

CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH
Volume 6
FIGURES OF THE THINKABLE

by Cornelius Castoriadis*



translated from the French
and edited anonymously
as a public service

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

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

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

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

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

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

■ *Postscript on Insignificance, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. 1st ed. March 2011. *Postscript on Insignificance, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance, followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. 2nd ed. August 2017. <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>.

■ *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the “MAUSS” Group*. <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>. January 2013.

■ *Window on the Chaos, Including “How I Didn’t Become a Musician” (Beta Version)*. <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf>. July 21, 2015.

■ *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. With a Translator/Editor’s Introduction by David Ames Curtis (March–April 2016). London, Eris, 2018. 488pp. <http://notbored.org/SouBA.pdf> London, Eris, 2018.

Plus two online videos with English-language subtitles:

■ Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis (outtakes from Chris Marker’s 1989 film *L’Héritage de la chouette* [The Owl’s Legacy]). <http://vimeo.com/66587994> May 2013.

■ Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis for the Greek television network ET1, for the show *Paraskiniom*, 1984 (with English-language subtitles). Video in Greek from publicly available online source. English translation: Ioanna. <http://vimeo.com/kaloskaisophos/castoriadis-paraskiniom-english-subtitles> (EL/EN-subtitles).

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

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

CL *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Tr. Martin H. Ryle and Kate Soper. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1984. 345pp.

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

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

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

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

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

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

- [CR](#) *The Castoriadis Reader*. Ed. David Ames Curtis. Malden, MA and Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1997. 470pp.
- [DR](#) *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group*. <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: January 2013. 63pp.
- [FTPK](#) *Figures of the Thinkable including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf> and [http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures of the Thinkable.pdf](http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures_of_the_Thinkable.pdf). Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: February 2005. 428pp.
- [IIS](#) *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Tr. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1987. 418pp. Paperback edition. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1997. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.
- [OPS](#) *On Plato's Statesman*. Tr. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. 227pp.
- [PPA](#) *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*. (N.B.: The subtitle is an unauthorized addition made by the publisher.) Ed. David Ames Curtis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 304pp.
- [PSRTI](#) *Postscript on Insignificancy, Including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy. Followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits, and Two Book Reviews*. <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2011. 2nd ed. August 2017.
- [PSW1](#) *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 1: 1946-1955. *From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 348pp.
- [PSW2](#) *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 2: 1955-1960. *From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 363pp.
- [PSW3](#) *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 3: 1961-1979. *Recommencing the Revolution: From Socialism to the Autonomous Society*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 405pp.

[RTI\(TBS\)](#) *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*.
<http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf> and
http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf.

Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: December 4, 2003.

[SouBA](#) *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service, with a Translator/Editor's Introduction by David Ames Curtis. London: Eris, 2018. 488pp.

[WIF](#) *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. Ed. and tr. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. 507pp.

[WoC](#) *Window on the Chaos, Including "How I Didn't Become a Musician."* <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: July 21, 2015.

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

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

- CE* *La culture de l'égoïsme*. Avec Christopher Lasch. Traduit de l'anglais par Myrto Gondicas. Postface de Jean-Claude Michéa. Flammarion, Paris, 2012. 105pp.
- CFG1* *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 1. *D'Homère à Héraclite*. Séminaires 1982-1983. *La Création humaine II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004. 355pp.
- CFG2* *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 2. *La Cité et les lois*. Séminaires 1983-1984. *La Création humaine III*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Castoriadis et l'héritage grec" par Philippe Raynaud. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008. 313pp.
- CFG3* *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 3. *Thucydide, la force et le droit*. Séminaires 1984-1985. *La Création humaine IV*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Le germe et le *kratos*: réflexions sur la création politique à Athènes" par Claude Moatti. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011. 374pp.
- [CL](#) *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978. 318pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2017. 432pp.
- CMR1* *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 1. *L'impérialisme et la guerre*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 443pp.
- CMR2* *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 2. *Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 318pp.
- CS* *Le Contenu du socialisme*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 441pp.
- D* *Dialogue*. La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 112pp.
- DEA* *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Avec Daniel Cohn-Bendit et le public de Louvain-la-Neuve. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981. 126pp. *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Paris: Éditions Le Bord de l'Eau, 2014. 107pp.
- DG* *Devant la guerre*. Tome 1: *Les Réalités*. 1^{er} éd. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1981. 285pp. 2^e éd. revue et corrigée, 1982. 317pp.
- [DH](#) *Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. 460pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 576pp.
- DHIS* Cornelius Castoriadis, Paul Ricœur. *Dialogue sur l'histoire et*

- l'imaginaire social*. Édité par Johann Michel. Paris: Éditions de L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2016. 80pp.
- DR *Démocratie et relativisme: Débats avec le MAUSS*. Édition établie par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010. 142pp.
- EMO1 *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 1. *Comment lutter*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.
- EMO2 *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 2. *Prolétariat et organisation*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.
- EP1 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 1. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 422pp.
- EP2 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 2. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 578pp.
- EP3 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 3. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 694pp.
- EP4 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 4. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 660pp.
- EP5 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 5. *La Société bureaucratique*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2015. 638pp.
- EP6 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 6. *Guerre et théories de la guerre*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2016. 723pp.
- EP7 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 7. *Écologie et politique*, suivi de *Correspondances et compléments*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 448pp.
- EP8 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 8. *Sur la dynamique du capitalisme et autres textes*, suivi de *L'Impérialisme et la guerre*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 709pp.
- FAF *Fait et à faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe V*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997. 284pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2008. 352pp.
- FC *Fenêtre sur le chaos*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007. 179pp.

- FP* *Figures du pensable. Les carrefours du labyrinthe VI.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 308pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2009. 364pp.
- HC* *Histoire et création. Textes philosophiques inédits (1945-1967).* Réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Poirier. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009. 307pp.
- IIS* *L'Institution imaginaire de la société.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975. 503pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 544pp. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.
- M68* Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Jean-Marc Coudray. *Mai 68: la brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements.* Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1968. 142pp.
- M68/VAA* Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Cornelius Castoriadis. *Mai 68: la brèche* suivi de *Vingt Ans après.* Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1988. 212pp. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008. 296pp.
- MI* *La Montée de l'insignifiance. Les carrefours du labyrinthe IV.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996. 245pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2007. 304pp.
- MM* *Le Monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990. 281pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2000. 349pp.
- P-SI* *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance.* Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet (novembre 1996). La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 37pp.
- P-SID* *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance.* Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet suivi de *Dialogue.* La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2007. 51pp.
- SB1* *La Société bureaucratique.* Tome 1. *Les rapports de production en Russie.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 317pp.
- SB2* *La Société bureaucratique.* Tome 2. *La révolution contre la bureaucratie.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 441pp.
- SB(n.é.)* *La Société bureaucratique* (nouvelle édition). Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1990. 492pp.
- SD* *Une société à la dérive. Entretiens et débats 1974-1997.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005. 307pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2011. 40pp.
- SF* *La Société française.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 315pp.
- S. ou B.* *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Organe de Critique et d'orientation révolutionnaire.* Paris. 1949-1965. See <https://soubscan.org>.
- SouBA* *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Anthologie.* La Bussière: Acratie, 2007.

344pp.

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

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

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French Editors' Preface*

The [first volume of *Carrefours du labyrinthe*](#) [in English, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*] appeared in 1978. Four other volumes were published, during the author's lifetime, between 1986 and 1997. The singularity of this experience of "entering into the Labyrinth," of this philosophical questioning pursued over a period of twenty years by Cornelius Castoriadis, was presented by him in the first pages of *Crossroads*:

To think is not to exit the cave, nor is it to replace the uncertainty of shadows with the clear-cut contours of the things themselves, the flickering glow of a flame replaced by the light of the true Sun. It is to enter into the Labyrinth.... It is to become lost amid galleries that exist only because we tirelessly hollow them out, turning round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac, access to which has been closed off behind where we had stepped—until this rotation opens up, inexplicably, some cracks in the wall wide enough for us to pass through.¹

As early as this first volume, Castoriadis was reflecting upon the being of language—as anonymous creation of speaking subjects—as well as upon psychoanalysis—in which he saw essentially a *practicopoietic activity*—and he was looking into the enigma of the *historical* character, in the weighty sense of *historical*, of philosophy and science as well as into the question of the mode of being

*Avant-propos, *FP*, 7-8 (7-9 of the 2009 reprint).

¹Preface to [CL1](#), xiv.

of the social-historical. Finally, he was blazing the trail of what was for him one of the basic *political* questions of our time: Would the project of autonomy be able to survive if the anthropological type that was consubstantial with its birth and its development was threatened with extinction? These questions, which were broadened and deepened in the following volumes, are to be found again in the texts brought together right here.

Figures of the Thinkable is not a title chosen by Castoriadis himself. We do, however, encounter this phrase in his writings.²

This is not a matter of literary style, nor of a "style" of thought—any more than, simply, a matter of new "ideas." The forms, types, figures/schemata/significations are *other*, just as are other the "problems," what does and does not pose a problem.³

It will be clearly apparent to the reader that "what does and does not pose a problem" for Castoriadis distinguishes him radically from those who are the stars of today on the intellectual stage. On themes like the limits of the "rationality" of capitalist society, democracy as the explicit self-institution of society, literary creation as creation/positing of new types of *eidos*, philosophical interrogation into science or into the mode of being of the social-historical and of the psyche, these final texts dig anew into those "galleries" traveled many times by the author. Whence the inevitable

²"The historical dimension of philosophy is also what is realized as *creation*. It is emergence of other figures of the thinkable," *ibid.*, xxix.

³*Ibid.*, xxxii.

repetitions, and all the more so since these presuppositions are far from obvious to everyone, as Castoriadis had already had the occasion to write when another collection of his texts was brought to publication.⁴

Under the section heading “Poiēsis”—poetic creation, of course, but just as much institutional creation—we have brought together two texts in which Castoriadis reflects upon the creation *par excellence* within language: poetry. There, he shows:

The poet...is not only *metropoios* [creator of meters, a versifier] and *muthopoios* [creator of myths, of stories]. He is also *noēmatopoios*, creator of meanings and of significations. And he is also *eikonopoios*, creator of images, and *melopoios*, creator of music.

He also shows how, in the different answers given to the question *What is man?* by the two great Greek tragic poets of the fifth century, one can already read the passage from the idea of a divine anthropogony to that of a self-creation of man, conscious of his own mortality. These two texts, “Notes on a Few Poetic Means” and “Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man,” illuminate some aspects of human creation that, while not being entirely new in this author’s work, were rarely approached by him head on and in this light.⁵

⁴See the Notice, in [CL4](#).

⁵But see now *CFG1*, *FC*, and *CFG2*.

French Editors' Notice*

Cornelius Castoriadis had planned the publication of a sixth volume in his *Carrefours du Labyrinthe* (in English, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*) series. Found among his papers are two "Tables of Contents." One, undated, includes the following chapter titles:

1. Space and Number
2. The Psychical and Social Roots of Hate
3. The Anthropology of Aeschylus and of Sophocles
4. Notes on a Few Poetic Means
5. False and True Chaos
6. The Enigma of the Ground of Politics
7. Psyche and Society Revisited
8. (Ardoino?)
9. The "Scientificness" of Psychoanalysis
10. The Historical Status of Meaning, the Psychical Status of Meaning

The other one, which bears the date "18.09.96" and which was undoubtedly subsequent to the first one, is made up of the following chapters:

1. False and True Chaos
2. Space and Number
3. Ardoino Interview
4. Aporias of Science
5. The Socialization of the Psyche
6. Psyche and History
7. Ontology and Anthropology
8. The Historical Status of Meaning
9. Aeschylus and Sophocles
10. Notes on Poetry
11. Hate of the Other, Self-Hatred
12. The "Rationality" of Capitalism

*Avertissement, first published in *FP*, 9-10 (11-13 of the 2009 reprint).

These lists of writings to be published were certainly provisional, if only because some of the texts existed only in the state of preliminary drafts or plans. As for the completed or already published texts, he undoubtedly would have introduced in them, as was his habit, numerous modifications.

Some of the texts retained by him had to be taken out because the state of the manuscript seemed to rule out any publication in the near future. But it seemed appropriate to include in the volume some texts that had not, for any apparent reason, been reprinted in previous collections. We have also included other, more recent texts about which it could reasonably be thought that they would have been retained by the author when he worked out his definitive selection and which, on major points, offer specifications, developments, or clarifications.

~

[Translator/Editor (hereafter: T/E): Shortly before Castoriadis went into the hospital to undergo the operation that preceded his death on December 26, 1997, I prepared for him, based on our previous discussions around the publication of a potential new volume in English, a proposal for “Possible New Cornelius Castoriadis Texts, to be translated and edited by David Ames Curtis.” This one-page draft, dated September 9 and shared with Castoriadis, was intended to plan our followup to the successful publication in 1997 of *World in Fragments*, *The Castoriadis Reader*, and a special issue of *Thesis Eleven* I edited as a Castoriadis *Festschrift* that also included two new Castoriadis translations (the second and third titles listed below). It listed the following texts:

Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime

The Crisis of the Identification Process

Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics

The Rising Tide of Insignificancy

*Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth

The Dilapidation of the West

*Freud, Society, History

The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions

*Passion and Knowledge

*Complexity, Magmas, History

*Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection

* = not yet translated [T/E: as of September 9, 1997; N.B.: the two parts of "Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection" had already appeared in [WIF](#) and [CR](#)]

The overall project was estimated to contain approximately 100,000 words.

These texts were drawn from chapters in the already published fourth and fifth volumes of the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series that had not yet appeared in translation in book form due to the vagaries of the publication history of *Carrefours* texts in the English language,¹ though a number of my extant translations had already been published in various venues. As explained in the [CL4](#) publication note for "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime" (which had already been published earlier in 1997 in a translation I did for *Constellations*), "the present (slightly revised and improved) translation was prepared September 24, 1997 for Castoriadis to use in a lecture ultimately never delivered due to his illness and subsequent death." "The Rising Tide of Insignificancy" was scheduled at the time for publication in the anarchist arts journal *Drunken Boat*, while "The

¹See the Translator's Foreword in [CL2](#).

Dilapidation of the West” had already appeared in a 1995 issue of *Thesis Eleven*, accompanied by a new “Postscript” written by Castoriadis in English especially for my translation of this 1991 text. Part of a 1992 colloquium I and others had organized at the Pompidou Center in Paris to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of democracy, Castoriadis’s paper, “The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions,” had already been included as a supplement to my 1996 translation, *Cleisthenes the Athenian*, by Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. And what has now become “Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection” in [CL5](#) was a mashup Castoriadis created from two already existing texts, one translated by me and reprinted in [WIF](#) (“Logic, Imagination, Reflection”), the other a talk Castoriadis delivered in Australia which I edited for [CR](#) (“Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary”).

As regards texts now published in [CL6](#), I translated “The First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions” as far back as 1988 for *Free Associations*; I had already begun work editing Castoriadis’s 1985 English-language talk, “Heritage and Revolution,” which also appeared in the 1996 collective volume, *The Ancients and the Moderns*; and “The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge,” another text written by Castoriadis in English that I edited for publication, had already appeared in [Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy](#). As I have noted in the [CL6](#) publication note for “Psychoanalysis: Situation and Limits,” a “copy of the original English-language typescript...was given to me by the author in September 1997.... As he had done in the past with other papers that were to be delivered in English, Castoriadis asked me to edit this English-language text in preparation for the scheduled White Institute talk” he ultimately was unable to deliver in person. Finally, as regards

“The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism,” I had begun working on this text at the request of the Castoriadis family during the Fall of 1997, when Castoriadis was in a coma at the hospital.

Thus, as a professional translator and as a close Castoriadis collaborator, I was already significantly involved in preparing a number of the texts that now appear in [CL4](#) as well as [CL5](#), along with what has now become this posthumous and final volume in the *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* series.]

On the Texts

Except when duly noted in the text, the editorial work on these manuscripts has been limited to the introduction of references when that seemed indispensable, to the correction of *lapsus calami*, and to a few minor stylistic modifications. With just one exception (the new section heading “Poiēsis”), the titles of the various section headings (“Polis,” “Psyche,” etc.) are those of the previous *Carrefours* volumes, but the arrangement of the texts was carried out by the editorial team.¹

[French Editors’ addition for the 2009 reprint: As with the other *Carrefours* reprints, a few minor corrections and supplemental bibliographical references have been introduced. T/E: Relevant publication information for each text now appears in the corresponding publication notes, while footnotes have been numbered consecutively, sometimes with the indication “French Editors,” “Author’s addition,” or “T/E.”]

¹The selection and preparation of texts for this edition were the work of a collective made up of Cybèle, Sparta, and Zoé Castoriadis, Enrique Escobar, Olivier Fressard, Myrto Gondicas, Pascal Vernay, and Dominique Walter.

Translator/Editor's Foreword

The text printed below was originally published as the Foreword for *Figures of the Thinkable* (including *Passion and Knowledge*), translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service ([FTPK](#); electronic publication date: February 2005). [FTPK](#) had included “Passion and Knowledge”—a Castoriadis text that had not before been translated into English and that may now be found, rather, in [CL5](#)—and did not incorporate “The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge,” since the latter text had already appeared in [Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy](#). “The Social-Historical...” now appears below, in correct order, within the present volume.

Some passages from the 1984 Ryle/Soper *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* edition already had to be reworked for their presentation in the [FTPK](#) Translator's Foreword. This was especially the case for excerpts drawn from what was this already out-of-print edition's translation of Castoriadis's Preface, as those excerpts did not always give clear expression in English of the French original's crucial term *le pensable*—“the thinkable,” now the titular theme of this last volume in the *Crossroads* series. Those passages have now been updated to reflect their new translation in [CL1](#). In the case of citations of and quotations from the 1987 Blamey translation, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, the [FTPK](#) Foreword used, where possible, selections from this edition that had already been reworked in the [Castoriadis Reader](#).

Not reprinted, because not directly relevant here, are the first four sections of the [FTPK](#) Foreword, which dealt with labor disputes surrounding the publication history of the present volume. The Foreword now begins, therefore, with the fifth section and thereby enters immediately into a discussion of the [FTPK](#) text “Passion and Knowledge” (which now appears, as we said, in [CL5](#)) as regards that text's contribution to the theme of “figures of the thinkable.”

The main thrust of the [FTPK](#) Translator's Foreword is to elucidate for the reader [CL6](#)'s eponymous theme within the historical context of Castoriadis's political and philosophical work as a whole. N.B.: Some slight editorial changes have been introduced into this [FTPK](#) 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



Thematically speaking, “Passion and Knowledge” fits extremely well with the title so felicitously chosen by the French Editors for this posthumous *Carrefours* tome [DAC-2021: i.e., in English, *Figures of the Thinkable*]. In that text, Castoriadis connects his enduring theme of “the thinkable” to the philosophical and psychoanalytic aspects of the process of knowing and to the conditions for knowledge and truth, as contrasted with mere belief. The ontological tenor of his remarks is immediately recognizable to English-language readers of his [*World in Fragments*](#) essays [DAC-2021: texts now in *CL2-CL4*]:

Clearly, the knowledge process presupposes two conditions that have to do with being itself. Curiously, only one of these two has especially been put forward by the inherited philosophy. For there to be knowledge, at least something of being must be *knowable*, since obviously no subject of any kind would ever be able to know anything about an absolutely chaotic world. Being, however, must also be neither “transparent” nor even exhaustively knowable. Just as the mere existence of beings-for-themselves assures us that there are a certain stability and a certain orderedness to at least one stratum of being—its first natural stratum, the one with which the living being deals—so the existence of a history of knowledge has its own weighty ontological implications. This history shows in effect that being is not such as it would be if an initial interrogation or a first effort at attaining knowledge could exhaust it. If one pursues this line of questioning, one will note that

these facts are *thinkable* [T/E: emphasis added] only by positing a stratification or fragmentation of being.

A second use of *the thinkable*, even more powerful and revealing than the first from the standpoint of the full title of this posthumous tome, follows approximately a page later in “Passion and Knowledge” and constitutes, indeed, the conclusion to this important Castoriadis text:

The true becomes creation, ever open and ever capable of turning back upon itself, of *forms of the thinkable* [T/E: emphasis added] and of contents of thought capable of having an encounter with what is. The cathexis is no longer cathexis of an “object,” or even of a “self-image” in the usual sense, but of a “nonobject/object,” activity and source of the true. The attachment to this truth is the passion for knowledge, or thought as Eros.

Besides the two above-cited instances found in this supplemental text [DAC-2021: “Passion and Knowledge,” now in [CL5](#)], *the thinkable* appears as such only two other times in [FTPK](#): once in the first chapter, regarding what was thinkable in fifth-century Greece, and once in the interview conducted by Fernando Urribarri, the fine Argentinian student of Castoriadis’s psychoanalytic thought—but in this last instance, it is Urribarri the questioner and not Castoriadis the interviewee who employs the term. True, the word *unthinkable* does occur four times in [FTPK](#) [DAC-2021: the actual number for [CL6](#) is six times], but never with the force or depth of *forms of the thinkable* as found at the conclusion to “Passion and Knowledge.”

In this added chapter [DAC-2021: “Passion and

Knowledge,” now in [CL5](#)], Castoriadis also reiterates his firm stand that what man generally has sought in history is not knowledge, with all the attendant difficulties of a search for truth, but belief. And here he gives this key assertion an interesting social-historical twist: “What, then, is passionately cathected is instituted social ‘theory,’ namely, established beliefs.” The status of such “instituted social ‘theory,’” what he elsewhere calls, after Bacon, the “idols of the tribe,” but which clearly encompasses not only social representations but the forms by which those representations are created and expressed—in short, the figures of a society’s “thinkables” [DAC-2021: with “thinking” taken in a broad sense]—can come to highlight the argument made at the outset of another [FTPK](#) chapter, “First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions.” In the latter text, Castoriadis asks whether there can be a “theory of the institution,” and he responds in the negative: there can be no external viewing of a society’s institutions, for we are always already in the institution. It is in questioning the institution, in trying to elucidate its imaginary character, that we can, not have a “view” of it (*theōria*), but seek to participate in an ongoing practical effort, already instituted in certain societies, to adopt a critical attitude with respect to instituted social beliefs, what our or another society is *able to think*, and we do so with the help of a positing of new figures of the thinkable. While Castoriadis himself did not spell things out so clearly, one may pertinently ask, after reading these two [FTPK](#) chapters in tandem, what those who have gone into the academy to “do social theory” think they are doing. And we may wonder whether, without the critical approach Castoriadis provides concerning what is instituted as thinkable in the imaginary institution of a society, they are accomplishing anything at all.



Indeed, it was with respect to the question of theory that Castoriadis first introduced *the thinkable* in the installment of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (*MRT*) that appeared in the October-December 1964 issue of *S. ou B.*:

Theory as such is a making/doing, the always uncertain attempt to realize the project of elucidating the world. And this is also true for that supreme or extreme form of theory—philosophy—the attempt to think the world without knowing, either before or after the fact, whether the world is effectively *thinkable* [T/E: emphasis added], or even just what thinking exactly means.¹

It was, moreover, in *MRT* that Castoriadis made his celebrated and controversial assertion that one must choose between Marxism and revolutionary theory, with him opting there, as we know, for the latter.

While it is not our purpose here to retrace fully Castoriadis's *thoughts on theory*, including revolutionary theory, which themselves have a complicated, varied, and stratified history not easily summarized in a few phrases or phases, for the purpose of aiding the reader of the present volume *to think about the thinkable* in Castoriadis's work it may nevertheless be helpful, first of all, to recall simply that

¹At least, we know of no earlier instances of *the thinkable* in Castoriadis than this one. In the text, we have used the corrected translation found in [CR](#), 149, where Curtis replaced Blamey's translation, “conceivable” ([IIS](#), 74), with “thinkable” (*pensable*). In general, and where possible, we have relied on the excepted version of [IIS](#) in [CR](#).

in many ways “theory,” in particular “revolutionary theory,” was the term with which he was at grips before *thinking* and *the thinkable* became prominent concerns in his work.² It might also be useful to observe that his main concern in confronting and elaborating *theory* was at least twofold, motivated as it was both by a desire to recognize the particular significance of theory in fostering practice and (given Castoriadis’s perspective as a revolutionary critic of bureaucratic rationalization) by a concerted effort to *put theory in its place*.

Thus, we may observe how “Without development of revolutionary theory, no development of revolutionary action” (“Presentation of Socialisme ou Barbarie” [1949], [CR](#), 37)—his now-celebrated revision, in the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, of the classic saying, “Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary action”—was prefaced by a nuanced conception of theory’s close and crucial relations with practice:

Separated from practice, from its preoccupations and from its control, attempts at theoretical elaboration cannot but be vain, sterile, and increasingly

²It makes perfect sense that for Castoriadis, a Greek, the transition from *theory* to *thinking* would be, in some ways, a continuity, for among the ancient Greek terms he at times translates as *thinking* [*penser*] or *thought* [*la pensée*] are not just *gnōmē*, *nous/noein*, and *phronēma*, but also *theorein*. Cf., in his remarkable account of “The Discovery of the Imagination,” this translation of Aristotle: “When one thinks (*theōrei*), it is necessary that at the same time (*hama*) one contemplate (*theōrein*) some phantasm” ([WIF](#), 217 [DAC-2021: now in [CL2](#)]). Obviously, “thinking” has many language-embedded nuances, and these nuances make a reconstructive account of Castoriadis’s *thinking about thought and theory* all the more challenging, and interesting.

meaningless. Conversely, practical activity that does not base itself on constant research can lead only to a cretinized form of empiricism (*ibid.*).

as well as followed by a renewed insistence on the indispensable role of theory:

All this does not signify merely that the development and propagation of revolutionary theory already are extremely important practical activities—which is correct, but insufficient. It signifies, above all, that without a renewal of the fundamental conceptions there will be no practical renewal (*ibid.*).

For Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, as we know, such a revolutionary theoretical renewal of fundamental conceptions came to pass by way of an increasingly critical and negative assessment of Marxism as a revolutionary theory as well as by way of a new conception, what Castoriadis called in 1952 “the creative activity of tens of millions of people as it will blossom during and after the revolution,” the “revolutionary and cosmogonic character” of which “will be original and unforeseeable,” and which contrasts (in what he was already calling there “the profound antinomy of Marxism”) with Marxism’s pretension to a “scientific analysis of society” (“Proletarian Leadership,” [*PSWI*](#), 198). It was in the first installment of “On the Content of Socialism” (1955) that Castoriadis began to examine how a *certain kind* of theory was part of the problem, while he continued to emphasize how a practical renewal of revolutionary theory, centered now on this “free creative activity,” was required:

Socialism can be neither the fated result of historical development, a violation of history by a party of supermen, nor still the application of a program derived from a theory that is true in itself. Rather, it is the unleashing of the free creative activity of the oppressed masses. Such an unleashing of free creative activity is made possible by historical development, and the action of a party based on this theory can facilitate it to a tremendous degree. Henceforth it is indispensable to develop on every level the consequences of this idea ([PSW1](#), 297/[CR](#), 48).

By the time his controversial and contested programmatic *S. ou B.* text "Recommencing the Revolution" (*RR*) was finally published in 1964, Castoriadis was calling for "nothing less than a radical theoretical and practical renewal" ([PSW3](#), 28/[CR](#), 107). There, he looked in review at *Socialisme ou Barbarie's* development of revolutionary theory over the previous decade and a half:

From the first issue of our review we have affirmed, in conclusion of our critique of conservatism in the realm of theory, that "without *development* of revolutionary theory, no development of revolutionary action." Ten years later, after having shown that the basic postulates as well as the logical structure of Marx's economic theory reflect "essentially bourgeois ideas" and having affirmed that a total reconstruction of revolutionary theory was needed, we concluded, "Whatever the contents of the organization's revolutionary theory or program, and however deep their connections with the experience and needs of the proletariat, there always will be the possibility, the

certainty even, that at some point this theory and program will be outstripped by history, and there will always be the risk that those who have defended them up to that point will tend to make them into absolutes and to try to subordinate and adapt the creations of living history to fit them.”³

Castoriadis's goal in *RR* was to bring together “the elements for an all-around theoretical reconstruction.” And yet, he added immediately, “one must also grasp that this reconstruction affects not only the content of the ideas, but also the very type of theoretical conception we are attempting to make” (*PSW3*, 33/*CR*, 112)—a type that, it must now be recognized, will always eventually be outstripped by the free creative action of living men and women in history. Theory of a certain type was being questioned, not just this or that theory surpassed by the constant and inevitable revolutionizing of reality. *RR* elaborates on what a “true in itself” theory actually entails, and it does so in light of what, before *MRT*, Castoriadis was already calling “the ruination of Marxism.” This ruination, he explains,

is not only the ruination of a certain number of specific ideas (though we should point out, if need be, that through this process of ruination a number of

³“Recommencing the Revolution,” *PSW3*, 29/*CR*, 108 (translation slightly altered). The accompanying endnote (*PSW3*, 53n2/*CR*, 137n2) points out that the text cited here is the 1959 *S. ou B.* position paper “Proletariat and Organization, I,” and that the specific passages discussed are to be found in *PSW2*, 202-203, 213-14, and 220. Actually, the second of these three citations should read “213-15” and concerns a section titled “Revolutionary Theory,” which obviously sheds important light on the whole discussion here and bears rereading.

fundamental discoveries and a way of envisaging history and society remain that no one can any longer ignore). It is also the ruination of a certain type of connection among ideas, as well as between ideas and reality or action. In brief, it is the ruination of the conception of a closed theory (and, even more, of a closed theoretico-practical system) that thought it could enclose the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of the historical period presently occurring within a certain number of allegedly scientific schemata ([PSW3](#), 33/[CR](#), 113).

In *RR*, he was already writing the obituary of Marxism as revolutionary theory, but also of a certain type of theory:

Never again will there be a complete theory that would need merely to be “updated.” Incidentally, in real life there never was any theory of this sort, for all great theoretical discoveries have veered off into the imaginary as soon as one tried to convert them into systems, Marxism no less than the others. What there has been, and what there will continue to be, is a living theoretical process, from whose womb emerge moments of truth destined to be outstripped (were it only through their integration into another whole within which they no longer have the same meaning).⁴

Castoriadis pertinently added here: “The idea of a complete and definitive theory...is today only a bureaucrat’s phantasm

⁴“Recommencing the Revolution,” [PSW3](#), 33/[CR](#), 113. Obviously, Castoriadis’s views on *the imaginary* were not highly developed yet in this text composed in 1963.

helping him to manipulate the oppressed; for the oppressed, it can only be the equivalent, in modern-day terms, of an essentially irrational faith," observing, moreover, that the "theological phase" in the history of the workers' movement was "drawing to a close" ([PSW3](#), 33-34; [CR](#), 113).

It was therefore not as an entirely new departure, but as a summation of fifteen years of constantly developing and mutating revolutionary theory, that Castoriadis declared in *MRT*, "the very idea of a complete and definitive theory is a pipe dream and a mystification," before affirming, almost in passing, that "a total theory cannot exist" ([IIS](#), 71/[CR](#), 146). And yet his mention, three pages later, of "that supreme or extreme form of theory—philosophy," which introduces for the first time his theme of *the thinkable*, both problematizes theory further and signals a switch to a broader examination of *thinking*, its ambiguities, and its aporias, for he describes philosophy there, we saw, as "the attempt to think the world without knowing, either before or after the fact, whether the world is effectively thinkable, or even just what thinking exactly means." Thus, for those who have followed him so far, he returns to the complex relations of theory and practice, now informed by his explicit critique of "total theory" and turning toward the signification of *praxis* and making/doing (*faire* in French). And, for those who now know where he would go once he had explicitly introduced philosophy and thinking, and not just "theory," into his sphere of concerns, it is clear why he immediately speaks of *politics*—what he will later call philosophy's nonidentical twin in the project of questioning and challenging the instituted world:

To demand that the revolutionary project be founded on a complete theory is therefore to assimilate politics to a technique and to posit its sphere of action—

history—as the possible object of a finished and exhaustive knowledge. To invert this reasoning and conclude on the basis of the impossibility of this sort of knowledge that all lucid revolutionary politics is impossible amounts, finally, to a wholesale rejection of all human activity and history as unsatisfactory according to a fictitious standard. Politics, however, is neither the concretization of an Absolute Knowledge nor a technique; neither is it the blind will of no one knows what. It belongs to another domain, that of making/doing, and to the specific mode of making/doing that is praxis.⁵

The primary target of Castoriadis's critique of "total theory," of an allegedly "finished and exhaustive knowledge," is the Hegelian *speculative* philosophy that, Castoriadis argued in *MRT*, still pervaded Marxist theory and practice:⁶

For speculative theory, the object does not exist if it is not complete and the theory itself does not exist if it cannot complete its object. Praxis, on the other hand,

⁵[IIS](#), 75; again, we opted for the revised translation (in [CR](#), 149).

⁶Speaking retrospectively, a decade later, of this period of his work that led to the 1963-1964 "Tendency"/"Anti-Tendency" split within S. ou B. and to Jean-François Lyotard and those whom Castoriadis labeled *neopaleo-Marxists* leaving the group, Castoriadis says, "Also being challenged...was the traditional conception of the role and content of theory, which conception partakes of the speculative attitude elaborated in the West over the past twenty-five centuries" ([CR](#), 14) The most accomplished commentator on Castoriadis's properly philosophical work undoubtedly is Fabio Ciaramelli. On the "speculative circle" vs "the circle of creation," see his article "Human Creation and the Paradox of the Originary," tr. David Ames Curtis, *Free Associations*, 7:3 (1999): 357-66.

can exist only if its object, by its very nature, surpasses all completion; praxis is a perpetually transformed relation to the object.... For speculative theory, only that which, in one way or another, it has managed to pack away and lock up in the strongboxes of its “proofs” is valid. Its dream—its phantasy—is the accumulation of a treasure of unusable truths. Inasmuch as theory goes beyond this phantasy, it becomes a true theory, the praxis of truth. (*IIS*, 89/*CR*, 164)

Guided, then, by this conception of praxis—“that making/doing in which the other or others are intended as autonomous beings and considered as the agents of the development of their own autonomy” (*IIS*, 75/*CR*, 150)—theory can establish that open-ended and alternative relation to the truth⁷ described in “Passion and Knowledge” in terms of “thought as Eros,” where “the true becomes creation...of forms of the *thinkable*.”⁸ And yet, as much as he continues to

⁷“Open-ended,” because the theological view of a complete and total system is no longer admissible; “alternative,” because the true is no longer thought of as “true in itself” or treated impractically as a storehouse of “unusable truths.”

⁸With Castoriadis’s turn to the Greeks, and his idea of a cobirth there of philosophy and politics, the move from *theory* to *thinking* supplies this claim about truth with both a historical inauguration and a sociospatial locus:

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 (*PPA*, 160 [DAC-2021: “Power,

relate praxis and theory closely (“the relations of practice to theory, true theory correctly conceived, are infinitely tighter and more profound than those of any ‘strictly rational’ technique,” [IIS](#), 76/[CR](#), 151), Castoriadis still wants to put all theory in its place:

The moment of elucidation is always necessarily contained in making/doing. It does not result from this, however, that making/doing and theory are symmetrical at every level, each encompassing the other. Making/doing constitutes the human universe to which theory belongs as a segment. Humanity is engaged in a multiform conscious activity, it *defines itself as* making/doing (which contains elucidation in the context of and in relation to making/doing as a necessary but not sovereign moment). Theory as such is a specific making/doing, it emerges once the moment of elucidation becomes a project for itself. In this sense one can say that there is actually a “primacy of practical reason.” One can conceive of, and indeed there existed for millennia, a humanity without theory; but there cannot exist a humanity without making/doing ([IIS](#), 381n10/[CR](#), 190n10).

“Thoughtful doing,” as well as “political thinking—society’s thinking as making *itself*,” of which we are given no more than a glimpse in the very last lines of [The Imaginary Institution of Society](#), are thus “one essential component” of “the self-transformation of society” ([IIS](#), 373)—with equal emphasis placed on their being only “one” component and on that one component being “essential.”



Once removed from its successive sedimentations, shorn of its historical connotations, and stripped of its Hegelian vestments, “speculative theory,” far from being an oxymoron, will, surprisingly, be revealed to be an exemplary instance of *redundancy*. At its root, this Latin-and-Greek-based phrase has no more to say than “visual view,” “watchful regard,” or “seeing look.” And thus the stark contrast between a “speculative” and a praxis-informed theory must inevitably fade, so to speak, into invisibility. It is theory itself—and vision, too, so privileged by the Greeks—that was increasingly going to be called into question.

In the [General Introduction to his *Political and Social Writings*](#), which was composed three years before the publication of [IIS](#) (1975), Castoriadis offered, as an introduction to a retrospective discussion of *MRT* (1964-1965; reprinted as the first half of [IIS](#)), the following paragraph:

To vulgar scientism provided for the consumption of the average militant is counterposed on a sophisticated level, and according to taste, the Hegelian filiation [...and] the grand theory itself; but this theory remains speculation, precisely in the sense that Marx himself and above all Lukács (the Lukács of 1923) gave to this term: a theory that is contemplation, sight. Practice follows as an application. There is a truth to be possessed, and theory alone possesses it—here is the ultimate postulate that Marx, whatever he might have said at certain moments, shares with the culture of his age and, beyond it, with the whole history of Greco-Western thought. Being is to be seen, just as it is—and when it has been seen, the essential thing, if

not everything, has been said. For an instant, Marx had the brilliant intuition that he must get off this path, which stretches from Parmenides to Heidegger, and along which the sights seen and speculated upon quite obviously have always been changing while the speculative relation between being and its *theōros* has not. But he quickly came back to this path. Thus for one more time was it covered over [*occulté*] that being is essentially a to-be [*à-être*], that vision deludes itself about itself when it takes itself for a vision, since it is essentially a making/doing [*faire*], that every *eidon* is an *eidos* of a *pragma*, and that the *pragma* is never maintained in the to-be except by the *prakton*.⁹

While this retrospective account does emphasize what Castoriadis considers to be the correct (modest and praxical) connection between theory and practice, it not only grows out of but also subverts and surpasses previous statements about what (good or bad) theory is, wholly altering them. Relating theory etymologically and explicitly to vision—to a (Greco-Western) view, so to speak, of vision that is mistaken when it fails to see, so to speak, that it is itself not just a vision (of what is) but a creative and risky form of making/doing—Castoriadis makes theory become both more and less than it was, a practically-informed capacity to bring about the new, which sometimes deludes itself as being mere vision, but not anything that might ever operate outside of a practical engagement.

Retrospective accounts, including ones written by Castoriadis, should always be greeted with a certain skepticism—especially when the language differs so radically

⁹[*PSW1*](#), 29 (translation altered).

from what an author was saying at the time. And yet such *retrospection*, this *looking back* on where he came from with respect to theory may also indicate what he was struggling with, less explicitly, at the time. *MRT* heralds the triumph of revolutionary theory over an outdated Marxism and over the type of theory Marxism represented (speculative theory) as well as constitutes the first enunciation of another kind of theory, another way of doing theory, thereby announcing the coming de-emphasis, in the second half of *IIS*, of theory itself in favor of a critique of inherited thought, a critique in which, with a no longer directly visual metaphor, what is thinkable plays a multiply predominant role.

In transition between these two texts, Castoriadis, in speaking of *the revolutionary project* in a 1974 interview, explains that a project includes:

a perpetual, never fully achieved, and open-ended elucidation and implies a completely different subjective attitude toward theorization. In short, it is to reject categorically the idea that there might be a complete (or indefinitely perfectible) theory and that theory is sovereign (*CR*, 16 [DAC-2021: “‘The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water’: An Introductory Interview”]).

Reminiscent of the establishment of the “other relation” to the Unconscious, advocated in *MRT* as the beginning of the project of autonomy on the individual level, he now calls for “a new attitude toward ideas and theory, for the type of relation people at present entertain with ideas and theory, an essentially religious type, must be shattered” (*CR*, 33). It is thus no longer just a matter of having or developing a better theory or a better kind of theory but, rather, of instituting

another relation to theory. The type of relation to theory, not simply the type of theory, must be altered, and this alteration must be accomplished, first, through the destruction of the old type of relation one has to theory. This move is not designed to deny the importance of theory, nor is it intended to remove theory's relation to *practice* (broadened now to encompass making/doing), but it puts theory in its place even more thoroughly while pointing to a different way of thinking both historically and personally about its relation with practice.

No longer will Castoriadis speak of "historical and social theory," as he had done in *MRT* (*IIS*, 12/*CR*, 143). Instead, "The Social Imaginary and the Institution" (*SII*, the second half of *IIS*) endeavors from the start "to elucidate the *question* of society and that of history" (*IIS*, 167/*CR*, 196; emphasis added). "Inherited ways of thinking can make only fragmentary contributions to this elucidation. Perhaps this contribution is mostly negative, marking out the limits of a mode of thought and displaying its impossibilities" (*ibid.*). What can become thinkable through posing "the question of society" passes by way of a destructive discovery of what is, has become, or must be made to become *unthinkable* within (inherited) thought

Now, not only *the thinkable* but also *what is unthinkable* had already appeared in *MRT*:

In posing the revolutionary project, in giving to it the concrete form of a "maximum program," not only are we not claiming to exhaust the problems, not only do we know that we cannot exhaust them; rather, we can and must indicate the problems that remain, tracing their outlines to *the very limit of the unthinkable*. We know and we must state that problems remain which we can do no more than formulate; others we cannot

even suspect; and still others which will have to be posed in different terms, currently *unimaginable* to us. We know that questions that cause us anguish now, because they are insoluble, may very well disappear by themselves, and that, conversely, replies that today appear self-evident may upon application reveal practically infinite degrees of difficulty. We also know that all this could possibly (but not necessarily) obliterate the meaning of what we are saying now (*IIS*, 86-87/*CR*, 161-62; emphases added)

The above quotation reminds us that, as early as *MRT*, Castoriadis had grasped the historical nature of the thinkable, and not just of theories. Moreover, what is *unthinkable* and what is *currently unimaginable* are already tied closely together in this final *S. ou B.* text, for Castoriadis had already begun to examine the imaginary and the symbolic, asking there, "How can we eliminate what is at the base of, or in any case what is inextricably bound up with, what makes us human beings—our symbolic function, which presupposes our *capacity to see and to think* in a thing something which it is not?" (*IIS*, 104/*CR*, 179; emphasis added). And yet this overlap between *seeability* and *thinkability* will only be worked out later on as the theme of *the imaginary* is elucidated in *SII*.¹⁰

¹⁰And also in later texts: "There are olfactory objects, tactile objects that are, at the outset, much more important than visual objects. I am not fixated on the "scopic"; one of the gross inadequacies of Lacan's conception of the imagination is his fixation on the scopic. For me, if one is speaking of stages that are worked out, the *imagination par excellence* is the imagination of the musical composer (which is what I wanted to be). Suddenly figures surge forth that are not in the least visual. They are essentially auditory and kinetic—for there is also rhythm. ...Nor is there

In the pages of *SII* that follow, Castoriadis constantly refers to what “is thinkable,” what “can be (thought),” as well as what “cannot be apprehended within the framework of inherited thought,” what is “inassimilable for traditional thought...if we are to begin to think seriously,” what “we cannot think,” what “cannot be thought within the traditional schemata,” etc. (*IIS*, 169, 179, 180, 182, 184/*CR*, 198, 208, 209, 211, 214), so many figurations of this theme of thinkability that was introduced a decade earlier in *MRT*. What can no longer be thought and what must now be thought are succinctly brought together in *SII*:

We cannot think the social, as coexistence, by means of inherited logic, and this means we cannot think it as the unity of a plurality in the usual sense of these terms; we cannot think it as a determinable set of clearly distinct and well-defined elements. We have to think it as a *magma*, and even as a *magma of magmas*—by which I mean not chaos but the mode of organization belonging to a nonensemblistic diversity, as exemplified by the social, the imaginary, or the Unconscious.¹¹

Or, as he retrospectively described, in 1981, this development to *MRT* and to *SII*:

anything “visual” in the social imaginary. The social imaginary is not the creation of images in society, it is not the fact that one paints the walls of towns. A fundamental creation of the social imaginary, the gods or rules of behavior are neither visible nor even audible, but *signifiable*” (*WIF*, 182-83 [DAC-2021: “From the Monad to Autonomy,” now in *CLS*]).

¹¹*IIS*, 182/*CR*, 211-12. His views on *chaos* will be worked out later on, including in “False and True Chaos,” in the present volume.

It is toward these inconsistent multiplicities—inconsistent from the standpoint of a logic that claims to be consistent or rigorous—that I turned, starting from the moment, in 1964-1965, when the importance of what I have called the *radical imaginary* in the human world became apparent to me. Noting that the human psychism cannot be “explained” by biological factors or considered as a logical automaton of no-matter-what richness and complexity and, also and especially, that society cannot be reduced to any rational-functional determinations whatsoever (for example, economic/productive, or “sexual,” in a narrow view of the “sexual”) indicated that one had to think something else and to think otherwise in order to be able to comprehend the nature and specific mode of being of these two domains, the psychical on the one hand, the social-historical on the other ([CR](#), 290-91 [DAC-2021: “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in [CL2](#)]).

In *thinking something else and in thinking otherwise* in 1975 (and thus not just retrospectively), Castoriadis offered to the world a stunning set of new or thoroughly revised and reworked philosophical and psychoanalytic ideas and concepts, including *the social-historical, ensemblistic-identitary logic, magmas, “leaning on,” legein, teukhein, psychical monad, and sublimation*, to supplement those critical rearticulations of traditional philosophical and political terms developed in *MRT*, such as *praxis, project, making/doing, instituted and instituted society, social imaginary significations, autonomy, heteronomy, alienation, the symbolic, and radical imaginary*—as well as, already, *the thinkable*—so many figures for *enabling one to think* (or to

rethink, beyond inherited thought) psyche and society, history and revolution.

~

Can we think the thinkable? The answer seems so obvious because the question appears tautologous. Of course we *can* think the thinkable, we are *able* to do so, otherwise it would not be *thinkable*, one might venture to reply, “thinking” that the matter is ended. Castoriadis had already spoken in *MRT*, we saw, of going to “the very limit of the unthinkable,” with, however, the knowledge that our concerns today, and our solutions, may be swept away by living history. Yet in *SII*, he tells us, we are, when “reflecting on society,” confronted with the “two limits of inherited thought,” ones not easily pushed back or eliminated. These limits, he explains,

are but the single limit characteristic of identitary logic-ontology. There is no way, within this limit, to think the self-deployment of an entity as the positing of new terms of an articulation and of new relations among these terms, hence as the positing of a new organization, of a new form, of another *eidos*. For, there is no way within the logic-ontology of the same, of repetition, of the forever intemporal (*aei*) to think a creation, a genesis that is not a mere becoming, generation and corruption, engendering of the same by the same as a different exemplar of the same type, but is instead the emergence of alterity, ontological genesis, which makes beings be as *eidos*, and as the *ousia* of *eidos*, another manner and another type of being and of being-a-being [*être-étant*]. And it may be

that this self-evidence is in effect blinding; it may be that it is, *at most, recognizable but not thinkable*. This question, however, will not be able to be resolved until it has been recognized, perceived, experienced, until it is *no longer denied or covered over by the veil of tautology* ([IIS](#), 181/[CR](#), 210-11; last two emphases added).

The struggle with/against tautology is what may make the thinkable, well, thinkable. Yet it is unclear whether we may ever attain it. Let us now examine how Castoriadis struggled with his self-invented theme of *the thinkable* in his post-[IIS](#) writings.

In introducing this titular theme, the French Editors of *Figures du pensable* inform us what, in the Preface to his [first Carrefours volume](#), Castoriadis himself *thinks* thinking is and is not:

To think is not to exit the cave, nor is it to replace the uncertainty of shadows with the clear-cut contours of the things themselves, the flickering glow of a flame replaced by the light of the true Sun. It is to enter into the Labyrinth.... It is to become lost amid galleries that exist only because we tirelessly hollow them out, turning round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac, access to which has been closed off behind where we had stepped—until this rotation opens up, inexplicably, some cracks in the wall wide enough for us to pass through [*fissures praticables*] [DAC-2021: Preface, [CLI](#)].

And they go on to cite, in a footnote, Castoriadis's own explicit formulation there of the *thinkability* theme: "The historical

dimension of philosophy is also what is realized as *creation*. It is emergence of other figures of the thinkable" [DAC-2021: Preface, [CLI](#)]. Castoriadis's conception of thinking thus is, negatively speaking, anti-Platonic and, positively speaking, a metaphorical exploration (or exploration of the metaphor) of a labyrinth man himself has historically created. But how might we think together these two descriptions, which appear to be at odds or at least to bear different emphases?

The first description, which comes after a dismissal of the Platonic image of the Cave, speaks of *loss*, indeed of a *self-loss* ("to become lost" or to lose oneself [*se perdre*]) that takes place amid what are affirmed (from the philosophical standpoint introduced on the first page of this [CLI](#) Preface) to be one's prior creations—the existence of which seems to depend on a constant forward and deepening motion, the action of digging further into, and digging more, "galleries." Furthermore, this initial description talks of a *cul-de-sac*, an impasse, the Platonic-Aristotelian moment of *aporia* that in this non-Ideal case becomes, for this self-lost soul, all the more disconcerting as it discovers, so to speak, not only that there is no longer a way forward¹² but that the "entrance" (the prior broaching of a formerly new gallery) has somehow been closed off behind it, as well. In such darkness of a soul that is now lost, that has lost itself (but what, then, is it now?), this (self-same?) lost soul "finds" that it can do nothing but turn "round and round," spinning [DAC-2021: so to speak, quoting the Ryle/Soper translation] on its ("own"?) axis—

¹²There is also, so to speak, *no way out*. Castoriadis eschews recourse to the metaphor of an aboveground Platonic Sun. As he said when setting up the metaphor, in our asking philosophical questions "the light on the plain has disappeared" from sight already [DAC-2021: Preface, [CLI](#)]. The *action* of digging deeper, not the metaphor of a theoretical *vision*, predominates.

until, by its very spinning, it breaks down barriers, creating, by blind force of “its” repetitive circular movement, “cracks” in the surrounding walls (*la paroi*—walls, too, formed by prior excavations) that afford an “open[ing]” [DAC-2021: or, at least, such rotational/fissure-producing action *may* produce a hole “wide enough” for us to “pass through,” if we are ready and inclined to do so].¹³

The second description, shorter, appears wholly positive. Philosophy’s history is that of creation, the positing of new figures. A more neutral term, *emergence*, then appears to account for the rise of other figures of the thinkable. Yet we have no idea here of the sense of loss, of being lost, a blind struggle, or the destruction through a volatile repetition, as found in the first description.¹⁴

What is this *repetition*, this earth-shaking *rotation* (as the original French says) that serves as prelude to the new? Castoriadis generally took a dim view of pulling dialectical rabbits out of a hat,¹⁵ and he did not subscribe to the view that

¹³The French *praticable* does double duty. Cracks become both “passable” and amenable to “practice”—*practicable*, we also say in English.

¹⁴In reality, *le pensable* appears several more times in this Preface, but not always so clearly in the extant translation [DAC-2021: i.e., Ryle/Soper’s]. Below, we bring out these additional instances of *the thinkable* for the reader who may not have easy access either to the French original or to the now out-of-print English edition [DAC-2021: now replaced, however, by [CLI](#)].

¹⁵Nevertheless, Castoriadis did say a bit in jest in the 1974 interview quoted above the following about the transition to *RR* and *MRT*: “All these things flowed together, converged into consequences, and there ultimately was, as comrade Mao would say, a transformation of quantity into quality. It no longer was this or that particular position, but Marxism as a whole, that was being put back into question” ([CR](#), 14).

a one-sidedly negative, destructive, or deconstructive critical theory could, in and of itself, bring about new attitudes. "For," we already quoted him as saying, "there is no way within the logic-ontology of the same, of repetition, of the forever intemporal (*aei*) to think a creation." Indeed, as he explained in a later (1988) text,

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 ([PPA](#), 163; emphasis added [DAC-2021: "Power, Politics, Autonomy," now in [CL3](#)]).

Repetition, "turn[ing] round and round," may be characteristic of the lost individual, but hardly of the creative, "truly individualized" one who stakes out new ground. To be sure, such "spinning" occurs only *within* the Labyrinth, a labyrinth that is born of our philosophical questioning, of our digging constantly beneath the surface: "To think is...to enter into the Labyrinth," the French Editors had quoted him as saying in this first *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* Preface. Elided, however, was the following clause: "more exactly," it is "to make be and make appear a Labyrinth, when one might have remained 'stretched out among the flowers, facing the sky'" (Rilke). Thus, the individual caught in labyrinthine repetition is not the traditional, prephilosophical, "true-to-form" individual. Once inside this Labyrinth, whose galleries "exist only because we tirelessly hollow them out," we nevertheless

may reach an impasse. It is difficult to see how a rotational repetition will make a difference, create a true breakthrough. Indeed, later in the same Preface, Castoriadis asserts that the individual who has already entered the philosophical Labyrinth cannot advance through “mere repetition”:

I am thinking here, now: as a function of what has already been thought, said, worked out, and acted, of what I know about that explicitly (quite little) and implicitly (a bit more). Yet if “as a function” truly means *as a function*, if what I am thinking is determined in a univocal manner by what has already been thought, I think nothing; I am engaged in mere repetition and there is no point in going further. If history, and the history of thought, is truly determined, it is but a vast tautological system.¹⁶

What can something more than “mere repetition” be, that which would break with tautology, positing new figures of the thinkable?

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It is fascinating to note that, beyond the Labyrinth metaphor explored at the outset, the rest of this [first Crossroads](#) Preface offers an extended exploration of *theory* in relation to practice and to *the thinkable*, one that outstrips

¹⁶[DAC-2021: now in [CLI](#).] Things are stated even more explicitly [DAC-2021: a few pages later, when] the “figures” of *figures of the thinkable* are introduced: “If it is not a matter of mere repetition, if the question is truly thought, it is so by the positing/creating of other schemata/figures/significations.”

his previous reflections on this score.¹⁷ In its second section, he surmises that

[t]he impatient reader will think: These texts are gauging up theory or criticizing it. Starting from what, in the name of what? Are they not, themselves, theoretical texts? Do they not lie within the scope of the theory of the theory-object? Do they not employ the resources of that which they criticize?

Other questions follow: "What is theory?", Castoriadis asks philosophically, answering quite practically, "The activity of theoreticians. And theoreticians are people who make theory. Derisory circularity; but what are we to put in its place?" (Preface, [CLI](#)) In order to explore, nontautologically, what might replace theory, what we might put in its place, one must first put theory in its place, something Castoriadis never tired of working toward from 1949 onward.

The fourth section broaches this task by criticizing the view of theory as viewing:

There exists no theory as "view" of what is, nor as systematic and exhaustive constitution or construction of the thinkable, either once and for all or gradually and progressively deployed (Preface, [CLI](#)).

Returning implicitly to the Labyrinth metaphor, he adds, "There is no sudden crack in the walls surrounding us that would allow us to see at last the light of a Sun that was always there." While this last statement reiterates the anti-

¹⁷Of note is the fact that the first chapter in [CLI](#) is titled "Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science."

Platonic character of the Labyrinth metaphor Castoriadis has constructed,¹⁸ it renders even more mysterious the process of engendering the new through a repetitive movement that somehow—"inexplicably"—creates (?) "cracks" (but not "breaches") in the surrounding walls. The Labyrinth metaphor has become labyrinthine.

In seeking to put it in its place, perchance to replace it, Castoriadis does not deny theory. On the contrary, he affirms its historical (temporal and noneternal) existence: "There is a theoretical making/doing, which emerges only at a given moment in history" (Preface, [CLI](#)). And once we begin to *practice theory*, we are "already...within theory, within this [social-historical] project [of theory]"; we are "pursu[ing] it" and cannot get out of it. The illusion of the "absolute Spectator" is to think that this "given moment" can somehow be dismissed as "contingent"—a term of Hegelian provenance well before it was picked up one-sidedly by Existentialists who felt that they could not be housed within the Hegelian system.

We are not this Absolute Spectator; we will never be so. And at the same time, and whatever might be said about it, we cannot refrain from taking his fictive point of view—would it only be to say that it does not exist or that it is *not thinkable* without contradiction (Preface, [CLI](#), emphasis added).

The transition from theory to the thinkable is made here by relating the attitude of the absolute Spectator to *theōria*:

¹⁸Castoriadis further states that this labyrinthine structure defies the usual logic, for neither is there "a harmonious edifice whose general layout we would discover as we go about constructing it" (Preface, [CLI](#)).

