nobody should have the power to tell us what we should think.

But free how, and up to what point? These are the questions of true politics—preciously absent from the contemporary discourses about “the political,” “human rights,” or “natural law”—to which we must now turn.

Heteronomy and Autonomy

Almost always, almost everywhere, societies have lived in a state of *instituted heteronomy*.³⁰ An essential constituent of this state is the instituted representation of an extrasocial source of *nomos*. In this respect, religion plays a central role. It supplies a representation of this source and of its attributes; it ensures that all significations—those pertaining to the world as well as those pertaining to human affairs—spring from the same origin; it cements the whole by means of a belief that musters the support of essential tendencies of the psyche. Let me add parenthetically that the contemporary fashion—for which Max Weber is partly responsible—of presenting religion as a set of “ideas” or as a “religious ideology” leads to a catastrophic misunderstanding, for it fails to recognize that the religious *affect* and the

³⁰*MRT*, 108-110, and the texts cited in n. 28.

religious drive are as important, and as variable, as religious “representations.”

The denial of the instituting dimension of society, the covering up of the instituting imaginary by the instituted imaginary, goes hand in hand with the creation of true-to-form individuals, whose thought and life are dominated by repetition (whatever else they may do, they do very little), whose radical imagination is bridled to the utmost degree possible, and who are hardly truly individualized. To see this, it is enough to compare the similitude of sculptures dating from the same Egyptian dynasty to the difference between Sappho and Archilochus or Bach and Handel. It also goes hand in hand with the peremptory exclusion of any questioning about the ultimate grounds of the beliefs and the laws of the tribe, thus also of the “legitimacy” of the instituted explicit power. In this sense, the very term “legitimacy” becomes anachronistic (and Eurocentric, or Sinocentric) when applied to most traditional societies. *Tradition means that the question of the legitimacy of tradition shall not be raised.* Individuals in these societies are fabricated in such a way that this question remains for them mentally and psychically inconceivable.

As a germ, autonomy emerges when explicit and unlimited interrogation explodes on the scene—an interrogation that has bearing not on “facts” but on the social imaginary significations and their possible grounding. This is a moment of creation, and it ushers in a new type of society and a new type of individuals. I am speaking intentionally of *germ*, for autonomy, social as well as individual, is a *project*. The rise of unlimited interrogation creates a new social-historical *eidōs*: reflectiveness in the full sense, or self-reflectiveness, as well as the individual and the institutions that embody it. The questions raised are, on the

social level: Are our laws good? Are they just? Which laws *ought we* to make? And, on the individual level: Is what I think true? Can I know if it is true—and if so, how? The moment of philosophy's birth is not the appearance of the "question of Being" but rather the emergence of the question: *What is it that we ought to think?* The "question of Being" is only a component of this more general question: What ought we to think about Being (or about justice, or about ourselves, etc.)? The "question of Being" has been, for instance, both raised and solved in the Pentateuch, as in most sacred books. The moment of democracy's birth, and that of politics, *is not* the reign of law or of right, nor that of the "rights of man," nor even the equality of citizens as such, but rather the emergence of the questioning of the law in and through the actual activity of the community. Which are the laws we ought to make? At that moment *politics* is born; that is to say, freedom is born as social-historically *effective* freedom. And this birth is inseparable from the birth of philosophy. (Martin Heidegger's systematic and not accidental blindness to their inseparability is the main factor distorting his view of the Greeks and of all the rest.)

Autonomy comes from *autos-nomos*: (to give to) oneself one's laws. After what has been said about heteronomy, it is hardly necessary to add: to make one's own laws, knowing that one is doing so. This is a new *eidos* within the overall history of being: a type of being that reflectively gives to itself the laws of its being.

Thus conceived, autonomy bears little relation to Kant's "autonomy" for many reasons, of which it will suffice to mention one. Autonomy does not consist in acting according to a law discovered in an immutable Reason and given once and for all. It is the unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations as well as the capacity, in

light of this interrogation, *to make, to do* and *to institute* (therefore also, *to say*). Autonomy is the reflective activity of a reason creating itself in an endless movement, both as individual and social reason.

Autonomy and Politics

Let us return now to politics, and start, so as to facilitate understanding, with what is *proteron pros hēmas*, first with respect to ourselves: the individual. In what sense can an individual be autonomous? There are two sides to this question, the internal and the external.

The internal side: the nucleus of the individual is the psyche (the Unconscious, the drives). Any idea of eliminating or “mastering” this nucleus would be plainly ridiculous; that task is not only impossible, it would amount to a murder of the human being. Also, at any given moment, the individual carries with itself, in itself, a history which cannot and should not be “eliminated,” since the individual’s very reflectiveness and lucidity are the products of this history. The autonomy of the individual consists in the instauration of an *other* relationship between the reflective instance and the other psychical instances as well as between the present and the history that made the individual such as it is. This relationship makes it possible for the individual to escape the enslavement of repetition, to look back upon itself,³¹ to reflect on the reasons of its thoughts and the motives of its acts, guided by

³¹T/E: Starting with this instance, Castoriadis ceases, at this point in his English-language translation, to refer to “the individual” as “it” and adopts the inclusive, nonsexist language of “his/her” and “him/herself” found elsewhere, inconsistently, in his original self-translation. For consistency’s sake, we continue with “it,” “itself,” etc.

the elucidation of its desire and aiming at the truth. This autonomy can effectively alter the behavior of the individual, as we positively know. This means that the individual is no longer a pure and passive product of its psyche and history and of the institution. In other words, the formation of a reflective and deliberative instance, that is, of true *subjectivity*, frees the radical imagination of the singular human being as source of creation and alteration and allows this being to attain an effective freedom. This freedom presupposes, of course, the indeterminacy of the psychical world as well as its permeability to meaning. But it also entails that the simply given meaning has ceased to be a cause (which is also always the case in the social-historical world) and that there is the effective possibility of the *choice of meaning* not dictated in advance. In other words, once formed, the reflective instance plays an active and not predetermined role in the deployment and the formation of meaning, whatever its source (be it the radical creative imagination of the singular being or the reception of a socially created meaning).³² In turn, this presupposes again a specific psychical mechanism: to be autonomous implies that one has *psychically cathected* freedom and the aiming at truth.³³ If such were not the case, one could not understand why Kant toiled over the *Critiques* instead of having fun with something else. And this psychical investment—"an empirical determination"—does not diminish in the least the possible validity of the ideas in the *Critiques*, the deserved admiration we feel toward the daring old man, the *moral* value of his

³²*MRT*, 101-107; "The State of the Subject Today," now in the present volume, 279-302.

³³"Epilegomena," in [CLJ](#), 48-56.

endeavor. Because it neglects all these considerations, the “freedom” of the inherited philosophy is bound to remain a sheer fiction, a fleshless phantom, a *constructum* void of interest *für uns Menschen*, to use the same phrase Kant obsessively repeats.

The external side of the question throws us into the deepest waters of the social-historical ocean. I cannot be free alone; neither can I be free in each and every type of society. Here again we encounter philosophical self-delusion, exemplified this time by Descartes—though he is far from alone in this respect—when he pretends that he can forget he is sitting upon twenty-two centuries of interrogation and doubt and that he lives in a society in which, for centuries, Revelation as well as naive faith by no means suffice any longer, since a “proof” of the existence of God is henceforth required by those who think, even if they believe.

The important point in this respect is not the existence or nonexistence of formal coercion (“oppression”) but the inescapable internalization of the social institution, without which there can be no individuals. Freedom and truth cannot be objects of investment if they have not already emerged as social imaginary significations. Individuals aiming at autonomy cannot appear unless the social-historical field has already altered itself in such a way that it opens a space of interrogation without bounds (without an instituted or revealed truth, for instance). For someone to be able to find in himself the psychical resources and, in his environment the actual possibility, to stand up and say: “Our laws are unjust, our gods are false,” a self-alteration of the social institution is required, and this can only be the work of the instituting imaginary. For instance, the statement: “The Law is unjust” is linguistically impossible, or at least absurd, for a classical Hebrew, since the Law is given by God and Justice is but one

of the names and attributes of God. The institution must have changed to the point that it allows itself to be called into question by the collectivity it enables to exist and by the individuals belonging to it. But the concrete embodiment of the institution are those very same individuals who walk, talk, and act. It is therefore essentially with the same stroke that a new type of society and a new type of individual, each presupposing the other, must emerge, and do emerge, in Greece from the eighth century BCE onward and in Western Europe from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries onward. No phalanx without hoplites, no hoplites without phalanx. No Archilochus capable of boasting, soon after 700 BCE, that in flight he threw away his shield and that little damage was done because he could always buy another one, without a society of warrior-citizens capable of honoring above all else both bravery and a poet who holds this quality up, for once, to derision.

The necessary simultaneity of these two elements during a social-historical alteration produces a state of affairs that is unthinkable from the point of view of the inherited logic of determinacy. How could one compose a free society unless free individuals are already available? And where could one find these individuals if they have not already been raised in freedom? (Could freedom be inherent in human nature? Why then has it been sleeping over millennia of despotism, whether oriental or otherwise?) But this apparent impossibility has been surmounted several times in actual history. In this we see, once more, the creative work of the instituting imaginary, as radical imaginary of the anonymous collectivity.

Thus, the inescapable internalization of the institution refers the individual to the social world. He who says that he wants to be free and, at the same time, proclaims his lack of

interest in his society's institutions (or, another name for the same thing, in politics), should be sent back to grammar school. But the same link can also be established starting from the very meaning of *nomos*, of the law. To posit one's own law for oneself has meaning for certain dimensions of life only, and it is totally meaningless for many others: not only the dimensions along which I meet the others (I can reach an understanding with them, or fight them, or simply ignore them), but those along which I encounter society as such, the social law—the institution.

Can I say that I posit my own law when I am living, necessarily, under the law of society? Yes, if and only if I can say, reflectively and lucidly, that *this law is also mine*. To be able to say this, I need not approve of it; it is sufficient that I have had the effective possibility of participating actively in the formation and the implementation of the law.³⁴ If I accept the idea of autonomy *as such* (and not only because “it is good for me”)—and this, obviously, no proof can force me to do, no more than any proof can force me to square my words with my deeds—then the existence of an indefinite plurality of individuals belonging to society entails immediately the idea of democracy defined as the effective possibility of equal participation of all in instituting activities as well as in explicit power. I will not delve here into the necessary reciprocal implication of equality and freedom when the two ideas are thought rigorously, nor into the sophistries by means

³⁴The speech of the Laws in the *Crito*—which I take to be a simple, though certainly admirable, transcription of the *topoi* of the democratic thinking of the Athenians—says everything that there is to say about the matter: *ē peithein ē poiein ha an keleuēi* (51b), either persuade it (the country, the collectivity that posits the laws) or do that which it commands. The Laws add: You are always free to leave, with all that you possess (51d-e), which, strictly speaking, is not the case in *any* modern “democratic” State.

of which, for a long time now, various people have tried to make the two terms appear antithetical.

And yet, we seem now to be back at square one, for the fundamental “power” in a society, the prime power upon which all the others depend, what I have already called the ground-power, is the *instituting power*. And unless one is under the spell of the “constitutional delusion,” this power is neither locatable nor formalizable, for it pertains to the instituting imaginary. Language, family, mores, “ideas,” “art,” a host of social activities as well as their evolution are beyond the scope of legislation in their essential part. At most, to the degree that this power can be participated in, it is participated in by all. Everybody is, potentially, a coauthor of the evolution of language, of the family, of customs, and so on.

To make our ideas on this matter clear, let us revert for a moment to the Greek case and ask: What was the radical character of the political creation of the Greeks? The answer is twofold:

1. A part of the instituting power was made explicit and formalized: this is the part concerning legislation properly speaking, public—“constitutional”—legislation as well as private law.
2. Specific institutions were created in order to render the explicit part of power (including “political power” in the sense defined earlier) *open to participation*. This led to the equal participation of all the members of the body politic in the determination of *nomos*, of *dikē*, and of *telos*—of legislation, of jurisdiction, and of government. Rigorously speaking, there is no such thing as “executive power.” (Its functions, which were in the hands of slaves in ancient Athens, are performed today by people acting more or less as

“vocal animals,” and they may one day be performed by machines.)

As soon as the question has been posed in these terms, politics has absorbed, at least *de jure*, “the” political. The structure and the operation of explicit power have become, in principle and in fact, in Athens as well as in the European West, objects of collective deliberation and decision. This collectivity is self-positing and, *de facto* and *de jure*, *always necessarily self-positing*. But more than that, and much more important, the calling into question of the institution *in toto* became, potentially, radical and unbounded. When Cleisthenes reorganizes, for political purposes, the Athenian tribes, this can perhaps be laid to rest as ancient history. But we are supposed to be living in a republic. Presumably, therefore, we need a republican education. But where does “education”—republican or not—start, and where does it end? The modern emancipatory movements, notably the workers’ movement but also the women’s movement, have raised the question: Is democracy possible, is it possible to obtain, for all those who want it, the equal effective opportunity to participate in power, when they live in a society in which tremendous inequalities of economic power, which are immediately translatable into political power, prevail? Or in a society in which women, though granted “political rights” some decades ago, continue in fact to be treated as “passive citizens”? Are the laws of property (whether private or “State-owned”) and of sex God-given, where is the Sinai on which they have been delivered?

Politics is a project of autonomy. Politics is the reflective and lucid collective activity that aims at the overall institution of society. It pertains to everything in society that

is participable and shareable.³⁵ *De jure*, this self-instituting activity does not take into account and does not recognize any limit (physical and biological laws are not of concern to us here). Nothing can escape its interrogation, nothing, in and of itself, stands outside its province.

But can we stop at that?

The Limits of Self-Institution and the Object of Politics

The answer is in the negative, both from the ontological point of view—before any *de jure* consideration—and from the political point of view—after all such considerations.

The ontological point of view leads to the most weighty reflections, ones that, however, are almost totally irrelevant from the political point of view. In all cases, the explicit self-institution of society will always encounter the bounds I have already mentioned. However lucid, reflective, willed it may be, the instituting activity of society and individuals springs from the instituting imaginary, which is neither locatable nor formalizable. Every institution, as well as the most radical revolution one could conceive of, must always take place within an already given history. Should it have the crazy project of clearing the ground totally, such a revolution still would have to use what it finds on the ground in order to make a clean sweep. The present, to be sure, always transforms the past into a *present past*, that is, a past relevant for the now, if only by continually “reinterpreting” it by means of that which is being created, thought, posited *now*.

³⁵See the text cited in n. 29.

But it is always *that given past*, not a past in general, that the present shapes according to its own imaginary. Every society must project itself into a future that is essentially uncertain and risky. Every society must socialize the psyche of the human beings belonging to it. But the nature of this psyche imposes upon the modes and the content of this socialization constraints that are as indefinite as they are decisive.

These considerations carry tremendous weight—and no political relevance. The analogy with personal life is very strong—and this is no accident. I am making myself within a history which has always already made me. My most maturely reflected projects can be ruined in a second by what just happens. As long as I live, I must remain for myself one of the mightiest causes of astonishment and a puzzle not comparable to any other—because so near. I can—a task by no means easy—come to an understanding with my imagination, my affects, my desires; I cannot master them, and I ought not to. I ought to master my words and my deeds, a wholly different affair. And all these considerations cannot tell me anything of substance about what I ought to do—since I can do whatever I can do, but I ought not to do whatever crosses my mind. On the question: “What ought I to do?”, the analysis of the ontological structure of my personal temporality does not help me in the least.

In the same way, the possibility for a society to establish another relationship between the instituting and the instituted is confined within bounds, which are at once indisputable and indefinable, by the very nature of the social-historical. But this tells us nothing about what we ought to will as the effective institution of the society in which we live. It is certain, for instance, that, as Marx remarked, “*le mort saisit le vif!*”—the dead take hold of the

living.³⁶ But no politics can be drawn from that. The living would not be living if they were not in the hold of the dead—but neither would they be living if this hold were total. What can I infer from this concerning the relationship a society *ought to will* to establish with its past, inasmuch as this relationship is subject to willing? I cannot even say that a politics that would try to ignore the dead totally, and even to obliterate their memory, and thus a politics so contrary to the nature of things, would be “bound to fail” or “crazy”; its total self-delusion, its complete inability to attain its proclaimed aim, would not wipe it out of reality. To be crazy does not prevent one from existing. Totalitarianism has existed, it still exists, it still tries to reform the “past” according to the “present.” Let us recall, in passing, that in this it has only pushed to the extreme, systematically and monstrously, an operation that everybody performs every second and that is done every day by the newspapers, the history books, and even the philosophers. And if you were to say that totalitarianism could not succeed because it is contrary to the nature of things (which here can only mean “to human nature”), you would only be mixing up the levels of discourse and positing as an essential necessity that which is a sheer fact. Hitler has been defeated, Communism has not succeeded, for the time being. *That is all.* These are sheer facts, and the partial explanations one could supply for them, far from unveiling a transcendental necessity or a “meaning of history,” also have to do only with sheer facts.

³⁶T/E: Karl Marx, Preface to the First German Edition, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867), vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 9.

~

Things are different from the political point of view and once we have accepted that we are unable to define, on a principled basis, nontrivial bounds for the explicit self-institution of society. For, *if* politics is a project of individual and social autonomy (these being two sides of the same coin), consequences of substantive import certainly do follow. To be sure, the project of autonomy has to be posited (“accepted,” “postulated”). The idea of autonomy can be neither founded nor proved since it is presupposed by any foundation or proof. (Any attempt to “found” reflectiveness presupposes reflectiveness itself.) Once posited, it can be *reasonably argued for* and *argued about* on the basis of its implications and consequences. But it can also, and more important, be *made explicit*. Then, substantive consequences can be drawn from it, which give a *content*, albeit partial, to a politics of autonomy, but which also subject it to *limitations*. For, from this perspective, two requirements arise: to open the way as much as possible to the manifestation of the instituting imaginary; but, *equally important*, to introduce the greatest possible reflectiveness in our explicit instituting activity as well as in the exercise of explicit power. We must not forget, indeed, that the instituting imaginary *as such* as well as its works are neither “good” nor “bad”—or rather that, from the reflective point of view, they can be either the one or the other to the most extreme degree (the same being true of the imagination of the singular human being and its works). It is therefore necessary to shape institutions that make this collective reflectiveness effectively possible as well as to supply it with the adequate instruments. I will not delve here into the innumerable consequences that follow from these statements. And it is also necessary to give

to all individuals the maximal effective opportunity to participate in any explicit power, and to ensure for them the greatest possible sphere of autonomous individual life. If we remember that the institution of society exists only insofar as it is embodied in its social individuals, we can, evidently, on the basis of the project of autonomy, justify (found, if you prefer) “human rights,” and much more. More important, we can also abandon the shallow discourses of contemporary “political philosophy,” and, remembering Aristotle—for whom the law aims at the “creation of total virtue” by means of its prescriptions *peri paideian tēn pros to koinon*, relative to the *paideia* pertaining to public affairs (civic education)³⁷—understand that *paideia*, education from birth to death, is a central dimension of any politics of autonomy. We can then reformulate, by correcting it, the problem posed by Rousseau: “Some form of association must be found as a result of which the whole strength of the community will be enlisted for the protection of the person and property of each constituent member, in such a way that each, when united to his fellows, renders obedience to his own will, and remains as free as he was before.”³⁸ No need to comment upon Rousseau’s formula or upon its heavy dependence upon a metaphysics of the individual-substance and its “properties.” But here is the true formulation, the true object of politics:

³⁷*Nicomachean Ethics* 5.4.1130b4-5, 25-26.

³⁸T/E: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, bk. 1, ch. 6. English translation taken from *Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume, Rousseau* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 238. Absent from Castoriadis’s English-language translation, everything about Rousseau, from “We can then reformulate...” until before “...the true object of politics,” is adapted from the French original.

To create the institutions that, by being internalized by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all forms of explicit power existing in society.

This formulation will appear paradoxical only to those who believe in thunderlike freedom and in a free-floating being-for-itself disconnected from everything, including its own history.

It also becomes apparent—this is, in fact, a tautology—that autonomy is, *ipso facto*, *self-limitation*. Any limitation of democracy can only be, *de facto* as well as *de jure*, self-limitation.³⁹ This self-limitation can be more than and different from mere exhortation if it is embodied in the creation of free and responsible individuals. There are no “guarantees” for and of democracy other than relative and contingent ones. The least contingent of all lies in the *paideia* of the citizens, in the formation (always a *social* process) of individuals who have internalized both the necessity of laws and the possibility of calling the laws into question, of individuals capable of interrogation, reflectiveness, and deliberation, of individuals loving freedom and accepting responsibility.

Autonomy is, therefore, the project—and now we are adopting both the ontological and the political point of view—that aims:

- in the broad sense, at bringing to light society’s instituting power and at rendering it explicit in

³⁹“The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983) in [CL2](#), 411-14; also “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in *CL2*, 247-56.

- reflection (both of which can be only partial); and in the narrow sense, at resorbing *the* political, as explicit power, into politics, as the lucid and deliberate activity whose object is the explicit institution of society (and thus, also, of any explicit power), and its working as *nomos*, *dikē*, *telos*—legislation, jurisdiction, government—in view of the *common ends* and the *public endeavors* the society deliberately proposes to itself.

Burgos, March 1978—Paris, May-June 1988

Psychoanalysis and Politics*

Discussions about the relation between psychoanalysis and politics have usually focused, in a one-sided way, on isolated formulations by Freud, or on his excursions and incursions into the philosophy of society and of history (*Civilization and its Discontents*, *The Future of an Illusion*, *Moses and Monotheism*). “Pessimistic” or even “reactionary” conclusions regarding the implications of psychoanalysis in terms of the projects of social and political transformation have almost always been drawn from these writings. To the (insignificant) extent that they express an opinion on these matters, psychoanalysts have exhibited a lazy and suspect readiness to satisfy themselves with these “conclusions.” For this to be possible, it has been necessary to neglect or remain silent about other writings (e.g., *Totem and Taboo*) and other formulations of Freud’s, to which I have drawn attention elsewhere.¹ Moreover, and more seriously, some substantive

*Lecture delivered October 25, 1987, at the New School for Social Research as part of a colloquium on Hannah Arendt. My French translation, “Psychanalyse et politique,” which originally appeared in *Lettre Internationale*, 21 (Summer 1989): 54-57, was reprinted in [MM](#), 141-54 (173-90 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: The English-language version originally appeared in *Speculations after Freud. Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, and Culture*, Sonu Shamdasani and Michael Münchow, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-12, where it was accompanied by a short editors’ introduction and a “Select Bibliography.” Besides slightly editing the English-language text, I have added, for the version that first appeared in [WIF](#), 125-36, and now to an even greater extent here, a few phrases that appeared in the French edition but that had not been incorporated into the initial published English version, itself based on the 1987 typescript. The French translation also appeared posthumously in *Passant Ordinaire*, 34 (April-May 2001): 32-35.]

¹See “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968), in [CL1](#).

questions, much more important than Freud's "opinions," have thereby been covered up. What is the signification of psychoanalysis itself, as theory and as practice? What are its implications—certainly not all of them fully explored, to say the least—in Freud's own writings? Has psychoanalysis nothing to do with the Western emancipatory movement? Is work directed toward gaining knowledge of the Unconscious and transforming the human subject wholly unrelated to the question of freedom and the questions of philosophy? Would psychoanalysis itself have been possible outside the social-historical conditions achieved in Europe? Can the knowledge of the Unconscious teach us nothing as regards the socialization of the individual, and, as a consequence, the institutions of society? Why should the practical perspective adopted by psychoanalysis in the sphere of the individual automatically become void when passing over to the collective sphere? One must recognize that these questions are seldom, if ever, raised and never in a satisfactory manner. In what follows I summarize and enlarge on the conclusions of twenty-five years' work.²

~

I shall take as my starting point a remark of Freud's I consider to be profound and true. He twice said that psychoanalysis, pedagogy, and politics were the three impossible professions.³ He did not explain why he took them

²See the first part, "Psyche," of *CLI*; also *IIS* (1964-65, 1975; English-language translation 1987), 102-107, and the whole of ch. 6.

³The idea is to be found in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937), in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of*

to be impossible, a term that must be taken literally as well as *cum grano salis*, since, after all, he created psychoanalysis and practiced it. We can reflect usefully on his use of this term, *impossible*. He did not say that these professions were extremely difficult, as, for instance, are those of a brain surgeon, a concert pianist, or Himalayan Sherpa. He said: impossible. Why? Certainly not because they have to do with that most intractable of all materials, the human being. Generals, salesmen, and prostitutes deal with the same material, and we would not pronounce their professions impossible.

We can, of course, think of one strong reason why psychoanalysis and pedagogy, at least, may verge on the impossible; this would be that both have as their object to change human beings. Things, however, are not that simple. A behavioristic (in fact, Pavlovian) psychiatrist, a pedagogue like the father of Court President Daniel Paul Schreber, the wardens of a Nazi or Stalinist concentration camp, the agents of Minilove and O'Brien himself (in Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*) all act in order to change human beings—and often they succeed.

In all these cases, the aim of the activity is fully determined in the mind of the agent: it is to eradicate from a patient's mind and soul any trace of personal thinking and willing. The agent uses determinate means and he is supposed to be in full control of these and of the process in general. (That he may fail and that the reasons for such a failure would

Sigmund Freud (hereafter *SE*), ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol. 23, p. 248, and, before that, in the Preface to August Aichhorn's *Wayward Youth* (1925), *SE* 19: 273, where it is taken to be a traditional *bon mot*. Freud in fact talks about "government" (*Regierung*), not politics. But, for reasons that will become apparent shortly, traditional "government" does not present the problems discussed here.

not be accidental is another matter.) Finally, means and ends are, in these cases, supposed to stand in a rational, ensemblistic-identitary relation.⁴ Given the conditions (including whatever knowledge the agent may possess), given his aims, and given what he knows or thinks he knows about the patient, he acts, or ought to act, in the most rationally efficient way. His knowledge may, of course, include knowledge of deep psychological processes—as in Bruno Bettelheim’s analysis of the rationale for the treatment of prisoners in Nazi camps: the main method of such a treatment was a breaking-up of the prisoner’s self-image, the demolition of his identificatory bearings. Before Bettelheim and independently of him, Orwell saw this with clarity and profundity in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. These considerations also lead me to speak of *politics*, when discussing Freud’s phrase, and not “government” (*Regierung*): “governing” people, by terror or gentle manipulation, can be boiled down to a rational technique, to a *zweckrational* action, an action that is instrumental or rational as to means, to borrow Max Weber’s expression.⁵

If we now consider psychoanalysis, we see that none of this applies. Despite discussions of the aims and ends, or even end, of analysis, the objective the analyst is trying to

⁴T/E: This sentence is missing from the French translation.

⁵T/E: This last sentence, a bit redundant in light of n. 3, translates into English an addition found in the French translation. Also to be noted, the present paper was delivered in English in October 1987, without this sentence that concerns not only Freud but also Weber; in February 1988, Castoriadis published in French “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” (see above, in the present volume), where he explains that “Weber’s term, *Zweckrationalität*, which in this one case is rather unfortunate, really means *Mittelrationalität*, ‘rationality of means used.’”

reach is not definable in determinate and specific terms. O'Brien attained his objective when Winston Smith not only confessed what he was required to confess but admitted to himself that he really loved Big Brother. This is a clearly describable and definable subjective state. Nothing similar can be said about the end of an analysis. (I consider here only what I beg permission to call the "full"—not ideal—analytic process. Certainly, the nature of the case may often lead the analyst to limit his ambitions. But even then the analyst would not know how to define in advance that toward which and up to what point he wants to go in the treatment.)

As is well known, Freud repeatedly returned to the question of the end and ends of analysis, giving various, apparently different definitions of it. I shall consider here one of the last he gave, for I think it is the most comprehensive, the most pregnant, and the most risky. It is the famous "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*"—"Where That was, I should/ought to become [and not 'be']."

I have discussed and commented at length on this formulation elsewhere⁶ and I shall now only sum up my conclusions. If, as Freud's formulation unfortunately seems to imply when considered within the sequence of his text, we take the sentence to mean that the *That*, the *Id*, *Es*, has to be eliminated, conquered by the *Ich*, the *Ego*, the *I*, dried up and reclaimed like the Zuider Zee, then we are proposing to ourselves both an impossible and a monstrous objective.⁷

⁶See [IIS](#), 101-107, and the first part of [CLI](#). Freud's phrase is in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), *SE* 22: 80, where it is translated as "Where Id was, there Ego shall be." Elsewhere, and very frequently, Freud talks about the "taming of the drives," *Bändigung*.

⁷Freud, of course, knew this perfectly well, as many formulations in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" show.

Impossible, of course, since there can be no human being whose Unconscious is conquered by the Conscious, whose drives are fully permeated and controlled by rational considerations, who has stopped fantasizing and dreaming. Monstrous, because reaching such a state would entail killing what makes us human. What is most human is not rationality, but the uncontrolled and uncontrollable continuous surge of creative radical imagination in and through the flux of representations, affects, and desires. Indeed, one of the objects of analysis is to free this flux from the repression to which it is usually subjected by an Ego that is usually only a rigid and essentially social construct. This is why I propose that Freud's sentence be completed with: "*Wo Ich bin, soll auch Es auftauchen*"—"Where I (Ego) am (is), That (Id) should/ought also to emerge."

The object of analysis is not to eliminate one psychical *Instanz* ("agency" or "instance") to the benefit of another. It is to alter the relationship between *Instanzen*—and to do that it has to alter one of them essentially: the I, the Ego, or the Conscious. The Ego is altered by taking in the contents of the Unconscious, by reflecting on them, and by becoming able to choose lucidly the impulses and ideas it will attempt to enact. In other words, the Ego has to become a self-reflective subjectivity, capable of deliberation and will. The aim of analysis is not saintliness; as Kant said, nobody ever is a saint. The point is important, because analysis is thereby explicitly opposed to all ethics based on condemnation of desire and therefore on guilt. I want to kill you—or rape you—but I will not. Contrast this with Matthew 5.27-28: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say unto you that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." How could analysis ever forget the

cardinal fact upon which it is based: that we start out life looking on a woman “to lust after her” (whichever sex we may be), that this desire can never be eliminated, and, most important, that without it we would not become human beings, nay, we would not even survive?

The altered relationship between *Instanzen* can thus be described as repression replaced by recognition of unconscious contents and reflection on them: inhibition, impulsive avoidance, or acting out give way to lucid deliberation. The importance of this change does not lie in the elimination of psychical conflict; nobody ever guaranteed us that we are entitled to a conflict-free inner life. It lies in the instauration of a self-reflecting and deliberating subjectivity that has not become a pseudorational and socially “adapted” machine, but on the contrary has recognized and freed the radical imagination, which lies at the core of the psyche.

I insisted on translating Freud’s *werden* by “become” (which is its precise meaning) and not “be” or even “come about,” because the subjectivity I am attempting to describe is essentially a process, not a state reached once and for all. This is why we can elucidate the aim of analysis but cannot strictly define it. What I call the project of autonomy on the level of the singular human being is the transformation of the subject so that he or she can enter this process; this is consubstantial with the aim of psychoanalysis.

This aim cannot be reached, or even approached, without the self-activity of the patient: remembering, repeating, working through (*durcharbeiten*). The patient is the main agent of the psychoanalytical process.

Here we do not have means separated from ends. The various aspects of the analytic setting (reclining position, fixed duration of sessions, and so on) are not its means; rather, they are conditions for its unfolding. The process itself

is analytic insofar as it is always both means and ends. Free associations, for instance, are not just a means; as they unfold, they express and realize the patient's developing capacity to free his flux of representations and thereby also recognize his affects and desires. The flux of associations, punctuated by the analyst's interpretations, brings into action the reflective activity of the patient: he reflects himself and reflects upon himself, he re-turns to the material and takes it up again.

Thus, psychoanalysis is not a technique, nor is it correct even to speak of psychoanalytic technique. Psychoanalysis is rather a practical/poetical activity where both participants are agents and where the patient is the main agent of the development of his own self-activity. I call it poetical because it is creative: its outcome is, or ought to be, the self-alteration of the analysand—that is, strictly speaking, the appearance of another being. I call it practical, because I call praxis that lucid activity whose object is human autonomy, an activity that can be reached only by means of this same autonomy.⁸

~

From this perspective, things are similar in pedagogy. Pedagogy starts at age zero and no one knows when it ends. The aim of pedagogy (or *paideia*)—I am of course speaking normatively—is to help the newborn hopeful and dreadful monster to become a human being, to help this bundle of drives and imagination become an *anthrōpos*. I here take the term *human being*, *anthrōpos*, to mean an autonomous being in the sense indicated above; we may say, as well,

⁸T/E: In this paragraph, the French has *poiétique* (poietic) instead of just *poétique* (poetical).

remembering Aristotle, a being with the capacity to govern and be governed.

At every age, pedagogy has to develop the self-activity of the subject by using, so to speak, this very self-activity. The point of pedagogy is not to teach particular things, but to develop in the subject the capacity to learn: learn to learn, learn to discover, learn to invent. This, of course, pedagogy cannot do without teaching certain things, any more than an analysis can progress without the analyst's interpretations. But like these interpretations, what is taught must always be considered a stepping-stone, not just for the possibility of additional teaching but for the development of the child's capacities for learning, discovering, and inventing. Pedagogy necessarily has to *teach* things, and in this respect many excesses of certain modern pedagogues are to be condemned. But two key principles remain: (1) Any educational process that does not aim at developing to the maximum the self-activity of the pupils is wrong; (2) any educational system that cannot reasonably answer the pupils' question, "Why should we learn that?", is faulty.

I cannot enter further into the vast subject of the relations between psychoanalysis and pedagogy. But one misunderstanding ought to be dispelled. Psychoanalysis does not postulate an intrinsically "good" human being nor does it believe—like Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, or some French ideologists of "desire"—that we have only to let desires and drives express themselves for universal happiness to follow. The result in such a case would rather be universal murder. Psychoanalysis, as well as common sense and thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to Diderot, knows that the adult has internalized a huge number of externally-imposed constraints that go to form an integral part of his psyche. From the psychoanalytic point of view, this human being has

renounced omnipotence, has accepted that words do not mean what he wants them to mean, has recognized the existence of other people whose desires most of the time oppose his own, and so on. From the social-historical point of view, the adult has internalized virtually the whole of the existing institution of society and, more specifically, the imaginary significations that in each particular society serve to organize the human and nonhuman worlds and give them meaning.

In terms of psychoanalysis, pedagogy consists of (ought to consist of) a nurturing of the newborn child, bringing it to the state described above, with a minimal inhibition of its radical imagination and the maximum development of its capacities for reflection. From a social-historical point of view, however, pedagogy must bring the child up to internalize, and therefore to accept fully, the existing institutions, whatever these may be. Clearly, we have reached an apparent antinomy, and a deep and difficult question. This brings us to politics and to the project of autonomy as a necessarily social, and not simply individual, project. I shall come to this presently.

Nevertheless, allow me first to return to the Freudian “impossibility” with which I began. The impossibility of psychoanalysis as well as of pedagogy lies in the fact that they both attempt to aid in the creation of autonomy for their subjects by using an autonomy that does not yet exist. This appears to be a logical impossibility—impossible, that is, within the usual ensemblistic-identitary logic. To be sure, human reality exceeds this logic.⁹ But the impossibility also appears, especially in the case of pedagogy, to lie in the attempt to produce autonomous human beings within a

⁹T/E: This sentence does not appear, for whatever reason, in the French translation.

heteronomous society, and beyond that, in the paradoxical situation of educating human beings to accede to autonomy—while or in spite of—teaching them to absorb and internalize existing institutions.

The solution to this riddle is the “impossible” task of politics—all the more impossible since it must also lean on a not yet existing autonomy in order to bring its own type of autonomy into being. To this we now turn.



Psychoanalysis aims at helping the individual to become autonomous, that is, capable of self-reflective activity and deliberation. In this respect, it fully belongs to the great social-historical stream of and struggle for autonomy, the emancipatory project to which both democracy and philosophy belong. But as I have suggested, psychoanalysis as well as pedagogy also always faces the question of the existing institutions of society. This is directly apparent in the case of pedagogy. For psychoanalysis, the encounter with existing institutions is the encounter with the concrete Ego of the patient. This Ego is largely a social fabrication; it is designed to function in a given social setting and to preserve, continue, and reproduce this setting—that is, the institutions that created it. These institutions are thus maintained not so much through violence and explicit coercion as through their internalization by the individuals in whose fabrication they participate.