If the philosopher believes that, by retiring into his study or simply by withdrawing into himself, he can remake the world in accordance with reasoned order and perform directly a lightning-quick opening within the thick integument of his particular language, of his era, of the solid and obscure articulations of the objective and subjective world created/instituted by his society in order to attain a vision—*theōria*—of being that would owe nothing to them, he is deluding himself [*s'illusionne*].... He deludes himself when he believes that he has found, in the conditions under which something seems to him *thinkable*, the atemporal conditions whereby anything whatsoever will ever be able to appear to be to any subject whatsoever; believing that he has grasped forever the *conditions of the thinkable*, he grants perhaps that one will be able to think something else but does not conceive that one could ever think *otherwise* (Preface, [*CLI*](#), first two emphases in English added).

“And yet,” he adds, so as not to dismiss theory and *theōria* entirely or out of hand as “imaginary” in a pejorative sense, this illusion or delusion is both “fecund and vital” (Preface, [*CLI*](#)).

It is “tautological thinking”—the kind of tautology we ourselves also found in the very term *speculative theory*—that must be challenged:

What tautological thinking is thus trying—and this is for it an inner necessity—to eliminate is what can be called *the gap between thought and what is thought*. It would not suffice to say that, without this gap, thought would come to a halt; it would, rather, cease

to be.... We are not dealing here with a gap given once and for all; the gap is created and recreated, transformed each time, transubstantiated in its mode of being and its being-thus (Preface, [CLI](#)).

Speaking of “great thought,” which “strives to take...into account” newly “created/posited...figures of the world,” Castoriadis teases out this gap’s ontological import: “What is thinkable and is not exhaustively so. And thought,” he adds in order to underscore the nature of this gap, which resists even as it invites speculation, “is not transparent to itself.” So as also to underscore its volatile historical nature, he further states that, whenever great thought makes strides, “there is also, each time, a hollowing out of the gap” (Preface, [CLI](#)).

Recognizing this gap that, from the standpoint of the Labyrinth metaphor, literally *undermines* tautology (and that is also reminiscent of the one between instituting and instituted society), Castoriadis returns to the treatment of thought and theory in terms of vision. Neither a “*reading*,” nor an “*interpretation*,” thought is not a “*perception*,” either. Taking Maurice Merleau-Ponty to task for treating “the history of philosophy as a *perception* of other philosophers,” Castoriadis asserts that such “an “exportation...[a] transfer copy of the schemata of everyday life” is “illegitimate—though almost fated” (Preface, [CLI](#)). Indeed, “the metaphor of vision, more generally of perception, which has from its origin dominated the history of philosophy, is itself—another crossroads—at once fecund and fallacious” (Preface, [CLI](#)). Indeed, while the ground/figure schema Merleau-Ponty borrowed from Gestalt psychology can apply to thought in its “*already made*, already accepted, already assimilated” state (Preface, [CLI](#)), it differs when applied to the thinkable rather than to the perceptible or to what is assimilated to the

perceptible. "The perceptual institution is instauration once and for all of what the ground is and of what, ever, *can be* figure, as well as of the mode, of the being-thus of their relation, of their distinction and solidarity" (Preface, [CLI](#)). "The *Lebenswelt*, the life-world in which we live" is necessarily treated as "unshakeable," and this unshakability is what speculative theory—this reduplication of seeing in a theory that denies itself as a perilous practice and defines itself as a pure vision—tries, in vain, to recover. "To think, however," Castoriadis asserts, "is precisely to shake up the perceptual institution in which every site has its place and every moment has its hour—just as it is to shake up the given institution of the world and of society, the social imaginary significations this institution bears" (Preface, [CLI](#)).

Thought as thinking, as taking place in the gap between instituting thought and instituted thought, "shake[s] up" a seemingly "unshakable" life-world. It is here that we might begin to understand why "cracks" may form in the apparently stable "surrounding walls." Castoriadis himself has in a practical way stayed close to these temporary partitions, which may be breached and become new openings, and even his critique of theory as vision admits that, despite the vision metaphor's fallaciousness, it is also fecund one. Returning then to the *figures of the thinkable* theme but keeping the vision metaphor in his sights, he now places the destructive and creative elements side by side: "original thought...posits/creates *other* figures, makes be as figure what till then could not be so—and that cannot happen without a tearing up of the existing ground, of the given horizon, and its recreation" (Preface, [CLI](#)). The contrast he wanted to make between "a [speculative] theory that is true in itself" and "true theory, the praxis of truth" reappears, altered, set on another ground, now that the figure of one's *relation to theory*, one's attitude

toward theory, has come into the foreground: “Our true relation to such a thought cannot but aim at finding again that moment of creative tearing, that different and fresh [*recommencée*] dawn where, in one go, things take on another figure in an unknown landscape” (Preface, [CLI](#)). Creation and destruction have melded into one seamless phrase—(the search for) a “creative tearing” that occurs “in one go.” Have we found, then, that (endlessly repeating, or repeated?) “given moment” wherein a turbulent rotation, different from “mere repetition,” births the new?

With the appearance of this “unknown landscape,” however, the Labyrinth metaphor has shifted, too, though we recognize a certain continuity with what had been said on the Preface’s first page: “The sole remaining choice is to disappear into this or that gallery rather than into another, *without knowing* where they might lead us or whether they will bring us back eternally to this same crossroads or to another one that would be exactly alike” (Preface, [CLI](#), emphasis added). Thinking is that risky enterprise where we *do not even know in advance* what thinking is [DAC-2021: because and to the extent that we give rise to new figures of the thinkable]. Returning to this “unknown landscape” while proceeding to come to terms with the difficult labor of reconstructing previous historical figures of the thinkable, Castoriadis explains that “that in turn implies that, for us, this thought of the past is becoming a new being within a new horizon, that we *create* it as object of *our* thought, in another relation with its inexhaustible being” (Preface, [CLI](#)). Our reconstructions of past figures of the thinkable are themselves new figures by which we understand what we have come to understand as past such figures, in a nontautologous movement of creative repetition or recapitulation. It is “after the fact” that “there always are ground and figure (or

difference and solidarity of Being and beings).” “Yet,” he adds, “that is not how things come to be.”

The creative and destructive elements begin to split apart again along with the previously acknowledged gap between thought and what is thought, which he now reintroduces: “History, and the history of thought, is ontological creation,” but it is *not* “mere ontological creation, emergence of another *eidos*,” as we might have thought in reading “emergence of other figures of the thinkable” (the sole quotation about *thinkability* supplied by the French Editors). “It is creation even of types of *eidos*, of another dehiscence of figure/ground, of another solidarity/difference of its ‘components.’” (Preface, [CLI](#)).

A semblance of temporal unity for this creation/destruction is maintained for a while:

Creation happens as dehiscence, where figure and ground at the same time come to be, each by the other and in its own relationship with the other. The historical figure and its horizon are created together (Preface, [CLI](#)).

The gap reappears, however, as the figure of *the thinkable* returns one last time, in this first *Crossroads* Preface, along with interminable questions about the thinkable it elicits:

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

that is so in two manners rather than one. What, in thought, is lasting has to do with *what* is each time thought. Yet it also has to do with the *how* it is thought. It is impossible to confuse these two moments, and it is impossible to separate them in a rigorous way (Preface, [CLI](#)).

Given this tensile gap, which is what renders nonexhaustive *thinkability* possible, if not necessarily thinkable, Castoriadis urges us to “grant the apparent redundancy,” a tautology and repetition that may also be fertile, when speaking of the new:

A new thought is a new way of thinking a new object. The redundancy gives birth straightaway to its riddle: regularly, the manner exceeds the object—and the object exceeds the manner (Preface, [CLI](#)).

“Regularly”? Might this “given historical moment” be endlessly repeating, always the same, occurring like clockwork, so that the creation/destruction of thinkables might be bottled and sold? No.

Yet we would be mistaken if we believed that we hold here finally the indubitable index of a clear difference, of a mutual exteriority between thought and its object. The manner exceeds the object starting from which and apropos of which there was thought (Preface, [CLI](#)).

In Castoriadis, thought, like theory before it, would seem to have “a power proper to” it, a power/potential of its own (*une puissance propre*, Preface, [CLI](#)) to bring about unprecedented new thoughts and practices that would constitute its

significance and its import in relation to practice. Or else, Castoriadis asks, *turning over* this question one last time, might “there [be] immanent universality, a complex uniformity of all that we come to think?”

But why then is this universality not immediate and total? The object exceeds the manner. There is, therefore, a heterogeneity and inexhaustible irreducibility of the object—or else, will the latter deliver itself up in another manner? But why then has it already partially delivered itself up in that other manner? (Preface, [*CLI*](#))

While we can put theory in its place, even seek (beyond the vitality and fecundity of the fallaciousness of the metaphor of vision) to replace theory, thinking does not allow itself to be contained in a place, placed on a stable ground from which uniform figures of thinking might always and inevitably be able to rise up, nor even any preordained series of them. Castoriadis's Labyrinth metaphor offers no sunny description of creation, no Apollonian rational process that flies from discovery to discovery. A process of destruction, that of a lost soul turning blindly in the dark until it somehow forces cracks in the surrounding walls of a closed impasse, accompanies, is the obverse side of, any new creation. Each creation/destruction, ever new, ever other, is always a laborious undertaking that must engage the difficulties, the crises of the time, even as it also often rediscovers (what it, perhaps correctly, perhaps mistakenly, takes to be) age-old or recurrent problems.

There can be no general description or explanation, nor even a general elaboration or elucidation of this destructive/creative process in thought. If such were possible,

we could have already anticipated the labor of creation in all its phases, past, present, and future. The figures of the thinkable—the historical ones already created, which require a new effort, new figures, from us, in order for us to comprehend them; and the ones to come, which call for our practical creative involvement—would have already been drawn, sketched out in advance. “It is only through the world that one can think the world,” Castoriadis said already, back in 1964-1965, when he introduced *the thinkable* for the first time. And even the *figure* of “figures of the thinkable” was sketched out then, in thought if not in those precise words: “Once thought is the thought of something, the content reemerges, not only in what is to be thought but in that by means of which it is thought (*darin, wodurch es gedacht wird*)” ([IIS](#), 106/[CR](#), 181).



Castoriadis remained close to (inherited) thought in order to think it, to think otherwise about it. And he offers no quick fix, no sure formula for how to think the thinkable. Creation/destruction is, each time, *sui generis*, a point he himself illustrates at length in one chapter of the present volume, which is appropriately titled “Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads.” It is because “in history, in *our* history, the aim of truth has risen up,” along with “freedom, equality, justice,” that “we are not” necessarily and forever “blind or lost. We can elucidate what we think, what we are. After having created it, we survey, piecewise, fragmentarily our Labyrinth” (Preface, [CLI](#)). Despite the illusions that may arise when thinking reduplicates itself into a tautologous, total, speculative theory, theory continues to testify to a *power of thinking otherwise, of thinking anew*. As

Castoriadis said later on:

It remains to recall the fundamental role of the imagination which its contribution to the *content* of reflection and of theory constitutes. This contribution consists in the creation of *figures* (or of *models*) of the thinkable. All theoretical work, all philosophical reflection, the entire history of science shows that there is creative imagination, source of figures/models, which in no way could be considered as empirically inferred but which are, on the contrary, conditions for the organization of empirical knowledge or, more generally, for thought (“Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection,” in [CL5](#)).

But to explore the creative/destructive process of thought, we must pick out specific sites to investigate: “the only way to find out if you can swim is to get into the water,” said this practical thinker of theory in another site-specific action metaphor ([CR](#), 1 and 32).

Castoriadis modestly concluded the Preface to the [first volume of his *Crossroads* series](#) with this line: “If the reader is convinced that he has been able to find here some not entirely pointless examples of such an elucidation, these texts will have attained their goal.” Let us, too, now conclude in an open-ended way the Foreword to the translation of the last volume in that series with an invitation to the reader to undertake such explorations on her own, thinking the thinkable in its figures, as illustrated in the examples Castoriadis offers here, and thereby testifying to and exercising her power to bring about new thoughts through practical engagement.

January 2005

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 sixth volume: windy, the feelings of law-abiding, social life, social dispositions, desire beaming from the eyes (these last four all from Liddell-Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*), for the sake of, pattern, moon, Welfare Economics, “If future innovation were foreseen in full detail it would begin to be made at once,” steady, juggernaut, dance, Savings and Loans, Political Action Committees, incumbents, packing, issues, “Garbage in, garbage out,” and fashionable, as well as various quotations from *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

POIĒSIS

Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man^{*}

*To Constantin Despotopoulos
as a gift for everything...*

What is man? is a question that remains ever present,

^{*}French Editors: Text published in Greek for a volume in *Homage to Constantinos Despotopoulos* (Athens: Papazissis, 1991). Translated from the Greek by Zoé Castoriadis and published as “Anthropogonie chez Eschyle et autocréation de l’homme chez Sophocle” in *FP*, 13-34 (17-42 of the 2009 reprint). The author had already put forward the ideas from this text in his seminars of May 2 and 9, 1984. [T/E: A transcription of Castoriadis’s talk that was delivered to an interdisciplinary colloquium held at the University of Paris-Sorbonne and at the Luxembourg Palace on December 2-4, 1996 and presided by Marc Augé was published as “L’Anthropogonie chez Eschyle et chez Sophocle” in *La Grèce pour penser l’avenir*, intro. Jean-Pierre Vernant (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), pp. 151-71. Castoriadis also delivered a version of this lecture at an April 1997 conference organized by Vassilis Lambropoulos at Ohio State University (OSU). An English translation by Stathis Gourgouris from the Greek original appeared as “Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Anthropos,” in *Agon, Logos, Polis: The Greek Achievement and its Aftermath*, ed. Johann P. Arnason and Peter Murphy (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2001), pp. 138-54. (Gourgouris’s use of the originally Greek word *anthrōpos* when translating Castoriadis into English has not been adopted. In “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” [now in [CL2](#)], Castoriadis does treat the two words as synonyms—“man (*anthrōpos*)”—and goes on to explain that by *man*, the term he generally used when speaking and writing in English, he clearly means “the species, male as well as female” and is not intending *man* in a sexist way.) All of the above versions have been consulted to a greater or lesser extent in the preparation of the present translation, first published in [FTPK](#).]

directly or indirectly, in Athenian tragedy.¹ But it is posed—and finds an answer—in a very clear and striking way in two of the most important, and marvelous, tragedies: Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (quite likely one of the poet's last works, around 460) and Sophocles' *Antigone* (dated 442 or 443).

The answers given by these two tragedies to this question, which is fundamental for all of Greek culture, are,

¹T/E: The French Editors' version strangely has here "*la tragédie grecque*" (Greek tragedy), whereas Gourgouris had "Athenian tragedy." In the 1996 Paris colloquium version of his paper, Castoriadis reiterated his longstanding and firm position (now translated into English):

One last preliminary remark. People generally talk about "Greek tragedy": that's a being that does not exist: There is only *Athenian* tragedy, and that is no accident. It is only in Athens that there has been this powerful rise of democracy, and tragedy is a democratic institution in all its aspects and especially in its most deep-seated content. It is also and especially democratic on account of the central question it asks: What is human *moira*, what is human destiny? That question remains closed in all theological societies, where this *moira*, this destiny, is fixed once and for all by God or by other extrasocial forces. But tragedy interminably deepens this question. First of all, because it places at its center the conviction, central for all Greeks, regarding man's essential mortality. Let us recall that Greek is the only tongue in which "mortal" (*thnētos*) means "man." One will find in French or even in Latin some verses in which one says "mortals" in order to say "men": this is a borrowing from the Greek tongue. Elsewhere, men are men, they are the sons of God; in Greek, they are the mortals, and there are, moreover, no other mortals: it will not be said of oxen that they are mortal. But there is above all the question of human *hubris*, of the irresistible push of man toward excess and its limitations. Now, the central question of democracy, once extrasocial norms are set aside, is the question of self-limitation, which, we shall see, is the main theme of *Antigone*. And it is also connected with the object of our discussions today, that is to say, the question of technique and of its necessary limits.

as I am going to show, diametrically opposed. And this difference cannot be attributed solely to the personal situation of the two poets: despite the brief period of time (about twenty years) separating these two works, it reflects the unprecedented pace of cultural creation in democratic Athens and is consubstantial with it. The traditional representations were more and more radically being dismissed; man's self-knowledge was being enlarged and deepened. The gap is in a sense analogous to the difference between Herodotus and Thucydides, of which it gave a foretaste twenty or thirty years in advance.

The time and space allotted do not permit me to dwell on all the "hermeneutical" issues (in the contemporary sense of the term) these two tremendous texts raise. I am deliberately going to "extract" the passages that interest me the most, not worrying (except for some incidental remarks I shall provide) about their relation to each tragedy as a whole, and still less to the whole of the work of these two poets. Nor am I going to make reference to the complex of anthropological conceptions that made their appearance from Homer and Hesiod until the fifth century and beyond.² The adjoining questions are of course legitimate. Yet it is no doubt

²Apart from the famous passage on the Cyclopes from the *Odyssey*, what immediately comes to mind are Hesiod (*Theogony* 507-616; *Works and Days* 42-121) and, obviously, after the tragedies discussed here, Democritus' *Mikros Diakosmos*, as we know it from the scholia of John Tzetzes, Plato's *Protagoras* (310d-323d), *Gorgias* (523a-524a), and *Statesman* (268e-274e). I shall discuss here *Prometheus Bound* (231-241, 248-254, 265-267, 436-507) and the celebrated stasimon from *Antigone* (332-375). For both these works, I am using the Budé Greek-French edition (Paul Mazon for *Prometheus Bound*, Alphonse Dain for *Antigone*). I am assuming that the reader knows these two tragedies and has before her a copy of the texts.

just as legitimate to consider *per se* and with their full force certain *things said* by the two poets (taking into account, obviously, all that surrounds them but without explicitly elaborating this knowledge), and, starting from these, to try, in a second stage, to shed light upon the entire Greek landscape.

Our subject here is *what is said*—and, consequently, what is *being proposed for the ears and understanding* of the Athenian public—in *Prometheus Bound*, on the one hand, and *Antigone*, on the other, relative to man and his essential attributes. It is of no great interest, therefore, whether Aeschylus and Sophocles “invented” their statements or whether they borrowed them, whether they thought them in a fully lucid state, whether they saw them in dreams, or whether these statements came to them in a moment of divine madness. It is also of relative indifference for us to know whether they “believed” them (although they certainly did believe them). From this standpoint, one thing alone really matters to us: what we are going to expound here, someone could think it in the Athens of 460-440 BCE, could present it to the public, and—at least in the case of *Antigone*—could win for himself the laurel wreath for having thought, expressed, and presented it. What really matters for us, therefore, is the *effectively actual presence* in the Athenian social-historical space of certain complexes of significations whose intimate affinity with the whole of the imaginary institution of this space is also familiar to us. Aeschylus’ relation to the roots of a mythical-religious tradition, upon which he imposes a decisive twist, and Sophocles’ relation to the whole effervescence of philosophical and “sophistic” creation are fairly well known. I believe that they will be clarified more sharply by the comparative analysis that follows.

I am not going to discuss past, more or less well-known interpretations of these two works.³ I shall mention only, and briefly, two points. And first of all, we are going to discuss Heidegger's "translation" and "interpretation" of the stasimon (choral song) from *Antigone*—the one that opens with the famous words *polla ta deina*.⁴ His "translation" horrendously violates Sophocles' text. It supports and depends upon an "interpretation" that, as almost always in Heidegger, is but a projection of his own schemata. It may be true that, by themselves, these schemata can push the often lazy reader to reflect on ancient texts and can "stimulate" her in a fruitful way. In this precise case, however, they lead to an artificial and frail construction that, all the while presenting Sophoclean man as an incarnation of Heideggerian *Dasein*, is characterized to an incredible and monstrous degree (like everything Heidegger writes about the Greeks) by a systematic ignorance of the city, of politics, of democracy, and of their central position in Greek creation. The inevitable result of this ignorance is obviously a twisted "understanding" of Greek philosophy, which is indissociably connected with the city and with democracy, even when it is hostile to them. Even Plato, and especially Plato, is not only unthinkable and impossible without the democratic city but quite simply incomprehensible as a philosopher without his persistent struggle against democracy. That is something the National-Socialist Heidegger (1933-1945) is neither willing nor able to

³For a compendium of contemporary discussions on *Antigone*, see George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

⁴Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tubingen: Niemeyer, no date; this is the 1952 edition of the 1935 course), pp. 112-26. [T/E: *Introduction to Metaphysics*, new tr. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 155-76.]

see. (We shall meet below, during our discussion of Sophocles' text, one of the results of this blindness.)

In his arbitrariness, Heidegger goes so far as to combine an alteration in the text's obvious punctuation with a setting aside of the very words that would show the absurdity of this alteration. Thus, for example, from lines 360-361 of the stasimon from *Antigone*, *pantoporos; aporos ep' ouden erchetai to mellon*, "capable of going everywhere, of going through everything, of finding the answers to everything, he advances toward nothing of what is to come without having some resource," he reads—in a shameless violation of the text—*pantoporos aporos, ep' ouden erchetai*, so as to translate "Everywhere on the road having experience, inexpert with no way out, he gets nowhere."⁵ And in order to grant a superficial plausibility to his translation, Heidegger is obliged to omit surreptitiously the words *to mellon* (the future, what is to come).

Some of Heidegger's arbitrary licenses and impertinent remarks have already been pointed out by Daniel Coppieters de Gibson,⁶ which leads me to the second point I want to mention at the outset. Against Heidegger, Coppieters de Gibson himself invokes the works and the conclusions of

⁵*Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 157. [T/E: Fried and Polt have: "Everywhere trying out, underway; untried, with no way out/he comes to Nothing." They add in a footnote: "The Greek that Heidegger translates in these two lines...can be more conventionally translated as 'resourceful in all, he meets nothing that is to come resourceless.' In other words, where Heidegger sees a paradox in the sentence, most translators would see merely an expansion of the notion 'resourceful in all' (*pantoporos*)."]

⁶Daniel Coppieters de Gibson, "Les Grecs et la question de l'homme. À propos d'une lecture de Sophocle par Heidegger," in *Qu'est-ce que l'homme? Hommage à Alphonse de Waelhens* (Brussels: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1982), pp. 53-70.

the contemporary French Hellenists of the “Structuralist” school—Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet—according to whom the figure of Greek man defines the status of man by situating him in relation to God, and symmetrically, in relation to animals.⁷ It cannot be denied that the Greek conception of man is defined, generally, by the organizational structure animals/men/gods, which is present, in a certain fashion, from the dawn of Greek civilization (at least starting with Hesiod) to classical times, and even beyond (see Aristotle’s *thērion ē theos*, “either savage beast or god”).⁸ This structure, which is evident *to us*, situated downstream from its constitution by the Greeks, is not at all evident. Let us think, for example, of the Jews, the Hindus, the Chinese, or the Amerindian tribes, where one often observes a “circulation” and not a break between the animal, human, and divine states.

Yet what we have here is but an envelope, a shell within which an enormous—and, for us, decisive—social-historical creation is played out. This social-historical creation *totally alters* the signification of the conditions/elements constituting this structure. And that happens exclusively through the change of the signification, of the magma of significations, that is attached to the central element of the structure, that is to say, man. This alteration is carried out along with the attempt to attain self-knowledge, which is, as a matter of fact, this creation’s central characteristic. If we stick with this “Structuralist” conception, we risk falling back into the critical misrecognition that, for centuries, has hindered the approach to the ancient Greek world. We will

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁸T/E: Aristotle *Politics* 1253a29.

speak in this case of “Greek man,” of the “Greek city,” of the “Greek conception of nature,” and so on, while forgetting that a decisive and fundamental characteristic of ancient Greek history is precisely that it is *history* in the strongest sense of this term, that the “spirit” of the Greeks is realized precisely as alteration, self-alteration, self-institution, all of these being consubstantial with the attempt to attain self-knowledge, which is constant action, work, process, and not frozen result.

Analysis and comparison of anthropology in Aeschylus and Sophocles allow us to grasp a decisive moment in this alteration. The juxtaposition of these two poets shows us clearly an ontological overthrow of enormous importance that occurred during this twenty-year period.

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The question *What is man?* is not formulated explicitly in these two tragedies, as would be the case in a philosophical text. It is included in the tragedies and is to be deduced from the lengthy answer that is given to it. Aeschylus answers this implicit question with an anthropogony. This anthropogony is mythical—and not simply in an outward sense, because it makes reference to a myth, the myth of Prometheus, which it reuses. It is mythical in the deep, philosophical sense of the term, for it responds to the question about man by referring back to his *origin* and by presenting a *narrative*: man is what he is because formerly, in very distant times (beyond all possible empirical confirmation or falsification), something happened that goes beyond our usual experience. It is to a superhuman being, Prometheus, that men owe what has made of them truly human beings. Here is a definition of myth: the narrative of origin responds to the question about essence. In Sophocles, as we are going to see,

presentation of the essence answers both the question about essence and the question about origin or provenance. The essence of man (*to deinon*)⁹ is his own self-creation.

Let us take a closer look at Aeschylus' text. Anthropogony is presented here as the work of Prometheus, which results from his decision and from his action. This decision follows, in turn, from a domestic conflict of superhuman forces—a conflict between Zeus and Prometheus. Zeus wanted to destroy men (231-236). Prometheus decides to save them, and saves them he does by handing over to them a part of this potential of *prattein/poiein*, of “acting/creating,” that was, until then, the exclusive property of the divine forces.

It is not vain to underscore this will to destroy mankind, which Aeschylus emphatically attributes to Zeus. Zeus' reasons or motives according to Aeschylus remain unknown to us. The poet had probably given them in his *Prometheus Fire-Bearer*, which has not come down to us.

What was humanity's situation before Prometheus' intervention? This question finds an obviously indirect and *a contrario* response in the enumeration of all that men lacked in their original situation (248-254, 458-506). But Aeschylus also gives a direct answer, with his positive description of

⁹T/E: In admiration of recent youth lingo, I was, I believe, the first to suggest the word “awesome” as a translation for the impossible-to-translate Greek word *deinos* (see Castoriadis's “The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions” [1993], in Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and of Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato*, tr. David Ames Curtis [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996], pp. 119-27, now reprinted in [CL4](#)). “Awe” is from the Proto-Germanic *agaz* (“terror, dread”). In French, Castoriadis often chose “terrible.”

prehuman humanity (248-254, 443-457). This description, especially in lines 443-457, is astounding. The prehuman state of humanity as presented by Aeschylus is literally incredible, totally fantastic, without any apparent “verisimilitude” or even concern for such verisimilitude.

These “men,” if they can be called thus, are like shadows without substance—they are reminiscent of zombies in contemporary fantasy literature. They saw without seeing, without benefitting therefrom (*matēn*); they listened without hearing and, “like figures from dreams,” *oneiratōn alinkioi morphaisi*, they spent their long lives without any order, at random (*eikēi*). They lived underground in dark caverns, unable to distinguish winter, spring, and summer. They did everything without any reflection, without thought, *ater gnōmēs to pan eprasson*. And they did not foresee—they did not know—death (248; I shall come back to the interpretation of this line).

This state is completely unrealistic—both for us as well as for the age of Aeschylus. It is not a matter here of ultraprimitive savages or of any possible or conceivable animal species. Neither apes nor ants (the latter mentioned in line 453) could be said to resemble dream figures that looked without seeing. The prehuman state of humanity is not, for Aeschylus, any sort of animal state. From the biological point of view, these beings are monstrous and radically unfit for life. Had they ever appeared, they would not have been able to survive beyond the second generation; no need for Darwinian theory to arrive at this conclusion.

And yet, Aeschylus’s description lets one see something that is more important than what is real: the state of man “before” or “outside” the institution of social life—of art, of labor, of speech. What is described here is man as he would be if he had a body, of course, and a soul—but not

thought (*gnōmē*). This is what I would call the *originary Unconscious*, the a-rationality or a-reality of the psychical monad. A state similar to a dream figure—full of dream figures—which we can think only logically, hypothetically, and through abstraction, *that* is what man would be and what he would resemble without thought and without art (*technē*). I claim that this abstraction is more important than reality, for it alone permits us to comprehend all that, in man, stems from what goes beyond the primary psychical givens and relates to the social dimension—to what, for us, is the institution of thought and of the arts, and which, for Aeschylus, is Prometheus’ gift to men: *nēpious ontas to prin, ennous ethēka kai phrenōn epēbolous* (443-444), “they who were like babies before they spoke, [I have rendered them] full of thought and possessing thought that can impose itself on what is.”¹⁰

Next come an enumeration and description of the gifts of Prometheus (457-506), for which it would be *a priori* ridiculous to find any systematic, logical-philosophical order. And yet, neither the order of the exposition nor what it contains and excludes could in any way be an accident. Prometheus speaks at the very start of the hard-to-discern (*duskritous duseis*) risings and settings of the stars. Risings and settings, here, have to be both daily phenomena and, especially, the *epitolai*, moments when a star reappears in its annual cycle and thus allows one to mark the season. The mere rising and setting of the sun or even of any other star is not “hard to discern,” and the inability to discern the seasons in which prehuman men found themselves was mentioned

¹⁰French Editors: The translation given here [T/E: and now translated from French into English] adopts the one proposed by Castoriadis in his seminar from the year 1993 [T/E: at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales].

right beforehand (454-456). Prometheus gives men *signs*, stable reference points, which alone render both the apprehension and the measure of time possible. This measure, of time and of all that is measurable, comes right after *arithmon, exochon sophismatōn, exēuron autois*, “I have invented for them number, the most excellent ‘sophism’” [invention, find] (459-460).¹¹

How, with this conjunction of time and of number, can one not be reminded of Aristotle’s *chronos esti arithmos kinēseōs kata to proteron kai husteron*, “time is the number of movement according to the before and after”?¹² For there to be enumeration, there must first be definition and determination of the “divisibles.” And a humanity without arithmetic is unimaginable. Just afterward come the *grammatōn...suntheseis, mnēmēn hapantōn, mousomētor’ erganēn* (460-61), the combinations or assemblages of engraved or traced signs, appropriate for embodying any memory and for assisting all labor “which is the mother of the Muses”—what we call the arts and sciences.

After this gift of time, of numbers, and of the (artificial) signs that underpin and embody memory come the productive arts—technique, as we would say today. I shall not comment this enumeration (462-469, 500-503) here. I shall simply note the emphatic reference to medicine (*to megiston*, “the most important,” 478-483) and the detailed description of manticism and the interpretation of dreams (484-499), to which I shall return. The line that closes this enumeration is heavy with meaning: *pasai technai brotoisin ek Promētheōs*,

¹¹French Editors: See n. 10, above.

¹²T/E: *Physics* 219b1-2; 220a24-25, quoting here Castoriadis’s own English translation found in “Time and Creation” (1990), now in [CL3](#), 339.

“all the arts [come] to mortals from Prometheus” (506). Our postulate in this analysis is that the poet is to be taken seriously. *Pasai technai* (all the arts) is equivalent to *pasa technē* (all technical ability). Prometheus has not given to men a few elements with which to compose and to assemble the rest; from him (*ek*) are derived all the arts (*pasai technai*). Aeschylus obviously cannot be unaware that in his time the various arts were constantly being improved—and that he himself had decisively transformed his own art. What is at issue here is a total break with the prehuman state and the sudden emergence of the arts as such. There can be no gradual and imperceptible [*insensible*] passage from nontime to time, from nonnumber to number. Numbers exist or they do not exist; the existence of a half or of a small quantity of number (with a “progression,” for example, toward three-quarters and then toward the totality of number) is inconceivable. Once number exists, we can enumerate greater and greater numbers—or even other kinds of numbers. The same thing holds for the arts (in the original sense of the term): either they exist or they do not exist. The apparition of art cannot but be the passage from nonart to art, a rupture, absolute alterity, which does not admit of degrees. Suddenly and sweepingly [*globalement*], we pass from one level to another—however primitive it might be. From the prehuman state to the human state, there is no progressive transition (let us recall language!).¹³ This transition happens or it does not happen; when it happens, it is total alteration, that is to say, creation. And this creation, Aeschylus cannot think it *qua* self-creation, as Sophocles will do. He nevertheless knows that it cannot be the result of any sort of accumulation, and he expresses this through the gift of Prometheus, from whom “all the arts” flow.

¹³See ch. 6 of my book [IIS](#).

I return to the long passage on manticism and the interpretation of dreams (484-499), which would itself also merit a long commentary. I shall limit myself to two observations and interrogations. The first thing we notice—which forces itself on us and which I simply present here—is huge, astonishing: Aeschylus speaks of manticism and not of religion; he mentions the gods only in passing and from a utilitarian perspective. The entrails of sacrificial victims have to be examined in order to see whether they suit “the pleasure of the gods” *daimosin pros hēdonēn* (494). Once again, I am not saying that Aeschylus “believed” that; I am saying that these *reflections*—under the same heading as the description of Zeus’ power as a brutal tyranny or of Zeus as an ephemeral tyrant doomed in turn to fall—were possible and thinkable for the Athenians of 460 BCE, as also was their public expression.

The other observation concerns the length and the place of as well as the need for this description. This passage is the longest (16 lines) in this anthropogony. Why? And why here? And why was it indispensable? I believe that a—certainly partial—answer to this question is to be found in man’s relationship to time, and more particularly to the future. Prometheus gave to men the apprehension and measure of time. He also gave them the means to institute a relation to the past: combinations of letters (*grammatōn suntheseis*), which are the memory of everything (*mnēmēn hapantōn*). Through manticism and the interpretation of dreams, he allows them to enter into relationship with the future, by directing them toward “this very hard to penetrate art,” the *dustekmarton technēn*, and by making them understand the “signs of fire [of sacrifices],” the *phlogōpa sēmata* (497-498).

From the moment that there is an apprehension of time, the horizon of the future exists, along with its basic

determinations: uncertainty, expectation, hope. In order that they might cope with these characteristics of the future, Prometheus gives to men manticism and the interpretation of dreams.

This set of ideas authorizes—indeed, obliges—us to return to a previous passage, one of fundamental importance, which we had not yet tackled. We are talking about lines 247 to 252, which included the first mention (after lines 235 to 236, where Prometheus says that he saved the mortals from the destruction Zeus had in store for them) of all that he has done for men. This first intervention—even before the gift of fire—is presented in the stichomythia of lines 248 to 251, which must be cited here as much for its own importance as for what seems to me to be the total absurdity of the way in which it is usually translated:

ΠΡΟΜΗΘΕΥΣ Θνητούς γ' ἔπαυσα μὴ προδέρκεσθαι
μόρον.

ΧΟΡΟΣ Τὸ ποῖον εὐρὼν τῇσδε φάρμακον νόσου;
ΠΡΟΜΗΘΕΥΣ Τυφλὰς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐλπίδας κατώκισα.
ΧΟΡΟΣ Μέγ' ὠφέλημα τοῦτ' ἐδωρήσω βροτοῖς.

Prometheus: I have made it so that the nonforesight of death cease for the mortals.

Chorus: By having found what medicine for this illness?

Prometheus: I have instilled in them blind hopes.

Chorus: This is a gift of great utility that you have made to the mortals.¹⁴

The first line is usually translated as: “I have delivered

¹⁴French Editors: See n. 10, above.

men from the foreseeing of death.”¹⁵ To begin with, this translation directly contradicts the description Prometheus gives of the prehuman state (447ff.). In the lines we are examining, it is clearly a matter of a passage from the prehuman state to the human state. The gift of fire is mentioned only afterward (252). How would it be conceivable that beings who do not even have the notion of time might be able to “foresee” their death? How is one to attribute to Aeschylus such an inadmissible discrepancy? Secondly, this translation does violence to the text’s obvious meaning (and, to this end, one must artificially attribute to the negative *mē* the contracted meaning of *hina mē*: “so as to avoid that...”).

¹⁵Thus, Paul Mazon, in the Budé Greek-French edition, has: “*J’ai libéré les hommes de l’obsession de la mort*” [T/E: which may be translated as “I have delivered men from the obsession of death.” On line 250 of the Herbert Weir Smyth translation (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973; we retain in the text the line numbering given by Castoriadis here and elsewhere for these two tragedies), this line reads: “I caused mortals no longer to foresee their doom,” with Smyth adding in a footnote, “‘doom’ here signifies ‘doom of death.’” Thus, Smyth’s English-language translation also makes what Castoriadis would consider to be an error here.] It is not out of the question that this customary translation might be due to the retroactive application to Aeschylus’ texts of Plato’s formulation (*Gorgias* 523d): “The first thing to do...is to take away from men the knowledge of the hour in which they are to die, for they know it in advance. Also, Prometheus has already been warned to put an end to this abuse” (Émile Chambry’s translation [Paris: Flammarion, 1967]) [T/E: in turn translated from French into English; W. D. Woodhead’s translation in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961] has “‘First of all then,’ he said, ‘men must be stopped from foreknowing their deaths, for now they have knowledge beforehand. Prometheus has already been told to stop this foreknowledge.’”]. But the men Socrates is describing in this myth from the *Gorgias* are unrelated to Prometheus’s men: those who are judged there are clothed; they can belong to great tribes, be rich (523c). Plato, obviously, is transforming Aeschylus’ myth for the needs of his argument.

The text says, *I put an end to the state in which the mortals did not foresee their death* (an obvious fact, since they lived without thought, *ater gnōmēs*). It is obviously not a matter of foresight of the hour or the moment but, rather, of foresight of the fact: I have taught the mortals that they are mortal. Thirdly, it is impossible to attribute to Prometheus the extravagant idea that he would have made these mortals (who were supposed to be foreseeing their death, whereas at the same time they “saw without seeing” and “in vain”)¹⁶ no longer know that they are mortal. If there is something certain for men, and in any case for the Greeks, it is their mortality: from Homer until the end of Athenian tragedy, the confirmation of this basic characteristic of human existence (*ousia*) is repeated on every occasion.

Prometheus taught men the truth: they are mortal and, according to the true ancient Greek view, definitively and insurmountably mortal. But to be mortal and to know it is, as the chorus says in the following line, an illness necessitating a remedy. Prometheus has found this remedy and given it: he has instilled in men “blind hopes.” Blind hopes, obscure and vain expectations: these are the—ultimately inoperative—weapons with which man combats his mortality, which otherwise would for him be unbearable. Thus, when the chorus speaks of a “gift of great utility,” the response is *not* ironic. If it were a matter for men to tear themselves away from their prehuman state, they would have to know the first and final truth, that they are mortal. This truth might have crushed them, as so often it crushes us. Counterbalancing this are blind hopes. They do not refer to any kind of “positive”

¹⁶T/E: The phrase *en vain* (“in vain”) seems to be Castoriadis’s alternative rendering of *matēn*, which he had previously translated as *sans en tirer aucun profit* (“without benefitting at all therefrom”).

immortality (as we know from Ulysses' descent among the dead, in the *Odyssey* [T/E: 11.487-491]). They have to do with all that man does or can do in this life. Of course, these hopes are blind, since the future is unknown and the gods envious. But these are the two elements that make up man, at least Greek man: *knowledge* of death and the possibility of a *prattein-poiein*, a making/doing-creating [*faire-cr  er*] that this knowledge sharpens instead of stifles. Greece is the most brilliant demonstration of the possibility of transforming this antinomy into a source of creation.



Athens, 442 BCE. The Thirty Years' Peace with the Peloponnesians (446/445) had officially confirmed Athenian superiority. In 450, Phidias erected on the Acropolis the huge bronze statue of Athena, which could be seen, it was said, from Cape Sounion. The construction of the Parthenon began in 447 and was completed in 438; that of Pericles' Odeon took place in 443. The Long Walls, finished in 456, were partially rebuilt in 445. Herodotus had already visited Athens, where, in all likelihood, he read in public some passages from his *Histories*. And Sophocles was going to write a poem about him in 441. Among the other great personalities who were visiting Athens or who lived there, one must mention Protagoras—the Protagoras of “Man is the measure of all things.” Protagoras had certainly expounded his own anthropogony, which is rather faithfully reported, I believe, by Plato in the dialogue of the same name. He, too, described therein men's successive inventions of the arts and sciences as well as their equal shares in political judgment, the foundation stone of democracy. In 444/443, the Athenians,

pushed no doubt by the *astunomous orgas*,¹⁷ decided to create a pan-Hellenic colony at Thurii, in Italy, on the site of Sybaris. They picked as Legislator a non-Athenian, Protagoras of Abdera. Aeschylus died in Sicily. Sophocles (born in 496 in Colonus) had beaten him in the Great Dionysia competition of 468. In 443/442, he wrote or completed *Antigone* (at the age of 53); the citizens of Athens named him *Hellēnotamiai*.¹⁸ Euripides participated in the tragic competitions as early as 455; he was to win for the first time in 441.

Such were the people about whom Pericles would say, a dozen years later, *pasan gēn kai pasan thalassan esbaton tēi hēmeterai tolmēi katanankasantes*, “[we have] forced every land and every sea to make way for our daring.”¹⁹ Such was the creative social-historical space in which emerged the line *polla ta deina kouden anthrōpou deinoteron pelei*.

Twenty to twenty-five years earlier, Aeschylus had expounded his anthropogony not as a gradual process but, rather, as an abrupt passage from a before to an after resulting from the decision and the act of a rebellious Titan, as the wrenching and almost the theft, by a superhuman force, of

¹⁷French Editors: “Instituting passions,” *Antigone* 354-355 (see n. 10, above); see the discussion of this expression in the pages that follow.

¹⁸French Editors: A magistrate charged with collecting the contributions of the allied cities.

¹⁹French Editors: See n. 10, above. [T/E: Slightly different from the Greek words Castoriadis is citing here, perhaps from memory or from a different edition, Thucydides *The Peloponnesian War* 2.41.4 reads (in the Greek edition available on the Perseus Digital Library): *pasan men thalassan kai gēn esbaton tēi hēmeterai tolmēi katanagkasantes*. Sophocles’ Greek phrase *polla ta deina*... (see next sentence in the body of the text) is explored by Castoriadis below.]

capacities and potentialities belonging to other superhuman forces (therefore already existent ones). As for Sophocles' anthropology, it presupposes nothing: there, men create these capacities and possibilities themselves; simply, clearly, and insistently, it posits humanity as self-creation. Men have taken nothing from the gods, and no god has given them anything whatsoever. That is the spirit of the fifth century, and it is to this tragedy that the Athenians gave the laurel wreath.

The stasimon from lines 332 to 375 must of course be translated in terms of its place in the overall economy of the work. It comes right after renewed threats from Creon, who has learned of the second attempt at a (symbolic) burial of Polynices, and just before the discovery and arrest of the guilty party, Antigone. Its meaning—in fact, the meaning of the entire play—is concentrated in its culminating lines (364-375): those lines intimately connect it to the highest ultimate significations, what is at stake in this tragedy. In man, who is described and celebrated in the preceding part, the longest one in this choral song (332-363), creative *deinotēs* is combined with a split in his nature that cannot be overcome.²⁰ *Technas huper elpid' echōn, tote men kakon, allot' ep' esthlon herpei* (365-366): his wisdom and his art surpass all expectation—but his reality is twofold; it makes him go sometimes toward the good, sometimes toward evil. The poet does not define this good and this evil as a moralizer would, but, rather, *politically*. Man goes toward the good when he succeeds in weaving together (*pareirōn*) the laws of his city

²⁰T/E: In a note, the French Editors offer *terribilité* for *deinotēs* ("awesomeness"). Castoriadis himself comments on the difficulties of translating this Greek term into a modern language both below in the present text and in "Notes on A Few Poetic Means," the next chapter in the present volume.

(*nomous chthonos*; here, *chthōn* is not the Earth in the cosmic sense, it is a matter of the land of one's fathers, the city, the political community) with the judgment/justice of the gods, as guaranteed by oaths (*theōn enorkon dikan*). In this case, man becomes *hupsipolis*—a word whose polysemy renders it untranslatable. *Hupsipolis*: great in his city, but especially great (sublime; see *On the Sublime* by “Longinus”) *qua* member of the city, of a political, that is to say, a human community. Contrasted immediately with *hupsipolis* is the man who is *apolis*, who, *tolmas charin*, by exaggerated daring, by insolence, by arrogance—in short, to use the appropriate term, by *hubris*—becomes *apolis*—allows himself to be inhabited by *mē kalon*, the contrary of the beautiful/good. He who is possessed by *hubris* exits from the political community of men (and the concrete result cannot but be death, flight, or exile). He becomes an individual who is *sans foi ni loi, sans feu ni lieu* (with neither faith nor law, with neither hearth nor home). And the chorus ends by saying: This *apolis*, I do not want him as *parestios*, inside or near my hearth, nor as *ison phronounta*, endowed with the same wisdom—an equal wisdom, shared by all citizens—and justified in considering himself as the equal of others.²¹

I am obliged to give here, very briefly, an overall interpretation of the tragedy.²² Its subject is neither the

²¹T/E: *Phronēsis* and related Greek words pose a particular problem in translation. Here, the French Editors have “*sagesse*” (wisdom), which was also Castoriadis’s shorthand original English translation in “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in *CL2*: *monos phronein* is translated there as “not to be wise alone.” See *OPS*, 36, for his own in-depth exploration of the meaning of this term, as well as n. 23 supplied by French Editors in the present chapter.

²²French Editors: The reader will be able to find a condensed version of

struggle of Antigone, an innocent victim, against the tyrant Creon, nor the contradiction between morality and *raison d'État*, nor the opposition of the individual to the State (which are modern interpretations), nor the conflict of the family with the Law and the Polity (the Hegelian version). The subject of the tragedy is, beyond all that, *hubris*, the act committed *tolmas charin*. Of course, Antigone and Creon represent two conflicting authorities. Yet the poet considers these authorities—*nomous chthonos* and *theōn enorkon dikan*—not as absolutely incompatible, since man can become *hupsipolis* by weaving them together (*pareirōn*). Antigone as well as Creon are incapable of weaving them together: for having devoted themselves to the blind and absolute defense of one of the two principles, each of them has become *hubristēs* and *apolis*.

Here is the supreme paradox: going beyond the limits of *phronein*,²³ attached to *monos phronein* (being the sole one to “think right”), the defender of the laws of the city, Creon, becomes *apolis*. But it is obvious that Antigone herself is *apolis*. Right after the passage we are examining here, when the guard brings in Antigone, whom he has caught—for the second time—throwing dirt over Polynices’ body, the chorus, expressing its deep sadness, does not address itself to Antigone as to a champion of piety and respect for divine laws but defines her, rather, as mad (*en aphrosunēi kathelontes*, 383). Antigone’s folly resides in this, that she too not only is incapable of weaving together the two principles but also goes beyond the limits, *tolmas charin*. There can be

this “overall interpretation” in “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy.”

²³French Editors: As Castoriadis defined it in his 1993 seminar, *phronein* is thinking right in real situations, though not in a speculative mode.

no city without laws of its own, its proper (*chthonos*) laws. And in violating these laws, Antigone becomes, herself too, *apolis* and exits from *ison phronein*.

The poet is saying to the citizens of Athens: Even when we are right, it is possible that we might be wrong; there is never a last word on the *logical* level. Indeed, the arguments of Creon and of Antigone, taken as such, are impervious, the one to the other, and not susceptible to logical refutation. This is what Haemon clearly expresses when he says to his father (686): “I am neither willing nor able to say (*out’ an dunaimēn, met’ epistaimēn legein*) that you are wrong,” but you are wrong for other reasons—because you cling obstinately to being right all alone, or to being the sole one who would be right. Here we must cite the tremendous lines 707 to 709:

ὅστις γὰρ αὐτὸς ἢ φρονεῖν μόνος δοκεῖ,
ἢ γλῶσσαν, ἢν οὐκ ἄλλος, ἢ ψυχὴν ἔχειν,
οὗτοι διαπτυχθέντες ὥφθησαν κενοί

For, he who believes that he is the sole one to be able to judge,
or else he who believes he has a soul or a discourse that no one else has
—those ones, if you open them up, you see that they are empty.²⁴

Creon is wrong, even if he is right, because he sticks to *monos phronein*. He does not find himself in *ison phronein*. He is neither willing nor able to hear the discourse and the reasons of the other, of others. He is in *hubris*; he

²⁴French Editors: See n. 10, above.

does not succeed in “weaving together.”

Antigone is—like the Funeral Oration of the Athenians, in Thucydides—a high point of thought, of the democratic political attitude. That attitude bars and condemns *monos phronein*, recognizes the intrinsic *hubris* of men, responds to it with *phronēsis*, and faces square on the ultimate problem of autonomous man: the self-limitation of the individual and of the political community.

Self-limitation is indispensable precisely because man is awesome (*deinos*) and because nothing external can truly limit this faculty of being awesome, not even the justice of the gods as guaranteed by oaths. This sort of justice is one of the principles that rule men’s lives, but it could not in any way suffice. If it sufficed, there would be no *Antigone* and no tragedy. Just as there is no and can be no tragedy where *one* ultimate authority gives answers to every question: that is, in the Platonic world as well as in the Christian world.

Tragedy, and more particularly *Antigone*, presupposes precisely the man of *deinotēs*, who culminates in and destroys himself with *hubris*, but who can also, when the awesome is “woven” with *ison phronein*, reach the high point the *hupsipolis* man embodies. Whence the need that pushes the chorus to describe and to praise this awesome character. And this is what it does in the main part of the stasimon (334-363).

The central idea of this choral song is heralded in the first two lines, *polla ta deina kouden anthrōpou deinoteron pelei*. These two lines immediately open up for us several questions. The key word in these lines is obviously the untranslatable *deinos*. (Heidegger renders it by the very inadequate *das Unheimliche*, “the uncanny,” which neglects the central significations of the word. And his French translator widens the gap by rendering *unheimlich* as *inquiétant*, disturbing.) To sum up the conclusions of another

study,²⁵ I will say that Sophocles—and this is a basic characteristic of ancient Greek poetry—not only is not always obliged to choose among the various meanings of a word but obviously, most of the time, does not choose. He is able and he is willing to give them all together. *Deinos* is he who quite rightly provokes terror, fear, fright—he is terrible, terrifying, dangerous. From there one is led, by one of the most beautiful productions of meaning in Greek, to *extraordinarily strong, powerful, astonishing, admirable*, and probably also *strange*. Why astonishing and admirable? Because capable to the highest degree, skillful, wise, a master craftsman, always finding a solution, never without means, *polumēchanos* [T/E: resourceful] and *polutropos* [T/E: much-traveled, versatile], as Homer would say—and Sophocles says it at the end of the passage we are examining: *aporos ep' ouden erchetai to mellon* (360-361). The lexicographers and the translators are obliged to choose among these significations. Sophocles, and those among us who are lucky enough to understand a bit of Greek, do not have to make such a choice.

The word's web of significations is clarified and enriched by what follows in the text. *Deinos* signifies all that Sophocles, dating from his *Antigone*, attributes to the man of *deinon*. And the first light is shed for us by the repetition of the word in the continuation of the phrase, in a quasi superlative act of negation of the comparative: nothing is more awesome than man. *Deinos* defines man, and it is defined by man: it is this characteristic that no being presents to the same degree as man.

Ouden anthrōpou deinoteron. Nothing is more awesome, astonishing, achievement-capable, than man. And

²⁵“Notes on A Few Poetic Means” [French Editors: see the next chapter in the present volume].

I ask once again: Do we dare take the poet seriously? Are we to assume that the poet is using the words at random? Master of the exactitude and pertinence of words, Sophocles says loud and clear: nothing. Nothing: neither the grisly sea (*polios pontos*) nor “the wind from the South that blows in winter” (*cheimerios notos*) nor “the races of savage animals” (*thērōn agriōn ethnē*). But Sophocles does not limit himself to nature. He says, absolutely: nothing. Nothing: therefore, not even the gods.

This makes *deinos* clearer still, even as what is said seems to obscure it. In what sense can man be more awesome than nature—and more awesome than the gods? The answer is nevertheless obvious—and it is expounded, almost immediately, in the rest of the stasimon. The *polios pontos* and the *cheimerios notos* are surely stronger than man, as also are the *thērōn agriōn ethnē* and so many other beings. But these beings are, and they are what they are, by virtue of their nature. Whatever epoch you might consider, they have done, do, and will do the same things. And their faculties have been given to them once and for all, without them being able to change them. Their *ti estin*, “what they are,” as Aristotle would say, what defines them and what develops in their various attributes, does not flow from themselves.

Exactly the same thing holds for the gods, too. Overwhelmingly strong when compared to the force of man, endowed with innumerable possibilities and capacities (yet, let us recall, not all-powerful), and immortal (yet not eternal or atemporal), the gods are what they are by their “nature” and without their having done anything to be what they are. Thus, for example, they do not need to have recourse to art, to *technē*; they have no need to manufacture boats, to move around, or to write something down in order to remember. In another connection, the art of Hephaestus is certainly

incomparably superior to that of men. Yet this art is not something Hephaestus invented; it was innate to him. Hephaestus is *technē*, as Ares is war and Athena wisdom.

Man is such a being that there exists none more awesome. For, nothing of what he does—which is described, in a necessarily suggestive and partial way, in lines 334 to 351—can be attributed to some “natural” gift. The *ti estin* of man, which is expressed and developed through his various attributes, is the work of man himself. To put it in philosophical terms: Man himself posits himself; the essence of man is self-creation. And this sentence can be understood in two senses: Man creates his essence, and this essence is creation and self-creation. Man himself creates himself as creator, in a circle whose apparently vicious logic reveals its ontological primacy.

That this is Sophocles’ conception may be ascertained without any doubt on the basis of one word. This word—which, along with *pantoporos*; *aporos ep’ ouden erchetai to mellon*²⁶ and *ouden anthrōpou deinoterōn*, constitutes the

²⁶T/E: It is to be remembered that Castoriadis translated-commented this key phrase above as follows: “Capable of going everywhere, of going through everything, of finding the answers to everything, he advances toward nothing of what is to come without having some resource.” Incredibly, the Gourgouris version of the present Castoriadis paper (see this chapter’s publication note) provides at this point what reads like a version of Heidegger’s much-criticized translation; Gourgouris has “without resources he comes to nothing,” simply supplying, at the end of this phrase, the ending Castoriadis criticizes Heidegger for dropping from his version: “in the future.” Thus, Gourgouris’s earlier, already ambiguous translation (“he comes to nothing in the future without resource,” p. 140) is exacerbated here (p. 150) and then repeated verbatim (“without resources he comes to nothing in the future”) on p. 151. Of note, in the 1997 OSU talk, Castoriadis provided his own straightforward English-language translation: “He never comes to meet the future without resources.”

third pillar of this part of the stasimon—is: *edidaxato*, he taught himself (354). As we know, the middle voice expresses the return of the action onto the acting subject. Man has not received the teaching from anyone (for example, from a Prometheus); it is he himself who has instructed himself on his own [*s'est instruit*]. When I am taught something, someone who already possesses some knowledge gives it to me, offers it to me, transmits it to me. When I teach myself (this is the middle voice in Greek), I myself give myself something that I do not possess (otherwise, why give it?) and that at the same time I do possess (if not, who would give it?). The apparent absurdity is lifted when we understand that the self-activity of the self-taught person [*l'action sur lui-même de l'autodidacte*] makes be the “content” as well as the “subject,” which are defined by each other and exist through each other.

This third pillar is perhaps the most important one, because this *edidaxato* redefines and resituates all that was said previously: all the works and the creations of man relating to the specific arts (navigation, agriculture, hunting, and so on). Indeed, all these arts presuppose in a decisive way what man himself has taught himself:

καὶ φθέγμα καὶ ἀνεμόεν
φρόνημα καὶ ἀστυνόμους
ὁργὰς ἐδιδάξατο...

He himself has taught himself his tongue,
and his thought which is like the wind,
and the instituting passions (352-356).²⁷

²⁷French Editors: See n. 10, above.

A century later, Aristotle was going to define man as *zōon logon echon* and *zōon politikon* (“living being provided with *logos*” and “political living being”). I dare say that the poet is here more profound, because more radical, than the very profound philosopher. Man does not “have” *logos* as a “natural” faculty or as a gift—and neither is his political being simply given to him or acquired once and for all. Man himself has taught himself—he has created—his tongue (*phthegma*), his thought (*phronēma*), and those *astumomous orgas*, which Heidegger translates, this time in clearly Nazi fashion, as *der Mut der Herrschaft über die Städte*, “the passion for domination over cities.”²⁸ This translation is indeed aberrant: for there to be domination over cities, there must first be cities. Sophocles does not speak of domination over cities already assumed to exist; he is positioning himself at the “moment” when (at the level of the ontological stratum where) man creates language, reflection, and the *astunomous orgas*, the passions, the dispositions, the urges [*pulsions*] that give laws to cities—that institute cities. *Instituting passions* is perhaps the best translation of Sophocles’ idea, which is so astonishing (we often think of law and institution as radically opposed to fury and the passions) and so profoundly true; at the root of the primordial institution is found a prelogical “will” and intention, and institutions cannot maintain themselves without passion.

The *deinotēs* (the awesomeness) of man is summed up in the phrase that closes this part of the stasimon: *Pantoporos; aporos ep’ ouden erchetai to mellon....* I shall limit myself to insisting once again on the term *pantoporos*, which refers not

²⁸T/E: In their translation of Heidegger’s translation, Fried and Polt offer here the similar, though more poetic phrase: “into the mettle/to rule over cities.”

only to *polumēchania* [T/E: resourcefulness, inventiveness] but also to the *overall character* [globalité] of self-creation in man.

The poet is familiar with a first limit to this *deinotēs*: death. *Haida monon pheuxin ouk epaxetai*, “the only thing he will not find is the means to flee Hades.”²⁹ Hades the conclusive—according to the classical and preclassical Greek view that was current until the end of the fifth century and did not allow one to console oneself with stories of immortality and false hopes about life after death—does not come here only as a reminder of the ultimate truth but also in order to underscore the *deinotēs* of this being that, knowing all the while its mortality, does not for all that cease to “advance” (*chōrei*), to “wear out [the earth for its profit]” (*apotruetai*), to “make [birds] prisoners” (*agei*), to “make himself master [of savage beasts]” (*kratei*), and to “by himself teach to himself” (*didasketai*).

A second limit—an internal one, if I may say so, and one innate to man—is his twofold nature, which makes him go sometimes toward *evil*, sometimes toward the *good*. This is a limit because Sophocles (like Thucydides, twenty or thirty years later), while describing in man a titanic process of creation and of ever-growing acquisition of power and of various faculties, does not see—and he is perfectly right in not seeing—any “moral progress” that would be in the process of realization. Good and evil have always accompanied man and will ever accompany him; they will always be the two poles alternately guiding his steps. The twentieth-century reader will have no trouble confirming this view of the poet, having had the experience of twenty-five centuries of grandiose and monstrous criminal works, the

²⁹French Editors: See n. 10, above.

worst of which were accomplished in the name of the good and of man's happiness in the world down here as well as in the other one.

The poet does not see this twofold nature as an inevitability. He knows that man can become *hupsipolis* by weaving together the laws of his country and the justice of the gods. Such justice thus appears as a third limit relative to man's practico-poietic activity. Man himself teaches to himself his laws; he lays them down and institutes them. But alongside these laws, there exists the justice of the gods, which could not suffice—otherwise there would not even be laws belonging to [*propre aux*] cities—but which could in no case be neglected.

In *Antigone*, the justice of the gods has a concrete content: it concerns the consecrated rites of burial. Yet it already encounters there its limits. A worship of cityless gods, gods without the community of men ruled by laws, is unthinkable. But a city that would not protect itself against the risk of treason and of enemy collaboration, the sole motive of which is the thirst for personal power (Polynices), is unthinkable, too. If Polynices behavior went unpunished, that would in the end make the worship of the gods impossible. His punishment in the form decided upon by Creon—forbidding his burial—equally insults the gods. The justice of the gods is not unequivocal—and that is something we know quite well, through Homer as well as through other tragedies. The gods themselves are at war among themselves; they have no laws; their relations are settled by *force* and not by law. Aeschylus' Orestes is one of the innumerable victims of the conflict among the gods. The commands of the gods are obscure and polysemous; they can lead to catastrophe—as they do for Antigone.

We do not know what Sophocles thought of the gods,

and this is something very difficult to reconstitute. We know that he belonged to Pericles' circle, as did Protagoras, who said, "As for the gods, I can know nothing; neither how they are, nor if they are, nor if they are not, nor about how they might look."³⁰ However, *Antigone* allows us at least to state one thing without hesitation: The Justice of the gods does not suffice any more than do the laws of the land suffice. In obeying these laws, man has to know that they do not define exclusively what is permitted and that they do not exhaust, either, what is forbidden. Alongside the law as it is each time instituted—positive law, which is highly limited by sociotemporal factors and therefore relative—another element has to exist.³¹ Without repealing it or dictating its contents, this other element needs to be woven with instituted law. In the language and representations of his time and his city, the poet calls this other element *theōn enorkon dikan*.³²

³⁰Περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὐθ' ὥς εἰσὶν οὐθ' ὥς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὐθ' ὅποιοί τινες ἰδέαν (Diels-Kranz 2.80.4) [French Editors: see n. 10, above].

³¹T/E: In both of the spoken presentations of this paper (i.e., at the 1996 Paris colloquium and at the 1997 OSU conference), this sentence is preceded by the following proviso: "Even in democracy, and now it is I and not Sophocles speaking,"

³²T/E: At the 1997 OSU conference, this sentence is prolonged with the following specification: "...and which I would like to describe as the nonexhaustion of society in that which each time is instituted or, if you prefer, the self-surmounting, the self-transcendence, of the human being and of all given social states." At the 1996 Paris colloquium, "self-surpassing" [*l'auto-dépassement*] and "self-transcendence" are qualified as being "always potentially there" and the equivalent French phrase for "of all given social states" reads instead (now in translation): "of every given social design" (*La Grèce pour penser l'avenir*, p. 169). However, at the end of the next paragraph (*ibid.*, p. 171), Castoriadis expands upon what he says in the present text at the end of its next (i.e., its penultimate)



In conclusion, let us compare the anthropogonies of the two poets. What they share, obviously, is the determinative signification of thought and of art. That said, the differences are enormous. Aeschylus does not mention the instauration and the institution of political society, whereas Sophocles centers his entire stasimon on the *astunomous orgas*, *hupsipolis*, and *apolis*. Aeschylus starts from a dreamlike, nightmarish prehuman state, and he presents the passage to the human state as a gift, the fruit of a superhuman being's decision and action. Nothing of the sort in Sophocles, for whom there is no prehuman state of man, since, from the

paragraph:

But there is also, on the one hand, [man's] capacity to weave together these two principles: both the institution of this society and something suspended above this positive institution, which goes beyond [*dépasse*] it but is nevertheless capable of seeing both the institution and what one has to do within the framework of the institution. This last point is entirely capital. You remember Herodotus [T/E: 7.104] and the discussions an exiled Spartan held with the king of the Persians: the Greeks are those who respect the laws. But the Greeks are also those who have called into question their own laws; they are those who have changed the laws—Aristotle counts eleven revolutions in Athenian history. Now, how does one change the laws? One judges them—these existing laws—and says: They must be changed. But in order to judge them, one must take some distance, one must have another point of view, one must invoke some principles that transcend positive law. It is this principle, in part at least, that Sophocles calls the *dikē* (justice) of the gods and which I, for my part, call the nonexhaustion of society in its each-time given state.

In the 1996 Paris colloquium paper, a long paragraph critical of the term *Greek miracle* then ends that version of Castoriadis's paper.

moment man exists, he is defined by a self-creative kind of practico-poietic action, by self-teaching activity. Prometheus taught Aeschylus' man that he is mortal, counterbalancing the unbearable weight of this knowledge with "blind hopes." Sophocles' man knows that he is mortal and that this basic determination is insurmountable. Of course, in the subject matter and the framework of *Prometheus Bound*, there is no reason, no way, nor any room to evoke the problems man faces. Sophocles grasps these problems at the root as being consubstantial with man's bipolarity, with his innate *hubris* (*tolmas charin*), and with his tendency to want to be wise all alone.

In a quarter-century, Greek self-knowledge passed from the idea of a divine anthropogony to the idea of man's self-creation. The stasimon from *Antigone* and, with it, consubstantially and unsurpassably, Thucydides' Funeral Oration, which comes twelve years later,³³ give this self-knowledge its most striking forms.

³³T/E: Castoriadis of course means here the actual Funeral Oration delivered by Pericles a dozen years later and reconstructively reported a few decades afterward by Thucydides.

Notes on a Few Poetic Means^{*}

Certain difficulties encountered in translation elicit the observation that the ancient Greek poets often relied upon a trait of the Greek language, one probably shared with other primary tongues. This trait may be called the indivisible polysemy of words and grammatical cases. Modern European tongues no longer possess this characteristic, and the poets have had recourse to other ways [*voies*] of instaurating a comparable intensity of expression.

These observations lead to an examination of the paths [*voies*] of poetic expressiveness, in particular its semantic musicality.

I

Four famous lines from Sappho (Bergk 52) bear the following:

δέδυκε μὲν ἅ σελάννα
καὶ Πληιάδες· μέσαι δὲ
νύκτες, παρὰ δ' ἔρχετ' ὥρα,
ἔγω δὲ μόνα κατεύδω.

A literal translation would yield something like this:

^{*}French Editors: This previously unpublished text, in gestation for twenty years, is undoubtedly not in the finished state Castoriadis would have liked to have given it. It nonetheless seemed to us that the presence of these “Notes” in the two tables of contents that have come to us, the novelty of their theme, and the light they shed justify their inclusion in *FP*, 35-61 (43-75 of the 2009 reprint). The substance of this text may be found in his April 18, 1984 seminar. [T/E: The present translation was first published in [FTPK](#).]

And the Moon has set
and the Pleiades, it's the middle
of the night, the hours pass
and I sleep alone.

Deduke, from the verb *duō*, signifies “has plunged.” In Greece, a country of two-hundred inhabited islands and several tens of thousands of kilometers of coastline, the sun, the moon, and the stars do not set; they plunge. *Selanna* is certainly the moon, and the word cannot be rendered otherwise. For a Greek, however, *Selanna* refers immediately to *selas*, light: *selanna* is the luminous, the luminary. *Plēiades* are *the* Pleiades, the Numerous. For a not very cultivated Frenchman—or a European—the word means nothing. And, for the moderately cultivated Frenchman, they are a famous group of sixteenth-century French poets, as well as a Gallimard Press imprint. For the Greek peasant, artisan, or sailor of Antiquity (and even still recently), however, they are a cloud of stars—at least seven can be distinguished by the naked eye—that an astronomer of today would call a globular cluster of a few million stars.¹ This magnificent constellation is part of the most beautiful configuration in the nighttime sky, an immense circular arc covering half the sky, that begins with the Pleiades, passes through Orion, and ends with Sirius. When, at the end of summer, Sirius appears just before the rising of the sun, the fading Pleiades have gone beyond the zenith on their westward march. At the moment Sappho is talking about, the Pleiades have already plunged, a precise and precious clue to which I shall return.

Mesai de nuktes, word for word: the nights are at their

¹T/E: The Pleiades is an *open cluster* ([English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)) of only a few *thousand* stars.

middle, it is the middle of the night. In the middle of this night, at midnight of that day, the moon and the Pleiades had already plunged. Let us suppose, provisionally, that the end of the poem might be rendered by:

[...] the hour passes.
and I go to bed alone.

It is Sappho who is speaking, Sappho who was born around 612 on Lesbos. It may be supposed that the poem was written around 580, perhaps earlier. It is a lyric poem, as is said, one expressing sentiments, the poet's states of mind [*états d'âme*]*—*and yet the *muthos*, the narrative, the story is there, nostalgic and splendid. Without making an effort, one can see the nocturnal sky that is turning, the moon and the Pleiades already set, and this woman, perhaps in love with someone who is not there, perhaps not, in any case full of desires, in the middle of the night, does not succeed in falling asleep and tells of her sadness at finding herself alone in her bed.

To read an ancient poem is to rediscover a world henceforth lost, a world now covered over by "civilization's" indifference toward elementary and fundamental things. It is the middle of the night and the moon has already set. A person of today does not see what that means. He does not realize that, since the moon has set before midnight, we are between the new moon and the first quarter; it is therefore the start of a lunar month (a measure of time for ancient peoples). But the Pleiades have already set, too. It is this exactitude of the ancient poets that we rarely rediscover among the Moderns: starting from this clue, one could almost date the composition of the poem.

We are in springtime, for it is in spring—and even at

the beginning of spring—that the Pleiades set before midnight. The further the year advances, the later they set [*se couchent*]. Sappho has lain down to go to bed [*est couchée*], and the *ōra* passes.

What is the *hōra*?² The translator will “naturally” render *ōra* by hour, of which the Greek word is, via the Latin, the root. But *hōra* in Greek also means *season*, already so in Homer, and this sense endures throughout Alexandrian and Byzantine times: *hai hōrai tou etous* are the seasons of the year. It is also the hour in the usual sense, not the hour of clock time but the hour as subdivision of the duration of the day. One of the most famous poems late Antiquity attributed to the lyric poet Anacreon commences as follows: *mesonuktiois poth’ ōrais*, at the hours of the middle of the night. But *hōra* is also the moment when a thing is at its hour, when it is truly good and beautiful; for human beings, therefore, it is the acme of youth. In the *Symposium*, when Alcibiades recounts how he attempted to sleep with Socrates but rose in the morning not having been more molested (*katadedarthēkōs*) than if he had slept with his father or his brother, he concludes: Socrates is a *hubristēs*, a man who insults others, so much has he shown contempt for (*katephronēs*) my *hōra*, has he scorned my youth, my beauty, the fact that I was ripe for the picking like a beautiful erotic fruit.

Finally, I must simply mention the conjunction *de*, both “and” and “but.” Here, choice is inevitable, and I shall translate it simply by “and.” So, what does Sappho say?

²French Editors: Starting with this occurrence and apart from the quotations of the poem, the spelling of this word is given in conformity with the Attic dialect, in which, contrary to the Aeolic Sappho used, it includes an aspiration mark.

The Moon and the Pleiades
 have plunged, it's the middle
 of the night, season, hour, youth go away
 and I sleep alone.

No modern translator, as far as I know, has dared to translate the single word *ōra* by three words. But the peak of the poem's force is precisely this word that conjoins several significations without wanting or having to choose between them; the season of the year, springtime—the new start of the year after winter, the season of love—the hour that departs, and Sappho's youth, which is consumed since she has no one in her bed. Sappho's genius is also this choice of a word that possesses a spectrum of significations; these significations are illuminated and enriched by the rest of the poem (without the mention of the setting of the Pleiades, the meaning season/springtime for *ōra* would be much less imperious).

We encounter this indivisible polysemy again in Aeschylus, in *Prometheus Bound*. When Prometheus, pinned to his rock, summons as witness of the sufferings he has unjustly undergone (89ff.) the Earth his mother, the divine ether, the sources of rivers and the breezes of the winds, he also calls:

[...] ποντίων τε κυμάτων
 ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα,

[...] waves of the sea
 [the] countless laughter

Let us overlook the richness of the tropes (there are, here, prosopopoeia and hypallage: the waves are countless and not their laughter) in order to focus ourselves on the word

gelasma. It can be translated only as “laughter” [*rire*], but an ancient Greek hearing or reading the line could not help but perceive in the word the other meaning of *gelaō*, which is found in the epithet *Zeus geleōn*, Zeus of the light, or in the Ionian tribe of the *Geleontes*, the illustrious, the brilliant. There is therefore a very strong harmonics to *gelasma*, and probably an etymological kinship with *gelas*, brilliance, scintillating. Still today, in French, we say: *comme cette journée est riante*, “what a bright and cheerful day.” It is bright and cheerful, “laughing,” because the sun is out, because it is brilliant. When one is on the sea, especially on the Aegean Sea, today as in the time of Aeschylus, one sees with one’s eyes this countless laughter, this interminable sparkling [*scintillation*] of the sea’s waves under the midday sun.

Herodotus’s prose provides another example. In the first book of his *Histories*, Herodotus says that he is presenting there his research so that what men have done will not fade away with time and so that great and admirable *erga*, some accomplished by the Greeks, others accomplished by the barbarians, will not lose their renown, whether it is a matter of peaceful *erga* or of the *erga* in and through which they have made war against each other. *Erga*, the plural of *ergon* (which yields *ergazomai*, to work, to accomplish), are also the acts and the exploits of labors and pieces of work [*ouvrages*] (Hesiod, *Erga kai hēmerai*—*Works and Days*). In his excellent introduction to this book of Herodotus in the Guillaume Budé Greek-French edition, Philippe-Ernest Legrand says that he hesitated between the two senses of *ergon*, piece of work and exploit, and explains why he preferred the second. We do not have to go into whether he was right or wrong; we have simply to observe that, as in the case of Sappho’s *ōra*, the modern translator is condemned to choose and to prefer. But in truth, one must not express a

preference. Herodotus is speaking, obviously, of pieces of work and of labors—of the walls of Babylon, of statues and objects dedicated at Delphi, of the bridge built by Xerxes over the Hellespont—as well as of exploits: the conquest of Asia by Cyrus, of Egypt by Cambyses, Darius’ wars, Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea. He describes both, and he says of them: *erga megala kai thōmasta*, of the great and admirable labors, works [*œuvres*], and exploits, some of which were achieved by the Greeks, the others by the barbarians. In truth, the *erga* are *deeds* [*faits*], if one agrees to give back to the word its at-once substantive and participial meaning, if one restitutes to *doing* [*faire*] the meaning of human activity in history, whether this activity culminates in a result separated from the act (Aristotle’s *poiēsis*) or not separated from it (*praxis*), a beautiful act like the battle of Salamis. All that is making/doing [*faire*], and describing it is the *ergon*, the labor and the exploit, of Herodotus rolled into one.

Let us now consider two examples taken from Sophocles in the stasimon from *Antigone* that begins with the famous *polla ta deina kouden anthrōpou deinoteron pelei*,³ “numerous are the *deina*, but nothing is more *deinon* than man.” The modern translator is obliged to choose amidst the multiplicity of significations of *deinos*, and she usually chooses something like *marvelous* or *terrible*, but the ancient auditor was not obliged to choose. He heard all that together, as the author had thought all that together. *Deinos* is certainly the terrible one, he who provokes terror (*deos*); he is the very powerful one, but he is also the marvelous one, he who excels in an occupation or an art—one can be a *deinos* swimmer or

³French Editors: See lines 322-375, which are commented in “Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man,” above in the present volume.

orator—excelling to the point of provoking terror and wonder [*émerveillement*]. It is impossible to grasp the significative constellation grouped under the word without elucidating the main point of the chorus, which we are going to do now. Let us say from the very start only that the word *deinos* can no longer be understood [*s'entendre*] in the same way once one has heard [*entendu*] the chorus from *Antigone*.

It is starting with line 353 that the most important part of the explication of the meaning of *deinon* begins. Speaking of man, Sophocles says that he has himself taught himself (*edidaxato*, a verb to which I shall return) his tongue (*phthegma*) and his thought (*phronēma*), the latter of which is qualified as *anemoen*. *Anemos* is the wind. Here the case is the opposite of the ones we have encountered up till now: of the word's many referrals, we have to eliminate a portion of them and retain another part. For example, Homer says (*Iliad* 3.305): *Ilion ēnemoessan*, Ilium the windswept; one can see the high walls of Troy at the summit of a hill, exposed to all the winds. But it is obviously not a windswept thought that Sophocles is talking about. Thought is extremely mobile like the wind. It is sometimes here and almost immediately afterward over there. It is also, like the natural element, powerful and violent. It is again, like the wind, transparent most of the time, but it can also move clouds and darken the sky. In French or in English, one will be obliged to weaken the image by writing: *like the wind*; *windswept* or *windy* obviously will not do at all.

Tongue⁴ and thought are not “natural,” given attributes of man: man *edidaxato*; he himself has taught them to himself. The reflexive form of the simple verb *didaskō* contains a philosophical thought of incomparable audacity

⁴T/E: *La langue* in French, in the sense of language.

that has remained without sequel for twenty-five centuries. Man does not “have” tongue and thought; he gives *himself* them, he has created them for himself, he has taught himself them. Plato would have asked: How can I teach myself something? If I know it, I do not need to teach myself it. And if I do not know it, I do not know what to teach myself. And this is what he does indeed say: One can never learn what, in a certain way, one does not already know. Sophocles breaks this apparently irrefragable logic and affirms clearly what I have called the primitive circle of creation: the “results” are presupposed by the activity that makes them be; man himself teaches to himself something he does not know, and thereby he learns what he is to know.

Sophocles continues by affirming that man *edidaxato*, “himself has taught to himself,” the *astunomous orgas*. I translate this right away as: the passions instituting the cities. *Astunomous* comes from *astu*, which is generally the town, but here the accent is placed at once upon the law that posits the town and upon the law that governs it *qua* political unit. *Orgē* has again multiple significations, and, once again, the translators are obliged to choose or to invent something. Paul Mazon, in the Budé edition, writes: “the aspirations whence cities are born”; but in the text it is not a question of birth. In citing the line, Liddell-Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* (s.v. ἀστυνόμος) gives: “the feelings of law-abiding or social life” (but, s.v. ὀργή, the *Lexicon* translates *astunomoi orgai* by “social dispositions”). Like every dictionary, this one is obliged to divide and to impute in univocal fashion. But one must know what a dictionary is and how to use it in appropriate fashion. A word is not a package of sundry varieties of cookies placed next to each other, among which one could always take one and leave the others. *Orgē* is drive [*pulsion*], impulse, temperament, mood (and also anger). It is

the word that yields *orgaō* and *orgasmos*, orgasm. Here *orgē* is drive, impulse, the spontaneous and irrepressible push. *Astunomous orgas* constitutes at first sight a contradiction or an oxymoron: How can the drives, impulses, lead to the institution of laws? But Sophocles says, *edidaxato*, and thereby gives to the verb a supplemental signification. These drives that pushed toward the constitution of communities, man has *educated* and *schooled* them; he has formed and transformed them; he has subjected them to laws and thus constituted cities. All that could have constituted an entire philosophical treatise; Sophocles says it in three words: *edidaxato...astunomous orgas*. Man has himself educated himself in transforming his drives in such a way that they become foundational and regulative of cities.

Discussing *astunomous orgas* at length is also important for a historical reason. It is here that one finds for the first time explicitly formulated what became one of the great themes of classical political philosophy, from Plato up to and including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though later forgotten in the intellectualistic aridity that has held sway in this domain for two centuries: it is that “in order to institute a people,” as Rousseau says, one must first change its “mores,” and mores are basically the schooling of the passions, which requires at least that the law take them into account in a positive way in the citizens’ *paideia*. Aristotle speaks of *philia* in the *Politics*: the legislators, he says, above all have to attend to instaurating *philia* among the citizens (*philia* is not a pale “friendship” but affection in the strong sense of the term), for where there is *philia* there is no need for justice. Aristotle, who condemned “communism” in this same *Politics*, continues on by saying: The proverb is right that says that among friends things are in common. When Sophocles speaks here of the *orgai*, he has in view this

essential cement of the life of cities that are, for the best and for the worst, the passions and mutual affections of the members of the community.

Deinos can therefore be understood only on the basis of this (here incompletely explored) set of semantic potentialities we have attempted to elucidate. To be *deinos* is to offer, effectively conjoined, the attributes designated by the poet. Considered in their essence, they all refer to one central idea: that of man's *self-creation*. The formulation may seem exorbitant. It will, I think, be fully justified if we take account of the decisive characterization the poet introduces from the very start and in the same phrase in which the term *deinos* appears:

πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδ' ἄνθρωπου δεινότερον πέλει

Numerous are the *deina*, and nothing is more *deinon* than man.

The *deina*, it might be said pedantically, form a collection, and this collection includes one unique maximum element, man. I tried, a dozen years ago, to sketch out the immense implications of this sentence.⁵ Here I summarize the basic features. One objection to this Sophoclean assertion comes to mind immediately: How can one say that man is more *deinos* than the gods? Sophocles was not impious, as the last lines of this same chorus show, and certainly an atheistic text would not have been awarded the laurel wreath at the Dionysia. Also, Sophocles does not say that man is better than the gods, nor that man is more powerful than they are. But he

⁵French Editors: "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in [CL2](#); see also n. 3.

is *deinoteros*, and we must—at least if we are to take the poet seriously—search for what way man may be so. And the answer, introduced by a *gar*—quite precisely, a *for* or a *since*—is given by the rest of the chorus, which enumerates and describes the many accomplishments of man. Then, this answer becomes blindingly obvious: What characterizes the *deinotēs* of man is this continual and immense transformation of his relations with nature, but also with his own “nature,” as is clearly indicated by the reflexive verb *edidaxato*. And his alterity with regard to the gods then becomes manifest. The gods have taught themselves nothing, and they have not been modified. They are what they have been since they first existed and what they will be for ever. Athena will not become wiser, nor Hermes swifter, nor Hephaestus a more clever artisan. Their potency is an immutable attribute of their nature, and they have done nothing to acquire it or to modify it. They build, they fabricate, but always by combining what is already there. But man, a mortal who is infinitely less strong than the gods, is more *deinos* than them because he creates and creates himself. Man is more *deinos* than everything natural and more *deinos* than the gods—who are *natural*—because he is supernatural. Alone among all beings, both mortal and immortal, he himself alters himself.

And if one were to say that this elucidation of the text introduces into it some of today’s ideas that are alien to fifth-century Greece, one should recall the “anthropogonies” of Democritus and of a few of the great Sophists, as well as of the potentialities present in Thucydides, both in his “archaeology” and in Pericles’ Funeral Oration. Fifth-century Athens put its finger on the idea of human self-creation—and one had to have the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War and the Platonic reaction for these buds [*germes*] to be nipped off and buried. And this reaction was so powerful that

it has almost completely dominated the European interpretation of this fifth-century invention.

The second chorus from *Antigone*, which is devoted to love,⁶ sheds light on other aspects of the poetic creativity of indivisible polysemy. It comes after the dispute between Creon and his son Haemon, who leaves the stage threatening him (Haemon will commit suicide soon thereafter). The chorus sings of the power of Eros the invincible (*anikate machan*), Eros who lies in ambush in the tender and smooth cheeks of the young girl (*en malakais pareiais neanidos ennucheueis*), and continues:

νικᾷ δ' ἐναργῆς βλεφάρων
ἡμερος εὐλέκτρον νύμφας

Mazon translates these lines as follows in the Budé edition: “So, who triumphs here? Clearly, it is the desire of the eyes of the virgin pledged to the bed of her spouse.” In this pusillanimous and Victorian translation, everything has to be rewritten, but I quote it in order to illustrate once again the ordeal of the modern translator. Let us proceed word by word. *Nikai*, is victorious, gains the upper hand. *Himeros*, desire. *Enargēs* would be translated, in a philosophical text, as *evident*. But here much more is at stake: *enargēs* comes from the root *argos*, which yields *arguros*, silvery (and *argentum*—silver, money, argent—in Latin), indicating shine [*l'éclat*], brilliance, light; *himeros enargēs* is therefore manifest, dazzling [*éclatant*] desire. Whose desire? *Blepharōn eulektrou numphas*. This is not a matter of a virgin pledged to the bed of her spouse; we are talking about a young bride, in any case a young woman ripe for marriage, as

⁶French Editors: See lines 781-800.

the epithet *eulektros* shows. A spade must be called a spade, and the Ancients were not afraid to do so. *Lektron* is the bed, and *eu-* is the good. An *eulektros* woman is a woman whose bed is good, that is to say, who is good in bed and for bed—modern Greek would easily say *kalokrevati*, which literally and faithfully translates *eulektros*. What is left is the genitive, *blepharōn*, of the eyes. Whose eyes? Citing this line, Liddell-Scott [T/E: s.v. *enargeia*] translates “desire beaming from the eyes”; so, we are talking about a desire, the subject of which is the girl. Mazon retains the ambiguity, but it is important to make it explicit. It is a matter of the desire “of” the young woman as well as of the desire for (the eyes) of the young woman. The desire comes from the eyes of the young woman and is directed toward the eyes of the young woman. A great modern prose poet, Marcel Proust, expresses the same situation in a magnificent passage from *In Search of Lost Time*. During the evening party in the “gardens of Gabriel Avenue,” at the home of the Princess de Guermantes, the narrator has been talking with Swann—a very sick Swann, who is coming to the end of his life—about the Dreyfus Affair and about the rise of anti-Semitism that is obsessing him when the Baron de Charlus passes by and lavishes excessive compliments upon the Marquise de Surgis, his brother’s mistress:

The Marquise, turning around, addressed a smile and held out her hand to Swann, who had risen to greet her. But almost without concealment, because his advanced years had deprived him either of the will, from indifference to the opinion of others, or the physical power, from the intensity of his desire and the weakening of the controls that help to disguise it, as soon as Swann, on taking the Marquise’s hand, had

seen her bosom at close range and from above, he plunged an attentive, serious, absorbed, almost anxious gaze into the depths of her corsage, and his nostrils, drugged by her perfume, quivered like the wings of a butterfly about to alight upon a half-glimpsed flower. Abruptly he shook off the intoxication that had seized him, and Mme de Surgis herself, although embarrassed, stifled a deep sigh, so contagious can desire prove at times.⁷

Swann plunged his gaze into the Marquise's corsage—which one can easily assume to be low-cut for an evening party—and the Marquise, who did not for all that have eyes at the ends of her breasts—felt she was being gazed at and felt flustered by this gaze. Such is the twofold reality of desire. To be noted are the accuracy, originality, and shrewdness of Proust's adjectives—an attentive, serious, absorbed, almost anxious gaze—but also their accumulation, which achieves the desired effect.

Parmenides furnishes a different example of semantic richness, whose source is no longer lexical but grammatical:

Λεῦσσε δ' ὅμως ἀπεόντα νόῳ παρεόντα βεβαίως

Consider how the absents (neuter: the absent things) are present with total certainty (*bebaiōs* = on unshakeable foundations) *noōi*.

⁷Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, and London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), vol. 4, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, part two, chapter one, p. 124.

Noōi is the dative of *noos*. Here this word incontestably means *thought* or *mind*. This is just one more of the sentences mauled by Heidegger, who translated *noōi* by *Vernehmen*, perceiving, perception. In this translation, Parmenides' sentence immediately becomes absurd: how can the absent things be presented by means of *perception*, whose object is by definition a simply and directly present thing? Of course, perceiving is also one of the primary meanings of *noein*, but in no way is it the only one. Heidegger is led astray by his rage to de-Platonize pre-Socratic terms. *Noos* squarely means *thought*, *mind*, from the first lines of the *Odyssey*. Ulysses, says Homer, "far more than other men, has seen cities and known (understood) *noon*," thought, the way of thinking (*Odyssey* 1.3). *Noos* is, in Parmenides's line, one's capacity to render present to oneself [*se rendre présent*] with total certainty what is not there. The *apeon*, "what is not there," can be a memory, a missing face, a mathematical theorem, the existence of people from times immemorial. The *nous* can itself render present all these objects, even in their physical absence. It is clear that, on the basis of this attribute, the term is to be understood as including imagination as well as memory. How is one to translate into a modern language without declensions, like French or English, this dative case, *noōi*? Nearly all the uses of the dative catalogued by grammarians are put into application here; choosing a single one of them is not to translate but to interpret by mutilation. This dative is instrumental: it is by means of the *noos* that the absents become present; it is locative: they become so in the *noos*; it is "charistic" (*pour la grâce de*; for the sake of, in English): the absents become present "for" the *noos*; it is dative of the object: this "oneself rendering present" intends the *noos*; and it is, of course, eminently subjective: the absent things are present "to" the *noos*, not in the sense of place but

of the subject before which the absents become present.

II

I have tried to highlight a specific trait of the ancient Greek tongue as well as the usage poetry has been able to make of it. The semantic and expressive possibilities of a primary tongue such as Greek are not to be found in modern European tongues. The great European poets have taken other paths to achieve effects of comparable intensity. To explore them even in a slightly systematic way would require an immense and no doubt endless effort. Here, I shall endeavor to illustrate one exemplary case, which has, I think, a more general value. I am thinking of Macbeth's famous monologue, in scene 5 of act 5 from the tragedy of the same name.

Let me recall briefly the place in the play the lines I am going to discuss hold. Macbeth, a Scottish general returning from a victorious battle, encounters three witches who predict that he will become the king of Scotland. Soon thereafter, King Duncan comes to his home and Macbeth, at the instigation of his wife, whom he has informed of the witches' prophecy and who henceforth becomes his partner in crime, guiding his hand, kills the king in his sleep and mounts the throne. After several other "preventive" crimes, Scotland revolts against him and an army led by a Scottish nobleman, Macduff, lays siege to his castle, Dunsinane. Right before this siege, Macbeth, tortured by the complete inability to sleep to which he has been condemned and by the madness to which Lady Macbeth, weighed down by her crimes, has succumbed, revisits the witches, who predict that he will be defeated only on the day that Birnam wood would march upon Dunsinane ("Fear not, till Birnam wood/Do come to Dunsinane," 5.5.42-43 and that "none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth" [T/E:

4.1.96-97].

The ambiguity of the witches' sayings is worthy of the Delphic oracles. For, at the moment of siege, Macduff's soldiers, on his orders, tear off branches from the trees of Birnam wood and thus march camouflaged to the castle. So, someone comes to announce to Macbeth that Birnam wood is marching against him. And during the final duel with Macduff, Macbeth heckles him, "I bear a charmed life, which must not yield/To one of woman born," only to hear the latter reply, "Despair thy charm/And let the angel whom thou hast served/Tell thee Macduff was from his [dead] mother's womb untimely ripped."⁸

The fifth scene in the last act of this tragedy, the fifth, takes place in the middle of this act. The act begins with the entrance of Lady Macbeth, carrying a taper in the dark. The Lady is suffering from a delirium that, for the spectator, makes perfect sense. For, this walking delirium is made of the disjointed and jumbled fragments of the story whose unfolding the spectator has witnessed during the preceding acts. Lady Macbeth tries to rub from her hand the imaginary spots of King Duncan's blood—"Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" [T/E: 5.1.48-50]. She speaks to her husband, saying to him, "No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that. You mar all with this starting" [T/E: *ibid.*, 42-43]. And all the sequences of this delirium end with a sinister refrain, "What's

⁸T/E: Here (*Macbeth*, 5.10.12-16) and elsewhere, the English original (*The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986]) has been used. The French Editors give no indication of what translation, if any, Castoriadis had used, in his original French text, for his quotations from Shakespeare. Nor do they cite an edition for when he quoted *Macbeth* in English. Pages lines differ from those supplied by the French Editors.

done cannot be undone” [T/E: *ibid.*, 65]. Enter Waiting-Gentlewoman and a Doctor of Physic. The latter, having heard Lady Macbeth, says, “This disease is beyond my practice” [T/E: *ibid.*, 56]. After three other scenes, the fifth scene begins with one of Macbeth’s main lieutenants, Seyton, coming to see him. Macbeth asks him, “Wherefore was that cry” from within the castle? Seyton answers, “The Queen, my lord, is dead” [T/E: 5.5.15-16]. Then come the ten lines of Macbeth I am going to discuss, and which begin with:

She should have died hereafter,
There would have been a time for such a word.

What follows operates on the mode of a spontaneous associative improvisation, which is typical in Shakespeare’s dialogues. So far as I know, it did not exist before him, and in any case not with this degree of richness and intensity.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

And now come the five famous lines, to which I want to pay particular attention:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

One could cite a very large number of other examples of this associative process that is typical of Shakespeare, one of the most beautiful being the monologue of Richard II in scene 2 of act 3 from the play of the same name. Here I shall mention only Hamlet's monologue, "To be or not to be," which is known to everybody, in order to shed some light on what I intend by the associative process. The important thing in all these cases is not that the character is speaking in an at-once spontaneous and "natural" fashion; that is already amply the case in Greek tragedy, as well as in any theater piece that hangs together. If a character does not speak in a spontaneous and "natural" fashion, the play is simply bad. But in Shakespeare, the characters speak as if they were improvising in a way that is, apparently, only very indirectly related to the situation, letting themselves go with a torrent of ideas that call forth one another in a fashion that, only after the fact, is obvious, and then very highly so. Hamlet begins with an unexpected interrogation: To be or not to be, that is the question. He goes on: Is it nobler to suffer or else to take up arms? He is describing troubles of existence that bear little relationship to his real situation, and he arrives at an exploration of the other end of the alternative.

To be, or not to be [...]

To die, to sleep.

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,

[T/E: *Hamlet* 3.1.58, 66-67]

This is the knot, the drama, the anguish that clinches life's impasse. Who knows what the dreams of this sleep might be, and whether they would be worse than waking life. Being, not being, dying, sleeping, dreaming, dreams, nightmares, such is the concatenation of associations.

I come back to the passage I quoted from *Macbeth*. The queen is dead—she should have died later; later, there would perhaps have been room for such a word, but not now, not when the catastrophes are piling up. But Macbeth catches himself right away and mocks himself: later, that is to say once again, and as for all the other fools, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.... We always say tomorrow, but this tomorrow, instead of being the site where our hope is fulfilled, is but what chains us down and constrains us to creep, day after day, to the last *syllable* of recorded time. A syllable, perhaps the last word of a dying man? Recorded where? By whom? Recorded in advance, as the time that is imparted to us until dusty death, as the short hour that will be imparted to the poor player. And from tomorrow he passes to yesterday, for all these tomorrows are transformed, with their petty creeping pace, into yesterdays that appear, after the fact, like traps, traps that have deceived the fools we are by lighting the sole way they ever can go, the way toward the dust of death. So out, out, brief candle of life. Then come the three sublime metaphors that glide, one into another, and open, like poisonous and deadly flowers, into a cinematographic movement. Life, our life, is a walking shadow; it is also a poor player who has his hour to appear on stage; strutting and fretting, but his hour quickly gives way beneath him and he is no longer heard. What is all this? It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. One passes from one metaphor to another, in a rising, expanding movement that reaches its zenith with the tale told by an idiot.

Why “brief candle”? We have just learned of Lady Macbeth’s death, and that is what makes this old poetic *topos*, the small candle of life that is consumed or is blown out by some *Moirai*, remind us how Lady Macbeth, holding a taper,

appeared for the last time in the play, a few minutes ago, before dying out. There is another *topos*. Life is but a walking shadow: Pindar had already written, more forcefully, *skias onar anthrōpos*, “Man is a dream of a shadow” [T/E: *Pythian Odes* 8.95-96], but here the commonplace metaphor is revived, revived, and entirely renovated by the context, by its harmonic melody; the continuous melodic line is in harmonic consonance with the foregoing. For, we have just seen on the stage a walking shadow, Lady Macbeth. She was there; she was walking in delirium before dying out. But she was also life, this shadow that was walking, Macbeth’s life, his partner in crime and his very soul [*son âme damnée et son âme tout court*]. It was she—when his courage, his soul had weakened at the moment of the king’s assassination—who had encouraged him, made him return to the king’s bedchamber and accomplish his hideous crime. It was she who had pushed him to murder Banquo, she who kept him going when the ghost of Banquo, who had been killed by Macbeth’s men, entered into the banquet room where he had treacherously been invited. She who had always energized him—it is she, the shadow we just saw walking, a shadow dreaming deliriously of herself. This life, this pitiful poor player to whom has been granted in all and for all but a short hour upon the stage, the petty hour of our life on the stage of the world, where we strut and fret. This player is pitiful because, whatever he might do, the result will be poor, as the Lady whom we have just seen was poor, and her hour upon the stage has just ended. She will no longer be heard; no longer will she be heard of. But it is Macbeth himself who is this poor player whose hour is on the point of finishing. On the plane of the play, the plot is going to reach its culmination: Macbeth has withdrawn to Dunsinane Castle and now is surrounded by his enemies, without hope of escape.

The first of the witches' prophecies has just been fulfilled by a sinister reversal of an impossibility into a reality. On the plane of the show [*spectacle*], as the spectator knows, the play is drawing to its end; it is the fifth act. And he who says that his life is a poor player who has his hour on the stage is himself, not *in dicto* but *in re*, a player whose hour of posturing [*gesticulation*] is on the point of finishing. Macbeth is speaking of himself and the actor who plays Macbeth is speaking of himself.

All this is a tale told by an idiot. One must keep in mind the etymological kinship of *tale* and *told*. The "sound" in "full of sound and fury" is not mere sound but, as is evident here, noise. Shakespeare—like ourselves—does not hear in life a musical song. He hears a noise.

A tale told by an idiot. The sequence of metaphors arrives at a break that does not abolish the continuity. The continuity is the referent that is always the same: life. The break is that there is a transition to another level. The first two metaphors—the shadow life that walks; life as a poor player who gesticulates...—are, so to speak, external; they are images or comparisons. Someone is speaking from the outside, inspecting, comparing, and stating. This exteriority is incorporated into the texture of the metaphor: in order that there be a shadow, there must be light; in order for there to be a player, there must be a theater and spectators. The dereism [*déréalité*] of life is grasped with reference to a reality that is opposed thereto, and without it, the metaphor would have no meaning. But when one arrives at a tale told by an idiot, everything is engulfed in the metaphor itself; there no longer is any external opposition; the metaphor has dilated to the point of resorbing within itself all reality. Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing: that concerns everything, you, me, the author, the spectator,

Macbeth, the player, he who speaks, he who hears, life, and the theater, which represents life. Space closes upon itself, becoming a black hole that is engulfed within itself. If we comprehend the terms of this sentence through difference and opposition, as we are necessarily required to do for every sentence in every language, that is due solely to the needs of this very effort to comprehend; they are not immanent to the metaphor. The first two metaphors situate life in something and by opposition to something else—the shadow to light, the illusion of the poor player on the stage to reality outside the theater. Shakespeare's greatness is to explode in this third metaphor the nothingness that is everything. It is the absolute metaphor; it is, as would be said in mathematics, algebraically closed. It does not say something about life in relation to something other than life; it situates everything in life and this life is absurd and it itself calls itself absurd. It is a tale told by an idiot; it is what happens on stage and between the stage and the spectators. Macbeth, the actor who plays the role, and the spectator who is watching are the same thing; it's the absurd tale that says of itself that it is an absurd tale; he who speaks is part of the absurd tale and understanding in this absurd tale that one finds oneself in an absurd tale is part of the tale and of its absurdity. Everything and everybody are a part of it. This statement even gets away from Epimenides. It does not say: I am lying. It does not say: What I am saying is absurd. The statement is true to the second power. The absurdity of life is not abolished if someone living observes, *Life is absurd*. It is *reinforced* thereby. For, precisely, what purpose does it serve, if life is absurd, to know this? This knowledge itself is absurd; it truly signifies *nothing*. The statement itself confirms itself [*s'autoconfirme*]; in knowing the absurdity of life, it is reinforced. From the humbly human point of view, life would certainly be less absurd if we did not

know that it is so. All religions are there to testify to this, to affirm that life is not absurd or, if it is, that there is also another life that, for mysterious (and, in fact, absurd) reasons, would not be, itself, absurd. The Greeks knew this absurdity quite well, and Aeschylus knew it when he has Prometheus say that he instilled in mortals “blind hopes” (*tuphlas elpidas*, *Prometheus Bound* 250).

The splendor of the poem plays here upon the metaphor’s deployment, its dilation. Of course, there is also at each instant the *lexis*, the unexpected and striking [*éclatante*] justness of particular words—the player who struts and frets about on the stage, the tale told by an idiot, immediately visualized by referral to the spectacle of Lady Macbeth, whose true life and the truth of her life have become delirium; what the Lady recounts is a web of absurdities, and these absurdities are true for he who knows the story: she is speaking of bloodstains, of the murder of the king, and of all the rest, but ultimately this reality is itself a web of absurdities, since all these crimes have been committed to seize the crown and to enjoy its possession, the final result thereof being Lady Macbeth’s madness and death and Macbeth’s imminent destruction. Here again, there are three successive levels. The justness and the richness of the words are still there, as in all the great modern poets, but Shakespeare has to weave the poetic meaning through the metaphor being deployed; unlike Sappho, Aeschylus, or Sophocles, he can no longer find it in a singular word and the indivisible polysemy of what the word is capable of saying.



Another related yet profoundly different type is what may be called the polysemous metaphor or image. Here, the

word is “univocal”: it is not the word being employed that offers an indivisible polysemy but, rather, the referrals that arise right away, multiple as they are and all quite laden with signification. *Lider*, in German, are eyelids, and nothing but eyelids. But let us consider the thickness of this word in the epitaph Rainer Maria Rilke wrote for himself:

*Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust
Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel Lidern.*

Rose, O pure contradiction, joy
To be the sleep of no one under so many eyelids.

What eyelids are these? The dead person—who is no one, *Niemand*, *outis*—sleeps behind his own eyelids. He sleeps under those eyelids that are the shroud and the coffin; he sleeps also under the many layers of earth that cover him over. He sleeps under countless eyelids of facts and gestures of a bygone life, of roles he has assumed, of what he was for various people. All these eyelids are needed to cover over—well, what? No one, *Niemand*, *outis*.

III

These examples were aimed at setting off, through opposition, one aspect of the difference between ancient Greek poetry and modern European poetry. I shall now attempt to draw a few more general conclusions. In doing this, I shall be led to formulate some hypotheses and to set forth some opinions, all of them extremely risky due to the very nature of the subject, which is a slippery one *par excellence*, and due to the frailty of my means, since I know relatively well five tongues (modern and ancient Greek, French,

English, and German) and am moderately ignorant only in three others (Latin, Italian, and Spanish). In other words, I am familiar only with a very limited part of the whole set of Indo-European languages. What, despite all and at my risk and peril, gives me the courage to undertake this attempt is what seems to me to be the near-universal [*quasi générale*] neglect, since the end of “classical” philology and the death of the great Roman Jakobson, of a very important research topic—the comparative exploration of the expressive resources of various tongues—a topic that is essential for the elucidation of the ways and means of social-historical creation. This neglect, it seems to me, is tied to one of the aberrations of contemporary times: the fear of seeming to privilege this or that tongue or culture, of laying oneself open to the accusation of cultural imperialism or, *horresco referens*, of Europeo- or logo-phallo-onto-etc.-centrism. This leads, under the fallacious pretext of the *de jure* equality of all peoples, to a rage to flatten everything out [*applatissement généralisé*]; it leads to a refusal to discuss the differences and, even more, the *alterities* that make up the unfathomable richness of human history. It is as if one had to have affirmed the equivalence of the “philosophy” of Tasmanians and Greco-Europeans in order to have the right to condemn the former’s extermination by the English. The imbeciles who reason thus do not even see that they are in fact conceding the principle of “reasoning” employed by those who justified colonization: if one culture is “superior” to another, the representatives of the former have the right to dominate (and, if it comes to it, to exterminate) those of the latter. *Therefore*, in order to condemn this domination or extermination, one would have to condemn every comparative cultural study that might risk leading to “value judgments” about one or another of these cultures. The absurdity of this pseudoreasoning

obviously has nothing to do with the immense intrinsic difficulties of such a study, nor does it have to do with the question, which is situated at a wholly other level, of the political choices we are necessarily led to make among the types of institutions different cultures have created. To proclaim my attachment to the democratic seeds [*germes*] created in the Greco-European tradition in no way obliges me to state that the architecture of a caste society, like Hindu society, is inferior to Western architecture, any more than, in order to support the rights of Africans, I am condemned to swallow the excision and infibulation of women in so many parts of the black continent. As for the capital theoretical question of the inner solidarity of the different domains of any cultural creation, a solidarity that is both evident and enigmatic, it has no direct political pertinence, as the mutual fertilization (or contamination or corruption) of the planet's cultures during the contemporary era shows. We can therefore broach an inquiry about the different paths poetic expressiveness could take in ancient Greece and in modern Europe without fearing that, in the case that it would lead us, *per impossibile*, to the conclusion that the former means are "superior" to the latter ones, we would be bound to campaign for the restoration of slavery. What remains is the risk of succumbing, in such an examination, to "subjective" tastes and preferences. This risk can never be eliminated as soon as it comes to "aesthetic" topics, but, as it happens, it is far reduced, since we are not proposing to "evaluate" in comparative terms ancient poetry and modern poetry but, rather, to describe and to analyze the expressive means both employ.

I shall begin here with a remark from Aristotle's *Poetics*. The tragic poet, he says, must be much more *muthopoios* than *metropoios*, much more a creator of myths,

of stories, than a creator of meters, a versifier. I think that this holds not only for tragic poetry but for all poetry. Even in lyric poetry, there is always *muthos*—I have tried to show this in the four lines from Sappho—that is to say, a story, a referent (obviously created by the poem itself), an object that is presented and that “unfolds,” even if this unfolding is very brief, and even if this referent is not, as in epic poetry and in tragedy, formed by acts but concerns, rather, the sentiments, the poet’s states of mind. Lyric poetry is not a pure exclamation; it does not limit itself to *Ah!*s and *O!*s. It has an object: states of mind—representations, affects, desires—and this object, even when grasped in a “snapshot [*instantané*],” cannot be presented as an absolute instant. It is in a time, caught by this time; it makes a time, forward and backward, exist. One finds this even in a kind of poetry like haiku or certain very brief Chinese poems made up of a few terms (e.g., a mountain, a lake, a bird, sadness); this apparently static presentation contains a minimal movement, and that is its *muthos*. Of course, Aristotle intends by *muthos* a developed narration, but between developed narration and the mere *metron* there is the space of the lyrical object, which is very much in time.

The poet, however, is not only *metropoios* and *muthopoios*. He is also *noēmatopoios*, creator of meanings and of significations. And he is also *eikonopoios*, creator of images, and *melopoios*, creator of music.

This last statement requires some elucidation. By music, I do not intend only material musicality, the rhythmic musicality of the meter and the sonorous musicality of the words (and of what goes along therewith: alliterations, rhymes, or simply a beautiful “intrinsic” sonority), but also the music of the meaning that manifests itself not only at the level of *muthos* but also at the level of the line, of the

succession of words and even of the singular word. There are a presentation and an articulation of the significations; there is signification at the level of the *muthos* of the story that is being recounted, of the object that is being presented overall; but there is also an articulation in the proper sense, similar to that of the body, subdivided into members that are not separate but bound up in a continuous synergy. And the subdivision is not separation of this overall signification into the parts of the poetic work, into verses, lines, words. There is presentation of a minimal poetic meaning at the level of the word itself, and certainly still more at the level of the connection, the linking of the words, ever-lively elements of an encompassing meaning. This minimal meaning of the word is not present in logical fashion, nor in purely descriptive fashion; here, all metaphors betray us because they betray the specificity of the poetic work. They nevertheless must be employed, and it must be said that this minimal meaning is presented at once pictorially and musically. In order to speak of poetry, we are obliged to employ metaphors that come from music and painting; likewise, in order to speak of music or painting, we have to employ metaphors that come from poetry as well as from painting and music. This is the circle of artistic creation; we cannot speak of poetry, of music, or of painting with geometrical or physical metaphors. All this is being mentioned here because we must understand in what consists that which we cannot call otherwise than the *musicality of meaning*. If I am led to privilege, in what follows, the musical metaphor, this is because the pictorial metaphor is appropriate only in the cases where the poetic expression refers to an “outside” object, but especially because painting, as opposed to music, does not offer the temporal deployment that animates poetry.

At the level of myth, as at the metrical level, that is to

say, of the lines, we always encounter two dimensions. The myth can be projected upon the dimension of a story, of what can be recounted, the “narration.” This is what is given, for example, by the scholiasts who offer at the beginning of manuscripts of the ancient tragedies the *hypotheses*, the argument, the anecdote of the play, its summary in the style of a press dispatch: “Polynices, having taken up arms against Thebes, his fatherland, has been killed during the duel with his brother who was defending Thebes. Creon, tyrant of Thebes, has forbidden his corpse to be buried, but Antigone, Polynices’ sister, violates this decree....” The myth can also be projected upon the dimension of signification; that is what we bring out when we analyze the content, the meaning of the story being recounted. A myth that would allow itself to be projected entirely upon the narration axis would have, as a borderline case, null signification; it would be the “tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing,” or the news item. A myth that would be projected completely upon the signification axis would be a sort of philosophical system, perhaps Spinoza’s system, certainly not a poem. A poem, like a tragedy, is always deployed upon these two dimensions.

What we are looking at here is not the *muthos* but the *metron*, the “line,” or the lines, subunits essential for the realization of poetic signification. Here, too, we have two dimensions. As was already said, there is “material,” phonetic, and rhythmic musicality. What really matters to us here is the semantic musicality: there is at once a melody and a harmony of meaning.

The melody of meaning is the weaving together of the “rise-and-fall” in the register of signification and in its level of intensity. The signification of each word modulates the signification of the line as the line unfurls [*se déploie*]; the variations in the acuity or intensity of the expression create a

form, a pattern. Thus, the rise in intensity in:

*Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel,
qu'importe?
Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!*

Now let us leap—
Heaven or Hell, what matter?—into the deep,
at the bottom of the Unknown to find the *new*!⁹

or the continuous rise:

*Demain c'est le cheval qui s'abat blanc d'écume,
Demain [...]*

To-morrow! — 't is the foaming war-horse falling;
To-morrow! [...]

brutally ended by the endless fall of:

Demain, c'est le tombeau.

To-morrow! — 't is the grave.¹⁰

⁹T/E: *One Hundred Poems from Les Fleurs du Mal*, tr. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1947), p. 329. These are the last lines of Baudelaire's poem "Le Voyage."

¹⁰T/E: Victor Hugo, "Napoléon II" (August 1832), *Les Chants du crépuscule*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris: V^{ve} Alexandre Houssiaux, 1864), p. 258. "The Morrow of Grandeur," from *The Songs of Twilight* was found in the second volume of the *Poems* of Victor Hugo (Boston: Estes and Lauriat [no date], p. 141).

The melody of the meaning is the horizontal relation between the meanings and the intensity of the particular words in their succession, which already in itself contains a harmonic component. For, just as, when one hears the end of a melody, its musical substance includes what preceded it, so the deployment of the meaning in a poetic phrase, which constitutes in itself a temporal form, culminates in a term that is what it is only as a function of everything that came beforehand.

The harmony of the meaning seems to be, strictly speaking, an illogical expression, since harmony is the consonance of several voices and because the poem—more generally, a linguistic expression—seems monodic. But there is harmony because there are harmonics of the words' significations. When one strikes a piano key or a violin string, a C or a G, one does not hear only this tone but at the same time its overtones [*harmoniques*]: the octave, the dominant fifth, and so on. This is what yields the richness and color of the sound of each instrument. One can consider a word's harmonics to be everything to which this particular word gives resonance. A word is what it is, from the standpoint of meaning, by means of all its harmonics, its resonances, and its consonances, what is called in traditional terms its connotations, everything it conveys and everything to which it refers.¹¹ This is certainly inseparable from the listener, from the concrete audience, but this is also and especially “impersonally” deposited in language. A word can function in language only by means of these indefinite referrals, each one of which engages and sets in motion other referrals. The harmonic richness of a line is made from the richness of the

¹¹From another standpoint, I have critically commented the traditional denotation/connotation opposition in ch. 7 of [IIS](#), 345-49.

referrals of the words that compose it.

All that holds for poetry in general, whatever the tongue in which it is expressed.¹² What I want to talk about here is a specific difference, relative to the “choice” of the mode of expressiveness of musical semantics, between ancient Greek poetry and modern European poetry. This difference appears to be tied to a property of ancient Greek that it probably shares with all tongues that could be called *primary*, in opposition to tongues that can be called *secondary*.¹³ There is in ancient Greek an originary polysemy

¹²This obviously holds for prose, too, in any case great prose. In truth, if one abstracts from the exigencies of a rigid metrics, which today in any case is no longer required, all great prose offers a “material” musicality and a semantic musicality. One could cite as examples a host of passages from Thucydides, including obviously the Funeral Oration, as well as a host of passages from Proust, including obviously the death of Bergotte [T/E: in *The Captive (La Prisonnière)*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 2, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Scott Hudson (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), pp. 596ff.]. Émile Zola, today unfairly scorned as artist and prose writer, provides some splendid examples with the prostitutes’ descent onto the boulevards in *Nana* [T/E: tr. F. J. Vizetelly with a Note by Henry James (New York: The Heritage Press, 1948), pp. 213-14], the charge of the Marguerite division in *La Débâcle* [T/E: *The Downfall: A Story of the Horrors of War*, tr. Ernest A. Vizetelly (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925), pp. 268-71], and Catherine’s death in *Germinal* [T/E: tr. with an intro. Leonard Tancock (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 486]. The broad overlap between poetry and prose raises difficult questions I cannot discuss here.

¹³This distinction is homologous to the one Rémi Brague formulated between Greek culture, considered as primary, and Latin then European cultures, which can be called *secondary* in the sense that they explicitly presuppose and always more or less refer to the primary culture. The ideas in the text I am presenting here were expounded in a seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales on May 9, 1984. Rémi Brague, who obviously was unaware of this seminar, presented his distinction in

of words, a multiplicity of significations¹⁴ that results not only from the connotations or from the harmonics but corresponds to semantic spectra, the term *spectrum* being taken in the physicomathematical sense. In ancient Greek, different meanings—sometimes derived from one another, sometimes simply related—cohabit within the same word, and they do so in a qualitatively other proportion than is the case with the European tongues of which I have any knowledge. This last distinction must, moreover, be relativized, be it only because it will often be impossible to decide whether the related meanings do or do not stem from some age-old derivation of which no traces exist any longer. Émile Benveniste's *Indo-European Language and Society* furnishes us with an abundant crop of them—which covers, moreover, as a matter of fact the bulk of the “primary” Indo-European tongues.¹⁵

his book *Europe: la voie romaine* (Paris: Criterion, 1992).