Institutions and social imaginary significations are creations of the radical social instituting imaginary. This imaginary is the creative capacity of the anonymous collectivity, which is clearly manifest, for example, in the creation and evolution of language, family forms, mores,

ideas, and so forth. The collectivity can exist only as instituted. Its institutions are always its own creation, but usually, once created, they appear to the collectivity as given (by ancestors, gods, God, nature, reason, the laws of history, the workings of competition, etc.); they become fixed, rigid, and are worshiped.

There always is in institutions a central, strong, and effective element of, as well as instruments for, self-perpetuation (what we would call in psychoanalysis *repetition*), and the main one of these instruments is, as stated previously, the fabrication of conformable individuals. Such a state of society I call heteronomous; the *heteros*, the other who gave the law is none other than the instituting society itself (which, for very deep reasons, has to disguise this fact). I call *autonomous* a society that not only knows explicitly that it has created its own laws but has instituted itself so as to free its radical imaginary and enable itself to alter its institutions through collective, self-reflective, and deliberate activity. And I call *politics* the lucid activity whose object is the institution of an autonomous society and the decisions about collective endeavors. It is immediately obvious that the project of an autonomous society becomes meaningless if it is not, at the same time, the project of bringing forth autonomous individuals, and *vice versa*.

There is indeed an illuminating analogy, but by no means an identity or “structural” homology, between the questions and the tasks the project of autonomy faces in the individual and in the social fields. In the case of heteronomy, the rigid structure of the institution and the disguising of the radical, instituting social imaginary correspond to the rigidity of the socially fabricated individual and the repression of the psyche’s radical imagination. In terms of the project of autonomy, we have defined the aims of psychoanalysis and

pedagogy as, first, the instauration of another type of relation between the reflective subject (of will and of thought) and his Unconscious—that is, his radical imagination—and, second, the freeing of his capacity to make and do things, to form an open project for his life and to work with that project. We can similarly define the aims of politics as, first, the instauration of another type of relation between the instituting and the instituted society, between the given laws and the reflective and deliberating activity of the body politic, and, second, the freeing of the society's collective creativity, enabling it to form collective projects and to work with them. The essential link between these two aims of politics is found in pedagogy, education, *paideia*, for how could there be a reflective collectivity without reflective individuals? An autonomous society, as a self-instituting and self-governing collectivity, presupposes the development of the capacity of all its members to participate in its reflective and deliberative activities. Democracy in the full sense can be defined as the regime of collective reflectiveness; everything else can be shown to follow from this. And there can be no democracy without democratic individuals, and *vice versa*. This is also one of the paradoxical aspects of the “impossibility” of politics.

One can show even more clearly the intimate solidarity between the individual and the social dimension of the project of autonomy. The socialization of the psyche, even its sheer survival, requires that it recognize and accept the unfulfillability of its core, primeval desires. In heteronomous societies, this has been achieved not by the interdiction of acts but especially by the interdiction of thoughts, by blocking the representational flux, by silencing radical imagination, as if society were applying, in reverse, the ways of the Unconscious in order to impose those ways upon it. To the

omnipotence of unconscious thought, society replies by attempting to bring about the full impotence of this thought, and ultimately of thought *tout court*, as the only means of limiting acts. Forbidding thinking has thus appeared as the only way to forbid acting. This goes much further than the “severe and cruel superego” of Freud; history shows that it has actually entailed a mutilation of the radical imagination. We want autonomous individuals, that is, individuals capable of self-reflective activity. But, unless we are to enter into an endless repetition, the contents and the objects of this activity, even the development of its means and methods, must be supplied by the soul’s radical imagination. This is the source of the individual’s contribution to social-historical creation. And this is why a nonmutilating education, a true *paideia*, is of paramount importance.



I turn now to what I have called the riddle of politics. An autonomous society entails autonomous individuals. Individuals become what they are by absorbing and internalizing institutions; in a sense, they *are* the main concrete embodiment of these institutions. This internalization, we know, is anything but superficial: modes of thought and of action, norms and values, and, ultimately, the very identity of the individual as a social being all depend upon it. In a heteronomous society, the internalization of the laws, in the widest sense of the term, would be useless if it were not accompanied by the internalization of the supreme law or metalaw, “Thou shalt not call the laws into question.” But the metalaw in an autonomous society can only be, “You shall obey the law—but you may call it into question. You may raise the question of the justice of the law, or of its

appropriateness.” (I shall not here enter into the formal clauses that may or should accompany this metalaw.)

We can now formulate the answer to our riddle, which is at the same time the first object of a politics of autonomy, of a democratic politics: Help the collectivity to create the institutions that, when internalized by the individuals, will not limit, but rather enlarge, their capacity for becoming autonomous. It is clear that from this formulation, together with the principle of equality implicit in the plural “individuals,” one can derive the main rules for a fully democratic institution of society, one incorporating, for instance, human rights and the equal effective possibility of participation in all forms of power.

I shall not elaborate these points further since they are beyond the scope of our present discussion, except to comment on my previous expression: “the first object of a politics of autonomy.” It is first because it is the presupposition of all the rest and, in the long run, contains virtually all the rest. There are, of course, other objects that are not exactly secondary. One such object is the creation of specific institutions that correspond to the above maxim and give it specificity under given circumstances. Another is the creation of real self-government. And a final one concerns proposals and decisions that pertain to collective works and endeavors. Autonomy is not just an end in itself: we want autonomy for its own sake, but also in order to be able and free to do things. The disembodied, ratiocinating political philosophy of our times always forgets this. A politics of autonomy must participate in all these tasks; it is neither a psychoanalyst nor a pedagogue nor the consciousness of society, but it is an essential dimension of the latter’s capacity for self-reflection. As such, it has to act on human beings, positing them as autonomous, in order to help them achieve

their autonomy, without ever forgetting that the ultimate source of historical creativity is the radical imaginary of the anonymous collectivity. We can thus understand why politics is an “impossible profession” like psychoanalysis and pedagogy, and perhaps even impossibly more impossible than these, given the nature and the dimensions of its partner and its task.

~

I shall end with some remarks on the most important question of all, which is common to psychoanalysis and to politics.

Social institutions hold sway over individuals because they fabricate and mold them; they do so completely in traditional cultures, and still to an important degree in our liberal societies. These institutions are internalized by the individual throughout his life.¹⁰ What is of decisive importance in this is the internalization of social imaginary significations. Society tears the singular human being from the closed universe of the psychical monad, forces it to enter into the harsh world of reality, but offers it, in exchange, waking meaning. In the real world created by each society, things make sense, life and (usually) death have a meaning that, for the individual, is the subjective face of that society’s social imaginary significations.

¹⁰T/E: This is another instance where Castoriadis has, in his own English text, “the individual...his” after having elsewhere used “it,” “its,” and “itself” to designate “the individual.” He reverts to these neuter forms for “singular human being” in the sentence after the next one. In this paper, he does not employ the nonsexist language he used in some other English-language texts.

This *Sinngebung* (donation of meaning), or rather *Sinnschöpfung* (creation of meaning), is the crucial and hard point. Psychoanalysis does not teach a meaning for life. It can only help the patient to find, invent, and create for himself such a meaning. There is no question of defining it in advance and in a universal way. On one of his more discouraged days, Freud wrote that analysis does not bring happiness but can only transform neurotic misery into common, banal unhappiness.¹¹ In this, I find him overly pessimistic. As such, analysis does not bring happiness, but in bringing neurotic misery to an end it helps the patient to form his own project for life.

But this does not exhaust the question. Why does analysis often fail or become interminable? In one of his last works, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" from 1937, Freud invokes many reasons for this situation and ends by pointing to what he calls the "bedrock," the repudiation of femininity, which takes the form of penis envy in women and of the refusal of the passive or feminine attitude toward another male in men. He also mentions the aggressive-destructive drive and the death wish. It seems to me that death indeed plays a paramount role in this problem, but not exactly as Freud saw it.

An interminable analysis is one essentially characterized by repetition. It is like neurosis, but at a higher level; it is repetition redoubled. Why this repetition? Cutting short a long story, we can say that repetition in the sense relevant here is the small change of death; it is the way in

¹¹T/E: Freud wrote in his (and Josef Breuer's) *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895) that his reply to his patients was that "much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness" (*SE* 2: 305).

which the patient defends himself against the reality of wholesale death. The reason analysis fails or becomes interminable concerns, first, the incapacity of the patient—and of the analyst working with him—to accept the death of what he was and is¹² in order for him to become another person (Freud knew this well, though he described it in different terms). The second reason is more important; it concerns the incapacity of the patient—and in this he is of necessity alone—to accept the reality of effective, total, and complete death. Death is the ultimate rock against which an analysis can run aground.

Life, as we all know, entails the continuously suspended precariousness of meaning, precariousness of cathected objects, precariousness of cathected activities and of the meaning with which they are endowed. But death is, as we also know, the meaninglessness of meaning. Our time is not time. Our time is not the time. Our time is no time.

Analysis, or maturity, is not achieved unless and until the person has become able to live on the edge of the abyss, within this ultimate double bind: live as a mortal, live as if you were immortal. (*Eph' hoson endechetai athanatizein*, aim at immortality as much as possible, wrote Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.)¹³

These legendary banalities, as Jules Laforgue would have said,¹⁴ find a fundamental analogy on the social and thus also on the political level. Heteronomous societies accomplish

¹²T/E: The French translation, for whatever reason, elides the “and is” phrase.

¹³T/E: 10.7.1177b33.

¹⁴T/E: Laforgue's *Moralités légendaires* was published in 1887, a few months after his death.

a *Sinnschöpfung* for everyone, forcing upon all the internalization of this meaning. And they institute real or symbolic representations of a perennial meaning and an imaginary immortality in which everyone is supposed to participate in various ways. This can be the myth of personal immortality, or of reincarnation. But it can also be the myth of the perenniality of an instituted artifact—the King, the State, the Nation, the Party—with which everyone can, *tant bien que mal*, identify himself.

I think that an autonomous society would have none of this—on the public level, I mean—and that one of the main difficulties, if not perhaps, *the* difficulty facing the project of autonomy is the difficulty encountered by human beings in accepting, *sans phrase*, the mortality of the individual, of the collectivity, and even of their works.

Hobbes was right, though for the wrong reasons. Fear of death is indeed the mainstay of institutions. Not the fear of being killed by the next man, but the justified fear that everything, even meaning, will dissolve.

Nobody, of course, can “solve” the resulting problem. Any solution to it, if there is one, will only emerge on the way to a new social-historical creation, and to a corresponding alteration of the human being and his attitude toward life and death.

Meanwhile, it would certainly be useful to reflect upon the partial answers given to this problem by the two societies in which the project of autonomy was created and pursued, in other words, the Greek and the Western. One cannot help being struck by the enormous differences in their answers and relate these differences to other essential aspects of the two attempts to create a democratic society. But this is a huge theme, which will have to be left for another time.

Paris, October 1987—March 1989

The Idea of Revolution^{*}

Le Débat: How does one properly situate the French Revolution in the series of great revolutions—the English Revolution, the American Revolution—that mark the advent of political modernity? And how is one to understand that, in relation to its predecessors, the French Revolution has acquired the status of model-revolution, of revolution *par excellence*? What does it introduce that is genuinely new? And in the history of the very idea of revolution, what place does it occupy?

Cornelius Castoriadis: It is important to begin by emphasizing the specificity of the historical creation represented by the French Revolution. It is the first revolution to posit clearly the idea of an explicit self-institution of society. In world history, one knew of bread riots, slave revolts, peasant wars; one knew of coups d'État, monarchies undertaking reforms; one knew, too, of a few more or less radical reinstitutions like that of Mohammed, for example, but in these cases some kind of revelation—that is, an extrasocial source and foundation—is invoked. In France, however, it is society itself, or an enormous portion of this society, that launches into an undertaking that becomes, very rapidly, one of explicit self-institution.

This radicality is not to be found in the English Revolution, certainly, but not even in the American Revolution. In North America, the institution of society, even if it is declared to proceed from the will of the people,

^{*}Interview originally published as “L’Idée de révolution a-t-elle encore un sens?” in *Le Débat*, 57 (November-December 1989): 213-24. Reprinted as “L’Idée de révolution,” in *MM*, 155-71 (191-212 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: The present translation first appeared as “Does the Idea of Revolution Still Make Sense?” in *Thesis Eleven*, 26 (1990): 123-38. Reprinted as “The Idea of Revolution” in *RTI(TBS)*, 288-310.]

remains anchored in the religious sphere [*le religieux*], as it also remains anchored in the past by English Common Law. Above all, it is limited in its ambition. The Founding Fathers, and the movement they express, receive from the past a social state, which they consider appropriate and which they do not think needs to be changed in any way. In their view, it remains only to institute the political complement of this social state.

In this regard, the parallel with the democratic movement in the ancient Greek world is interesting. It was the Greeks, certainly, who discovered that every institution of society is self-institution—that it pertains to *nomos*, not to *phusis*. They anticipated on a practical level the consequences of this discovery; in any case, they did so in the democratic cities, and notably at Athens. This was clear as early as the seventh century BCE, was confirmed with Solon, and culminated in the Cleisthenean revolution (508-506), which was characterized, as one knows, by its audaciously radical attitude toward the inherited ways of articulating sociopolitical arrangements—arrangements it threw into upheaval in order to make them conform to a democratic political way of functioning. Nevertheless, explicit self-institution never became for them the principle of political activity encompassing the social institution in its totality. Property was never really challenged, any more than was the status of women, not to mention slavery. Ancient democracy aimed at achieving, and it did achieve, the effective self-government of the community of free adult males, and it touched the received social and economic structures to the least extent possible. Only the philosophers (a few Sophists in the fifth century, Plato in the fourth) went any further.

Likewise, for the American Founding Fathers there was a social (economic, moral, religious) given that was

accepted, that even was to be actively preserved (Jefferson was against industrialization because he saw in the agrarian freehold the cornerstone of political liberty), and that was to be furnished with the corresponding political structure. The latter, of course, was “founded” elsewhere—on the “principles” of the Declaration, which express the universalist imaginary of “natural rights.” But by a miraculous coincidence—which is decisive for American “exceptionalism”—the two structures, the social and the political, happened to correspond to each other for a few decades. What Marx called the socioeconomic basis of ancient democracy, the community of independent small producers, also happened to be in part the reality of North America in the age of Jefferson and the underlying support for his political vision.

Now, the grandeur and the originality of the French Revolution are to be found, in my judgment, in that very thing for which it is so often reproached, namely, that it tends to call into question, *de jure*, the existing institution of society in its totality. The French Revolution couldn’t create politically if it didn’t destroy socially. The members of the Constituent Assembly knew that and said that. The English Revolution and even the American Revolution could give themselves the representation of a restoration and recuperation of a supposed past. The few attempts, in France, to refer to a tradition rapidly aborted, and what Burke says about it is pure mythology. Hannah Arendt committed an enormous blunder when she reproached the French revolutionaries for having become involved with the social question, presenting the latter as amounting to philanthropic gestures and pity for the poor. A twofold blunder. First—and this remains eternally true—the social question *is* a political question. In classical terms (in Aristotle, already): Is

democracy compatible with the coexistence of extreme wealth and extreme poverty? In contemporary terms: Is not economic power *ipso facto* also political power? Second, in France the *Ancien Régime* was not simply a political structure; it was a total social structure. Royalty, nobility, the role and function of the Church in society, properties and privileges were woven into the innermost texture of the old society. It is the whole social edifice that was to be reconstructed, for without that a political transformation was *materially* impossible. The French Revolution *could not*, even if it wanted to, simply superimpose a democratic political organization onto a social regime that it would have left intact. As so often in Hannah Arendt, ideas prevent her from seeing the facts. But the great historical facts are ideas more weighty than the ideas of philosophers. The “thousand-year-old past,” as opposed to the “virgin continent,” necessarily carries with it the need to mount an attack on the social edifice as such. From this standpoint, the American Revolution could actually be but an “exception” in modern history, in no way the rule and still less the model. The members of the Constituent Assembly were fully conscious of that and said so. Where the American Revolution could build on the illusion of an “equality” already existing in its social state (an illusion that remained the foundation for Tocqueville’s analyses fifty years later), the French Revolution found itself faced with the massive reality of a highly inegalitarian society, of an imaginary of royal rule by divine right, of a centralized Church whose role and social functions were omnipresent, of geographical differences that in no way could be justified, and so on.

Le Débat: But is it not at this very point that it runs afoul of Burke’s criticism, and in its most profound aspect? Can a generation make a gap in history by acting in pure discontinuity with its past? Is a foundation for freedom, which

no longer has as support either Providence or tradition but which rests, rather, entirely within itself, not evanescent?

C.C.: That is why the revolutionaries constantly invoked Reason in 1789—as they also went on to do throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries—which also had disastrous consequences.

Le Débat: You would grant, then, at least a part of the Burkean line of argument, which states that it is difficult to found freedom on Reason?

C.C.: Here there are several points. First, it is not a matter of founding freedom upon Reason, since Reason itself presupposes freedom—autonomy. Reason is not a mechanical device or a system of ready-made truths; it is the movement of a thought that doesn't recognize any authority other than its own activity. To accede to Reason, one must first want to think freely. Second, there is never pure discontinuity. When I say that history is creation *ex nihilo*, that does not signify in any way that it is creation *in nihilo*, or *cum nihilo*. The new form emerges; it takes up what it finds lying about. The rupture is in the new *meaning* it confers upon what it inherits or utilizes. In the third place, Burke himself is inconsistent. He is drawn onto the field of the revolutionaries and grants implicitly the cogency of their presuppositions since he tries to refute their conclusions "rationally." He feels himself obliged to give a foundation in reason to the value of tradition. Now, that is a betrayal of tradition: a true tradition isn't discussed. Burke, in other words, cannot escape from the reflectiveness whose effects in the Revolution he denounces.

Le Débat: Does this inconsistency take all pertinence away from his criticism?

C.C.: His criticism touches upon truth when it bears upon what should be called "mechanical rationalization," which begins rather early in the Revolution and which went

on to enjoy a brilliant future. That leads us to the ambiguity of the idea of Reason, to which I just alluded. To phrase it in philosophical terms, the Reason of the *Lumières* is both an open process of criticism and elucidation—which implies, among other things, the clear-cut distinction between *fact* and *right*—and mechanical, standardizing understanding. Philosophical criticism, and then revolutionary practice destroy the mere fact—existing institutions—showing that they have no reason to be other than that they have already been. (Here too, Burke is caught in ambiguity, since he supports what is both because it has been *and* because it is intrinsically “good.”) But then, after having destroyed, one must construct. Starting from what? It is here that the rationality of the Understanding, mechanical rationality, quickly takes the upper hand. The solutions that appear to some as “rational” will have to be imposed upon everyone: people will be forced to be rational. The principle of all sovereignty resides in the Nation—but this Nation is replaced by the Reason of its “representatives,” in the name of which it will be knocked down, forced upon, violated, and mutilated.

That, however, isn’t a “philosophical” development. The imaginary of abstract and mechanical rationality is an integral part in a weighty social-historical process, which here again prefigures in exemplary fashion key characteristics of modern history. Power becomes absolutized, the “representatives” become autonomized. An “apparatus” (the Jacobins), overtaking the official authorities and controlling them, was constituted; it was an embryo of what later we would call a specifically political bureaucracy. Now, this was possible—on this point, Michelet’s interpretation is in my view the right one—only on the condition that the people withdraw from the scene, and in fact this retreat was, if not fomented, at least encouraged by the new power. In this way,

every living mediation is suppressed: there was on the one hand the abstract entity of the “Nation,” on the other hand those who “represent” it in Paris, and, between the two, nothing. The members of the Convention were neither willing nor able to see that the autonomy of individuals—freedom—cannot effectively become instrumented in “rights” and in periodic elections alone, that it is nothing without the self-governance of all intermediary collective formations, whether “natural” or “artificial.” The old mediations were destroyed (which was deplored both by Burke and, fifty years later, by Tocqueville, while idealizing them fantastically), without permitting new ones to be created. The “Nation,” a dust cloud of theoretically homogenized individuals, no longer had any political existence other than that of its “representatives.” Jacobinism became delirious and the Terror was set up from the moment the people withdrew from the scene and the indivisibility of sovereignty was transformed into absoluteness of power, leaving the representatives in a sinister face-to-face with abstraction.

Le Débat: How do you appraise the role that the formation of the modern State has played in the genesis of the idea of revolution? Does not the French case lead one to think that it is considerable?

C.C.: Here again, I think that it is necessary to make distinctions. The central idea realized by the Revolution—and in it I see its capital importance for us—is that of the explicit self-institution of society by collective, lucid, democratic activity. But at the same time the Revolution never freed itself from the grip of this key part of the modern political imaginary that is the State. I say expressly “the State”—a separate and centralized apparatus of domination—and not “power.” For the Athenians, for example, there is no “State”—the very word doesn’t exist; the power is “we,” the

“we” of the political collectivity. In the modern political imaginary, the State appears ineliminable. It remained so for the Revolution, as it remains so for modern political philosophy, which finds itself in this regard in a more than paradoxical situation: it has to justify the State even as it makes every effort to think freedom. What is happening here is that one bases freedom upon the negation of freedom, or that one entrusts it to the care of its principal enemy. This antinomy reached the point of paroxysm under the Terror.

Le Débat: If one grants that the modern State constitutes one of the absolute preconditions for the revolutionary idea, does that not limit the scope of the self-institution you have just invoked? Is a self-institution that carries with it a tradition all the stronger when it is denied?

C.C.: The imaginary of the State limited the French Revolution’s labor of self-institution. It also limited, later on, the actual behavior of revolutionary movements (with the exception of anarchism). It makes the idea of revolution become identical with the idea that, if one wants to transform society, it is both necessary and sufficient to seize control of the State (the taking of the Winter Palace, etc.). It becomes amalgamated with another cardinal imaginary signification of Modern Times, the Nation, and finds therein an all-powerful source of affective mobilization; it becomes the incarnation of the Nation, the Nation-State. Unless one challenges these two imaginaries, unless one breaks with this tradition, it is impossible to conceive a new historical movement of society’s self-institution. What is certain is that the statist imaginary and the institutions in which it is embodied have for a long time channeled the imaginary of revolution and that it is the logic of the State that finally triumphed.

Le Débat: The nineteenth century adds an essential component to the idea of revolution, with the element of

history.

C.C.: It effected—and this it did basically with and through Marx—a conflation, a chemical compound of Revolution and history. The old transcendencies were replaced by History with a capital H. The myth of History and of the Laws of History, the myth of the revolution as midwife of History—therefore, born and justified through an organic process—were put into operation as religious substitutes, within a millenarian mentality. Marx fetishized a fabricated representation of the revolution. The model of *Ancien Régime*/development of the forces of production/violent birth of new relations of production, which he constructed from the alleged example of the French Revolution, was erected into a schema-type of historical evolution and projected into the future. And what under the brilliant pen of Marx still remained ambiguous and complex in this regard became totally flat and transparent in the Marxist vulgate.

Le Débat: Here you are leading us right to the second paradigmatic revolution, that of 1917. What specific development, from your point of view, does it contribute?

C.C.: It contributes two entirely antinomic elements. First, and this as early as 1905, a new form of democratic collective self-organization, the soviets, which went on to acquire a new scope in 1917 and were carried on in the factory committees, which were very active and important during the 1917-1919 period and even until 1921. But at the same time, it is in Russia that Lenin created the prototype of what all modern totalitarian organizations were to become: the Bolshevik Party, which very rapidly after October 1917 came to dominate the soviets, to stifle them, and to transform them into instruments and appendages of its own power.

Le Débat: Are we not here fully within the domination of the revolutionary idea by the logic of the State?

C.C.: Certainly. The construction of this machine for seizing state power testifies to the dominance of the imaginary of the State. But it bears witness, as well, to the dominance of the capitalist imaginary: everything happens as if one did not know how to organize in any other way. It has not been pointed out enough that Lenin invented Taylorism four years before Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylor's book dates from 1906. *What Is to Be Done?* dates from 1902-1903. And Lenin speaks there of the strict division of tasks, with arguments based upon pure instrumental efficiency; one can, in reading between the lines of Lenin's book, find the Taylorist idea of the "one best way." He obviously couldn't time each operation. But he was striving to fabricate this monster that is a mixture of a party-army, a party-State, and a party-factory, which he actually succeeded in setting up starting in 1917. The statist imaginary, masked during the French Revolution, became explicit with the Bolshevik Party, which was a budding army-State even before the "seizure of power." (Its twofold character became even more manifest in the case of China.)

Le Débat: The mention of the soviet revolution inevitably raises the question of revolutions going astray, which seems to constitute their "iron law." Let us squarely formulate this question: Is not the slide toward totalitarianism of necessity inscribed in revolutionary ambitions when they become, as they do among the Moderns, the explicit project of reinstituting society?

C.C.: First, let us reestablish the facts. There was a revolution in February 1917; there was no "October Revolution": in October 1917, there was a putsch, a military coup d'État. As has already been said, the authors of this putsch succeeded in achieving their ends only against the popular will as a whole—see the dissolution of the

Constituent Assembly in January 1918—and against the democratic organs created starting in February, the soviets and factory committees. It is not the revolution that, in Russia, produced totalitarianism, but the coup d’État of the Bolshevik Party, which is something else entirely.

Le Débat: But can one so easily sever the ties between revolution and totalitarianism?

C.C.: Let us continue on the level of facts. There was an installation of totalitarianism in Germany in 1933, but no revolution (the “national-socialist revolution” is a pure slogan). Under completely different specific circumstances, the same thing goes for China in 1948-1949. On the other hand, without the actual intervention or the virtual threat of Russian divisions, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as well as the movement in Poland in 1980-1981 would certainly have led to the overthrow of the existing regimes; it is absurd to think that they would have led to totalitarianism. And it also has to be pointed out that *revolution* does not at all necessarily mean barricades, violence, bloodshed, and so on. If the King of England had listened to Burke in 1776, no blood would have been spilled in North America.¹

Le Débat: But perhaps there would have been no revolution either. Can one completely separate the idea of revolution from the idea of a rupture or of an overthrow of established legality?

C.C.: Surely not; but this rupture is not bound to take the form of murder. Without the War of Independence, the

¹T/E: Factually, Castoriadis is inaccurate here. He is forgetting the Boston Massacre of 1770, “The shot heard round the world” on April 19, 1775 (the battles of Concord and Lexington, where blood was shed on both sides), etc. Adding “further” between “no” and “blood” could have corrected his statement. His larger point stands, namely, that revolution and bloodshed are not necessarily synonymous.

thirteen colonies would probably have adopted a republican constitution anyway, thereby breaking with monarchical legality.

On the level of ideas, now: *Revolution* does not signify only the attempt at explicit reinstitution of society. Revolution is this reinstitution by the collective and autonomous activity of the people, or of a large portion of society. Now, when this activity unfolds, in Modern Times, it always exhibits a democratic character. And every time a strong social movement has wanted to transform society radically but peacefully, it has run up against the violence of the established power. Why does one forget Poland in 1981 or China in 1989?

As for totalitarianism, it is an infinitely weighty and complex phenomenon. One will understand little about it by saying *Revolution produces totalitarianism* (which we have seen is empirically false at both ends: not all revolutions have produced forms of totalitarianism, and not all forms of totalitarianism have been tied to revolutions). But if one thinks of the germs of the totalitarian idea, it is impossible not to think, first of all, of the totalitarianism immanent in the capitalist imaginary—unlimited expansion of “rational mastery”—and of the capitalist organization of production—the “one best way,” discipline made mechanically obligatory (the Ford factories in Detroit in 1920 constitute totalitarian minisocieties)—and second, the logic of the modern State which, if one allows it to reach its limits, tends to regulate everything,

Le Débat: You were speaking just a minute ago of the role of reason in the idea of revolution. Does not reason in particular take the form of the project of a rational mastery of history? And does not this project contain, despite everything, at least as one of its virtual components, the risk of totalitarian

enslavement?

C.C.: We then arrive at an idea that is completely different from the current vulgate: if, and to the extent that, revolutionaries are caught up in the fantasy of a rational mastery of history, and of society, whose subjects they at that very moment evidently consider themselves to be, then there obviously is here one possible source for an evolution toward totalitarianism. For, they will then tend to replace the self-activity of society with their own activity: that of the members of the Convention and of the Republic's "representatives on mission," later that of the Party. But even in this case, society would have to give in [*se laisse faire*].

As was just said, one sees this process occur during the French Revolution (although it would be absurd to identify the Jacobin dictatorship and the Terror with totalitarianism). Reason tends to be reduced to the Understanding; for autonomy (for freedom), the idea of rational mastery is substituted. In the same stroke, this "rationalism" reveals its unwise, imprudent character.

Le Débat: Is not one of the manifestations *par excellence* of this imprudence the valuing of the revolution as end in itself—a valuing that has been at the same time one of the most powerful motives for its ascendancy?

C.C.: There does indeed come a moment when one begins to encounter formulas whose spirit, pretty much, is this: "Revolution for the sake of revolution." Moreover, we know the echo this mind-set has had, in the nineteenth century and afterward, in the intellectual and spiritual world: rupture, the rejection of established canons, becomes value as such. To confine ourselves here to the properly political level, however, the problem of a revolution is to instaurate another relation with tradition—not to try to suppress tradition, or to

declare it “Gothic nonsense”² from beginning to end.

Le Débat: We will be in agreement if we say that two centuries of history of the revolutionary project show us that this project is burdened with two major illusions: the illusion of rational mastery and the illusion of the end of history. If one removes these two illusions, does the idea of revolution still today have any content?

C.C.: You will not be surprised if I reply that it is precisely because today we are familiar with these two illusions and because we can combat them that we can give to the revolutionary project its true content. Once it is recognized that a full-scale constructivism is both impossible and undesirable; once it is recognized that there can be no repose for humanity in a “good society” defined once and for all, nor transparency of society to itself; once it is recognized that, contrary to what Saint-Just believed, the object of politics is not happiness,³ but liberty, then one can effectively think the question of a free society made up of free individuals. Is the present state of our societies that of democratic, effectively free societies? Certainly not. Could one reach that state by making incremental changes, and without the great majority of the population entering into activity? Again, no.

What is a free, or autonomous, society? It is a society that itself gives to itself, effectively and reflectively, its own laws, knowing that it is doing so. What is a free, or

²T/E: A phrase from Abbé Sieyès’s *What Is the Third Estate?* (1789).

³T/E: This is probably a reference to Saint-Just’s speech to the French National Convention, March 3, 1794, celebrating “happiness” as “a new idea in Europe,” to which Castoriadis also alludes in “Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime” (1996), now in [CL4](#).

autonomous, individual, once we recognize that this individual is conceivable only in a society in which there are laws and power? It is an individual that recognizes in these laws and this power its own laws and its own power—which can happen without mystification only to the extent that this individual has the full and effective possibility of participating in the formation of the laws and in the exercise of power. We are very far from that—and who would imagine for an instant that the burning concern of the ruling oligarchies would be to bring us around to such a situation?

A second, more sociological consideration is added to this first, fundamental one. We are living—I am talking about the rich Western societies—under liberal-oligarchic regimes, which are no doubt preferable, both subjectively and politically, to what exists elsewhere on the planet. These regimes have not been engendered by some automatic and spontaneous process, or by the previous good will of ruling strata, but by means of much more radical social-historical movements—the French Revolution itself is one example—of which these regimes constitute the side effects or the byproducts. These movements themselves would have been impossible, had they not been accompanied by the emergence—as both “effect” and “cause”—of a new anthropological type of individual, let us say, to be brief, *the democratic individual*: that which distinguishes a peasant of the *Ancien Régime* from a French citizen today, or a subject of the Czar from an English or American citizen. Without this type of individual, more exactly without a constellation of such types—among which, for example, is the honest and legalistic Weberian bureaucrat—liberal society cannot function. Now, it seems evident to me that society today is no longer capable of reproducing these types. It basically produces the greedy, the frustrated, and the conformist.

Le Débat: But liberal societies progress. Women, for example, have attained an equal status since the Sixties without there being a revolution, but they have done so massively, irreversibly. Is that not an immense change in our societies?

C.C.: Certainly. There are also important movements, over the long haul of history, that are not strictly political or condensed in a precise moment of time. The change in the status of young people offers another example. Liberal society has been able, not without long resistance—the feminist movement in fact began in the middle of the last century; women obtained the right to vote in France in 1945—to accommodate itself to such changes. But could it accommodate itself to a true democracy, to effective and active participation of citizens in public affairs? Do not present-day political institutions also have as their goal [*finalité*] to *distance* citizens from public affairs and to persuade them that they are incapable of concerning themselves with these matters? No serious analysis can contest that the regimes that proclaim themselves democratic are in reality what every classical political philosopher would have called oligarchical regimes. An ultrathin stratum of society dominates and governs. It coopts its successors. Of course, it is liberal: it is open (more or less...), and it gets itself ratified every four, five, or seven years by a popular vote. If the governing part of this oligarchy goes too far afield, it will get itself replaced—by the other part of the oligarchy, which has become more and more like it. Whence the disappearance of any real content in the opposition of “Left” and “Right.” The frightening emptiness of contemporary politicians’ speeches is a reflection of this situation, not of genetic mutations.

Le Débat: Have not our societies, as a matter of fact,

left behind participatory democracy such as you describe it? Have they not, as they have developed, privileged the private individual to the detriment of the citizen, as Benjamin Constant had diagnosed the situation as early as the 1820s? Is not this the strongest impression it has produced?

C.C.: In no way would I challenge the diagnosis on the level of facts—quite the contrary, I have placed it at the center of my analyses since 1959:⁴ it is what I have called *privatization*. But to note a state of fact does not mean that one approves of it. I am saying, on the one hand, that this state of fact is not tenable in the long run; and on the other hand and especially, that we ought not to accommodate ourselves to it. This same society in which we live proclaims principles—liberty, equality, fraternity—that it violates or diverts and deforms every day. I am saying that humanity can do better, that it is capable of living in another state, the state of *self-government*. Under the conditions of the modern era, its forms certainly remain to be found; better: to be created. But the history of humanity in the West, from Athens to the modern democratic and revolutionary movements, shows that such a creation is conceivable. Beyond that, I too have noted for a long time the predominance of the process of privatization. Our societies are progressively sinking into apathy, depoliticization, domination by the media and celluloid politicians. We are arriving at the complete realization of Constant's formula, asking no more of the State than "the guarantee of our enjoyments [*jouissances*]"⁵—the

⁴T/E: See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," written in 1959-1960, first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 31-33 (December 1960—April 1961—December 1961), and now available in translation in [PSW2](#).

⁵T/E: In his 1819 speech at the Royal Athenaeum of Paris, "The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns."

realization of which would probably have been a nightmare for Constant himself. But the question is: Why then would the State guarantee these enjoyments indefinitely, if citizens are less and less disposed and even capable of exerting control over the State and, if need be, of opposing it?

Le Débat: Are we not nevertheless observing over time an ongoing preponderance of the basic values of democracy? Over two centuries, from universal suffrage to the equality of women passing by way of the Welfare State, the reality of democracy has grown tremendously richer. Moreover, the style of both political and social authority, for instance, has been completely transformed under pressure from the governed or from executives. Before hastening to the diagnosis of privatization, should we not register the geological force of this movement that nevertheless irresistibly makes democratic demands into a reality?

C.C.: That the style of domination and authority has changed, no doubt. But what about their substance? I do not think that the phenomenon of privatization can be taken lightly, either, particularly in its most recent developments. To every institution corresponds an anthropological type, which is its concrete bearer—under other terms, this has been known since Plato and Montesquieu—and is both its product and the condition for its reproduction. Now, the type of person who has independent judgment and feels concerned by questions of general import, by the *res publicae*, is today under challenge. I am not saying that this type has completely disappeared. But it is gradually, and rapidly, being replaced by another type of individual, centered on consumption and enjoyment, apathetic toward general matters, cynical in its relation to politics, most often stupidly approving and conformist. One does not seem to be aware of the fact that we are living in an era of generalized and thoroughgoing

conformism;⁶ true, the latter is masked by the acuteness of the tragicoheroic choice individuals have to make between a Citroën car and one from Renault, between the products of Estée Lauder and those of Helena Rubinstein. One must ask—as is not done by the crooners of the ambient pseudoindividualism—the following question: What type of society can contemporary man bear? In what way would his psychosocial structure allow *democratic* institutions to function? Democracy is the regime of political reflectiveness; where is the reflectiveness of the contemporary individual? Unless it is reduced to the barest management of current affairs—which, even in the short term, isn't possible, since our history is a series of intense perturbations—politics entails choices; starting from what will this individual, more and more deprived of any bearings, take a position? The media flood becomes all the more effective as it falls on receivers lacking their own criteria. And this is also what the empty speeches of the politicians are adapting themselves to. More generally speaking, we may ask: What does it mean for an individual today to live in society, to belong to a history; what is the contemporary individual's vision of the future of its society? All we have here is a perplexed mass, which lives from day to day and without any horizon—not a critical-reflective collectivity.