¹⁴See what Émile Benveniste has to say in his *Indo-European Language and Society* (tr. Elizabeth Palmer [Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1973]) about the supposed Indo-European root, as well as about the impossibility of independently establishing and enumerating the meanings attached to this root and of deciding whether it was not “already” polysemous.

¹⁵See, for example, the discussion of the expressive resources of ancient Greek in Tadeusz Zielinski's already ancient book, *Wir und die Antike*, as well as the various essays of Roman Jakobson. [T/E: The correct title of the former volume is *Die Antike und wir, Vorlesungen* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1905). This book, based on lectures delivered in St. Petersburg in 1903 and published in Russian that same year, was translated into German in 1905 and from there was translated into English four years later with an introduction and notes by H. A. Strong and Hugh Stewart as *Our Debt to Antiquity* (London: George Routledge & Sons and New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1909). This English translation was reprinted in 1971 by Kennikat Press (Port Washington, NY).]

Greek terms like *einai*, *logos*, *phainesthai*,¹⁶ and so many others really seem to have embodied from the very start of this tongue, and without one being able to decide on a derivation, sheaves of significations, within which it really seems impossible to establish any internal genetic order.

Added to this is another, just as important fact. Even in the case of derivation, the internal connections of the terms of the lexicon are immediately visible; one can, so to speak, touch them with one's hands, whereas that occurs only in a few and, so to speak, uninteresting cases in secondary tongues. We have seen above some examples with *selanna* and *ōra* in Sappho, *gelasma* in Aeschylus, and *ergon* in Herodotus. Let us consider, by way of opposition, the word *lune* in French or *moon* in English. Neither is charged with any lexical kinship. Their connotations are either real or literary. These words do not refer to a shared matrix of meaning from which a spectrum of signifiers and signifieds would spurt forth. From this point of view, *lune* in French is, as it were, inorganic; the word has fallen into French because in Latin one said *luna*, as *moon* has fallen into English from the Germanic root *Mond*. It may be noted that this last term is just as "inorganic" today in German.

This originary indivisible polysemy in Greek is certainly not a privilege of this tongue. To judge simply by the examples found in the aforementioned book by Benveniste, phenomena of the same type exist in Sanskrit and in ancient Iranian, as they also exist in Proto-Germanic. It is up to those who study those tongues to say to what extent they have been actively utilized in the poetry of those tongues.

There is, indeed, in ancient Greek (as also in modern

¹⁶See, on *phainesthai*, my text "The Discovery of the Imagination" (1978), now in [CL2](#).

Greek) an immense amount of free lexical productivity. One can create words, and words have been created from Homer on down to the fourth century and later, starting from the possibilities immanent to this tongue and from its given rules of formulation, on a scale that is incomparably vaster than is the case in contemporary European tongues. The use of prefixes and suffixes, the creation of verbs on the basis of substantive nouns or adjectives, or the reverse, their composition—all these have not taken place once and for all but in a continuous process. That does not rule out one engaging in discussion and adopting a critical attitude. In the *Frogs*, Aristophanes, putting words into Euripides' mouth, criticizes Aeschylus for treating one's tongue like a marble mason extracts blocks of marble from a quarry. Euripides accuses him of fabricating words as large as mountains and of having too big a mouth, whereas he, Euripides, would be speaking the language of the common man.

These devices of derivation, in the vastest sense of the term, seem frozen in modern European tongues, or they are employed much more rarely. The rigidity of academic French is almost caricatural in this regard, the luxuriance of Rabelais's tongue having been killed off by François de Malherbe, Nicolas Boileau, and the Académie Française.

The device of compounding, which in German remains numerically sizable, seems to be confined to administrative, practical, and scientific language. I find hardly any compound words in Friedrich Hölderlin, Stephan George, or Rilke. The production of verbs on the basis of nouns or the reverse is still practiced in English, but it remains confined to journalistic-administrative or technical jargon.

The modern European poet obviously has not been disarmed by this situation or made to feel inferior. Rather, he has been led to create other types of resources. To describe

them at all adequately would require one to write a treatise on European (by which I mean Western) poetics, countless volumes in length. I have tried above, in speaking of Macbeth's monologue, to bring out one of them, which I have called *developed metaphor*. It is not a matter here obviously of "elementary" metaphor, which is to be found everywhere and always as soon as there is language, since every linguistic expression is always metaphorical/metonymical, and more generally tropical. Nor is it a matter of "poetic imagery"—comparison, likening, allegory—which can extend over a number of lines, as so often is the case in Homer. The three "images" presented by Shakespeare in the passage we discussed communicate from within, passing from one "image" to the other in an ascension of figuration/presentation. They all refer to their referent and each one to the others. And they enrich one another until they reach their final acme.

If something is to arouse our wonder, it is the multiplicity of paths the creative might of the poets has been able to bring forth in various tongues, attaining the most forceful expressiveness of semantic musicality in poetry. This wonder one feels is first of all at the resources, the potential hidden within each of these tongues—the creation, each time, of another society, of another anonymous collective.

May 1984—July 1996

KOINŌNIA

The “Rationality” of Capitalism*

*To Vassilis Gondicas
The faculty of judgment personified*

It may seem bizarre for anyone still to be discussing the “economic rationality” of contemporary capitalism in an age when the official unemployment rate has reached three-and-a-half-million persons in France and more than 10 percent of the active population in the countries of the European Economic Community, and where European governments are responding to this situation by reinforcing such deflationary measures as budget-deficit reduction. The thing becomes less bizarre, or rather the bizarreness shifts, when one considers the incredible ideological regression that has struck Western societies since the late 1970s. Things that were rightly considered to be accepted knowledge, such as the Cambridge School’s devastating critique of academic political

*“La ‘rationalité’ du capitalisme” was originally presented at a CIRFIP colloquium on “Instrumental Rationality and Society” in October 1996 with the title “Notes pour servir à une critique de la ‘rationalité’ du capitalisme.” The present version, considerably enlarged and reworked, owes much to the critical remarks of my friend Vassilis Gondicas. It goes without saying that I alone am responsible for any eventual errors or weaknesses in this text. [French Editors: Previously published in the *Revue Internationale de Psychosociologie*, 4:8 (Autumn 1997; “*La Résistible Emprise de la rationalité instrumentale*”): 31-51. Posthumously reprinted in *FP*, pp. 65-92 (79-112 of the 2009 reprint). T/E: This is one of the last texts Castoriadis completed before his death. “CIRFIP” stands for the Centre International de recherche, formation et intervention psychosociologiques—International Center of Psychosociology (Research, Training, and Intervention)—founded by Castoriadis’s longtime friend Eugène Enriquez. May Enrique Escobar be thanked for his enormous assistance in tracking down Castoriadis’s references to economic literature and Pierre Dumesnil for reviewing an earlier version of the translation, which was first published in [FTPK](#).]

economy between 1930 and 1965 (Piero Sraffa, Joan Violet Robinson, Richard Ferdinand Kahn, John Maynard Keynes, Michał Kalecki, George Lennox Sharman Shackle, Nicholas Kaldor, Luigi Pasinetti, etc.) are not discussed and refuted but quite simply passed over in silence or forgotten, while some naive and far-fetched inventions, such as “supply-side economics” or “monetarism,” have held the inside track at the same time that the crooners of Neoliberalism present their aberrations as commonsense established facts, the absolute freedom of capital movements is in the process of ruining entire sectors of production in almost all countries, and the world economy is being transformed into a planetary casino.

This regression is not confined to the domain of the economy. It prevails just as much in the domain of political theory (“representative democracy’s” character has become undisputed and indisputable at the very moment when it is increasingly being brought into disrepute in all countries where it has a bit of a past) and, more generally, in the social sciences and the humanities [*les disciplines humaines*], as shown by the scientistic and positivistic offensive unleashed against psychoanalysis, which has been in full swing in the United States since the early 1970s.

The social-historical background for this regression is visible to the naked eye. It accompanies a social and political reaction that has been going on since the end of the 1970s, and whose principal artisans in France have been the “Socialists.” For the moment, nothing allows us to foresee its end—except, in a faint and far-off future, the self-destructive character of this new capitalist course. But even this prospect cannot offer any consolation. For, much more than capitalism’s suicide is at stake, as is shown, among other things, by the destruction of the environment on a planetary scale. Providing a critical analysis of the present changes

becomes that much more imperative. This, however, is not the principal object of the present text.

Capitalism is the first social regime to produce an ideology according to which it would be “rational.” The legitimation for other types of institutions of society was mythic, religious, or traditional. In the present case, it is claimed that there exists a “rational” form of legitimacy. Of course, this criterion—being rational (and not consecrated by experience or tradition, handed down by heroes or the gods, and so forth)—is in fact *instituted* by capitalism. And yet everything happens as if the fact of having been instituted very recently had, instead of relativizing it, made it indisputable. However little one might reflect upon the matter, one cannot avoid the following question: What then is rationality, and what rationality? Capitalism might avail itself of a certain kind of Hegelianism: Reason is the operation conforming to a goal, said Marx’s old master. It is therefore the *conformity* of the operation to its goal that would be the criterion of rationality. We would thereby be prevented from asking: What about the rationality of the goal itself? This rationality that is confined to means—what Max Weber curiously called *Zweckrationalität*, namely rationality *relative to a* (supposedly granted) *goal*, instrumental rationality—clearly has no value in itself. The choice of the best poison to use to kill one’s spouse or that of the H-bomb most effective in exterminating millions of people increases, by their very “rationality,” the horror we feel not only as to the goal being pursued but also as to the means that have permitted one to attain it with maximum efficiency. Yet capitalist ideology claims, in its most philanthropic moments, to be upholding a “rational” goal, which would be “well-being” or “welfare.” But its specificity comes from the fact that it identifies this well-being or welfare with an economic maximum—or

optimum—or else claims that well-being or welfare will certainly or very probably flow from the achievement of this maximum or optimum. In this way, rationality is reduced, directly or indirectly, to “economic” rationality, and the latter is defined in a purely quantitative way as maximization/minimization—maximization of a “product” and minimization of “costs.” It is obviously the regime itself that decides upon what a product is—and how this product will be evaluated—just as it decides upon what the “costs” will be and how much they will be.¹

Let us note that, at least since Max Weber (not to hark back to Herodotus), we have known about the relativity of the ultimate criterion for every culture. Every society institutes at once its institution and the “legitimation” thereof. This legitimation—an improper, Western term, referring already to some kind of “rationalization”—is almost always implicit. Better put, it is “tautological”: the arrangements of the Old Testament or of the Koran have their “justification” in the very thing they set out to affirm—that “there is only one single God, who is God,”² and that these arrangements represent His word and His will. In other cases—archaic societies—such arrangements find their justification in the fact that they have been given by the ancestors, who are to be revered and honored according to what the institution prescribes. Capitalism’s “legitimation” through rationalization is likewise tautological: Who within this

¹See my 1974 text, “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality,’” now in [CL2](#), especially the section on “The Fiction of an Economic ‘Rationality.’”

²T/E: This quotation or paraphrase may be referring to various Biblical formulations (e.g., “there is but one God, the Father,” 1 Corinthians 8.6) and/or to the Shahada (Islamic oath: “There is no god but God”),

society, save perhaps for a poet or a mystic, would dare to stand up against “rationality”?

This circle of the institution is, of course, but one instance of the circle of creation. The institution cannot exist if it does not assure its own existence, and brute force is generally incapable of fulfilling this role beyond short periods of time.³ One can ask, parenthetically, what an autonomous society—namely, a society capable of calling its own institutions, explicitly and lucidly, back into question—will be like in this regard. In a sense, it, too, obviously will not be able to exit from this circle. It will affirm that social and collective autonomy “is valid and worthwhile.” Certainly, it will be able, downstream, to justify its existence through its works—among which will be the anthropological type of autonomous individual it will create. But the positive evaluation of these works will still depend upon criteria—more generally, social imaginary significations—it will itself have instituted. I say all this in order to recall that, when all is said and done, no sort of society can find its justification outside itself. One cannot exit this circle, and it is not here that we would have something that can constitute the grounding for a critique of capitalism.

It must be noted that of late the on-duty ideologues have finally given up their pretense of justifying or legitimating the regime. They simply refer us to the bankruptcy of “actually existing socialism”—as if the activities of Landru furnished a justification for those of Stavisky⁴—and to “growth” figures, where growth continues

³See my text “Power, Politics, Autonomy” (1988), now in [CL3](#).

⁴T/E: As stated in a note for “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), now in [CL3](#), “Henri Désiré Landru was a famous convicted French serial killer

to occur. They used to be more courageous, back when they wrote treatises on Welfare Economics. It is also true that the piteous state of the (“Marxist” or alleged Marxist) professional ex-critics of capitalism allows these ideologues, in complete accord with the spirit of the times, to set aside all pretense of seriousness.

In any case, our critique will basically be an immanent one. It will attempt to show that, on the theoretical level, the constructions of academic political economy are incoherent, or meaningless, or valid only for a fictive world, and that, on the empirical level, the way the capitalist economy actually functions has no more than a remote relationship with what is said about it in “theory.” In other words, the critique of capitalism will be conducted according to its own criteria. Our discussion will be grouped into four parts:

- the specificity and social-historical relativity of the capitalist institution;
- the theoretical ideology of the capitalist economy;
- the effective reality of the capitalist economy;
- the factors of capitalist society’s productive efficiency and of its social-historical “resiliency.”

of lonely wealthy women whose life story was made into a film written and directed by Charlie Chaplin, *Monsieur Verdoux*.” It might be added that Claude Chabrol made a 1962 film, *Landru* (known as *Bluebeard* in English). The Stavisky Affair of mid-1930s France involved a well-connected swindler named Serge Alexandre Stavisky, who died under mysterious circumstances after his sales of worthless bonds were exposed to the public. The affair created a governmental crisis and played a role in the violent riots of French royalists and others on February 6-7, 1934. Alain Resnais brought Jorge Semprun’s script to the screen in his 1974 film *Stavisky*.

Specificity and Social-Historical Relativity of the Capitalist Institution

For someone who takes an overview of history, the characteristic trait of capitalism, among all the forms of social-historical life, is obviously the positing of the economy—of production and consumption, but also, much more than that, of "economic criteria"—as the central site and supreme value of social life. A corollary of this is the constitution of the social "product" specific to capitalism. To put it briefly, all human activities and all their effects come to be considered more or less as economic activities and products, or, at the very least, as characterized and valued essentially through their economic dimension. No need to add that this valuing is done solely in monetary terms.

This aspect was frankly recognized as early as the late eighteenth century, if not earlier. Justifications for the modern indifference to public affairs and politics⁵ invoked the centrality, for modern man, of economic interests. Saint-Simon as well as August Comte became the crooners of the "industrial" or "positive" age. The passages from Marx's *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* relative to the transformation of all values into monetary values are beautiful and strong, but they do not stand out from the opinion of the age on account of their content (see Balzac) but, rather, because of the virulence of the critique. But characteristic is the fact that the robust awareness of the historicity of this phenomenon, which was present at the time, was quickly covered over by the apologists for the new regime, who were

⁵Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1759), and Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns" (1819).

recruited especially among the economists. This occultation took the form of a glorification of capitalism, presented as a “rational” economic regime whose appearance betokens a triumph of reason in history and relegates previous regimes to the obscure darkness of “Gothic” (to borrow an older word from Abbé Sieyès)⁶ or primitive times. The historical emergence of capitalism became, in their writings, the epiphany of reason, and it was thereby assured an indefinite future. As Marx wrote, for them “there has been history, but there is no longer any.”⁷

Curiously—or not, if one thinks of the ideological advantages involved in adopting this posture—denial of capitalism’s historicity has prevailed among the economists from David Ricardo down to the present day. Political economy as well as its object have been glorified as an investigation into “the pure logic of choice” or as a study of “the allocation of limited means for the achievement of unlimited objectives.”⁸ As if this choice could be totally independent, in its criteria and in its objects, from the social-historical form within which the choice is exercised. And as if the economy alone were concerned (or, respectively, as if the economy could subordinate all human activities wherein any choice whatsoever, from strategy to surgery, is exercised). This aberration has thrived in recent times, where we have

⁶T/E: A phrase from Abbé Sieyès’s *What Is the Third Estate?* (1789).

⁷T/E: Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the Philosophy of Poverty by M. Proudhon*, in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), vol. 6, p. 174.

⁸T/E: See Lord (Lionel) Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (1932), 3rd ed. (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981).

seen “economies” and pretensions to economic calculation popping up nearly everywhere (from education to penal policy). It is clear that, from this perspective, the “reasonings [*raisonnements*]” of economic science (I shall henceforth write this word without quotation marks to avoid a heaviness of style) would apply *de jure*, and even *de facto*, to all societies that have or will ever have existed.

These ideas have resurfaced under another form in the writings of Friedrich August von Hayek. Capitalist society is said to have proved its excellence—its superiority—through Darwinian selection. This society supposedly has revealed itself to be the sole one capable of surviving in the struggle with other societal forms. Beyond the absurdity of applying the Darwinian schema to social forms in history, and the repetition of the classic fallacy (the survival of the fittest is the survival of the fittest to survive; the domination of capitalism shows simply that it is the strongest, ultimately in the crudest and most brutal sense of this term, not that it would be the best or the most “rational”—the “antimetaphysician” Hayek showing himself here to be the most vulgar kind of Hegelian), we know that things did not happen like that. What one observes in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries is not a competition among an indefinite number of regimes, out of which capitalism would have emerged the victor, but the enigmatic synergy of a host of factors that have all conspired toward the same result.⁹ That, later on, a society founded upon a highly evolved technology might have been able to show its superiority by exterminating Amerindian nations and tribes,

⁹See my “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (1964-1965), now in [IIS](#), 45-46, and “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality,’” cited above, n. 1.

as well as Tasmanian or Australian aborigines, and by enslaving many others, presents no great mystery.

It is not necessary to enumerate here the examples and studies that go to show that almost the totality of human history has unfolded within regimes where economic “efficiency,” maximization of the “product,” and so on were in no way the central bearings for social activities. Not that these societies would have been positively “irrational” on the plane of their organization of labor or of their relations of production. But almost always, on a given technological level, social life unfolds with a wholly different set of preoccupations than that of improving the “productivity” of labor through technical inventions or through rearrangements of work methods and production relations. Those sectors of social activity were subordinated to and integrated within others that were considered, each time, to embody the main finalities of human life. And above all, they were not *separated qua* “production” or “economy.” Such separations were quite late in coming and, in the main, have been instituted at the same time as capitalism, through and for the latter. Let us limit ourselves here to recalling the works of Ruth Benedict on the Indians of North America, of Margaret Mead on the societies of the Pacific Islands, of Gregory Bateson on Bali, and so on, without forgetting those of Pierre Clastres on the Tupi-Guarani and of Jacques Lizot on the Yanomami. Most recently, it has been Marshall Sahlins who has provided the most satisfactory overall treatment of these questions.¹⁰ Nor, moreover, is it just a matter of “primitives.” The economic anthropology of ancient Greece leads to analogous conclusions, as does the analysis of medieval

¹⁰Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Atherton, 1972).

societies (Gurevich).¹¹

All the works done on the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe forcefully go to show the historical “contingency” of this process, whatever their intrinsic validity might be. This is the case with Max Weber, with Werner Sombart, with R. H. Tawney, and so on and so forth. Even for someone as convinced of “historical necessity” in general and that of capitalism in particular as Karl Marx was, the birth of capitalism is inconceivable without what he calls, rightly, *primitive accumulation*. In chapters 26 through 32 of the first volume of *Capital*, he shows that primitive accumulation is conditioned by factors that have nothing “economic” about them and that owe nothing to “the market”: specifically, extortion, fraud, and violence, both private and state-led.¹² For a more recent period, an analogous effort was carried out, in a magisterial way, by Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*.

Before going any further, the question needs to be answered about how to characterize the capitalist regime in a satisfactory way. It has been known, at least since Marx, that capitalism’s specific trait is not the mere accumulation of wealth. Hoarding is practiced in many historical societies, and attempts by latifundist landowners to exploit the land on a grand scale with servile labor are also known (in particular, during a period close to us, in imperial Rome). But simple maximization (of wealth, of production) does not, as such,

¹¹Aron Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture* (1972), tr. from the Russian G. L. Campbell (Boston and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

¹²We have had a new demonstration *in vivo*—and *in anima vili*—in the mafia-like “primitive reaccumulation” being carried out through the process of “privatization” in the societies of the ex-Communist countries.

suffice to characterize capitalism. Marx had grasped the basic core of the matter at hand when he posited, as determinative for capitalism, the accumulation of productive forces, combined with the systematic transformation of production and labor processes and what he called “the rational application of science in the production process.”¹³ It is not accumulation as such but, rather, the continual transformation of the production process with a view toward increasing output, combined with a reduction of costs, that is the decisive feature. This characterization contains the basics of what Weber would later call “rationalization,” and about which he will say, correctly, that under capitalism it tends to seize hold of all spheres of social life, doing so in particular as an extension of the empire of calculability. Georg Lukács went on to add to the views of Marx and Weber some important analyses about the reification of the whole of social life produced by capitalism.

Why “rationalization”? Like all historical creations, the domination of the tendency toward this “rationalization” is, at bottom, “arbitrary.” We can neither deduce it nor produce it starting from something else. But we can offer a closer characterization of it by connecting it back to something that is better known, more familiar, and expressed under other forms in other types of social organization: the tendency toward mastery. This allows us, in particular, to join

¹³The separation of the producer from the means of production is not absolutely specific to capitalism: it is already there in slavery. [T/E: The phrase *application raisonnée* appears in various forms, relating to “industry” or “science,” in Castoriadis’s writings and is sometimes attributed to Marx. Perhaps the source is a passage from chapter 32 of the first volume of *Capital*, which he often quoted. There, one finds the phrase “the conscious technical application of science [*die bewußte technische Anwendung der Wissenschaft*].”]

it together with one of the most deep-seated traits of the singular psyche—the aspiration to being all-powerful. But neither is this tendency, this *push* toward mastery, in turn, something exclusively specific to capitalism; social organizations oriented toward conquest, for example, manifest the same thing. We can approach capitalism’s specificity, however, by considering two of its essential characteristics. The first is that this push toward mastery is not merely oriented toward “foreign” conquest but intends just as much and still more the totality of society. It is not only in production that such mastery is to be achieved but also, very much so, in consumption, and not only in the economy but in education, law, political life, and so on. It would be an error—the Marxist error—to see these extensions as “second-order” or instrumental in relation to the mastery of production and of the economy, which would be the main thing. It is the same social imaginary signification that seizes hold of social spheres, one after the other. That it “began” with production is not an accident, certainly: it is in production that technical changes first allow a domineering sort of rationalization. But production does not have the monopoly on it. Between 1594 and 1607, Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange and *stathouder* of Holland and Zeeland, with the aid of his two cousins William Louis and Johann, set the standard rules for musket handling: these rules include approximately forty precise movements the musketeer has to carry out, in order and according to a fixed and uniform rhythm for the entire company. These rules were later formulated by Jacob de Gheyn in his *Wapen-handelinghe* manual, published in Amsterdam in 1607, which was at once widely distributed across Europe and was translated, by order

of the czar, in a practically illiterate Russia.¹⁴ The second characteristic is obviously that the push toward mastery gives itself new means—means of a special character (“rational,” that is to say, “economic” ones)—in order to fulfill itself. It is no longer magic or victory in battles that is its means but, as a matter of fact, rationalization, which here takes on a particular, quite specific content: that of maximization/minimization, that is to say, *extremization*, if this term may be forged using mathematics (maximum and minimum are two instances of the extremum). It is in considering this set of facts that we can characterize the core social imaginary signification of capitalism as the push toward the unlimited extension of “rational mastery.” Below I shall explain why I use the quotation marks.

This unlimited extension of rational mastery goes hand in hand with, and is embodied in, several other social-historical movements. I do not want to talk about the consequences of capitalism (for example urbanization and changes in the character of cities) but rather about those factors whose presence has been an essential condition for its emergence and its development:

¹⁴See William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), as well as John Keegan’s review, “Keeping in Time: The Rise of Foot Drill and the Decline of the Minuet,” *Times Literary Supplement*, July 12, 1996: 3 and 6; September 6, 1996: 17. [T/E: An English-language translation, *The Exercise of Armes for Caliuers, Muskettes, and Pikes after the Ordre of His Excellence. Maurits Prince of Orange Counte of Nassau Etc. Gouvernour and Captaine Generall. Ouer Geldreland. Holland, Zeeland, Vtrecht. Overyssel. Etc. Sett Forthe in Figures. By Iacob De Gheyn. With Written Instructions. For the Service of All Capitaines and Comaundours. For to Shewe Hereout the Better Vnto Their Jong or Vntrayned Souldiers the Playne and Perfett Maner to Handle These Armes*, was printed in The Hague in 1608.]

- The enormous acceleration of technical change, which is a historically new phenomenon (though banal, this point must be underscored). This acceleration was borne along by the blooming of science, which had already begun before the “Renaissance” but which became enormously more pronounced with the latter’s arrival. In recent times, it has been transformed into an autonomous movement of technoscience. One particular trait of this evolution of technics must be underscored: it is predominantly oriented toward the reduction, then the elimination, of man’s role in production. That is understandable, since man is the most difficult element to master. But at the same time, this leads to irrationalities of another type (for example, weaknesses and failings in technical systems can have catastrophic consequences).
- The birth and the consolidation of the modern State. The development of capitalism in Western Europe went hand in hand with the creation of the absolutist State, which fed and facilitated its development in several regards. At the same time, this centralized State became bureaucratized: a “well-ordered” bureaucratic hierarchy was substituted for the more or less chaotic entanglements of feudal times. This bureaucratization of the State and of the army came to furnish an organizational model for the nascent capitalist business enterprise.
- In the most significant cases (England, France, the Netherlands...), the creation of the modern State paralleled the formation of modern nations. The modern State was thus constituted as a national sphere, one that—as much from the economic standpoint (national and colonial protected markets,

state orders) as from the juridical standpoint (unification of rules and jurisdictions)—was essential for the first phase of capitalist development.

- An anthropological mutation of considerable proportions took place. By hook or by crook, economic motivation tended to supplant all other motives. The human being became *homo æconomicus*, that is to say, *homo computans*. Duration was resorbed into a measurable time imposed upon all. The Schumpeterian type of entrepreneur, then the speculator type, became the central figure. The various professions increasingly became steeped in the mentality of calculation and gain. At the same time, a working-class psychosociology characterized by solidarity, opposition to the existing order, and contestation of that same order was born and began to develop; for nearly two centuries, it went on to oppose the dominant mentality and to condition social conflict.
- As a matter of fact, and above all, capitalism was born and developed within a society where conflict and, more specifically, a questioning of the established order were present from the start. Manifested at the outset as a protobourgeois movement whose intention was to establish the independence of the commons, this calling into question of the established order ultimately came to express, under the conditions extant in Western Europe, the resumption of the ancient movement toward autonomy, and it deployed itself in the various species of the democratic and workers' movement. After an initial stage, the evolution of capitalism is incomprehensible without this internal contestation, which has been of a decisive

importance as the very condition for its development, as will be recalled below.

The Theoretical Ideology of the Capitalist Economy

What today passes for “economic science” has been the object of so many devastating critiques, and maintains so little relationship with reality, that to go into it again may seem as anachronistic and useless as beating a dead horse. But as I have already noted, the ideological regression of the age is so great and, especially, the debris from these “theories” is still floating around in so many confused minds (and not only in those of journalists) that it is necessary to engage in a summary exercise of recapitulation.

There existed a classical form of political economy, which drew to a close in fact with Marx. But as Marx himself had already remarked, what under his classical predecessors had been a serious effort to analyze a newly emergent social reality had rapidly become, in the hands of Adam Smith’s and David Ricardo’s epigones, an exercise in the defense and glorification of the new regime. After a phase of vulgar apologetics, political economy dressed itself up in mathematical garb, thus allowing it to lay a claim to “scientificness.” But the ideological character of the new science was given away by its persistent effort to present the existing regime as both inevitable and optimal. One could easily point out that one or the other of these two virtues would have sufficed; that the inevitable might at the same time be optimal can only make one prick up one’s ears. Here, we shall attempt merely to bring to light a few of the basic postulates of this ideology and to show either their vacuity or their unreality.

The idea that stands above all others is the idea of *separability*, which leads to the idea of *separate imputation*. Now in fact, the economic subspace, like all social subspaces, is neither discrete nor continuous, it being understood that these terms are being used here metaphorically. As regards economic activities, an individual or a firm is certainly capable of being identified, designated, as an entity existing apart from other ones, but all aspects of this activity are constantly intermixed with the activity of an indefinite number of other individuals or firms in manifold ways that are themselves not strictly separable. A business firm makes decisions in terms of a “general climate of opinion,” and its decisions, however slight in size they might be, will alter this general climate. Whether a firm wants it or knows it, its actions will make the life and the activity of other firms easier (external economies) or more difficult (external diseconomies), and in turn, it will undergo, positively or negatively, the effects of the actions of other firms and of other factors of social life. The imputation of an economic outcome [*résultat économique*] to a firm is purely conventional and arbitrary; it respects boundaries traced out by law (private property), convention, and habit. Just as arbitrary is the imputation of the productive yield [*résultat productif*] to this or that factor of production, “capital” or “labor.” Capital (in the sense of the produced means of production) and labor contribute to the productive yield without one being able—save in the most trivial of cases, and even then...—to separate out the contribution made by each one. The same thing holds, within a factory, between the different departments and shops. And the same thing holds again for the “labor output [*résultat du travail*]” of each individual. No one would be able to do what he does without the synergy of the society in which he is immersed and

without the accumulation, in his gestures and his mind, of the effects of preceding history. These effects are treated, tacitly, by classical political economy as “free gifts of history,” but they have highly tangible results, ones that are noticeable, for example, when the industrial productivity of a European population is compared with that of the populations of precapitalist countries.¹⁵ The social product is the product of the cooperation of a collectivity whose boundaries are fuzzy. The idea of an individual product is a legacy of the juridical convention/institution of the first instauration of “private property” on the land. These ideas—separability in general and the possibility of a separate imputation in particular—are tacit presuppositions for the postulates of economic theory.

The first of these postulates, which is explicit or implicit even in its attenuated forms, is that of *homo œconomicus*. It does not concern just individuals but also organizations (business enterprises and the State—though the

¹⁵I already noted in my 1974 text “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality’” that the officials responsible for “development policy” were beginning to understand that the “obstacles to development” were situated at a much deeper level than the lack of capital or of technical skills. This fact has been recorded in official reports of the World Bank, for example, but without influencing “theoretical economists.” Moreover, even “serious” political officials continue to make redundant discoveries of this sort. In a recent speech, Alan Greenspan, President of the U. S. Federal Reserve Board, advanced the idea that the introduction of capitalism into a country was impossible if certain “cultural” presuppositions were not met. William Pfaff (“Genuflecting at the Altar of Market Economics,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 14, 1997: 8) quotes Greenspan as saying that after 1989 (!) he had discovered that “much of what we took for granted in our free-market system and assumed to be human nature was not nature at all, but culture. The dismantling of the central planning function in an economy does not, as some had supposed, automatically establish” market capitalism.

latter, curiously, seems to escape the postulate of rationality that is supposed to characterize all the other actors of economic life, no doubt because this one is disturbed by political factors). The fact that these collective bodies develop forms of conduct, specific “rationalities,” and, especially, “irrationalities” does not overly concern these theorists. This economic man is a man who is uniquely and perfectly calculatory. His behavior is that of a computer maximizing/minimizing at every instant the outcomes of his actions. One could easily elicit some laughter from the reader by bringing out the strict consequences of this fiction: for example, that he himself, each morning after he wakes up but before he gets out of bed, inspects without knowing it the several billion possibilities offered to him to maximize the pleasantness or minimize the unpleasantness of his day that is now beginning, weights their various combinations, and then sets his foot on the ground, always ready, moreover, to revise the conclusions of his calculation in light of every new piece of information he receives. Just as the overall view of the capitalist system offered by its apologists seems to know nothing about history, ethnology, and sociology, so does this postulate wish to ignore psychology and psychoanalysis as well as the sociology of groups and organizations. No one functions by trying constantly to maximize/minimize his “utilities” and “disutilities,” his benefits and his costs, and no one could do so. No consumer knows all the merchandise on the market, their qualities and defects, and no one could know them. Nor is anyone guided exclusively by considerations of utility or personal “Pareto optimality.” Each has to choose within the environment accessible to him, he is influenced by advertising and publicity, and his “tastes” reflect a host of social influences that are more or less random from the “economic” point of view. This point holds equally for the decisions of

organizations. Not only does the managerial bureaucracy that runs business firms have imperfect information and entertain criteria that most of the time are false, but neither does it make its decisions as a conclusion based upon some sort of “rational” procedure; it arrives at those decisions at the end of a struggle among cliques and clans that are propelled by a series of motivations, only one of which is the maximization of the firm’s profits, and this one is not always the most important.

The postulate of mathematization is obviously consubstantial with “rationalization” conceived as exclusively quantitative. The textbooks and other writings of political economy are filled with equations and graphs, which are almost always meaningless, except as elementary exercises in differential calculus and linear algebra. There are several reasons for this absence of meaning:

- Such mathematization is essentially quantitative (algebraicodifferential). But the real economy offers the paradox of being full of quantities that are not really liable to mathematical treatment except on an elementary level. There are, of course, physical quantities, but these quantities, as one knows, are heterogeneous. They cannot be added up or subtracted from one another, save when it is strictly a matter of the same object. (I am not speaking of the engineer’s calculations here.) Nonetheless, they are added up on the market, or on national accounts’ balance sheets, via their prices. But the magnitudes thus established have meaning only within a very narrow framework. For example, they are not comparable over time [*inter-temporellement*] or internationally. Only the valuations of current prices can be added up, and

those valuations furnish only an “instantaneous” snapshot whose signification is limited. Strictly speaking, there is not much sense in comparing, for example, the national product over successive time periods, however close those periods might be: its composition has changed in the meantime, and the methods that have been invented to get around the celebrated problem of index numbers are artifices that are not very rigorous. That does not undermine the truth of such statements as “Production this year has fallen off relative to the previous year” or “Working-class consumption has increased considerably for a century,” but it does make calculations and forecasts to the third or fourth decimal point, which are regularly practiced in national accounting, simply ridiculous.¹⁶

- Political economy goes on and on about “capital” as a factor of production, intending thereby the entire set of produced means of production. Now, this set is not truly measurable, and it is not so for a number of

¹⁶T/E: Working for his day job from 1948 until 1970 at what became known as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Castoriadis eventually became its Director of the Branch of Statistics, National Accounts, and Growth Studies. Castoriadis already made a similar point in “From Ecology to Autonomy” (1981; now in [CR](#), 242), where he specifically mentions the French president of the time; Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, “who claims to be an economic specialist[,] ...held forth in the Chamber of Deputies with a three-hour speech in which he laid out statistics rounded to four decimal places.” And in this capacity at the OECD, Castoriadis seemed to take delight, at least retrospectively, in “making Giscard d’Estaing come back from his vacation in ’62-’63, when he had made a pseudoplan for stabilization, a piece of stupidity” (see p. 15 of the “Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview: Cerisy Colloquium (1990)”: <https://www.agorainternational.org/enccaiint.pdf>).

reasons: its composition is heterogeneous; the valuations at market prices of the goods that go to make it up [*qui le composent*] can change from day to day, depending upon the state of demand and profit expectations; the technical inventions that are intervening all the time constantly modify the “value” of the elements that make it up (new machines may lose all their value if better performing ones appear on the market); and changes in “tastes”—that is to say, more or less lasting modifications in the structure of demand—also modify the “value” of these elements. That certainly does not keep textbooks of political economy, and even Nobel Prize winners, from going on about “production functions” and arguing over the most appropriate form they should take.

- Differential calculus, on the other hand, deals with continuous magnitudes, whereas economic quantities are discrete (whether one takes them “physically” or one takes their valuations in current prices). The derivatives and differentials that fill up economic texts are a mockery of mathematics. All the “marginal” curves—of costs, of “utility,” and so forth—are thoroughly meaningless. True, the same question of principle appears in quantum physics, where differential calculus is used even though the phenomena are probably a discrete subjacent structure. But observable reality is nonetheless sufficiently “pseudocontinuous” to justify this form of treatment, as is shown, moreover, by the scientific effectiveness of the methods of physics. (The same thing holds for the equations of statistical thermodynamics.) One can “interpolate” the points of an alleged curve on the basis of some extremely close

observable values, and one can therefore calculate something like a derivative. But a graph upon which only a few points can be determined rules out treatment via mathematical analysis. This is true in all areas of the economy, but quite particularly so when it is a question of capital and production. To take a striking but in no way exceptional example, an airline company that wants to increase its transport capacity can do so only by purchasing units that cost tens of millions of dollars a piece.

- All this boils down to saying that the notion of *function* in economics lacks validity. A function is a law that connects in absolutely rigid fashion one or several values of the independent variable to one and only one value of the dependent variable. But even supposing that these variables could be measured, such rigid relations are quite simply nonexistent in economics. There are certainly a great number of approximate regularities; without them, the real life of the economy would be impossible. But the correct appreciation of these regularities and their adequate utilization by the economy's actors pertain to an art, not to a "science." One can be roughly assured that, if demand for a commodity increases in relation to a more or less fixed supply, the price of the commodity will rise. But it is absurd to try to say mathematically how much it is going to do so. Likewise, an increase in demand will, in general, entail an increase in production. But the distribution of the purchasing power of the additional demand between an increase in price and an increase in supply (in production) depends upon a host of factors that are not measurable and, truly speaking, are not always assignable: for

example, the degree of oligopoly in the branch under consideration, the various firms’ estimations of the fleeting or lasting character of the increase in demand, and so forth. The very possibilities for an increase in supply (in production) in such a case are not really determinable *a priori*. Production capacity in fixed capital is precisely determined only in a few exceptional branches (blast-furnaces, etc.). For most manufacturing industries, this capacity can vary from a factor of one to almost three, depending upon whether or not it is possible to pass from one work shift to two or three shifts. The degree to which fixed capital may be used is fuzzy, and, to a lesser degree, the same thing holds for how intensely labor-power may be utilized. More generally, to speak of “laws” in economics is a monstrous abuse of language—beyond, once again, a few trivial cases that are not themselves liable to rigorous quantitative treatment. Even over a short period of time, in a “static” economy, the system’s state and its evolution basically depend upon the actions and reactions of individuals, groups, and classes, which are not subject to fixed kinds of determinism. This holds even more so for how things evolve over the medium and long term. Such an evolution is determined in part by the pace and the content of technological changes, which are by their essence unforeseeable. If they were foreseeable, they would have been achieved instantaneously, as Joan Robinson already remarked in 1951.¹⁷ This evolution is determined, on the other

¹⁷“If future innovation were foreseen in full detail it would begin to be made at once” (Joan Robinson, “Notes on the Economics of Technical

hand, by the attitude of business firms, which, beyond other “irrational” factors, is motivated by their expectations (for whose correctness there is no guarantee). It is determined, finally, by the behavior of the laboring class, which is just as slightly foreseeable (their tendency to lodge demands, for example, as well as the possibility of doing so with success, is subject to psychological, political, and other factors).

- Finally, the main arguments [*l’essentiel des raisonnements*] of academic economics concern the study of positions of “equilibrium” and of the conditions for their fulfillment. The obsession with equilibrium has two roots, both of which are ideological. Positions of “equilibrium” are chosen, since they alone allow determinate and univocal solutions: systems of coupled equations here provide a mask of rigorous scientificness. On the other hand, equilibria are almost always presented as equivalent to “optimized” situations (“clearing” markets, fully-employed factors, consumers achieving maximum satisfaction, and so on). The result was that, until the 1930s, persistent disequilibria—or catastrophic or nonoptimizing “equilibria” (the “equilibria” of monopolistic or oligopolistic markets, which involve an additional overexploitation of consumers, or the “equilibria” of underemployment)—have tended to be masked or to be relegated to footnotes. Someone (Arthur Cecil Pigou) had even succeeded in the exploit of

Progress,” in *The Rate of Interest and Other Essays* [London: Macmillan, 1952], p. 56). One encounters this argument in some of Karl Popper’s later writings, which were also designed to show the unforeseeability of technical progress.

presenting situations of massive unemployment as more or less satisfactory positions of “equilibrium,” explaining that unemployed workers had in reality “withdrawn from the market” because they were rejecting an infinitesimal drop in their wages in order to find employment. (These kinds of stupidities are still in full force today, when it is claimed that unemployment in Europe could be resorbed if only the “labor supply” became more “flexible,” that is to say, if workers accepted wage and benefit cuts.) Now, the permanent situation of the capitalist economy is that of a succession of changing disequilibria, the result of which is to make both expectations iffy and the structure of “capital” as well as of demand that exists at every moment full of “fossils” (Joan Robinson).

The Effective Reality of the Capitalist Economy

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*¹⁸

For a very long time, the new “economic science” was preoccupied only with factors that determine the prices of

¹⁸T/E: Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, in *Alice in Wonderland. Authoritative Texts of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass, The Hunting of the Snark; Backgrounds, Essays in Criticism*, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2nd ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1992), p. 57.

particular commodities under conditions of static “equilibrium.” Economists believed or feigned to believe that the same factors that determine the price of an “ideal” commodity under “ideal” conditions (perfect competition, and so on) would determine nearly all prices (including the “price of labor” and the “price of capital”), which would in turn determine everything of importance that happens in the economy: its overall equilibrium, the distribution of national income, the allocation of produced resources among various categories of users and use, and—though this question remained veiled in a misty haze—its long-term evolution. All that was supposed to, with a few corrections, derive from the curves of costs and marginal utilities—which could always be “proved,” on the cheap, to intersect at optimal points of “equilibrium.” That the basic characteristic of capitalism might be the abrupt and violent upheaval of the economy and of society, therefore the incessant reproduction of discontinuities, did not seem to make them lose any sleep.

This tune continues to be murmured *sotto voce* by the academic economists of today, but no one seems to be taking it seriously any longer. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the fiction of perfect, pure and perfect, or perfectly perfect competition has gone up in a puff of smoke—I shall return to this below—and that it is impossible, even on paper, to get from the reality of oligopolistic markets to general “equilibria” that optimize something other than the profits of oligopolies or, more precisely, of the clans that run them. Still more, the *effective* globalization of capitalist production, with the colossal differences in the conditions of production it is bringing out between formerly industrialized countries and “emergent” countries, makes it simply ridiculous to postulate even approximate market homogeneity of “factors of production” on the planetary scale.

For the “classical” phase of capitalism, or until around 1975, any economic analysis that might have wanted to maintain some relevance to reality and to those aspects of the economy that matter for the state of society and its evolution was faced with three groups of problems. The first, which was clearly defined by Ricardo and taken up again by Marx, is that of the distribution of the social product (“national income”). It highly influences the allocation of resources among categories (“sectors”) of production. The second is that of the ratio between the available productive resources (“capital” and labor) and effective social demand, a ratio upon which the full employment or the underemployment of these resources depends. It is closely connected with the third one: that of the evolution of the economy, that is to say, the effectively actual or desirable growth of production. These three groups are closely connected, since, for example, income distribution is the principal factor regulating the distribution of resources, which in turn plays a key role in the quantity as well as in the content of investment, and thereby in future evolutions of the economy.

If one skips over the details, the qualifications that need to be made, and specific cases, and if in a first stage one abstracts from foreign trade (for example, by considering a supposedly near-homogeneous world economy), the answer to these questions is astonishingly simple. Income distribution among social classes and, within each of these classes, among social groups evolves basically in terms of the relation of forces that exists among them. As a first approximation, let us say that this distribution regulates the allocation of resources between consumption and investment. Roughly speaking, laboring people consume what they earn, while the propertied

classes earn what they spend;¹⁹ the latter consume a small portion of their income and invest the bulk of it—or they do not invest it, in which case it disappears, and at the same time, then, an unemployment situation appears. The distribution of investment between industries producing consumer goods and industries producing the means of production is also determined thereby. The “overall equilibrium”—approximate equality between supply capacity, or employment of available capital and labor power, and effective (that is, solvent) demand—depends in the first place upon the quantity of investment. If one takes as given the total wages and incomes of the propertied classes that are earmarked for consumption, there will be equilibrium only if business enterprises invest nearly enough to soak up the productive capacity of the industries that produce the means of production. Nothing prevents them from doing so. But also, nothing guarantees that they will do so. That depends upon numerous factors, the principal one of which is molded by their expectations concerning future demand for their products.²⁰ Few reasonable things can be said *a priori* and in general about these expectations. Whence the recurrent fluctuations in the level of activity and the “accidents” that can go so far as to

¹⁹French Editors: Here Castoriadis takes up Kaldor’s formula about the Kaleckian theory of distribution.

²⁰Keynes added to this the “cost” of investment measured by the rate of interest. But, for the bands that matter, variations in the rate of interest are less decisive than profit outlooks. And above all, their effects are dissymmetric. The central banks can choke off a period of expansion with large interest-rate hikes; they can sustain one much less easily, not to say not at all. Witness the numerous cases since 1945, and again now [T/E: 1997] in Germany, in France, and especially in Japan. Real rates in France and in Germany are at their lowest levels for a long time, while in Japan the discount rate is 0.5 percent and bond yields are lower than 2 percent.

become major depressions or phases of high inflation. If, as a first approximation, one considers the pace of technical progress (therefore also of the rise in labor productivity) to be nearly constant, these same expectations and the level of investment they dictate will determine the economy's rate of growth over the longer term. They will be, in this case, highly influenced in their tendency by the entire past experience of the capitalist economy, which is that of average expansion. Over the “long term,” therefore, there will be a bias toward growth—but also a significant margin of uncertainty at each particular instant for each particular company, which, when combined with the rebound effects of previous fluctuations upon existing fixed capital, rules out there ever being a long-term, balanced, and “steady” growth. This general framework can and should, of course, be filled in by a consideration of other factors (acceleration or slackening of technical progress, variations in demographic movement, opening of new geographical zones of exploitation, and so on).

Nothing in all the foregoing allows one to speak of a guaranteed equilibrium, or of an optimal rate of growth or level of production, or of a maximization of social utility, or of a remuneration of labor according to its “marginal product,” or of a natural rate of profit or of interest, or of any of the other cupids and nymphs that populate textbooks of economics. Specifically, firms' profits are not determined by the “marginal cost” of their product (which, in normal times, sets only a lower bound for their selling prices) but, rather, by the price they can obtain (impose, extort) for their product, given the state of demand. By itself alone, this rules out any discussion about the “rationality” of the allocation of resources in the economy.

Here are a number of facts that go to show concretely of what, under capitalism, economic “rationality” is made:

- Each firm invests in the first place in its own production line, and not where profit would be “marginally higher” (therefore “socially preferable”). If it ventures to invest in other sectors, this is because it foresees therein a *tangibly* higher rate of profit.
- When not engaged in a monopoly or a producer combine of one form or another, almost all firms (including neighborhood shops) are in an oligopolistic and not competitive situation.
- This fact turns the notions of “commodity” as a homogeneous product and of “sector” as a set of firms producing “the same product” into a bunch of fuzzy ideas.
- A firm’s decisions to invest or not to invest, to raise or to lower production, are made with information that is full of holes as well as biased. In big firms, these decisions are the result of internal battles of “experts” and bureaucratic clans (and not of the rational “decision-making processes” of Herbert Alexander Simon,²¹ and so on). They are highly biased in favor of keeping the ruling team in place, as the studies of Robin Marris had shown as early as the 1960s.
- On account of the bureaucratization of the firm and the resistance of the workers, the firm’s internal situation remains, to a greater or lesser degree, opaque to its directors.²²

²¹T/E: Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization* (1945), reprint (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

²²See my 1958 *Socialisme ou Barbarie* text, “On the Content of Socialism, III: The Workers’ Struggle against the Organization of the Capitalist Enterprise,” in [PSW2](#).

- The “capital (as well as credit) market” is totally “imperfect,” because the available funds, as was already stated, are directed as a priority toward the places where they have been acquired, because the situation of borrowers remains opaque, and because of the very strong ties that exist between banking and industry.
- Closely connected with the preceding point, we may state that “capital,” as the power to dispose of productive resources and, in particular, of others’ labor, is dissociated in part from ownership or possession of amounts of securities. The basic thing is the possibility of having *access* to such resources, which can be assured via other paths (for example, bank credit).
- The market “valuation” of existing businesses is of nebulous value, for it depends upon expectations concerning their future profits *and* the forecasted “average rate” of profit.
- Production (like the labor market, up to a certain point) is full of guaranteed incomes [*rentes de situation*].
- Private ownership of the land creates an absolute ground rent (Marx) that does not have and cannot have any economic justification.
- Labor-power is not a commodity. Its production and reproduction are not and cannot be regulated by a “market.”²³

²³I have developed this point numerous times: “Sur la dynamique du capitalisme,” *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 12 (August-September 1953): 1-22 [T/E: we hope to translate this two-part text, now in *EP8*, for the projected eighth volume of Castoriadis’s *Political Writings*]; “Modern Capitalism

- Actual labor output (or the effective rate of pay/physical output)²⁴ is largely indeterminate.

In the present phase of capitalism, that is, since approximately the early 1970s, all the foregoing remains true, but new factors are upsetting the overall perspective. Thus, the effective globalization of production—which is made possible by new developments both technological (briefly put: the nearly total reduction, quantitatively speaking, of the importance of labor skills in physical production, thus putting billions of starving people throughout the world at the disposal of world capital) and political (the disarmament of governments in matters of economic policy, in particular the total liberation of international capital flows)—has had the apparently paradoxical effect of destroying the homogeneity of world economic conditions for production at the very moment when a truly world market was being established. Every discussion about the determination of prices or of anything else—including capitalist profits—by “rational” factors becomes, under these conditions, ridiculous. I shall return to this point in the last part of the present text.

Relative Efficiency, Flexibility, and Resistance of Capitalism

The best justification for capitalism is the one Joseph Alois Schumpeter offered at the end of his life in *Capitalism*,

and Revolution” (1960-1961), now in [PSW2](#); and “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us” (1975); now in [CLI](#).

²⁴See my book *DG*, 132, n. 1 (147-48, n. 1 of the 1983 reprint).

Socialism and Democracy. It was summarized by Joan Robinson as follows: The system is certainly “cruel, unjust, turbulent, but it does deliver the goods, and, damn it all, it’s the goods that you want.”²⁵

Here again, the justification is circular. In the “wealthy” countries, people “want” these goods because they are raised from their tenderest years to want them (go visit an elementary school today, if you doubt it) and because the regime prevents them, in a thousand and one ways, from wanting anything else. In all countries, they want them because, while capitalism did not invent *ab ovo* what is called the demonstration effect,²⁶ it has raised it to a hitherto unknown degree of power. For the moment, capitalism still manages somehow or other to deliver these goods. Here, the discussion can only stop: as long as people want this pile of junk, which is accumulating in a more and more haphazard way for a growing number of people, and with which they one day may or may not become saturated, the situation will not change.

Yet a few questions remain. Despite all its limitations,

²⁵Joan Robinson, *Economic Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 130.

²⁶T/E: “Demonstration effect: The stimulation of consumer demand through advertising, displays of greater varieties of goods, and similar means. Such actions may increase consumer purchases even when consumer income has remained stable..., both on an individual or family level and on an international level. For example, through massive international distribution (and advertising), the Coca-Cola Company manages to sell its products in many countries where per capita income is well below the subsistence level and cash might more rationally be spent on necessities” (Christine Ammer and Dean S. Ammer, *Dictionary of Business and Economics*, rev. and expanded edition [New York and London: The Free Press, 1984], p. 126).

how far does this “efficiency” of capitalism go, and upon what is it based? What makes the regime capable of surviving a long series of crises and historical vicissitudes, and, up to a certain moment at least, of exiting from them reinforced? In these regards, what changes might its new phase entail?

The answer to the first question is not so difficult. Capitalism is the regime that aims, by every means, at increasing production—a certain kind of production, let us not forget—and, by every means, at reducing “costs”—costs, let us not forget either, that are defined very restrictively: neither the destruction of the environment, nor the flattening of human lives, nor the ugliness of cities, nor the universal triumph of irresponsibility and cynicism, nor the replacement of tragedy and popular festival by televised sitcoms is taken into account in this calculation, nor could they be taken into account in any calculation of this type. To achieve this end, capitalism has known how to and has been able to count on a kind of technological development that is unprecedented in history and that it has itself promoted in a thousand ways. True, this technology is itself narrowly oriented, but it is adequate to the ends being pursued: might for those who dominate, mass consumption for the majority of those who are dominated, as well as the destruction of the meaning of work and the elimination of man’s human role in production. But its most formidable means has been the destruction of all prior social significations and the instillation, in the soul of everyone or almost everyone, of a rage to acquire what, in each’s sphere, is or appears within reach, and, for that, to accept practically everything. This enormous anthropological mutation can be elucidated and understood, not “explained.”

To these means was added, from a certain point in time and not at all from the start, the transformation of an institutional mechanism of the greatest antiquity, the market,

rid of every impediment and gradually extended to all spheres of social life. This market is not, has never been, and will never be, so long as capitalism exists, a “perfect” market or even a truly competitive one in the pious sense of textbooks of political economy. It has always been characterized by interventions of state might, capitalist coalitions, withholding of information, manipulation of consumers, and outright or camouflaged violence against laboring people. It differs little from a moderately savage jungle. And like in every jungle, those fittest to survive have survived and do survive—except that this fitness to survive does not coincide with any social optimum, or even with maximum production, since production is impeded by capital concentration, oligopolies, and monopolies, not to mention irrational allocations of resources, unused capacity, and permanent conflict around production in places of work. But through these ups and downs, booms and crashes, it has somehow or other functioned within its limits and according to its own goals [*ses finalités*].

The answer to the second question, if indeed there is one at all, is more difficult and complex. It is basically paradoxical. Left to itself, the minimization of costs logically implies the lowest possible wages for the highest possible productivity. It is toward a situation of this type that capitalism was spontaneously oriented during the first half of the nineteenth century, and it is this logic that Marx extrapolated with his conceptions of immiseration and overproduction. Working-class struggles were what thwarted this tendency, forcing increases in wages and reductions in working time that created enormous domestic consumer markets and kept capitalism from drowning in its own production. One has also seen, as one knows, and as can be proved—Keynes had done it—that, left to itself, the system is

not spontaneously led toward achieving an “equilibrium,” however approximate that might be, but rather toward alternating phases of expansion and contraction—economic crises—the most violent of which can bring about, and did bring about, a considerable destruction of accumulated wealth and breathtakingly high levels of unemployment—30 percent of the labor force in the United States in 1933. Now, here again, starting in 1933 and first of all in the United States, social and political reactions forced new policies favoring state intervention in the economy.

In both cases—distribution of the social product, role of the State—the capitalist establishment in both banking and academia violently combated these crazy innovations that were threatening to bring an end to the world. For a long time, the bosses did not just demand (and obtain) the army’s intervention against striking workers; they proclaimed that it was impossible for them to grant wage increases or reductions in the working day without ruining their companies and society as a whole. And they always found professors of political economy to tell them that they were right. Jacques Rueff, the hero of French economic policy, was the one who organized the “Laval deflation” of 1932, while on the other side of the Channel the Treasury and the Bank of England were piling up memoranda to prove that any use of public works to boost demand back up would bring about an economic catastrophe.

It was only after the Second World War that more or less regular wage increases and state regulation of overall demand were generally accepted by employers and academic economists alike. This resulted in the longest phase of practically uninterrupted capitalist expansion (the “long boom,” or *les Trente Glorieuses*—the thirty glorious years—as is said in French). As Kalecki had foreseen as early

as 1943, the consequence was going to be an upward pressure on wages and prices, and that is what clearly began to manifest itself starting in the 1960s. Nothing indicates that it could not have been moderated by moderate policies. But here, a properly political factor came into play. This moderately inflationary situation gave the signal, and offered the pretext, for a reactionary counteroffensive (Thatcher, Reagan), a sort of conservative counterrevolution, which has spread all over the planet since the early 1980s. On the political level, this counteroffensive exploited the bankruptcy of the traditional "left-wing" parties, the trade unions' enormous loss of influence, the monstrosity, now manifest, of the regimes of "actually existing socialism" even before their collapse, the apathy and privatization of whole populations, and their growing irritation with the hypertrophic growth and absurdity of state bureaucracies. Aside from the last one, all these factors express, directly or indirectly, the crisis of the social-historical project of individual and collective autonomy. The great imbalance in the relations of social forces that resulted therefrom has allowed a return to a blind and brutal form of "Liberalism,"²⁷ the principal beneficiaries of which are, certainly, the big industrial and financial firms and the groups that run them. But this "Liberalism" far exceeds their political role; in France, in Spain, and in several Nordic countries, it has been the so-called Socialist parties that have taken it upon themselves to introduce and to impose, or (in the case of Great Britain) to maintain, Neoliberalism. We are witnessing the unmitigated triumph of the capitalist imaginary under its crudest and coarsest forms.