Le Débat: Are you not underestimating the impact of two conjunctural phenomena, on the one hand the disarray provoked by the collapse of the eschatology of socialism, and on the other the aftershock of the thirty years of expansion, the Long Boom of 1945-1975? On the one hand, the figure

⁶T/E: See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (first published in French in 1990 but first delivered in English in September 1989), now available above in the present volume.

that dominated the future, even for its adversaries, is vanishing, leaving a terrible void as to what might give an orientation to collective action. On the other hand, we are exiting from a period of unprecedented economic and social upheavals, under the effect of growth and redistribution. What gave an orientation to history is disappearing at the same time that, from a different angle, history is proving to have traveled much faster than anyone had foreseen—and, in addition, somewhat in the right direction from the standpoint of the well-being of all. How would citizens not be tempted to fold their arms and give in?

C.C.: Certainly. But to point out the causes or the conditions of a phenomenon does not exhaust its signification or circumscribe its effects. For the reasons you have cited, and for many others, we have entered into a situation that has its own direction and its own dynamic. But your allusion to growth and to well-being introduces quite rightly a key element of the problem, which until now we have left aside. We have spoken in terms of political and philosophical values. But there are economic values and, more exactly, the economy itself as central value, as central preoccupation of the modern world. Behind Constant's "enjoyments" there is the economy: these "enjoyments" are the subjective side of what the economy has become in the modern world, that is to say, the central "reality," the thing that truly counts. Now, it seems evident to me that a genuine democracy, a participatory democracy like the one I have evoked, is incompatible with the dominance of this value. If the central obsession, the fundamental *push* of this society is the maximization of production and of consumption, autonomy disappears from the horizon and, at the very most, a few tiny liberties are tolerated as the instrumental complement of this maximization device. The unlimited expansion of production

and of consumption becomes the dominant, and almost exclusive, imaginary signification of contemporary society. As long as it retains this place, as long as it remains the sole *passion* of the modern individual, there can be no question of a slow accretion of democratic contents and liberties. Democracy is impossible without a democratic passion, a passion for the freedom of each and of all, a passion for common affairs, which become, as a matter of fact, the personal affairs of each. One is very far from that.

Le Débat: But one can understand the optical effect that can be attributed to public opinion since 1945, the idea that the economy is in the service of democracy.

C.C.: In reality it has been in the service of oligarchical liberalism. It has permitted the ruling oligarchy to provide bread, or cake [*la brioche*] if you prefer, and shows [*les spectacles*], and to govern in full tranquillity. There are no more citizens; there are consumers who are content to give a vote of approval or disapproval every few years.

Le Débat: Is not the pressing problem today above all to extend democracy to the rest of the world, with the enormous difficulties this implies?

C.C.: But could that be done without fundamental challenges? Let us consider, first of all, the economic dimension in particular. Prosperity has been purchased since 1945 (and already beforehand, certainly) at the price of an irreversible destruction of the environment. The famous modern-day “economy” is in reality a fantastic waste of the capital accumulated by the biosphere in the course of three billion years, a wastefulness that is accelerating every day. If one wants to extend to the rest of the planet (its other four-fifths, from the standpoint of population) the liberal-oligarchic regime, one would also have to provide it with the economic level, if not of France, let us say of Portugal. Do

you see the ecological nightmare that signifies, the destruction of nonrenewable resources, the multiplication by fivefold or tenfold of the annual emissions of pollutants, the acceleration of global warming? In reality, it is toward such a state that we are heading, and the totalitarianism we have got coming to us is not the kind that would arise from a revolution; it is the kind where a government (perhaps a world government), after an ecological catastrophe, would say: You've had your fun. The party is over. Here are your two liters of gas and your ten liters of clean air for the month of December, and those who protest are putting the survival of humanity in danger and are public enemies. There is an outside limit that the present unfettered growth of technical developments and of the economy is sooner or later going to run up against. The poor countries' exit from a life of misery could occur without catastrophe only if the rich part of humanity agrees to manage the resources of the planet as a *diligens pater familias*, to put a radical check on technology and production, to adopt a *frugal* life. That can be done, with arbitrariness and irrationality, by an authoritarian or totalitarian regime; it can also be done by a humanity organized democratically, on the condition that it abandons economic values and that it cathects other significations.

But there is not only the material-economic dimension. The Third World is prey to considerable, uncontrollable, and essentially antidemocratic forces of reaction—let us think of Islam, but that is not the only one. Does the West today have anything to offer the Third World, apart from an abundance of gadgets, to jolt it in its imaginary institution? Can one say to them that jogging and Madonna are more important than the Koran? If changes in these parts of the world are to go beyond the mere adoption of certain techniques, if they are to affect cultures in their deepest and

most obscure recesses, so as to render them permeable to democratic significations, for which nothing in their history prepares them, a radical transformation is required on the part of that part of humanity I do not hesitate to call the most advanced: Western humanity, the part of humanity that has tried to reflect on its fate and to change it, not to be the plaything of history or the plaything of the gods, to put a greater part of self-activity into its destiny. The weight of the responsibility that weighs on Western humanity makes me think that a radical transformation must take place first here.

I am not saying that it will take place. It is possible that the present-day situation will endure, until its effects become irreversible. I refuse for all that to make reality into a virtue and to conclude that something is right just because it is a fact. It behooves us to oppose this state of things in the name of the ideas and of the projects that have made this civilization and that, at this very moment, allow us to have a discussion.

The Revolution Before the Theologians: For a Critical/Political Reflection on Our History^{*}

Before the great majority of texts and stances occasioned by the bicentenary of the French Revolution, it is Georges Clemenceau who has the most right to rejoice. With a few notable exceptions—François Furet and those working close to the outlook he has promoted, or, in another direction, Ferenc Fehér in a recent article¹—“friends” and “enemies” of the Revolution alike seem to be in accord on one point: the Revolution is a bloc, dark and sinister for some, radiant and resplendent for others. True, in reading these authors one wonders sometimes whether they are all talking about the same object, so much do the events sampled from the immense mass of facts, the way these events are highlighted, cast into perspective, and, whatever one claims, morally evaluated differ from and stand in opposition to one another. And yet, the approach to the object, the “method” and,

^{*}Originally published as “La Révolution devant les théologiens” in *Lettre Internationale*, 23 (1989): 70-73, the full text of this article was published with this same title in *MM*, 176-86 (213-30 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: The present translation, which first appeared in abridged form as “Our Revolutionary Tradition” in *Common Knowledge*, 1:3 (Winter 1992): 44-55, includes section headings added to the *Lettre Internationale* text that were retained in the complete version first published with the full title in *WIF*, 70-83. The “before” in the title (as well as in a few other places in the text) is intended in the sense of “considered by”—as in, “the matter *before* the committee”—not in the sense of “prior to” or “in front of.”]

¹T/E: Ferenc Fehér, “The Loss of Revolutionary Tradition,” *Dissent*, 36:4 (Fall 1989): 535-40. Castoriadis cites the French translation of Fehér’s article, which was published in the preceding issue of *Lettre Internationale*, 22 (Autumn 1989).

inseparable therefrom, the implicit philosophy are the same. The Revolution is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition; the point is to show that it must be condemned or approved, save for some secondary reservations. In both cases, the underlying philosophy of history is almost or downright theological: the Revolution cannot but be the Incarnation of Good or of Evil.

Before examining, at the end of this article, what under the pen of Solzhenitsyn² this sort of philosophy offers, I want to broach discussion of a few more general presuppositions and then try to contribute a few elements for a critical/political reflection on the Revolution.

I. The Relevance of History

The lucid citizen and the political thinker cannot but reject outright the demonology, or angelology, of the Revolution. Not so as to adopt a benevolent eclecticism, to issue balanced judgments, to declare oneself somewhat in favor of everyone, but rather so as to develop a *critical* and *political* attitude. Critical, from *krinō*, a verb that, before signifying “judging,” means “separating,” “distinguishing”—*auseinandersetzen*, as one would say in German. Before a process that, even if it dates back two centuries, retains for us an eminent *political* significance—as is shown not only by the quarrels that have once again arisen over the Revolution but also by some less ephemeral aspects to which I shall return—such a critical attitude, the effort to distinguish and to separate, becomes imperative.

A historian who, *qua* “pure” historian (if such a thing can exist), studies and describes the reign of Cambyses, the

²Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “Les Deux révolutions,” *Lettre Internationale*, 22 (Autumn 1989): 54-62.

Merovingian age, or the Time of Troubles does not have to *krinein*, to distinguish/separate/judge. "Differences in appreciation" of these periods, authors, and acts can have bearing only upon the real linkages (what would have happened if Cambyses had behaved differently in Egypt?) and are of interest only to specialists.

Things are altogether different with events, processes, or social-historical forms that, though irremediably swallowed up into the past, remain *quodammodo* alive for us today since they are not mere antecedents of what we are, some *de facto* necessary conditions for the present, but rather are relevant and, so to speak, still active components for our interrogations and our will. What makes them relevant? It is that the *significations* created at that time, and the *institutions* in which they were embodied, retain a meaning for us, *and* that this meaning does not go without saying (as, let us suppose, the existence of writing or a certain validity of mathematics goes without saying). This signifies that the questions we pose to ourselves regarding what is and is not to be done, regarding the way we organize ourselves collectively, regarding the orientations of social life inasmuch as such orientations depend on our lucid and deliberate activity, these questions—which therefore remain unresolved for us—have been *created* as questions during these periods; this signifies, as well, that the responses furnished, whether we find them acceptable or unacceptable, continue to enter into the terms of discussion.

Here a clarification is necessary. The questions of how society is to be organized and of what role individuals are to play therein have, naturally, been "posed" and "resolved" in all places and at all times; without that, there would be no society. They have been resolved by the Navahos as well as by the Balinese, by the Aztecs as well as by the Pharaohs,

during the era of the Tangs as well as during that of Ivan the Terrible. But they have been “resolved” *without having been posed*.

Now, we pose these questions explicitly, and we cannot *not* do so without ceasing to be what we are. Perhaps, to proffer a highly improbable hypothesis and in any case vain speculation, we would pose them in any event. The fact is that if we do pose them, it is that we exist in and through a history that is the only one to have posed them and that is defined essentially by this very fact. This history is defined by the emergence of explicit questions raised by real people: What ought we to think? What ought we to do? How ought we to organize our community? These questions are raised by people and have to find a response in and through people’s thought and action and outside all Revelation and all instituted authority. This history commences with Greece, recommences after a long eclipse with the first Renaissance (which precedes by three or four centuries the conventional “Renaissance” of history textbooks), continues with seventeenth-century England, the Enlightenment, and the revolutions of the eighteenth century (in America and France), and then with the workers’ movement.

Other histories—the Chinese or the Aztec, for example—are of philosophical importance to us. In them unfolds before our eyes certain of the possibilities of human being; these histories concretize the ontology of humanity. It is not true that “industry is the open book of human faculties,”³ but it is true that history in general is the scroll on which is inscribed human creation as it occurs. Yet this

³T/E: Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 5th rev. ed. (New York: International Publishers 1988), p. 104 (translation slightly altered to reflect Castoriadis’s French).

history, ours, also is of *political* interest to us. It retains its relevance for us—and it acquires relevance, too, for the other inhabitants of the planet—because it is the history of freedom, of our effectively actual social-historical freedom, freedom to make and do things, freedom of thought, in part already realized, in part stuttering, in part still to be accomplished—and always in danger.

We may illustrate this difference in interests by considering the reasons why the history of Russia, properly speaking (i.e., before the country fell under the political influence of the West and until the time band extending from the Decembrists to 1905), holds absolutely no interest for us in terms of a political history. Nothing can be done about this, for in it there is nothing to reflect upon *politically*. At the very most, Russian history can be of negative use through its juxtaposition with and opposition to that of Western Europe. Indeed, it offers a magnificent and massive counterexample to the idea that Christianity might have been an important element in the process of emancipation initiated in Western Europe starting in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It shows to what extent Christianity can be combined organically and harmoniously with Oriental despotism so as to produce a theocratic absolutism—as had already occurred for one-thousand years in the Byzantine Empire. It also shows that, if Western Europe therefore has found itself capable of opening another path, the efficient conditions for this opening are to be sought elsewhere. The Athenians, the Florentines, and even the Romans can make us reflect politically. Until the nineteenth century, however, Russia had no place in the history of freedom (whereas it obviously has a very important one—as does, moreover, Byzantium—in the history of painting, architecture, music, etc.). It enters into this history only starting from the moment when it attempts, after its own

fashion, to become naturalized into the history of the West—a painful process of naturalization that has also given birth to the monster of Leninism-Stalinism and that remains problematic, as is shown by the events now unfolding before our very eyes.

To reflect upon historical eras and processes critically, to separate/distinguish/judge, is to strive to find therein some germs of importance to us, as well as also limits and failures that, to begin with, put a halt to our thinking since they had served within reality itself as actual stopping blocks. (This is also the way one reads—or, rather, the way one ought to read—a great philosophical text, if one wants to make something of it for oneself.) It is certainly not to look in them for models, or for foils. Nor is it to look in them for lessons. Contrary to what some are now claiming once again, history is not a learning process. And yet, within this segment of history that concerns us, there exists a specific steadfast continuity, one that makes it possible for significations previously created to remain politically relevant for us. In this there is no contingency at all. If reflection on this history is possible, it is because this history itself is, to an important degree, reflective. It is this history itself that creates reflectiveness, reflectiveness implying and requiring, among other things, that one turn back upon the past in order to elucidate it. This is also why it is here that we encounter Thucydides, Jules Michelet, Alexis de Tocqueville, or Henri Pirenne—whereas everywhere else we find royal chroniclers and archivists.

It would be just as absurd to “condemn” the Athenians (because of slavery, the status of women, or even their religion) as it would be to claim that we have to imitate them (even with “modifications”). And as Aristotle’s texts are truly relevant only if they are taken as the point of departure for our

thought, not as an object of commentary or interpretation, so the significations created by the Athenians acquire their full relevance only if we are willing and able to create new ones.

II. A Self-Institution

In the case of the Athenians, we are reflecting upon the first form of self-government people have given themselves in history and the first society in which individuals in the full sense of the term have been created. In the case of the French Revolution, we are reflecting first of all upon the fact that a people (with the dimensions of a modern nation, and no longer those of a city) was willing, and able, to self-institute itself [*s'auto-instituer*] explicitly; that it challenged and brought back into question an institution of society that had denied it freedom; that, out of this freedom, it formulated and reformulated some of the principles without which, as insufficient as they might be, we can no longer even conceive simply of a civilized society. We are reflecting upon the immense instituting work [*œuvre*] that was accomplished in so many domains in so little time. We are reflecting upon the break that was established *vis-à-vis* “reforms” and “improvements” *granted* by one’s *masters* (for example, Alexander II or Mikhail Gorbachev, passing by way of Pyotr Stolypin). We are reflecting upon the testimony the Revolution has provided concerning the possibility and the capacity of a collectivity to take its own destiny into its hands. We are reflecting, above all, upon the abyssal question the Revolution has reopened and rendered infinitely more acute than was done by any previous movement (to take a conspicuous example, the American Revolution): Insofar as the institution of society depends on deliberate and explicit activity, *how ought* society to be instituted and *who ought* to

respond to this “*how ought*”? In responding to this “Who?” with “the people,” and in positing this “how” as “in a *de jure unlimited* fashion,” the Revolution has redefined for our age both democracy and the project of human autonomy.

Despite all its vicissitudes, the Revolution has anchored this project in historical reality (quite far beyond the borders of France): it has not, however, brought it to a successful conclusion. Hence its relevance for us. Certainly, the French Revolution is “over.” “Over” not only trivially, chronologically, but in the sense François Furet had in mind when he advanced this formula:⁴ both as abstract principles and as institutions (universal suffrage and electiveness, separation of powers, rights of man, etc.), the “gains” of the Revolution no longer are, *as such*, brought back into question by any segment of the population, even one of tiny significance; moreover (or: for this reason), we no longer can conduct our political struggles under the banners of ’89 (or of ’93). And yet when one considers the emancipatory potential of the questions to which it has given rise, a potential far from fully realized, as well as the immense gaps between its principles and reality, the Revolution is not “over,” or rather, it is to be resumed and to be carried beyond.

We are left with questions and gaps. Sovereignty, the Revolution says, belongs to the nation. But does sovereignty truly belong to the nation when power is in fact in the hands of an economic-political oligarchy, as is everywhere the case in the “democratic” countries?...to the nation, which exercises its sovereignty directly or by means of its representatives? Do these representatives always represent the nation, or something else? This vague (certainly not

⁴François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978), tr. Elborg Forster (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

disjunctive) “or” covers over and masks the opposition between direct democracy and “representative democracy.” If, however, “representative democracy” evolves fatally toward oligarchy (as Rousseau already knew), is not the question of direct democracy posed with renewed vigor? And what does a genuine direct democracy on the scale of modern political collectivities mean? How can one achieve direct democracy on that scale? “Liberty, equality, fraternity,” the Revolution says. Yet it is in the name of economic “liberty” (which bestows its benefits basically upon those who are already “economically free”) that considerable political inequality reigns. And how can “liberty” exist (other than in a limited and defensive sense) if the entire nation, save for an infinitesimal minority, is excluded from participation in power? To be one’s own master and to have imposed a few limits on the power of your masters are two radically different things.

The Revolution saw some of the social conditions for democracy and realized them (through its destruction of the *Ancien Régime*). It did not see many others, notably economic ones. The insistence with which the Assemblies voted to forbid proposals for “agrarian laws” (that is, those affecting property) is remarkable, as is its “ignorance” of the woman question. Indeed, these examples point to some of the Revolution’s most decisive limitations. There are undoubtedly many others. I mention them only to combat the confusion and forgetfulness that are characteristic of our age.

None of this—save for those who consider liberal capitalism the finally-found form of human society, and who, whether Hegelians or not, are dreaming the end of history—stops the questions the Revolution has explicitly or implicitly raised, as well as those it has silenced, from remaining with us still.

III. The Cunning of Unreason

We are also reflecting upon the failures of the Revolution and its drift. This presupposes that they are *separable*, in thought, within the unfolding of this great historical process; that the aspects and the moments of this process are not, were not at that time, held together by bonds of steel, chained by an irrefragable fatality. History cannot be, prospectively, the domain of the possible while ceasing *to have been so* retrospectively. I wrote a long time ago that we cannot, even retrospectively, think history without the category of the *possible*.⁵ And for a number of years, Hugh Trevor-Roper has insisted on the importance of the imaginative reconstruction of other trajectories, other issues to past forks in the road, if we truly want to comprehend what has happened.⁶ To say that is not to want to remake the history of the Revolution or to show that an “ideal” (or idyllic) evolution was equally possible. It is to want to test the solidity of the “internal logic” of the process, the very idea, at the limit, of an *exhaustive* internal *logic*, to refuse to come out on the cheap and with dry feet from the torrents of historical contingency, and above all to understand the possible logic, or nonlogic, of our own actions.

This attitude is obviously unacceptable to the absolute determinist or to the Hegelian (that boils down to nearly the same thing), who will say that, in thought, such separation is impossible: '89 *is* the Vendée, the Declaration of the Rights of Man *already is* the Terror. It is amusing to see Christians like Solzhenitsyn, or “philosophers” who denounce the

⁵[IIS](#), 48-52.

⁶See also Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, pp. 20-24.

origins of totalitarianism in Hegel, espousing the view of history as fatality, and affirming, If you want the Revolution, you want, you are obliged to want, the Terror (or the Gulag). This rhetoric, which has nourished the journalistic vulgate of the past decade, is possible only as a function of a *magical* conception of history: the sortileges of the Revolution fatally end in horror.

I have discussed this paralognism elsewhere.⁷ Counterexamples to this pseudoequation, revolution = totalitarianism, abound. That does not dispense us from the task of discussing and of criticizing the drift of the French Revolution: the drift toward the Terror, the drift toward war—the two being closely connected, as we know. Nor does it dispense us from taking stock of the fact that, in these regards too, the Revolution has been a failure—a failure that leads us to reflection, a failure whose conditions we try to elucidate.

These questions do not pose themselves naturally for Solzhenitsyn. The evil spell immanent to the Revolution, to every revolution, cements together the tiniest pieces of the catastrophic process, giving them all an equally demonic character. The chains of events occur fatally once the “Red Wheel” is set in motion, and no one can do anything about it. As so often in Solzhenitsyn, Leo Tolstoy (the Tolstoy of *War and Peace*) is standing right behind him. And the cunning of unreason supplies itself with the tools that it requires and that it merits. When one leaves behind the thoughts on “the profundity of being,” one glimpses the fact that under the pen of Solzhenitsyn, like so many others before him, not only the Terror but the Revolution in its entirety is resolved into the

⁷See “The Idea of Revolution” (1989), now available above in the present volume.

activities of a handful of crazed ideologues and bands of criminals who have risen from the dregs of society. By what miracle has the conjunction of these two marginal minorities led to the overthrow of a society that (as opposed to the Russia of 1917) was in no way in a state of decomposition and to the creation of new institutions, most of which remain standing at the base of the present edifice? And how were those tiny groups able to hold their own against the European coalition and to defeat it utterly, to spread their message, and to ensure that, two centuries later, people are still disputing over the meaning and value of their acts? A demonological mystery, upon which only a staretz⁸ would be able to shed any light.

The Terror is the failure, *par excellence*, of the Revolution. Perhaps we cannot eliminate *all* violence from political life—and logic and experience combine to tell us that it is extremely improbable that a ruling group not in a state of decomposition (as are, or are in the process of becoming, the Communist parties of Eastern Europe and Russia) would be willing to abandon power peacefully. There is no doubt, however, that a politics that proclaims itself to be revolutionary and democratic, but that can impose itself only through Terror, has already lost the game before it has begun, has ceased to be what it claimed. Humanity cannot be saved in spite of itself, and still less against itself. A democratic regime, whose *sole* foundation is the free activity of people and their participation in public affairs, cannot be instaurated by making these affairs the private reserve of a Committee of Public Safety, of a Jacobin Club, or of a “revolutionary” party, and by *freezing* (the word is Saint Just’s) these same

⁸T/E: A staretz or starets is an elder Russian monk who acts as a spiritual advisor.

people through application of the Terror. To the sundry “No liberty for the enemies of liberty” and “We shall force them to be free,”⁹ Rosa Luxemburg had already responded in her critique of Bolshevism: Freedom is above all freedom for those who *think otherwise*. Rosa knew Russian, but it is nevertheless strange to see her anticipating with this phrase the expression that, fifty years later, was to be used to designate, in Russian, that country’s dissidents (“those who think otherwise”).

Stating these things, however, is not enough. The French Revolution was not a putsch of a small party (like October 1917 was). It was carried forward, from 1789 until 1792, by the movement of a great proportion of society. Now, this movement came to a halt toward the end of 1792. The people withdrew from the stage, abandoning it to the leaders, to the clubs, and to the activists. And it is from that moment onward that the Terror settled in. The failure of the Revolution is not only the failure (or the crime) of revolutionaries or Jacobins. It is the failure of the people in its entirety.

It is strange to have to remind Solzhenitsyn—a writer who, in the finest pages of *The Gulag Archipelago*, insistently emphasized that the Stalinist Terror was *also* conditioned by the general attitude of the Russian people—of this. In a first phase of the French Revolution, the revolutionaries would have been nothing if the people had not been there. In a second phase, the revolutionaries would have been nothing if the people had been there. This is not to exculpate the artisans of the Terror; it is to note that the condition for the Terror was

⁹T/E: The first of these two lines comes from Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, the second from the seventh section of the first book of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*.

the withdrawal of the people. And that, too, leads us to reflection. We can say, of course, that such a withdrawal must fatally supervene in every revolution, that the political activity of the population in modern societies is highly cyclothymic. But we can also see in this cyclothymic character one of the principal obstacles, and even, all things considered, *the* obstacle to the instauration of a democratic society. Thenceforth, this fact becomes the formulation of a problem: What is to be done and how does one go about doing it so that each stage of an emancipatory process, through its very results, renders easier rather than more difficult, at the following stage, people's political participation? (I will remark in passing that the spirit of this formulation is also valid for the pedagogic process as well as for the psychoanalytic process.)

That, of course, is far from what was done during the Revolution. I cannot discuss here why (I have done so, in summary fashion, in my interview, "The Idea of Revolution").¹⁰ I shall simply add that no one, or almost no one, at the time thought and, without doubt, could think the question in these terms. It is the Revolution itself, and its failure, that allows us to do so. And the conclusions we draw therefrom are massively reinforced by the monstrous consequences of the Bolshevik putsch of October 1917 and by the rapid instauration of the world's first totalitarian power that followed.

¹⁰See n. 7 of the present chapter.

IV. February and October

It is here that we find the sole point of contact between the French Revolution and what, wrongly, is called the Russian Revolution when what one intends thereby is the seizure of power by Lenin and his party. There was a Russian Revolution in February; there was no revolution in October, only the coup d'État of a party, already germinally totalitarian in its structure and in its spirit, that seized power, set everything in motion in order to dominate and to domesticate the popular movement, and quickly succeeded in doing so (the final act taking place at Kronstadt in 1921).

Solzhenitsyn revives, without further ado, the old *topos* at the heart of the Bolshevik-Communist view, according to which a profound kinship exists between—or an identical essence (“common nature,” he writes) is shared by—the events in France and in Russia. Furet has already said what one should think of this “revolutionary catechism,”¹¹ which can serve just as well, we see, as a reactionary catechism. It is this catechism that Solzhenitsyn repeats, simply by inverting the algebraic signs. (Let us note in passing that the parallel between Louis XVI and Nicholas II was developed at length by Trotsky.)¹² He also is evidently repeating the underlying metaphysics, for the fatality of the “Red Wheel” bears a striking resemblance to the determinism of the “internal dynamic of the revolutionary process” dear to Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin’s obsession with the French “precedent” (whose image he has obviously fabricated in

¹¹Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, pp. 81-131.

¹²Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Sphere, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 101-108.

tailor-made fashion and which is false from beginning to end), the explicit self-identification with the Jacobins, the haunting memory of “Thermidor,” are all known. When one really reflects upon it, his statement that “This is Thermidor. But we shan’t let ourselves be guillotined. We shall make a Thermidor ourselves,”¹³ says it *all*: retain power, come what may and little matter why one does so. But this grotesque and sinister imitation of a caricatured past is far from capable of creating a “common nature.”

The obsession with an essence of the Revolution as such, one that would be common to the French and Russian processes (angelic essence for the communist ideology, diabolic for Solzhenitsyn), makes Solzhenitsyn lose sight of the essential. Under his pen, peoples disappear as active (lucid or not, it matters little here) agents of their history. The decisive differences between the French events and those of Russia are also made to disappear. In the end, it is the differences in the results that disappear.

Indeed, the movement of societies and the complex activities of men and women are dissolved into a series of exactions and crimes committed by madmen and bandits, on the one hand, and, on the other, the “whirlwind that seizes hold” of almost everything, the “Red Wheel.” Hardly ever does he name, save sporadically, a few social groups, and these seem to act only by reflex, or else to take advantage of situations in order to give themselves over to crimes and

¹³T/E: This quotation of Lenin appears in Victor Serge’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 131. When I first showed Castoriadis this passage, with which he was unfamiliar, he dismissed it as “nothing new”; thus his phrase, “When one really reflects upon it,” to indicate that he had given his initial response a second thought, thereby exemplifying the “critical/political reflection” he advocates in the present text.

pillaging, these being, as is well known, the province of "crowds." The "popular awakening," the "exceptional activity of the popular masses," to take up Furet's expressions, do not exist for him—or else are treated as pure anarchy and disorder. In this way Solzhenitsyn excises from the history of his country what is, to this day, its sole title of entry into the history of freedom: the creation, in 1905 as well as in 1917, of soviets, followed by the creation of factory committees. New forms of collective democratic power (factory councils, as is known, were to be revived by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956), the soviets and factory committees in no way coincided with the Bolshevik power, which tried to appropriate them, often encountered resistance from them, and succeeded in emasculating them and domesticating them completely only at the end of a four-year period.

Now, this very fact reveals one of the essential (not descriptive) differences between what happened in France and what happened in Russia. Schematizing to an enormous degree, certainly, it can be said that in France there was not, at the outset and for a long time, any genuine cleavage between the social strata that made the Revolution and its political "representatives." As has already been said, it was starting at the end of '92 that the people withdrew. From then on, there remained on the stage only the activists of the *sections*, especially the Parisian ones, which the Robespierrean power repressed in the Autumn of '93 and then again in the Spring of '94. In Russia, however, there was an enormous gap that Solzhenitsyn covers over [*occulte*], in exactly the same way Bolshevik historiography does. February is not Bolshevik—and October is not popular. There are two vectors in the Russian events. The collapse of Czarism was the effect of an immense movement on the part of workers and soldiers, which extended immediately to the

peasantry. This movement, as one knows, took the Bolsheviks by surprise once again, and it endowed itself immediately with autonomous forms of organization, the soviets. The logic of this movement is certainly not the totalitarian power of a single “leading” party. On the other hand, there are Lenin and his party, very weak at the outset, which aimed at absolute power and organized itself for the purpose of seizing it. This party was already a micro-State and a micro-army. While it succeeded in acquiring a high degree of influence within the Petrograd Soviet and within the workers’ soviets, it was greatly in the minority when, in October, it seized power. Thenceforth, the totalitarianism whose seed it was germinating quickly blossomed: it became in fact a Party/State/Army and “resolved” all problems by means of the Terror. One will search in vain among these activities for one institutional creation that retains any interest or meaning. Or rather, its sole creation is precisely totalitarianism itself, accompanied by the reconstruction of a statist and military Apparatus and, fifteen years later, by the construction of a national industry on top of millions of corpses. Even that accomplishment could not have taken place, however, without destroying the soviets in fact (while at the same time shamelessly appropriating the name), without eliminating all their power and all their autonomy, without succeeding in transforming them, in the face of significant resistance, for some time into transmission belts and then, rapidly, into screens for its power. This cleavage, this potential and often real conflict in Russia from 1917 to 1921 between the Bolshevik power and the organs created by the masses starting in February cannot be neglected by those who want to reflect on this period. Yet Solzhenitsyn does not seem to see any problem in the fact that the Bolsheviks were only able to arrive at power by crying “All Power to the Soviets” and were

only able to remain in power by making of this slogan the first phrase of Orwellian Newspeak in the twentieth century.

V. A New Social Imaginary

Nothing analogous occurred in France. The Jacobins were not a totalitarian party, not even a true party: if they had been, there probably would have been no Thermidor. To speak, however, as does Solzhenitsyn, of post-1917 Russia without speaking of the Bolshevik Party and of its role of capital importance, is to serve the garlic mayonnaise without the garlic, to mount a production of *Hamlet* without the Prince.

Second, both the theology of the Revolution as essentially demonological as well as the trivial, journalistic description of “parallels” plunge one into darkness as to the enormous and essential difference in their respective outcomes. It is simply absurd to insinuate that liberty might have been established in France in spite of the Revolution and that “if liberty has finally been achieved in France, it is really thanks to these U-turns” (namely, the Restoration, the Second Empire, etc.).

Of the Bolshevik enterprise there remains and there will remain nothing but an immense accumulation of corpses, the inaugural creation of totalitarianism, the perversion of the international workers’ movement, the destruction of language—and the proliferation, over the surface of the planet, of a number of bloody regimes of slavery. Beyond lies a subject for reflection upon this sinister counterexample of what a revolution *is not*.

Of the French Revolution there remains, beyond the message of liberty that has been received as such everywhere in the world and that has nowhere—except, precisely, in

Russia—given rebirth to the Terror, a host of insistent and fecund questions, as well as a social-historical base without which it is unclear how we could proceed any further along the path of human emancipation.

Finally, there is Edmund Burke's tune, which Solzhenitsyn reprises in turn. Russia, Solzhenitsyn says, was on the path toward progress and reform; 1917 (and here, as everywhere in his text, February and October are not distinguished) brought only an interruption and an end to this process. For my part, I am convinced that, without the Bolshevik putsch and supposing that the movement begun in February had failed as radical democratic movement, a liberal regime would have ended up being established in Russia and that the continued development of capitalism would have raised the Russian economy nearly to the American level, perhaps as early as the 1930s. What Solzhenitsyn fails to ask himself, however, is the following: And why, then, did those reforms undertaken by the last Czars take place at all? Was it by divine inspiration? Did 1905 play no part? As for the preceding period, did European influences play no role at all? If one considers these influences at the political level, was the French Revolution there for nothing? After 1789 and 1848, could Alexander II have confined himself to repeating Catherine the Great or Peter the Great?

Certainly, we can rediscuss the French Revolution; this is the discussion with Burke. However, the reforms undertaken during the final decades of the *Ancien Régime* (reforms that were, in fact, negligible as far as liberties were concerned) did not themselves stem from the good will of the Monarch, either. As weak as they were in reality, they gave expression to the enormous pressure that was coming from the social body as a whole—and that finally burst forth in the form of revolution. This pressure did not result from any form

of economic determinism. It expressed an immense sea change in ideas, a new social imaginary, the emergence of such significations as political liberty, equality, popular sovereignty. These significations were already at work in the American Revolution of 1776. Behind the latter, as well as, in a more indirect fashion, behind the French Revolution, stands seventeenth-century England, the two revolutions and the civil war that occurred there, Charles's severed head. The history of freedom in Europe is not a history of reforms granted. It is a history of struggles, in which revolutions play a part.

One can love the people as popes and czars did: on the condition that the people bow its head, accept despotism with gratitude, and, with still more gratitude, a few concessions in the way of "liberties." Such is not *our* tradition. A liberty granted is as little liberty as a system of thought accepted as dogma is a personal form of thought. Revolution is the effort of a people to give itself freedom, and to trace for itself the limits thereof.

October 1989

LOGOS

The State of the Subject Today^{*}

Fashions come, go, and look alike. The gold embroidery wears off, the hide remains. Not so very long ago, the death of man and the “unbeing” [*dès-être*] of the subject were widely celebrated. To believe the most recent news items, however, these reports were slightly exaggerated. Like a veritable risen ghost, the subject would seem to be among us once again.

All this talk about the death of man and the end of the subject has never been anything other than a pseudothoretical cover for an evasion of responsibility—on the part of the psychoanalyst, the thinker, the citizen. Similarly, today’s boisterous proclamations about the return of the subject, like the alleged “individualism” that accompanies it, mask the drift of decomposition under another of its forms.

The subject has not just returned, for it never left. It was always there—certainly not as substance, but as question and as project. For psychoanalysis, the question of the subject is the question of the psyche—of the psyche as such and of the socialized psyche, namely, the psyche that has undergone and constantly is undergoing a process of socialization. Understood in this way, the question of the subject is the

^{*}“L’État du sujet aujourd’hui” is the title of a speech delivered in Paris on May 15, 1986, during a series of “Critical Confrontations” of the Fourth Group (the French-Language Psychoanalytic Organization). I have restored here in their entirety certain sections, notably those concerning metapsychology, that I had to eliminate from my oral presentation. The written version of this speech was originally published in *Topique*, 38 (November 1986): 7-39, and reprinted in [MM](#), 189-225 (233-80 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: Originally published in *Thesis Eleven*, 24 (1989): 5-43, “The State of the Subject Today” was reprinted, with some typographical errors, in *American Imago*, 46:4 (Winter 1989): 371-412, and then correctly in [WIF](#), 137-71.]

question of the human being in its innumerable singularities and universalities.

I broach this question here, starting, of course, from the opening offered by Freudian thought and from the aporias to which it leads. As to the plurality of “psychical persons”—“instances” or “agencies” grouped in a supersubject that encompasses them—we may inquire whether, by using the various Freudian topographies and their subsequent elaborations by others, one can formulate a notion of the subject that covers them all and that is not simply formal in character, that is to say, more or less empty. We shall see that such a notion exists and that it exists precisely in a *prepsychical* sense, for it includes all living beings, whether endowed with a psyche or not. This first line of inquiry opens the way toward another interrogation: What, then, is the *unity*—if that is what it is—of the human being, beyond its corporeal identity and its “history” seen simply as its chronological container? This unity, which is assuredly more than enigmatic, will appear to us as something that is, properly speaking, *beyond the workings of the psychism*—beyond what the psychical would ever produce if “left to itself”; it is *to be accomplished* [*à faire*], it is that which makes itself [*se faire*] as it has to be, through analysis. In general, it may be called *project* and, in particular, it is the project—or, as is said, the end—of the analysis, provided that we understand clearly what unity, what kind of unity, is in question here.

~

The question of the subject may be formulated thus: *Who* comes into analysis? *Who* recounts a dream? *Who* makes a slip, “acts out,” or engages in an episode of delirium? And

who is behind (or in front of) this subject, sitting over there in the chair? And why does the latter generally think she is capable of responding to the question of who she is with the reply: I am so and so, the psychoanalyst?

Do these questions have any meaning? Thinking that he could trip us up, a first-year college student might point out to us that they have none at all; it is not because the grammars of Indo-European languages, he would say, just happen to include a personal pronoun and/or a first person singular form of the verb (which is not the case in all languages) that a reality of one order or another must correspond to this vocable. (A similar remark can be made, and has been made, apropos of the verb “to be” and ontology.) With the same argument one could show that the imagination, blood circulation, the Andromeda nebula, or Hilbert spaces do not exist. But there is more: no matter what the grammatical form of the *response*, there is no conceivable human tongue in which it is impossible to pose the following *questions*: *Who* did this? *Who* said that? A human tongue is always the tongue of a society; and a society is inconceivable if it does not create the possibility of *imputing to someone* both words and deeds.

In this form, the question *Who?* relates to the mode of subjectivity we call *the social individual* (see below). For psychoanalysis, however, the question of the subject, the question *Who?*, is posed immediately; it is raised as soon as the psychoanalyst ceases just sitting back in her chair and instead begins to interpret. (I am not talking about a totally and absolutely silent analyst. Clearly for him, this question, like almost all others, is by definition undecidable.) Indeed, it is impossible to formulate an interpretation and to communicate it to the patient without asking the following two questions: *Of whom* does this interpretation speak? *To whom* is this interpretation addressed? In both these cases, the

“who” does not concern the citizen, male or female, the social individual lying on the couch, but rather someone invisible. That of which the interpretation attempts to *make sense* makes sense only as an act (a wish, a thought, an affect) of someone who the visible analysand is not and in whom she does not, at the outset, recognize herself. (The patient N. N. feels a great aversion to the idea of sucking his mother’s breast—which nevertheless appears to have been the wish expressed in his dream the night before.) Nor is *she of whom* the interpretation attempts to make sense (speaking of someone, of the acts this interpretation makes sense of), to begin with, the visible analysand. In any case, it is not the person “before entering into analysis”; rather, it is someone who is in the process of *making herself*, someone who is aided by the meaning [*sens*] proposed in the interpretation to make herself be and who makes herself be only to the extent that she can make sense of what the interpretation proposes to her. The unavoidable question for the psychoanalyst is this: *Who* hears the interpretation (and experiences all the modifications in the interpretation and in the style of the interpretation throughout the treatment and throughout the entire dynamic of the treatment)? This unavoidable question has meaning only if one presupposes, each time, a certain view of the subject and of the state of the subject, not as substrate or immaterial substance but as emergent capacity to gather meaning and to make something of it for herself—that is to say, to gather a *reflected* meaning (the interpretation offers no “immediate” meaning) and to make something of it for herself by reflecting upon it (were it only because acceptance of an interpretation based entirely upon a transference “belief” in its meaning would express merely the subject’s continued alienation). It is around these terms—the gathering of a reflected meaning, reflection upon the meaning proposed and presented—that the

essential aspect of the problematic of the subject as a psychoanalytic project turns.

Certainly, one could—as one is tempted to do when one reads certain psychoanalytic writings of recent vintage—present psychoanalytical treatment as the looping together of two tape recorders, one of which, being in the place of the analyst, is constantly “mute” (out of order?). But in that case one would have to eliminate all interpretative activity on the part of the analyst, for all our acts of interpretation not only hypothesize effective action upon the “subject” and a reaction on the latter’s part—which is equally true in surgery, for example—but also, and especially, postulate that this sequence of action and reaction occurs by way of *meaning* and that this meaning is not contained in our words like medicine in a tablet. The simplest of interpretations is deciphered by the patient at her own risk and peril, and the main thing is what *she* will make of it: in the *reception* (or the rejection) of the psychoanalytic interpretation, the *subject* manifests herself as the indeterminable source of meaning, as the (virtual) capacity to reflect and to (re)act. Were one to correct the preceding sentence by saying not what *she* will do, but what *Id* will do, the question would remain in its entirety, for we do not and we cannot always take this *Id* in the same way; this begins already at the level of what the *Id* does in us and what the *Id* makes us do—in analysis I mean, but elsewhere as well. If after an interpretation (I am not necessarily saying *on account of* an interpretation) the patient “acts out” in one way or another, we cannot help but ask ourselves to what extent this interpretation has entered into the efficient conditions of this act, to what extent it might not have been better for us to keep it to ourselves or to think things out a bit further.

We ask *ourselves*. Here we use the reflexive form of

the verb. The term “reflexive” refers us once again to one of the poles of the question of the subject. We ask ourselves, because we *could have* done it or not have done it: we ourselves undertake the responsibility and we do not rid ourselves of the responsibility for the way the treatment evolves. We therefore grant ourselves, *qua* analysts, the status of an instance that can *reflect* and can *act*, can *decide* to intervene in this way or another one, to interpret or to abstain from doing so, call attention to a slip or let the associations continue to flow. Now, nothing permits us to refuse this status to others, and in particular to analysands—and it is this status that the term *subject* covers.

“Status” here does not signify “reality” or “substance” but “question” and “project.” I say “question,” for reflection implies that the interrogation is interminable. And I say “project” since what is aimed at through the treatment is the effective transformation of someone. It is neither foreseeable nor definable in advance, and yet it is not just anything at all.¹

~

One often encounters in the psychoanalytic literature of the past few years the expression “the unconscious subject.” Does this expression have any meaning? Everyone knows that the objective of the analysis is the exploration of the unconscious psyche, in the strict sense of the term, that the postulate of psychoanalysis is that this is where things really unfold, and that its aim (whatever its explicit form) is in fact to aid the analysand to modify “her” relation to “her”

¹This is why psychoanalytic treatment can be defined as a *practicopoietic* activity. See “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968) in [CLL](#).

Unconscious. But we should also point out that psychoanalysis never encounters this Unconscious, so to speak, “in person”; at most, psychoanalysis catches a fleeting glimpse of a few of its effects with the aid of a dream, a verbal slip, an abortive act. Psychoanalysis always encounters a flesh and blood human being who speaks—and who speaks not a tongue in general but in each case a quite particular tongue—who has or does not have a profession, a family situation, ideas, behaviors, orientations, and disorientations. In short, we are always faced with a human reality in which social reality (the social dimension of reality) covers almost all of the psychical reality. And, in a first sense, the “subject” presents itself as this strange totality, a totality that is not one and is one at the same time, a paradoxical compound of a biological body, a social being (a socially-defined individual), a more or less conscious “person,” and, finally, an unconscious psyche (a psychical reality and a psychical apparatus), the whole being supremely heterogeneous in makeup and yet definitely indissociable in character. Such is how the human phenomenon presents itself to us, and it is in the face of this cloudy cluster [*nebuleuse*] that we have to think the question of the subject.

The question becomes more complicated, moreover, at a second level since what is of central importance for us in this chimerical multiplicity is psychical reality. Now, the latter was seen by Freud not as a “subject” but as a *plurality* of subjects. He spoke about a multiplicity of “psychical persons,” “intrapsychic” conflicts between opposing “instances” or “agencies”:² these are metaphorical

²There is no need to document this point with quotations. But the following note, written by Freud in 1897, is worth citing: “MULTIPLICITY OF PSYCHIC PERSONALITIES. The fact of

expressions, to be sure, and those who think themselves clever have taken the opportunity to have a good laugh over them. The juridicoadministrative metaphor found in the term “instances” or “agencies” refers both to a hierarchy and to the possibility of jurisdictional conflicts. And the metaphor of different persons relates to the old Platonic image of the chariot with several horses drawing it in several directions at once. Noting that this is a metaphor does not eliminate, however, the characteristics of the object intended by this metaphor.

Indeed, both in the work of Freud and in that of his continuators, the “instances”—or what take their place—each appear as “acting” on their own and pursuing their own ends [*finalités*]. Among these ends, the first, perhaps, though also the least apparent, is to persevere in its own state of being (which is the ultimate meaning of resistance!); the specificity, the being-apartness, of each of these instances implies the existence, for each one, of a world of its own, of objects, of modes of connection, of valuations that are particular to it. The Freudian psyche thus presents itself as a conglomerate of psychical subspheres, arranged and held together somehow or other; each of them pursues its own goals and proves capable, in this activity, of performing theoretically and practically “infallible” “calculations” and acts of “reasoning” (let us recall Freudian arithmology: “it is impossible to think of a number that would be selected in a completely arbitrary manner”)³ and each of them “knows” its “objects” and “works

identification perhaps allows us to take the phrase *literally*” (capitals and italics in the original, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*), ed. James Strachey, vol. 1 [London: Hogarth, 1953-74], p. 249).

³T/E: We translate Castoriadis’s French version of this Freudian phrase.

them out” after its own fashion (think, for example, of the Freudian Superego, of its “aims,” its “style,” and its “procedural methods”).

I shall try to show below that there is truly nothing “metaphorical” about this way of presenting things. These categories—finality, calculation, self-preservation, a world of one’s own or “proper world”—are used in a completely justified fashion in this case. They correspond on a more profound level to the mode of being of the entities in question. The confusion comes from the fact that the categories in question are not *specific* to the psyche—to the “instances” or to the psychical “persons”—but govern a much vaster region: they are valid everywhere the *for-itself* exists. At the same time, they are completely insufficient for characterizing what may be called *subjectivity*, or the subject in the strong sense of the term. The *for-itself*—or, more simply, the *self*—exists elsewhere than in the psyche: on “this side” of as well as “beyond” the psyche. It is not the self or the *for-itself* as such that characterizes the psyche. Conversely, the psychical as such still does not yield a true *subjectivity*, in the sense I shall try to define for it.

In fact, we are dealing with a multiplicity of regions, and even levels, of being, all of which come under the title of the *for-itself*. The lack of sufficient distinctions between these regions and/or levels is the source of confusion on this score. To understand better what follows, let us first of all briefly characterize the *for-itself*.

The English-language translation, “one cannot make a number occur to one at one’s own free choice any more than a name,” appears in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life: Forgetting, Slips of the Tongue, Bungled Actions, Superstitions and Errors* (1901), SE 6: 240.

1. The for-itself is the *living being* as such (I mean: already, at least, at the cellular level). It is quite understandable that one might be tempted to label “subjective” the active core of the living being, whatever kind it may be.
2. The for-itself is the *psychical*, both as such and in its plurality, namely through its various “instances” and “for” each of the “psychical persons.”
3. The for-itself is the *social individual*, in other words, the socially constructed or fabricated individual, or again, the product of society’s transformation of the psychical—language and the family already being two aspects of society. This transformation, which occurs starting from each singular soma-psyche, brings into existence an entity that is socially defined and oriented in its sexual and professional roles, in its state and its appurtenances, in its motivations, its ideas, and its values.
4. The for-itself is *society*, as given each time and as such. When one says in everyday language, “Rome conquered the Mediterranean basin” or “Germany declared war on France,” these expressions—though certainly abuses of language—are not just metaphorical. I am not referring here to hypersubjects, to a collective consciousness or unconsciousness or to the spirit of a people but rather to the evident fact that each society possesses the essential attributes of the for-itself: the finality of self-preservation, self-centeredness, and the construction of a proper world.

In these four regions, we are dealing with the *merely real*. But we do not encounter here what, in psychoanalysis, is of greatest interest to us: the *human subject* properly

speaking, the subject that is at once the setting, the means, and the end (the finality) of the treatment. This subject is not merely real, it is not given; rather, it is to be made and it makes itself by means of certain conditions and under certain circumstances. The end of analysis is to make it come about [*faire advenir*]. It is an (abstract) possibility but not an inevitability for every human being: it is *historical creation* and a creation whose history can be followed. This subject, *human subjectivity*, is characterized by *reflectiveness* (which ought not to be confused with simple “thought”) and by the *will* or the capacity for deliberate action, in the strong sense of this term.

Similarly, we ought to reserve a place for *a society* that would not be simply a for-itself beyond individuals but would be *capable of reflecting on itself* and of deciding after deliberation—a society that can and should be called “autonomous.” We are authorized, and even obliged, to speak of it in this way because certain societies have emerged in history that are capable of broaching this sort of reflection on their own law, of calling it into question, and, up to a certain point, of deciding to modify it as a consequence of this reflection.⁴

There can be no question, however, of broaching here, even superficially, the set of questions raised by the existence of these six regions in which the for-itself appears and by the interrelationships among these regions. I shall concentrate mainly on trying to elucidate two points that seem to me of particular relevance to psychoanalytic theory and practice. First of all, I shall investigate the astounding similarities and the abyssal differences that unite and separate the living being

⁴See on this subject, most recently: “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in [CL2](#).

and the psychical. I shall then examine the question of the human subject properly speaking, as reflection and as will, as it is encountered in the problematic of psychoanalysis.

Before doing all that, and since I mentioned at the beginning the fashions of the past quarter-century, let us note that the preceding distinctions allow us to strip naked and expose to full scrutiny the sinews of the arguments made by the heroes of those years. These people wanted, in effect, to tear the human subject in two; the two resulting “subjective” modes, while related to it, in no way get to the heart of the problem. On the one hand, if one considers the for-itself as a simple self-centered process of self-preservation that is nevertheless “blind” to everything that goes beyond the instrumental activities on which these two finalities, self-centeredness and self-preservation, depend and that therefore is apparently fully “mechanizable,” the human being would no more be a “subject” than, for example, the immune system (which, as is known, exhibits a very strong tendency toward selfhood) is. One thus arrives at the “subjectless process” (Big discovery! But what, then, is a galaxy but a “subjectless process”?) and the Lévi-Strauss/Althusser/Foucault line of argumentation. Or else, one claims that the human subject can be entirely resorbed into the dimension of the social individual, and in particular into language; one will then say that it is caught, lost, alienated in language (and in the tinsel of society), that it does not speak but is spoken (or—why not?—that it does not write but is written)—only to install “behind” it a “subject of the Unconscious,” which obviously cancels itself out as soon as a word is uttered. This gives us the Lacan/Barthes/Derrida line of argumentation.

The Living Being

The initial for-itself, the archetypical for-itself, is the living being. Everything that will be said below presupposes the categories of the living being and presupposes that these categories persist through the various levels of the for-itself—not as positive attributes but as framework for relevant questions. “For-itself” signifies being one’s own end. Whether this manifests itself as the for-itself of a particular living specimen—the drive for self-preservation—or as the for-itself of the species—the drive for reproduction—matters little: there is self-finality (obviously with the limitations already indicated by the passage from the first case to the second). With self-finality goes a world of one’s own. This proper world is constituted, each time, in and through a series of encasements and interlacings of various types; the proper world of a dog “participates” in the proper world of the species dog, the proper world of some cell of this dog is simply a condition for the proper world of the dog without explicitly “participating” in it. These encasements cannot detain us now.

What does a proper world signify? There is necessarily each time—at least as soon as one reaches the cellular level—presentation, representation, and a bringing into relation [*mise en relation*] of that which is represented. Certainly “there is” something “outside,” there is *X*. But *X* is not information, as its very designation here indicates. It “informs” one only of the following thing: that “there is.” It is mere shock, *Anstoß* (we shall return to this). As soon as anything more could be said about it, it would have already entered into the play of “subjective” determinations—and ultimately, even this emptied, eviscerated limit case of determination that we are calling “there is” is not exempt

from the following question: *For whom* is there something? Nature contains no “information” waiting to be gathered. This *X* becomes something only by *being formed* (in-formed) by the for-itself that forms it: the cell, immune system, dog, human being, etc., in question. Information is created by a “subject”—obviously in *its own* manner of doing so.

The information thus created is not and can never be “point-like”: elements (or “bits”) of information are abstractions made by the theorist. Actual information is always a *presentation*—therefore always a *setting into images* [*mise en image*], and an image can never be an atom but always already is also a *bringing into relation*: it includes, indissociably, “elements” (of an indeterminate number, moreover) and their own mode of cobelonging. This bringing into relation can be built up in an indeterminate number of stages up above or down below, but we need not go into that here. We may call this function of the living being its “cognitive function.” We shall do so, however, on the condition that we understand how it unites, indissociably, two different dimensions: that of *imaging* [*l’imager*] and that of *relating* [*le relier*]. By an abuse of language these two dimensions may be called the “aesthetic” and the “noetic,” or the “sensorial” and the “logical.” The abuse of language consists in this: that, as we just said, imaging is intricately involved in relating and *vice versa*. There is always a “logical” organization of the image just as there is always an “imaged” support for every logical function. Staging [*mise en scène*]*—to use the terminology of Piera Aulagnier—already contains meaning, and putting into meaning* [*mise en sens*] cannot happen without a “presentification” of this meaning or sense—which requires a “scene.”

Each time and up to a certain point, setting into images as well as bringing into relation obey certain “rules”

[*règles*]. Indeed, they must exhibit a certain *regularity*, for without such regularity the living being would simply be unable to survive. We do not have to consider here the terms of these rules except to recall that they must be submitted (at least partially) to the self-finality of the living being—and already, for example, to the necessities of its self-preservation. Whence derive two other essential determinations of the for-itself of the living being. What is presented must be *valued* in one manner or another, positively or negatively; it is “*affected*” by a value (good or bad, food or poison, etc.), and therefore it becomes a support for (or correlate of) an *affect*, positive, negative or, at the limit, neutral. And this evaluation—or this affect—henceforth guides the *intention* (the “*desire*”), leading eventually to a corresponding act (of advancement toward or avoidance). Here we have the three characteristics of the *for-itself*, which were first sifted out as distinct elements during the fifth century BCE in ancient Greece.⁵ Everywhere there is the for-itself, there will be representation or image, there will be affect, there will be intention; in ancient terminology: the logiconoetic, the thymic, and the orectic. This goes for a bacterium as well as for an individual or for a society.

It is not difficult to comprehend that these two determinations—that is, self-finality on the one hand, and the construction of a proper world on the other—require each other in a reciprocal manner. If any entity whatsoever is to preserve itself as it is—to preserve itself numerically (this

⁵Thucydides 2.43.1 (the Funeral Oration). Apropos of the dead honored in this speech, Thucydides cites the positive qualities of the affect, thought, and desire. His primary “source” is obviously the Greek language; these three qualities must have already been sorted out in “Hippocratic” and/or “Sophist” circles.

dog) or generically (dogs)—it must act and react in an environment, it must give a positive value to what favors its preservation and a negative value to what disfavors it; and for all this, it must *be aware of...*, of this environment, be it only in the vaguest of senses. For the parts, the elements, of this environment to exist for it, they must be present for this entity and therefore represented by it. Now, such representation can be neither “objective” nor “transparent”—each of these eventualities would be a contradiction in terms. Representation cannot be “objective” since representation is representation through and for “someone,” and therefore necessarily “adjusted,” to say the least, to the finalities of this someone; neither can it be “transparent” since the manner of being of this someone participates as an involved party in the act of constituting this representation. Thus, to mention only its most brutally obvious feature, this presentation-representation can only be immensely *selective* in character. What is, each time, “perceived” or “taken in” leaves out an infinitely larger mass of the “nonperceived” of all orders; selection is not only quantitative, it is necessarily also qualitative. Some strata of what is will be able to be “acquired/constructed,” others will not, due to the nature of what is as well as to the nature of the presentational/representational predisposed apparatuses of the living being, which can only be determinate. “Determinate” means, in identical terms, “*limited*” or, if one prefers, *specific*. (This is why the omniscient God of rational theologians is itself an irrational idea: it would have to “perceive” at all possible phenomenal levels everything that might possibly ever be given to all internal and external *sensoria*; “thinking” would obviously not suffice here, for one cannot, through “thought,” reconstitute the specific pain of someone who has just undergone an operation or just lost a loved one.) This

specific selectivity is obviously also correlative with the aims of the for-itself that, each time, this specific living being is, and which depend on what it already is. A tree's goal of preserving itself does not lead to the same sort of selections within the environment that a mammal's goal of sexually reproducing itself does. Something else is selected each time, and each time it is transformed in another fashion when it is presented/represented. This leads to different predispositions in "perception/elaboration"—and the particular character of these predisposed apparatuses is also codetermined by that which "comes to hand" (François Jacob's "*bricolage*").⁶ the living being does not create its system of acquisition, elaboration, and "interpretation" of the elements of the environment in absolute liberty. For the most part, however, each living for-itself constructs, or better creates, *its own world* (I call "world," in opposition to environment, that which emerges through and with this creation). Quite obviously, the construction/creation of this world supports itself each time—it leans, to take up Freud's term (*lehnt sich an...*)—on a certain being-thus of what is. Of this being-thus, we can say strictly nothing—*except* that it must be such that it allows, precisely, for the ongoing existence of living beings in their unending variety.

We nevertheless are talking about it. How are we talking about it? In this specific case, we are talking about it *qua* metaobservers who are capable of observing at one and the same time the living being and that which happens outside the living being and of noting that an element *X* of *our* world triggers, in some living being, an element *X'* of *our* world that we call "reaction *Y*" of the living being. We are saying then,

⁶T/E: See Jacob's "Evolution and Tinkering," published in *Science*, 196 (1977): 1161–66.

if we are not careful, that for the living being in question, the element *X* furnishes information *Y*. This is a dreadful abuse of language. That which, “in itself,” corresponds to *X* is not information, nor does it furnish information: all we can say about it is that it creates a shock (*Anstoß*, to take up Fichte’s term) that sets in motion the formative (imaging/imagining, presenting, and relating) capacities of the living being. It is only after this enormous process of elaboration takes place that the indescribable correlate of *X* becomes “information.” But at the same time, this “beyond *X*” to which we can attribute no form (every form being “subjective”) *cannot be absolutely formless*: the *shock* cannot be, in itself, absolutely indeterminate and totally undifferentiated, for if that were the case we would be able to hear paintings and see perfumes.⁷

Here, then, we have the points of departure for a consideration of the living being as for-itself. Let us summarize once again the three principal ideas: the living being is for-itself insofar as it is self-finality, insofar as it creates its own world, and insofar as this world is a world of representations, affects, and intentions. And without being able to extend the following remark, we must mention certain questions to which the living being and its mode of being give rise. These questions straddle the “scientific” investigation of the living being and philosophy, and they will show, I hope, the relevance of what has just been said to psychoanalysis.

First of all, the living being exists in and through *closure*. In a sense, the living being is a closed ball. We do not enter into the living being. We can bang on it, shock it in some way, but in any event we do not enter into it: whatever we might do, it will react *after its own fashion*. The analogy

⁷See, most recently, “Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1986), now in [CL2](#).

with the psychoanalytic situation—and with every human relationship in general—is direct. One does not enter into someone as one pleases; one does not even enter in at all. An interpretation—or a period of silence—is heard by someone. That someone hears it: she has her own predisposed listening apparatus, just as the cell has its own predisposed perceptual/metabolic apparatuses.

In the second place—this may seem paradoxical and indeed it is, but it is also a consequence of the first point and a response to it—when we get to the heart of the matter, we cannot think of the living being except from within. Of course, to an enormous extent we cannot do without causal, “scientific” explanations and they are important, but ultimately something is still lacking: all the linkages we describe in scientific and purely outward terms, along with the coexistence and overlapping of these sequences, become intelligible to us only because they are enslaved to this finality that leads nowhere, to this being without a *raison d’être*, this particular living being. This is true of any single living specimen we might consider and it is true of the species as well. And this is apparent in an almost comic fashion in the writings of neo-Darwinians: after the hypothesis that everything is mechanistic/random is posited, all descriptions are given in teleological or finalistic terms. Species have evolved (as if it were) *in order to* adapt themselves to the environment; one adaptive strategy has succeeded whereas some other one has failed, and so on. (One never hears it said that a galaxy has failed in some activity or other.) But to say “some strategy of adaptation has failed” shows that one cannot *think* the set of processes of mutation-selection, and so on, without espousing the “point of view” of a species that “aims at surviving.” (What matters here is not the linguistic metaphor but the category that permits intellectual

comprehension.) Analogously, and leaving aside the literature relating to empathy and the critique thereof, there is no psychoanalysis unless it takes into consideration the “point of view” of the patient; no interpretation is possible if it fails to “see things from the inside.”

Finally, we encounter the supreme paradox: closure and interiority go hand in hand with a universality and a sort of participation. There is not *a* cell, there are an incalculable number of them. There is not *an* oak tree, there are oak trees—and *the* oak tree would not be able to exist without there being *oak trees*. But to closure and interiority is opposed not only a generic universality. Each singular entity participates in entities at other levels, it is integrated within them—or it is itself formed by the integration of such entities. An oak tree cannot exist without a forest, a forest cannot exist without birds, nor can they without worms, and so on. There is not a *single* obsessional neurotic, but also obsessional neuroses in their totality are not mere examples of the entity “obsessional neurosis.”

The Psychical

What are the specific characteristics of the psychical relative to the living being? Before answering that question, however, let us ask another one: What does one intend by “the psychical”? As we know, Aristotle attributes a soul—*psuchē*—to animals and plants, on the one hand, and to the gods, on the other.⁸ This is what we have called the for-itself. What concerns me here is the human psychism and its specific characteristics. But specific characteristics in relation

⁸*De Anima* 1.1.402b3-7.

to what? We shall keep in mind during this discussion what we know—or think we know—of the “higher” animal life forms, for example, since monotremes appeared some 150 million years ago. What can we say, what can we suppose, about the differences between the “psychism” of echidnas and the human psychism? The difference is obviously not sexuality as such. What is specific to humans is not sexuality but the *distortion* of sexuality, which is something else entirely.

This specificity is first of all *transversal* or *horizontal* in character. I mean by that that its traits hold for all psychical “instances.”

The first of these traits is the *defunctionalization* of psychical processes as they relate to the biological substratum (component) of the human being. We need only reflect a short while to see that this defunctionalization holds even for the Freudian Ego, which is supposed to ensure the human being’s connection with reality: in most cases in which someone commits suicide, the Ego must actively cooperate in the effort. Certainly, in this defunctionalization can be seen the condition for a functionality of another order: the psychical “instances,” each taken in itself, and the psyche as a whole are biologically nonfunctional in order to be “functional” from another point of view, their own. It is, for example, in the “functionality” of preserving one’s own “self-image” that one can, at the limit, kill oneself. But as this example indicates, that would be an abusive use of the term *functionality*. Each instance works at preserving *its* world, of which *its* image of the being in question is a central part.

That the preservation of this image may be valued, in general, much more than the preservation of the “real being” is a consequence, among other things, of a second transversal trait of that which is humanly psychical: the *domination of*

representational pleasure over organ pleasure. And from this derives what Freud had called the “magical omnipotence of thoughts”⁹ and which ought to be called, more correctly, the *real* omnipotence of unconscious thought. We say “real” here because for the Unconscious the question is not that of transforming “external reality” (about which it knows nothing) but that of transforming the representation so as to render it “pleasing.” Now, in principle, such a representation can always be formed; if and when it is not formed, another psychical instance is opposing it in this endeavor.

Presupposed by these two traits, but not identical to them, is a third that undoubtedly is the one that characterizes, *par excellence*, the humanly psychical: the *autonomization of the imagination*.¹⁰ We are speaking here, of course, of the radical imagination: not the capacity to have “images” (or to see oneself) in a “mirror” but the capacity to posit that which is not, to see in something that which is not there. Strictly speaking, and as has already been said, this *imaging* must be presupposed everywhere the for-itself exists, therefore beginning with the living being in general. The living being makes an image (a “perception”) be where *X* is (and even where there is nothing at all, as in the case of shadows). But it makes the image once and for all, always, “in the same fashion,” and it makes this image by enslaving it to the requirements of functionality. For the human psychism, there is unlimited and unmasterable representational flux, a representational spontaneity that is not enslaved to an ascribable end, a rupture of the rigid correspondence between

⁹T/E: See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13.

¹⁰See, [*IIS*](#) (1975/English translation 1987), ch. 6, in particular 274-300.

image and *X* or a break in the fixed succession of images. It is obviously upon these properties of the radical imagination that the human being's language capacities lean: these capacities presuppose the faculty of *quid pro quo*, of seeing something where there is something else, for example in the ability to "see" a monkey in the five phonemes and six letters of this word, but also not always seeing the *same* thing, therefore in the ability to understand the expression "I've got a monkey on my back," and once again in the ability to see a monkey in *singe*, if one knows French.

I shall merely add a few words on a fourth trait, one that seems to me of capital importance and that, to my knowledge, has been neglected by other writers: the *autonomization of the affect* in the human psychism. I think that it is of capital importance from a psychoanalytic point of view to note the existence of this trait. We are in the habit of thinking that the affect happens to be dependent on the representation or on a certain connection between desire and representation. If we were to listen more simply, I would dare say more naively, both to clinical data and to ourselves by means of self-observation, we would easily be able to convince ourselves that the affect and the representation are interrelated *and* independent. This is of great importance both with respect to the limitations on interpretation (on the power of interpretation) and with respect to the role of the analyst. States of depression provide the clearest example. Quite often when dealing with someone in a state of depression the question inevitably arises: Is the patient in a depressed mood because she sees everything in a dark light, or does she see everything in a dark light because she is in a depressed mood? We see in these states that, to the extent that the representation determines the affect, interpretation can work. But to the extent that the representation depends on the affect,

the interpretation does not work and the analyst cannot fulfill her role as interpreter; here she can only play the role of providing an affective support or reinforcement—within the limits dictated to her by her profession. I think that this duality exists, that neither of these two roots of depressed moods is reducible to the other, and that this is the reason why these states so often prove unamenable to treatment.

That there is also both a *defunctionalization* and an *autonomization of desire* is obvious and clearly recognized (although under other terms). We must simply note that they are indissociable from the autonomization of the representation (imagination) and of the affect.

In this human psychical world—which is characterized by defunctionalization, the domination of representational pleasure over organ pleasure, and the relative autonomization of the imagination, of the affect, and of desire—remain floating debris of the animal's *functional* “psychical” apparatus—namely, mechanisms dependent upon ensidic¹¹ logic—and these are, moreover, constantly being utilized by the various instances of the “psychical apparatus.” It is obviously not the existence of such mechanisms that can be said to characterize the human psyche but rather their “disintegration,” their being put into operation [*mise en œuvre*] for goals [*finalités*] that are contradictory or incoherent. Man is not, first of all and to begin with, a *zōon logon echon*, a living being possessing *logos*, but a living being whose *logos* has been fragmented, the fragments being put in the service of opposing masters.

The specificity of the human psychism, on the other hand, lies in its vertical dimension, that is, in its *stratification*.

¹¹Ensemblistic-identitary logic. See “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in [CL2](#).

We do not have to enter here into a discussion of particular conceptions of this stratification; whether one adopts the first or second Freudian topography, Kleinian “positions,” or something else—for example, Piera Aulagnier’s topography, which is articulated through originary, primary, and secondary strata; or again, the one I have formulated on my own, which posits at the outset a psychical monad, closed upon itself, that bursts apart during a triadic phase and then goes through an Oedipal phase to culminate, finally, via various processes of sublimation, in the social individual¹²—we are still dealing with a psyche characterized by a multiplicity of “instances,” which is something completely other than a functional deployment of parts aimed at achieving a better division of labor. We are justified in speaking about *stratification* here since some of these instances—or of these processes (I am not presupposing, in all that is said here, any sort of “substance”)—are much closer to the “surface” than others and since this division between “surface” and “depth” is inscribed in the very thing itself (it is not an “optical illusion,” etc.: in short, there is a dynamic Unconscious).¹³

¹²See [IIS](#), 308-20.

¹³The term *stratification* obviously ought not to be taken to signify a sedimentation of deposits that are ordered and regular. It is in thinking about this indescribable mode of coexistence among various psychical processes that I have been led to reflect on a logic of a different type, the logic of *magmas*. See “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy.” Freud speaks of *Brecciagestein* (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* defines “breccia” as “a rock consisting of sharp fragments embedded in a fine-grained matter”): see *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*), vol. 2/3, p. 422; in English, *SE* 5: 419 (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, chapter 6, section F: “Speeches in Dreams”); also, *GW* 11: 184 (in English, *SE* 15: 181-82, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, “XI. The Dream-Work”).

Now, this stratification, as well as defunctionalization, furnishes us with a decisive way of discriminating between the human psychism and the animal “psychism.” An animal is not “stratified” in the strong sense of the term: it has no psychical *history*; it has no intrapsychic conflicts. (That one might happen to make them appear via *experimentation* only goes to confirm what I am saying.) But in the human being, intrapsychic conflicts are conflicts of “instances”; and the very existence, as well as each particular concretion, of these instances are the result of a *history*. In and through this history, instances (or types of processes) are constituted; they are not later “transcended” or “harmoniously integrated” but instead persist within a contradictory and even incoherent totality. Here we have what radically distinguishes the human psychism’s temporal evolution from all “learning processes.”¹⁴ Certainly there is human learning, just as there is human logic: both are part of the human being’s animal inheritance. (The astonishing thing in the human being is not that it learns but that it does not.)

In this history, the subsequent stages do not nullify the preceding ones, they coexist with them in all conceivable modes. Thus is created the range of human psychical “types”

Again in chapter 6 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Section G: “Intellectual Activities in Dreams”), Freud speaks of dreams as a *Konglomerat* (GW 2/3: 451; in English, SE 5: 449). By the way, the page references from the *Register der Gleichnisse* in the *Gesamtregister* (GW 18: 911) are erroneous; they should be corrected and supplemented, based on the preceding citations.

¹⁴It would change nothing in what we are saying here if, in order to satisfy those who believe in innate instances or innate embryos of instances (the first Freud sometimes did), we replaced this phrase, “are constituted,” with “are deployed” or “are developed.”

we have become familiar with through nosology and psychoanalytic characterology. But what we should be emphasizing here is what confers upon each “instance”—or upon each type of process—its essence of *for-itself*. This is what we observe, each time, concerning processes that are self-related and that are creations of a world. There are, for each “instance” or for each process, new and specific *objects*, specific valuations and affects, specific appetitions. We equally have, each time, a new and specific type of meaning—namely, the insertion of “representations” into new types of relationships, into other matrices of equivalence and belonging. (The forest for the Conscious and the forest for the Unconscious.) Each time, a mode of representing, a mode of desiring, a mode of being affected is deployed. For example, there is an affective coloration that is anal and nothing but anal. There is, therefore, also a preservation of closure for each of its instances, as is the case for the living being: each knows its world and does not want to know anything but that world, each pursues its ends and is opposed to all the other ends. But at the same time there is in the psychical apparatus a relative *rupture* of this closure: these different instances do not exist in a relation of pure mutual exteriority, and this is what furnishes, among other things, the condition for the possibility of psychoanalytic treatment. I shall return to this point.