This imaginary was materialized basically through the

²⁷T/E: "Liberalism" in the Continental sense of conservative ideological advocacy of a "free market."

dismantling of the State's role in the economic area. International movements of capital have been freed of all controls, the fetishism for balanced budgets forbids any policy of demand regulation, and monetary policy has passed entirely into the hands of central banks, whose sole concern is to struggle against a henceforth nonexistent inflation. Since the early 1980s, the result has been the maintenance of a high level of unemployment; where unemployment has receded, as in the United States and in Great Britain, it has been at the price of a proliferation of part-time or low-paid jobs and a stagnation of or reduction in real wages, which has taken place in parallel with a continual increase in company profits and in income for the wealthiest classes. The head-on attack against wages and benefits previously attained by laboring people, which has been made possible by hikes in unemployment and job instability, is justified by blackmail of the following sort: Labor costs must be reduced in order to face up to foreign competition or to avoid factory relocations. Perhaps one is pretending in this way to make believe that wage cuts of a few percentage points in France or in Germany would be enough to struggle to victory against production in countries where wages are a tenth or a twentieth of ours (US\$2.50 a day for Nike workers penned in this firm's *ergastula* in Indonesia, and still less in Vietnam). No amount of "labor flexibility" in the old industrialized countries could resist competition from the miserably paid manpower of countries that contain an inexhaustible reservoir of labor power. Quickly, and practically without any need for training, hundreds of millions of potential working men and women can be mobilized in China, as many in India, almost as many in the other countries of Asia, not to mention Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe. And it is ridiculous to claim that a smooth transition might lead countries with such gaping

differences in their initial conditions to reach a state involving a harmonious international division of labor. We are witnessing a brutal, savage transitional phase on a much vaster scale, and over a much shorter lapse of time, than the other transitional phases that have occurred in the history of capitalism. Some people are trying to justify this new phase under the absurd pretext that the present course is unavoidable, that no policy can resist the juggernaut of the present evolution of the economy.

In such a situation, there is no point in discussing any “rationality” of capitalism whatsoever. The regime has shunted aside on its own the few means of control 150 years of political, social, and ideological struggles had succeeded in imposing upon it. The lawless [*anémique*] domination of the predatory “barons” of industry and finance in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century offers us but a pale precedent. Transnational firms, financial speculation, and even Mafias in the strict sense of the term are now roving the planet, and they are guided solely by the short-term view of their profits. The repeated failure of every attempt to protect the environment against the effects of industrialization, both civilized and savage, is only the most spectacular sign of their myopia. The foreseeable and terrifying effects of “modernizing” the other four-fifths of the world play no role in guiding present-day policies.²⁸

The ensuing outlook is not that of a general “economic crisis” of capitalism in the traditional sense. In the abstract, capitalism (global companies) might do better and better until the day the sky falls on our heads. That would suppose,

²⁸In “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality,’” I was already talking about the foreseeable effects of the industrialization of “undeveloped” countries, and I surely was not the first person to do so.

among other things, that the ruination of the old industrialized countries, particularly in Europe, and the exit of billions of persons from their age-old world in order to enter into technicized, wage-earning, urban societies in the as-yet-unindustrialized countries might be able to pass off without major social and political hitches. That is one possible perspective. It is not certain that it is the most probable one.

Analysis can go as far as to pose these kinds of questions. The rest depends upon the reactions and actions of the populations of the countries concerned.

September 1996—August 1997

Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads*

I am going to speak about the imaginary and the imagination from the standpoint of the crisis they are undergoing today in Western societies. This is a crisis of the social instituting imaginary, a crisis of the imagination of singular human beings. That is why the title of this presentation is “Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads.”

And first of all, why *imaginary*? A few words undoubtedly must be said, at this festival, about this notion. I say *imaginary*, because the history of humanity is the history of the human imaginary and its works. I am talking about the history and the works of the radical imaginary, which appears as soon as there is a human collectivity: there is the instituting social imaginary, which creates the institution in general (the *form* institution) and the particular institutions of the society under consideration, and there is the radical imagination of the singular human being.

Just a few words about the notion’s destiny in the history of philosophy. Within this history, the notion of imaginary has been either ignored or mistreated. As for the imagination, it was recognized first by Aristotle, who, so to speak, discovered it and caught sight of its essential features—for example, that the soul never thinks without phantasm, that is to say, without imaginary representation—but who arrived at the question of the imagination nearly at the end of his treatise *On the Soul* and then abandoned it to carry on with

*“Imaginaire et imagination au carrefour” is a speech given in Abrantes, Portugal, in November 1996, at the invitation of the La Preia association. Published in *FP*, 93-114 (113-38 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: The present translation was first published in [FTPK](#).]

the thread of his original presentation. The question returned a few times among the neo-Platonic philosophers in the first centuries of our era, but later on the imagination was treated more or less as a “psychological faculty,” employing the most facile and banal features of Aristotle’s presentation, and this up until the eighteenth century. During the second half of that century, and related to the interest evinced in that age for the questions of taste and art, the term began to appear often in the writings of a number of English and Scottish Enlightenment authors, then in Germany. In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant discovered what he called the *transcendental imagination*—that is to say, the imagination that is required so that there might be certain and not empirical knowledge. But in the second edition of this same *Critique*, he reduced its role and its importance considerably. The notion returned in force with Johann Gottlieb Fichte, then the question sank, philosophically speaking, into oblivion until 1929, when Martin Heidegger, in his book *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, rediscovered the notion of the imagination as a philosophical notion. He rediscovered Kant’s discovery of the imagination, noted that, between the first and second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had recoiled from this question and occulted it himself, and tried to give anew to the imagination an essential place in the human being’s relation to the world. And then, a third repetition in this history, after his 1929 book Heidegger no longer spoke of the imagination at all.

Yet ultimately it can be said that, for better or worse, there has been this treatment of the imagination in the history of philosophy, with its successive coverings-over. But what one would search for in vain is what I call the *instituting social imaginary*, that is to say, the recognition of this fundamental fact that one can “explain” neither the birth of

society nor the ways in which history evolves by natural, biological, or other such factors any more than by some “rational” activity of a “rational” being (man). One observes in history, from its origin, the emergence of the radically new; and if one doesn’t try to have recourse to transcendent factors in order to account for it, one really has to postulate a creative potential, a *vis formandi*, that is immanent to human collectivities as well as to singular human beings. From then on, it is entirely natural to call *imaginary* and *imagination* this faculty of radical novation, creation, and formation. Language, customs, norms, and technique cannot “be explained” by factors external to human collectivities. No natural, biological, or logical factor can account for them. At the very most, they can constitute their necessary (most of the time external and trivial) conditions, never their sufficient conditions.

We therefore must grant that there is in human collectivities a creative potential, a *vis formandi*, which I call *the instituting social imaginary*. Why has philosophy been unable to recognize this necessity, and why does it still now recoil with horror and irritation before this idea? I am always being asked, What is this instituting imaginary? Whose imagination is it? Show us the individuals who...or the factors that..., and so on. But we have here precisely a constitutive faculty of human collectivities and, more generally, of the social-historical field. What in this affair ruffles and irritates the representatives of the inherited philosophy, as well as those of established science, is the need to recognize the collective imaginary, as well as the radical imagination of the singular human being, as a potential for creation. Here creation means creation *ex nihilo*, the making be of a form that wasn’t there, the creation of new forms of being. Ontological creation: of forms like language, the

institution, music, painting—or else of such and such a particular form, this or that musical, pictorial, poetical, etc. work. Why does the inherited philosophy find it impossible to recognize the fact of creation? Because this philosophy is either theological, therefore reserving creation for God—creation has taken place once and for all, or it is continual divine creation—or rationalist and deterministic and therefore has to deduce all that is on the basis of first principles (and upon what basis then will one deduce first principles?) or else produce it on the basis of causes (and upon what basis then does one produce first causes?). But creation appertains to being in general—I won't go on at more length about that since today we are not in a philosophy seminar—and creation appertains in a dense and massive way to social-historical being, as is attested to by the creation of society as such, of different societies, and the slow or sudden incessant historical alteration of these societies.

How is one to detail this work of the instituting social imaginary? It consists, on the one hand, in institutions. But a look at these institutions shows that they are animated by—or are bearers and conveyors of—significations, significations that refer neither to reality nor to logic; that's why I call them social imaginary significations. Thus, God, the God of monotheistic religions, is a social imaginary signification, borne and conveyed by a host of institutions—such as the Church. But so also are the gods of polytheistic religions or founding heroes, totems, taboos, fetishes, and so on. When we speak of the State, we're talking about an institution animated by imaginary significations. The same goes for capital, commodities (Marx's "social hieroglyph"), and so on.

Once created, both social imaginary significations and institutions crystallize or solidify, and that's what I call the *instituted social imaginary*. The latter assures a society's

continuity, the reproduction and repetition of the same forms, which thenceforth rule men's lives and remain there so long as a slow historical change or a massive new creation doesn't come to modify or radically replace them with other ones.

Let us consider the imagination of the singular human being. Here we have the essential determination (the essence) of the human psyche. This psyche is radical imagination first of all inasmuch as it is flux or incessant flow of representations, desires, and affects. This flow is continual emergence. You can try to close your eyes, stop up your ears—there will always be something. This thing happens “within”: images, recollections, wishes, fears, “states of mind” surge forth in a way that sometimes we can understand or even “explain,” and other times absolutely not. There is here no “logical” thought, save by way of an exception and discontinuously. The elements are not bound together in a rational or even reasonable fashion; there is surging forth, indissociable mixture. There are above all representations without any functionality. One can think that animals, in any case higher animals, have a certain representation of their world, but this representation—and what composes this representation—is regulated in functional fashion; it contains essentially what is necessary for the animal to live and to continue its species. But in the human being, imagination is defunctionalized. Humans can be made to kill for glory. What's the “functionality” of glory? At most, it will be a name written on a monument, itself eminently perishable. Glory is the subjective corollary of a social imaginary value that constitutes one pole of the activity of humans, of some of them at least, and that brings into existence a desire directed toward it. Or, what are the various human affects, in particular the less banal affects—for example, the affect of nostalgia? This is a creation of the psyche's radical imagination.

If human beings were given over fully and exclusively to this radical imagination, they would not be able to survive; they would not have survived. This flow is not necessarily bound either to logic or to reality; at the outset, it is entirely alien to these, and the desires that surge forth don't bear the subject toward a life lived in common. One of the most powerful affects that is encountered there and that manifests itself or doesn't manifest itself for all to see, is for example the affect of hate, which can go as far as a desire for murder. I often say in joking that someone who hasn't felt at least once a year a death wish toward someone else is seriously ill and ought to go consult a psychoanalyst as soon as possible. The "natural" reaction when someone poses an obstacle to us is to wish for him to disappear—and that, as one knows, can go as far as acting upon the wish. This radical imagination of human beings must therefore be tamed, channeled, regulated, and made to conform to life in society and also to what we call "reality." That is done via their socialization, during which they absorb the institution of society and its significations, internalize them, learn language, the categorization of things, what is just and unjust, what can be done and what is not to be done, what must be adored and what must be hated. When this socialization takes place, the most important manifestations of radical imagination are, up to a certain point, stifled, its expression is made to conform and becomes repetitive. Under these conditions, society as a whole is heteronomous. But heteronomous, too, are the individuals of such a society, who only in appearance exercise judgment; in fact, they judge according to social criteria. Besides, we shouldn't overly flatter ourselves. Even in our societies, a huge quantity of individuals are in fact heteronomous; they judge only according to conventions and "public opinion."

Societies in which the possibility of and the capacity for calling the established institutions and significations into question are a tiny exception in the history of humanity. In fact, we have only two examples of such societies: a first example in ancient Greece, with the birth of democracy and philosophy, and a second example in Western Europe, after the long heteronomous period of the Middle Ages.

A very important, and key, phenomenon for our discussion today is that the history of societies is marked by “pulsating” processes: phases of dense and strong creation alternate therein with phases of creative sluggishness [*atonie*] and regression. Examples abound. Obviously, all these examples belong to historical societies, since we cannot say much about the other ones. It’s possible that the disappearance of “Homeric”—Minoan and Mycenaean—civilization might not be due solely or even essentially to invasions or earthquakes but to processes of “domestic” disintegration. We don’t know anything about that, at least for the moment.

One case where a society, after an epoch of rich and intense creativity, entered into a period of decline is that of ancient Greece and, notably, the city of Athens. The truly creative era unfolded until the end of the fifth century, until the end of the Peloponnesian War, when philosophy, democracy, and tragedy—not to mention the other arts and sciences—emerged. Then, starting in the fourth century, nothing much happened any longer. Certainly, society continued to forge ahead with creation, and there is notably the paradox that two of the most important philosophers ever to have existed, Plato and Aristotle, belong to this same fourth century, yet they come after the great period of creation. This is, moreover, the probably unique and, in any case, flagrant case that offers an illustration of Hegel’s much-talked-about

phrase that philosophy appears only when the works of the day are ended, like Minerva's bird taking flight only at nightfall.¹ (Literally speaking, this statement is false: philosophy took flight in Greece at nearly the same time that Greek political creation began, and things didn't happen otherwise in Modern Times. The phrase expresses only Hegel's wish that the history of humanity in the strong sense of the term might draw to a close with his own system.) In any case, after the victory of Macedonia, of Philip and of Alexander, came the appearance of Hellenistic or Alexandrian civilization—which is rather comparable, if I may be allowed to look ahead from there, to our own situation: no great creation, just eclecticism, endless commentaries (which are, moreover, quite precious); the philology and the art of the grammarians developed then, and various technical forms and forms of knowledge continued to “progress,” but (with the remarkable exception of mathematics) there was no great manifestation of truly innovative radical imagination.

An analogous case is that of the Roman Empire after the first century of our era. Decisively conditioned by the internal evolution of imperial Roman society and by the decomposition of the social imaginary significations that underlay its institutions, its fall was merely facilitated by the Germanic invasions. The barbarians had been knocking at the gates of the Roman dominion from the first century before our era, but they had successfully been driven back until the end of the second century. The Empire's domestic decline at that moment is too flagrant for one to contest its existence without

¹T/E: G. W. F. Hegel, “Preface,” *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21: “the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.”

a lot of quibbling.

Similar major instances will be found everywhere one knows about societies' evolution: in Egypt, in the Middle East, in India, in China, and as far away as Meso-America.

The important thing here, from the standpoint of elucidating history, is the failure of "explanations." That isn't surprising. No more than there is any "explanation" of phases of creation in history, or of the moment they arise, or of the content of this creation can one "explain" the appearance of phases of decline, the moment they supervene, the content they take on. A host of partial facts can be assembled that seem to make these alternations more comprehensible, yet that won't furnish a true "explanation" of them. There are no "laws" governing the radical imaginary, its phases of blossoming or the phases when it fades away. And obviously no "explanation" is furnished by Oswald Spengler's biological and botanical images.

I have already noted above that, during the Hellenistic period as well as during the late period of the Roman Empire, there continues to be a certain amount of technical development (and also that this reminds us of what is going on today). We are thus led to posit a distinction that forces itself upon us for other reasons, as well. It is the distinction between culture in the strict sense of the term and the purely functional dimension of social life. Culture is the domain of the imaginary in the strict sense, the poietic domain, what in a society goes beyond what is merely instrumental. Obviously, there is no society that would be without culture. No society is reduced to the functional and the instrumental. No human society is known that lives like bee or ant "societies." We always find therein some songs, some dances, decorations, things that "serve no purpose." These primitives, who had so much difficulty just living, succeeded in finding

time for such “stupid nonsense.” As we know, some prehistoric paintings have just been found in Portugal on the walls of Paleolithic caves that are probably among the oldest known.² They whiled away their time in these ill-lit grottos doing cave paintings. That was more important for them than developing the forces of production or maximizing the yield of their capital.

The distinction between what I call the poietical and the functional is obviously not in things; it is to be found in the relationship between the way in which things are made and the goal assigned to them [*leur finalité*]. A vase can be simply functional—a plastic vase, for example, serves its purpose—but it can equally be an admirable art object, like so many vases from Antiquity as well as Chinese or African vases. In the latter case, an essential dimension of what constitutes the vase eludes finality or goes beyond it: the beauty of a vase is “useless.” These two creations, the poietical and the functional, do not march at the same rhythm or in the same direction. Poietic creation can subside without that affecting creation in the functional domain: new inventions can be made, technical or even scientific development can continue. This is what, as was already said, happened during the Hellenistic period as well as after the end of the culturally creative phase of Roman history. In other cases, for example after the collapse of “Homeric” civilization or during the true European Middle Ages (from the fifth to eleventh century CE), poietical and functional regressions occur simultaneously. It is also possible for there to be periods of major poietic creation when the functional component of a society remains nearly stable; at least, this is what we are led to think in examining a number of archaic

²French Editors: This is the site at Foz Côa, on the upper Douro River.

societies whose cultures are profoundly different, whereas the way they are functionally instrumented seems roughly identical.

This differentiation, which Hegelo-Marxism completely covers over, adds still another dimension to the immense question of the *unity* of a society. How is one to think through the fact that two parts of the same body can run on different rhythms? How can two—or several—sectors of the life of one and the same society live with temporalities that are so different? I can only raise here these interrogatory questions, without attempting to elucidate them.

After Greece, the project of autonomy emerged anew with the birth of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe, this emergence starting to manifest itself in the eleventh-to-twelfth century. That was the beginning of the “modern” period in the broad sense. From this moment on, one observes that cultural creation gains, expands, and accelerates with a richness and with rhythmic variations that render it incompressible and almost uninspectable. It is practically impossible to write a history of European culture. It takes place everywhere: in Italy, in Spain, in Portugal, in France, in England, in the Germanic countries, in the Scandinavian countries, in the Slavic societies of Central and Eastern Europe; at different moments, different activities develop in different countries, and all that crosspollinates and interbreeds. This extraordinary profusion reaches a sort of pinnacle during the two centuries stretching between 1750 and 1950. This is a very specific period because of the very great *density* of cultural creation but also because of its very strong *subversiveness*.

I connect this explosion to the fact that the social-historical project of autonomy invaded society and haunted all its aspects. It took the form of the democratic movement, the revolutions of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and twentieth

centuries, the workers' movement, more recently the movement of women and youth. But what really matters to us here is what happened in the properly cultural domain. There, one witnesses the creation of new forms and new contents that had the quite explicit intention of effecting change, and this at a pace hitherto practically unknown in history, except perhaps in ancient Greece during the period around the fifth century.

As one knows, there was at the same time an enormous acceleration in technical inventions, incomparable to what could have been experienced in other phases and in other regions of the history of humanity. I am speaking about this here independently of the many-sided destructive effects such technical development was able to have. But this technical progress could not have "caused" the cultural upheavals that concern us. Such progress itself depended upon changes of capital importance in the scientific imaginary. It was during this period that the form chemistry, the form electricity, the theory of heat and thermodynamics, field theory (Michael Faraday, James Clerk Maxwell), as well as the theory of relativity and quantum theory, were, in the main, "created"; likewise, progress in medicine and applied biology are to be correlated with the emergence of a new biological science. And certainly the creation of new disciplines in the human domain, like sociology and psychoanalysis, is connected with the movement of society as a whole, not with technical developments. This is even truer for the great philosophical movements of the Enlightenment and then of German Idealism. The general movement toward the liberation of society, the questioning and the overthrow of the old political forms didn't halt at the gates of particular activities and disciplines, both in art and in philosophy and science.

One will perhaps be surprised if, in speaking of the

deployment of the poietic, I include therein not only philosophy but also science. Don't they both express a movement of "pure" Reason? I do so because, contrary to received ideas, the creative imagination plays a fundamental role in science as well as in philosophy. Every great philosophical work is an imaginary creation; it is creation of these particular significations that are philosophical significations. The latter are not "rational" products. The idea of *idea*, for example, doesn't proceed from an empirical induction or from a logical deduction—these latter two, rather, presuppose it. The same goes for ideas like *potentiality* and *actuality*, *cogito*, *monad*, or *transcendental*. These are great inventions, upon whose basis a set of facts concerning being, the world, nature, human thought and its relation to the other, and so on, are made clear. But the same goes for science. The great scientific advances proceed from the creation of new imaginary schemata; these are formed *under the constraint* of available experience but don't "follow" or "result" from that experience. By definition, a logical deduction cannot give birth to a new *hypothesis*. ("Induction" is only a nonrigorous deduction made on the basis of an incomplete set of facts combined with already existing rules, conclusions, and so on. A "new" fact can—though not necessarily—invalidate the prevailing hypotheses; it doesn't furnish even one ounce of new hypotheses. It's in this respect that Karl Popper's conception of "falsification" is fundamentally flawed. Falsification by a new observation can simply "refute" an existing conception, and even that isn't always the case: "falsified" theories persist for a long time, sometimes wrongly and often rightly. The situation will change only with the invention of a new hypothesis.) A physicist cannot formulate just any hypotheses; the new theories must account for known facts (that's the constraint)

and, if possible, predict new categories of hitherto unknown facts. That's what happened when great new imaginary schemata were posited, such as the Newtonian image of the universe, Faraday and Maxwell's idea of field, the successive schemata formulated by Albert Einstein, and so on.

There exists a profound kinship between art on the one hand, philosophy and science on the other. Not only does one see here and there the creative imagination at work, but art as well as philosophy and science try to give a form to the chaos: to the chaos that underlies the *cosmos*, the world, that is behind the successive strata of appearances. There is an indetermination to being in its depths that is the corollary of its creative potential, the infinite layers of the cosmos embodying its successive determinations. The institution of society also aims at covering over this chaos and at creating a world *for* society, and it does create that world, but in this creation it is impossible to avoid there being some big holes, some large conduits, through which the chaos becomes evident. One of these conduits, for the human being, and no doubt the most difficult one to stop up, is death. All known institutions of society have tried to give it a signification: one dies for the fatherland; one dies in order to become one of the ancestors who will come to be reincarnated in the newborn child; one dies in order to attain the Kingdom of Heaven. And in this way the intrinsic non-sense of death is covered over.

Art on the one hand, philosophy and science on the other, try to give form to the chaos, a form that can be grasped by humans. Art does so in its own manner; philosophy and science do so in theirs. In both cases, we have a creation of forms. The difference is that art, in giving—in order to give—form to the chaos, creates a new world and new worlds, and this it does in relatively free fashion. It doesn't labor under the constraint of experience; the constraints to which it

must face up are of another order, an internal order. But philosophy and science aim at elucidating the world such as it is given to us, and that imposes upon them a very strong constraint, the constraint of available experience. Of course, science does so in its own manner and in a restricted domain, that of our physical experience, and it attends to what in this experience offers an essential regularity and can be rendered explicable. For philosophy, it's not a matter of explaining or even, truly speaking, of understanding (when it comes to disciplines involving the human domain); it's a matter of elucidating. But a philosophy doesn't hold water if it doesn't try to account for the totality of human experience. I note here, without being able to linger over it, that there exists a marvelously mixed domain, that of mathematics, which in the most important cases creates new worlds, but in doing so contributes to the elucidation of the world as it is given to us.



I now come to what is, properly speaking, our topic today. It's the contemporary period, starting from 1950—a date that obviously has no pretensions to exactitude. The brutal observation I make is that this great movement of creation is in the process of wearing itself out. This exhaustion extends beyond the domain of art. It touches both philosophy and, I think, even true theoretical creation in the scientific domain, whereas technical development and technoscientific development are accelerating and becoming autonomized. This evolution, this drop in creativity, goes hand in hand with the triumph, during this period, of the capitalist imaginary and an ever-more marked drop in the democratic movement, in the movement toward autonomy, on the social and political plane.

I begin with the domain of philosophy. Martin Heidegger seems to have succeeded in turning his—erroneous—diagnosis of the “end of philosophy” into a sort of self-realizing prophecy. With but a few exceptions, there are no more philosophers; there are some very erudite commentators and very scholarly historians of philosophy, but hardly any new creation. The sole experience to which philosophy tries to face up is that of its own history. It is condemned to nourish itself by feeding upon itself, by devouring its own flesh.

Perhaps in this case at least one can discern an internal factor that has contributed to the way things have evolved—but without that sufficing, certainly, to “explain” it. I am talking about the influence of the two great philosophers of German Idealism, Kant and Hegel. The influence they have had has no doubt played a part here on the basis of considerations that are contradictory, yet ones that have converged toward the same result. The radical break Kant tried, under cover of a critique of metaphysics, to inaugurate between philosophy and science—philosophy being reduced, in the domain of knowledge, to a “critique of theoretical reason”—has led to the idea that the domains of science and of philosophy were separated by an abyss that could be cleared only under penalty of falling into the chasm of metaphysical speculation. In a symmetrical and opposite fashion, Hegel’s elaboration of a “system” that claimed to encompass all knowledge, including science’s, and the proclamation that this (scientific as well as philosophical) knowledge has just found its completion in this system, seemed to demonstrate, via the failure of said system, that theoretical philosophy was thenceforth to be confined within the domain of the theory of knowledge if it didn’t want pathetically to repeat this vain Hegelian bid. Looking closely

at the matter, one sees that the two effects are found again in Heidegger's proclamation of the "end of philosophy in technicized science."³ But this watertight separation between philosophy and science, powerfully aided by the growing specialization and technicalness of contemporary science, couldn't help but have catastrophic results for philosophy. For, this separation condemned philosophy to leave aside an enormous patch of human experience (everything that concerns inanimate and living nature) and either to become itself a particular discipline of no great interest (as witness the domination of logical positivism and "linguistic philosophy" in the Anglo-Saxon world) or to claim to be a pure "thought of Being," which is both empty and sterile, since one can say nothing of Being outside of beings.

Yet this factor was able to play only a secondary role, since an analogous evolution was observable in all other domains. Thus it was in the case of science itself. Some important scientific advances are certainly still being made, but in both cases—relativity between 1905 and 1916, quantum theory between 1900 and the 1930s—the major theoretical forms upon which science has relied were created more than three quarters of a century ago. Both of these theories are nevertheless at once contradictory with respect to each other and, each of them, full not of *puzzles*, to use the

³T/E: Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 59 (translation slightly altered). In the Preface to *CLI*, Castoriadis had *décomposition* (Stambaugh's "dissolution") and in "The 'End of Philosophy'?" (1989), now in *CL3*, *disparition* (disappearance); in his paraphrase here, he applies *fin* (end) directly from title of Heidegger's piece.

terminology of Thomas Kuhn,⁴ but of veritable aporias that should have challenged the theoretical paradigms themselves. It's true that new schemata are being proposed (string theories and superstrings, an inflationary universe, and so on), but up till now none of them satisfy the constraints of experience.

The last great basic discovery in biology, that of DNA, took place in 1953, and besides it itself followed from Max Delbrück's research in molecular biology, which dates back to 1943. Perhaps, by way of a possible exception, we should mention the theories of self-organization—which are based, however, upon the theory of automata created by Alan Turing and John von Neumann between 1935 and 1955.

It is worth dwelling for a moment upon the situation created by the post-1900 advances in mathematics and in physics as these relate to philosophy. These advances have challenged categories until then (and still now) deemed basic for an intelligible understanding of the physical world: causality, locality, separation, and so on. Starting in 1930, astonishing results in mathematics—the theorems of Kurt Gödel, Turing, and Alonzo Church—pulverized hitherto prevailing conceptions about mathematical foundations and possibilities. This situation desperately calls for a philosophical elucidation. But there has been nearly nothing to that effect, as if philosophy had resigned its role as elucidator of our experience.

There is, then, this exhaustion of the imagination and of the imaginary in the domains of philosophy and of science,

⁴T/E: See the fourth chapter, "Normal Science as Puzzle-Solving," of Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1962), which begins: "Perhaps the most striking feature of the normal research problems we have just encountered is how little they aim to produce major novelties, conceptual or phenomenal."

and there is also, manifestly, exhaustion of the political imagination and of the political imaginary. One cannot help but notice the degeneration of the workers' movement and, more generally, of the democratic movement. Both on the "Right" and on the "Left," present-day political discourse is completely sterile and repetitive; one doesn't even know in what way "Right" and "Left" differ from each other. To take just the example of France (but one could under the same heading talk about the United States, England, Spain, and so forth), there are no remarkable differences between the successive governments during President François Mitterrand's two seven-year terms and the governments that have preceded or followed; certain details are different and not without their importance (for example, policy on the question of immigration), but the broad outlines remain the same. Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé today [T/E: 1997] does what former Gaullist Prime Minister Édouard Balladur did previously, who was doing only what the Socialist Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy did before him.

But what matters most for our point is the exhaustion of creativity in the domain of art. When I began to write about this question—my first formulations on this topic date back to 1960, in a text titled "Modern Capitalism and Revolution,"⁵ where I observed that the novel had arrived at an impasse, and then in a text from 1978, "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation"⁶—I was told, "You're exaggerating" or, "You are starting to get old; what's being done now isn't what was

⁵See *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 31 (December 1960-February 1961), now available as the first part of "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" in [PSW2](#).

⁶Published in French in 1979 and now translated in [PSW3](#).

being done when you were young, so you hate the contemporary age and you look with nostalgia upon the time of your youth.” Almost twenty years have passed, and I have the sad pleasure of observing that even the “official” critics—who for a long time were devoted to the worship of the “avant-garde”—are saying the same thing, perhaps with the sole exception of the novel.

What has been the situation of art during the last forty years? There first was a false “avant-garde” and a simulacrum of subversion. What is the avant-garde? There was, during the prior two centuries, already with Romanticism but in any case with Charles Baudelaire and with Édouard Manet, a large-scale and new phenomenon: a rupture between the creative artists and the established society, “bourgeois” society. Official opinion begins by rejecting for a long period novations of form and content created by art in all domains. Contrary to what some might have told you, this phenomenon was historically new. Young creators might have had some difficulties gaining recognition in other periods; such difficulties remained phenomena of clans and of jealousy. But starting in the mid-nineteenth century, there really was a rupture in almost all domains. I have mentioned Baudelaire; one can add Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Lautréamont in France as well as similar cases in other countries. In painting, there’s the gap created by Manet, the Impressionists, and all that followed. In music, this began already with Richard Wagner, then Igor Stravinsky and the Vienna School.

Now, this avant-garde really seems to have become exhausted after World War II. And one is witness, in a first phase, to the appearance of a fake avant-garde, a succession of artificial efforts to do something new for the sake of the new, to subvert for the sake of subversion, whereas one has

nothing new to say. This is flagrantly the case in painting and music. Then, in a second phase, there are no longer even these gesticulations of subversion. Already before Postmodernism, but especially with it, one enters into the era of conformism, that is to say, the unscrupulous practice of eclecticism and collage. One imitates the creations of previous times by mixing them up; one puts together the most heteroclitc kinds of plagiarism. So, too, in the domain in philosophy, does one see “weak thought” glorified,⁷ that is to say, the glorification of resignation before the task of philosophy. Sterility triumphs.

Postmodernism is the ideology that attempts to theorize and glorify these practices; more generally, it tries to present the stagnation and regression of the contemporary era as the expression of maturity, of an end to our illusions. It expressly champions the rejection of novation and originality, and even of the coherency of form. In 1986, in New York, I heard one of the most famous postmodern architects pronounce, during a speech, this memorable line, “Postmodernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style.”⁸ In these people’s minds, style is a tyranny, whereas style is the coherency of form, without which there is no work of art, at the same time that it is the expression of the creator’s individuality.

Let’s try to give all this a bit of detail. Let’s take a

⁷T/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).

⁸T/E: With the prefacing phrase, “At last,” this “April 1986... procla[mation]” by a “well-known architect” is cited in English in the first note to “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1990), now in [CL3](#).

look at what happened for example in music. After the atonal and twelve-tone school, there were various experimentations that didn't culminate in anything viable. Presently, the music that is produced (that's the word that fits) boils down to imitations and compilations of the musics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Luciano Berio, for example, has been seen inserting long citations of Beethoven symphonies into his music.

The first half of the twentieth century had seen the marvelous creation of two new and popular forms of art, jazz and cinema. Now, the creative period of jazz in my view—or in my ears, if you prefer—ends with the deaths of Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk. Afterward, rock, rap, dance music, and techno are certainly important social phenomena, but they are unrelated to musical creation, for they display a total rhythmic monotony and a harmonic and melodic stereotypy that is pathetically impoverished.

The other great creation of the twentieth century, cinema, is in the process of losing itself in industrialization, facileness, and vulgarity. One can easily cite dozens of great directors of the previous period, but almost none of the recent period.

In the domain of painting, the basic way of innovating today, it seems, is to represent in quasi photographic fashion Campbell's soup cans and ketchup bottles, to return toward different variants of realism, or to offer poor imitations of Marcel Duchamp's provocations when, in 1920 (therefore, more than three-quarters of a century ago), he exhibited a bidet. Recently, at the Pompidou Center in Paris, one could go see Joseph Beuys's piano wrapped in felt presented as a work of art.

The case of the novel is more debatable. There are no doubt still a good number of excellent novelists. But do these

novels truly contribute something new and important in comparison with the great novel as we knew it? Can one place these novelists on the same crest line as Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Henry James, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner...? Might the *novel form* have itself become exhausted? I shall cite only the case of Milan Kundera, who, after having written a certain number of more or less classically crafted novels, felt the need in his last two or three books to experiment with new forms. But I shall leave the question of the novel open.

This return to conformism is a general return to heteronomy. I defined heteronomy as the fact of thinking and acting as the institution and the social milieu require (overtly or in subterranean fashion). Now, at present, just as there is “uniform thinking [*pensée unique*]” in economics, no one daring to challenge the absurdities of Neoliberalism, which are leading to the ruination of the European economies, no one seems to be able to call into question the “end of philosophy” or to say that what is being presented as painting is, in the majority of cases, worthless trash—of null value, and not mediocre or merely acceptable. If you do so, you’ll hear the response that you’re a Boeotian who doesn’t understand anything about art, or else an old man who refuses to accept the evolution of history.

If one accepts these facts as a whole and agrees even roughly with the interpretation I’m giving of them, they give expression to a crisis of the institution of society as a whole and of social imaginary significations. As I have already indicated, this crisis is not incompatible with continued technical “progress” and continued “progress” on the levels of production, scholarship, and even science. For my part, and for reasons I don’t have the time to expound upon now, I doubt that even these sorts of “progress” would be able to

continue for long without the roots that had nourished them.

I think that we are at a crossing in the roads of history, of history in the grand sense. One road already appears clearly laid out, at least in its general orientation. That's the road of the loss of meaning, of the repetition of empty forms, of conformism, apathy, irresponsibility, and cynicism at the same time as it is that of the tightening grip of the capitalist imaginary of unlimited expansion of "rational mastery," pseudorational pseudomastery, of an unlimited expansion of consumption for the sake of consumption, that is to say, for nothing, and of a technoscience that has become autonomized along its path and that is evidently involved in the domination of this capitalist imaginary.

The other road would have to be opened: it is not at all laid out. It can be opened only through a social and political awakening, a renaissance, a resurgence of the project of individual and collective autonomy, that is to say, of the will to freedom. This would require an awakening of the imagination and of the creative imaginary. For reasons I have tried to formulate, such an awakening is by definition unforeseeable. It is synonymous with a social and political awakening. The two can only proceed together. All we can do is prepare it as we can, where we find ourselves. Thank you.

Responses to Questions

Mr. Heleno's question was as follows: In the distinction between the poetical and the functional, would not the functional be the "badly" poetical? No. It is important to discuss some criteria in order to distinguish between the poetical and the functional. But as such, the functional cannot be "bad." There can be no society without a functional component. It's the domain of ensemblistic-identity

(ensidic) logic, *legein* and *teukhein*.⁹ There can be no society without arithmetic, nor any society where tools don't have determinate effects upon the matter being worked upon, where its institutions don't have a certain functionality, an ensemblistic-identitary coherence. What is "bad," what is to be combated, is what is going on in contemporary society, under capitalism: the autonomization of the functional, the irrationality that consists in positing everything within "rational mastery," which obviously leads to unmitigated absurdities. As for the distinction between the poietical and the functional, it isn't difficult to see. The functional is all that obeys vital or physical necessities and observes logical constraints. Production as such belongs in general to the functional. But the ultimate objectives of production are never "functional," since there is no human society that would produce solely for purposes of self-preservation. Christians build churches. Primitives often painted designs on their bodies or faces. These churches, paintings, or designs serve no purpose; they belong to the poietic. Certainly, they "serve" for much more than "serving for something": that for which they serve, much more important than all the rest, is that humans might be able to give a meaning to the world and to their lives. That's the "role" of the poietic.

"Descending" in logical order, I believe that Mr. Cometti must now be answered. He posed an important question to which the two of us would probably give different answers. I think that you are completely right to say that philosophy very quickly, especially starting from the moment when there were great thinkers who constructed systems,

⁹T/E: See ch. 5 of *IIS* regarding *legein* (to "distinguish-choose-posit-assemble-count-speak") and *teukhein* ("assembling-adjusting-fabricating-constructing").

played a role of obstruction as much as a role of opening. But I wouldn't say that philosophy has especially blocked things. Let's take the example of Plato. He's the philosopher who without a doubt has most dominated Western thought (and not only thought) for the past twenty-five centuries, and he continues, moreover, to do so. We still think in more or less Platonic terms, and even when one revolts against Plato, it's against Plato that one is revolting, which is again a form of domination. At the same time, he's the philosopher who played a very "negative" role, and first of all via his hatred of democracy, which led him to give an entirely false image of the ancient world. He succeeded in pulling off a fantastic operation whereby he imposed upon posterity an invidious image [*représentation détestable*] of democracy, describing its political men as demagogues and its thinkers as "Sophists," in a sense of this term that he created all by himself and that has prevailed since then, claiming that its poets were telling absurd fables and had nothing but a corrupting influence, and so on and so forth. At the same time, he fed—through misunderstandings, but at the root of these misunderstandings there is nonetheless what he actually wrote—a whole "idealist" current, in the bad sense of this term, within Western philosophy. All that must be smashed, broken up. But is that Plato's sole contribution? There have been tens of thousands of young people who have been awakened to philosophy by reading Plato, many of whom have become great scientists (like Werner Heisenberg).

But the question also has another feature. All thought, and all great thought, tends toward a certain closure; it tends to close upon itself. It tends to close upon itself perhaps through its own near-necessities. The obsession with unity, which becomes obsession with the system, is one manifestation of the continued hold of the ensemblistic-

identitarian upon philosophical thought. The infinite objective of philosophical thought, that everything is to be elucidated, becomes: Everything has to be organized. That one has to account for and to provide a reason for what one is advancing becomes: Everything must be “grounded,” and must be so on the basis of a “unique” foundation. Here we have some almost invincible tendencies of thought, but they have to be combated as much as possible by an internal critique. It is possible to have an open philosophy without falling thereby into eclecticism, still less into what is now called *weak thought*, rhapsodic thought that goes all over the place without being able to say why it goes one way rather than the other. Philosophy can be sustained by this effort at elucidation, which can find fulfillment only in a certain coherency, but it doesn’t have to fall into the illusion that it can close and be closed as a system. Upon this condition, there is still an essential role for philosophy to play, which after all is but one of the principal ways in which our freedom is embodied. And this isn’t the role played by certain tendencies today, which indulge in an eclecticism that becomes a form of irresponsibility.

As for interdisciplinarity, I’ve been asked if it has its place in this kind of modern dislocation. Indeed, the fragmentation of disciplines is one factor of decadence and even of heteronomy because it boils down to breaking up the universe of research and thought into domains that don’t communicate with one another, each of which tends to develop its own dogmatism and to be blind to the rest. And this can be connected back to Mr. Pereira’s question about psychoanalysis. If there is something striking about the human sciences today, it’s what I have called the psychoanalytic deafness of the sociologists and the sociological deafness of

the psychoanalysts.¹⁰ Both groups speak while forgetting that the human being includes two indissociable dimensions, the psychical dimension and the social dimension. Each takes one half and speaks about that half as if the other half didn't exist. And as it's not a question of two separable "halves," the "half" about which each one believes to be speaking becomes a caricature. The effects this attitude has had are particularly devastating in sociology. Political theory, economic theory, sociology—which, moreover, is dominated by a methodological individualism of indescribable naivety—continue to talk on and on as if Freud had never existed, as if human beings' motivations were trivially simple and "rational." If, however, humans' "rational" motivations were what determined, for example, all of economic life, economic life would be foreseeable—which is evidently not the case. The same thing goes for "political theories." Psychoanalysis's contribution to the understanding of the human world, which is quite fundamental, shows us clearly that considerations of economic "interest" or "rational" factors are not what dominate humans' motivations and what would allow one to understand their behavior. Conversely, psychoanalysis continues to try to ignore the fundamental role of the social institution in the socialization of humans and to claim to be able to derive institutions and social significations on the basis of the psyche's underlying [*profondes*] tendencies, which is multiply nonsensical.

¹⁰T/E: In "Done and To Be Done" (1989), now in [CL5](#), Castoriadis writes of "the sociological lethargy of the psychoanalysts and the psychoanalytic lethargy of the sociologists"; in "From the Monad to Autonomy" (1991), also in [CL5](#), he speaks of "the sociological and political blindness of the psychoanalysts and the psychoanalytic blindness of the sociologists and the philosophers"; he states that "psychoanalysts are deaf" in "Psyche and Education" (1993), below in the present volume.

Nevertheless, psychoanalysis can and should make a basic contribution to a politics of autonomy. For, each person's self-understanding is a necessary condition for autonomy. One cannot have an autonomous society that would fail to turn back upon itself, that would not interrogate itself about its motives, its reasons for acting, its deep-seated [*profondes*] tendencies. Considered in concrete terms, however, society doesn't exist outside the individuals making it up. The self-reflective activity of an autonomous society depends essentially upon the self-reflective activity of the humans who form such a society. A politics of autonomy, if one doesn't want to be naive, can exist only by taking into account the human being's psychical dimension; it therefore presupposes a high degree of understanding of this being—even if, for the moment, the contribution of psychoanalysis to this comprehension has not sufficiently been developed. The democratic individual cannot exist if it is not lucid, and lucid in the first place about itself. That doesn't mean that everyone must be psychoanalyzed. But a radical reform of education undoubtedly must be carried out, which would consist, among other things, in taking much more into account the question of the autonomy of one's pupils, including in its psychoanalytic dimensions (which isn't the case today).

As for the question of the relations between democracy and the State, it must first of all be emphasized that there is here a confusion, knowingly maintained by reactionary writers, between the State and power. There can be no society without power: there will always be a need to settle disputes or to decide, in this or that case, that there has been a transgression of the social law, just as there will always be a need to make decisions that affect the totality of the members of society as to what is to be done and not to be done, that is to say, a need to establish laws and govern. The

utopia of anarchism and Marxism (Marx's conception of the "higher phase of communism") is an incoherent utopia. Given what we know about the human psyche and about the questions raised by this psyche's process of maturation, there will always be a need for laws, for collectively decided limitations upon human action, which can no doubt be internalized by the individual in the course of its socialization but can never completely be internalized to the point of becoming intransgressible, for then we would no longer have a society of autonomous individuals but, rather, a society of automatons. There is always therefore some power. But *power* doesn't mean *State*. The State is an instance of power separate from society, constituted in a hierarchical and bureaucratic apparatus, that stands opposite society and dominates it (even if it cannot remain impervious to its influence). Such a State is incompatible with a democratic society. The few indispensable functions the present-day State fulfills can and should be restituted to the political community.

Paris, November 1996—Tinos, August 1997

First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions*

Our topic today is: Is there a theory of the institution? My answer is: Certainly not. There is not, and cannot be, a *theory* of the institution, for theory is *theōria*: the gaze [*regard*] that puts us face to face with something and inspects it. We cannot put ourselves face to face with the institution and then inspect it, since the means one would use to do so themselves form a part of the institution. How could I talk about the institution in a language that professes to be rigorous, formalized, or formalizable to an indefinite degree, and so on, when this language itself is an institution, perhaps the first and most important of institutions?

We are speaking [English] here. I am speaking to you in [English] since I have learned [English], though it happens that my mother tongue is Greek. Neither my [English] nor my Greek, however, is in any way natural. Since people here at the conference seem to be enjoying the jokes the speakers have been making, let us say that I was born in China (I am not even saying that I would be Chinese, but simply born in China). If this were the case, I would be condemned all my life not to know the difference between elections and erections, since *l* and *r* are not distinct phonemes in Chinese.

*“Institution première de la société et institutions secondes,” a lecture presented on December 15, 1985, the sixth day of a Paris conference sponsored by the Centre d’Étude de la Famille Association and titled “Psychanalyse et approche familiale systémique,” was published as part of a pamphlet under the title of the topic discussed at the conference that day: *Y a-t-il une théorie de l’institution?* (Is there a theory of the institution?), pp. 107-12, and was posthumously reprinted in *FP*, 115-26 (139-52 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: An English-language translation by David Ames Curtis, which first appeared in *Free Associations*, 12 (1988): 39-51, was reprinted in [FTPK](#).]

Yet it is not just a matter of phonetics. All Greco-Western philosophy, and thought, and the theory or theories we construct owe much to certain grammatical rules characteristic of Indo-European tongues—and in particular to that much talked-about verb *einai*, “to be.” Many tongues, very beautiful ones and completely appropriate to the societies to which they belong, do not include the verb “to be.” And if the peoples who speak these tongues undertook to constitute a fundamental philosophy, they would not call it “ontology.” Thus, I can *elucidate* my relation to tongue, but I cannot abstract myself from it and “look at” [*regarder*] it, nor can I “construct” it from the outside.

I cannot make a “theory” out of the institution, for I am on the inside. Indeed, not even this statement goes far enough. Abstracting, for a moment, from a limit point—a point I try to approach with the patient on the couch, or by myself with the aid, perhaps, of a dream—abstracting from this limit point, which is situated almost at infinity, I am a walking fragment of the institution of society, as we all are such walking fragments, each one complementary to the others. Talking bipeds, one might say. *Bipeds*, for this reminds us of our biological nature, or, rather, our leaning on [*étayage*] our biology. And *talking*, for that certainly reminds us once again of this leaning on, these biological underpinnings of ours, since to be able to speak one must have vocal cords, and so forth, a central nervous system organized in a certain fashion—but one must also have language as social institution. This is not the time or the place to enter into the interminable discussion that began in Greece in the fifth century BCE concerning the “natural”—*phusei*—or conventional/instituted—*nomōi*—character of language, which was taken up again a few decades ago, first with structural linguistics, then with Chomsky’s views and the

search for universals or invariant structures extending across the different languages people speak.

One thing is certain. An enormous part, the most important part, of language, the part that concerns the *significations* it conveys—its semantics—does not correspond in a univocal manner to the central nervous system of *homo sapiens* since, if it did, all languages would be strictly isomorphic to each other, and one would be able to pass from one to another by means of uniform, rule-governed transformations with neither loss nor gain. Now, we know there is no exact or “perfect” translation, strictly speaking, of a text into any tongue other than its original (besides the trivial case in which the text in question is merely a series of mathematical symbols). As Roman Jakobson said, “genuine” translation is always poetic re-creation.

There is therefore a deep-seated dependence, in respect to language, between what I think and what I say. And this is only one example of the prevalence, indeed the penetration through and through, in each one of us, of what is instituted in our native society.

Can one then say, as has just been said, that theory is “calling the institution into question”? First, we must once again eliminate from this discussion the term *theory*, in its commonly accepted sense. Next, we must note that “calling the institution into question” through reflection upon it or the attempt to elucidate the institution occurs only by way of an exception in the history of humanity, and only in one line of societies: the European or Greco-Western. There is no ethnocentrism in this—and still less any privilege, political or otherwise, that would thus be conferred upon us; it is just an acknowledgment that “calling the institution into question” implies an enormous historical *rupture*—and that, as far as we know, this rupture has not occurred among the Nambikwara

or the Bamileke.

We encounter this rupture only twice in the history of humanity: in ancient Greece for the first time, then in Western Europe beginning at the end of the High Middle Ages. This rupture implies that these same individuals who have been fabricated by their society, who are its walking fragments, have been able to change themselves essentially; they have been able to create for themselves the means to challenge and to call into question the institutions they have inherited, the institutions of the society that had raised them—which obviously goes hand in hand with an essential change in the entire instituted social field. And this is expressed both by the birth of a public political space and by the creation of free inquiry, of unlimited interrogation. The possibility of having a thought about the institution, of elucidating it, exists only from the moment when—in deeds as well as in discourse—the institution is called into question. This is the birth of democracy and philosophy, which go hand in hand.

People stand up and say, “The representations of the tribe are false.” They try to think the world and man in the world in another way. And people stand up and say, “The established power is unjust, the instituted laws are unjust, we must instaurate other ones.” These two positions are profoundly interrelated [*solidaires*]. What does it mean that the established power is unjust? Who gives you the right to say that? And do you want simply to put another, equally unjust power in its place, or are you claiming to instaurate a just power? But what is a just power—what is justice? On the other hand, you are destroying the tribe’s representations, you are trying to put something else in their place, therefore you are claiming that this other thing is true—and thus that you know what is true, but what is truth?

We see already that although the institution is a

fundamental fact of humanity's history, and indeed one of the two elements that hominize man—the other being the radical imagination—one cannot talk in the same way about all institutions in history, for in a predemocratic and prephilosophic society the possibility of challenging and questioning the institution quite simply does not exist. Individuals do not know that the gods of the tribe are institutions. They do not know it, and they cannot know it. To be brief, I take one of the clearest and most well-known cases: for the Hebrews, the Law is not a law of the tribe; it has been formulated by the Lord Himself and given by Him in person. How could you call this Law into question? How could you say that God's Law is unjust, when Justice is *defined* as the will of God? How could you say that God does not exist, when God provides His own self-definition: *Egō eimi ho ōn*, I am (the one who) is, I am being (I avoid here the quarrel over the proper translation of the original Hebrew text). What do you mean by *God does not exist* when, in the language of the tribe, that would mean *being does not exist*?

In the overwhelming majority of societies—the ones I call heteronomous—on the one hand, the institution asserts on its own that it is not the work of man; on the other hand, the individuals belonging to these societies are raised, trained, and fabricated in such a way that they are, so to speak, resorbed by the institution of society. No one can assert ideas or express a will or desire opposed to the instituted order, and this is so not because they would be subject to sanctions but because each person is, anthropologically speaking, fabricated this way; everyone has internalized the institution of society to such an extent that one does not have at one's disposal the psychical and mental means to challenge this institution. And what changes—with ancient Greece, on the one hand, and postmedieval Europe, on the other—is that the institution of

society renders possible the creation of individuals who no longer see therein anything untouchable but succeed rather in calling the institution into question, be it in words, be it in deeds, be it through both at once. We thus come to the first rough historical sketch of what I call the project of social autonomy and of individual autonomy.

But what does “autonomy” signify? *Autos*: oneself; *nomos*: law. The person who gives herself her own laws is autonomous. (Not, *The person who does whatever comes into her head*, but rather, *The person who gives herself laws*.) Now, that is immensely difficult. For an individual, to give oneself one’s own law, within the fields in which this is possible, requires the ability to hold one’s own in the face of all conventions, beliefs, fashion, learned people who maintain absurd ideas, the media, the silence of the public, and so forth. And for a society, to give itself its own law means to accept at bottom the idea that it is creating its own institution and that it creates this institution without being able to invoke any extrasocial foundation, any norm of norms, any measure of its measures. This therefore boils down to saying that such a society should itself decide what is just and unjust—and this is the question with which true politics deals (we are obviously not talking here about the politics of the politicians who occupy the stage today).

Society cannot exist without institution, without law—and it must itself decide what is law without recourse (except illusorily) to an extrasocial source or foundation. Both aspects are there in the ancient Greek word *nomos*. *Nomos* is that which is particular to each society or to each ethnic group; it is its institution/convention, that which is opposed to the “natural” (and immutable) order of things, to *phusis*. And at the same time *nomos* is law, that without which human beings cannot exist as human beings, since there is no city, no *polis*,

without laws, and there are no human beings outside the *polis*, the city, the political collectivity/community. When Aristotle says that outside the *polis* man cannot be but a savage beast or a god,¹ he knows and he says that the human being is humanized only in and through the *polis*—an idea, moreover, that returns again and again among the ancient Greek poets, historians, and philosophers.

There are therefore these two sides to *nomos*, to the law: it is, each time, the institution/convention of some particular society; and it is, at the same time, the transhistorical requisite for there to be society—that is to say, whatever the content of its particular *nomos*, no society can exist without a *nomos*. Without this double understanding (that we cannot exist without *nomos*, but also that this *nomos* is *our* institution, *our* work), there can be no democracy. For, of course, democracy does not signify simply “human rights” or *habeas corpus*. That is only a *derivative* (which does not mean minor or secondary) aspect of democracy. Democracy signifies the power of the people; in other words, it means that the people make their own laws—and to make them they must be convinced, as a matter of fact, that the laws are the making of human beings. But at the same time this implies that no extrasocial standard for their laws exists—and this is the tragic dimension of democracy, for it is also its dimension of radical freedom: democracy is the regime of *self-limitation*.

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Let us return to this very idea of institution. The term, indeed, is polysemous, and this polysemy creates a feeling of

¹T/E: Aristotle *Politics* 1253a29.

malaise, for, as has been said, “all is institution.” Surely, we should distinguish the levels at which we situate ourselves when we speak of institution. To begin with, we do not mean, of course, the social security system or mental health clinics. We mean first and foremost language, religion, power; we mean what the individual is in a given society. We even intend here man and woman, who clearly are institutions, too: the noninstituted facets of man and woman are their biological underpinnings, their leaning on—*Anlehnung*, to borrow Freud’s term—the existence of a sexed, anatomicophysiological bodily constitution. But being-a-man and being-a-woman are defined one way in our society, were defined another way in ancient Greece, and are defined otherwise in some African or Amerindian tribe.

The same goes for being-a-child. Childhood as such quite obviously has a biological dimension. And being-a-child is an institution that has a transhistorical form in the sense that every society must give some kind of instituted status to children. At the same time, however, this institution is profoundly *historical*; what being-a-child signifies concretely in each particular society changes the total institution of that society: being-a-child is one thing for the child under the *Ancien Régime* and another for children today with their electronic games, television sets, and all that these gadgets presuppose and entail. Let us note in passing that this signification of childhood today seems in danger of dissolving, for no one seems to know any longer what a child is supposed to do and not do.

Similarly, people seem to know less and less in what sense and under what form men are men and women are women. The radical—and fully justified—questioning of the traditional status of woman has both left completely up in the air the social (and psychical) signification of being-a-woman

and, thereby and *ipso facto*, called back into question the social and psychical status of being-a-man, since these are but two inseparable [*solidaires*] poles of signification. What are the behaviors, signs, and emblems of virility and femininity today? Does being-a-woman mean, as it did in my grandmother's time, having fourteen successful pregnancies, or does it mean measuring twenty-four inches around your hips?

Here I insert a parenthesis relating to a question that was raised a few moments ago: How do institutions die? Someone said: The birth of institutions raises an easily answered question; what is difficult to comprehend is the disappearance of institutions. Hearing this, I smiled to myself, for to say that the birth of language, of philosophy, and so on raises an easily answered question is quite a surprising statement. What is interesting is that the speaker took a position opposite to the one traditionally taken in philosophy. In the traditional philosophical view, as well as in popular preconceptions, what goes without saying and demands almost no explanation is that things end, become corrupt, die, pass away. What is scandalous is creation; therefore, creation does not exist, except as a divine act accomplished once and for all at the beginning of time. The idea that the history of humanity might be a continuous creation—which is obvious—is strictly unthinkable within inherited thought.

By way of contrast, the fact that institutions and regimes may disappear seems to raise for people nothing but soluble problems. But in truth the two questions, the two enigmas, are perfectly symmetrical. The death of forms raises a problem that is just as formidable as the one raised by their emergence. How does it happen that “at a given moment,” as one says, in ancient Greece the idea of the *polis* (what I call the social imaginary signification *polis*), the city as community/collectivity of citizens responsible for their laws,

their acts, their fate, and everything else that goes along with this signification, emerges? All functionalist, economic, “historical-materialist,” and even psychoanalytic “explanations” are just plain impotent (and in truth appear absurd) in the face of this very emergence. But they are also so before the fact that, starting from “another moment,” that which had held this *polis* together disintegrated, decayed, and disappeared.

How does it happen that, once again, at the end of the Middle Ages, in the interstices of the feudal world, communities that wanted to be self-governed collectivities were reconstituted—new cities or bourgeois communes, in which a protobourgeoisie (long before any idea or real existence of capitalism!) created the first seeds [*germes*] of modern democratic and emancipatory movements? And how is it 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? There is no way to get around these two questions, and no theory gives us an “answer” to them.