We know that this psychical plurality leans heavily on the stages of neurophysiological maturation (and animal learning), which are not of concern to us here. But it is also codetermined to a decisive degree by the process of socialization, both in its consistency (each time of a specific character) and in the simple fact of its unfolding. And this strange plurality is not a system; it is what I call a *magma*, a *sui generis* mode of coexistence with an “organization” that

contains fragments of multiple logical organizations but which is not itself reducible to a logical organization.¹⁵

The Social Individual

I was just talking about the process of socialization. This leads us to the third region of the for-itself, which is that of the social individual. In psychoanalysis, no one likes to use either this term or that of socialization, and I truly do not know why. Everyone is always talking about the mother. But what is the mother? The mother is someone who speaks; even if she is a deaf-mute, she speaks. If she speaks, she is a social individual, and she speaks the tongue of such and such a particular society, she is the bearer of imaginary significations specific to that society. The mother is the first, and massive, representative of society for the newborn baby. And as society, whichever one it is, participates in an indefinite number of ways in human history, the mother is to the newborn the acting spokesperson for thousands of past generations. This process of socialization begins on the first day of life, if not before—and ends only with death, even if we think that the decisive stages are the very first ones. It culminates in the social individual, a speaking entity that has an identity and a social state, conforms more or less to certain rules, pursues certain ends, accepts certain values, and acts according to motivations and ways of doing things that are sufficiently stable for its behavior to be, most of the time, foreseeable (sufficiently as to need)¹⁶ for other individuals.

¹⁵See “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy.”

¹⁶T/E: Castoriadis takes the phrase “sufficiently as to need” from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.

The condition for the whole process is the *psyche's capacity for sublimation*, which I have spoken about elsewhere.¹⁷

The process results in an individual that *functions* adequately: that is to say, functions adequately for itself most of the time (we must consider the history of humanity and not just our patients) and, above all, functions adequately from the point of view of society. This last aspect was admirably recognized by Honoré Balzac when he described, at the beginning of one of his novels, his hero's arrival into Paris.¹⁸ This description serves as the pretext for a brief but wonderful characterization of the essence of the big city—in this case, Paris—and culminates in one of the most discerning definitions of the relationship between the individual and society: “You are always acceptable to [*convenez*] this world, you will never be missed by it.” That is society. Whether you are Alexander the Great, Landru,¹⁹ De Gaulle, Jack the Ripper, Marilyn Monroe, a girl from the red light district, autistic, an idiot, an incomparable genius, a saint, or a criminal, there is always a place for you in society, you are

¹⁷On sublimation as such, see [IIS](#), 311-20 (ch. 6). I return to this below.

¹⁸Balzac, *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*, tr. Ernest Dowson (Chicago: Peacock, 1928), p. 6 (translation slightly altered). In the next sentence I shall say “pretext,” but in fact one can just as well think that, for Balzac, individuals become pretexts for a description and analysis of these galaxies of times, places, states, passions, endeavors, and “careers” that are the living flesh of *society*. Ultimately, it is not a question of pretexts one way or the other. The miracle of Balzac is the balance he establishes between the phenomenalization of society through individuals and the realization of individuals via society.

¹⁹T/E: Henri Désiré Landru was a famous convicted French serial killer of lonely wealthy women whose life story was made into a film written and directed by Charlie Chaplin, *Monsieur Verdoux*.

sued for [*convenez*] it. And three minutes (three milliseconds, rather) after your disappearance, the surface of the waters closes upon itself again, the hole disappears, society continues, and you are not missed. From this point of view—from the point of view of society—the process of socialization is always in operation. The failures that occur are on the side of the “person”—but that is another story.

This allusion, via Balzac, to the self-finality of *society* is all that I shall be able to say about this fourth level of the for-itself.

With the advent of the social individual the question I posed in my introduction arises once again: What is the unity of the singular human being? But an answer to this question now also emerges. This unity/identity of the individual is the unity/identity of its singular social definition—including here, of course, its name (*X*, son of *Y* and *Z*, inhabitant of *C*, with profession *P*, age *t*, married to...). Certainly, this unity/identity is, first of all, a unity/identity of markings. But above all it is a *unity of attribution/imputation*, without which society cannot function (Who did or said that? To whom should this be given?). As such, it seems to be—and, indeed, it is in large part—a social artifact, a unity that covers plurality, an identity that conceals the contradictions of the psyche. An enormous part of the rhetoric of the Sixties and Seventies concerning the subject as a simple effect of language and its “un-being” was in fact questioning only this social individual, more exactly the (fairly naive) idea that this individual represents a “substantial reality” or possesses an “authenticity,” whatever the meaning of these terms might be.

The Human Subject

I now come to the center of my concerns, the human subject. There is obviously no question of “deducing” it or of “constructing” it. We shall start with the vague “common sense idea,” in our culture, of what a “subject” is and we shall keep in view, too, the terms I had indicated at the outset, namely, reflectiveness and will (or capacity for deliberate activity).

In the psychoanalytic field, we encounter “instances” that can claim, as a first approximation, the title of “subject” in the sense intended above. This would be the Conscious of Freud’s first topography (which includes, obviously, the Preconscious) or the conscious Ego (*Ich*) of the second topography. Let us note in passing that in any case this Conscious or conscious Ego is, to a decisive degree, the coproduct of two factors, each irreducible to the other and at the same time mutually indissociable: on the one hand, the psyche and, more particularly, the emergence of various psychical instances (in whose “series” the Conscious is found); and on the other hand, the social, which constantly acts in the formation of the Conscious as mother, family, language, objects, group, and so on.

I say that the Freudian Conscious can claim the title of “subject,” but as a first approximation only. The positive part of this statement probably goes without saying; the negative or limiting part requires some elucidation.

The “Conscious” as such can quite easily be confused with mere “logical reasoning” or even with “calculating,” which in no way includes the moment of reflectiveness. Hobbes already defined human “reason” by the word “reckoning,” that is to say, calculating (computing, Edgar Morin would have said), and Leibniz, in his *Ars*

Combinatoria, expressed his approval of this definition. For reasons that are quickly going to become clear, we should today, more than ever, avoid this confusion. Freud was, inevitably, rather ambiguous on this score. As is well known, he used the term “thought” when speaking of the Unconscious: he spoke of unconscious thoughts, unconscious thoughts (or representations) oriented toward a goal, etc. But the “Conscious” itself, in Freud’s work, appears essentially as a calculator, trying to work out compromises between the unconscious instances and to get along with a minimum of inconveniences. We may observe here Freud’s reluctance to examine, as such, the domains of the “higher activities of the mind,” as philosophy and traditional psychology would call them, this reluctance being responsible, perhaps, for the immense gap he left in the place of sublimation. But let us also take note of the profundity of his view: the activity of calculation and reasoning does not belong specifically to [*pas propre à*] waking consciousness, it exists everywhere in the psychical sphere and, we may add today, everywhere the for-itself is, certainly everywhere the living being is.²⁰

²⁰One confusion is to be avoided here. Freud talks all the time about unconscious thought processes: *unbewußter Denkvorgang*, *ubw. Denkprozess*, *ubw. Denktakt*. At the same time, he writes, as we know, apropos of dream-work—which transforms “dream-thoughts” into “dream-contents”—that “it does not think, does not calculate or judge in any way at all; it restricts itself to giving things a new form” (*Die Traumdeutung*, in *GW* 2/3: 511; in English, *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, in *SE* 5: 507). This dream-work consists of (and culminates in) displacements and condensations (psychical intensities and parts of dream-thoughts) that are subject to the need to take the conditions for figuration into consideration and culminate in such figurations. [T/E: Here Castoriadis uses *la prise en égard de la figurabilité*, which is a slight variation on the standard French translation for *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*; his usual expression is *exigence de figurabilité*, which we have translated as “requirement of

But if this calculating and reasoning activity does not belong specifically to waking subjectivity, can one find some *intrinsic* characteristic other than the trivial one: “that which has not been repressed”?

We cannot help but impute a calculating and reasoning sort of activity to all living entities, whatever their order of complexity. And neither can we avoid imputing to

figurability.”] Elsewhere, and much later (*Das Unbewußte* [1915], in *GW* 10: 285-86; in English, *The Unconscious*, in *SE* 14: 186), he returns to displacement and condensation in order to insist on the point that these are the essential characteristics of the primary psychical processes. Now, in actual fact, dream-work does not “think”—if “thinking” is *exclusively* ensemblistic-identitarian; dream-work, in the main, *images*, it sets into images, it presentifies (under known constraints and with the means at its disposal). Can we go along with Freud and say that it “does not think, does not calculate or judge in any way at all” but “restricts itself to giving things a new form”? Does it transform just anything into just anything else? Does not the “inversion of psychical intensities,” which is for Freud the essential aspect of displacement, evident in this very characterization, bear the mark [*trace*] of calculation and convey its results? In dream-work there is a *setting into images* that is certainly the “essence of dreaming [*das Wesentliche am Traum*]” (*Die Traumdeutung*, in *GW* 2/3: 510-11, n. 2; in English *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, in *SE* 5: 506-7, n. 2); in other words, it is the creative work of the imagination, the *presentation* (as visible and audible) of that which in itself is neither visible nor audible. But in this dream-work, as in all work of the imagination, the ensemblistic-identitarian is also always present, it is everywhere dense. No more than one could write a fugue without making calculations could one condense and displace without elementary logical operations, without a certain “reckoning.” The confusion, or the deficiency, comes from an imprecise notion of “thought.” The topic under discussion would certainly require a much broader treatment, but we have no room to do so here. See, nonetheless, my article on “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy.” [T/E: It is unclear whether Castoriadis’s French phrase *inversion des intensités psychiques* is a direct quotation from Freud (in translation) or just a paraphrase for the transference and displacement of these intensities, about which Freud speaks.]

them another decisive trait, one implied by self-finality: that is, *self-reference*. To this extent, “knowing that one knows” does not yet characterize the human subject, more precisely the human subject’s capacity for *reflectiveness*. If one considers the immune system, one sees that reckoning, calculation, computation obviously are constantly present there, but self-reference is also present there to the same extent. The immune system is nothing if not the ongoing (and certainly, as one knows, fallible) capacity to distinguish *self* from nonself (and to act accordingly). In more general terms, if any system is endowed with the property of self-finality, self-reference is necessarily implied thereby: the system must preserve (or attain) the desired state, and to accomplish that, it must “actively” refer to itself. It follows that, in one fashion or another, the system must include a certain “knowledge of its own state”; such knowledge, however, can be provided simply by a set of “state indicators” (including “deviation detectors” [*indicateurs de déviation*] and “reaction/correction initiators”), without at any time there being in the system a representation of the system as such or any “instance” or “process” having or embodying this representation. (It is in an analogous fashion that Douglas Hofstadter believes, in *Gödel, Escher, Bach* as well as in *The Mind’s I*, that he can eliminate the question of “consciousness” or the “Ego.”)

The human Conscious is obviously endowed with self-referentiality, and this weakly implies knowing that one knows. But this can be—and most of the time it is—a simple “accompaniment,” a green light indicating that the circuit of “state indicators” is functioning well. In reflectiveness we have something different: the *possibility that the activity proper to the “subject” becomes an “object,” the self being explicitly posited as a nonobjective object or as an object that is an object simply by its being posited as such and not by*

nature. And it is to the extent that one can be for oneself an object by being posited as an object and not by nature that *the other*, in the true sense of the term, becomes possible.

I have spoken of “accompaniment” being a matter of mere consciousness. But reflection implies the possibility of *scission* and *internal opposition*—Plato already spoke of “the soul’s dialogue with itself”: a dialogue presupposes two possible points of view—therefore also the possibility of *calling oneself into question*.

Freud’s mere unconscious thought knows neither of objections nor of interrogations but, at the very most, of obstacles. It functions according to given rules; if it encounters something that is impossible, it is put off track or it stops in its tracks. (These types of incidents cover what Gregory Bateson called “double binds”; there is no reason why they should be excluded from the pathogenic factors of psychical development. But let us recall their evident kinship with the procedures used for producing experimental neuroses in animals.) As ensemblistic-identitarian, this type of thought (“reckoning,” etc.) *has to* be blind to its own axioms, its rules of inference, and so on. Mere consciousness is not blind about what it does, but it is generally more than blind about *why* it does it; likewise, it thinks something but does not ask itself why it thinks this rather than the contrary or something else. Now, history as well as psychoanalysis shows us that the *possibility* of such an interrogation, beyond what each time is authorized by the instituted system already in place, while being a possibility that we have to postulate as present everywhere among human beings, is *only very rarely realized* throughout the variety of historical societies and even among individuals in our own society. It is through a *historic creation* that this possibility is transformed into an effectively actual reality: in this sense, there is indeed self-creation of

human subjectivity as reflectiveness. I cannot extend my remarks here on the conditions for and circumstances surrounding this historical creation.²¹ In order to recall the pertinence for psychoanalysis of the preceding considerations, let me simply note that the question of the possibility of representing *oneself as* representational activity and of calling oneself into question as such is not a philosophical subtlety; it corresponds to the *minimum* we require of every patient when we try to lead her to discover that *X* is not *Y* but that it is very much so for *her* own representational activity and that there may be reasons for this.

The absolute condition for the possibility of reflectiveness is the imagination (or phantasmization). It is because the human being is imagination (nonfunctional imagination) that it can posit as an “entity” something that is not so: its own process of thought. It is because its imagination is unbridled that it can reflect; otherwise, it would be limited to calculating, to “reasoning.” Reflectiveness presupposes that it is possible for the imagination to posit as being that which is not, to see *Y* in *X* and, specifically, to see double, to see *oneself* double, to see *oneself* while seeing oneself as other. I represent myself, and I represent myself as representational activity, or *I act upon myself as active activity*. Of course, here too there is the possibility of having “illusions” or of being “taken in”: among other things, I can, in this way, posit myself as a (“material” or “immaterial”) “thing” or “substance,” I can “realize” (reify, objectify) my thinking activity and its results (and, consequently, also hear voices).

Clearly, psychoanalysis presupposes this

²¹See again my article on “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in [CL2](#).

reflectiveness as actual in the analyst and as virtual in the patient. Psychoanalysis thus presupposes that reflectiveness may be used as a virtuality in the process of actualization in the patient and that its goal is to instaurate the patient's capacities for reflection as definitively as possible (which does not mean at all that the goal of the analysis is for the Conscious to dominate the Unconscious, that to understand is to heal, etc.). But psychoanalysis also presupposes the capacity for deliberate activity, first of all in the psychoanalyst (she decides whether to accept a patient or not, to talk or to remain silent, etc.), then in the patient (who must at least be able to come to sessions regularly)—a capacity it aims at instaurating within the patient in as definitive a manner as possible.

I have spoken of a capacity for deliberate activity. If I wished to ignore the risk of being misunderstood and the risk of an allergic reaction among many psychoanalysts, I could just as well have spoken of "will," too. By this term I do not even necessarily mean that which presides over or triggers a motor gesture—or the inhibition of such a gesture. There already are deliberate activity, and an act of will, when my attention becomes focused in a systematic and sustained way on an object of thought: the object of the capacity for deliberate action, or of the will, can simply be a state of representation, a way of orienting the representational flux. What is generally called *thought* (in the sense of "theoretical" thought, for example) is a mixture in which the parts played by nonconscious and conscious activity are indissociable; so too are the parts played by spontaneous activity and deliberate activity.

The capacity for deliberate activity is something other than the possibility of performing an act dictated by mere logical calculation or "reckoning" (an animal, even a

bacterium, is capable of that). I call capacity for deliberate activity or will the possibility for a human being to make the results of its reflective processes (beyond what results from mere animal logic) enter into the relays that condition its acts. In other words, will or deliberate activity is the reflective dimension of what we are as imagining (that is, creative) beings, or again: the reflective *and* practical dimension of our imagination as source of creation.

I have already spoken of the relationship between the imagination and reflectiveness. There is just as profound a relationship between imagination and will. One must be able to imagine something other than what is to be able to will; and one must will something other than what is to liberate the imagination. Analytic practice, as well as everyday experience, constantly show this: when one does not will anything other than what is, the imagination is inhibited and repressed; in this case, it represents only the eternal perpetuation of what is. And if one cannot imagine something other than what is, every “decision” is only a choice between possible givens—given by life as it existed beforehand and by the instituted system—which can always be reduced to the results of a calculation or some form of reasoning.

~

What is the relationship between what has just been said and the Freudian outlook on these issues? And what are the metapsychological presuppositions of reflectiveness and of the capacity for deliberate action?

I see four such presuppositions, two of which belong to the investigation of the metapsychological sphere and two of which go beyond the psychoanalytical field proper. These presuppositions are: (1) sublimation; (2) the existence of a

quantum of free energy, or significant capacities for energy alterations within the conscious instance; (3) the lability (liableness to change) of cathexes in this field; and (4) the capacity to call into question objects that have already been cathected as a function of reflection. I shall briefly comment, as needs be, on these four presuppositions.

The first metapsychological presupposition of these two possibilities, the actualization of which defines human subjectivity properly speaking, is the psyche's capacity for sublimation. I can only mention here in passing my enormous astonishment at certain recent insinuations that the notion of sublimation is hardly compatible with the Freudian outlook—and, more generally, at the hesitations, confusion, and vagueness concerning what is generally said about it.

Undoubtedly, the question was left in a chaotic state by Freud, but this is neither an explanation nor a justification. To resituate it, we must recall the following banal but evident fact that no one seems to take into account: to speak is already to sublimate. The "subject" of language is not a "subject" of drives [*"sujet" pulsionnel*].²² As soon as the oral apparatus cathects an activity that does not procure any organ pleasure (at least not in general), there is sublimated activity. To speak is a sublimated activity, first of all because this activity procures no organ pleasure; second and above all, because it is instrumented in and through an extrapsychical creation that goes beyond what the singular psyche is capable of doing by itself: that is, the institution of language; finally, because speaking always potentially implies that one is addressing

²²On psychoanalysis itself as a sublimated activity, see "Epigomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science," *CLI*, 45-56 and, especially, "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation" (1977), *ibid.*, 116-47.

other participants, *real* ones, situated in society (I am disregarding psychotic delirium here, though...).

We can understand nothing about the human psyche (no more than anything about society) if we refuse to acknowledge that at the basis of all its specific characteristics are found the substitution of representational pleasure for organ pleasure. This is a massive *conversion*, cooriginary with humanity; its depths we can sound no further and yet this is what renders sublimation possible. Certainly the substitution of representational pleasure for organ pleasure first takes the form of phantasmaticization or, as Freud said, hallucinated pleasure. But already in this case of hallucinated pleasure one sees the psyche realize the possibility of satisfying itself with something that no longer concerns the state of an organ. In phantasmaticization properly speaking, the scene no longer depends on anything but the avatars of the representational flux; these are indeterminate and indeterminable avatars, and, in any case, they are unrelated as far as their “content” goes to the sexual (or instinctual [*pulsionnelle*]) naturalness of any supposed initial object. The boot as fetish object is a challenge to every naive theory of sexuality, and it shows the omnipotence of phantasmaticization (were it only because for most of their history, humans have walked on bare feet). In Freudian terms, one would say that this substitution of representational pleasure for organ pleasure is equivalent to a change in the “goal” of the drive. But the characterization provided here, which is more general and inclusive, concerns phantasmaticization as well. The distinction between the two will be made below.

Correspondingly, one could say in an almost identical and in any case indissociable fashion, that sublimation requires a change in the quantity of psychical energy, from energy directed toward “motor discharges” into energy

concentrated on the representation or the representational flux itself. This, too, is an essential trait of phantasmatization (of the radical imagination) that sublimation also shares—which is understandable since it is, in a sense, an offspring thereof.

But in the third place—and here is the difference between sublimation and phantasmatization—the “object” of sublimation (that on which the energy in question is cathected) exists and has value only in and through its almost always actual and sometimes also virtual social institution.²³ This boils down to saying that sublimation is the cathecting of representations (or states of representation) whose referent is no longer a “private object” but rather a nonprivate, public, that is to say, *social* object. And these social objects are *invisible*—or have value by means of their *invisible attributes*: in other words, they are valuable by virtue of their constitution or by virtue of their being permeated with social imaginary significations. In the animal, in contrast, the concatenation of representation and motility is: (a) in principle constant (to change it, a “learning process” is required: the imagination here is repetitive); (b) functional; (c) always related to a “real” referent.

Here a digression is necessary. In everything that has been said here—and as is the case in the entirety of Freud’s psychoanalytic work²⁴—“*causation*” by *representation* has

²³“Sublimation is the process by means of which the psyche is forced to replace its ‘own’ or ‘private objects’ of cathexis (including its own ‘image’ for itself) with objects that exist and have value in and through their social institution and, out of these, to create for itself ‘causes’, ‘means,’ or ‘supports’ of pleasure” (*IIS*, 312 [translation slightly altered]).

²⁴And contrary to Freud’s prepsychoanalytic convictions, when he adhered to the views of John Hughlings-Jackson. See the Editor’s Note to the translation of *Das Unbewußte* (SE 14: 163) and, especially, the excerpt

been fully assumed. In other words, we are taking for granted that modifications in representation or in the state of representation in general can bring about motor discharges, lasting modifications in one's cathexes, and therefore in the distribution of psychical energy, and so on. Not only is the idea supported by the most massive and elementary commonplace pieces of evidence, but without it psychoanalytic activity becomes incomprehensible and impossible. This statement, however, in no way furnishes us with an argument in favor of the existence of a "free will" in the traditional sense, since one's representations are in this case only links or relays within "causal" processes that themselves can be rigorously determined. In fact, *they are not*: such is the nature of the representational flux, about which I explained my views earlier.²⁵ Should one want to pursue the determinist argument, however, let us point out that these determinations need not be considered point-like in character, either: they can relate instead to the overall state—and, as such, they could not be localized in any sense of the term—of representation, which each time conditions (and is conditioned by) "exchanges with the outside world." Of course, the strict epiphenomenalist will maintain that these links or relays either are superfluous or are "subjective illusions" (?) and that one passes, each time, from one precisely defined overall "material" (neuropsychological) configuration (or "cause") to another such configuration (or

from his monograph on aphasia, 14: 206-8.

²⁵The term "causation" is here a very clear abuse of language. In any case, there is no such thing as a strictly causal series of representations and there cannot be. See "Epigomene to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science," in [CL1](#), and [IIS](#), ch. 6, 274-78, 279-81, 282-84, 292-94, 300-1, 320-29.

“effect”). We discover, then, that: (1) this view can itself be characterized as a subjective illusion; (2) it provides the blueprint for a research program that is unrealizable or, in the best of cases, would require the erection of a fantastically encumbering set of scaffolding for the purpose of understanding some of the simplest facts; and finally, (3) this view is incapable of grasping even these “facts.” A word in a telegram provokes a world war. If representations are relays, the links in the chain of causal determinations are not formally broken. (It is something else again that we may encounter here an extreme disproportion between “causes” and “effects.”) But at the same time it is clear that a description of the outbreak of World War I in terms of electric currents moving along telegraphic wires and the nervous systems of Kaiser Wilhelm, the Czar, Sir Edward Grey, Raymond Poincaré, and René Viviani is absurd; it is already absurd because it cannot provide itself with its object on its own terms.

The second presupposition is that there exists a quantity of free energy or significant capacities for energy alterations in the conscious instance. One would be tempted to postulate that the attainment of reflectiveness, like the attainment of the capacity for deliberate activity, requires the existence of a (nonspecific and unconnected, freely floating, etc.) quantum of free energy. And one would be tempted to insist upon the same prerequisite for the whole of (human, and even animal) psychical life in light of facts as fundamental as the development of the psychism, its capacities for adaptation and learning, and so on. Nevertheless, all that can just as easily be placed under the title of a “capacity for disqualification/requalification” (or, more briefly, modification) of psychical energy. Though it is

certainly something other than a mere metaphor,²⁶ the expression “psychical energy” does not as yet cover anything that is truly discernable and assignable, and therefore the two terminologies appear to be equivalent. We know that there are cathexes of different intensities—and that these intensities can change. We have no idea about how and whether these intensities allow for mutual “comparison”—except in the roughest of qualitative manners and *only when it is a matter of the same individual*—and still less for “addition.” We cannot even broach such questions as: “Are the evident ‘energy’ differences between individuals congenital or do they result from blockages caused by the singular history of one or the other individual?”

Whether one postulates the existence of a quantity of “free energy” or the capacity for energy alterations,²⁷ it is clear that each time that the psychical apparatus does something other than look after its homeostasis, there is a disqualification/requalification of energy and that this process plays a fundamental role in the history and constitution of the human being. And it goes hand in hand with the emergence of new objects. That does not surprise us, for the wrong reasons and as a function of habit, when these new objects and the corresponding energy alterations follow the usual psychical course—for example, when the child cathects its genital apparatus “in place of” the anus/feces. Nonetheless, it should surprise us and make us reflect when the psyche cathects new

²⁶On the critique of criticisms of “mere metaphors,” see “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science,” [CLI](#), 40-45.

²⁷In any case, direct action by representation on energy cannot be eliminated as a possibility without ultimately falling into an infinite regress.

objects that are “invisible”: for example, during passages in history like that from paganism to Christianity or from Catholicism to the Reformation. Neither do I see how it could be denied—especially when one is a psychoanalyst—that the emergence of a new representation (and a grouping or arrangement of representations is to be counted under the same heading) can, in the case of opposing cathexes, tip the balance toward one side rather than the other.

With the last two presuppositions we leave the properly metapsychological terrain and enter into a domain where the synergy of the social institution is decisive. For this reason, and for reasons of space, I shall have to be very brief here.²⁸ The establishment of a form of reflectiveness and of a capacity for deliberate activity requires, in the third place, a large (and relative) *lability* of cathexes. This lability is not to be confused either with some sort of fluidity or with what Freud called the “vicariousness” of the object of the drive. It is simply the contrary of *rigidity*. Now, this rigidity of *sublimated* cathexes is characteristic of almost the entirety of human societies—and it can be said that it is the best characterization, from the psychoanalytic point of view, of their *heteronomy*. A believer’s cathexis in her Jehovah, her Christ, her Allah, an NSDAP member’s cathexis in the Führer, a CPSU member’s cathexis in the General Secretary, or a scientist’s cathexis in the hereditary character of intelligence (leading him to doctor observational data) is not labile. The cathexis of a citizen who is willing and able to discuss the cogency of a law he in the meantime obeys, or that of the critical scientist, is labile. Now, this does not depend on the singular human being, and that is so in at least two ways.

²⁸On the points briefly discussed here, see especially “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982) now in [CL2](#).

First of all, it is never the singular human being that has inscribed over the pediment of society, *The law is made by us* instead of *God has given us the law*. Second, it is not the singular human being that has educated itself in such a way as to refuse to recognize any supreme authority that would fail to account for and provide a reason for its acts and its existence; others *who have already been raised in this way* have educated it to adopt this attitude.

Finally, as the fourth presupposition (the distinction between this and the preceding one is extremely tenuous, and one can call the former the “objective” side and the latter the “subjective” side), one must have the effectively actual capacity to call into question by means of reflection hitherto cathected objects (even if they are, at the limit, simply rules for thought) and to come to conclusions based on the results of this reflection. This boils down to saying that one must have the capacity to call instituted objects into question. This too, as “subjective” as it is, is related to the mode and the content of the social institution of these objects. It is *psychically inconceivable* for one to say, *The law is unjust* when the law has been given by God and justice is merely one of God’s name-attributes. (The same goes for the Czar.)

~

What I have just done is to give some more precise content to what I have defined since 1965 as the *autonomy* of the human “subject.”²⁹ The establishment of another relationship between the Conscious and the Unconscious can be made more specific: it must contain, on the part of the

²⁹See [IIS](#), ch. 2, 101-110, and, more recently, “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy.”

conscious instance, reflectiveness and the capacity for deliberate action. There is no point in adding that this in no way implies that the Conscious should “take power,” thus absorbing or drying up the Unconscious: the contrary, rather, is true, and this is so for obvious reasons. (*Who* is most afraid of viewing her most monstrous desires? A heteronomous being.) Nor is there any point in adding, in response to a rhetoric that has been in vogue in France since the mid-Fifties, that autonomy not only has nothing to do with some kind of “adaptation” to the existing state of things but is instead the contrary thereof, since it signifies, precisely, the capacity to call this order into question. And this existing order is just as much founded on an act of sublimation that respects instituted significations as it would be little threatened by an explosion of “desires” (which are, by definition, inarticulate and incapable of being articulated) or by the ghostly apparition on the social scene of the “subject of the Unconscious.”

Of course, we are talking about the human being’s *possibilities*. We are not saying that they are realized always, most of the time, automatically, and so on. We know positively that the contrary is true. But we know, too, that these possibilities are actualizable, that they have been actualized by certain societies and by certain human beings, that thinking, psychoanalyzing, saying what we are saying presupposes this actualization of the possible.

In speaking of the capacity for deliberate activity, I have equally used the term “will”—but with precautions. These precautions are motivated only by the selective and biased reading (biased on both sides) that has, almost always, been made of what Freud wrote in this regard. The will, such as I intend it here from the metapsychological point of view, refers to the existence of a quantity of free energy or to the

capacity for significant alterations in energy, coordinated with reflectiveness. Now, from the beginning to the end of Freud's work, we see a host of formulations abound, all of them insisting that the processes through which energy is "concentrated" in the Ego develop along with the individual. Freud lines up against the absurd idea of a "free will" in the sense of a motiveless flash capable of making a *tabula rasa* of the entire previous history of the individual. Yet, neither can causation via representation be eliminated without reducing his entire life's work to nothing. If one attentively rereads the third point of "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis," one will see that Freud is in no way saying that the Ego can do nothing. He says instead that the Ego (in this case, the mentally ill or neurotic Ego) has, in light of the conditions or circumstances in which it is placed, willed to do too much. And yet one can still help it to adjust its goals and broaden the means at its disposal. Now, to broaden the means at the Ego's disposal consists in remobilizing its energies, directing them toward the process of reflection, and facilitating "reflected" representations to act on psychical energy; indeed, it consists in doing all of these at once.³⁰

All these points boil down to saying that what is at issue here is the establishment or reestablishment of pathways [*frayages*] (*Bahnungen*, "routes," passages, trajectories—"facilitations" as some English translators believed they could say), a term that contemporary neurophysiology would certainly be far from disavowing. It is by means of the

³⁰It does not matter that this energy might in large part be cathected on the Ego's self-images, on the "ideal Ego," or on other objects of sublimation, or that it therefore might have, in addition, a "narcissistic" or pseudo-"object-related [*objectale*]" character; all these cases are perfectly consonant with what has been said above in the text.

establishment of such pathways, as we know, that the human being becomes what it is: the entire process of maturation, every stage of development, and all of education is the establishment of such pathways, whether one takes the term in a “material,” neurophysiological sense or in a psychological one. These pathways are historical in both accepted senses of the term: they constitute, first of all, the history of the being in question, but they also depend (via education in the broadest sense) on the collective history to which this being belongs. And what is analysis itself but the effort to create new pathways in the analysand, and, in particular, a cathexis of her capacity for reflection, a remobilization of her energy, and, finally, a capacity for coordinating her “energy utilization” with her processes of reflection?

These considerations will not satisfy the defenders of “pure freedom” among the philosophers any more than they will satisfy certain psychoanalysts. For the former, let us recall simply that Aristotle defined virtue as *hexis proairetikē*,³¹ namely, the *habitus* that is dependent upon choice and that is the creator of choice. He knew very well what he was talking about. All the antinomies, the real ones as well as the apparent ones, of the matter at hand are already to be found in this phrase. Autonomy is not a habit—that would be a contradiction in terms—but autonomy creates itself through its self-exertion, which presupposes, in a certain manner, that it preexists itself. Perhaps the image Plato employed apropos of true knowledge is, in his case too, the least ill suited: the flame that grows by feeding upon itself.³²

³¹T/E: *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6.1106b36.

³²Plato *Seventh Letter* 341c-d. Relative to “pure Kantianism,” see



I shall conclude my remarks by attempting to respond, in summary fashion, to the two questions I raised at the outset.

In the first place, it is impossible to formulate an all-inclusive concept of the subject. We are obliged to differentiate. We must acknowledge, at the outset and on a first level, a *for-itself*—a *soi*, a *self*—of the living being as such, itself capable of realizing the decisive traits that will characterize all “subjective” entities at all levels. These entities, which exist at each-time different levels, are the psyche and the psychical “instances,” the social individual, society. Each of them exhibits decisive, specific characteristics. In particular, Freud’s psychical “instances”—or the corresponding entities found in other descriptions of the “topography” of the psyche—are each a *for-itself*, certainly, but the other characteristics they create by their very being open up an abyss between them and the simple living being. The same goes for the social individual or the entity we call “society.”

More specifically as regards the social individual, great confusion remains in distinguishing it, the psychical being, and the subject or human subjectivity properly speaking. The social individual, the “socially functional” level of the human being, certainly exhibits the characteristics of a *for-itself*; via the family, language, education, and so on, society fabricates this social individual out of the latter’s psychical material, but this social individual is “separated” from other psychical instances by the barrier of repression.

“Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science,” [CLI](#), 45-52.

Nearly coextensive with “the Conscious” of Freud’s first topography, it is capable of “thinking” within instituted boundaries and of “volition”—in the sense of activating motor mechanisms by conscious means—within these same boundaries.³³ But as a general rule (if the entirety of human history and society is considered), it is not up to the task of calling these boundaries themselves into question or of calling itself into question.

There is therefore no reflectiveness in the strict and strong sense of the term—and, consequently, no capacity for deliberate activity as it has been defined here—these being characteristic of what should be called *human subjectivity*. Of the latter one ought to say that, as a relatively recent historical creation (the historic break that created it occurred in ancient Greece), it is virtual in every human being, but it certainly is not a fated process. Recent and present history offers massive and horrifying examples in which the last traces of reflectiveness and of a will of one’s own, which human beings can possess, are reduced to nothing by the social (political) institution. It is inasmuch as it makes itself as subjectivity that the human being is able to challenge itself and to consider itself as the origin (though only partial) of its past history as

³³Certainly, it can also *transgress* one boundary or another. But the act of transgression here goes unquestioned; indeed, this act rather confirms existing laws. As for the rest, I cannot enter here into the undoubtedly very profound and highly significant relationships that exist between individual transgression and political contestation. “Relationships” here obviously does not signify the same thing as “identity.” Those who sang the praises of transgression (as well as of political “subversion”) are no better than the psychoanalysts (alas, there have been some) who wanted to reduce political contestation to transgression; their stance was not so different from the effort to criminalize revolt, which every self-respecting penal code incorporates.

well as to will a history to come and to will to be its coauthor. This, I emphasize again, mere “consciousness” is far from capable of doing on its own: one can perfectly well conceive of a consciousness that remains a simple spectator, recording the processes that unfold in its individual life. Examples, both clinical and nonclinical, abound. Without such a subjectivity—without the *project* of such a subjectivity, but one that is already in the process of being realized—not only does every aiming at truth and knowledge collapse but every ethical effort disappears, since all responsibility vanishes. Psychoanalysis would then become, as a theory, a variant of sophistry and, as a practice, a cynical venture in exploitation.

To my second question, “Is there a *unity* to the singular human being beyond its corporeal identity and the chronological container of its ‘history,’” my brief and provisional response will again be many sided. There certainly is a certain unity to each singular psyche, at least as the common origin and obligatory cobelongingness of forces that are plunged into an extended war taking place on the same theater of operations. There is, in its way, the more or less solid unity of the individual fabricated by society. Beyond this, there is a unity that is aimed at or that we ought to aim at: the unity of reflective self-representation and of the deliberate activities one undertakes. “Unity” does not mean, of course, invariability through time.



I shall end by providing two images for the reader’s consideration. The *for-itself* may be thought of as an enclosed sphere—that is what closure means—whose diameter is approximately constant. And it happens that this sphere is somehow or other “adjusted,” each time, through an indefinite

number of dimensions, to an indefinite number of other spheres. *Human subjectivity* is a pseudoenclosed sphere that can dilate on its own, that can interact with other pseudospheres of the same type, and that can call back into question the conditions, or the laws, of its closure.

Self-dilation signifies that the human world, the world accessible to human subjectivity, is not given once and for all; it is both extendable and modifiable (toward the “outside” and toward the “inside”). We have already spoken of this possibility, of its rootedness in the radical imagination of the psyche, of its interdependence with the institution of society.

Genuine interaction with other subjectivities signifies something unprecedented in the world: the overcoming [*dépassement*] of mutual exteriority. (We have been trying, at least, to think the simple living being as the incredibly fine-tuned and complex adjustment of mutual exteriorities.) It is this effort to go beyond [*dépassement*] mutual exteriority that is at issue when we try to comprehend as well as to accede to the dimension of meaning as invisible. Should someone tell us, Human beings are always mutually external to one another, we adjust to each other like tape recorders built for that purpose; I act as if I am talking to you and you act as if you are hearing me, making faces as if what I say makes sense; to love is to want to give something one does not have to someone who does not want it, and so on and so forth, we would certainly respond, first of all and above all, that our idea of what makes sense forbids us from acting as if we are having a dialogue with a tape recorder and that therefore we will just let it make noise over in its corner. But between us, we would also say that this someone not only is repeating philosophical trivialities one could rightfully have hoped had been shelved for twenty-five centuries but also that this someone does not know the essential prerequisites of

psychoanalytic theory, for in this domain the implication we could draw from the idea that one can never go beyond a situation of mutual exteriority among human beings is that, in the development of the psychism, genuine introjection would never occur: all introjection would be a completely “introprojective” construction; everything that the child would introject from its mother would be due *exclusively* to the child and the mother would be there for nothing; she would be a pure projection the child would illusorily reincorporate into itself. Now, we know that this isn’t even half the story: the child transforms what is given to it or what it finds by giving to it a meaning—but this is not unrelated to the meaning of what has been given to the child. Babies that fail to distinguish between a look of love and one of hate do not exist. And it is also upon this condition that one learns to *speak*, that is, to accept that the *signification* of a word is the one that *others* attach to it.

Finally, and this is the most difficult point, every questioning of the laws and of the conditions of the closure of subjectivity still occurs in closure, in the closed sphere of other laws and conditions—as immensely enlarged as this sphere might be. To be a subject, to be an autonomous subject is still to be someone and not everyone, not just anyone or anything. It is still, and above all, to cathect determinate objects and to cathect *one’s own* identity—the representation of oneself as autonomous subject. It is for this reason that Socrates accepts to die—and it is for this reason that, in dying, he also saves *himself*. He saves himself for himself; he saves his image, this being the triumphant return of self-finality in the disappearance of its “subject.” But he also saves something for us: an equally triumphant affirmation of sublimation, the root and continuing condition for historical life nourished by so many voluntary deaths.

The “End of Philosophy”?*

We are living through a protracted crisis of Western society and culture. The diagnosis is not invalidated by its innumerable repetitions—from Rousseau and the Romantics through Friedrich Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, and Leon Trotsky to Martin Heidegger and beyond. In fact the very ways along which many among these authors and others have tried to establish it are in themselves symptoms of the crisis and belong to it.¹

To the crisis belongs also the proclamation—especially, but not only, by Heidegger—of “the end of philosophy” and the whole array of deconstructionist and postmodernist rhetoric. Philosophy is a central element of the Greco-Western project of individual and social autonomy; the end of philosophy would mean no more and no less than the end of freedom. Freedom is

*The ideas in this text were first presented during a lecture at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, in November 1986. The version published here is that of a lecture at Skidmore College (October 1988) published in *Salmagundi*, 82-83 (Spring-Summer 1989): 3-23. My own French translation, “La ‘fin de la philosophie’?”, now appears in *MM*, 227-46 (281-306 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: For the version first published in *PPA*, 13-32, I translated and included a last paragraph that had been added to the French version. It appears here in brackets at the end of the present text. Other slight changes have been made to reflect Castoriadis’s French translation.]

¹For my part I have dealt with the subject in “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961), now in *PSW2*, especially 271-96, and in various other texts, among which “The Crisis of Western Societies” is available in a (poor) English version in *Telos*, 53 (Fall 1982): 17-28. [T/E: A new translation of the latter text is now available in *CL4*. In the French version, Castoriadis cites, instead of “Crisis,” his 1965 talk to London Solidarity members, “The Crisis of Modern Society,” and “Social Transformation and Cultural Creation” (1978), both now available in *PSW3*.]

threatened not only by totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, but also, in a more hidden but no less deep fashion, by the waning of conflict and critique, the spreading of amnesia and irrelevance, the growing inability to call into question the present and the existing institutions, be they strictly “political” or *weltanschaulich*. Philosophy has had a central, if mostly indirect, role in this critique. This role is being dissolved first and foremost by contemporary social-historical trends, which I will not discuss here.² But an effect of these trends, which in turn reinforces them, is the influence of the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian adoration of brute “reality”—and the Heideggerian proclamation “we have nothing to do,” “nothing is to be done.”³ The combination of both can be found in the glorification of a “*debile* thought,” of a soft, weak, flexible thought expressly adapted to the society of the media.⁴ Deconstructionist “criticism,” carefully limiting itself to the deconstruction of old books, is one of the symptoms of the crisis.

The proclamation of the “end of philosophy” is, of course, not new. It is most clearly decreed by Hegel. It rests,

²See the texts in n. 1 and my “The Crisis of Culture and the State” (1987), now in [PPA](#).

³See for instance and among many other formulations, the “Conversation on a Country Path,” concerning *Gelassenheit*: “We are to do nothing, but wait.” (In *Discourse on Thinking*, tr. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund [New York: Harper and Row, 1966], p. 62.) The posthumous *Spiegel* interview is also very outspoken on this point.

⁴Thus, *Weak Thought* (1983), ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, tr. with an intro. Peter Carravetta (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), and Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern culture* (1985), tr. with an intro. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

both in Hegel and in Heidegger, on a philosophy that is, indissociably, an ontology (or a “thinking of Being”), a philosophy of history, and a philosophy of the history of philosophy. It is not my purpose to discuss Hegel, nor Heidegger’s ontology; however, some remarks do seem to me relevant here.

Heidegger’s implicit philosophy of history—history as *Geschick*, destiny, destination, and donation of/by Being—and the entirety of his writing have as necessary condition Heidegger’s congenital blindness before the political/critical activity of humans (at the root of his adherence to Nazism and the *Führerprinzip*). This blindness is fittingly complemented by a seemingly equally congenital blindness concerning sexuality and, more generally, the psyche. Here we have the bizarre spectacle of a philosopher talking interminably about the Greeks, and whose thought draws a blank in the place of *polis*, *eros*, and *psyche*. But an “interpretation” of Greek philosophy ignoring systematically the fact that philosophy was born in and through the *polis* and is a part of the same movement that brought about the first democracies, is bound to be irredeemably lame. If, as Heidegger once wrote, Greek is not “a” language, but *the* language, and therefore predestined for philosophy, what are we to make of the fact that Spartans spoke Greek—indeed, they spoke better than the other Greeks, *lakōnizein*—but no Spartan philosopher is known?⁵ The same blindness leads him

⁵Except for the Lacedaemonian Chilon, one of the Seven Sages. Heidegger’s monstrous (and, in the most important place, clearly political-reactionary) “interpretation” of the celebrated *stasimon* of Antigone (“many things are terrible...”) at the end of his *Introduction to Metaphysics* shows how deeply alien he was to the Greek world and spirit. [T/E: To avoid ambiguity, I have elsewhere translated *deinos* not as “terrible” but as “awesome.”]

to see in the present period only the domination of technique and “science”—in both cases, with an unbelievably naive stance before the supposed omnipotence of both—and makes him incapable of seeing the internal crisis of the technoscientific universe and, even more important, the activities of humans directed against the present system and the possibilities these activities contain.

This philosophy of history leads Heidegger to a method of interpretation of the history of philosophy that is, at its core, Hegelian, for the same deep reasons and, in fact, with the same results. In short: a true critical discussion of the philosophers of the past is forbidden or becomes impossible. Thereby philosophical democracy, the intertemporal *agora* of living and dead philosophers where they gather over the centuries and truly discuss, is abolished. With Hegel, critique of the past philosophers is only a sign that the critic does not understand what philosophy is. Past philosophers cannot be criticized, but only surmounted, *aufgehoben*, shown to lead “from inside” to the next philosopher, and so on till we arrive at Absolute Knowledge, that is, the Hegelian system. (Of course, Hegel himself could not possibly remain faithful to this program.) The deep links of this attitude to Hegel’s overall philosophy are as obvious as the intractable impossibilities to which it leads. The end of philosophy is not a whim or an opinion of Hegel—it is the necessary implication of his whole system, which stands and falls with it.

Things are not truly different with Heidegger. No critical discussion of the past philosophers can take place; the “thinkers,” in fact, express moments in the “History of Being,” Being talks through their mouths. (Of course, Heidegger also cannot remain faithful to his program.) Past philosophers can only be interpreted and “deconstructed” (the

program of *Sein und Zeit* is *die Destruktion der Ontologie*, “deconstruction” is a more recent fruit). This means that it has to be shown, in each case, that they all partake of “metaphysics” understood as the covering up of the “ontological difference,” the Forgetting of Being, the preoccupation with the being of beings, and the neglect of the question of the Meaning of Being, and that, nevertheless and curiously, this forgetting somehow “progresses” (that is, regresses) in a quite Hegeloid fashion through history, toward more and more complete forms, so that the accomplishment/achievement of metaphysics and the forgetting of Being are there at once with Plato (and perhaps even the pre-Socratics), but are more completely completed with Hegel and then Nietzsche. Along this way, conflicts, contradictions, struggle among philosophers are ignored or covered up, and the whole history of philosophy is linearized so as to reach its destined result—the closure of metaphysics and its thinker, Heidegger.

With Hegel, all philosophies are reduced to the same in the sense that all of them represent merely “moments” in the process of self-consciousness and self-cognizance of the Spirit—and in the sense that all these “moments” stand convicted as “moments” of the (Hegelian) System. With Heidegger, all philosophers are reduced to the same:⁶ they represent various but, when we come to the heart of the matter, indifferent ways of forgetting Being, of thinking Being as presence, and of mixing up presence and that which is, in

⁶Cf. the last pages of *Der Spruch des Anaximander* (1946), where Aristotle, Plato, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Anaximander are presented as thinking “the same.” [T/E: See Martin Heidegger, “The Anaximander Fragments,” in *Early Greek Thinking*, tr. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 56.]

each case, present. With post-Heideggerians, this will become the unbreakable circle of Greco-Western onto-logo-theo-phallocentrism. But fortunately, we are not yet completely lost. With the help of the *Zeitgeist*, some noises about the possibility of evading this circle through recourse to the Old Testament (not of course the New, hopelessly contaminated by those damned Greeks), are increasingly perceptible. After we had been almost convinced of the nothingness of any “transcendental signified,” we are now informed that Jehovah, his laws, and the ethic of the Hebrews can and must be restored in the place of a (meta-? or post-?) transcendental signified. Dare we hope that we only need to replace philosophy by revelation in order to be saved?



No wonder that, a few exceptions apart, philosophy is practiced less and less, and that most of what bears that name today is just commentary and interpretation, or rather, commentary squared and interpretation squared. This means also that the history of philosophy itself is becoming distorted, torn between spiritless and scholastic academicism and deconstructionist irrelevance.

How to approach the history of philosophy, that is, the work of important philosophers of the past, is of course a huge question in itself. Some cardinal points seem to me worth noting.

A philosopher writes and publishes because he believes that he has important and true things to say—but also, because he wants to be discussed. Being discussed entails also, possibly, being criticized and refuted. And all great philosophers of the past—up to and including Kant, Fichte, and Schelling—have explicitly discussed, criticized,

and frequently refuted—or thought that they refuted—their predecessors. They thought, rightly, that they belonged to a transtemporal, social-historical public space, to the transhistorical *agora* of reflection, and that their public criticism of other philosophers was an essential factor in maintaining and enlarging this space as a space of freedom where there are no authorities, no revelation, no general secretary, no *führer*, and no *Geschick des Seins*; where different *doxae*⁷ are confronted and where everybody is entitled, at his own risks and perils, to express disagreement.

This is why for a philosopher there *can* only be a critical history of philosophy. Critique of course presupposes the most painful and disinterested attempt to understand the work criticized. But it requires also constant vigilance as regards its possible limitations—which result from the almost inevitable *closure* of any work of thought that accompanies its breaking of the previous closure.

But this is also why for a philosopher there *must* be a critical history of philosophy. If this history is not critical, he is not a philosopher, just a historian, an interpreter, a hermeneutician. And if there is no history in the full meaning of the word, the philosopher works under the fateful delusion that he is starting everything all over again—the delusion of the *tabula rasa*. Philosophy is a reflective activity that deploys itself both freely and under the constraint of its own past. Philosophy is not cumulative—but it is deeply historical.

In this sense, a circular situation obviously obtains, one that does not manifest any “logical defect,” but expresses the very essence of self-reflection within the necessarily total horizon of philosophical thought—or the fact that its center is

⁷T/E: Instead of the Latin plural, *doxae*, used here, in the French translation Castoriadis instead gives the Greek plural: *doxai* (opinions).

its periphery, and *vice versa*. A critical history of the past is not possible without a proper standpoint. But it is not possible, either, without some conception of what history is—human history in the widest and deepest meaning of the term—and what the place of philosophy in this history is. (In this respect, Hegel and Heidegger are, of course, formally correct.) This does not in the least mean “explaining” (and “refuting”) Plato and Aristotle by the existence of slavery, Descartes and Locke by the rise of the bourgeoisie, and all the well-known similar nonsense. But it does most emphatically mean that past (and present) philosophy has to take its place in the history of the human imaginary and of the painful, millenary struggle against the heteronomous institution of society. It would be just as silly to deny the essential *political* motives and determinations of Plato’s philosophy, the fight against democracy, and their deep links to the whole of Plato’s thought up to and including his ontology—as it would be silly to deny that Plato created and instituted again, for a second time, philosophy and that he remains to this day the greatest philosopher of all. Equally, and on a much more modest level, it would be silly to deny the deeply reactionary, antidemocratic motives and traits of Heidegger’s thought, manifest already in *Sein und Zeit* (six years before the *Rektoratsrede*) and persisting to the end (the posthumous *Spiegel* interview), and their intimate relation to the whole of his conceptions—as it would be silly to deny that Heidegger was one of the important philosophers of the twentieth century and to assert that a philosopher today could simply ignore him. The paradox apparently involved here certainly requires further examination, but this is not our present theme.

Philosophy is not cumulative—as science could be taken to be, though even here things are not so clear as they

usually appear. For practical purposes, anyhow, one can learn physics or mathematics today by studying contemporary textbooks, and with no need to read Newton, Einstein, Archimedes, Gauss, or Cantor. Art is not cumulative either, though it is a different case. Immersion in the culture where a given work of art has been created is almost always a condition for “understanding” (not only externally) works of art. But this does not mean that one cannot be taken by Wagner, say, unless one has gone through all the steps from Gregorian chant to Beethoven, etc.

With philosophy it is a different matter again. As self-reflective activity of thought, philosophy entails that, ideally, *any* form of thought is obligatorily relevant for it; therefore also, for a philosopher, what other philosophers have already thought is obligatorily relevant. But self-reflectiveness means of course critique: a philosopher critical of past philosophers is exerting, so to speak, self-criticism (rightly or wrongly is another matter). I cannot wake up one morning with an idea contradicting what I thought up to then, and rush to develop it, forgetting what I was thinking in all my previous life. Birds sing innocently anew every morning—but they are birds, and they sing the same song. In the same way, I cannot ignore the fact that my own thought, however original I may deem it to be, is but a ripple, at best a wave, in the huge social-historical stream that welled up in Ionia twenty-five centuries ago. I am under the double imperative: to think freely, and to think under the constraint of history. Far from forming a double bind, this apparent and real antinomy is a spring and a source of strength for philosophical thought. Putting it in the simplest, plainest way: the spring and the strength of a potentially immensely rich monological dialogue.

This means also, finally, that I must have—or

gradually form—a conception of what philosophy is, of what self-reflective activity is about. Now, what philosophy is has been each time defined again, explicitly or implicitly, by every important philosopher—and each time in the most intimate relation with the content of his philosophy. (No need to quote examples of this.)⁸ In other words, it is impossible to define what philosophy is without some understanding of what philosophers have said—this is almost a tautology—but also, without a critical stand (which may lead to just a reconfirmation) in regard to it. Thus the conception of philosophy I form is strongly linked with the conception of the history of philosophy I form, and *vice versa*. But it is also impossible to think what philosophy is without some conception of history, since philosophy is a social-historical datum. (Whatever the “transcendental” claims, I would stop discussion with somebody who asserted that Aristotle could have been Chinese or Hegel Italian.) And, to close the circle, this shows that a philosophy is impossible without a philosophy of the social-historical.

~

In this respect, I can only summarize here, dogmatically, my own positions. I believe it impossible to understand what philosophy is truly, without taking into account its central place in the birth and deployment of the social-historical project of (individual and social) autonomy. Philosophy and democracy were born at the same time and in the same place. Their solidarity comes from the fact that both express the refusal of heteronomy—the rejection of the claims

⁸T/E: This parenthetical sentence dropped out of the French translation, perhaps by mistake.

to validity and legitimacy of rules and representations just because they happen to be there, the refusal of any external authority (even, and especially, “divine”), of any extrasocial source of truth and justice, in brief, the calling into question of existing institutions and the assertion of the capacity of the collectivity and of thought to institute themselves explicitly and reflectively.⁹ To put it in another way: The struggle for democracy is the struggle for true self-government. As the aim of self-government is not to accept any *external* limits, true self-government entails explicit self-institution, which presupposes, of course, the calling into question of the existing institution—and this, in principle, at any time. The project of collective autonomy means that the collectivity, which can exist only as instituted, recognizes and recovers its instituting character explicitly, and questions itself and its own activities. In other words, democracy is the regime of (political) self-reflectiveness. What laws ought we to have, and for what reasons? But the same is true about philosophy. Philosophy is not about the question: What is Being, or what is the meaning of Being, or why is there something rather than nothing, etc. All these questions are secondary, in the sense that they are all conditioned upon the emergence of a more radical question (radically impossible in a heteronomous society): What is it that I ought to think (about being, about *phusis*, about the *polis*, about justice, etc.—and about my own thinking)?

This questioning goes on, and has to go on, incessantly, for a simple reason. Any being- for-itself exists and can only exist in a closure—thus also society and the social individual. Democracy is the project of breaking the

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

closure at the collective level. Philosophy, creating self-reflective subjectivity, is the project of breaking the closure at the level of thought. But of course, any breaking of the closure, unless it remains a gaping “?” that does not break anything at all, posits something, reaches some results, and, thereby, risks erecting again a closure. The continuation and renewal of reflective activity—not for the sake of “renewal,” but because this *is* self-reflective activity—entails therefore the calling into question of previous results (not necessarily their rejection—no more so than the revisability of laws in a democracy entails that they have to be changed wholesale every morning).

Thus, the birth of philosophy is not just coincident, but equisignificant with the birth of democracy. Both are expressions, and central embodiments, of the project of autonomy. Here one has to take up another aspect of the deformation Greece underwent and is constantly undergoing at the hands of the never fully de-Christianized Westerners. Greek political creation—the *polis* and democracy—has always been seen as a static “result,” with the “merits” and “demerits” of the Athenian democracy discussed as if this regime were to be a model or an antimodel forever and anywhere¹⁰—instead of being seen to show that what is really democratic in Athens over and above all the rest, and what is of paramount importance for us, is not any particular institution established at a certain point in time (though many of them are full of lessons for us), but the continuous process

¹⁰What is worse is that, most of the time, Western political philosophers—e.g., Leo Strauss—usually talk about the “political thought of the Greeks,” hereby meaning mostly Plato (and much less Aristotle). This is tantamount to speaking about the “political thinking of the French Revolution” quoting Joseph de Maistre or Charles Maurras.

of democratic self-institution, going on for almost three centuries: there is the creativity, there is the self-reflectiveness, there is democracy, and there is the lesson. In the same way, the important thing about Greek philosophy—over and above any “results” reached (we all know how weighty these remain)—is the continuing process of its self-institution. As soon as Thales appears, he conditions the appearance of another philosopher, and so on; a self-reflective movement of thought starts in a truly historical dimension, embodied also in continuous open and public discussion and criticism, and this is not a vain assertion of “individuality,” since these thinkers continuously take cognizance of each other’s positions and produce arguments (almost all of them still to be taken into account today), materializing thereby not a “dialectical progression” but a genuine historical self-deployment of thought. Not two or three “schools,” frozen forever and commenting interminably on the teachings of Confucius or Lao Tzu, but many dozens of truly independent thinkers. The Pythagoreans excepted, “schools” come into existence only when decadence sets in: with Plato and afterwards. With the fall of democracy and the Stoics, philosophy becomes rigidified in schools and given more and more to commentary and interpretation.

We can date the end of this period as synchronous with the end of the period of democratic political creation. The defeat of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War in 404 and the death sentence against Socrates in 399 are symbolically of equal importance. Socrates is the last philosopher-citizen—and the *dēmos* of the Athenians is no more the *dēmos* of the sixth and fifth centuries. It may seem paradoxical that the decadent period then starting produced two of the greatest philosophers ever, Plato and Aristotle—though the matricide Plato was brought up and

formed under democracy.

With Plato starts the Platonic torsion, and distortion, which has dominated, ever since, the history of philosophy—or at least, its mainstream. The philosopher ceases to be a citizen. He gets out of—or above—the *polis*, and tells people what to do, deriving it from his own *epistēmē*. He searches for, and thinks he reaches, a unitary ontology—that is, a theological ontology. At the center of this ontology, as of all the rest, he places the meta-idea of determinacy (*peras*, *Bestimmtheit*). He tries to derive from this ontology the ideal polity. And later (with the Stoics and much more so, with Christianity), he sanctifies reality, that is, he starts rationalizing that which exists in all fields.

We do not need to dwell upon the long intermediary period. A new birth takes place in Western Europe around the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, with the emergence of the protobourgeoisie and the constitution of political collectivities—the new or renewed cities—attempting self-government. From then on, philosophy, though under heavy Christian-theological constraints, again becomes involved with the Western emancipatory movement, but it never frees itself fully, in its dominant stream, from the main traits of the Platonic torsion. From the sixteenth century onward, the struggle becomes manifest within philosophy itself. Thus, the evolving galaxy of European philosophy, from Occam and Duns Scotus to Edmund Husserl and Heidegger, always presents antinomic characteristics. It is sometimes a participant in the emancipatory struggles, more frequently indifferent toward them or their scornful enemy. The system-building, reality-sacralizing, looking-down-upon-the-collectivity attitude remains, in various guises, the predominant one, with, sometimes, the most paradoxical outcomes: for instance, the “critical” thinkers

Marx and Nietzsche clearly belong in the *sancta realitas* mentality (laws of history, “innocence of becoming,” etc.). The main contribution of philosophy to the emancipatory movement during this whole period is to be found not so much in its “contents,” but in its maintaining an open debate and a critical spirit. Though denying it in principle most of the time, it reinstaurates *de facto* the philosophical *agora*.

~

The traits I outlined earlier as characteristic of the Platonic (plus Stoic-Christian) torsion are evident (except for the idea of determinacy) in Heidegger and underlie his proclamation of the “end of philosophy.” The *sancta realitas* principle is central with him. Planetary domination by technoscience is taken as insurmountable *not* by virtue of a reflection on the social-historical possibilities and forces (such a reflection could not, anyhow, reach a categorical result or decide the case) but on the basis of strictly “metaphysical” (in the derogatory sense) and fully arbitrary pronouncements about the “destiny of Being.” This is consonant, and combined, with the most uncritical and, in fact, uninformed view about contemporary technique and science.¹¹

¹¹Heidegger writes (on the first page of *On Time and Being* [New York: Harper & Row, 1972]) that Werner Heisenberg was “searching” for “the full ultimate equation of the universe.” [T/E: In his original English-language version published in *Salmagundi*, Castoriadis had confused *On Time and Being* (1969) with *Being and Time* (1927). Joan Stambaugh’s English translation simply says: “cosmic formula.” I have retained Castoriadis’s English-language version of Heidegger’s phrase, perhaps drawn from the French translation of Heidegger’s text, which Castoriadis quotes in his French translation of his own text: *formule absolue du monde*

The “theoretical” ground for the proclamation of the “end of philosophy”—briefly speaking, that philosophy is “metaphysics” and that metaphysics has been “absorbed” *restlos*, without remainder, by contemporary science—only makes sense on the basis of Heidegger’s thesis that there can be a *Denken des Seins* (“thought of Being”) or a *Denken des Sinnes von Sein* (“thought of the meaning of Being”) as such, separated from any reflection concerning *Seiendes* (being) or *das Sein des Seienden* (the being of beings). The thesis is both sterile and meaningless.

(absolute formula of the world). The original German reads: *gesuchten weltformel* (the world-formula [Heisenberg] is seeking).] An ultimate in absurd equations of which I have been able to find no trace in the writings of Heisenberg. There is at most one phrase (a banal one, for those familiar with the work of modern physics) in his Gifford Lectures of 1955-1956 (*Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* [London: Penguin, 1989], p. 154), expressing the “hope” that one day a “complete understanding of the unity of matter” will be achieved; this quite obviously is a reference to “unification” theories, which indeed have made some headway since then—and in no way to “the full ultimate equation of the universe.” Heisenberg expresses, in completely express fashion, his doubts concerning the possibility of reducing the phenomena of living beings to simple physicochemical laws (*ibid.*, pp. 143, 187). It is highly improbable that Heisenberg could have uttered such an ultimate absurdity as “the full ultimate equation of the universe” (he was one of the last great physicists with a knowledge of and feeling for philosophy). But even if he had done so, a philosopher ought to have reacted with a sorrowful smile, both on grounds of principle and because he ought to know that, from Newton through Lord Kelvin through George Gamow and up to today’s proponents of TOE (theory of everything), physicists have periodically proclaimed the advent of the theory to end all theories—and each time, journalists have been, of course, quick to spread the good tidings. Heidegger in fact *believes* naively in modern science and technique the way a bank teller amateur reader of vulgarized “scientific” magazines believes in it. He never saw the deep internal antinomies and aporias contemporary science is full of.

Its sterility is immediately apparent in the fact that, with Heidegger himself, it has only led to pseudopoetic and pseudoprophetic high-sounding words (like *das Geviert*,¹² etc.), and that nowhere can one see, even approximately, in what the *Denken des Seins* consists. No wonder that Heidegger’s epigones proved unable to produce anything along this direction, and that they had to confine themselves to the endless “interpretation” and “deconstruction” of past philosophers.

But the thesis could make sense only on the faulty presupposition that the object of philosophy would be, for instance, the question of Being, or why is there something rather than nothing, etc. In fact, as I said before, the object of philosophy is the question: What ought I, what ought we, to think—about being, about knowledge of Being, about “I,” about “we,” about our polity, about justice, etc.? And one obvious result of the Heideggerian restriction is that any reflection on politics or ethics, for instance, becomes impossible, both on grounds of “substance,” because “we are to do nothing but wait” (*Gelassenheit*)—this being, of course, the immediate consequence of the conception of history as “destination of Being”—and on the grounds of “method,” since, for example, the *polis* and all that must be taken as belonging to the “ontic,” therefore do not form a worthy object of the thought of Being.

How wonderfully all this fits *die geistige und politische Situation der Zeit*, the spiritual and political situation of the times, hardly needs saying. This of course

¹²T/E: Correcting in the text Castoriadis’s misspelling of this Heideggerian German word, translated by Albert Hofstadter as “fourfold” (i.e., earth, sky, divinities, mortals) in “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1954), *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 148ff.

does not forbid anybody from discussing its substance. But neither can one fail to see that these proclamations appear at a time when the questions: What are we to think? What are we to do? are taking on a tragic immediacy and urgency. In this sense, the Heideggerian philosophy and its offshoots are but one of the expressions of (and a minor factor in) the more general trend toward the decomposition of Western society and culture—that is, toward the vanishing of the project of autonomy. But this trend, undoubtedly real and more and more threatening (we have not waited for Heidegger to see and say that), nobody can today consider as definitively and irreversibly victorious. We do not yet live in fifth-century Rome or Constantinople.¹³

¹³Sometimes, nice, sincere, and honest people say: But you cannot deny that Heidegger *is* the critique of modern technique. This is of course “epochal” parochialism and ignorance. The critique of modern technique starts at least with Rousseau and the Romantics, is there through the whole of the nineteenth century (e.g., William Morris, John Ruskin, etc.) and becomes the *lieu commun* in Germany around the turn of the century with Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Alfred Weber, Georg Simmel, etc. The chapter “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” in Georg Lukács’s *History and Class-Consciousness* (1923), developing ideas of Marx and Weber, contains, of course in a Marxist garb, most of what is of some substance, in this respect, in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and the *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1935). The Frankfurt School should also be mentioned in this respect. (Nobody seems to have noted that most of Foucault’s writing is but an application of the central ideas of Lukács and the Frankfurt School in some particular fields.) In brief: the critique of modern technique and its world, of reified society, the *Entzauberung der Welt*, etc. were flowing in the gutters of Weimar Germany (and in other European countries: see, e.g., D. H. Lawrence) and belonged to both the “right wing” and the “left wing” of opponents of capitalist society. What Heidegger “added” to it was to make technique the *result* of “Western metaphysics,” instead of seeing that (1) the birth of capitalism and the emergence of Descartes/Leibniz, say, were parallel manifestations of a

There is, in fact, no real possibility for philosophy to become absorbed by technoscience. What is possible, and indeed taking place, is that genuine philosophical questions get buried deeper and deeper under a thick layer of a quiet and soft dogmatism of positivistic metaphysics (in secret complicity with an “anarchism/scepticism” *à la* Feyerabend: “anything goes” is a thoroughly positivistic position. Anything goes and nothing goes really, but some things work provisionally; the question of truth is a “metaphysical” question, etc.), while, in other buildings of Academia, historians of philosophy go on chewing the dried fruits of their specialty, and, in the glorious free market of ideas, “philosophical” punk sects supply ideoclips for the consumption of the various media.

I must leave aside here the question whether, in the present social-historical situation, a single person recognizing what I take to be the genuine tasks of philosophy and working on them can do more than bring forward a personal *œuvre*. What the resonance of such an *œuvre* may be, what stimulus it could provide for a renewal of philosophical activity—these are, of course, questions that can never be answered in advance. In this respect as in other domains, the only valid

new social-historical imaginary (neither Plotinus’ nor Thomas Aquinas’s metaphysics “produced” technique or capitalism); and (2) parallelly, and antinomically, the project of autonomy (the emancipatory or democratic movement) never ceased to manifest itself during this period and to interfere—in an extremely complex relation of antagonism and mutual contamination—with the capitalistic project of unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery. But, of course, for Heidegger the democratic movement could be nothing more than another expression of the modern Forgetting of Being.

maxim is: *Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra*.¹⁴

But one example will help, I hope, to understand why I consider impossible—*de jure*—the “disappearance of philosophy within the world of technicized science.”¹⁵

Virtually the whole of inherited philosophy, when talking about the world or physical (and psychical) being, has in view either the *Lebenswelt*, the “life-world” (most ancient philosophers, partly Kant, fully of course the later Husserl and Heidegger), or the “classical” world of mathematical physics (from Descartes onward). In both cases these *images* have played a decisive role both as paradigms of “being” (*on*, *Seiendes*) and as the basis for a method. Now, the *Lebenswelt* (that is, the return of old Husserl to Aristotle’s starting point) is an indispensable common initial ground—but slippery and full of holes and quicksands. And the “classical” edifice lies in ruins.

Things, time, space, matter have become riddles more than they ever have been. Modern physics, generally without knowing it, is uneasily sitting simultaneously on all four pairs of the Kantian antinomies—and adds to them plenty of new ones. Its wonderful “instrument,” mathematics, displays more and more its terrifying efficiency—for no apparent reason (the

¹⁴T/E: Do your duty, come what may.

¹⁵T/E: This is Castoriadis’s own translation into English. On page 59 of “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” in *On Time and Being*, translator Joan Stambaugh has: “the dissolution of philosophy in the technologized sciences.” Castoriadis, however, systematically distinguished the historically extant *spectrum* of available “techniques” from an instituted society’s (say, capitalism’s) specific choice of “technology.” The German original has *technisierten*; also, in his Preface to *CLI* and in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (*ibid.*), Castoriadis has *décomposition* (“decomposition” or Stambaugh’s “dissolution”), while here he has *disparition* (“disappearance”).

Kantian reasons are of no avail for a quasi-Riemannian four- or perhaps ten-dimensional manifold). The dazzlingly rapid progression of mathematics, while unveiling the gap in its own foundations (undecidability theorems—Gödel, Turing, Church) and based on paradoxical assumptions (axiom of choice), has led to a situation (Gödel and Paul Cohen on the continuum hypothesis) where an indefinite number of “non-Euclidian” (“non-Cantorian”) set theories appear possible.

Mathematics appears more and more as a free creation of human imagination working under certain constraints (consistency, economy). But it also appears as (1) strangely related to the physical world (any physical theory is mathematized, though sometimes in a very weird way, e.g., quantum theory, and purely mathematical considerations play a tremendous heuristic role in today’s physics), and (2) bumping against no man-made constraints, necessities, and intrinsic kinships. We seem to be creating a multilayered “ideal” world that, in the most strange and uninspectable way, *encounters* both a multilayered physical world *and* an “ideal” world *in itself*.

Everybody knows, or ought to know, the chaotic theoretical situation in fundamental physics—a situation that is all the more puzzling as it does not in the least interfere with the experimental, observational, and practical accuracy and efficiency of physics, nor with its predictive capacity. The two main theories—general relativity and quanta—are, both of them, continuously corroborated by observation and experiment, while each of them contains as yet unsolved deep problems and while they contradict each other. The classical edifice of categories—by no means causality alone—is a broken machine that still turns out wonderful products. And I could go on for pages.

It would be silly to speak of all this as just “epistemological” or even “metaphysical” (in the Heideggerian sense) problems. They go directly at the heart of the ontological question. What is the being of this (human) being that can freely create forms, which then turn out to have something to do with, and *encounter*, something externally given? What is the being of these forms?¹⁶ And what is the being of the externally given? But then: What ought we to think of being as such, if being belongs also to a being capable of a free creation, which both meets and fails to meet whatever there is? It would be ridiculous to think that these questions are eliminated by the “ontological difference”—or by the supremacy of the question about “the meaning of Being.” The question of the “meaning of Being” in the resolutely un- and anti-Aristotelian turn Heidegger wants to imprint on it is meaningless, except as an anthropomorphic/anthropological and/or theological question. Who told you that there is a meaning of Being? And the “ontological difference” is just a terminological nicety, without substantive import. Being is inseparable from the modes of being, themselves in turn inseparable from beings. To put it in the fashionable jargon: presence as such is obviously different from that which is present—but presence itself is each time different, is in a different mode in relation to that which presents itself. The presence of a lover is not the presence of a crocodile (not necessarily, at any rate). The phenomenality of the phenomena is not itself a phenomenal datum, to be sure. But the phenomenality of, for example, thought, is not the phenomenality of a star. To talk just about phenomenality (or presence, or presence/absence, etc.)

¹⁶T/E: This sentence dropped out of the French translation, perhaps by mistake.

becomes of necessity empty talk (*logikon kai kenon*, Aristotle would say),¹⁷ meaning simply: something is given—*es gibt, estin einai*—something has to be given. Far from absorbing philosophy, in the sense of integrating the philosophical questions within its methods and its procedures, contemporary science both returns to these and puts them in a new light.¹⁸

Something is given—something has to be given—but *to whom*, and *how*? Is mathematics “given” to us—or are we creating mathematics? In what place are infinite-dimensional Hilbert spaces “given”? And *who* is thinking of Being? Is it the *Dasein*—this bastard and composite construct (bastard and composite as the philosophical “subject” almost always is), ignorant of its constituent elements, an artificial juxtaposition of psychical, social-historical, and reflective components peppered with a powder strongly smelling both of the social-historical situation of the time and of its creator’s idiosyncrasies and value choices?

If we are doing philosophy (or even, “thinking the meaning of Being”), we have to ask: Who is that “we,” and what is he or she? Who and what am I, when I stop being simply a *Dasein* and start reflecting on the question: Who and what am I *qua Dasein*? Now, the latest era has witnessed the flourishing of an eclectic, incongruous, and unthoughtful hodgepodge, proclaiming “the death of the subject” (and of man, of meaning, of history, etc.), under the sign of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, but—strangely—with Heidegger as the

¹⁷T/E: Aristotle’s phrase *logikōs kai kenōs* is found for example in the *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b21.

¹⁸T/E: This sentence dropped out of the French translation, perhaps by mistake.

philosophical guarantor. Yet one could not note, in all this, the slightest awareness of the true questions raised, on the philosophical level, by psychoanalysis or by whatever is of value in Marx or Nietzsche. I leave aside the obvious objection of the clever high-school adolescent: If everything you say is determined by your Unconscious (or your social position), or is just an interpretation, then so too is this very conception of yours (this was already well known in Athens around 450 BCE). But the substantive problem is: Given that *it is true* that at the core of the “subject” (whatever that may mean) an unconscious psyche most of the time motivates its acts (therefore, also, its pronouncements); given that *it is true* that nobody can ever jump over his times or extract himself from the society to which he belongs; given that *it is true* that any statement contains an irredeemable element of interpretation corresponding to the interpreter’s position, outlook, and interests—how can it be that we are capable of any self-reflective activity, including the one leading us to the above statements and all the others?