The institution of the overwhelming majority of known societies has been heteronomous, in the sense specified above. In two historical societies, of which ours is one, the *seeds* of autonomy have been created. These seeds are still alive and are represented in certain aspects of formal institutions, but above all they are embodied in the individuals fabricated by these societies—you, me, and others—to the extent that these individuals are still capable—at least one hopes—of standing up and saying, *This law is unjust*, or, *The institution of society must be changed*. If there is a genuine politics today, it is one that tries to preserve and to foster these seeds of autonomy. And if psychoanalytic practice has a political meaning, it is solely to the extent that it tries, as far

as it possibly can, to render the individual autonomous, that is to say, lucid concerning its desire and concerning reality, and responsible for its acts: holding itself accountable for what it does.

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As I said above, the mark of man's hominization is, on the one hand, the institution. Why is there institution? An enormous question—and at the same time absurd: Why is there something rather than nothing? But we must raise it to show the absurdity of a stupid and superannuated discourse that is still a stupid discourse even if it is held by Nobel Prize winners in Economics. This discourse posits that society is made up of an assemblage or combination of "individuals." But where do we get these "individuals"? Do they grow wild [*poussent dans la nature*]?

The individual is a fabrication of society. And what I know as a psychoanalyst is that what is not social in the "individual" would not only be incapable of "composing" a society but is radically and violently asocial. What is not social in the "individual," what is in the depths of the human psyche, is assuredly not what has been called *desire* over these last few years. When one speaks of *desire*, one always means something that can, in one way or another, at least become articulated—thus presupposing that a series of *separations* has already been carried out. The kernel of the psyche, however, is a psychical *monad* characterized by the pure or radical imagination, which is completely undifferentiated at the outset. The emergence of the human species as a living species is characterized by the appearance of this congenital neof ormation—this psychical cancer, if you will—that is, the imagination developed out of all proportion,

the imagination gone “mad,” the imagination that has broken with all “functional” subservience. This leads to the human trait, unique among all living species, whereby organ pleasure is replaced by representational pleasure. (Even for the socialized and fully developed human individual, the prevalence of representational pleasure over organ pleasure is manifest and overwhelming; otherwise, no one would be capable of going off and getting killed in a war, phantasying would not be an essential prerequisite to sexual pleasure, and so forth).

There is, therefore, defunctionalization of representation and defunctionalization of pleasure; for a human being, pleasure is no longer simply, as it is for the animal, a sign indicating what is to be sought and what is to be avoided but has become an end in itself, even when it is against the preservation of the individual and/or the species. Man is therefore not simply, as Hegel said, a sick animal; man is a mad animal, an animal radically unfit for life. Man survives only by creating society, social imaginary significations and the institutions that bear, convey, and embody these significations. Society—the institution—is there not only to “contain the violence” of the individual human being, as Hobbes believed and as the Sophists of the fifth century BCE had already said; nor is it even there just to “suppress one’s drives,” as Freud thought. Society is there to hominize this little wailing monster that comes into the world, making it fit for life. To do this, it must inflict a rupture in the psychical monad; it must impose upon it something that, from start to finish and in its very depths, the psyche rejects: the recognition that “omnipotence of thought” exists only on the level of phantasy, that outside the self there are other human beings, that the world is organized in a certain way (the work, each time, of the institution of society), that the obtainment of

“real” pleasure must be instrumented through a series of mediations, themselves “real” in character and in themselves, most of the time, rather disagreeable, and so on.

Thus, the institution of society must each time insert into the “real” and collective life of society, by means of a radical violence inflicted upon the psychical monad, this egocentric being that brings everything back to itself and is capable of living almost indefinitely in the pure pleasure of representation. Doing this, the institution destroys that which, at the beginning, was meaningful for the psyche and gave meaning to it (self-closure, the pure pleasure of “solipsistic” representation)—and in compensation, so to speak, it furnishes the psyche with another source of meaning: the social imaginary signification. In being socialized—in becoming a social individual—the psyche internalizes these significations and “learns” that the true “meaning of life” is to be found elsewhere: in the fact that one has the esteem of the clan or the hope of being able to rest one day with Abraham in the bosom of God; or that one is *kalos kagathos* and attends to one’s *kleos* and *kudos* or is a saint; or that one accumulates wealth or develops the forces of production; or “builds socialism,” and so on. We see here again the human species’ capacity to substitute representational pleasure for organ pleasure; representation is here the subjective side of the social imaginary significations borne and conveyed by the institution.

From then on, therefore, the institution furnishes “meaning” to socialized individuals. But it also furnishes them with the means to make this meaning exist for themselves, and it does so by restoring at the social level an instrumental or functional logic that no doubt existed, in another manner, on the animal level but that has been fractured in man by the unfettered development of the

imagination. Once instrumented in and through this logic, the radical imagination of a singular human being can henceforth become a source of creation on the collective and “real” level. A phantasm remains a phantasm for a singular psyche, but an artist, a poet, a musician, a painter does not produce phantasms; he or she creates works. What his or her imagination engenders acquires a “real”—that is to say, social-historical—existence by utilizing an innumerable quantity of means and elements—and, to begin with, language—that the artist could never have created “all by himself.”²

These are some of the elements that define what I call the *first institution* of society; the first institution is the fact that society itself *creates itself* as society and creates itself each time by giving itself institutions animated by social imaginary significations specific to that society: specific to Egyptian society at the time of the Pharaohs, to Hebraic society, to ancient Greek society, to French or American society today, and so on. And this first institution is articulated and instrumented through *second-order* (which in no way means “secondary”) *institutions*.

Such second-order institutions may be divided into two categories. There are those that are, in the abstract and in their form, *transhistorical*. Among these, for example, are: *language* (each tongue is different, but there is no society without language); *the individual* (the type of individual a society fabricates is, concretely speaking, different in each society, but there is no society that fails to institute any *type*

²Readers interested in how these ideas may be defended and developed are invited to refer to my books: *IIS*, part 1, “Psyche,” of *CLI*; as well as “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984) and “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), both now in *CL2*.

of individual whatsoever); *the family* (the specific organization and “content” of the family are other each time the family is instituted, but no society can fail to assure the reproduction and socialization of the next generation, and the institution charged with accomplishing this task is the family, whatever its form—baby factories in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* are families in this sense). And there are second-order institutions that are *specific* to given societies and play an absolutely essential role therein, in the sense that what is of vital importance for the institution of the society under consideration (its social imaginary significations) is borne and conveyed essentially by its specific institutions.

Let us take two clear examples. The Greek *polis* is a specific second-order institution, without which the ancient Greek world is impossible and inconceivable. The capitalist *business enterprise* is also such a specific second-order institution. There is no capitalism without the business enterprise—and there really is not what we intend here by business enterprise in the societies that preceded capitalism: this institution that bears and conveys a signification, this set [*ensemble*] of arrangements and rules that brings together [*met ensemble*] a large number of people, compels them to use certain tools and machines, supervises their labor and organizes it hierarchically, and has as its end [*finalité*] limitless self-enlargement. This institution and its signification are a creation of capitalism, and it is only in and through this creation that capitalism can exist. When woven together, these second-order institutions—those that are transhistorical and those that are specific to the society under consideration—provide each time the concrete texture of that society.

Let me end with two remarks concerning practice, since all of you, like myself, work with certain aims [*finalités*] pertaining to social reality and since I presume that for you, as

for me, not everything is at it should be or as we would like it to be, despite the fact that polls claim to show that 80 percent or more of the French people are, or report themselves to be, “happy.” The first remark concerns the essential inseparableness [*solidarité*], the enormous interdependence among various institutions, of all different orders, within a given society. For a few years one has had a tendency to forget this interconnectedness of institutions, or one avoids talking about it, usually with the excuse that we must not consider society as a whole or the totality of society, because we would risk sliding toward totalitarianism. This is obviously absurd; a society *is* an extremely complex totality, and its different “parts” hold together in a thousand ways. It is by no means sure, for example, that, with the dislocation of the traditional significations and roles of man and woman in contemporary Western society, the rest of the system will be able simply to continue to function as if nothing had happened. This even shows the incoherency of all policies that seriously profess to be “reformist” and nothing but “reformist”; for, such a politics boils down to wanting to modify a few pieces in a system without worrying about—and without even being conscious of—the effects these modifications will have on the remainder of society.

The second remark concerns a pitfall that is the reverse of the first one, its symmetrical opposite. This would be to tell oneself, having taken precisely this preceding remark into account, that nothing can be done—or else that one’s work can consist only in aiming immediately at a radical transformation of society. As it turns out, however, a radical transformation of society, if such is possible—and I deeply believe it is—will be possible only as the work of individuals who will their autonomy, on the scale of society as well as on the individual level. Consequently, to work for

preserving and enlarging the possibilities of autonomy and autonomous action, as well as to work for aiding in the formation of individuals who aspire to autonomy and for increasing their number, is already to do political work, a work whose effects are more important and more lasting than certain sorts of sterile and superficial agitation.

POLIS

Heritage and Revolution^{*}

I

My title, “Heritage and Revolution,” may sound bizarre.

The term *heritage* connotes something conservative, if not something downright reactionary, some organization in the United States.¹ Or else, it brings to mind legal papers, deeds, and notaries.

Revolution, on the other hand, is a term that has been prostituted by the contemporary publicity industry: every now and then, there is a revolution in vacuum cleaners or toilet paper. But in common parlance, between 1789, when La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt used it for the first time in its modern sense, and somewhere around 1950, it meant a radical change, a subversion of the existing, instituted order of things (not to be confused with gun firing or bloodletting).

So my title needs some explanation. Here it is.

I do not think that the game is over. And I do not want the game to be over. I mean the political game, in the grand sense of the term *political*; I am not talking about Mr. Reagan or Mr. Mitterrand. Nor do I have in mind the management of

^{*}Originally published in English in *The Ancients and the Moderns*, ed. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 159-69. An initial (unpublished) version of this text was given as a speech at one of the New School for Social Research Hannah Arendt colloquia in October 1985. Translated by Dominique Walter as “Héritage et révolution,” *FP*, 129-44 (155-73 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: The original typescript version of this English-language text was edited for publication while consulting the French translation; it first appeared in that form in [FTPK](#).]

¹French translator: The Heritage Foundation is an ultraconservative American pressure group.

the current affairs of government. By *politics* I mean a collective activity endowed with self-reflection and lucidity, aiming at the overall institution of society.

The historical singularity of Western Europe and before it, eighth- to fifth-century Greece, is that they are the societies, and the only ones, to have *created politics* in the sense of a collective activity explicitly aiming at the overall institution of society, explicitly attempting to change it, and succeeding to a substantial extent. In all other societies, we have court intrigues, group rivalries, machinations, open competitions, complicated games to obtain power—but these are always *within* the existing, instituted framework. In Ancient Greece and in Western Europe (including, of course, the United States) we have *politics*.

Considered this way, politics is a moment and an expression of the project of autonomy; it does not accept passively and blindly what is already there, what has been instituted, but calls it into question. Now, what is called into question may be the “constitution” or a body of law. It can also be the prevailing collective representation about world, society, truth, or values. In the latter case, the calling into question is, of course, philosophy in the pristine sense. The creation of politics and the creation of philosophy, as expressions of the project of autonomy, go together, and together indeed they have gone in actual history, both in Greece and in Western Europe.

These expressions of the project of autonomy also take on, almost immediately, the *content* of autonomy. The Greek *politai*, or the European *bourgeois*, did not set out to change institutions simply in order to manifest their capacity to do so. Rather, they tried to bring about a state of affairs entailing the beginning of the realization of social and individual autonomy. This is the *democratic* component of

their political activity and of the resulting institutions. (The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about philosophy as realization of intellectual and psychical freedom, but this is not our present object.)

What this means is that *our* heritage, *our* tradition, is the democratic heritage and the revolutionary tradition in their strictest senses. So much about the coexistence of these two words in my title.

Such things can of course be seen differently, even from an opposing view. It could be argued that our heritage is just what is there, that there is nothing more to be done except to manage its legacy, to take care of this fortune, large or small. We should be clear, however, about the consequences of this position. The central part of our heritage lies in making our institutions; we can change them, and we ought to change them if we think fit. Now, the assertion that we have nothing to change, at least nothing important, that there is nothing to do beyond the day-to-day legislation and management of the Congress or Parliament, is tantamount to the statement that things are perfectly satisfactory as they are, that we have reached the highest attainable state of society or, at any rate, the least imperfect one. It is saying, in other words, that our society is such that any attempt to change its institution will inevitably bring about something worse. As is well known, this position has been argued explicitly since at least the mid-Seventies.

One has only to open one's eyes to dismiss this view. Regardless of whether one is "satisfied" or "dissatisfied," the existing state of affairs is untenable in the long run because it is self-destructive, and by this I mean self-destructive *politically*. It produces a growing glacier of privatization and apathy; it dislocates the social imaginary significations that hold institutions together. An apathetic and cynical society

cannot maintain for long even the few liberal institutions existing today. And a society of liberal institutions based upon the relentless pursuit of individual self-interest is sheer nonsense.

Another suggestion has surfaced in the last few years, that we have come to live under a new form of “democratic politics,” made up of a juxtaposition of various “social movements”—or rather, nonmovements—none of which would be concerned with envisaging society as a whole, but whose additive synergy, rather, would work to produce a “democratic” state of affairs. It is not difficult to see that these “movements,” stripped of general concerns, take inevitably the form of lobbies, the mutually opposed pressures of which currently contribute to the stalemates of society on substantive issues. Recent developments have amply illustrated this point.

A final preliminary remark. Formulations that suggest, for example, that the ideas of the Enlightenment have not yet been fully implemented are defective in more than one way. Our heritage goes far beyond the *Aufklärung*, and has not been, to say the least, exhaustively “recapitulated” by it. The Enlightenment itself, very important as it is, forms only one phrase in the symphonic creation of the project of autonomy. Many important things have happened since the *Aufklärung* that are not limited to the implementation of its ideas. Above all, if and when a new period of political activity oriented toward autonomy begins, it will carry us far beyond not only the *Aufklärung* but also beyond anything else we are now able to imagine.

II

In order to minimize misunderstandings, I should now make clear some of my further presuppositions.

Human history is creation. It is, first and foremost, wholesale self-creation, the separation of humanity from sheer animality, a separation at once never complete and abyssal. This self-creation manifests itself through the positing of new forms of being, without precedents, “models,” or “causes” in the presocial world. Such forms of being are: language, tools, instituted rules, meanings, types of individuals, and so on. Such are also the particular overall forms society takes on in different times and places: Tupi-Guarani or Hebrew, Greek or Medieval European, Assyrian or capitalistic bureaucratic.

These elemental facts—the self-creation of humanity, the self-institution of societies—are, almost always, almost everywhere, veiled; they are concealed from society by its very institution. And almost always, almost everywhere, this institution contains the instituted representation of its own extrasocial origin. The *heteronomous* character of the institution of society consists in the fact that the social law is not posited as created by society but is seen, rather, as having a source beyond the reach of living human beings. This is the root of the religious character of the institution of almost all known societies—and likewise of the almost unbreakable link between religion and heteronomy. The institution of society has found both the guarantee of its validity and its protection against internal contestation and external relativization through the instituted representation of an extrasocial origin for itself.² “God has given us our laws, how could you dare change them?”

Every institution of society aims at its perpetuation. And it generally succeeds in creating appropriate means for this, since human beings can exist only insofar as they are socialized, that is, humanized, by the social institution, and in

²See “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), now in [CL2](#).

the ways this institution posits, which are conformal to it and tend to reproduce it indefinitely. To put it another way, newborn bipeds only become social individuals through internalizing the existing social institutions.

This should have entailed that a social order, once created and barring external factors, would last for ever. We know that this is not so. More precisely, we know that although this was *almost* the case for a very long time, it then ceased to be so. We know that there have been many extraordinarily different societies and that they are all to some degree historical in the proper sense, that is, self-altering. I shall now describe briefly two important types of this self-alteration, that is, historicity.

First, as far as we know, some degree of self-alteration, however small or slow, seeps through in all societies. Language offers perhaps the most striking example of this. Every day several anonymous and untraceable changes are introduced into the English language as it is spoken, say, in the United States, in the guise of new slang words, semantic shifts, and so on. This same thing has been going on with a slower tempo for thousands of years in “primitive” or “savage” societies as well as in “traditional” societies such as peasant societies under “Asiatic despotism” or European peasant societies, especially those in Eastern Europe, up to the twentieth century.

This minute but continual self-alteration will persist as long as there are human beings and societies, for it has to do with the nature of human beings as well as that of social institutions. If institutions were made of iron, they would still be subject to alteration, but not *self*-alteration; rather, like iron, they would rust. If they were made of rational ideas, they would last for ever. But institutions are actually made of sanctioned social meanings and procedures for giving

meaning. These meanings are at heart imaginary—not “rational,” not “functional,” not “reflections of reality”—they are *social imaginary significations*. They can be effective, and effectively alive, only as long as they are invested (“cathected”) and lived by human beings. The same is true of the procedures for the sanction of these meanings.

Human beings are essentially defined, not by being “reasonable,” but by being possessed with a radical imagination. It is this imagination that has to be tamed and brought under control through social fabrication, but such taming never fully succeeds, as witnessed by the existence of *transgression* in all known societies. Thus, the life and the activities of innumerable human beings continually introduce infinitesimal alterations in the ways of doing things as well as in the manner of effectively living, or “interpreting” (re-creating for themselves), the instituted social imaginary significations. As a result, a slow—and, of course, nonconscious—self-alteration is always in process in actual social life. This self-alteration is almost always the object of an occultation on the part of the existing institutions of society in the same way and for the same “reasons” that the creative dimension of self-institution is such an object. The occultation of self-institution (of the self-creation of society) and of self-alteration (of the historicity of society) are two faces of society’s heteronomy.

The second type of self-alteration, leaving aside the extremely important class of “intermediate” cases consisting in relatively swift but fully blind social change, concerns the periods of rapid and important societal self-alteration in which an intense collective activity, endowed with a minimal degree of lucidity, is successfully aimed at changing institutions. Such periods manifest another mode of being of the social-historical, the explicit calling into question of its

laws of existence and the corresponding work toward their lucid transformation. These periods I would call revolutionary. In this sense, I speak of a revolutionary period in the Greek world from the eighth to the fifth century BCE, and in Western Europe from, say, the thirteenth century onwards. During these two periods the project of social and individual autonomy was created, thanks to which creation we can today think and speak as we do.

III

I come now to the idea of a revolution as an explicit political project—or, rather, as a dense period of time within which a radical political project takes hold upon social reality.

What does *radical* mean in this context? Of course, the idea of a *total* revolution, of the creation of a social *tabula rasa*, is absurd. In the most radical revolution imaginable, the elements of social life that would remain unaltered are immensely more numerous than are those that might be changed: language, buildings, tools, ways of behaving and doing, and, the most important, heavy parts of the sociopsychical structure of human beings.

This can be seen as a great *fact* that, made explicit, sounds like a truism. But it can and must also be seen as a crucial problem for political action.

This problem, as far as we know, was raised explicitly for the first time by Plato. Given what humans are, which means, for Plato, given that human beings are utterly and hopelessly corrupt, how is it possible to make the desired changes? And, in particular, *who* is going to bring them about?

Plato's answer in the *Republic* is well known: Philosophers ought to become kings, or kings philosophers.

Plato himself considers both eventualities very unlikely.

Plato's position is unacceptable for us, or at least, to me. Certainly, to call Plato a totalitarian is to misuse and abuse terms—it is even silly. It is also wrong to call him a conservative: what he intended was not at all the conservation of an existing state of affairs or the return to some previous one. Any decent Athenian conservative would recoil with horror at Plato's proposals regarding property and women and children. Rather, Plato aimed to arrest the movement of history (this can be more clearly seen in the *Laws*), and the hidden, certainly not fully conscious, presupposition behind his political attitude and his bitter hatred of democracy was the understanding that history is the work of the human collectivity. Once you give free rein to the will of the many and to its expression, then *genesis*—change and becoming (the negation of true Being)—and its concomitant decay set in.

Nevertheless, the diagnosis of the problem was correct, and its formulation remained, by and large, the same during the subsequent millennia. How can you change society if both the actors and the instruments of change are living individuals, that is, the very embodiment of that which is to be changed? Accordingly, Rousseau could write in the second half of the eighteenth century, "*Celui qui ose entreprendre d'instituer un peuple doit se sentir en état de changer, pour ainsi dire, la nature humaine* (The one who dares to endeavor to institute a people must feel himself capable of changing, so to speak, human nature)."³ It is true that in this passage

³Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, bk 2, ch. 7, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), vol. 3, p. 381. A similar formulation can be found already in the first version of the *Contrat*, bk 2, ch. 2, *ibid.*, p. 313.

Rousseau deals explicitly with the question of a “first” institution. But the whole of his political writings shows that he is at grips with Plato’s problem. To give institutions to a people one has to change, first of all, the *mores*, the *Sitten*, the ways of being of the people. Without such a change, the new institutions are useless and cannot even function. But it is precisely in order to bring about change in these ways of being, in these *mores*, that new institutions are required.⁴ Rousseau, like Plato, like Machiavelli, like Montesquieu, like all great thinkers (and in contradistinction to recent political theorists) was very lucid on this point. There cannot be a “political” institution that is not, from top to bottom, from its most superficial to its deepest level, linked to the *mores*, the *Sitten*, the whole anthropological, sociopsychical structure of the people living in that society.

Let us dwell a bit longer on Rousseau’s statement, “The one who dares to endeavor to institute a people,” to give institutions to a people.... Behind this formulation, one sees the image, the figure, and the story of “*the*” legislator, and the canonical list originating already with Machiavelli: Moses, Theseus, Lycurgus, Numa, Now, Rousseau is a deep thinker, and, in a sense, a democrat. Why then does he think only of *celui qui...*, *the one who...*, as a subject of action, and of the people, *le peuple*, as a *passive object* of this action, an object that has to be *formed* (“*formed*” is the precise term in the first version of the *Contrat*: “*celui qui se croit capable de former un peuple...*”), formed by the active legislator not only in terms of a narrowly conceived political constitution but also with respect to its *mores*, its ways of feeling, thinking, doing, and being? That Plato could speak in these terms is

⁴See also Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, ch. 1.

understandable. Regardless of any contradiction that this view might have with his ideas about the human being or the soul, he firmly believes that the people are rabble, and he says so repeatedly. But Rousseau?

One could argue that Rousseau is very pessimistic, indeed gloomy, about the people of his time and about human nature in general. Contrary to the widespread, popular misunderstanding, this was indeed the truth of the matter—and, as we know, events rapidly proved him wrong (the *Contrat social* was published in 1762; Rousseau died in 1778). What is more important and deeper is the fact that the common ground on which Plato and Rousseau stand is the philosophical equivalent of the imaginary of heteronomy. Both Plato and Rousseau would recognize that people have been active in bringing about the obtaining state of political affairs. But they would also be quick to point out that it is a bad, corrupted state of affairs—and necessarily so. Framed in these terms, the aporia has no solution; indeed, this is what Rousseau says in the first paragraph of chapter 7, book 2, of the *Contrat*: “il faudroit des Dieux pour donner des loix aux hommes (Gods would be required to give laws to humans),”⁵ an echo of Plato’s *God is the measure of all things*.⁶

People, and history, can bring forward something “new”—but only in the sense of *destruction*, of *decay*, of a *less good* state of affairs. By virtue of the Platonic conflation of Being and Good, *less good* means also *less being*, *hēttōn on*. Thus, such a “new” is new by virtue of a deficit or negation and therefore not truly new.

⁵*Du contrat social*, p. 381.

⁶T/E: Plato *Laws* 716c. Plato’s phrase is, of course, a direct challenge to Protagoras’ famous saying, “Man is the measure of all things.”

In the view of the heteronomously instituted society, the laws are not created by man. According to Plato, and most philosophers, the laws are made by humans, and that is precisely why they are so bad. They ought to be the reflection (or translation, or whatever) of a superhuman order, mediated by an “exceptional” being⁷ and protected against human attempts at their alteration by a “noble lie,” the fable of their divine origin.⁸

But the trails of Rousseau and Plato, because they are radical thinkers, lead to the heart of the matter. Let us reformulate the idea in question as: “one who wants to institute a people has to change the *mores* of the people.” But who does, in actual historical fact, change the *mores* of peoples? The answer is obvious: The peoples themselves. Thus we have at least a formal answer to our question. If there is to be a true change in institutions, it must be accompanied by a deeply consonant change in *mores*. Changes in *mores* are brought about by the people. So, the only assurance for this consonance is that the people be as active in bringing about the political (formal institutional) change as they are in changing their *mores* (though, of course, in a different way).

We may recall that Marx confronts this same question in the third of his *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The materialist theory of the change in circumstances and of education forgets that circumstances are changed by man and that the educator must be himself educated.... The coincidence of the change in circumstances and of human activity can be rationally considered and understood only as revolutionary

⁷For Rousseau, see the whole of ch. 7 of bk 2 of the *Contrat*.

⁸*Republic* 414b-c; same position in Rousseau, *ibid.*, p. 383.

praxis.”⁹ In other words, the old aporia that human beings are conditioned by the existing state of affairs and that this state cannot be changed except by their actions. But why should human beings want to (and could they?) change this state of affairs, if they are conditioned by it to function in conformity with it? Marx’s answer, “revolutionary praxis,” appears verbal. But it means that people change by changing the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Things will become, I hope, more clear if we use the ideas I introduced before. It is through the same historical process that people change “anthropologically,” that is, change their *mores* and sociopsychical organization, and change also the (formal) institution of society. It might appear that all of the elements required for the solution of our problem presuppose one another and that we find ourselves caught in a vicious circle. This is a circle, but it is not “vicious,” for it is the circle of historical creation. Did the Greek *politai* create the *polis* or the *polis* the *politai*? This is a meaningless question precisely because the *polis* could have been created only by the action of human beings who were by the same token transforming themselves into *politai*.

⁹T/E: The English version in the text appears to be Castoriadis’s own, though he may have used an unsourced French or English translation. (The French translator uses the J. Molitor French translation from Éditions Costes.) Here is how the International Publishers’ English-language translation reads: “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating.... The coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionising practice*” (Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* [New York: International Publishers, 1968], p. 28).

But why and how, one may ask, do people start changing themselves and their institutions? And why is it that they do not do so all the time?

We have, in a sense, already answered this question. Human history is creation. We can elucidate this creation in some of its general characteristics, or in its concrete content, after it has happened. But we can neither “explain” nor “predict” it, because it is not determined; it, rather, is determinant. Likewise, its tempo and rhythm are themselves part of the creation. It is only in an external, descriptive sense that historical processes take place in measurable, homogeneous calendar time. Intrinsically, in its concrete content and texture, the time of a historical epoch is an integral part of the creation this epoch *is*, congruent with its deepest imaginary significations. That Greek time, or Western European time, differs deeply from Trobriand or pharaonic Egyptian time hardly needs stressing, but it requires, indeed, thinking.

It is useful to revert for a moment to Marx, for he has been till now the most explicit thinker of revolution. I cannot enter here into the ambiguities and antinomies of Marx’s thought, which I have discussed many times.¹⁰ Despite the third *Thesis on Feuerbach* quoted above, and similar formulations, when it comes to his main preoccupation, the socialist revolution, Marx is unable to maintain the irreducibility of praxis; to put it more sharply, he proves unable to see its

¹⁰See ch. 1 (1964) of [IIS](#). See also François Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution* (1986), tr. Deborah Kan Furet, with selections from Karl Marx, ed. and intro. Lucien Calvié (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). A work on Marx’s concrete analyses of other historical transitions, in the light of the problematic formulated here, would be very helpful. His ambiguities concerning the French Revolution receive an excellent analysis in Furet’s book.

creative character, looking instead for solid causes, that is, guarantees, of and for revolution. The direct result is that he pays scant attention to the problems of political action and organization proper. Instead he looks for economic “laws” that would somehow engineer the collapse of capitalism. This, of course, even if true, would be irrelevant and useless: there is nothing to ensure that a collapse of capitalism would be followed by socialism rather than fascism, the *Iron Heel*, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, or cannibalism.¹¹

More to the point are his attempts to find in capitalist circumstances the conditions for the creation of a “revolutionary class”: not just a class striving to overthrow the system but a class capable, after this overthrow, of establishing a new society with a fully “positive” character; in Marx’s terminology, first the “inferior,” then the “superior” phase of communism. This class is the proletariat or the working class. But why should this be so?

One can find three kinds of answers to this question in Marx:

- the proletariat is subject, under capitalism, to total alienation or absolute deprivation; it is a pure negation that therefore can only produce the absolutely positive. This Christiano-Hegelian position has to be dismissed straightaway as factually erroneous, logically nonsensical, politically inconsistent, and philosophically arbitrary.
- “laws of history” demand that after capitalism there follows an “end of history” or, rather, an end of “prehistory.” This is communism. The proletariat will

¹¹French translator: *The Iron Heel*, a novel by Jack London published in 1907 in which one could see a premonition of the rise of fascism.

therefore be “historically compelled, in conformity with its being” to do whatever is necessary to bring about the new society (*The Holy Family*).¹² This arbitrary eschatology does not need to be discussed, either.

- capitalist circumstances, especially work and life in the factory and in working-class neighborhoods, *positively instill* into the proletariat a new mentality consisting of solidarity, practicality, soberness of mind, depth of understanding, “humanity,” and so on, which is intrinsically homogeneous with and appropriate to the new society to be established. In other words, capitalist circumstances produce not only a working class but, in the person of this class, a new anthropological type and a new sociopsychical structure, which are the necessary conditions for the production, in turn, of a new society. Capitalist circumstances change human beings in such a way that they will in turn change circumstances in the wished-for direction.

For a series of reasons, the most compelling of which is the huge quantitative decline of the proletariat in its Marxian sense, this discussion might appear to have only historical interest. In fact, it brings us back to the center of our theoretical and political preoccupations.

¹²T/E: This quotation from Marx and Engels’s *The Holy Family*, here given in Castoriadis’s own English-language version, is discussed at length in Castoriadis’s key 1973 essay, “The Question of the History of the Workers’ Movement” (1974), now in [PSW3](#), beginning on p. 159. On p. 202n.2 of that text, the standard English-language reference was given as follows: *The Holy Family*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 37.

Marx was correct, to a considerable degree, in diagnosing a change in the sociopsychical structure of the working class. In the main capitalist countries, the working class in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries behaved and acted in a way no other exploited and dominated class had ever behaved and acted before. This was not the “product” of “circumstances” but truly the self-creation of the working class as a class and as an active factor in capitalist society. The passage from a proletariat “in itself” to a proletariat “for itself” was not (and is not) “necessary,” nor was it *determined* by the objective conditions of life and work under capitalism. It was the British, the French, the German, and then the American workers who struggled to free themselves from illiteracy, to acquire, shape, and spread political ideas, to organize, to formulate, and finally to impose demands aimed at altering their “circumstances.”¹³ And it is only *some*, and not *all*, working classes in capitalist countries that showed similar performances.

Now, the difference between, say, English workers of the early nineteenth century and Brazilian workers until 1964 (or, for that matter, today’s English workers) is certainly not a reflection of genetic disparities. Partly, this difference is just there, and unexplainable. But partly also, if we want to understand it, we must take into account the dissimilarities in *historical* endowment, in the total “circumstances” of the countries involved, including their political traditions, *beyond* the establishment of capitalism.

The fact is that the first, most important, inaugural, and instituting steps in the workers’ movement took place in countries where a tradition of struggle against oppressive

¹³I have argued this point at length in “The Question of the History of the Workers’ Movement.”

authority in favor of popular regimes, in favor of freedom of thought and inquiry, was part of the historical sediment. Once started in these countries, the movement could and did spread elsewhere—though not, emphatically not, everywhere, not with these characteristics, despite “capitalist circumstances.”

The workers’ movement in the “European” (*lato sensu*) countries created itself. But it was able to do this on the basis of the heritage, the tradition of democratic movement it found in the history of these countries, the reference to the social-historical project of autonomy, born within the “European” world. It is therefore also fully comprehensible that before its bureaucratic degeneracy (whether social-democratic or Bolshevik), the workers’ movement created institutions of a deeply democratic character, some of which go beyond the forms of the bourgeois democratic movement and resurrect long-forgotten principles embedded in ancient Greek institutions, such as the rotation of people in posts of responsibility within the British trade unions of the first period, the importance of sovereign general assemblies of all concerned, and the permanent revocability of delegates instaurated by the Paris Commune and revived or rediscovered every time workers formed autonomous organs, like Councils (as they did again in Hungary in 1956). The radical demands of the workers’ movement concerning the ownership of the means of production belong to the same sphere of signification. Democracy entails the equal sharing of power, and equal possibilities of participation in the process of political decision-making. This is, of course, impossible when individuals, groups, or managerial bureaucracies control centers of huge economic power, which, especially under modern conditions, immediately translates into political power.

IV

Our heritage, our tradition, includes many contradictory elements. Our history has created democracy—but it is also the only history to have created totalitarianism. The Athenians are accountable both for *Antigone* and for the dreadful massacre of the Melians.

But our tradition has also created freedom in another sense: the possibility of and the responsibility for *choosing*. Choosing is a political act at the basis even of philosophy, properly speaking. To enter philosophical activity one has to choose for thinking and against revelation, for unlimited interrogation and against blind acceptance of what has been inherited.

Our heritage contains antinomic elements. And it contains the possibility of and the responsibility for choice. This entails freedom in a sense much deeper than the “constitutional” one. When reading Thucydides, one never sees the Athenians complaining that their plights are brought on by God’s wrath; they recognize in them the results of their own decisions and actions. Neither, I hope, would people in the democratic tradition today seek extrasocial causes for their collective predicaments.

In this heritage, we choose the project of individual and collective autonomy, for an endless series of reasons, but ultimately because *we will it*, and all that goes with it. All that goes with it: that is, the best in our culture, as we know it.

Will is not “voluntarism.” Will is the conscious dimension of what we are as beings defined by radical imagination, that is, defined as potentially creative beings.

To will autonomy entails willing some types of institution of society and opposing others. But it entails also willing a type of historical existence, a type of relation to the

past and to the future. Both of them, relation to the past and relation to the future, have to be re-created.

Today the relation to the past is either through cheap touristic archeology or by erudition and study of Museums of various sorts. We must oppose pseudomodernity and pseudosubversion—the “*tabula rasa*” ideology—as well as eclecticism (“postmodernism”) or servile adoration of the past. A new relation to the past means that we revive the past as our own *and* as independent of us; it entails being able to discuss with it as well as to let ourselves be questioned by it. Here again perhaps the relation of fifth-century Athenians to their past offers itself *not* as a model, but as a germ, as an index of actualized possibilities. Tragedy does not “repeat” the myths; it reelaborates and transforms them so that they, originating in a past immemorial, can vest themselves in language and the forms of the most vivid present, thereby addressing human beings in all possible futures. This uncanny “dialogue” with the past, two one-way runs apparently disjointed and yet actually not so at all, is one of the most precious possibilities our history has created for us. In the same way that we ought to recognize in individuals, in groups, in ethnic or other units their true alterity, and organize our coexistence with them on the basis of this recognition, we must recognize in our own past an inexhaustible source of proximate alterity, a surface of rebound for our endeavors and a line of resistance to our always imminent folly.

And we have to establish a new relation to the future, to stop seeing it as an indefinite “progress” giving us ever more of the same, or as the locus of undefined explosions. Neither should we bracket our relation to the future with the disingenuous term *utopia*. Beyond the so-called possibilities of the present, fascination with which can only generate repetition, we must, without abandoning judgment, dare to

will a future—not *any* future: not a blue print, but this ever-unforeseeable, ever-creative unfolding, in the shaping of which we can participate, working and struggling, for and against.

What Democracy?*

It may be useful to recall that, already with the changes in Latin America since the mid-1980s, but especially with the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe since the Autumn of 1989, not only the journalists but even a few serious authors have begun to talk about the triumph of democracy, of the irresistible march of democracy over the planet, and other such puffed-up *soufflés* made with the same flour. What democracy?

Etymology does not resolve all substantive problems but can sometimes aid one's thinking. Democracy: *dēmos* and *kratos*, *kratos* of the *dēmos*, the power of the people—as aristocracy is the power of the *aristoi*, the best, the noble, the great; as autocracy is the power of *autos*, of oneself, of he who does not have to account to another or to others. Where do we today see the power of the people?

Before going further, two confusions attributable to two great modern authors must be cleared up. The first one comes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the *Social Contract*, his definition of democracy is limpidly clear—and untenable, since it proceeds from the pure play of abstract notions. Democracy as it is conceived in the *Social Contract* is the *identity* of the Sovereign and the Prince, that is to say, the

*Presented to the Cerisy colloquium on July 5, 1990, and transcribed here with slight stylistic changes and full restitution of the passage on the economy, which time constraints had obliged me to abridge during the colloquium presentation. The notes, mostly references, were added during the transcription process. “Quelle démocratie” was first published in *FP*, 145-80 (175-217 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: Videos from this July 3-10, 1990 colloquium devoted to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis are now available online: <https://www.agorainternational.org/videos-cerisy-1990-castoriadis.html>. Castoriadis's talk can be viewed here: <http://vimeo.com/kaloskaisophos/cerisy-1990-castoriadis-06-quelle-democratie>. The present translation was first published in *FTP*.]

identity of the legislative—or, in a more radical sense, instituting—body with what today is called the “executive,” or at once the governmental power and the administration. It is of this regime that Rousseau says that it would be excellent for a people of gods but unachievable by human beings. Such a regime never has existed and could not exist, not even in a tribe of fifty persons. The identity of the Sovereign and the Prince implies that the political body decides collectively upon everything and collectively executes its decisions, whatever the object of those decisions might be: for example, collectively replacing a burnt-out light bulb in the hall where the assembly meetings are held. In such a regime, there can be and there must be no delegation. Clearly, this is not what one is talking about when one talks about democracy, and the Athenian regime, for example, was not like that.

I take the occasion of this single allusion to the Athenians to repeat what I have said many times—but there are none so deaf as...—namely, that I have never made of the Athenians a model or said that nothing politically important has been done since their time. Modern Europe created itself as modern Europe; it took from the Greeks what it was willing and able to take; above all, it constantly recreated them in terms of its own imaginary. It also went much further, notably as concerns universality, and this in a host of domains. To recall one obvious example, the Greeks created mathematics, but European mathematics constitutes an extraordinary creation that breaks the closure of Greek mathematics. Greece matters to us on account of the appearance there of forms that do make us or can still make us reflect and that in particular show, in the political field, that certain democratic forms of exercising power are possible and achievable. This, in collectivities of 30 thousand citizens. What can happen when we are dealing with thirty-million

citizens, as in France, or three billion citizens? This is the genuine problem of democracy today, which no one, among the thinkers of democracy, seems to want to raise, and which is sidestepped when one talks about the sovereignty of the nation—but that is another question. We shall come to it.

A few words now about the signification of the term *democracy* in Tocqueville. A thinker of immense stature, he was barely thirty years old when he arrived in the United States, stayed for a few months, and saw things no one else saw—he was so immense a thinker, in fact, that for some decades now, even in the United States, political scientists and sociologists have been having recourse to him in order to comprehend American society. Nor is there any need to recall how important were his reflections upon the *Ancien Régime* and the Revolution. In France, rediscovery of his work dates only from the Seventies—and this rediscovery has taken place as an ideological recourse stemming from the crisis of Marxism. This is a bizarre swing in the other direction, whereby Marx is thrown overboard—which, in a certain fashion, certainly had to be done and which, in my case, I have been doing since 1960¹—but at the same time, not only the baby but the bathtub, the bathroom itself, and, ultimately, the entire house are thrown out along with the dirty bath water. That is to say, under the fallacious pretext that Marx would have been wrong for having contrasted how society really operates with what was written in the law books, the social-historical reality in which the political regime bathes is purely and simply wiped out.

So, Tocqueville has been rediscovered—which is excellent—and one tries to make him into the thinker of contemporary “democracy”—which is bizarre. Tocqueville

¹T/E: In “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961), now in [PSW2](#).

was in the United States at the beginning of the 1830s, but the United States he was describing already no longer existed when he was there. He was describing in fact the Jeffersonian social situation—more exactly, the social situation that ideally corresponded to what (setting aside slavery) Jefferson would have wanted to be democracy's ground: in other terms, a society in which the "equality of conditions" is achieved. Tocqueville is anything but a formalist. He does not analyze constitutional arrangements; he describes a social situation (and a cultural one—an imaginary institution, in my sense of the term) characterized by the "equality of conditions." Equality would have a *chance* (to borrow Max Weber's term), a significant probability of being effectively achieved in society. Unfortunately, the moment when Tocqueville was describing such a state in the United States was the moment when this state was disappearing. This was the Jacksonian era. Industrialization was advancing in great strides, the workers were laboring seventy-two hours a week, and so on. The "equality of conditions" was in a bad way—as it was, moreover, from the outset. (Let it be said in passing that the boosters of the American Republic generally forget that the Founding Fathers also established the Constitution *against* the subversive social movements of the time, the demands for the abolition of debts, and so on.) What, then, in relation to the present (1990) question of democracy, is the relevancy of Tocqueville's descriptions?

The Jeffersonian political schema was quite "classical" (Greco-Roman) and the same as the one Marx superbly formulated a century later: "The genuine socioeconomic basis of the ancient democracies was the community of independent petty producers."² The existence

²T/E: In "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions" (1993;

of free lands in the United States preserved for this schema a semblance of relevancy throughout the nineteenth century, until the “closing of the frontier.” But already in 1830, large-scale slavery in the South, a heritage of the past, and the rapid industrialization of the North, proceeding hand in hand with the rise of corrupt and powerful political “machines,” heralding the future, showed that this schema no longer corresponded—that is, if it ever corresponded—to the central realities of North American society. One way or another, powerful oligarchies had seized political power.

Yet Tocqueville’s description was basically “sociological,” not political. Better put, it was social-historical. It did not intend so much established political power but, rather, this enormous upheaval in the imaginary of modern societies that rejects *hereditary* differences in status or, to put it another way, that rejects every status that would, *de jure*, be both permanent and inaccessible to the “general citizen.” We know that Tocqueville was a nobleman. We can see his nostalgia (in part “justified,” moreover) for certain traits of the *Ancien Régime*, his praise for individual excellence and for what Marx would have called the organic community formed between the lord and the tiny collectivity

now in [CL4](#)), Castoriadis paraphrases this statement as follows: “Marx said that the genuine socioeconomic condition for the ancient democracy was the existence of a host of independent petty producers.” We noted there:

On p. 596 of vol. 3 of *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), Marx writes: “Hence the popular hatred against usurers, which was most pronounced in the ancient world where ownership of means of production by the producer himself was at the same time the basis for political status, the independence of the citizen.” He had spoken of “small independent individual producers” two pages earlier. This may or may not be the source Castoriadis has in mind.

for which he acts as chief, judge, and father. What is striking to him is that all that had been eradicated in the United States or, rather, never existed there. The “equality of conditions” is the general movement of human societies—which, by a brilliant intuition (similar to the one of Marx, who, on the basis of a few factories in Manchester, deduced the industrialization and “capitalization” of the world), he projected onto modern societies as a whole, and which leads those societies to reject the old forms of social discrimination. You can spend July on the Côte d’Azur, August at Biarritz, September at Deauville, October in Scotland, November in the Sologne region of France, and December at Cairo without anyone asking you whether you have the right to do so. You have this right just as much as any duke married to an American heiress. Of course, you will need some money, but we are not talking about such vulgarities here, you see; we are talking “political.” But what is the “political”? The “political” is power, its acquisition, its exercise. On that, you will find a scant few things in Tocqueville, and his conception of “democracy” is politically unusable.³ An additional proof of this, via *reductio ad absurdum*, is given in Tocqueville’s idea about “despotic democracy.” Tocqueville does not intend thereby the perfectly achievable case in which a “tyranny of the majority” would be pushed to the extreme, would oppress individuals or minorities, would violate its own laws (for example, the Athenian *ekklēsia* in 406). He has in view a perfectly “democratic” society (in his acceptance of the term),

³Pierre Manent had seen this very clearly: “Democracy...[is], in the first place, a social state defined by equality of conditions, not an ensemble of political institutions” (*Intellectual History of Liberalism* [1987], tr. Rebecca Balinski [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], p. 104). See also his *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (1982), tr. John Wagoner (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

wherein the “equality of conditions” would be perfectly achieved, but wherein citizens’ political apathy, their conformist lethargy, would leave all power in the hands of a “tutelary” State (or, perhaps, in the hands of a triumphant demagogue, and even, why not, of a Stalin or of a Hitler). But what, concretely, would this “tutelary” State be? Certainly not a pure concept, it would be, as a matter of fact, a State—that is to say, a bureaucratic pyramid populated with privileged, well-ensconced subpotentates who, to borrow a well-known phrase, would be more equal than the others. If such a regime remained “democratic” in Tocqueville’s sense (that is to say, legalistic and rejecting all inequality in legal statuses), it would quite simply be what we see around us: a liberal oligarchy, not a democracy.

The evolution of Western societies shows that there is indeed a movement toward the “equalization of conditions” in Tocqueville’s sense. Here is one of the dimensions of the contestation of the old order, combining the tendency toward the realization of the project of individual and collective autonomy with the capitalist transformation of money into a veritable general form of equivalence, therefore also a general substitute (lavishly described by Balzac well before being formulated by Marx). There is a tendency toward the equalization of certain conditions at the same time that there is a tendency toward the unequalization of other conditions, which are constantly being reproduced and remain with us still. From the standpoint of effective social-historical actuality, not of the letter of the laws, we live in very highly inegalitarian societies, including and especially as concerns power in all its aspects. As regards this inequality, it does not matter much that the dominant strata might revitalize themselves via recruitment or cooptation of the fittest, cleverest, and most intelligent members of the dominated strata.

What is one to understand by *democracy*? Certainly not a movement toward the equalization of any conditions whatsoever; for, then Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are, each in its own way and minus a few details, achieving the equalization of the most important conditions of all: the metaphysical conditions governing the eternal life (or nonlife) of the faithful. I have explained my views on this point on a number of occasions and, again quite recently, in “Power, Politics, Autonomy” (1988) and “Done and To Be Done” (1989).⁴ But to set the ideas in focus, I shall recall two points.

First of all, democracy is the power of the *dēmos*, that is to say, of the collectivity. Immediately, the question is raised: Where does this power stop? What are its limits? It is clear that this power has to stop somewhere, that it has to include some limits. But it is just as clear that, as soon as society no longer accepts any transcendent or merely inherited norm, there is *nothing* that might, intrinsically, be able to set the limits where this power has to stop. The result is that democracy is, essentially, the regime of self-limitation. For example, human rights constitute such a self-limitation. In a number of countries, this self-limitation takes on a constitutional character; in France, its status is a bit bizarre, both constitutional and “more than” constitutional. Despite this, I do not think that any jurist would say that in France it is impossible, in a quite regular fashion, to abrogate the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. A revision of the Constitution is always possible, and during such a revision nothing prevents the Preamble, which makes reference to the Declaration of Rights, from being modified, repealed, and so on. The idea of an unrevisable Constitution

⁴Now available, respectively, in [CL3](#) and [CL5](#).

is a legal and factual absurdity. But to say that a Constitution is revisable signifies that only the activity of the constituent body—in democracy's case, of the people—can set limits upon this revision and, notably, guarantee human rights, a certain separation of powers, rules like *nullum crimen, nulla poena sine lege*, and so forth. All these provisions are worth fighting for. But they all depend upon explicit acts of the constituting, that is to say, instituting body. Democracy is the regime of self-limitation [*autolimitation*], in other words, the regime of autonomy, or of self-institution [*auto-institution*]. Considered in their full meaning, these three terms are in fact synonymous. And it is also for this reason that democracy is a tragic regime. This is the very meaning of tragedy: the question of man is *hubris*; there is no ultimate rule to which he might refer in order to escape therefrom—not the Ten Commandments, not the Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount does not tell me what laws I am to vote (it tells me in fact that there is no need for law, that love is enough). We ourselves have to find the laws we are to adopt; the limits are not traced out in advance, and *hubris* is ever possible. That is what Athenian tragedy, a democratic institution *par excellence*, is talking about; this institution constantly reminds the *dēmos* of the necessity of self-limitation. When, after the Athenians' atrocious massacre of the Melians, Euripides put on *The Trojan Women* (which, stupidly, the Moderns so often take to be an antiwar manifesto; that is not at all what it is about), he set on stage, before the Athenians, the Athenians themselves, that is to say, the Greeks after the fall of Troy, representing them as dreadful monsters carried away by *hubris* and incapable of placing any limit upon their acts. He presented them as carrying out the Auschwitz or the Katyn massacre of the time. He did so in front of the *dēmos*—*tua res agitur*—and the *dēmos*—the same *dēmos* that had accomplished these

horrors or allowed them to occur—crowned him with the laurel wreath.

We are talking about a power that does not accept being limited from the outside. (I am not talking about trivial limits—natural ones, for example.) But we are also talking about self-instituting power. Democracy is a regime that self-institutes itself [*s'auto-institue*] explicitly in an ongoing [*permanent*] manner. That does not signify that it changes Constitutions every morning or the first of each month but, rather, that it has made all the necessary arrangements, *de jure and de facto*, in order to be able to change its institutions without civil war, without violence, without the spilling of blood. Of course, no one can guarantee that violence will for ever be exiled from human history if democracy is instaurated.

A second point: What does equality signify in the context of an autonomous, self-governed, and self-instituted society? What is the logical and philosophical way of passing from the one (autonomy) to the other (equality)? First, no one can reasonably want autonomy for oneself without wanting it for all. But it is also that, as soon as there is a collectivity and as this collectivity can live only under laws, no one is effectively autonomous—free—if one does not have the effective possibility of participating in the determination of these laws. Liberty and equality require each other. Living in society, I cannot live outside the laws. (Living in society is not some adventitious attribute of human being; it is being human. And laws are not a desirable or deplorable addition to society; the institution is the being-society of society.) The laws cannot be defined by each individual and for itself alone; this idea is as meaningless as the one about a private language. The only sense in which I can say that they are *my* laws is that I have been able to take part in the formation of

the law, even if I have been beaten in the vote; it is a law of which I approve or of whose elaboration and adoption I approve because I was able to participate therein.

Rigorously speaking, then, equality signifies: the effective, and not on-paper, equal possibility for all to participate in power. It is not just a matter of going into the voting booth [*l'isoloir électoral*]; it is also a matter, for example, of being informed, and as informed as anyone else, about what is to be decided. Let us distinguish between the *oikos* (strictly private matters), the *agora* (the private/public sphere, the “site” where citizens meet one another outside the political domain), and the *ekklēsia* (the public/public sphere—that is to say, in a democratic regime, the site where one deliberates and decides matters of common concern). In the *agora*, I discuss with others, or I buy books, or something else. I am in a public space, but one that is at the same time private, for no political (legislative, governmental, or judicial) decision can be made there; the collectivity, by its legislation, assures us only of the liberty of this space. In the *ekklēsia* in the broad sense, including the “people’s assembly” as well as the “government” and the courts, I am in a public/public space: I deliberate with others in order to *decide*, and these decisions are sanctioned by the public power of the collectivity. Democracy can be defined also as the becoming truly public of the public/public sphere—which, in other regimes, is in fact more or less *private*. It is not only under the *Ancien Régime* that the political “public” is the *private* affair of the monarch, or, under totalitarianism, of the apparatus of the Party; one of the many reasons why it is laughable to talk about “democracy” in today’s Western societies is that there the “public” sphere is in fact private—and this is so just as much in France as in the United States or in England. It is so first of all in the sense that the genuine decisions are made

behind closed doors, in the corridors or gathering places of those who govern. As is known, such decisions are not in fact made in the official places where they are supposed to be made; when they come before the Council of Ministers or the Chamber of Deputies in France, everything has already been played out. Second, the grounds (the genuine grounds, in any case) are secret. and in most cases, one is legally prohibited from having access. The waiting period for access to public archives is thirty years in England; in France, I believe, it is fifty years. Fifty, thirty, or ten years, or even a month, suffices for what I wish to show. Wait fifty or thirty years, and then you will know why your father, brother, or son was killed in the war. That is “democracy.”

The becoming truly public of the public/public sphere implies, of course, that the collectivity and the public powers are indeed obliged to inform citizens effectively about everything that concerns the decisions that are to be made. Of this, they have need in order to be able to make these decisions in full knowledge of the relevant facts.⁵

Therefore, before any discussion of the question of “direct democracy or ‘representative’ democracy,” we note that the present-day “democracy” is anything you want it to be except democratic, for the public/public sphere is in fact *private*. It is the possession of the political oligarchy, and not of the political body.

But when one says “equality means the effective equal

⁵As early as 1957—in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 22 (July 1957), now in [PSW2](#) as “On the Content of Socialism, II”—I insisted upon the fundamental character of the dissemination of relevant information for decisions to be made *in full knowledge of the relevant facts* [en connaissance de cause], as well as upon the essentially political character of (therefore implying a responsibility and obligation of accountability in) the functions of collecting and disseminating information.

possibility for all to participate,” one obviously is not talking about the mere possibility of having access to information. Implied here is the effective capacity to judge—which leads directly to the question of education—as is also implied the *time* necessary for information and reflection—which leads just as directly to the question of production and of the economy. On the other hand, it is necessary to recall, in the face of the barrage of contemporary demagoguery and sophistry, that it is a matter of *political* equality, of equality of participation in *power*. Equality does not signify that the collectivity would be engaged in rendering everyone capable of running the 100-meter dash in 10 seconds, or of playing Chopin’s *Études* to perfection, or in passing all children with the same grades in all their classes—or even in simply passing them all in all their classes, period. That does not have anything to do with political equality (although, as certain developments in contemporary society indicate, this might have something to do with Tocquevillean “equality”).

Some recent authors have tried to define democracy on the basis of other considerations, for example, by making it the regime of “indetermination,” or the regime that abolishes the unity of the norm among different social sectors, or the unity of knowledge and power. Some have also been able to write that it is the regime of openness—a formula in which I can, though without its vagueness, recognize things I myself have written.⁶ But we are talking about contemporary Western societies. Every political philosopher of classical times would have recognized in these societies regimes of

⁶T/E: On these criticized views, Castoriadis’s main target seems to be Claude Lefort, with whom he cofounded *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. On the last one, “openness,” Castoriadis may also have in mind Sir Karl Popper, author of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

liberal oligarchy: oligarchy, since a definite stratum dominates society; liberal, since this stratum allows citizens a certain number of negative or defensive liberties. What then is, today, in these societies, the concrete content of this “openness”? It is generalized conformism.⁷ And what is the content of these regimes’ “indetermination”? Inasmuch as the functioning of a social-historical regime might be “determined”—obviously, it *never* is so, even in the case of a tribe of savages or of a totalitarian regime: a social-historical regime is neither a machine nor a Newtonian universe—inasmuch, therefore, as it could be determined, this regime of alleged indetermination is perfectly “determined” by real, informal mechanisms that are essentially distinct from the formal (juridical) rules, yet allowed and covered thereby, and that assure, as far as possible (for, there are surprises everywhere, even in Russia or in China; history is surprise), the reproduction of the same. It is this reproduction that we observe in contemporary “democratic” societies—if we set aside, once again, the unforeseeable and the indeterminate, which are at the heart of every social-historical regime. There is reproduction of the same on the economic plane, on the political plane, on the cultural plane.

Can it be said that the different sectors apply different norms, that there does not exist today a norm that imposes itself upon all sectors? It is amusing to note that one is invoking this differentiation or separation of norms (out of which, let it be said in passing, the young Marx, certainly wrongly, made the very definition of alienation) during a period in which two and only two norms are becoming more

⁷T/E: See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1990), now in [CL3](#). This lecture was first delivered in English in September 1989, about ten months before the present talk.

and more the rule [*s'imposent de plus en plus*] (nothing, certainly, can impose itself absolutely): the bureaucratic-hierarchical norm inside the large organizations of all kinds (productive, administrative, educational, cultural) within which almost everyone spends his entire life; the norm of money everywhere contemporary pseudomarket arrangements prevail. This mixture of the money norm and of the bureaucratic-hierarchical norm suffices for us to continue to characterize the wealthy liberal societies as societies of fragmented bureaucratic capitalism.