In the face of this situation—which, by the way, is *not* fundamentally new in its form (but I will not dwell upon that now)—and barring a self-silencing radical skepticism, only two positions seem possible.

Either we accept that this or that individual or philosopher—for instance, Heidegger, or *stultiores minoresque alii*—has been endowed, *for no reason*, with the capacity to utter the truth—or the meta-, or the post-truth—anyhow: to make pronouncements valid for everybody, but about which no further enquiry is possible. Then we revert simply to the consecration of a particular philosopher as a prophet—that is, we revert to the religious position.

Or we stand in the Greco-Western tradition, and recognize no prophets—whether it be God or Being talking

through their respective mouths. Then we remain under the obligation of *logon didonai*—of giving account and reason for whatever we say and do publicly. *Logon didonai* does not mean, of course, mathematical demonstration or experimental corroboration, neither does it mean the search for and the exhibition of a “foundation.” But it means that we accept critique and discussion, and discussion is not possible without the requirement of a minimal *consistency* (which is *not* ensemblistic-identitary consistency).

Then we have to face this challenge: How is it that a psychical being,¹⁹ which is at the same time social-historical, can become a reflective subjectivity? For various reasons, the Kantian position will not do. We cannot be satisfied with the “transcendental” point of view—or, in other terms, with the simple distinction between the *quaestio juris* and the *quaestio facti*—because the “subject” we are interested in—and which is of critical importance for whatever we think and do—is not a “Transcendental” subject but an *effective* subject.²⁰ We find ourselves facing two, *prima facie* antinomical considerations: we know, and cannot pretend to forget, that for whatever we

¹⁹T/E: In conformity with the French translation, “physical being” from the original printed English text now reads, more plausibly: “psychical being.”

²⁰As is, or ought to be, known, Kant wavers on this point. He continually speaks of “us humans” (*wir Menschen*), and of the interest of *our* reason—and constructs a “transcendental subject” of which we never know if it represents the way we actually function or the way we ought to function. In brief: the “transcendental” answer leaves us in the dark as to the ontological status of the knowing subject. See also my text “Ontological Import of the History of science” (1986), now in [CL2](#), and, concerning the relation between psyche and reflective thought, the first part, “Psyche,” of [CL1](#), and ch. 6 of [IIS](#). [T/E: In the French, Castoriadis replaces this mention of [IIS](#) with a reference to “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), which may be found above in the present volume.]

do and think, there are psychical and social-historical conditions (not “causes”!);²¹ and we cannot pretend to ignore that we attempt to think, to discuss, and to judge irrespective of these conditions, that we intend validity for what we say irrespective of place, moment, motives, and conditions. We therefore have to recognize both the effective and the reflective point of view. And we have to face the fact that it is only in and through the social-historical (and leaning on certain capacities of the psyche) that the reflective (of which the “transcendental” is a dimension) becomes effective. If we cannot think the possibility and the effectivity of a marriage between *jus* and *factum*, we simply cannot think anymore.

But we know that reflective thinking, no more than democracy, was not there all the time. It emerges, it is created through human activity at a certain time in a certain place (after which, of course, it becomes virtually accessible to all humans). We therefore have to recognize in them human creations; we are thus led to recognize also, beyond that, the otherwise obvious fact that human history is creation—of significations and institutions embodying them, of the social individual out of the “raw material” of the psyche, and of self-reflective subjectivity. We then can see—from the vantage point of a tradition to which philosophy and democracy belong—that almost all societies have instituted themselves as heteronomous, in and through the closure of their institutions and significations. Then we see that democracy and philosophy are the twin expressions of a social-historical rupture, creating the project of (social and individual) autonomy. The meaning of this project is the refusal of closure, and the establishment of another

²¹T/E: The phrase “psychical and” dropped out of the French translation, perhaps by mistake or perhaps purposely.

relationship between the instituting and the instituted at the collective level, between radical imagination and the socialized individual at the level of the singular human being, between the incessant reflective activity of thought and its results and accomplishments at any given moment.

These are creations. There is no way of showing that the condensation of galaxies, the Big Bang, or the combinatory properties of carbon were necessary *and* sufficient conditions for the emergence of democracy and philosophy. On the one hand, this leads us again into the ontological issue: there is at least one type of being capable of altering its mode of being—and since this is a mode of being therefore it pertains to what we think of Being. On the other hand, this creation contains the creation of a social-historical space where, and of a type of individual—self-reflective subjectivity—for whom, the question of truth can arise and be elucidated in a nonvacuous fashion. That means that the reflective belongs to the effective—and that the effective can bear the reflective. This has nothing to do with a *Geschick des Seins*, a destination/donation of Being. The creation of the project of autonomy, the reflective activity of thought, and the struggle for the creation of self-reflective, that is, democratic institutions, are the results and the manifestations of the making/doing of humans. It is human activity that gave birth to the claim for a truth that each time breaks the walls of the instituted representations of the tribe.²² It is human activity that has created the claim for freedom, equality, justice, in its struggle against established institutions. And it is our free and historical recognition of the validity of this project, and the effectivity of its partial realization up to now, that binds us to these claims—the claim for truth, the claim for freedom,

²²T/E: Castoriadis translates “claim” into French as *exigence*.

equality, and justice—and that motivates us to move forward in this direction.

To work under these claims is therefore both a political and a philosophical task, in all senses of these terms. From the more specifically philosophical point of view, the closure we are up against is the ensemblistic-identitary character²³ that has more and more, since the Stoics, dominated philosophy. At this level, the idea of an “end of philosophy” expresses essentially impotence in overcoming the ensemblistic-identitary closure and the vain attempt to escape from it by taking refuge in pseudopoetical and pseudoprophetical utterances masquerading as thought.

[Night has fallen only for those who have let themselves fall into the night. For those who are living,

hēlios neos eph' hēmerēi estin

the sun is new each day (Heraclitus, Diels 22B6).]

Frankfurt, November 1986—Paris, October 1988

²³T/E: In the French, Castoriadis substitutes *clôture* (closure) for “character” here.

Time and Creation*

I

When thinking about time—as, indeed, about anything—we cannot avoid encountering immediately an insurmountable division:

- Time for us—or for some subject, or being-for-itself, with various evident and, at the same time, enigmatic characteristics (be it only its pulverization among all actual and possible subjects);
- Time in or of the world, as receptacle and dimension of whatever may appear, and as order and measure of this appearance.

Let us call these, provisionally, subjective and objective time. Immediately, then, arises the question of time *as such*, a third term making it possible to talk about subjective and objective times as *times*. Time as such would

*The ideas developed in this text were first presented in a lecture given during the June 1983 Cerisy-la-Salle Colloquium, “Temps et devenir” (Time and Becoming). The reworked text served as the basis for my introductory lecture at the colloquium on “The Construction of Time,” held at Stanford University in February 1988. My translation into French of this lecture appeared, with a few modifications, as “Temps et création” in *MM*, 247-77 (307-48 of the 2000 reprint). [T/E: These modifications were incorporated into the published record of the Stanford colloquium, *Chronotypes: The Construction of Time*, John Bender and David E. Wellbery, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 38-64. In addition to making some slight editorial modifications in Castoriadis’s text for the version first published in *WIF*, 374-401, I included my translations of phrases added by Castoriadis to his French translation of this text that did not appear in the previously published English-language version; more appear in the present version—now all in brackets.]

then appear as *overarching*, not only the various subjective times—mine, yours, the time of the Aztecs and the time of the Westerners, the time of the whales, and the time of the bees—that is, the varieties of private times or times for a subject, but also all particular times of whatever nature, including objective time and its possible fragmentations (there is such a fragmentation in general relativity) and making possible, through innumerable articulations and encasings, their mutual adjustment, or at least accommodation and “correspondence.”

So, we do speak, can and have to speak, of time in general but must always bear in mind that there are many species of time—or many meanings of the term, in the same way as Aristotle used to say of being that it is a *pollachōs legomenon*, a term used in many different ways. This mention of Aristotle is not accidental: I shall argue that time is inseparable from being. It is not just that we happen to give various meanings to the same term, time, but also that *there are* different categories of Time. Why are they categories *of time*, that is, what do they share in common or, to put it in a more radical form, why *is there* a unity and unicity of time, if indeed there is one?—these are questions to which only a very complex attempt at an answer is possible. Here again, the situation is the same as the one relative to being and, if I am correct, for the same deep reasons.

I spoke about subjective and objective time. Why take over and endorse this old-fashioned and platitudinous distinction between the subjective and the objective? I will return to this question later. For the moment, I will assert that there is being as subject, or that there are beings that are subjects, that is, are for-themselves. For instance: *we*. Now, a subject is nothing unless it is the creation of a world for-itself in a relative closure. This world (receptacles, elements,

relations, and so on) is what it is *for* the subject, and would not be as such and as it is unless there were a subject and *this* subject (and/or this class of subjects, etc.). This creation is always creation of a multiplicity. This we just find and state; we can neither deduce nor produce it. This multiplicity is always deployed in two modes: the mode of the simply different, as difference, repetition, ensemblistic-identitary multiplicity (for brevity: ensidic multiplicity); and the mode of the other, as otherness, emergence, creative, imaginary, or poietic multiplicity (see the Note at the end of the chapter).

But I shall also assert that—unless one is to give oneself fully to an absolute solipsistic delirium—subjectivity does not exhaust being. First of all, which subject? There are indefinitely many subjects and modes of subjective being, and there is no way I can construct the existing and effective organization and functioning for-itself of a crocodile or a beehive as a product of my (or the transcendental) consciousness. Neither can I forget that the world of the beehive entails necessarily the world of flowering plants; or—to stop here an unlimited series of inferences—that the world of plants has to do with some properties of, or possibilities supplied by, inorganic matter. To be sure, whatever I say about all this is also in a decisive way codetermined, coorganized, by me as subject. But—and we shall revert to this argument—whether I think about the organization I, as thinking subject, impose on whatever there is, or about the organization living beings in general both present and impose on their world, it remains the case that neither would exist if the world as such, in itself, were not *organizable*. Subjects cannot exist outside a world, nor in any conceivable world. The meaning of the term “objective” is, here: the possibility offered to subjects as beings for-themselves by what there is, to exist in a world and to

organize, each time in another way, what there is [this possibility being largely independent of these subjects].

Two consequences follow: First, we can never separate rigorously and absolutely or ultimately, in whatever we say about the world, the subjective component and the objective component. Second, we cannot restrict the two modes of difference and alterity to the world of the subject(s): they are inherent in the world as such. There is ensidic multiplicity, difference, repetition:¹ there are trees, in the plural; a cow produces calves and not parrots, etc. And there is creative, poietic multiplicity: a jaguar is other than a neutron star, a composer is other than a singing bird.

These two implications—as well as, most of the time, the premises underlying them—have been on the whole neglected or ignored by inherited philosophy. And this in two ways rather than one.

First, on an abstract level, inherited philosophy works with a radical separation of subject and object. The result has been a hovering between a subjective and an objective position (*Einstellung*). This situation does not change, but is rather brought to the extremes, when the one [totally] absorbs the other—as happens with idealism or materialism. That takes place, of course, on the gnoseological (*erkenntnistheoretischen*) level, with empiricism (inductivism), and apriorism. What is neglected in both views is that there is a subject and that any world is a world for a subject—while, at the same time, there could not be a subject and a world for this subject without a world that lends itself to the existence of subjects and to their knowing something (this boils down to the same thing) about the world. Whether

¹T/E: For an unknown reason, Castoriadis did not translate “difference, repetition” into French.

we consider the most naive “perceptual faith” (Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty) or the most sophisticated philosophical or scientific thought, we are always in the middle of a subjective world that would not exist, or be the way it is, simply because the subject is what it is. But the same is true on the ontological level, when the essential determination of subjective being, its self-creation *qua* subjective being, is either denied to it—or denied to the being of the world, considered as an inert assembly of elements subject to perennial, self-identical determinations.

Second, on a more concrete but no less fundamental level, with the simple polarization or separation between subject and object, philosophy has ignored the *social-historical*, both as proper domain and mode of being, and as the *de jure* and *de facto* ground and medium for any thought. This can be seen in the way philosophy, from Plato to Martin Heidegger, has structured its domain. This it has done by the positing of a polarized couple: the subject or ego, on the one hand (psyche, *animus*, transcendental consciousness, ego, *Dasein* as the *je eigenes, je meines* [= that which is each time my own, mine]); and the object or world, on the other hand (cosmos, creation, nature, transcendence, *Welt* and/or Being). What is covered up in this way, never in fact thematized, and never understood in its proper philosophical weight and character—its character as the condition, medium, purveyor of forms, and active co-operant² in any process of thought—is the social-historical, which is always, both *de facto* and *de jure*, the cosubject and coobject of thought. The actual, concrete embodiment of thought is, of course, the thinking, self-reflective subjectivity—but this subjectivity is, itself, a social-historical creation.

²T/E: Castoriadis translates “co-operant” as *co-auteur*, that is, “coauthor.”

The twin results of this occultation have been:

- That the subjectivity about which [inherited] philosophy talks is always a bastard construct, combining in various proportions elements of the psychical proper, of the socially-historically instituted understanding and reason, and of the self-reflecting activity of the social individual at a certain stage of history.
- That the world (or being) considered by [this] philosophy is thought irrespective of its social-historical construction (that is, creation), with the results, *inter alia*, that (1) the true question of the world as the ground for all the various social-historical creations of it is covered up, and (2) the deeply historical character of knowledge, the existence of a genuine history of knowledge, is either made impossible (Kant), ignored, reduced to a moment in the “forgetting of Being” (Heidegger), or downgraded to a sheer relativistic “sociological” or other version—eliminating, in all cases, the question of the history of truth and of truth as history.

It is beyond my purpose and terms of reference to deal here with this inherited situation for itself. I will only exemplify and discuss it briefly at the level of the question of time.

As Paul Ricœur has correctly shown (in *Time and Narrative*, especially vol. 3) philosophy has always dealt either with subjective or phenomenological time (Augustine, Husserl, in essence Heidegger) or with objective or cosmological time (Plato, Aristotle, Heidegger’s “vulgar” understanding of time; Ricœur only in passing mentions Plato

and places in this category also Kant, a decision that raises questions I shall not discuss here), with the result that each advance in the understanding of the one only multiplied the difficulties in understanding the other as well as in bridging somehow or other the gap between them.

Now this division can easily be understood and interpreted on the basis of what has been said above. Philosophy has concentrated:

- Either on a reified, identitary (ensemblistic-identitary, *ensidic*) time (such time would form, supposedly, the backbone of physical experience and, as such, has to be essentially measurable; it therefore has to be conceived centrally from the point of view of the repetition of the identical (periodicity, etc.), thus ignoring, among many other riddles, the basic datum of the emergence of Otherness);
- Or on an experienced, lived time, which as such can only be, in each case, utterly subjective in the derogatory sense of the word (*je eigenes, je meines*, says Heidegger), and makes of the existence of both a public and a cosmic time either an intractable aporia or the outcome of the fall of the subject (the *Dasein*) into everydayness and inauthenticity and of its forgetting Being and covering it up with simply “encountered” particular beings (*Vorhandenes*).

Let me illustrate, at this point, the fateful effects of the covering up of the social-historical. If the social-historical had been, as it ought to have been, placed at the starting point of the reflection, a part of the aporias of time would have been dissolved, and another part brought under another light. One would have immediately perceived both the solidarity and the

distinction between identitary and imaginary time; the necessary leaning of the former on the first natural stratum (therefore on a cosmic time); the irreducibility of imaginary time to identitary time, but also their inevitable interpenetration;³ the fundamental alterity of the imaginary times instituted by societies that are other, as opposed to the relative homogeneity and commensurability of their identitary times taken as such (abstractly and in separation). One would also have seen that each society, as being for-itself, entails the creation of a proper (imaginary) time, consubstantial to its being-thus (being a society and this particular society).

II

To illustrate the aporias engendered by the objective (or cosmological) and subjective (or phenomenological) approaches, a short discussion of two eminent proponents of the respective views is useful.

Leaving aside Plato—in the *Timaeus* (37d), time is clearly posited as an identitary, objective, measurable ordering of everything worldly—we find in Aristotle the first systematic and thorough exposition of the objective, cosmological point of view. The well-known locus⁴ is *Physics*, 4.10-14 (217b29-224a17). Without going through the intricacies and the extraordinary richness, subtlety, and solidity of the argument, we pluck the solution given by

³T/E: For an unknown reason, Castoriadis did not translate the phrase running from “the irreducibility” to “inevitable interpenetration;” into French.

⁴T/E: Castoriadis replaces “locus” by the Latin phrase *sedes materiae* (seat of the matter) in his French translation.

Aristotle, as usual, in the canonical form of a definition: “Time is the number [numbered number, measure] of movement according to the before and after” (219b1-2; 220a24-25). Movement for Aristotle, we must remember, is not only local movement but change in general (and this is reaffirmed in several places in the fourth book of the *Physics*). Time *is* not the change (movement)—but it is one of the essential determinations of the change (movement). And it is also one of the essential determinations of change (movement) to be measurable.

Let us grant this. We cannot, though, help asking: What is the “before and after”? The explanation of it (219a10-25) betrays a slippage papered over by the harmonizing interpreters and commentators of Aristotle. Despite the repeated (in the *Physics* and e[lse]where)⁵ metaphysical and physical thesis that local movement is but one of the species of change (*metabolē*; hinted already at *Ph.* 4.10.218b19-20), which comprises, beyond local movement, generation and corruption, alteration, and increase/decrease, that is, changes according to essence, to quality, to quantity, and to place (*Ph.* 8.7.261a27-36), Aristotle asserts, here and elsewhere (219a11-25; cf. *Ph.* 8.7.261a26-27), that local movement is the “first” (in the sense of the most important) and that “the before and after” is, firstly (originarily), in the *topos*—place, location, space. We would thus have to take “the before and after” as a spatial ordering—the spatial before and after of a moving body—which the temporal ordering follows (*akolouthēin*, 219a19), since movement (locally defined) and time always accompany each other (*ibid.*). But any spatial ordering is, of necessity, arbitrary. (That for Aristotle this

⁵T/E: The English had the exaggeration “everywhere” (replaced by *ailleurs* in his French translation).

arbitrariness is not absolute, the Earth having a privileged or rather unique position, is irrelevant. We do not necessarily measure movements in relation to the center of the Earth.) A subjective element, therefore, inevitably creeps into Aristotle's cosmological view of time, and this is manifest in the formulations of *Physics* 4.2: "we take cognizance of time, when we have defined the movement by defining the before and after; and only then we say that time has been [has elapsed] when we perceive the before and after in the movement. ...for, when we think [*noēsōmen*] that the extremities are other than the middle, and the soul pronounces the present/instants [*nun*] to be two, the one before, the other after, it is only then that we say that this is time" (219a22-25; 219a26-29). The after and before becomes, thus, a primitive notion, the understanding of which must appeal to some subjective ordering by the soul (the observer). I shall return to this shortly.

Seven centuries later—and leaving aside the very important Stoics and Plotinus—we find in Augustine (*Confessions* 11) both the first clear formulation of the subjective approach and a rebuttal of the conception of "a philosopher" that, very probably, he takes to be the conception of Aristotle, whom, equally probably, he has not read—or, if read, not understood. I start with the latter. Time, says Augustine, cannot be the movement; for, we see the same movement taking place with different durations (11.23.[29-30]; 11.24.[31]). The argument of course has nothing to do with Aristotle's definition. Aristotle did not write that time *was* the movement (he wrote explicitly the contrary) but that time was one of the essential determinations of the movement, that is, its *measure*. If "the same movement" takes place with different durations, then it is simply not the same movement, since one of its main

determinations is its temporal measure. Nobody in his right senses would suppose that Aristotle did not know the difference between walking home and running home—or between the tortoise and Achilles. But also Augustine's misplaced rebuttal conceals the central aporia of his own position (and that is why it is discussed here): How does he know that the two "different durations" of "the same movement" are different, except by comparing them with a *tertium quid*—for example, another movement supposed to run at a constant rate during the same "time"? "The same movement" here can only mean: *the same spatial endpoints*, and thus the argument does not make sense. Augustine goes on to say, *Non est ergo tempus corporis motus* (11.24.[31]), the time therefore is not the movement of the (a) body, and that we measure movement as well as rest by *nostra dimensio*, our measure. But could we measure rest if everything were at rest? An Aristotelian would of course remark that we "measure" rest as the time during which another measured movement took place, that is, by reference to and comparison with movement.

But, if Augustine's dialectics are poor, his central intuition is strong. We can measure time, he says, because there is a *distentio* (*distendo*: to extend, to deploy)—an extension or tension or deployment. *Distentio* of what? *Distentio animi*—a stretching of the mind. *In te anime meus tempora metior*: I measure the times in you, my spirit (or mind) (11.27.[3]6). And I measure this *distentio* insofar as *aliquid in memoria mea metior quod infixum manet*—insofar as I measure something that remains fixed in my memory (*ibid.* [3]5).

Thus, time is strictly correlated to the capacity or possibility of the mind to measure the affection (or impression: *affectionem*) *quam res praetereuntes...faciunt...et*

...manet, ipsam metior presentem:⁶ it is this very impression made by previous things, and which remains, that I measure as present (or because it is—*still*—present) (11.[2]7.[3]6). Time is, in fact, the *distentio* the *animus* lives through and that remains (in the memory) and, therefore, can be re-called, called back unaltered—unaltered at least *qua distentio*. (Insofar as measure, in the proper sense, is concerned, this is obviously an untenable position; we shall return to this.) Thus the future, the not-yet (*nondum*) “consumes itself into the past” and the past, the no-more, grows (*crescit*) because the *animus* is capable of three activities or postures: *et expectet, et adtendit, et meminit*, it expects, it pays attention to (or attends to—is preoccupied with, Heidegger!), it remembers (11.28.[37]). So that (or: in view of, *ut*) “the expected through that which is attended passes into [*transeat*] that which is remembered.” The *animus*—the mind—is in time and/or makes time be insofar as it is *distentio* uniting these three “moments,” expectation, attention, memory. If it is capable also of measuring time, it is because of this strange possibility of quantification supplied by the accretion of memories in memory.

Then Augustine reverts (book 12) to the question that had, to begin with, put him on this treacherous track and remains the motor of his enquiry. “What was God doing before the creation?”, this silly and blasphemous question, is answered in principle by the distinction between eternity, as *nunc stans*, immutable now, and time, which belongs only to the created. But if time is linked to the created *animus* not only for its measure or its perception, but in essence, as the developments of book 11 tend to show, intractable difficulties arise, which will lead Augustine, in the book 12 of the

⁶T/E: Correcting here Castoriadis’s quotation of the Latin.

Confessions, to a flagrant contradiction, as we shall shortly see. In the meantime, let us note the decisive influence of Augustine on the time conceptions of Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger.

We discuss Augustine to exemplify a basic position and its aporias. Let us take up one of these (common to all subjective approaches).⁷ Augustine does not (and could not!) simply say: there is time only insofar as there are an *animus* and a *distentio animi*. He says, as we have seen, and has to say, I measure time by this *distentio*. This creates an impossibility, shared by all subjective approaches to time. How could a *distentio animi* supply a common, public time, and a common measure of time? How could it even supply a measure, in the proper sense (one has to suppose that Augustine knows what *metior*, “I measure,” means), of private, subjective, personal time? Augustine’s referents are purely subjective (even if they were taken to be nonpsychological): expectation, attention, memory. In order to arrive at a common time and a common measure of time, all *animi* would have to be endowed *a priori* not only with an abstract capacity of measuring time but with the capacity to measure the same time and strictly in the same way. Let it be said in passing: in this perspective, the existence for all subjects of a flow of time with the same direction has to be taken as a sheer fact, not susceptible of further elaboration or elucidation. The structure of subjectivity is such that it lives in attending, expecting, and remembering (in Husserl: attention, retention, protention; in Heidegger: the expected, the memory, the present), and with the same ordering of events for all. The concrete content of this ordering for me

⁷T/E: For an unknown reason, Castoriadis did not translate this sentence into French.

must be the same concrete ordering for you. This seems self-evident to Augustine (as, indeed, to all philosophers), so he does not even mention the problem. But also: the measuring has to be done with the same yardsticks and lead to the same results, without any external *repères*—bearings and benchmarks. Thus all *animi*—or the *animus* as such—must be such that their measuring operations are identical, in a way wholly independent of any “quantity” and “quality” of the memories stocked in each case. Then why refer to these memories at all? And why address always the *animus* as *animus meus*, as Augustine does (this will become the *je meines, je eigenes* of Heidegger)? But even in the case of the single *animus*: What is there to ensure the identity of successive measures of the same—or the comparability, as to measure, of different stretches of time—each one obviously filled with different memories?

Let me allow myself an aside at this point. Do we die *after* we were born because we expect death and remember birth (Heidegger’s *Geworfenheit* and *Tod*)? A sentence absurd on the whole—and wrong or nonrigorous in its second part. We do not remember birth; strictly speaking, we do not know properly, *eigentlich*, that we were born. The *Dasein* does not know it was born; it only has been told so, and it has seen other people being born. Neither does the *Dasein* know *eigentlich* that it will die; it has been told so, and has seen other people die. Nothing in me, nothing *meines* and *eigenes*, tells me that I was born and that I will die—nothing “psychological,” and nothing “transcendental.” That I was born and that I will die is essentially *social* knowledge, transmitted to/imposed upon me (and which, of course, the innermost core of the psyche simply ignores).

We revert to the aporias of the subjective approach. In Augustine’s theological framework, the difficulties could be

accommodated by divine construction (what could not?). But this way is barred for a philosopher (thus also for Husserl, Heidegger, etc.). And, even for the theologian Augustine, the way remains fraught with enigmas, since he has clearly based his whole argument on strictly subjective notions (memories, etc.). Therefore equivalent *a priori* properties of the subjects have to be postulated *ad hoc*. The question is important because, in another framework, it persists through Kant up to Husserl and Heidegger, where it becomes intractable.

It is useful to show this in the case of Kant. For Kant, time as a pure *a priori* form of intuition forces, so to speak, whatever appears, external as well as internal, into one single dimension of succession. The application of this form to whatever appears (the phenomena) requires the mediation of a transcendental schema, supplied by the transcendental imagination. This schema is the "line." We have here, obviously, a shift of the problematic of time toward the problematic of space. But even this shift will not do. A fundamental property of time (any sort of time) is irreversibility, and there is nothing irreversible about a line: the total order on the open interval (x,y) is isomorphic to the total order on the open interval (y,x) . Then, also, time is and has to be measured. In the case of space, one can accept the idea of measuring without any external support (as this is done, for example, in mathematics): pure intuition compares segments, finds them equal or unequal, and so forth. But this presupposes that segments can be superimposed on each other or made congruent (in pure intuition). But segments of the "time line," by their very nature, are not superimposable. How, then, can they be compared in a valid way, and how could time be measured? Without something inherent in the phenomena as such, and which cannot be supplied by the transcendental subject, that is, without the existence of the

effective repetition of equivalent pairs of phenomenal occurrences for which it can be rationally postulated that they are separated by equivalent intervals, there can be no measure of time—and no physical experience (*Erfahrung*) in the sense of Kant.



Now it is important to observe that neither Aristotle nor Augustine can hold his position to the end.

I gave above two quotes from Aristotle that link, in an ambiguous way, time with the activity of the soul (*Ph.* 4.2.219a22-25 and 219a26-29). But there is more. If nothing changes in our mind, or if the change escapes our notice, it seems to us (*dokei*) that no time has elapsed. But if there is “a movement in the soul,” even if we are in the dark and nothing affects our body, it seems to us immediately that time has elapsed (*Ph.* 4.11.218b21-219a2 and 219a4-6). So, the soul cannot perceive time unless there is *for it* a change. But also it can itself produce the change (the “movement”) through which time is given to it. And when, toward the end of his enquiry (*ibid.* 4.14.223a25-26), Aristotle discusses the aporia: *Would there be time, if there was not soul?*, his answer raises more difficulties than the interpreters would admit. If there is not a numbering subject, says he in explaining the aporia, there can be no number (and time is the number of movement, let us remember). Therefore, “if nothing else has in its nature [*pephuken*] the possibility to measure except soul and the mind of the soul, it is impossible for time to be if the soul is not, except that which is the substratum of time [*ho pote on*], in the same way as it would be possible for movement to be without the soul.” In a soulless *kosmos* there would be movement, because *phusis* is movement; there would also be

the “substratum” of time; there would be no time in the full sense—in the sense given by Aristotle’s own definition—since this requires the “numbering” or “measuring.” The difficulties in this solution are linked with the more general difficulties of the fundamental Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality, which cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to conclude that for Aristotle (a) the soul itself can produce a substratum for time through its own movement (no wonder in this, since *psuchē* either is *phusis* or is strongly linked to it), and (b) the actualization [(the passage from potentiality to actuality)] of time as measure of the movement entails the activity of the soul.

Things are simpler with Augustine, who contradicts himself openly and naively. Further on in the *Confessions*, when the discussion of the Creation is resumed, he asserts flatly: “You [God] have from this quasi-nothing [*paene nihilo*: the initial formlessness [*informitas*] created before everything else] created all these things in which this variable [*mutabilis*] world subsists and subsists not, where the mutability itself appears, in which the time can be perceived [*sentiri*] and measured, for the times are made through the mutations of things, when the appearances [*species*] vary and change [*vertuntur*]” (12.8.28-32; cf. [12.9.9 and] 12.[15].13-15). But he had already written ([12].11.4-10): “Who would ever say to me that, if all appearances were suppressed and annihilated and if only the formlessness were to remain, through which everything changes and varies from one form to another, this formlessness would exhibit the vicissitudes of time? This is absolutely impossible, for there are no times without the variety of motions and where there is no form, there is no variety.” Time here has ceased to be just the *distentio animi*, the stretching of my mind; it is that in which the forms *vertuntur*, are changing into one another, and it is

produced by this mutation of forms, strictly dependent on it. In other words, God has to create time together with his giving form to the initial, itself God-created *informitas*. (That the whole is a paraphrasis in Old Testament dress of Plato's *Timaeus* is obvious.) And this is not a *lapsus* of Augustine: he has to say that, since the Creation is a story unfolding in time (in cosmic time, from the *Diesseits* point of view), in which the creation of the soul comes *last*.

III

Time belongs to any subject—any being-for-itself. It is a form of the self-deployment of each being-for-itself. Being for-itself (for example, any living being) is creation of an interior, that is of an own world, a world organized in and through own, or proper, time (*Eigenzeit*). This is neither a deduction, nor an explanation. We take it to be a fact requiring elucidation.

This is most evident for us, as a primary datum, in the case of the human psyche—unconscious as well as conscious. To be sure, we also have to reckon here with the fact that, in a deep sense, the time of the Unconscious and the time of the Conscious are definitely not “the same”—though they act upon each other. But this would be an object of enquiry in its own right—as would, for example, the time of a psychoanalytic session and the time of the treatment.

Psyche is irreducible, in its kernel, to society. The true polarity is not between individual and society, but between psyche and society. The individual is a social fabrication. But psyche cannot survive unless it undergoes the process of socialization, which imprints on it, or builds around it, the successive layers of what, in its outer face, is the individual. Socialization is the work of the institution, mediated of course

in each case through already socialized individuals.

In and through the process of socialization the psyche absorbs or internalizes the time instituted by the given society. It henceforth knows public time—and has to go on living, coping with the difficult cohabitation of the various layers of its own, private time with instituted, public time. The same is of course true for all the rest: ideas, cathected objects, etc. The difficulty, or rather the clash, manifests itself not only in the opposition between the finite horizon within which the private time of the individual has to be lived (death) and the indefinite social horizon of time, but also, and equally importantly, in the difference between the rhythm and the quality (both extremely variable) of private time, and the steadiness, fixity, and prearranged variations in quality of public time.

Society (societies as such) is a type of being-for-itself. It creates, in each case, its own world, the world of social imaginary significations embodied in its particular institutions. This world—and such is the case for all worlds created by a being-for-itself—appears as the deployment of two receptacles, social space and social time, filled with objects organized according to relations, etc., and vested with meaning. Why receptacles, and why two receptacles? How far can these receptacles be separated from what they receive and from the subject to which they appear as receptacles? These are the questions ultimately reflecting the multiplicity of being, to which I shall revert later.

Descriptively, we always find social (public) time (and space) instituted in two intertwined threads. There is and always has to be identitary (ensidic) time, the backbone of which is calendar time, establishing common, public benchmarks and durations, roughly measurable and characterized essentially by repetition, recurrence,

equivalence. But social time is and always has to be also, and more importantly, imaginary time. Time is never instituted as a purely neutral medium of or receptacle for external coordination of activities. Time is always endowed with meaning. Imaginary time is significant time and the time of signification. This manifests itself in the significance of the scansions imposed on calendar time (recurrence of privileged points: feasts, rituals, anniversaries, etc.), in the instauration of essentially imaginary bounds or limit-points for time as a whole, and in the imaginary significance with which time as a whole is vested by each society. There is the time of the perpetually recurring return of the ancestors; of the innerworldly avatars of human souls; the time of Fall, Trial, and Salvation; or, as in modern societies, the time of "indefinite progress." Imaginary time is constituted inseparably from the three dermas (as I would like to call them, borrowing a term from embryology), the overlapping, overfolding, and interpenetration of which weave together society: socially instituted representations, affects, and drives (pushes). The link of imaginary time not only with the creation of a social representation of the world strictly speaking, but with the fundamental drives of a society and its fundamental affects (*Stimmungen*, moods), is obvious, but would bear lengthy examination. Thucydides (1.78), describing and opposing the moods and behavior of Athenians and Lacedaemonians, shows clearly their intimate link with the manner each of these two societies lived time.

This creation of (social) time by society requires in and of itself an elucidation. But another aspect has to be stressed first. Society always leans, and has to lean, on the first natural stratum insofar as the identitary (ensidic) dimension of its creations is concerned. (And this is true for every being-for-itself.) I dare think that a proper consideration

of this fact forces us to admit the two cardinal and, to my mind, self-evident propositions that I mentioned at the beginning of this text and that ought to end the perennial philosophical dispute between objectivism and subjectivism and place the question these conceptions have tried to answer on a new ground:

- Societies know—as do the fox and the hedgehog—at least something of the world. (Otherwise, they could not exist.) But this entails that, at least in some of its aspects, the world is *knowable*, lends itself to some knowledge (whether empirical, relative, etc., is totally irrelevant for the present discussion).
- Societies construct in each case their world—but this entails that there is something possessing in itself this quality independent from any construction: that it is *constructible* (in part, to be sure).

But we are in no position, from an ultimate point of view, to separate rigorously and absolutely disentangle that which, in these constructions, originates in the constructing subject—in this case, society—and that which appertains to the world in itself, to what there is. Our effort to achieve such a separation is certainly neither sterile nor meaningless, on the contrary. But it is bound to be interminable.

We can show this in a more precise way in the case of the social institution of time. Society creates itself—institutes itself—along two intertwined dimensions: the ensemblistic-identitary (ensidic) dimension, and the properly imaginary, or poietic, dimension. It creates current, ordinary logic and arithmetic and objects with stable attributes and permanent relations: this is the identitary (ensidic) dimension of the institution, and of all the significations it embodies. This,

society could not do without leaning on the first natural stratum, that is, on the immediately accessible layer of the world, as given to humans by dint of their animal constitution. To put it bluntly: The existence of societies proves that there is in the world in itself—at least, in the first natural stratum—something corresponding to arithmetic and geometry. Or: Causality is certainly an *a priori* category, not inducible from the phenomena. But causality would be useless if it were not, repeatedly, confirmed through the possibility of its application. The same is true concerning identitary social time, or calendar time: identitary social time is created leaning on cosmic time, that is, on the fact that equivalent recurrences (equivalent “sufficiently for use and need,” as Aristotle would say)⁸ do exist among the data of the first natural stratum: they have to be singled out—but they *can* be singled out. So much, but also no more. For social ensidic time to be created and organized in detail, it is necessary that the first natural stratum exhibit what can be constructed as equivalent recurrences. Nothing is thereby said as to the temporality or otherwise of other layers of the world (neither, of course, as to their nature). The same must be said about the fundamental characteristics of usual time, for example, local irreversibility, untransportability, and so on: they equally lean on aspects of the ensidic dimension of cosmic time. Whatever the riddles of the concept of irreversibility in physics, for instance, the fact remains that all the King’s horses and all the King’s men could not put a broken egg together again.