The “dissociation of knowledge and power” is a multiply confused idea that acquires its semblance of meaning only by opposition to Plato’s *Republic* or to the *pretensions* of the Stalinist regime (which was, in reality, the power of the ignorant). The kings of France were not kings because they “knew,” but because God had willed them to be so. Even Hitler did not claim that he “knew”; he affirmed that he embodied the destiny and the mission of the German race. As for what is desirable, this dissociation tells us nothing more than the myth told by Protagoras in the Platonic dialogue of the same name: politics, I have written dozens of times, is not a matter of *epistēmē* (scientific knowledge) but of *doxa* (opinion)—and that is the sole nonprocedural justification for the majority principle. And in saying this, one has still not finished, for not all the *doxai* are equivalent, and there is a sort of knowledge in politics that is not a “science” but does have to do with judgment, prudence, and likelihood (that is why Plato scorned the rhetoricians, whereas Aristotle wrote a *Rhetoric*). As for contemporary reality, it tends, rather, to achieve the opposite of this dissociation. This may be seen in every bureaucratic-hierarchical structure, wherein the director, the full professor, or the board of examiners is necessarily right (power claims to imply knowledge). It can also be seen

in the attitude of the population, to the extent that the latter takes an interest in politics. Why is so-and-so “good” at running things (the State, Party, etc.)? Because he “knows”: (pseudo)knowledge legitimates power. That, as a matter of fact, it almost always is a matter of a pseudoknowledge matters little in this respect (though certainly in many other ones).

All that does not prevent us in any way from classing Western societies apart from other known social-historical regimes. In these societies, the project of individual and collective autonomy has, once again since the time of Greece and under different modalities, come to light. They have been belabored, haunted by this project for almost ten centuries. The struggles and revolutions this project has inspired—as well as, moreover, the slow but colossal changes in the behaviors of individuals—have led to the explicit and implicit institution of arrangements that, while they have not succeeded in effectively achieving autonomy and self-government, have nevertheless made of these societies open societies, ones in which domestic contestation still remains possible and in which individuals and groups enjoy certain rights and certain liberties that—formally and, up to a certain point, effectively—make it possible for them to reflect independently from and in opposition to the established authorities. These rights and these liberties are the result of the heritage of the emancipatory movement that has enlivened the West for centuries. It is their existence, but also their essentially negative and defensive character, that allows us to qualify Western political regimes as liberal oligarchies, and the societies that underpin them may be qualified as relatively open societies. To what extent the effectively actual social-historical processes that are now unfolding before our eyes are not just preparing a new closure is a second question, to which I shall return at the end of this presentation.

A fair proportion of contemporary discussions, at least in France, takes place as if there were a political sphere totally independent from the rest of social life or else determinative of the rest (inverted historical materialism). This political sphere is discussed, moreover, not according to the reality of effectively actual processes, arrangements, and mechanisms, nor even according to the genuine spirit of the laws, but according to the letter of the laws. The real is thus wiped out to the benefit of the formal, the implicit to the benefit of the explicit, the latent to the benefit of the manifest. It is by forgetting or occulting the effective actuality of the social-historical regime under which we live that the rationalizing constructions currently standing in for “political philosophy” can be deployed.

Particularly odd is what happens in this regard as to the question of “representation.” Those who write about politics today provide no “philosophy of representation.” Nowhere have I seen a foundation or an elucidation of what a political “representation” really can be, and I do not see in what it might consist. Could one conceive, in the Western way of conceptualizing law and in general, of a rule that would prevent me from altering my will, or from revoking a delegation of powers that is supposed to be in *my sole* interest (and not contractual)? “Representation” signifies that we grant, in *our sole* interest (and not in that of the “representatives,” too)—for a period of four, five, or seven years, it matters not how long—an *irrevocable* delegation of power to someone. But an irrevocable mandate in the *sole* interest of the principal or constituent [*mandant*], even for a limited duration, obviously unknown in private law, is absurd, impossible to construct juridically. The proxy [*mandataire*], delegate, or representative “exists” as such only to express the will of the represented person and can bind the latter only

insofar as he expresses that will. But with the “representative” system, the collectivity gives an irrevocable mandate for a lengthy period of time to “representatives” who can act by producing irreversible situations—so that they themselves determine the parameters for and the themes of their “reelection.”

These “elections” themselves constitute an impressive resurrection of the mystery of the Eucharist and the real Presence. Every four or five years, one Sunday (Thursday in Great Britain, Tuesday in the United States, where Sundays are devoted to other mysteries), the collective will is liquified or fluidified and then gathered, drop by drop, into sacred/profane vases called ballot boxes [*urnes*], and the same evening, by means of a few additional operations, this fluid, condensed 100,000 times, is decanted [*transvasé*] into the thenceforth transsubstantiated spirit of a few hundred elected officials.

There is no philosophy of “representation,” though there is an implicit metaphysics; neither is there any sociological analysis. Who represents whom, and how does he represent her? Forgotten without any discussion are the critiques of “representative democracy” begun with Rousseau, considerably broadened since then, and unreservedly validated by the most superficial observation of contemporary political facts. Wiped out is the alienation of the sovereignty of those who delegate to the delegates. Such delegation is supposed to be limited in time. But as soon as it is instaurated, everything is over. Rousseau was wrong in this regard: the English are not even “free once every five years.”⁸

⁸T/E: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and tr. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 114: “The

For, throughout those five years, the alleged choices about what the electors will be called upon to pronounce themselves will have been completely predetermined by what the deputies will have done between the two elections. These five-year terms obviously have cumulative effects, and the “choice” of the elector finds itself reduced to such grandiose dilemmas as François Mitterrand or Jacques Chirac, George Herbert Walker Bush or Michael Dukakis, Margaret Thatcher or Neil Kinnock, and so on. And as soon as a small separate political body exists, it cannot help but look after its own powers and interests and enter into collusion with the other *de facto* powers that are set up within society, notably economic ones.

Certainly, all that is just the vulgarly empirical—“judeophenomenal reality,” Marx would have said. What do trifling anecdotes like the implication of almost all the American senators in the Savings and Loan Scandal (whose cost is estimated at 700 billion dollars, with estimates constantly being revised upward) matter to us? Is a billion dollars a political concept? Obviously not. You are forgetting, Sir, that objects like that are unworthy of our thought, which considers only “the political” and the essence of democracy, which consists in this, that the site of power is empty and no one can claim to occupy it. —Excuse us; we were stupidly thinking that decisions about whether to send people to get themselves killed, to reduce them to unemployment, or to confine them in ghettos were to emanate from a highly occupied “site of power.”

Of course, there are elections in the United States, for

English people thinks it is free; it is greatly mistaken, it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, it is enslaved, it is nothing.”

the Senate and for the House of Representatives. Of course, too, it is a recognized fact—one has to be politically illiterate to ignore it—that no one over there doubts what is granted just as easily as the fact that Washington is the federal capital, that is, that once you are elected senator, you become, accidents aside, a senator for life. Why? Because being elected senator requires money, lots of money (a “nonpolitical” concept), for the financing of electoral campaigns (television, etc., included), and because this money is furnished by PACs (Political Action Committees) provided for under American law (which, on paper, regulates rather strictly their activities as well as the “limits” on contributions). Who gives money to these PACs? Probably not the drugged homeless person on the street corner. Instead, it is the people who have both the money and the reasons to give some of it to the Republican PAC rather than the Democratic one, or *vice versa*. And one more or less knows who has given how much—as one knows precisely which senator has voted for what. Money will be given by those who have it to those who vote well. But as soon as a senator disposes of money from a PAC richer than that of his adversary, he is practically assured reelection. And in fact, extremely rare, not to say nonexistent, are the cases in which incumbent senators are defeated in elections.⁹

So much for the reality of representation. But in truth one must not speak of the reality of representation for the simple reason that one is battling against windmills. For, in the majority of cases, the elected representatives hardly have any power. What powers does the French Parliament have?

⁹T/E: Castoriadis is speaking of a period *before* the 2010 Citizens United v. FEC US Supreme Court ruling and the proliferation of “dark money,” which have only worsened the situation he describes here.

Or even the English Parliament? Hardly any. The powers belong to extraparliamentary “political” instances of authority, political parties, and, each time, to the majority party. This is a basic political reality of the modern world, wonderfully ignored by our political thinkers; effective power is concentrated in the majority party’s hands. People talk about the separation of powers—but what separation of powers? The majority party disposes of the legislative power; it also has at its disposal the power hypocritically labeled *executive*, implying thereby that it only “executes” the laws, which is just plain silly: the “executive” power does not *execute* anything; it decides and governs. It is bailiffs and secretaries that “execute.” The “executive” power is in reality the *governmental* power; it makes decisions that are predetermined by no law. It does not “apply” the law; it acts within the framework of the laws, which is something else entirely. Its decisions are, in the major cases, discretionary and without remedy. Can that admirable French institution, the Council of State, repeal acts *of* the government? Yes, if it is a matter of trivial acts; no, when it is a matter of truly major ones, which the French Council of State has very well described as *governmental acts* (Couitéas affair, 1912),¹⁰ and about which it has judged that these acts can be attacked neither for excessiveness nor for abuse of power. Obviously, the bulk of the acts of a government are precisely... governmental acts. The acts of the administration are, by comparison, of secondary interest, even though it is important

¹⁰T/E: The Couitéas affair of 1912 was a complicated legal matter, lasting many years, that concerned one Basilio Couitéas, a Greco-French colonist in Tunisia who was endeavoring to expel indigenous residents from “his” lands. From a reluctant French State concerned about the risk to public safety, Couitéas unsuccessfully sought military aid in carrying out court-sanctioned eviction orders.

to protect citizens from the arbitrariness of the subprefects.¹¹

The majority party therefore dominates the legislative power, the governmental power, and maintains a hold over the administration properly speaking (nominations to hundreds or thousands of major posts). As for the judicial power, one must consider the question with a modest dose of realism and good sense. Before the constitutional instauration of the separation of powers (which, moreover, in Western Europe factually predates by several centuries the Revolution in the case of the courts), it may be doubted that the absolute monarch would ever have intervened in suits between peasants or shopkeepers, trials of thieves, and so forth. Still today, the established power has no reason or interest in intervening in the functioning of the judicial apparatus in general when it comes to common civil or criminal cases. But it has good reasons and great opportunities to do so in cases that matter to it, and this is usually what happens. As soon as it comes to cases having a “political” aspect, the government can intervene by various means, and it actually does so. In France, there are the gendarmes in Nouméa, the amnesty of deputies, Urbatechnique, and so on.¹² In Great Britain, an entire literature has been piling up for a dozen years about the

¹¹T/E: In France, the *sous-préfets* are the permanent ministerial representatives in a subdivision (*commune*) of a *département* (administrative division).

¹²T/E: The gendarmes in Nouméa: an April-May 1988 hostage situation in French New Caledonia that unfolded right in the middle of a French Presidential election and that ended in a deadly rescue mission. The amnesty of deputies: in 1988, members of the French National Assembly amnestied themselves concerning campaign finance irregularities. Urbatechnique: a campaign finance scandal involving a company’s fake billings, with proceeds going to politicians.

“decline of British liberties” (poor Edmund Burke!). The situation still remains quite different in the United States (where, moreover, we are witnessing a hypertrophy of the “judicial power,” along with the progressive blockage of legislative mechanisms), but, with the packing of the Supreme Court by the previous three American presidents,¹³ this court has politically veered off in the direction of the political choices of the judges nominated by the President (and confirmed by the Senate).

It is therefore, in large part, a snare to talk about the *separation of powers* today—and it is another one to talk about *representation*. The “representatives” are members of parliament, and the majority (as well as, moreover, the minority) does what the leader (or the leadership) of its party tells it to do. That is what goes on in truly parliamentary countries (for example in England, the “mother” of parliaments). Or else, as in France, it does what the president tells the prime minister he must make it do, save when the president thinks that it is just a matter of mere supervisory issues [*affaires d'intendance*] and lets him make do on his own. This phenomenon, which is fundamental from the standpoint both of reality and of political thought (for example, where would parties be at in a genuine democracy?), remains overlooked, except to recall that all this had already been said by Robert Michels. Of course, and Max Weber too, and a few others since then. Let us simply add—something also known for a long time—that parties are not mere

¹³T/E: It may be assumed that, in speaking in 1990 of “court packing,” Castoriadis did not have in mind President Jimmy Carter—a Democrat who nominated no Supreme Court judges during his four-year term of office (1977-1981)—but rather “the previous three” *Republican* administrations, those of Richard Nixon (1969-1974), Gerald Ford (1974-1977), and Ronald Reagan (1981-89).

groupings of opinions or even groupings of interests. The essential feature of parties today is that they are themselves bureaucratic apparatuses, ones dominated by self-coopting clans; see what happened in the Socialist Party's March 1990 congress in Rennes, or in the neo-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), and so on. Of course, it may happen that tomorrow, in England, after ten years of Thatcherism, a self-protective reflex on the part of the Conservatives will lead them to sack Mrs. Thatcher so that they will not lose the next election.¹⁴ That will simply mean that the clan (or clans, after a brawl and a compromise) at the summit of the Conservative Party will have understood that it can save itself only by sacrificing its glorious leader. There is nothing "democratic" in this; it is a process that is as old as the world, and you will find similar instances both in ancient empires and in contemporary dictatorships, and even in the logic governing who succeeds a Dillinger or an Al Capone. This is the logic of all highly hierarchized structures, which are dominated at the top by a group with a more or less powerful and charismatic leader; it has nothing to do with democracy.

The reality of parties is therefore left entirely by the wayside. So is the nature of the State. The State is implicitly represented as an abstract operator for society's unification. Its structure as a bureaucratic-hierarchical apparatus, largely autonomous and separate from those whom it administers, is forgotten. I will not insist any further upon the question of the State, except to express once again my astonishment at a "political philosophy" that does not even mention its name.

In a recent issue of *Le Débat*, Marcel Gauchet,

¹⁴This is indeed what happened to Mrs. Thatcher fifteen months after the date of this presentation.

offering a sort of review of the state of humanity in general and of France in particular in the year 1990, speaks splendidly of “the flat electroencephalogram of the party in power,” that is to say, of the Socialist Party.¹⁵ A quite accurate phrase, but why limit it to the party in power? Are the electroencephalograms of Messrs Chirac, Pasqua, Giscard,¹⁶ and so on, not as individuals, certainly, but as political heads, appreciably less flat than that of the Socialist Party? Seeing what these encephala have produced, it may legitimately be doubted. And why limit oneself to France? In the United States, everyone has been lamenting for decades, and especially since 1980, how worthless the Democratic Party is, noting that it has no ideas and has nothing to say. And were it not for the customary obsequiousness toward the president and for the ongoing bluff of the Reagan era, the same thing would have been said—and already is being said—of the party in power. The flatness of political electroencephalograms is universal. They are just as flat, for example, in Germany—whence this divine surprise for Chancellor Kohl: events have quite suddenly turned someone considered by everyone to be worthless into the great chancellor of Germany’s reunification.¹⁷ The poor guy did not have anything to do with

¹⁵T/E: Marcel Gauchet, “Pacification démocratique, désertion civique,” *Le Débat*, 60 (May-August 1990): 87-98; see: 87.

¹⁶T/E: At the time, Jacques Chirac headed the neo-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (Rally for the Republic), and his chief RPR rival was Charles Pasqua. Former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing led the center-right Union pour la démocratie française (Union for French Democracy). The UDF was in an uneasy coalition with the RPR at the time against the Socialist-Communist electoral alliance.

¹⁷T/E: After his electoral defeat in 1998, the “great chancellor of Germany’s reunification” Helmut Kohl reverted, when a major party

it. And do not say that he might have bungled it: it is not clear how he could have.

Already in 1960, I was writing about the absence of imagination on the part of contemporary politicians.¹⁸ Since then, things have just grown dumber. But we must go further. Why, then, we may ask, is this electroencephalogram flat? Might humanity have degenerated in the space of a few decades? Is it an accident that the encephalogram of the parties in France—"the classic land of politics," Marx said—might be flat?¹⁹ Does it not signify anything about this society? Is bringing to power parties with flat encephalograms all that a "democratic" society knows how to do? What is a "democracy" governed by men who are in such a state? Just as a doctor does not limit herself to noting that the patient's blood pressure is quite high, but asks herself why it is so, we have to ask ourselves why this encephalogram is flat. That should lead us to an in-depth analysis of the whole social-historical organism under consideration and of the reasons why it produces ruling structures that are so pathetic.

finance scandal rendered him *persona non grata* even among his own Christian Democrats, to being perceived as the political hack Castoriadis reminds us he was first known as. Kohl was excluded, in particular, from events commemorating the tenth anniversaries of the fall of the Berlin Wall and of German reunification.

¹⁸See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 31-33 (December 1960—April 1961—December 1961), and now available in [PSW2](#).

¹⁹T/E: This phrase is translated as "France, the land of political culture" in Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* ed. with intro. and notes Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1970; corr. ed, 1982 reprint), p. 120. I thank Étienne Balibar for the lead that resulted in the discovery of this reference.

Another point that is conspicuously absent in contemporary “political philosophy” is the following: the weighty and massive reality of the nation. How is the universality of the principles one elsewhere champions in order to “ground” “democracy” to be reconciled with the multiplicity of “national sovereignties” (the great majority of which, let it be said in passing, operates upon the constant violation of those principles)? What, philosophically speaking, is “national sovereignty”? Philosophy gives up in the face of this massive lump of coarse facts or gives in to disgraceful compromises with “reality.” It seems that, in contrast to a well-known late eighteenth-century author, our “philosophers” have never met men who are Frenchmen, Englishmen, Poles, Turks, Greeks, and so on; they never deal with anyone besides men in general.²⁰

Finally, and most importantly, it is thought that the bureaucratic-capitalist structure of society is irrelevant to its overall or political operation. It is not an issue of the sixty or two-hundred richest families, as is said in France, or men in top hats with fat cigars who would be buying governments. The question does not lie there. The true question is that of the anthropological structures that correspond to the socioeconomic structures, that is to say, of the psychosocial structures of the contemporary individual, of the way in which this individual acts and fits into society, and of the kinds of behavior the very operation of this society is constantly tending to produce and reproduce. Ignored, purely and simply, is the dominant social imaginary on whose basis the

²⁰T/E: In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Edmund Burke denigrates the “rights of men” as “abstract principles” and contrasts these with “the rights of Englishmen...a patrimony derived from their forefathers.”

contemporary individual is structured. This in fact is what happens when one talks about individualism—or, like Pierre Rosanvallon this morning, about the “advent of the individual.”²¹ As if this “individual” were completely indeterminate—or, as if there existed an individual in itself and for itself whose advent would occur along with this alleged democracy!

In fact, it is a quite particular individual whose advent occurs along with modern capitalism: these-here men, these-here women, and not just any men and women whatsoever. Who are they? They are neither Bamilekes nor fifteenth-century Florentines nor Russians from the Time of Troubles but, rather, men and women of late twentieth-century capitalism. We do not have to, nor can we, take into consideration their deepest Unconscious; it suffices for us to consider their social manifestations, their activities, their tastes, the manner in which they raise their children, and so on. These are the individuals who give “individualism” its concrete content.

The ambient ideology, however, wants to build the entire political system upon the idea of an ahistorical and asocial individual. It claims to grant to—or to recognize for—this individual the greatest possible autonomy, without for a second raising the question of the content of this autonomy and of its use (such a carefree attitude might perhaps be defensible from a Kantian point of view—that is

²¹T/E: Philippe Raynaud, the organizer of this colloquium devoted to Castoriadis’s work, failed to obtain written versions of the contributions from a sufficient number of speakers, and so no acts of the colloquium were ever published. Agora International’s video recording of Rosanvallon’s talk, “La naissance du suffrage universel,” is now available here: <http://vimeo.com/kaloskaisophos/cerisy-1990-castoriadis-04-rosanvallon>.

to say, from the point of view of a philosophy with neither flesh nor bones). It happens that the contemporary individual uses the liberties the regime grants it in order to indulge in apparently inoffensive activities: going to supermarkets, driving the car, watching television, and so on. It is nevertheless legitimate to ask oneself, from the philosophical point of view, what would happen if this individual gave another “content” to its autonomy, or if it proved to be the case that its activities were not so inoffensive—for example, because these activities, directly or indirectly, resulted in pollution or in the destruction of the environment. But above all, what this “autonomous” individual does obviously has nothing individual about it, save for its physical location mark: it is social, pure and simple, and this is true in contemporary society almost as much as in a traditional society. This individual does what it has learned or what it is induced to do, and at this very moment, at 10:25 P.M., most French households are getting ready to turn off their television sets, which almost all of them turned on at 8:00 P.M., and to go to bed as a single man (or woman).

As it is conceived by the (rare) coherent spokespersons for contemporary “individualism,” right itself is not liable to any reasonable justification. An “individualism” truly consistent with its premises ought to limit socially sanctioned rules to ones that follow uniquely from the principle that “it is prohibited to do anything that encroaches upon the autonomy of the other” and that remain, beyond that, strictly formal and procedural.²² But it is

²²§C. The Universal Principle of Right: “Any action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law” (Immanuel Kant,

impossible to conceive a system of legal norms completely devoid of a minimum of substantive “content” that goes beyond the mere preservation of the “liberty” of each. First, there is *nothing* in this freedom and its presuppositions—not even bodily integrity—that would go absolutely without saying, in other words, that would be radically independent of *every* social-historical institution of man’s humanity. (Both Robert Nozick and John Rawls are blind to their historical provincialism, thinking that what more or less goes without saying in their country today goes without saying.) Second, provisions that can be justified only on the basis of substantive considerations are necessarily present both in the penal code and in the civil code. The quarrel over the right to abortion, for example, can be resolved only by invoking substantive arguments that make the present “sectoral” liberty of a woman preferable to the “total” but simply potential and future liberty of an embryo—or the reverse. The determination of the amount of alimony a divorced parent is to pay for his children is made by taking account of this parent’s “means”: in other words, it does not have anything to do with the “liberty” of those kids but, rather, purely and simply incorporates a principle of hereditary maintenance of the existing sharing out [*répartition*] of economic resources. (Besides, all inheritance law has strictly nothing to do with the preservation of any “individual autonomy” whatsoever—except if and when it grants complete freedom to make a will, which, I think, must not be the case in any country.) Society

Introduction, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. and ed. Mary Gregor [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996], p. 24). See also the end of §B: “Right is therefore the sum of the conditions under which the choice of one can be united with the choice of another in accordance with a universal law of freedom.” In German, *Recht* can signify *right* (in every sense of this word) as well as *just*.

is nothing over time without socialized children—that is to say, ones “raised” and “educated” in a certain manner. To have a child born in one country rather than in another already encroaches upon that child’s “liberty,” just like raising him in one way and not in another, or teaching him at this school rather than that one. In order to preserve the child’s “liberty,” is the gendarme-State to snatch the child away from his or her parents (therefore, “raise” him or her and “educate” him or her according to *its* norms, the State’s); or, rather, are the parents to preserve him from every outside influence, including their own? If a minimum State is nevertheless to be maintained in order to sanction the minimum rules of social coexistence, its operating expenses have to be covered; it would really be interesting to see in what a tax system that is absolutely *neutral* as to its social effects would consist.

The existence of collective norms, whether trivial or not, is impossible, both logically and really, without taking something situated beyond “individuals” into consideration: some sort of “common good,” whether it is a matter of the “happiness of the greatest number,” of the might of the State or of the tyrant, of the opportunities provided for supermen to be able to develop without being contaminated by the slave morality, of justice, of “racial purity,” or of whatever else. *Really*, because every system of norms is necessarily inspired by and unavoidably ends up promoting substantive values. *Logically*, because necessarily implied in the norm’s “all” is something that transcends the “individual.” In the simplest of cases, in order to preserve the “autonomy” of each, the norm has to encroach upon the “autonomy” of each, that is to say, of all. This anonymous and indefinite “all” is neither a determinate individual nor a concrete collection of determinate individuals but, rather, the “abstract” possibility of continuing social life as such. If this continuation is not

posited as a value beyond discussion, nothing in the “individualistic” metaphysics can halt the well-known argument, which runs from Callicles and Thrasymachus, passing by way of Sade, up to Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche. If it is, it entails norms and decisions with substantive content that go well beyond formal and procedural rules that preserve individual freedom.

What could be called Hobbes’s answer to Callicles—that no man is so strong that he might be able to brave a coalition of a multitude of the weak lined up against him—makes sense only upon the radically presocial terrain upon which Hobbes places himself for the needs of his construction. When humans were unblemished brutes who did not yet know how to tangle one another up in fine words, magic and miracles, divine revelations, divisive maneuvers, and so forth, the brute force of the multitude did indeed win out on its own. But obviously, the whole history of humanity testifies against this, filled as it is with domination by sacred kings, minoritarian oligarchies, dictators, emperors, parties ensconced in power, and so on. Hobbes’s construction tries to squeeze an entirely relative “right” out of a fictive fact. It is fictive not because such a “state of nature” could never have existed (which is undoubtedly true) but because, were it to have existed, it would not have been a state of a *human* collectivity, namely, a collectivity of speaking—therefore, imagining and instituting—beings.

Contemporary liberal ideology occults the social-historical reality of the established regime. It occults, too, a decisive question, that of the anthropological ground and correspondent of every politics and of every regime. This is a question that gnawed at the philosophers who wrote about politics: Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant. A democratic man is not just any

“individual” whatsoever, and this is what we are in the process of experiencing. And we have also had this experience, in dramatic form, in the contrasting unfolding of recent events in Czechoslovakia, on the one hand, and in Romania, on the other.

The anthropological content of the contemporary individual is, as always, only the expression or concrete, flesh-and-bone realization of the central social imaginary of the age, which fashions the regime, its orientation, its values, what is worth living or dying for, society’s *push*, its very affects—and the individuals called upon to make all of that exist concretely. This central imaginary of the age, as one knows, is more and more the central capitalist imaginary, unlimited expansion of so-called rational so-called mastery—in fact, unlimited expansion of the economy, of production, and of consumption—and less and less the imaginary of autonomy and of democracy.

It is from this angle, too, that the capitalist “innovation” to which Gauchet was referring must be viewed.²³ Insofar as it exists, this innovation is not just anything, either: oriented by the capitalist imaginary, it heads in a certain direction and excludes other ones. Our age knows it especially as technological, productive, commercial, and financial innovation—and almost never, any longer, as political, artistic, cultural, and philosophical innovation.

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A long digression on the economy is necessary here. I was speaking a minute ago about *illiteracy* apropos of the

²³T/E: Gauchet, “Pacification démocratique, désertion civique,” p. 90.

regime of representation; I shall repeat the expression, and still more forcefully, apropos of the economy and of capitalism. Everywhere, people are talking now about “the triumph of the market economy over planning.” But there is no more a genuine market in capitalist countries than there was planning in the totalitarian bureaucratic countries. To put it briefly, there is no market under capitalism. For, where there is capitalism, there is no market, and where there is a market, there cannot be capitalism. There is only a more than “imperfect” oligopolistic pseudomarket that is irrational. That it might function a billion times better than the aberrant bureaucratic delirium going on in Russia or elsewhere is incontestable, as is the fact that it is infinitely preferable to live here than over there. But that does not mean either that *market* and *capitalism* are synonymous or that the capitalist pseudomarket is the optimal mechanism for allocating and sharing out resources that one claims it is. The market has been around at least since the Phoenicians. It was there among the Greeks and the Romans, and it was highly developed in the Mediterranean world. It regressed considerably during the true Middle Ages (the fifth to tenth centuries), then developed anew in parallel with the constitution and development of the bourgeoisie. Then, it was caught up in the development of capitalism. But in order for it to take on its capitalist form, violence and state intervention were necessary, as both Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi have amply shown. Infinitely more “efficient” as a setting for exchanges than any authoritarian allocation of resources such as bureaucratic pseudoplanning, the market has nothing to do in reality with that rationally optimizing mechanism described in idyllic terms by student textbooks of political economy.

The rationality of the market would require there to be:

1. perfect competition among business firms. This does not exist; we live in, and capitalism *necessarily is*, an economy of oligopolies, monopolies, explicit or tacit combines, and so on.
2. perfect consumer information. One need only try to visualize what that would mean for one to see that it is an absurdity.
3. perfect producer information. Same remark as the previous one.
4. perfect fluidity of factors of production, that is to say, not only complete *mobility* but complete *transformability* of the concrete units of capital and labor. This, strictly speaking, implies for example that buildings can instantaneously be transformed at no cost into aircraft or that unemployed longshoremen from Marseille can, without expense or delay, become computer programmers at Mauberge (and—why not?—airline hostesses in Atlanta). This means, to put it in other terms, that in this dream economy there are neither frictions nor losses nor any costly irreversibility of decisions—which amounts to saying that there is no time and that the workers are capitalists (capable, without any problem, of advancing the costs of any training that might to them appear advantageous).
5. rationality of production costs, notably of the price of labor, of the “cost” and “price” of capital, and of the price of nonreproducible resources. All this is meaningless. The price of nonreproducible resources (land, mines, etc.) is necessarily, under a regime of private property, a monopoly price. The “price of labor” is indeterminate and theoretically indeterminable; in fact, it expresses at each instant the

(explicit and implicit) relation of forces between employers and employees at the same time that it reproduces the established structure of income distribution [*répartition des revenus*]*—*namely, the inequality of the initial sharing out of resources and conditions. To put it in other terms, labor power is not a commodity. The “cost of capital” (considered as material assemblage of produced instruments of production) is determined only as “historical cost,” which is entirely irrelevant in an economy with technical change (the intervention of a new machine or of a new product can cancel out the value of existing machines); its “present value,” like that of every durable good, is basically determined by expectations about its future value, which have nothing to do with any “production cost” whatsoever. In a capitalist economy, interest rates are essentially a monetary phenomenon (which has nothing to do with any “return on capital” or with the “scarcity” of the latter) determined, on the one hand, by central bank policy and, on the other, by the financial markets’ expectations about this same policy and about other equally irrational phenomena (price fluctuations, etc.)

6. spontaneously achieved overall market equilibrium—that is to say, full employment of productive resources. Clearly, there is nothing of the sort—and one has known, at least since John Maynard Keynes, why it cannot be so.

If I am speaking, in crude terms, of illiteracy, this is because the foregoing basics have been known for a long time; in fact, since the 1930s: Joan Violet Robinson, Edward Hastings Chamberlin, John Maynard Keynes, Richard

Ferdinand Kahn, Piero Sraffa, George Lennox Sharman Shackle, Michał Kalecki, and so on. This was pretty much generally granted around the mid-1950s. Then, as in political philosophy, an enormous regression began; perhaps this happened a bit less gratuitously in economics, as a function of the fact that Keynesian regulation of overall demand was giving rise to other problems (and in particular that of chronic inflation generated by long-term maintenance of a constantly rising level of overall demand). Accompanying the Reagan-Thatcher offensive against the unions and wage levels, this regression allowed the Chicago toothpullers to trot out some old ideas (in fact, the quantitative theory of money) refuted long ago, the “experts” from the International Monetary Fund to hammer a few more nails into the poor countries’ coffin, and Mr. Guy Sorman,²⁴ in France, to become the apostle of the economic Enlightenment.

If one sets aside for a moment these tiresome, pathetic, and trivial twists and turns, what lies at the bottom of these questions is in no way trivial. From the purely theoretical point of view, I mean.

First of all, the economy (also) has to do with “quantities”—and economic “quantities” are not really so: they are not generally *measurable*, for they cannot be compared among themselves. They become comparable, conventionally (by institution to the second degree, if it may be put thus) and *after the fact* (*ex post*), as soon as nearly fixed exchange rates are set up [*s’instituent*], and notably, as

²⁴T/E: French journalist and essayist Guy Sorman had just published *Les Vrais Penseurs de notre temps* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), in which he interviewed “the true thinkers of our time,” including the economist Friedrich von Hayek. More recently, Sorman has been campaigning in favor of the commercial exploitation of genetically modified organisms.

soon as *money* is instituted. Money is the veil of pseudocomparability thrown over incomparable “objects.” A theoretical comparability could be worked out in a *static* economy by reducing all the inputs necessary for production to a single one, and notably, for obvious reasons, to labor time (this is, roughly speaking, the point of view of the classical authors, already since John Locke and, in any case, since Adam Smith and up till Karl Marx). Even this reduction has nothing to do with reality for a host of reasons: labor itself is not homogeneous; some resources are not reproducible; finally, exchanges take place via prices that both reflect and achieve the distribution of the surplus (and of the product in general) between laborers and nonlaborers, as well as between the various groups of the latter category; and this sharing out is marginally determined by “economic factors,” and principally by the incessant and polymorphous struggle among the parties involved.

But in the second place, even in pure theory the problem that is to be resolved does not concern a static economy but, rather, an economy undergoing technical change (as well as changes in “tastes,” that is to say, in the composition of final demand). Now, in such an economy the technical coefficients of production, that is to say, the relative quantities of goods necessary for the production of a given object, change over time. (It suffices for a *single one* of them to change in order to alter the whole picture.) In technical terms, the matrix representing the economy (whose vectors correspond to the different activities of production and to the components of final demand), or M , changes with time, or t . An intrepid professor of economics with a degree in mathematics might say: Never mind! We shall write $M(t) = f(t)$. But of course, that would be a laugh, not only because one does not know the function f but also because the idea

that one could know it is intrinsically absurd: if one knew the function f , one would know next year's technology and one would only have to apply it starting now, and so on *in saecula saeculorum*. But there is, if possible, something graver still, for technical change is not simply a change of the matrix of the technical coefficients of production and of final demand; it is a change of the vector space itself within which one would try to write this matrix (which, let it be said in addition, is practically impossible). To put it in simple terms, each invention of a new product, instrument, or production process signifies that new dimensions are being added to the economic vector space and that other (not necessarily "corresponding") ones are discontinued. If our friend, the intrepid professor of mathematical economics, then tried to write: $S(t) = g(t)$ (where S is the vector space and g another "function"), he really would have to be fired. For, writing out a function presupposes that one can at minimum define the set wherein it draws its values, which here would boil down to affirming that one can define *all* possible technologies (now or in a million years) *and* the law of how they will succeed one another in time. To put it still more simply, the reasons why the real economy is not "rational" are in large part the same as those why there is no rigorous "economic science." If there were one, all economists, and only them, would be infinitely rich.

But we are not finished yet. The entire edifice of the alleged "economic science" is necessarily grounded (including in Marx) upon the idea that there could be a *separate imputation* of production costs (or, what boils down to the same thing, of the outcome of production) to production units and production factors. But such a separate imputation is, theoretically speaking, a complete fallacy. The overall product is the result of overall activity (and of the whole prior

history). The postulate of separability—and the corresponding imputation of the product's "parts"—is the pseudothoretical translation of the institution of private appropriation (a mystification to which Marx himself succumbed).

It is the economic system taken *in toto* (and with its prior history) that does the producing, and not this factory or that worker. There is no discrete or continuous economic topology (I am obviously not talking about the physical universe subjacent to and implied in economics). It is *because* there is private appropriation that one draws an accountancy boundary indicating where a business firm's "own" costs (and its "own earnings") end; this boundary is, from another standpoint, fictive, if only because there are (as one is now discovering, in terms of environmental problems) *externalities*, costs borne by others than the firm and earnings for which the business firm has itself done nothing. To take an extreme but eloquent example, "costs" and "profits" from the same factory, with strictly identical machines and personnel, situated in the Ruhr Valley and in Anatolia certainly will not be the same. And if one is able to produce as one does produce in a modern factory, it is *also* because there are the "external economies" of the whole of prior history and of the entire present human environment—free "gifts," not of "nature," but of the Western social-historical sphere [*du social-historique occidentale*], from which India, Africa, and even Russia have not benefitted.

Every decision involving imputation is a *political* decision, for it is at the same time and *ipso facto* a decision involving *allocation* [attribution]. The basic content of the never explicitly formulated political decision underlying the capitalist economy is to reproduce, roughly, the existing structure of the sharing out of resources and incomes (though not exactly the individual beneficiaries of this sharing out). In

a democratic society, the basic decisions about imputation and allocation will have to be made explicitly and in full knowledge of the relevant facts. I shall briefly return to this point below.²⁵

To say that the contemporary capitalist economy is “rational” means that it would be so at the micro level, too: this micro level is the business enterprise, a bureaucratic-hierarchical structure bursting with contradictions and struggles, notably the one between directors and executants (which, moreover, is not one that opposes two neatly separated groups in the business enterprise but, rather, most of the time courses through individuals themselves). Gauchet recently wrote, in *Le Débat*, that we are awaiting “the theoretician of the bureaucracy’s irrationality.”²⁶ I hope that, when he appears, this theorist will be able to profit a bit from the analysis I have made of it since the late Forties as concerns the irrationality of the overall political bureaucracy as well as that of the bureaucracy in the business enterprise.²⁷

²⁵Various aspects of the preceding points were developed more amply in “Sur la dynamique du capitalisme,” *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 12 (August 1953) and 13 (January 1954) [T/E: we hope to translate this two-part text, now in *EP8*, for the projected eighth volume of Castoriadis’s *Political Writings*]; “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” now in *PSW2*; “Technique” (1973), now in *CLI*; “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality’” (1976), now in *CL2*; “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle, from Aristotle to Us” (1975), now in *CLI*; and *DG*, 2nd rev. and corr. ed. (Paris: Fayard, 1983), pp. 143-235 [T/E: now in *EP6*, 196-277 (we hope to translate this book for the projected sixth volume of Castoriadis’s *Political Writings*). See also “The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism” (1997), now above in the present volume].

²⁶T/E: Gauchet, “Pacification démocratique, désertion civique,” p. 91.

²⁷See all my texts reprinted in *SB1* and *SB2*; one-volume reprint: *SB(n.é.)*.

I hope, too, that this person will appear during my lifetime, so that I might be able to see in what way my analyses were basically insufficient. But, let it be said in passing, I can only be astonished by people delighting in the bureaucratic management of the overall economy if they seem to think that things go otherwise when it comes to the managerial bureaucracy of IBM, General Motors, Peugeot, Mitsubishi, and so on.

These contradictions and struggles within the contemporary business enterprise are expressed by what are modestly called “dysfunctions,” the sole response to which capitalism has found is the increasing robotization of production. But beyond its intrinsic problems (we cannot enter into an analysis of these problems here, but we can point out that they are manifest, for example, where it has advanced the furthest, in information technology), this robotization merely defers or displaces the question toward the not-as-yet robotized parts of business enterprises and of the system in general.

Finally, whether it exists or not, the “rationality” of the economy would never be but the “rationality” of a system of *means*, and judgment about the latter “rationality” hangs upon the judgment one makes about the rationality of the ends these *means* achieve. The allocation of productive resources in the capitalist system as well as its organization are subordinate to an end that is neither “rational” nor simply reasonable: the indefinite expansion of (pseudo)rational

[T/E: Many of these texts have now been translated and edited in *PSW1-3* and in [CR](#).] Also, and especially, see “On the Content of Socialism, III” (*Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 23 [January 1958]), now in [PSW3](#). [T/E: We hope to include all these texts for the projected eight-volume translation of Castoriadis’s *Political Writings*.]

(pseudo)mastery—concretely speaking, the indefinite expansion of production, which is justified by the indefinite expansion of the consumption it would allow. One ultimately arrives at the unlimited expansion of consumption as end in itself—which is an absurdity. Those who want to defend contemporary capitalist societies “philosophically” would have to defend these societies’ values “philosophically.” These values are unambiguously the following: one lives and one dies for the sake of increasing consumption. I would really like a “philosopher” to stand up and say, “We are on this earth for the sake of consuming more and more,” and to try, if not to ground, at least to defend this proposition. But nowhere do I see that. I see only discourses about “democracy” and the equalization of conditions, and not even a word about the following question: What are the “conditions” that it is a matter of equalizing?

Of course, there is a last line of defense—and it is not one purely and simply to be brushed aside. Ultimately, it is individuals themselves, in their great majority, who want this regime, these orientations, or who at least do not reject them. I myself have insisted upon this point many times. But that is a statement of fact, not a political judgment, and it says nothing more than what is known about every regime: the regime is not separable from the individuals, nor the individuals from it. Individuals are the products of this regime they are constantly reproducing. Islamic societies produce Islamic individuals who reproduce Islamic societies; soviet society produced soviet men and women, who reproduced it—until the moment when that has become impossible, *and even after that moment* (see Russia today). More generally, no society is (lastingly) possible if it fails to fabricate a minimum of adherence, on the part of the main portion of the population, to its institutions and to its imaginary

significations. By this yardstick, all societies would be “democratic”—which is just plain silly. And in none of them would there be a *politics* contesting the established institution, and there *should not* be one, since that would be “antidemocratic”—which is nothing more than a sophism meant to mask the basic *conformism* of the contemporary defenders of the established order.

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In conclusion, a few words about the principles that, in my opinion, are to be at the base of every democratic organization of the economy:

1. The autonomy of individuals implies their sovereignty *qua* consumers—therefore, a genuine market (without monopolistic or oligopolistic situations, and without manipulation of consumers).²⁸
2. It also implies their power of collective decision-making *qua* producers—therefore the self-management of units of production.
3. The private appropriation of unearned income [*rentes*] of any kind is unacceptable.
4. Market prices are to reflect the size of relative demand and the “production costs” corresponding to the level of production entailed by demand for the product in question.
5. As we have seen, these “production costs” cannot be determined without arbitrariness; the major clauses necessarily at the base of this determination will

²⁸I defended this principle, as well as the ones that follow, as early as 1957, in “On the Content of Socialism, II,” now in [PSW2](#).

therefore have to be settled by explicit political decision of the collectivity.

6. The principal clauses are as follows:
 - an hour of labor = an hour of labor;
 - the cost of utilizing a piece of equipment is equivalent to the present and foreseen cost of reproducing it, divided by the foreseen duration, plus, when appropriate, a margin that is identical for all types of equipment (see 7, below);
 - to the extent that they are assignable, positive or negative externalities are imputed (under the form of taxes or bonuses) to the units that generate them.
7. The collectivity decides democratically on the distribution of the consumable product between overall private consumption and public consumption, and on the distribution of the net total product between total consumption and net investment. In other words, it decides on the principle of growth and, if the answer is in the affirmative, on the rate of this growth. This rate then becomes the margin ("rate of profit," or "rate of interest": John von Neumann, 1934) added to the cost of using existing "capital." It is clear that in a static economy this "rate of profit" can only be *nil*.

I am not claiming that these principles are sufficient to resolve all questions. They are simply, in my view, the point of departure for every discussion of the problems of a democratic economy *qua* economy.



What are the prospects for the regime of liberal oligarchy in the wealthy countries?

The continued existence of this regime presupposes, first of all, the continued presence of certain natural conditions. It is true that fantastic economic expansion has taken place under capitalism, and this expansion is infinitely more impressive than the most impassioned hymns from Marx on the progressive role of the bourgeoisie would have led one to suspect. The system is highly effective at producing, and unprecedented technical development has occurred. For this production to expand outward, nature was needed: natural reserves of all sorts. And in fact, the enormous development of production and of the economy over the last 150 years was conditioned by the irreversible destruction (consumption) of natural or accumulated reserves that have been in the biosphere for hundreds of millions of years. This irremediable destruction is continuing: at this very moment, the destruction of the tropical forests as well as of living species carries on. The measures being taken or envisaged to stop this destruction are laughable. So, to talk, as Gauchet has done here, about man's domination over the anthroposphere and the world created by him merely reproduces the old Cartesian-capitalist-Marxist illusion of man as master and possessor of nature—whereas man is rather like a child who finds himself in a house whose walls are made of chocolate and who has set out to eat them without understanding that soon the rest of the house is going to fall down on his head.

Now, this destruction is, until further notice, necessary to the survival of the system. The regime of liberal oligarchy, with the apathy and privatization that render it possible, presupposes that people actually do spend their time in

supermarkets and in front of their television sets. The countries in which people can live like that represent something like 800 million persons, out of a total global population that in 1990 is approaching 5.5 billion—or around a seventh of the total. In the wealthy regions inhabited by this first group, the per capita annual GNP, measured in conventional terms, is on the order of \$20,000. In the other regions, with their population of 4.7 billion persons, the GNP does not exceed, on average, \$500 or \$600. (Within the latter group, differences as much among countries as among social strata are far higher than within the first. For a number of reasons, these figures represent only rough approximations.) Now, if there effectively is, as I believe there is, a connection not between democracy and capitalism but between the political flabbiness by means of which wealthy societies more or less operate and their standard of living in the capitalist sense of the term, the universalization of this “democracy” would require that one raise the living standards, thus defined, of the poor countries to the height of those of the wealthy countries, within 20, 30 or 50 percent. In other words, it would be necessary to multiply annual world production by a factor of around 200 (roughly speaking, seven to take into account the difference in the number of inhabitants, and 30 for that of “living standards”) and, thereby, to increase 200 times the speed of nature’s annual destruction, the volume of pollution emissions, and so on. And, supposing that by some magical operation one might attain this level of world production, this level would still have to increase by two to three percentage points per year—that is to say, it would have to double nearly every thirty years. If one wants the universality of Western-style “democracy,” and if one scorns “utopias” and “utopians,” one has to say how these challenges will be taken up.

But more important still, if possible, are the system's anthropological conditions. Capitalism has developed by making irreversible use of a historical heritage created by prior eras, ones that it is incapable of reproducing. This heritage includes, for example, honesty, integrity, responsibility, care for one's work, regard for others, and so on. Now, in a regime that is constantly proclaiming, in words as well as in deeds, that money is the only value, and in which the sole sanction is that of criminal law, why would judges not put their rulings up for auction? Sure, the law forbids it—but why would those charged with applying it be incorruptible? *Quis custodes custodeat?*²⁹ What, in the logic of capitalism (or of contemporary “democratic individualism”), forbids a tax auditor from receiving bribes? Why should a teacher be hassled with trying to teach things to his pupils if he can work things out with his school inspector? A first-rate mathematician, a faculty professor, earns perhaps \$3,000 a month and “produces” young mathematicians. Among them, those who know what is going on in life (that is, almost all of them) will not continue to do mathematics; they will do computer science and enter into a business firm with a starting salary of perhaps \$6,000 a month. Who then, in the next generation, will become a professor of mathematics? According to the logic of the system, hardly anyone. It will be said that there will always be a few oddballs who like a beautiful proof more than a high salary. But that is precisely what I am saying: According to the norms of the system, such persons ought not to exist; their survival is a systemic anomaly—just like that of conscientious workers,

²⁹T/E: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (Who will watch the watchmen?) is to be found in Juvenal's *Satires* (6.347-48), either originally there or interpolated into the text.

honest judges, Weberian bureaucrats, and so on. But how many times can a system reproduce itself solely on the basis of systemic anomalies?

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I end with a few of the “latest news items,” that is to say, two studies on American youth. (Michael Oreskes, “US Youth in the 90’s: The Indifferent Generation,” *International Herald Tribune*, June 29, 1990: 1 and 5.)

Mr. John Karras, 28 years old, found himself one day in a shop. The most popular local youth radio station was broadcasting a report on the dead and missing from the latest big floods in southeastern Ohio. The cashier, a bit younger than Mr. Karras, cast a glance at the radio and said: “I’m sick of hearing about it.” Mr. Karras, who is preparing a doctoral thesis in education at Ohio State University, “recalled the incident to illustrate what he called a ‘pervasive’ attitude among the members of his generation toward the world. Young people do not want to hear about it, he said, ‘unless it’s knocking’ on their door.”

The findings of two national studies, says the newspaper, concur with this observation. A study of the *Times Mirror* Center for the People & the Press,³⁰ which was just released, concludes that the younger generation (18 to 29 years old) “knows less, cares less, votes less and is less critical of its leaders and institutions than young people in the past.” The surveys of the Census Bureau show that, since 1972, almost all the decline in voter participation is due to persons less than 45 years old and that the steepest decline is observed among voters between 18 and 25. The article goes

³⁰T/E: Now known as the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

on to speak of a “citizenship crisis.” The sole things of interest to young people are the issues that affect them personally, and among those issues, the ones that mobilize them the most are those that touch upon government intervention in their personal freedoms. When asked to define citizenship, one of the interviewees “said it meant the right not to be harassed by the police.” (The implication of this definition is obviously that the police can harass as much as they like those who are not citizens—resident aliens, clandestine immigrants, or even tourists! So much for “human rights,” and so forth.)

For my part, I could not dream of a better confirmation of what I am saying about the negative and defensive character of liberties under the present-day regime: this is what they are, and it is thus that they are, rightly, perceived by young people today. The director of the *Times Mirror* study offers what I consider to be a fair interpretation of young people’s attitudes: they are “not so much disillusioned,” like people of previous generations, “as disinterested”; this is a generation, he says, for whom the thirty-second televised commercial is the most appropriate medium. All these young people are constantly emphasizing their “rights” and ignoring their responsibilities. That reminds me of a recent phrase from a French philosopher that pretty much says that the fight for democracy was the fight for “ever more rights.” Rights *against whom?*

What we have here are not the effects of a conspiracy of Big Capital or of the activity of the multinationals. We have the whole system, the people formed by this system, what the people under this regime in the wealthy countries are becoming. And as the example of the erstwhile German Democratic Republic shows, the populations of other countries seem to aspire to only one thing: to find themselves,

too, in this situation. We have here the emergence of an anthropological type of individual (vaguely reminiscent of Roman citizens after the defeat of the Gracchi and until the end of the Empire) that no longer has any relation to the one that created this regime, either on the political plane or even on the economic plane (replacement of Schumpeterian entrepreneurs by managerial bureaucracies and financial speculators). These men and women would never have been able to make the French or American Revolution—nor even play the role of the great figures of the industrial revolution. The continued self-reproduction of the system, and quite particularly of its liberal components, becomes under these conditions more and more problematic.

As a result, extremely grave questions loom for the future of the project of autonomy. It is no longer a matter of showing that this project is achievable, that it does not include any internal incoherencies and does not run up against any impossibilities. As its realization requires an attitude on the part of human beings that is radically opposed to the one described above, it is a matter of the desire and capacity of these human beings to exit from this condition, to give rise to something else. The revolution required for that purpose is infinitely deeper and more difficult than a taking of the Winter Palace or victory in a civil war.

The roots of the situation we are living through are to be found in the rout of what, after the de-Christianization of society, its secularization, the rejection of every orientation based upon transcendent norms, had taken their place: the imaginary of progress, whether under its liberal-capitalist form or under its Marxist form, which no longer survives except as a shell emptied of all value-content, of all content that people might value unconditionally. This imaginary and the ideologies that gave it common currency were

constructing human history as a march toward more and more freedom, more and more truth, more and more happiness. It certainly was this abominable and laughable *more and more*, but not just any one: the *more* bore upon objects that everyone in society could agree upon valuing. What survives therefrom is the expansion of consumption of nearly anything and the autonomized expansion of technoscience, which takes the place of the religious beliefs of old. One can ask oneself to what extent, sociologically speaking, contemporary man's superstitious attitude toward technoscience differs essentially from primitive people's attitude toward magic: certainly, there is a difference as to the object, but what about the attitudes and modes of adherence? Does contemporary man know more about what technoscience is affirming, the reasons why technoscience affirms it and he believes in it? Does the mixture of hope and terror with which he regards technoscience have different effects?

If such is the dominant imaginary of contemporary Western humanity, the rebirth of the project of autonomy requires immense changes, a veritable earthquake, not in terms of physical violence but in terms of beliefs and human behaviors. It is a matter of a radical change in the way the world and human beings' place therein are represented. The representation of the world as an object of growing mastery or as the decor of an anthroposphere must be destroyed. The world, with its share of the chaotic and the forever unmasterable, will never be separable from the anthroposphere, and man will never master it. How could he master it, when he will forever be incapable of mastering the web of his acts, from whose succession his own life is woven? This grandiose and empty phantasm of mastery serves as counterpart to the grotesque accumulation of ridiculous gadgets, the two operating in tandem as distraction

and diverting entertainment in order to occult our basic mortality, to pervert our inherence in the cosmos, to make us forget that we are the improbable beneficiaries of an improbable and very narrow band of physical conditions that render life possible on an exceptional planet we are in the process of destroying.

Also to be destroyed are the push and the affects that correspond to this representation. There is a push for indefinite expansion of an alleged mastery as well as a constellation of affects that curiously accompany it: irresponsibility and a carefree attitude. We have to denounce the *hubris* in ourselves and around us, to accede to an *ethos* of self-limitation and prudence, to accept this radical mortality in order to become finally, as much as we can be, free.

What is at issue, then, is something entirely other than tranquilly managing the existing consensus, increasing, an inch at a time, the “spaces for freedom,” or demanding “more and more rights.” How to do this is another matter. A great collective political movement cannot be born by the act of will of a few persons. But so long as this collective hypnosis endures, there is, for those among us who have the weighty privilege of being able to speak, a provisional ethics and politics: unveil, criticize, and denounce the existing state of things. And for all: try to behave and to act in exemplary fashion wherever they find themselves. We are responsible for what depends upon us.

PSYCHE

The Psychical and Social Roots of Hate*

Perhaps there have been wars that mobilized only “limited” aggressive drives, including, for example, the minimum of aggression involved in self-defense. But what we

*The main ideas of this text have supplied the matter for lectures at the following conferences: “Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Neo-Fascism and Anti-Immigration Politics: Trends in Europe and the United States,” San Francisco, May 8, 1995 (organized by the Psychoanalytic Institute of San Francisco and the University of California at Berkeley), “Guérir de la guerre et juger la paix,” Paris, June 23, 1995 (organized by the University of Paris-VIII and the Collège International de Philosophie), and “Paysages de la pensée française,” Rome, October 24, 1996 (organized by the French Embassy). It was considerably reworked and supplemented for a lecture given as part of the “Die Konstruktion der ‘Nation’ gegen die Juden” symposium, Mülheim, November 26, 1996. [T/E: The present version is based on the original English-language typescript of this lecture, dated September 1996, and incorporates changes and additions that appear in the version prepared by the French Editors. Editorial changes to the English typescript suggested by Joel Whitebook and Fuyuki Kurasawa were examined, considered, and incorporated when deemed appropriate. Kurasawa’s version, which appears to be missing several passages of original text, includes others not indicated in the final printed French version, and sometimes testifies to an unfamiliarity with standard Castoriadian and Freudian terminology as well as to a lack of knowledge of common French phrases and English-language editorial practices, was published in a special “Tribute to Cornelius Castoriadis,” *Free Associations*, 43 (1999): 402-15; additionally, some text included in the Kurasawa typescript seems to have been dropped by the *Free Associations* typesetter. (See, also n. 10, below, this chapter.) Efforts to contact Kurasawa both before and after publication were unsuccessful. “Haine de soi, haine de l’autre” appeared in *Le Monde*, January 9, 1999: 1 and 13. It had already appeared as “Les racines psychiques et sociales de la haine,” *Guérir de la guerre et juger la paix* (Acts of the International Philosophy Colloquium held at UNESCO, June 21-23, 1995), ed. Rada Ivekovic and Jacques Poulin, preface by Daniel Janicot (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998), pp. 257-73, and it was reprinted in *FP*, 183-96 (221-37 of the 2009 reprint). The present translation was first published in [FTPK](#).]

have been witnessing for years now, in Europe and in Africa, as well as what happened in Europe and in East Asia during the last world war, is an explosion of unlimited aggression, as expressed through racism, indiscriminate murder of civilians, rape, destruction of monuments and homes, killing or torture of prisoners, and so on. And what we know of human history forces us to think that the recent innovations in this field pertain mostly to the quantitative dimensions and the technical instrumentations of the phenomena, as well as to their articulations with the imaginary of the groups concerned, but not at all to their nature. Whatever the importance of other concomitant factors or conditions might be, it is impossible to understand the behavior of the people involved in these events unless we see in it the materialization of extremely strong affects of hate.

I shall endeavor to show that there are two sources of hate, each reinforcing the other:

- the fundamental drive of the psyche to reject (thus, to hate) that which is not itself;
- the near necessity of *closure* for the social institution and the imaginary significations it bears.

The Psychical Root

“Hate...is older than love,” wrote Freud,¹ and this is true if one takes love in the usual sense, as object-love. But hate is not older than archaic, primordial love of “self,” what

¹T/E: “Hate, as a relation to objects, is older than love,” Sigmund Freud, “The Instincts [*sic*] and their Vicissitudes,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*), 14: 139.

is often and inadequately called “primary narcissism,” the original psychical nucleus’s representational/affective/desiring closure upon itself. I call this core the psychical *monad*.