But on these beams, so to speak, a proper social time is, in each case, erected: the imaginary dimension of social time frequently overrules the above-mentioned characteristics. There is for instance no simple and absolute irreversibility for

⁸T/E: Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.

many, if not most, beliefs and religions (which posit a cyclical time); neither is there, necessarily, untransportability of the segments of time (or of time-bound processes) for many of them (shamanism, magic, etc.). The question about time and its characteristics beyond the data of the first natural stratum and beyond the beliefs of the tribe first emerges with the creation of philosophy and rational/scientific thought.

Imaginary [social] time would be the most important theme to treat—and I cannot treat it here. Suffice it to say that it is, in each case, consubstantial with the most decisive aspects of the overall institution of society and its imaginary significations. And, as for all nuclear social imaginary significations, its content is essentially independent of any substantive leaning on the first natural stratum: it is a pure creation of the society considered (compare, for instance, Christian and Hinduistic or Buddhistic time). Taking this into account in its most general implications, our philosophical question about the world can be given a sharp formulation. In relation to identity time, as to the whole edifice of identity objects and relations created by society, we ask: How must the world be, in itself, in order that this edifice can be erected. The only possible answer is: The world must contain the (otherwise mysterious) equivalent of an identity dimension. For example, cows and bulls beget, and can only beget, calves and heifers in functional social life—irrespective of whatever bulls and cows may mean in religion or in the tribe's representations; stars return periodically and perpetually, whether they are gods, God-created luminaries, or heaps of hydrogen and helium.

In relation to imaginary time, as well as to the whole edifice of imaginary significations erected by each society, we ask: How must the world be, in itself, in order that this amazing and unlimited variety of imaginary edifices can be

erected? The only possible answer is: The world must be tolerant and indifferent as among all these creations. It must make room for them, and for all of them, and not prevent, favor, or impose any among them over and against the others. In short: the world must be void of meaning. It is only because there is no signification intrinsic to the world that humans had, and were able, to endow it with this extraordinary variety of strongly heterogeneous meanings. It is because there is no voice thundering from behind the clouds, and no language of Being, that history has been possible. (Of course, religions, especially revealed religions, assert the contrary. But there are just too many of them.) And the prevalence, today, of the Western imaginary signification of the unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery is made possible by the ubiquity of the identitary dimension of the world, on which its practical achievements lean—and which, as such, is meaningless.

IV

Social identitary time—and therefore, social time *tout court*—presupposes identitary time in the first natural stratum or an identitary dimension of time (as of the rest) of what there is in general. It is with this identitary dimension of the world that physics deals, at least at the start. I must limit myself to a few brief remarks on an immense, immensely difficult subject, inextricably linked with mathematical and physical technicalities.

There is no question that the specter of the spatialization of time⁹ haunts the whole of physics since, at

⁹T/E: The French translation dropped the qualifying “of time” after “the specter of the spatialization.” If this was intentional, the phrase before the

least, the times of Lagrange (“physics is a geometry in four dimensions”). Einstein himself firmly believed that time is a subjective illusion (whatever that may mean). In mathematical physics, time appears centrally as the fourth dimension of a four-dimensional manifold. It is not easy to see *why* it is distinct from the other three dimensions, nor *what* distinguishes it from them.

Usually, irreversibility of time (or rather, of processes in time) is brought in in order to supply the proper character of time: movements in space are reversible, processes in time are not. But this is unsatisfactory from many points of view. First of all, it is not at all certain that all movements in space are reversible. Wherever there is a very strong gravitational gradient, for instance (as in the neighborhood of a black hole, say), spatial movement can take place only in some privileged directions (except for quantum effects). And, if we take the Universe as a whole and the prevalent cosmological conceptions explaining the observed red shift of the light emitted by distant galaxies, there are directions in space that cannot be reversed: no cluster of galaxies could move “inwards” during a phase of expansion of the Universe, nor “outwards” during a phase of contraction. Secondly, as precisely the previous example hints at, irreversibility becomes a riddle on the cosmological scale. I cannot resist the temptation to quote a news item illustrating this in a somewhat amusing way (*New York Times*, January 21, 1987):

Of all phenomena that affect the human condition none has perplexed scientists more than the forward march of time, its link to the seemingly relentless tendency toward disorder known as entropy,

eliminated “of time” should read: “the specter of spatialization” instead.

and to the expansion of the universe.

Some of the world's leading theorists have speculated that, if the current expansion reverses itself and the universe begins to contract, the arrow of time will change direction. People—if there are any—would live from the grave to the cradle and would “remember” what is to happen tomorrow. Some theorists have suggested that those living in such a universe would not be aware that time was running backward, because their perception of time would be reversed. But they would live in a universe whose future, in every detail, is predetermined. Scientists have also suggested that our universe might have a twin, formed of antimatter, in which time runs backward.

Stephen W. Hawking of Cambridge University in England, a prominent proponent of the view that time would run backward in a shrinking universe, announced recently that he had changed his mind. Recent research has led him to conclude that time would still march forward, even if the universe began to contract, he told a conference in Chicago of astrophysicists.

With all due respect to the extraordinary mind of Stephen Hawking, there is a bit of consolation for the philosopher to see the prominent physicists of today caught in the tangles of time—and, one must add, exhibiting a modicum of *naïveté*. One must also deplore the waning of classical studies. Surely, seventy years ago, a Hermann Weyl or a Werner Heisenberg would not have missed the opportunity, in this context, to mention that “time running backwards” is the central theme of the famous myth in Plato's

Politicus (a title wrongly rendered in the standard English usage as “Statesman”).¹⁰

Third, as is well known, attempts to deduce irreversibility from first physical principles (or even, to make it compatible with them), which started with Ludwig Boltzmann a century ago, have remained unsatisfactory.

Fourth, and the most important, physical irreversibility is of course *locally* an undisputable fact. But it is a *partial* fact, which does not, by far, exhaust the data. More precisely, physical irreversibility is interpreted as increasing entropy, that is: [disorder]¹¹ and disorganization (which, let it be said in passing, entails the paradox that, were the tendency toward increase of entropy to prevail fully and the Universe to become, as it should, a photon gas, time would cease to have any physical meaning). But entropy is not all: living species emerge, babies are born and grow, painters put together masterpieces. All this does not “violate the second law of thermodynamics”—it just is beyond its scope. Forms are not only destroyed, they are also created, and one cannot reach an understanding of time, nor, I think, elucidate its “arrow” and irreversibility without taking into account both facts: creation and destruction of forms.

~

I have mentioned the specter of spatialization haunting physics. In fact, the question goes deeper. The spatialization of time in physics is but a consequence of the fact that physics, mathematical physics, treats everything within the

¹⁰T/E: See now [OPS](#).

¹¹T/E: The original English text had: “homogenization” here.

ensemblistic-identitary (ensidic) framework, including space itself. This is a result of its dependence on mathematics (at least, mathematics up to now), which is the endless elaboration of the possibilities of the ensemblistic-identitarian. Let me note in passing that this was also the error of Bergson, who criticized the physicist's conception of time as spatialized, and identified space with the quantifiable. This is only true for abstract—that is, mathematical, ensemblistic-identitary—"space." Insofar as time is treated by physics as just the fourth dimension of a four-dimensional geometrical space, this is true. But nothing ensures that actual space (the space we live in as well as the space of the world in itself) is reducible to abstract, mathematical space (and is, thus, susceptible of quantification pure and simple). This is not the place to elaborate this question. Henceforth, my references to space as distinct from time have to be understood as relative to abstract, mathematical space.

We cannot reach the kernel of the question of time—be it subjective, objective, or overarching time—unless we start from the idea of the emergence of Otherness, that is, from alteration (*alloiōsis*), as creation/destruction of forms, considered as a fundamental determination of being as such, that is, in itself. This forces us to distinguish strictly between difference and otherness. The number 34 is different from 43, a circle and an ellipse are different. The *Iliad* and *The Castle* are not different—they are other. A horde of baboons and a human society are other. Human society, for instance, exists only as the emergence of a new form (*eidos*) and embodies such a form. We will say that two objects are different if there is a set of determinate transformations ("laws") allowing the deduction or production of this one from that one. If there is no such set of determinate transformations, the objects are other. The emergence of the other is the only way to give a

more than verbal meaning to the idea of newness, or the new as such. The new is not the unforeseeable, unpredictable, nor the undetermined. Something can be unpredictable (for example, the next number in a roulette) and still be the trivial repetition of a form; or be undetermined, and again, a sheer repetition of a given form (for example, quantum phenomena). Something is new when it is the positing of a form neither producible nor deducible from other forms. Something being new means, therefore: something is the positing of new determinations, of new laws. This is the meaning of form—of *eidōs*.

The new *eidōs*, the new form, is created *ex nihilo* as such. It is not, *qua* form, *qua* *eidōs*, producible or deducible from what “was there.” This does not mean that it is created *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. So, for instance, humans create the world of meaning and signification, or institution, upon certain conditions, namely, that they are already living beings, that there is no constantly and bodily present God to tell them what is the meaning of the world and of their life, etc. But there is no way we can derive either this level of being—the social-historical—or its particular contents in each case from these conditions. The Greek *polis* is created under certain conditions and “with” certain means, in a definite environment, with given human beings, a tremendous past embodied *inter alia* in Greek mythology and language, and so on, endlessly. But it is not caused or determined by these. The existing, or part of it, conditions the new form; it does not cause or determine it.

The fact of creation as such has nothing to do with the quarrel about determinism. It only contradicts the paradoxical, if not absurd, idea of a homogeneous universal determinism that could reduce levels or strata of being (and their corresponding laws) to a single ultimate and elementary level.

This would entail *inter alia* the interesting metaphysical-theological conclusion that it was strictly necessary for the universe to reach a self-knowledge (by means of physical theory). Creation entails only that the determinations over what there is are never closed in a manner forbidding the emergence of other determinations.

This allows us to offer a characterization of time in its distinction from abstract, mathematical space (and space-time). We can abstract, in thought, from that which is different, and think of pure difference as such. This is possible—and the result of this abstractive operation is pure, abstract space. In this space every point is different from any other point without any intrinsic characteristic—just by virtue of something external to it, that is, its position “in” space. Two strictly identical cubes are different if and only if they are in different places in space. Abstract space is this miracle, this fantastic possibility of the difference of the identical. Points, equal segments, figures, or solids can be distinguished without any “proper” difference—because they differ as to location, as to their position in space.

Difference is infinitely productive: for example, it underlies and makes possible the whole of mathematics. In mathematics we proceed by attaching characteristics to sets of “indifferent” elements, then making these same characteristics “indifferent” on another level, and so on. “Production” means building up from given elements and according to given laws. We can think of an infinite manifold of “identical” elements along one “dimension” or along any number of “dimensions”—and we have a “space-like” receptacle. We can fill this receptacle with objects produced as different—that is, reducible to each other and all to some elementary objects, according to determinate rules and laws: we then have a pseudophysical, immobile universe. We can then add to it a

supplementary dimension, call it time, and endow it with some peculiar properties, distinguishing it from the other dimensions of the pseudophysical manifold. Such properties can be, for example:

1. productions are irreversible: that is, the inversion of the total order structure imposed on this ["time"] dimension is impossible or meaningless;
2. there are some singled-out properties of the elements and the constructions that are invariant along this dimension—that is, properties that are “conserved” along this “space-like” time (for example, “matter-energy,” and, now, some other, more exotic ones, in quantum physics);
3. some [“]subsets[”] of “elements” and “productions,” called processes, are not transportable along this dimension.

We then have a four- (or n -) dimensional manifold, constructed from the identical and the different (that is, the identical repeated), and which we can think of and elaborate abstracting from any concrete content of it. (Things become more complicated in general relativity, where the measure of “time” depends on the total “spatiotemporal” structure of the Universe, which depends, in turn, on its matter-energy “content.” But then, of course, we run into the cosmological riddles, some of which were hinted at above.)

But in the case of otherness we cannot abstract from that which is, in each case, other; we cannot think of pure otherness as such. Otherness does indeed appear also in space—but there is no pure, abstract space for otherness. Otherness is always the otherness of something in respect to another something (*ti* and *allo ti*—*etwas anderes*, not *etwas*

verschiedenes). We do experience otherness the moment we fall in love (or discover that we are already in love), or with any sudden change of mood, or in the emergence of another idea, or when we read *The Castle* after *Madame Bovary*, or look at photographs of the Parthenon and the Cathedral of Reims, or even when we look at a rock, and suddenly see a worm moving on the rock.

In this case, thus, we do not have a pure receptacle which can or cannot be filled with indifferent elements. The dimension along which otherness is, is, in each case, consubstantial and coemergent with that which emerges as other in respect to something. It is inseparable from it—from the forms or events that make the otherness be, and which make be, in each case, another otherness. The differences in the positions of Mars and Venus relative to the Earth are comparable (and therefore measurable in identitary space-time). The otherness separating *Gaspard de la Nuit* from the *Razumowsky Quartets* and the latter from *The Art of the Fugue* is not comparable—and the chronological distance between these works (measured in identitary, calendar time) gives us only external benchmarks. Otherness is irreducible, indeducible, and not producible.

Insofar as the form emerging in each case is other, it brings with it—is consubstantial with—its own time. There is another time for each category or class of otherness. And there is always a question of a proper time for each instance or realization of the new form—even if it be unique. The time of the cell is certainly not the time of the organism as a whole; but also, the time of Gustave Flaubert's *Éducation Sentimentale* is not the same as the time of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. The encasing, nesting, interlocking of these times among themselves is a huge subject in its own right, which cannot be dealt with here. As emergence of the otherness—of

that which cannot be produced or deduced from what is there—being is creation: creation of itself, and creation of time as the time of otherness and of being. And creation entails destruction—if only because another form alters the total form of what was there.

Difference and abstract space are solidary, but they are extrinsic to that which is, in each case, different: for example, two points. Thus, we can think of abstract space, precisely by abstracting from any particular content: mathematics. Otherness and time are solidary. But otherness and time are not extrinsic to that which is, in each case, other. We cannot think of pure otherness as such. An empty space is both a legitimate mathematical concept and a possibility of our [(“pure”)] intuition. An empty time is nothing—or it is just an additional “space-like” dimension, of which, considered as such, we cannot have an intuition and which simply we cannot think. I would add: irrespective of any possibility or impossibility of our intuition, an empty time cannot be.

Time is being insofar as being is otherness, creation, and destruction. Abstract space is being insofar as being is determinacy, identity, and difference.

A [long] digression here is necessary. I have been talking about abstract space, and warned against the mistaken identification (Bergson) of abstract space with space *tout court*. What Bergson calls space is only true about mathematical space (and the space of mathematical physics), and [what he says about it] in fact concerns the ensemblistic-identitary dimension of space. But such an identitary (ensidic) dimension is inherent to whatever there is—even to time, and this allows us (societies) to construct a public, identitary time (calendar time). The usual public time, as well as the usual public space, is constructed by society and endowed with definite ensidic characteristics (homogeneity, repetition,

difference of the identical, etc.), leaning obviously on ensidic characteristics of what there is—beyond which there is certainly a vaster multiplicity about which, to begin with, we know nothing. But also, abstract space far from exhausts what we have to think of as space. Nothing authorizes us to treat space as identitary through and through. I am not only talking about the fact that actual space is never purely ensidic for a subject (animal, human, society, etc.), never reducible to homogeneity, repetition, etc., but always qualitatively organized and articulated by and for the subject (this is Heidegger's *In-der-Welt-Sein*). I am talking mainly about the deployment of being as deployment of a heterogeneous multiplicity of coexistent alterities. Even the consideration of time as such brings us to this idea, since we have to admit the coexistence (and interlocking, mutual encasing, mutual intercrossing, etc.) of a multiplicity of proper times. We therefore have to think of space as containing not only an ensidic but also an imaginary or poietic dimension. Insofar as it entails the “simultaneous” deployment of forms that are other, insofar as it allows an “instant cross section” of whatever there is as other, insofar as there is “synchronous multiplicity” of other forms, actual space, in the full sense of the word, goes beyond abstract space and beyond simply ensidic organization.

It would therefore be wrong simply to equate space (full space, actual space, as distinct from abstract space) with identity and difference, repetition, determinacy—in brief, with the ensemblistic-identitary (ensidic), and time with alteration, creation/destruction only.¹² There is poietic space, space

¹²T/E: Castoriadis adds here in his French translation a parenthetical reference to ch. 4 of *IIS*, 186-215 (as usual, we refer to the pagination of the English-language translation).

unfolding with and through the emergence of forms. And there is identitary time, ensidic time embedded in poietic or imaginary time. And it is the limit of this identitary time we vainly attempt to reach, when we try to think of the difference between the state S and the state S' of a pure photon gas. Even in this case, there would certainly be a difference, and this difference would be describable by and for an ultrafine and ultrapowerful observer—whose appearance, however, would immediately destroy the state of the Universe as a pure photon gas and who, in addition, would be, through his subjective observations and acts, the only source of meaning for a before and an after attached to the states of the gas.

Is there, then, a possibility for an essential distinction between time and space—beyond the lived evidence of this difference, beyond the objectivistic reduction of time to abstract space and beyond the positivistic avoidance of the question? I think that there is, and it is grounded in their distinct relation to alterity and alteration.

I say: the emergence of forms is the ultimate character of time; the before and the after is given by the scansion of creation and destruction. Along this line we can, in a sense, elucidate irreversibility. In the indifferent, ensidic dimension of time—[beyond] the measurable but reversible repetition of the identical as the successive—forms emerge, or forms are destroyed (*not*: thermodynamically disorganized!). The direction along which disorganization of the ensidic (entropy) increases *and* forms emerge and are destroyed *qua* forms, gives us an arrow of time. (Forms *qua* forms are not necessarily destroyed by entropy. There is no possible meaning in the sentence “The Roman Empire collapsed because of the second law of thermodynamics.”) Could we reverse this arrow? If we restrict ourselves to the identitary or ensidic dimension, such a reversal is only immeasurably

improbable. But if we take into account forms, the idea of a reversal becomes meaningless. There is a finite (though vanishingly small) probability for the drop of ink diluted in a glass of water to condense again spontaneously in the exact place where it was dropped to begin with. There is no meaning in the idea that Proust could have written *La Recherche* before *Jean Santeuil* or that Athens could have started with Demosthenes and proceeded, through Pericles, to Solon and his predecessors.

This is not because the after was *caused* by the before. In the most important cases, we cannot speak of causation. And, at the elementary level, the action of causality is reversible (this is the root of the difficulties in the thermodynamic “deduction” of irreversibility). It is because the before (the relevant, in each case, before) conditions the after in a [nonsymmetrical]¹³ way. (The trivial but fundamental distinction between causes and conditions, or that between simply necessary and necessary *and* sufficient conditions, is surprisingly often forgotten in this type of discussion.) Forms as forms are not caused by something—but they emerge given certain (in fact, innumerable) conditions. The conditions allow the emergence of the form—but the converse is meaningless. Thus, the reversal of the arrow of time is extremely improbable from the abstract, ensidic point of view—and simply absurd, when the emergence of forms is taken into account. Not only can we not conceive the Greek *polis* without Greek mythology; the *polis* was, in itself, impossible without this mythology (which far preceded it). But the mythology did not cause the *polis*—it was not the necessary *and sufficient* condition for it (even if supplemented by any number of other conditions);

¹³T/E: The English had, instead, “non-reversible” here.

neither can we, or anybody, derive the one from the other, in either sense.

What is, then, the distinction between time and space? I said before that usual (thermodynamic) irreversibility does not suffice to establish this distinction. We speak about time as the emergence of forms, an emergence conditioned in each case by the (or some of the) already existing forms. But by the same token, forms emerge also—though in another sense—in space (not necessarily “physical” space) and can only be by deploying a space.¹⁴ We can even say, and it is obvious, that the emergence of a new form is conditioned by the (or some of the) forms surrounding it. Any here is conditioned by the elsewhere.

All the same, the distinction can be made. The time perspective is effectively complete. It contains and entails space. In time forms emerge, are created. But a form is an organized multiplicity, thus its emergence brings into being a simultaneous coexistence (of the constituents of the form). The converse is not true. The space perspective is essentially deficient. The being of a form, considered as such, does not refer to or relate with any succession, any past/present/future; nor is it in need of time to deploy itself. [(Form *as such* entails space, simultaneous multiplicity. It does not entail time, successive multiplicity; it is its *emergence* that requires time and scans time.)] In a strange reversal, typical of inherited thought, this fact has been considered from Plato onwards as “grounding” the “derived” character of time.

We can express the same idea in yet another way. If no new forms were to emerge, we cannot say that space would cease to exist; not even that it would become abstract, ensidic

¹⁴T/E: For an unknown reason, Castoriadis did not translate this sentence into French.

space. We can conceive of a heterogeneous space, full of immutable forms, other and other, in which nothing happens. (A Platonic world of Ideas could be a model for such a space.) If a voyager were to go around this space and find successively other forms, each new to him, these would be *his* discoveries; nothing would still happen, except his (impossible) voyage through this space and the changes in *his* subjective states, scansions in *his* subjective time, without relation to the world he is visiting. This is more or less the journey of the Platonic soul in the supracelestial world.

But we can say that, if the emergence of alterity, the creation/destruction of forms, were not there, there would be no time (except in the impossible purely ensidic sense explained above). Bringing this thought to its limit, we can say that no thing (nothing) would be there, since no form would ever have arisen.

In this sense, time is essentially linked to the emergence of alterity. Time is this emergence as such—whereas space is “only” its necessary concomitant. Time is creation and destruction—that means, time is being in its substantive determinations.

V

We have posited two fundamental categories to help us elucidate the question of time: difference and otherness. We now may bring together difference and otherness under multiplicity. Multiplicity formally entails unity; without unity, multiplicity would not be multiplicity—it would be an uninspectable,¹⁵ in itself dispersed and disconnected

¹⁵T/E: For an unknown reason, Castoriadis did not translate “uninspectable” into French.

Infrachaos. Unity, on the other hand, does not entail multiplicity. It just happens that there are many. It just happens that being is—and that it is not one. This we can only see and accept, we cannot elucidate it further.

What does it mean that being is—and is not one? Insofar as multiplicity in being exists as difference, being is one not only logically and nominally (being as abstract name for whatever there is), but effectively. Multiplicity as difference means that the plurality of particular beings is brought into one by the laws that produce, deduce, etc., beings from each other. Briefly and brutally speaking, qualities are reduced to quantities and different quantities give different (reducible) qualities. This is both Hegel and the dominant, reductionist [program]¹⁶ in the positive sciences.

But insofar as multiplicity in being exists as otherness, or alterity, the unity of being is essentially fragmented. This is because, despite all the recent talk about the ontological difference, being and modes of being are not separable—and modes of being emerge, thereby altering being itself, and manifesting being as self-alteration. To be sure, emergence as such is distinct from that which, in each case, emerges—as presence is different from the present, and being from beings. But this is a scholastic, logical distinction. Being as self-alteration entails also alterity in the modes of emergence—and talk about emergence as such, abstracting from the mode of emergence, which is in turn inseparable from that which is emerging, would be empty talk. Such has been Heidegger's talk about being, or about presence. Presence as such—the fact of presence—is certainly distinct from that which is present. But modes of presence are other, and there can be no thought of presence as such abstracting from the modes of

¹⁶T/E: The English original had the weaker noun “trend” here.

presence. Not only can we not put under the same title—except verbally and vacuously, as Aristotle would say¹⁷—*The Well-Tempered Clavier* and the Andromeda Nebula; we cannot think being as self-alteration and incessant to-be without considering the modes of this self-alteration and the modes of being they bring about.

Does being exist as otherness, alterity? Certainly; if it did not there would not be a being-subject (indefinitely many beings-subjects, and indefinitely many modes of being-a-subject), creating each time its own mode of being and its own world (and time), and, for instance, thinking and talking about being. Without otherness, there would not exist a question of being. Not only would there be nobody to ask the question, but, if the question were raised so to speak in the void, the answer would be simple: being would be a set, or a set of sets, and in this case being and mode of being coincide, as do possibility and actuality. Mathematically, what *is possible* simply *is*, and something is not if and only if it is impossible. Elements of a set *are* if and only if a set of which they are elements can be defined in a consistent way.

Multiplicity of being is an irreducible, primary *datum*. It is a given. But what is also given is that multiplicity exists as difference on the one hand, as otherness on the other hand. Insofar as difference is a dimension of being, there is identity, persistence, repetition. Insofar as otherness is a dimension of being, there is creation and destruction of forms. And indeed, [here again] otherness entails difference. A form cannot be said to be unless it is identical to itself (in the broadest sense of the term “identical”), and persists/repeats itself for a while—that is, in and through an identity dimension along

¹⁷T/E: This is a translation by Castoriadis of Aristotle’s phrase *logikōs kai kenōs*, found for example in the *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b21.

which it differs with itself only by being placed in a different (identitary) time. And this is but one aspect of the fact that no form can be without a minimal determinacy. That means that any form has necessarily an ensidic dimension—and therefore participates necessarily in the ensidic universe.

If then these are the characteristics of being, we find that they are the same as the ones we should attribute to time: the unfolding of otherness, the deployment of alterity, together with a dimension of identity/difference (repetition). The latter alone we find in abstract (ensidic) space. We find both—difference and alterity—in actual space. But, for the reasons given above, actual space presupposes time. The fullness of being is given—that is, simply is—only in and through the emergence of otherness, which is solidary with time.

With self-deployment in and through time, that is, with the emergence of otherness, we can understand that the unity and unicity of being are truly fragmented and stratified. This is particularly manifest with the emergence of being-for-itself (starting with the living being), which entails the creation of other modes of being (objectively) and of other, self-closed worlds (subjectively), with, in each case, their own time. The being-for-itself unfolds also, *qua* being, in space and time. But the being-for-itself creates time and space and being for-itself, and thus it fragments being, space, and time. And we cannot consider one temporality as the only originary or authentic one (such as the *ursprüngliche Zeitlichkeit des Seins-zum-Tode* of Heidegger's *Dasein*—which is of course typically a subjective temporality, exactly as its *In-der-Welt-Sein* is a subjective¹⁸ mode of a being in a *Lebenswelt* that is

¹⁸T/E: For an unknown reason, Castoriadis did not translate into French this second instance of “subjective” in his sentence. Translating from

socially-historically created without *Dasein* or, for that matter, Heidegger, being aware of this fact) because we know and cannot pretend that we do not know that there is time for the living being and that there is cosmic time and that there is nothing derived or inauthentic about them.

As a result, there arises, both for us and in itself, the question of the unity and unicity of being and time above and beyond their indefinite and unforgettable fragmentation and stratification. Insofar as the ensidic dimension alone goes, we could talk of a unity of being. But this unity is of course only partial, and, for the most part, inessential. (In both a Beethoven sonata and in a star, we can distinguish enumerable elements. So what?) Thus, the overarching question of overarching time and being has to remain a question for the time being, and probably for all times.

Cerisy-la-Salle, June 1983—Stanford, February
1988—Paris, September 1988

Note

To facilitate reading, I have eliminated notes; in some cases, references are included in the main text. Here, I limit myself to some indications that may be of help to the interested reader.

I have developed the notions of the ensemblistic-identitarian (which now, for brevity, I write ensidic) and of the imaginary mainly in my book [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) (1964-1965, 1975) now available in English (1987). Especially relevant for the

Castoriadis's French to English, *ursprüngliche Zeitlichkeit des Seins-zum-Tode* is rendered as: "originary temporality of being-toward-death"; *in-der-Welt-Sein* as: "being-in-the-world."

discussion of the present text are ch. 4 (philosophical and social institution of time, identitary time as opposed to imaginary time, the social-historical as creation of a proper temporality), ch. 5 (on the social institution of ensemblistic-identitary logic), and ch. 7 (on social imaginary significations). To ensidic logic I oppose what I call a logic of magmas; this idea was first formulated in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), in [CL1](#), in particular 267-79. It was further developed in [IIS](#), 340-44, and, in a much more detailed fashion, in “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in [CL2](#).

On the ultimate inseparability of the subjective and the objective, see “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984) and “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1986), both now in [CL2](#). On self-reflective subjectivity, see the first part (“Psyche”) of [CL1](#); [IIS](#), ch. 6; and “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), above in the present volume. On the socialization of the psyche and the social fabrication of the individual, see [IIS](#), ch. 6.

On Aristotle’s theory of time, the late Victor Goldschmidt’s *Temps physique et temps tragique chez Aristote* (Paris: Vrin, 1982) is fundamental. I do not always share his outlook, especially insofar as he tries to interpret away all riddles in Aristotle’s text.

Paul Ricœur’s important book *Temps et Récit*, 3 vols. (1983, 1984, 1985), is now available in English as *Time and Narrative* from University of Chicago Press; vol. 3 was published in 1988. My obvious and central differences with Paul Ricœur do not of course stand in the way of my admiration for the richness and solidity of his critical analysis of the main inherited philosophical conceptions regarding time.

The recent book by the great physicist Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, is sadly disappointing, and I am not surprised that it has been, for more than 100 weeks, on the American bestseller list.¹⁹ It juxtaposes to an elementary and flat summing up of the history of the question of time in physics a wild final speculation, totally devoid of rigor.

One must, on the contrary, recommend among the numerous recent publications the book by Roger Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), especially ch. 7, "Cosmology and the Arrow of Time," where one can find an excellent resume of the state of the question from the point of view of physical and cosmological theories.

The small book by P. C. W. Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint* (London: Unwin, 1987), may help to convince those who are in need of arguments that nothing in contemporary science authorizes the continuation of positivistic blackmail, which allows (nonpositivist) philosophers to continue in their dogmatic slumber.

The translations of the quotations from Aristotle and Augustine are mine.

¹⁹T/E: The *Washington Post*'s Derek Hawkins reported March 14, 2018 that the book remained on *The New York Times* bestseller list for a total of 147 weeks.

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 November 2000 reprint of [*Le Monde morcelé*](#), the (uncorrected) French source for the present [*CL3*](#) translation.

[Highlighted version of the French original of *Carrefours du labyrinthe*, tome 3.](#)

14n1 « Un cours inédit », *Magazine littéraire*, mai 1988, p. 36.

Translator's Note: Actually, the issue in question dates instead from four years earlier: "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?", *Magazine Littéraire*, 207 (May 1984): 35-39. From the first hour of Foucault's January 5, 1983 lecture, this text is now available in translation here: *The Government of Self and Other: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*, tr. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador/Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); see: pp. 13-14.

18n1 *The Categories of Medieval Thought* = *The Categories of Medieval Culture*

18n1 1981 = 1985

23 Un paragraphe entier n'apparaît pas (par inadvertance ?) dans la traduction française, après la fin de la phrase précédente : ...chef-d'œuvre de symbolisme historique.

The condition for there being a vast audience for this “neoliberal” discourse is a widespread and rising collective amnesia. Two striking instances of this tendency are offered (1) by the disappearance of any critique of “representative democracy” and (2) by the total disappearance of the devastating criticism the best academic economists of the 1930s—Piero Sraffa, Joan Robinson, Richard Ferdinand Kahn, John Maynard Keynes, Michał Kalecki, George Lennox Sharman Shackle—had previously directed at the would-be “rationality” of twentieth-century capitalism. We live in a period of appalling ideological regression among the *literati*. As for the society at large, beneath the celebrated *consensus* all investigations and polls show a deep distrust and cynicism regarding *all* the instituted powers (politicians, business, trade unions, and churches).

- 24n1 no XX, = no 86,
 30 'Kung = !Kung
 32 romphaias = rhomphaias
 50 ungeheuer = ungeheures
 50 orientiertem Handeln = orientierten Handelns
 52 einfühlend = einfühlendes
 52 Mittelnrationalität = Mittelrationalität
 57 Il faut ajouter une ligne vide ici, comme dans la version d'*Esprit*, p. 95.
 90-91 Strassman = Strassmann
 123 Il faut ajouter une ligne vide ici, comme dans la version originale *Les scientifiques parlent...* p. 295
 135 celui-ci = celui-là {CC parle du « passé » et non pas du « présent » ici, n'est-ce pas ? }
 147n1 « Réflexions sur = « Notations sur
 147n1 1986 = 1987
 162n1 1986, p. 24-39. = 1986, {ajouter la pagination correspondante dans la réédition de [MM](#) ?}.
 164n1 *a an kéluei* = *ha an kéleuèi*
 174n1 Il faut citer ici le premier volume des *Carrefours* et non pas seulement *IIS* (voir la date : 1978). Voici la version du tapuscrit en anglais :

See the first part, "Psyche," of [CLI](#); also [IIS](#) (1964-65, 1975; English-language translation 1987), 102-107, and the whole of ch. 6.

175 Une phrase entière n'apparaît pas (par inadvertance ?) dans la traduction française, après la fin de la phrase précédente : une autre affaire.)

Finally, means and ends are, in these cases, supposed to stand in a rational, ensemblistic-identitary relation.

180 *anthropos.* = *anthrôpos*.

181 Une phrase entière n'apparaît pas (par inadvertance ?) dans la traduction française, après la fin de la phrase précédente : une impossibilité logique.

To be sure, human reality exceeds this logic.

188 Deux mots n'apparaissent pas (par inadvertance ?) dans la traduction française, après : celui qu'il était and is

194 matériellement = *matériellement* {Voir : *Le Débat*, p. 215}

194 ne peut pas = *ne peut pas* {Voir : *Le Débat*, p. 215}

235 (on parlant = (en parlant

265 Il faut ajouter une ligne vide ici, comme dans la version d'*Topique*, p. 29.

283 *lakonizein* = *lakônizein*

289 Une phrase entière, entre parenthèse, n'apparaît pas (par inadvertance ?) dans la traduction française, après la fin de la phrase précédente : le contenu de sa philosophie.

(No need to quote examples of this.)

296 *das Gevier,* = *das Geviert,*

301 Une phrase entière n'apparaît pas (par inadvertance ?) dans la traduction française, après la fin de la phrase précédente : quelque chose donné de l'extérieur ?

What is the being of these forms?

301 Une phrase entière n'apparaît pas (par inadvertance ?) dans la traduction française, après la fin de la phrase précédente : quelque chose doit être donné.

Far from absorbing philosophy, in the sense of integrating the philosophical questions within its methods and its procedures, contemporary science both returns to these and puts them in a new light.

304 Dans la traduction française, les mots “psychical and” de la VO anglaise n’apparaissent pas avant : social-historiques ; mais nous

310 Dans la traduction française, les mots “, difference, repetition” de la VO anglaise n’apparaissent pas après : Il y a multiplicité ensidique

313 Dans la traduction française, les mots “the irreducibility of imaginary time to identitary time, but also their inevitable interpenetration;” de la VO anglaise n’apparaissent pas après : (donc sur le temps cosmique) ;

315 *noésomen* = *noésômen*

317 *et manet* = *et...manet*

317 *ipsa* = *ipsam*

318 Dans la traduction française, la phrase : “Let us take up one of these (common to all subjective approaches).” de la VO anglaise n’apparaissent pas après : une position fondamentale et ses apories.

318 pretention ; = protention ;

321 *Phys. IV, 10, 218 b 21* = *Phys. IV, 11, 218 b 21*

329 la spatialisation = la spatialisation du temps {selon la V.O. anglaise : « spatialization of time »}

336 *alto* = *allo*

337 l’être est création ; = l’être est création : {comme dans la V.O. anglaise}

339 *l'In-der-Welt-sein*, = *l'In-der-Welt-Sein*,

341 Dans la traduction française, la phrase : “But by the same token, forms emerge also—though in another sense—in space (not necessarily “physical” space) and can only be by deploying a space.” de la VO anglaise n’apparaissent pas après : (ou par certaines d’entre elles).

- 343 Dans la traduction française, le mot “uninspectable” de la VO anglaise n’apparaissent pas après : ne serait pas multiplicité, mais
- 346 Dans la traduction française, le mot “subjective” de la VO anglaise n’apparaissent pas après : l’ « être-dans-le-monde » est un mode d’être