Freud had had a glimpse of this self-closure. He used Eugen Bleuler’s word *autism* to characterize it, and he likened this primordial state of the human being, including the feeding function of the mother, to the fullness of a bird’s egg.²

Such closure becomes, for the psyche, the matrix of meaning. More precisely, what the psychical core will, now and forever, “understand” or “consider” as meaning is this “unitary” state, where “subject” and “object” are identical and where representation, affect, and desire are one and the same because desire is immediately representation (psychical possession) of the desired and hence affect of pleasure (which is the purest and strongest form of the omnipotence of thought). This is the meaning the psyche will forever seek after. Of course, that will never be fully attainable in the “real world,” and substitutes for it will come in the form of long series of mediations or else unworldly “mystical” visions. Unless we understand this, we will never be able to understand why identification—with persons, with tasks, with collectivities, with significations, with institutions—is such a potent and omnipresent process in psychical life. Nor could we understand why society can, almost boundlessly, play with the psyche’s plasticity—on the sole condition, that is, that society provide the subject with meaning (rigorously

²Sigmund Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911), *SE* 12: 219, n. 4; in German, *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*), 8: 232, n. 1. Contrary to what is sometimes said, the theme of an originary narcissistic cathexis is to be found in Freud’s work up to and including the 1938 *Outline*.

speaking, a social substitute for meaning) in “real life.”

From the moment (perhaps a theoretical or “ideal” limit) this primeval state of “psychical quiescence” (to use Freud’s expression)³ is broken—and broken it must be, if the infant is to survive—the initial “energy” of this self-love is split into three parts:

- a part of it remains as self-cathexis of the core of the psyche, and its influence impregnates all the subsequent phases of the subject’s psychical development and the corresponding strata of the mature personality;
- another part is transferred, under the form of *self*, to the breast: *Ich bin die Brust*, I am the breast, is one of the last sentences Freud wrote;⁴
- a last part is transformed into hate of the “external world,” which we have to take here to mean: all that is external to the psychical monad, and which thus *includes* the avatars of the developing psychical and somatic “reality-Ego” (*Real-Ich*).

The first part (remanent self-love) accounts for the ineradicable egocentrism that, in a more or less thinly

³T/E: See *SE* 3: 132 and n. 1. Castoriadis had, in his original English, “psychical tranquillity,” which, along with the standard spelling, “tranquility,” does not appear in Freud’s writings in English translation. See, however, *SE* 3: 132, n. 1, regarding “psychical quiescence” and *SE* 12: 219 for the phrase “the state of psychical rest was originally disturbed by the peremptory demands of internal needs.”

⁴T/E: See “Ergebnisse, Ideen, Probleme” (note of July 12, 1938, in London), in Freud’s *GW* 17: 151; in English, “Findings, Ideas, Problems” (1941 [1938]), in *SE* 23: 299.

disguised way, dominates in the final analysis all our thoughts and deeds. From another, apparently unrelated point of view, what we have here is the ontological egoism necessarily immanent to any being-for-itself. Everywhere and always, I am the origin of the spatial and temporal coordinates; my here and now is *the* here and now; the world is my representation.

The other two parts become intermingled and entangled very quickly. Whence the fundamental ambivalence of all affects, and, to begin with, that of the relation to the first separate love-object, the mother. They become entangled because the breast “is so often missed by the child” (Freud).⁵ The absence of the breast would have amounted to the destruction of the closed totality of the *infans*, thus to a collapse of the meaning of his/her world. Initially, this destruction is palliated by an imaginary creation, the hallucination of the breast. When this hallucination of the breast ceases to be capable of covering up the breakup of the original monad’s closure, the *infans* is left with a gaping hole in his/her world, and s/he reacts with anxiety and rage. This hole, the absence of the breast, is meaninglessness. And here, as always, meaninglessness—or the actual or imminent, real or imagined, destruction of meaning—is source of anxiety. As the *infans* possesses the rudiments of inductive intelligence—that is, as his/her imagination has to make something out of repetition or regularity—a link is quickly established between the hole and the memory of the object that “normally” fills it. (The habitual becomes normal since it corresponds to the desire.) This object’s character or value is split into two contradictory attributes, the good and the bad breast. These

⁵T/E: Freud explains that the “breast has to be separated from the body and shifted to the ‘outside’ because the child so often finds it absent” in his 1938 text, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (SE 23: 188).

attributes—and the affects and desires accompanying them (briefly speaking, love and hate)—are subsequently transferred to the image that has been linked with the breast, the mother as an entity or person. This becomes the matrix of the ambivalence that will henceforth be inherent in all the subject's relationships.

But there is something more to it, and something more important. The result of the process of maturation/socialization is the formation of the social individual—which in itself is, from the point of view of the monadic core of the psyche, an alien and strange “object.” (In Freudian terms, the *Real-Ich*, the reality-Ego, exhibits all the attributes that are contradictory to those of the *Lust-Ich*, the pleasure-Ego.) It thus becomes both the support for a transfer of self-love and the object of the hate of the “unreal” psychological instances—a hate that, as was already stated, burdens whatever is “external” to the psychological core. The reality-Ego cannot escape from being the object of the ambivalence of the affects. Usually, love toward the Ego prevails over the hate of which it is the object—sufficiently, at any rate, to ensure the subject's survival in real life. But hate of the Ego continues its noiseless life within the depths of the psyche.

There are thus, from the psychoanalytical point of view, two vectors of hate. The first, hate of the “real other,” is simply the reverse of the positive side of the cathexis of self. It is sustained by a powerful and elementary sophism that is also present in the collective forms of hatred or contempt and is perhaps more easily perceived in these latter forms: I am good; (the) good is me; he is not me; he is not good (or is less good than me). I am French (American, Italian, British, etc.); to be French (American, Italian, British...) is to be (the) good; he is not French (American, Italian, British...); therefore, he is not good.

The second is self-hate. For, the self—the Ego—is one of the first strangers the psyche encounters. This is also one of the meanings of Rimbaud's phrase, "I is an other"—a meaning that is not all that different from its apparent, *prima facie* meaning: for, the "I" or Ego, essentially a social construct, is no more "me" than any neighbor or passerby. Contrary to what is perhaps generally believed, this self-hatred is universal. Clearly, it (properly speaking, the subject bearing it) can survive only if it is severely tamed and/or displaced toward truly "external" objects. Through this displacement, the subject can maintain the affect while changing its object. This process is most visible in the phenomenon of racism, to which I will return.

The Social Root⁶

The link between the psychical and the social roots, in the case of hate as in all others, is the socialization process imposed upon the psyche. Through this process, the psyche is forced into society and "reality," while society takes care, more or less, of the psyche's paramount need: the need for meaning.

The *infans* will either die or, as happens much more frequently, be socialized. This socialization process leans on biological need (hunger) and, much more heavily, on the psychical need for meaning. Neither of these needs is absolutely insurmountable: anorexia and autism demonstrate, also in this case, the afunctional and asocial nature of the psyche. Once the initial, monadic closure has been broken, the

⁶T/E: We adopt, through translation, the subtitle that appears in the French version; in the original English, the subtitle reads: "The Social Dimension."

psychical need for meaning has to be satisfied by the environment of the *infans*—an environment made from already socialized individuals who cannot convey anything but those meanings they themselves have already absorbed and cathected. To be socialized means, first and foremost, to cathect the existing institution of society and the imaginary significations this institution bears. Among such imaginary significations are: gods, spirits, myths, totems, taboos, kinship, sovereignty, leadership, law, citizen, State, justice, commodity, capital, interest, and reality. Reality is, of course, an imaginary signification, and its particular content for each society is heavily codetermined by the imaginary institution of this society.

This meaning-giving dimension of the social institution is obviously more than many-sided and extraordinarily complex; it is, in fact, the creation of a world, of this society's world. One of its main dimensions is, of course, language. Language is not an "instrument of communication," as if there existed ready-made and fully-formed individuals eager to communicate and lacking only an "instrument" for that purpose. Language is the element within which "objects," "processes," "states," "qualities," and so on, as well as various kinds of relations and links among them, are established.

What interests us here are the intrinsic reasons why the institution of each society has up to now almost inevitably taken on the character of a *closure* of various types. There is, to be sure, always a "material" closure, in the sense of more or less well-determined territories or frontiers, and/or, in all cases, strictly limitative definitions of the individuals belonging to this particular society. But the most important one is the *closure of meaning*. Territories and so on acquire their importance only because of specific meanings attributed

to them: thus, the Promised Land, or the sacred character of territory for the Greek *poleis*, or the strident character of border disputes everywhere. This is, as we shall see, also and even more true of individuals: a *stranger* is a stranger because the significations of which he is the bearer are *strange*, foreign. Now a signification can be non-strange only if it is positively cathected. It suffices to replace the term *non-strange* in the previous sentence with the term *familiar* to see that this is in fact a tautology.

The metaphor of open and closed societies has been in use for a long time now. But I am using the term *closure* here with almost its precise mathematical sense.⁷ A world of meanings is closed if any question capable of being formulated within it either has an answer in terms of the given meanings or is posited as meaningless. Thus, the worlds of archaic or traditional societies are closed, whereas the ancient Greek world or the modern European one (in the broad sense) is more or less open.

Almost all known societies have instituted themselves by means of and within a closure. They have created for themselves a metaphysical niche of meaning, which is tantamount to saying that they have been religious. Or, alternatively, we can say that they have been heteronomous in the sense that they have covered up the fact that they have instituted themselves and, instead, attribute their institution to an extrasocial source. I cannot dwell here on the reasons why

⁷An algebraic field is closed if all equations written with elements of the field find their solutions within the field. For example, the field \mathbb{R} of real numbers is not algebraically closed—the equation $x^2 + 1 = 0$ does not contain a solution—but the field \mathbb{C} of complex numbers is closed, and the preceding equation contains the solution $x = i$, where i is the square root of -1.

these characterizations are more or less equivalent.⁸ Suffice it to say that these traits correspond to two essential traits of a heteronomous society:

- the “need” or “necessity” for an extrasocial (extrainstitutional) foundation and guarantee of the institution;
- the “need” or “necessity” to make it impossible to call into question in any way the institution—that is, to stop any discussion about ultimate foundations—by claiming that it rests on something beyond the ken of living humans.

During and by virtue of the very process of their socialization, socialized individuals have to pass from an initial meaning coextensive with their own psychical, private sphere (monadic meaning) to a shared, social one. As was already implied above, monadic meaning is completely alien to what, in waking life, we consider meaning to be. Not only does it not know time and contradiction, but it does not even know distinction, separation, and articulation. Through a series of concentric circles—family, kin or clan, locality, age group, social group or class, nation, “race,” and so on—the world of meaning of the subject who is becoming an individual is enlarged, and this enlargement goes together with an extended and more or less strong identification with these larger units. (That these identifications can sometimes be antinomic with respect to each other has supplied tragedy with a recurrent theme.)

All this is, or ought to be, quite well known. What needs to be stressed are the consequences for the psychical

⁸T/E: See “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), now in [CL2](#).

organization of the individual. All of the individual's identificatory bearings are part and parcel of the instituted world of social meanings, among which, of course, those that refer to the various collective instituted entities of which the individual is a member or an element are an essential component. Consider, for example, the sentence, "I am the son of X." What a son is—beyond the simple biological fact of procreation, which, moreover, is initially unknown and at any rate always uncertain—and what he has to do *qua* son, who and what X is, and the very idea of an "I" and an "am," all these terms have no meaning whatsoever outside the socially instituted world of meaning in general and outside the specific meanings proper to the society under consideration. A Roman son of 500 BCE and an American son of today have very little in common. And, for obvious reasons: the nearer we are to a completely closed, archaic society, the stronger is this identification. There are well-known cases of "savages" who died just because well-meaning Europeans insisted on taking them far from their tribe and their place.⁹ And it is also well known that, most of the time, this identification supersedes the individual's self-preservation. To kill and be killed in a family vendetta, in tribal conflicts, in feudal warfare, in national wars—*pro patria mori*, in all its versions—is the universal fact. It is the obligation societies impose upon their members, and it is what these members always and everywhere proudly and gladly accept—except, that is, over a small geographical area and in recent historical times, in modern societies.

⁹T/E: The French version printed in *Guérir de la guerre et juger la paix* reads "*leur dieu*" (their god) while the French version of *FP* reads "*leur dieux*" (their gods), instead of Castoriadis's English "place" (which would have been *lieu* in French).

Meaning for the psyche is identical with the indivisibility of its initial totality. The breakup of this totality is possible only if the psyche is continuously supplied with substitutes of self and substitutes of meaning. This is the process of identification, through which quanta of cathexes levied from the initial self-cathexis are first transferred onto the immediate objects and then onto the different forms of instituted collectivities and onto significations dwelling within them. In a manner that has probably become incomprehensible to some “individuals” in modern societies, the savage *is* his tribe, the fanatic *is* his Church, the national *is* his nation, the member of an ethnic minority *is* this minority—and *vice versa*.

Obviously, this identification with collectivities also supplies a substitute for the lost omnipotence of the psychical monad. The individual may feel that it participates in the effective power of five-thousand, or fifty-million, other individuals. “We shall prevail, for we are stronger” is a stupidity shared equally on both sides of the front. This identification also has important effects in the suppression of guilt and inhibitions and thus renders possible the frantic deployment of murderous destructiveness in war, but also during crowd movements, as has long been observed. It is as if, in these moments, individuals recover, without knowing it, the certitude that the source of the institution is the anonymous collective, capable of positing new rules and lifting old prohibitions.

Outcomes

There are, as I have said already, two psychical expressions of hate: hate of the other and self-hate. The latter, in general, does not appear as such. But we must understand

that both have a common root, the psychical monad's refusal to accept what is, for it, alien and thus strange: the socialized individual, whose form it has been forced to wear, and social individuals, whose coexistence it is obliged to accept (though their existence is always less real than its own existence for itself, and therefore also much more *expendable*). This ontological structure of the human being imposes insurmountable constraints on all social organizations, and all political projects, a point which cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that such constraints irrevocably rule out all ideas of a "transparent" society and all political projects that would aim at an immediate universal reconciliation and claim to shortcircuit the social institution.¹⁰

During the process of socialization, both dimensions of hate are tamed to a significant degree, at least in their most dramatic forms. This is accomplished, in part, through a permanent diversion of the destructive tendency toward more or less "constructive" social ends: exploitation of nature, various forms of interindividual competition (potlatch, peaceful agonistic activities such as athletic or other types of games, economic and political competition, rivalries over the acquisition of prestige, bureaucratic infighting, etc.), or just banal interhuman malice. In all known societies, all such outlets channel a part—but by no means all—of the "available" hate and destructive energy.

Up to now, however, it seems as if this channeling was possible only if the remaining part of hate and destructiveness was kept, as it were, in a reservoir, ready to be turned, at regular or irregular intervals, into formalized, institutionalized destructive activities against other

¹⁰Note added by Kurasawa and corrected by T/E: See "'Communism' in its Mythical Sense," in [IIS](#), 110-14.

collectivities—that is, into war. This is not to say that psychical hate is the “cause” of wars: that is not a question we have to discuss here. It is clear that one can find in history numerous wars—from the Germanic or Mongol invasions to the “lace wars” of the eighteenth century, not to mention civil wars—for which hate was not the primary source. Yet hate is certainly not only a necessary but an essential condition for war. I mean by *essential condition* a condition that maintains an intrinsic relationship with that of which it is the condition. Hate conditions war and expresses itself in war. André Malraux’s statement in *Les Noyers d’Altenburg*, “Let victory in this war rest with those who fought it without loving it,” expresses a wish contradicted by the reality of almost all real wars.¹¹ Otherwise, one would not understand how millions and millions of people throughout the known history of the human species could be ready, at the drop of a hat, to kill unknown people and be killed by them. And when the resources of this reservoir are not actively mobilized, they manifest themselves rampantly under the guise of contempt, xenophobia, and racism.

Let it be noted here, parenthetically, that psychoanalysts often speak carelessly about the taboo against murder. In truth, what is clearly and exclusively intended by the Freudian myth in *Totem and Taboo* is *intraclan* murder only. It is also the only type of murder against which there is a social sanction, whereas murder during wartime or in the course of a vendetta results in glory for the killer.

The fatal conjunction is that the destructive drives of

¹¹T/E: André Malraux, *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg* (1943), tr. A. W. Fielding (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). The translation appears to be Castoriadis’s; Fielding’s translation reads: “Oh, may victory rest with those who went to war without liking it” (p. 207).

individuals fit admirably well with the near necessity for the institution of the society to close upon itself, to reinforce the position of its own laws, values, rules, and meanings as being uniquely excellent and the only true ones. This takes place through the assertion that the laws, creeds, gods, norms, and customs of the others are inferior, false, wrong, disgusting, abominable, diabolic. And this, in turn, is in complete harmony with the needs of the identificatory organization of the individual's psyche. For the latter, what lies beyond the circle of meanings it has so painfully cathected along the road of its socialization is inferior, wrong, meaningless. And these meanings are, for it, coextensive with the instituted collectivity (and network of collectivities) to which it belongs: clan, tribe, village, nation, religion. Conflicts among these various poles of reference are of course possible. But, for all we know, they arise much less in archaic environments and much more frequently in more modern ones. What must at any rate clearly be understood as the basis for all the rest is that, as a first approximation and in principle, individuals experience any threat to the paramount instituted collectives to which they belong as more serious than a threat against their own lives.

As was said before, these characteristics can be observed with the greatest intensity and purity in fully closed societies: in archaic and traditional ones, to be sure, but, even more, in modern totalitarian societies. The cardinal fallacy is always: Our norms are good; the good is our norms; their norms are not our norms; therefore, their norms are not good. Likewise: Our God is true; Truth is our God; their God is not our God; therefore, their God is not a true God. It has always seemed almost impossible, for human collectivities, to consider alterity as just that: alterity. In the same guise, it has been almost impossible for them to see the institutions of the

others as neither superior nor inferior but simply as other institutions, and in truth, mostly incomparable to their own.

To sum up an argument I have expressed in detail elsewhere,¹² a society's encounter with the others generally opens up three possible ways of evaluating them: They are superior, they are equal, or they are inferior. If they were superior, we would have to renounce our own institutions and adopt theirs.¹³ If they were equal, being a Yankee rather than a Crow Indian, a Christian rather than a Pagan, would be a matter of sheer indifference. Both possibilities are intolerable. For, both entail, or seem to entail, that the individual should give up his or her own identificatory bearings, that is, give up, or at least call into question, his or her own identity, so dearly acquired during the socialization process. There remains then the third case: They are inferior. Of course, this overlooks the possibility that the others might be our equals in the sense that our institutions and theirs might be, in an initial overall view, *incomparable*. It is not hard to understand why the emergence of such a view is historically improbable. It would lead us to

¹²"Reflections on Racism" (1987), now in [CL3](#) [French Editors: see also *SV*, 209-49].

¹³As is known, this possibility is not absent from effectively actual history. It corresponds to the different forms of acculturation, which are often imposed through violence, including economic violence, and sometimes also adopted by the victors as partial acculturation compensated by their effective domination: the Mongols in China, the Romans faced with Greece, and so on. A detailed discussion of these various cases would show, I am sure, that the ideas expressed in the present text supply the key for the understanding of such cases. Instances of massive "voluntary" conversion, notably religious conversion, relate to different considerations. From the point of view adopted here, they are equivalent to "revolutions" during which one imaginary institution of the total society is subverted and replaced by another one.

accept in the others what for us is abomination, something that is in principle impossible for any religious culture. And even in the case of “nonreligious” cultures, it would sometimes raise questions that are insoluble on a purely theoretical level: what to do, for example, with societies that do not recognize human rights, that inflict cruel punishments on their members, or that indulge in practices that in our view are horrific (such as the excision and infibulation of girls)? Attaining to the idea of a possible incomparability of cultures is possible only for a society in which, whatever the intensity of its adherence to its own institutions, an initial internal rift has already taken place that makes it possible to distance oneself from the established institution.

This is why the movement toward the recognition of this essential alterity starts at the same time, and with the same deep-seated motivations, as the movement toward a rupture of the closure of meaning—that is, the movement toward calling into question the given institution of society, the end of full heteronomy, the freeing of thoughts and deeds, in sum, the birth of democracy and philosophy.

From that time onward, the idea that the others are neither wicked nor inferior starts to make its way (in Homer, Herodotus, Montaigne, Swift, Montesquieu, and so on). It would be both tempting and encouraging to be able to say that the opening of thought and the partial and relative democratization of political regimes in the West have advanced in step with the decline of chauvinism, xenophobia, and racism. But, even leaving aside the terrifying explosions of xenophobic and racist barbarism in the twentieth century, one could accept such a statement only with many strong qualifications. In particular, it is necessary to reflect upon the extremely virulent revival of nationalism, xenophobia, and racism during the twentieth century in the “civilized” and

“democratic” countries. As for the non-Western world, the appalling contemporary situation hardly calls for comment.

One must add that, here again, the inscrutable multiplicity and heterogeneity of the historical forms of institutions defy any simple schema of understanding. Hostility toward strangers covers practically the whole spectrum of possibilities, from immediate murder to the most generous hospitality. *Xenia* was an institution common to all Greeks, though the Lacedaemonians had instaurated *xenēlasia*, expelling foreigners from Lacedaemon after a minimal sojourn there.¹⁴ But it must also be noted that this

¹⁴Xenophon *Constitution of the Spartans* 14.4. [T/E: The following paragraph and a half appears at this point in the version edited by Kurasawa and published by *Free Associations* but not in any other version published in English or French:

The command to be amicable to strangers “for ye were strangers in Egypt” is given by Yahweh to the Jews in the desert. This does not prevent them—with the full approval of the Lord—from exterminating all the tribes they find in Palestine.

For straightforward reasons, I have exclusively dealt here with the hate of others, of the aggressiveness to which they give rise. But these reasons *do not include* the illusion that the hate of strangers would be astonishing, and friendliness toward them easy to understand. A parallel inquiry to this one remains to be done, regarding the varieties of friendly attitudes toward strangers, and specifically, the place of this friendliness in the psychological economy of socialized individuals and the social-historical economy of institutions and significations. There are very numerous cases where hospitality, for instance, is instituted as a sacred obligation.

Kurasawa rightly notes that Castoriadis supplies the Biblical references for the Hebrews’ extermination of tribes in Palestine in the first note for “Reflections on Racism” in [CL3](#). In reprinting this otherwise missing paragraph and a half, no editorial changes have been introduced. The full quotation (in the King James Version) concerning strangers is: “for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (*Leviticus* 19.34).]

variety of institutions and the goodwill it sometimes expresses concern exclusively foreign *individuals*, never their institutions as such, and foreigners “passing through,” almost never their settling down. (Multiethnic empires are in a class by themselves for evident reasons. In their case, central authority usually imposes tolerance of alien minorities—which has not prevented, as is well known, pogroms against Jews and massacres inflicted upon the Armenians.)

All that I have said up to now provides an account of the exclusion of the external other. It does not suffice to “explain” why this exclusion can become discrimination, contempt, confinement, and, finally, hatred, rage, and murderous folly. Regarding the extreme forms these behaviors can take, and their acute explosions during specific moments in history, I do not think there can be a general “explanation”: historical accounts alone can really make some sense of the bewildering diversity of the related facts. Yet such an understanding requires in the first place that we recognize and gauge accurately the extraordinary quantity of hatred contained in the psychical reservoir, which the social institution has proved unable or unwilling to divert to other objects.

Nevertheless, one factor can be singled out in relation to the massive explosions of national and racial hate during Modern Times. The dissolution, in capitalist societies, of almost all bodies of significant intermediate collectivities and thus the disappearance of alternative possibilities of identification for individuals have undoubtedly had the effect of an identificatory retrenchment around the entities “religion,” “nation,” or “race” and thus of a tremendous exacerbation of misoxeny in the broadest sense of the word. The situation is not essentially different in non-European societies, where the shock of invading modernity is most

acutely felt and the crushing of traditional identificatory bearings leads to increased religious and/or national fanaticism.

A final remark concerning racism, specifically. It is astonishing that, as far as I know, the main, defining characteristic of racism, immediately visible to the naked eye, has been overlooked by writers on the subject. This is the *essential inconvertibility* of the other. Any religious fanatic would gladly accept the conversion of the infidels; any “rational” nationalist should rejoice at the annexation of foreign territories and the “assimilation” of their people. Not so the racist. German Jews would have been content—or, at least, most of them would have accepted and demanded—to remain citizens of the Third Reich, but the Nazis would have none of it. And it is precisely because, in the case of racism, the object of hate must remain *inconvertible* that the racist imaginary has to invoke or to invent the existence of would-be physical (biological)—that is, irreversible—characteristics in the objects of its hate: the color of the skin and facial traits are the most appropriate support for this hate, for they mark the irreducible strangeness of the object and do away with any risk of confusion with the subject. Hence also the extremely strong repulsion against crossbreeding, since it blurs the frontier between the pure and the impure and shows to the racist that little would be needed for himself to be found on the other side of the hate barrier. Finally, we would certainly be justified in attaching this extreme form of hate of the other to the most obscure, somber, and repressed form of hate: self-hate.

Heteronomy and hatred of the other have one common root: the near “need” or “necessity” for the closure of meaning, which arises from the intrinsic tendencies of the institution of society and from the singular psyche’s search for

ultimate certainties, and which leads to extremely strong identifications with watertight bodies of belief shared and supported by real collectivities. Autonomy, that is, full democracy, and acceptance of the other are *not* the natural inclination of humanity. Both face the same tremendous obstacles. We know from history that the fight for democracy has been, up to now, marginally more successful than that against chauvinism, xenophobia, and racism. But for those who are committed to the only reasonably defensible political project, the project of universal freedom, the only way open is to continue this uphill struggle.

Paris, March 1995—September 1996/March-April 1997

Psyche and Education*

Jacques Ardoino: On the occasion of the publication of an issue of the review *Pratiques de formation* (Educational Training Practices) centered around “multireferentiality,” we’d like to question you about the problems of the education and training of subjects. And we’d like to put your own theory of the imaginary and of the psyche to the test on this theme.

René Barbier: My personal feeling is that one major point isn’t broached in this theory, and perhaps rightly so: it’s the question of what in the Oriental tradition is called *meditation*—that is, a state of being, a state of consciousness, that is not “consciousness of” something achieved through personal experience. In the ultimate phases of this sort of meditation, we find at once an extreme wakefulness and an absence of representation. There is neither concept nor image. This is a zone of the psyche where the imaginary would be as if “silent.” This would contradict your conception of psychical life as continual and uninterrupted flux of images, of forms, of figures, and so on. What do you think about that?

Cornelius Castoriadis: I have some familiarity, in an inadequate way, with Oriental philosophy, but I am not competent to speak about Oriental meditation practices.... I do not believe that one could speak about these practices without having a personal experience of them. Even so, it may be asked to what extent those who have gone through these experiences can speak about them correctly. Apart from what

*Interview with Jacques Ardoino, René Barbier, and Florence Giust-Desprairies conducted February 7, 1991 in Paris. Published in *Pratiques de formation*, 25-26 (April 1993): 43-63 [T/E: as “Entretien avec Cornelius Castoriadis.” French Editors: For reasons of space, the wording of the questions has been slightly abridged. Title supplied by the French Editors.] Reprinted in *FP*, 197-220 (239-67 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: The present translation was first published in [FTPK](#).]

could be called a *borderline state* (not in the psychiatric meaning of this term), and still then, I don't see how a psychical state could be anything other than a representational-affective-intentional flux. What does one know about these borderline states? There are those fleeting milliseconds of the orgasm, a "little death," the Ancients said, the *fading* of the subject, in Lacan's translation:¹ an evanescent and unsayable moment in which the usual subject "disappears." In the Western tradition, there are "mystical" experiences; perhaps, each can have a feeling for similar lived experiences (the "oceanic feeling" of Romain Rolland and Wilhelm Reich; as one knows, Sigmund Freud stated that this feeling was unknown to him).² It could be said, as a first approximation, that these are states without representation or intention—although not without affect. I don't know what would be said about them by an Oriental practitioner of meditation who would also be somewhat familiar with our notions. For my part, I think that this description is inadequate. These states make me think much more about a return toward the initial monadic state of the psyche: toward a sort of primary lack of differentiation [*indifférenciation*], a lack of differentiation between self and other, between affects, representations, and desires, that would basically be characterized by a *conatus* of perpetual identical continuation, of permanence in this "being"-there. That is for me, as you

¹T/E: The word *fading* in French is a direct borrowing from the English, with the same meaning.

²T/E: See Freud's July 14, 1929 letter to Rolland, in *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939*, p. 389 and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*), 21: 64ff.; "I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself" (21: 65).

know, the initial, originary state of the human psyche, insofar as we might be able to reconstitute it—or postulate it—through a regressive approach and starting from the fundamental observable traits of the psyche, which is possible only because, as a matter of fact, it has always already partially broken up this state.

This is what I believe I have found, under an impure form mixed with the “ideas” of the presence of another (of Christ, of God, etc.), in those mystical texts of the West with which I am familiar (Saint Theresa, Saint John of the Cross, and so on). This would probably have to be compared to trance phenomena, as well, about which I also must confess my incompetency and for which one would have to consult our friend Lapassade.³ But to me it seems likely that, in these phenomena too, what is at issue is the re-fusion of the usually distinct elements of psychical life, which tend to return to “primordial unity.” The closest analogy I can find in my personal experience is listening to music—though not just any music, certainly. There is here something like a complete absorption in something other than one’s self. (This is, moreover, the initial meaning of the word *emotion*, *ex-motus*.) But here again, it is in a flux of representations and affects that one is caught. There are auditory representations, certainly, ones that offer the extraordinary peculiarity of being at once completely distinct (the more one is familiar with the music in detail, the more one loses oneself in it) and in perpetual fusion, each with all the others, both vertically and

³T/E: A former member of Socialisme ou Barbarie, Georges Lapassade (1924-2008) was the author of, among many other books, *Les États modifiés de conscience* (Altered states of consciousness) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987). He also wrote an *Essai sur la transe: le matérialisme hystérique* (Paris: J. P. Delarge, 1976).

horizontally. But there are also affects—even if the latter, as soon as one tries to name them, betray the thing—for, contrary to what is believed, music neither “expresses” nor “represents” affects known elsewhere; it is creative of them. Here, there is a meaning that is not discursive (that’s why verbal commentaries about music’s “content” are generally inane). And there is a desire, one that is close, perhaps, to the desire for the state of nirvana (Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, etc.)—the desire that this might always last thus—but one that nevertheless finds fulfillment, at least in classical Western music, in and through a movement and a balancing of alteration and repetition. (For flamenco and gamelan music, things proceed otherwise.) This is probably what a Westerner like myself is able to know by way of analogy about the states to which you are referring. But once again, I cannot, *a priori* and until there is proof to the contrary, believe those who say that, in the extreme points of meditation, there is no longer any representation. If this were so, I don’t see how they could speak about it after the fact, or even remember it.

R.B.: I think that those who have lived through this type of state of consciousness don’t speak of it in terms of representations but refer, rather, to a state of consciousness that is not “consciousness of” something. Undoubtedly, when all is said and done, we find ourselves here in the realm of philosophical postulates.

C.C.: They do talk about it.

R.B.: Yes, they talk about it afterward. But they don’t talk about it in terms of representations, except for those who have had visions, and so on. But that’s something else. I am not talking about ecstatic visions....

C.C.: But if they talk about it, that means that, even at the most acute moment of the experience, they had

perception, in the vaguest sense of the term, of something that was there and that was at the same time themselves.

J.A.: What we're sure about, if I have understood well what you were saying, is that there is at least intention—will, even—for, one reaches this meditative state only through asceticism. There is an effort to reach it or to return to it.

C.C.: An effort to exclude everything else.

J.A.: There again is intentionality, when one talks about it afterward, since there is a will to signify something to someone, that is to say, to account for or at least to say something about this experience. Therefore, there is an appreciable element of intentionality. But then I ask myself whether there might not be something on the order of a search that one is really forced to call *regressive*. (I am not necessarily taking the word *regressive* in the pejorative sense). That is to say, a return to the mother, ultimately in a primitive, undifferentiated state. In the case of meditation, of asceticism, of a spiritual approach, this regression is voluntary, productive of something else; there is no question of reducing it to its purely regressive aspect, in the initial sense of the term, but there is, all the same, something of this order.

C.C.: Yes, except that I would not speak of the mother: the monadic state is a state prior to the mother, as it is a state prior to the part-object, as one says in psychoanalysis, *qua* separate object.

J.A.: But would there be a memory of the monadic state?

C.C.: There is no memory, neither conscious nor even unconscious; this is what I have tried to say in chapter six of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#), inasmuch as it is sayable. The monad is not repressed; it is on the near side of repression. But unless one postulates a monadic state, all the

rest of the history of the psyche remains incomprehensible. Whence comes, for example, the “magical omnipotence of thoughts”?⁴ First of all, it is in no way “magical.” Freud calls it *magical* because he is thinking of reality, but this omnipotence is real. We are obviously not talking about reality in the subway; we are talking about the only reality that interests, to begin with, psychoanalysis: psychical reality. The Unconscious can form, and does effectively form, the phantasm that satisfies the desire. In this regard, the psyche is effectively all-powerful. What is the origin of this omnipotence? Next, we are saying that, starting at some moment, the *infans* imputes omnipotence to the mother. But whence can the *infans* exit from a schema of omnipotence, where has the *infans* found it? The *infans* found it in itself; it’s a projective operation. We have here a fundamental trait of the subject’s radical imagination: the subject can at the outset grasp the world only as itself. One must not even say *as in its own power*, for that assumes a differentiation, but, rather, *as itself*, infinitely plastic relative to what it “desires,” this word being another abuse of language, since there is at this stage no distinction between desired and represented.

We find again [*retrouvons*] some traces of this same state in the adult individual. Why is this hard schooling in reality, in distinction, in differentiation necessary? Why can’t one bear another who would be truly other and not simply another exemplar of oneself? And whence comes this mania, this rage for unification that is found again both in politics and in philosophy? The monad is on the near side of the fused state that prolongs the nursling’s need to see everyone as itself. This view is already there, in fact, in Freud’s phrase

⁴T/E: See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13.

from one of his last notes in 1938: *Ich bin die Brust*, "I am the breast."⁵ What does this mean? That I am the breast, and that the breast is me—that there is no distinction. It is only later on that the breast will be perceived as belonging to someone else, who has it at her disposal. But since this other has to fit into the world of the self, of the subject, the nursling tries to instaurate a state of fusion with its mother. And here again, we have a powerful echo of this in adult love. In the second act of *Tristan and Isolde*, Tristan says, "Tristan you, I Isolde, no longer Tristan," and Isolde answers, "You Isolde, Tristan I, no longer Isolde!" The two lovers, and the listener, too, are inside this fantastic music, a copulatory music in at once the most elementary and the most philosophical sense of the word, a meeting of two parts hitherto separated that nevertheless belong to each other.

The monadic state is prior to every distinction with the mother, therefore, to all fusion with the mother, since fusion presupposes two separate things.

R.B.: Is this to say that you do not distinguish at all between what a baby would be able to live and what could be lived by someone whose psyche is as elaborately worked out as Krishnamurti's?

C.C.: I am making a fundamental distinction. I am saying that Krishnamurti, by dint of asceticism, of various efforts, of I know not what, succeeds in reproducing a state that is obviously not that of the baby, since he thinks this state as a union with the whole and abolition of distinctions, things

⁵T/E: Castoriadis sometimes says that this note was written in 1938, sometimes in 1939, as here in the French. The correct date is indeed 1938. See "Ergebnisse, Ideen, Probleme" (note of July 12, 1938, in London), in Freud's *Gesammelte Werke* [hereafter: *GW*], 17: 151; in English, "Findings, Ideas, Problems" (1941 [1938]), in *SE* 23: 299.

that for a baby signify nothing. Only an individual who has thought distinction can think of an abolition of distinctions. This is obviously not the baby's state, but one can speak of it only in the same terms: I am the whole, the whole is me, distinctions are abolished—but, of all that, Krishnamurti has, after the fact, a representation.

Now, starting from the moment representation ceases to be this unintelligible and unrepresentable monadic state, representation always implies multiplicity and differentiation. At minimum, it implies a figure. But it implies much more than that. And if we begin to take this *much more* into account, we see that we cannot account for it in terms of ensidic (ensemblistic-identitary) logic. For example, one cannot say how many elements this multiplicity contains. We are seated here; each of us has a perception, and more than a perception. If we try to enumerate the “elements” that are therein, we immediately notice that this is impossible. It eludes set theory [*la théorie des ensembles*]; algebra doesn't hold up here, nor does topology. Where are our boundaries? We are talking. I am here, you are there, I am talking to you. This goes into your ears, and you think some things. What relation do these things have with what I am saying? They are certainly not the strict reproduction and repetition of what I am saying; you think them at the same time as something else apart from yourself. But you are not in the state where you would be if you were alone and you weren't listening to me; and the same thing goes for me. There is no boundary, therefore there is no topology. Nor are there ordered relations. No logicomathematical structure substantially applies. Nonetheless, there is differentiation.

Whereas, in the monadic state, there is no differentiation: I am everything, I am being itself, being is me, and I am pleasure, pleasure is me. Of course, it's our adult

language that is saying this. But this is lived as exactly the same, which is me, which is everything.

Florence Giust-Desprairies: Might not one see in the increasing number of persons joining in spiritual experiences a protest against a more and more atomized, fragmented [*morcelé*], unbearable world? It would then be a matter of trying to find, to rediscover [*retrouver*] something else through those experiences of unity....

C.C.: To me, that seems certain. What has been called, in an abusive and exaggerated way, *the return of the religious* relates to this, but so does an auditorium for popular music concerts like the *Zénith*. What we have been seeing since the Sixties are these large halls where the music is never deafening enough. One cannot help but think of near-trance states, a loss of self and a lack of differentiation relative to others, a pseudounification and a pseudosignification attempting to go beyond signification. One lives in the instant; one lets oneself be penetrated by the music, a sort of properly physical rape by dint of the number of decibels, a mixing of bodies in a diffuse sexuality, marijuana joints circulating—but this isn't important. All these things serve as supports [*étayages*] for rediscovering a situation that appears to be achieving a total meaning, all the while being on the near side of all articulate meaning. Like you, I think that the attempts to give oneself over to Oriental meditation pertain to the same despair of individuals in this Western world that is at once depersonalized and privatized.

R.B.: Here you are giving a sociological interpretation of the phenomenon. And I would like to come back to the nature of the phenomenon. You say that the baby is in a monadic state. If I understand you well, this monadic state is, in some sort of way, unconsciously taking into account the chaotic state, in the sense of the chaos/abyss/groundless, of

which you speak.

C.C.: It's not the same thing.

R.B.: What's the difference? What connection do you make between this monadic state in the *infans* and the chaos/abyss/groundless?

C.C.: The chaos/abyss/groundless is what is behind or underneath every concrete existent, and it is at the same time the creative might—*vis formandi*, one would say in Latin—that makes forms, organized beings surge forth. The singular human being is a fragment of this chaos and, at the same time, is itself a fragment or an instance of this *vis formandi*, of this might or this creativity of being as such. And both aspects are to be found again in the subject's radical imagination: it is there, precisely, that we find the monadic form, what us adults would express by saying: I am all.

J.A.: The monadic state, "I am all," is, at that moment, pantheistic. This is indeed amusing, because one always thinks of Leibniz, of course, but one must also consult one's Spinoza.

C.C.: The "I am all" of the monad signifies: All is me, nothing is outside of me. But for a true pantheist, that's not what is at issue; rather, it is: All is God; God is everywhere; I am a fragment of this All/God, etc., and I can eventually have access to this All by means, for example, of knowledge of a third kind. The state I am trying to describe, however, is truly the windowless monad, as Leibniz would have said, except, obviously, there is no preestablished harmony, no harmonious insertion of all the monads in an overall symphony; the monad's "perception" is a self-perception, its *conatus* is directed toward itself, in no way harmonized with that of the other monads. This always remains, even in the adult individual: "one dies alone." Even a great philosopher is always, for himself, the center of the world: the world is

irrevocably going to end for oneself; one plunges into absolute darkness even if one knows that “things go on.”

J.A.: But the monad contains everything, too.

C.C.: No, the monad contains this push toward the unification of everything, and this is ultimately what, later on, allows one, in a sense, to hold together what would otherwise be a sort of absolute dispersion. Consider what happens to a nursling—even to any living being in general. A host of things happen, sensory stimuli, internal bodily pains, sensations of hunger, “shadows” that stroll about—shadows that become, in a series of fits and starts, “objects,” a “breast,” then a “mother,” and so on. All that has to be held together, and can be held together, first of all and to begin with (and to end with, moreover), only (a) because this being lives under the absolute requirement that this hold together (in adult language, that this make sense) and (b) because it has at its disposal the capacity to make it, somehow or other, hold together. Here we again find, from another angle, the questions of philosophy. When Kant said, in his “Deduction of Categories,” “the *I think* is the principle of the transcendental unity of apperception,” he saw the adult, cognitive segment of the matter at hand. But the principle of all subjective life is: I am all. Subjective life, to begin with, relates everything to itself. The world is my representation (and my mood, and the infinitely plastic material of my desire). And one has to exit from that in order to enter into adult life. At the outset, “words” have the meaning I give them (and the residues of this are there until the end). One must learn with difficulty that words have a socially established meaning and that one cannot make them say what one wants. The point of view of the *infans* beginning to appropriate words for itself is the point of view of Humpty

Dumpty in *Alice*: Words mean what I want them to mean.⁶

J.A.: And by the same token, the monad is timeless.

C.C.: In the sense that it does not know time. Freud says that for the Unconscious, but, when he says that the Unconscious does not know time and does not know contradiction, his formulation is excessive.⁷ This can be said of the monad; it cannot be said of the Freudian Unconscious. The latter does not know usual time, diurnal social time. But it is obvious that it unfolds its own time, its proper time. A dream unfurls in a dream time, and it creates, it makes be a dream time. There is a temporality proper to the dream, as, more generally, a temporality proper to the Unconscious. This is not “our” temporality of socialized adults, and noon can be switched to before 9 A.M.; that matters little, there is a before/after.

J.A.: But *qua* unifying power, it is timeless. Whereas, representation is necessarily already temporal.

C.C.: Certainly.

J.A.: And by the same token, representation is plural.

C.C.: Certainly.

J.A.: Which brings us to multireferentiality.

C.C.: The radical imagination gives rise to its time,

⁶T/E: It is in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (also known as *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*) that we find, “‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’” This line comes right before the dialogue between Alice and Humpty Dumpty quoted by Castoriadis in “The ‘Rationality’ of Capitalism” (1997); see its n. 18, above in the present volume, for the reference.

⁷T/E: “There are...no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty [in the Unconscious].” “Reference to time is bound up...with the work of the system Cs” (*GW* 10: 286; in English, *The Unconscious*, *SE* 14: 186, 187).

which is a proper time, a time of its own, and to its space, which is a proper space, a space of its own. I am always, even now, the origin of the coordinates. The zero of the axes x , y , and z is always me, here and now. It is socially that all these origins are referred to and integrated into a social “origin”—the first Olympiad and the navel of Delphi, the birth of Christ and the Greenwich meridian, and so forth. But it also and especially gives rise to a “content,” to a spontaneous, inexhaustible, and unmasterable representational-affective-intentional flux. You’ve lain down to sleep. You were tired but in a good mood. Then suddenly an idea or a memory pops up, the mood changes completely, and you can no longer go to sleep. This is a trivial, but striking, example of the psychical flux.

R.B.: This is not the case with everybody.

C.C.: What do you mean that this not the case with everybody?

R.B.: Certainly, that’s what happens most often, but I believe that certain beings can stop this mental flux. Krishnamurti, for example, doesn’t have anything to do with this intentionality, this will for mastery. And it is said of him that he was in a sort of perpetual emptiness. I don’t think that we could go any further on this theme, and we have other very important points to deal with. Yet, despite everything, I remain unsatisfied by the comparison you are making between the young child and someone who meditates: the way I see it, there is in the latter a dimension that is of another nature. It’s not some regressive tendency. What happens with someone who meditates is a sort of reconnection, but it is not on the order of a fusion.

C.C.: I don’t want to prolong this discussion. I have already said that I am not competent. But I’ll ask, nonetheless, why the devil Krishnamurti or anyone who meditates wants

at all costs to attain a state of reconnection. Why does he want to attain this state rather than a state in which everything is infinitely differentiated and articulated? Whence does this idea come to him?

R.B.: I believe that he does not want to attain something. I believe that he does not have a project.

C.C.: Come on, now.... Krishnamurti and the others spent their lives trying to attain this state. They could have tried to prove Fermat's last theorem, gamble at Monte Carlo, chase after girls.... Whence comes this craving?

R.B.: That's the question....

C.C.: The answer, in my opinion, is that the monad is always crouching in the background and whispering: One must refind [*retrouver*]....

R.B.: I'll respond to this question. This craving comes to him from the fact that Krishnamurti, like everyone, and like the world, is chaos/abyss/groundlessness, and I am putting into this conception a whole dimension of destruction and creation. It's from this, within oneself, that this desire comes. And the desire to rediscover bliss [*retrouver la plénitude*] in being affiliated with others.

C.C.: But you say "to rediscover bliss"! To rediscover: watch out for your phrase *to rediscover*.

R.B.: Yes, but it's rediscovering in another way. Because there really is a difference.... I completely agree with your conception of the imaginary institution of society, which, with a certain amount of violence, opens up the *infans's* monadic psyche in order that it might accede to a process of autonomization. That seems really quite clear, hence the importance of society, of the social-historical. But at the same time, the psyche of a "sage" like Krishnamurti is something other than a "long-lost rediscovery [*retrouvailles*]." It's something that is on the order of a reconnection that I would

distinguish from a fusion. But undoubtedly we're at the limits here of what's describable.

C.C.: We're in the realm of the totally uncontrollable. Which is not the case with psychoanalytic experience.

R.B.: Except about what one can live oneself.

C.C.: Yes, but this is by its nature incommunicable.

R.B.: Certainly, that's why the true wise man remains silent.

C.C.: It should nevertheless be asked, before passing to the other topic, to what extent such sages can form a collectivity.

R.B.: This is something else.

C.C.: Yes, but to me that seems very important.

R.B.: I agree. Hence the path I am defending as a bit of a "hybrid" Westerner, the perspective of a paradoxical Krishnamurti-Castoriadis approach (*laughter*)! One more reason to broach the second theme of our interview: education.

J.A.: You have on several occasions spoken of education, yet without having differentiated it from pedagogy. It's a matter of passing from an original core of drives to the *anthrōpos*—that is to say, to a being that would henceforth be provided with a certain capacity for autonomy and that would, by the same token, have gotten over [*ait fait le deuil de*] omnipotence. For us, education is a set of aims, of finalities, and, by way of consequence, education is already on the order of the political.

C.C.: On this, you'll find me in complete agreement. I have written explicitly in "Power, Politics, Autonomy"⁸ that the object of genuine politics is to transform institutions, but to transform them in such a way that these institutions educate

⁸Now in [CL3](#).

individuals toward autonomy. Undoubtedly, there's no autonomous society.⁹ It's the so-called political philosophy of modern and contemporary times that has "forgotten" the question of education, which had been the central preoccupation of all the great philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle until Rousseau. Political philosophy talks now on the supposition that "free individuals" have been given, one knows not how, to these societies—no doubt, they are supplied by some factory—and that the sole question is that of arranging how they are to relate to one another. But these relations will be only what these individuals will be. Marx knew that perfectly well when he spoke of the old question of the relations between the educators and the educated, and he reminded us that the educators themselves have to be educated.¹⁰ But he believed that he had the solution because he thought that he had found in the socioeconomic reality of capitalism the great Educator, the "objective" circumstances that would train [*formeraient*] both the educators and the educated properly. Now, that isn't true; more precisely, this reality trains both the educators and the educated in the spirit of the existing society. Only an autonomous collectivity can form autonomous individuals—and *vice versa*; hence, for the usual logic, a paradox. Here is one of the aspects of this paradox: autonomy is the capacity to call into question the given institution of society—and it is this institution that, by means especially of education, has to render you capable of calling it into question.

⁹T/E: This statement probably needs to be qualified by adding "today" at the end, if indeed the transcription is correct.

¹⁰T/E: See the third of Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* [New York: International Publishers, 1968], p. 28.

R.B.: Don't you make a distinction between the pedagogue, the teacher, and the educator?

C.C.: I have not reflected in detail on these questions. I grant a huge place to education, and especially to its basic orientation, but clearly some distinctions and articulations are to be made. First, it must not be forgotten that education begins with birth and ends with death. And the main thing the education that contemporary society furnishes individuals is not the formal education dispensed by the schools but, rather, the one being spread daily by the media, especially television, advertising, and so on—and, beyond even that, by everything that happens in society, politics, urban planning, songs, and so on. Already, Plato said that the very walls of the city educate children and citizens. It is clear that someone who lived in such a society as ancient Athens must have been, and as Florence had to be and still is a bit, is educated differently from someone living in a slum, in France or elsewhere. One breathes in society through all one's pores.

Now, within education in the broad (but rigorous) sense thus defined, there are certainly more particular "sectors" or "moments" like pedagogy, that is to say, education addressed to individuals who are not yet formed as adults. A good part of pedagogy, perhaps the most essential part, begins before school: when a mother nurses her child, she is doing pedagogy, whether she knows it or not.... Then, there is certainly pedagogy in the traditional and narrow sense, in specific institutions, and its relations with instruction properly speaking, which are not simple.

J.A.: Borrowing your terms, it seems to me that there would be, first of all, an interesting distinction to be made between pedagogy and education. The term *pedagogy* would be reserved for the relational issues connected with the transmission of knowledge to the child, within the educational

system. This is a kind of work that, at bottom, bears, rather, on ensemblistic-identitary logic and on the radical imagination of the subject. Whereas the notion of education effectively implies articulation between the latter and the creative social imaginary. It is still posited in terms of leaning-on [*étayage*], that is to say, leaning on both registers, that of the psychical and that of the social.

A second point: more, perhaps, than the notion of autonomy, I would, on the side of the imagination and of the subject, tend to employ here the term *authorization*. Lacan employed it in his celebrated formula “one only authorizes oneself,”¹¹ even if he denied it in practice, but that’s another story.... The notion of authorization—but in the reflexive sense, that is to say, authorizing oneself, making oneself one’s own author (or one’s own coauthor, if one wants to avoid the psychotic form)—is an extremely valuable notion that allows one to avoid certain sociological usages of autonomy: the de-dialecticization of the sociologists of ideology, for example, that is to say, the radical break, which permits one to say that there is an autonomous functioning of racist thought, for example....

C.C.: I believe that one must be firm on this point and retain the term *autonomy*.

J.A.: But on a rather more social, more institutional side...

C.C.: It obviously has two sides. The interaction between the social imaginary and the singular radical imagination is there, from the outset; the breakup of the

¹¹T/E: In his “Proposition of 9 October on the Psychoanalyst of the School” (first published in French in *Scilicet*, 1 [1967]; tr. Russell Grigg, *Analysis*, 6), Lacan wrote: “a psychoanalyst authorizes himself only by himself.”

psychical monad begins with that. And the key agent of this break, of the socialization of the *infans*, is the mother. The psychoanalysts, as I have written *ad nauseam*, speak of the mother as if she had fallen from the sky and as if she were a specifically and exclusively psychoanalytic entity. But what is the mother? She is the delegate to the baby at once of existing society and of three-million years of hominization. Certainly, she is there with her Unconscious, and the latter acts on the child in decisive fashion. But this Unconscious itself, the maternal Unconscious, has been highly worked over by the whole socialization process the mother has undergone. If she had not undergone this socialization process, she would not have been a mother, and in any case she would not have been able to teach the child to speak. Therefore, this interaction of the social imaginary and of the singular imagination is always there.

The difference with respect to education in the most general sense I was intending a moment ago is that the latter does not address itself to someone designated specifically by name. When the authorities, let's suppose they're democratic—the *dēmos* of Athens, for example, or a modern self-governing collectivity—decide to organize the town in such and such a way, to place the *agora* and the *ekklēsia* on the side, and the public buildings in an open space in the center of the town, and the private living quarters at the periphery, they are making decisions with an obvious and deep-seated political meaning that are aimed at present generations as well as at future generations for an indefinite time to come; their decisions are not aimed at beings designated by name. On the other hand, if I am a parent or a primary-school teacher, a teacher in a high school or a professor at a university, I always have before me determinate beings; I interact directly with their psychism. And here begins the other component of

pedagogy in the proper sense of the term. This is a dimension that one always forgets about, as was seen, in a fantastically troubling and derisory way, during the latest high-school crisis here in France this Autumn.¹² No one spoke of the student-teacher relationship, which is the cement of this affair. Without it, there can be no pedagogy, nor even any instruction. There is no pedagogy if the student doesn't cathect, in the strongest sense of the term, at once what she is learning and the process of learning. And she can cathect it, for that is how humans are made, only by means of the cathexis of a concrete person, by means of a Platonic Eros. Now, this person is not and cannot be a wage earner like everyone else. One doesn't say this, one doesn't dare say this, because there are the various teachers' unions, whose sole preoccupations are salary scales and "working conditions," as in any trade. No one dares raise the question of the teachers' capacities to arouse the Eros of their students. The teacher trade is not a trade like the other ones. Of course, teachers have to be paid, much better than they are; for sure, they have to have working conditions that allow them to accomplish their task. But it's not measures on these levels—the sole ones the unions and the governmental ministries are capable of envisaging—that will respond to the crisis of teaching. If the teachers are not capable of inspiring children with love

¹²T/E: In the Fall of 1990, high-school students, faced with crumbling buildings, inadequate school resources, and a shortage of teachers and other staff, led protestors, numbering in the hundreds of thousands throughout France, to demand that then-Education Minister Lionel Jospin in Prime Minister Michel Rocard's Socialist government earmark additional governmental funds to pay for educational needs. Later, the various French teacher's unions Castoriadis mentions in the interview—"la FEN, le SNES, le SGEN, le SNE-sup"—joined in support of these student protestors.

both for what they are learning and for the act of learning, they're not teachers. Without that, one may possibly exit from high school like some kind of exam fiend, but not as someone open to the world with a passion for this enormous dimension of human existence that is knowledge. If I have been able to do something in my life, it's thanks to my parents, but also thanks to the great luck I had, in the course of the miserable Greek education of my childhood and my adolescence, to have each year, among the dozen teachers we had, at least one of whom I was, in a way, in love.

R.B.: One thing strikes me now. Two authors, Henri Atlan¹³ and Michel Serres,¹⁴ have just published books that reflect upon education, ethics, values, and so on. To my knowledge, no psychoanalyst at the moment has recently published a book on this theme. Why do psychoanalysts leave the education question somewhat to the side, whereas, as I might add, it is central in the psychical development of the subject?

C.C.: Professional ethics, as you know, bars one from criticizing one's colleagues. But I have written the following enough to also be able to do so now. Today's psychoanalysts are deaf to everything that is not "their psychoanalysis": the couch, the psychical apparatus, their psychoanalytic societies, and so on. They are deaf to social questions, deaf to politics, deaf to pedagogy, deaf and blind. This is flagrant, with minute exceptions. For my part, I have tried to place the psychoanalytical dimension in contact with the social-historical dimension, in Chapter 6 of [*The Imaginary*](#)

¹³Henri Atlan, *Tout, Non, Peut-être: Éducation et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

¹⁴Michel Serres, *Le Tiers-instruit* (Paris: François Bourin, 1991).

Institution of Society as well as in several other texts and, again quite recently, in “Psychoanalysis and Politics,”¹⁵ a text that starts from the celebrated phrase from Freud about the three impossible professions: psychoanalysis, pedagogy, and politics. If the psychoanalysts were not deaf and blind to the social, to the political, to the educational, they could have tried to think these objects and to say something about them—not by “psychoanalyzing” politicians or voters, which is ridiculous, but by trying to elucidate these objects from the psychoanalytic point of view, and thereby, perhaps, to render people’s activity more lucid. Freud had formulated some hopes heading in this direction in a variety of texts, both before 1914 and afterward. The psychoanalysts have followed up on these hopes very little—and besides that, there have been a few not very interesting perversions and degenerations.

But I wanted to take advantage of what Ardoino reminded us of concerning transference to complete what I am saying in this text on “Psychoanalysis and Politics.” There is, in this regard, a fundamental distinction to be made, one that I didn’t make in this text, and I thank you for making me think of it. This is the privilege of discussion. And as was asked a moment ago: Who is the author of a thought, and what is the originality of a thought? Where’s the boundary line? The whole prior discussion can be taken up again from the perspective of transference. What is transference? It’s certainly the subject’s entry into a regressive state. Regression does not mean that he is going to pee on the couch but, rather, that he relives the infantile love and hate of the adult figure whom he puts in the place of the analyst. Generally, it’s the parental imagos; it can also be other figures, yet always with the intensity of the affects and desires—even if they are

¹⁵Now in [CL3](#).

masked, censored, etc.—that had been directed against this figure. And psychoanalytic catharsis takes place, in those cases where it does take place, when the subject passes again, via such regression, through this initial incandescent flux; the subject melts back into it and remakes itself there, to use Ibsen's images in *Peer Gynt*. That's psychoanalytic transference in its fullness [*plénitude*]. In pedagogy, however, there can only be sublimated forms of transference, if I may use this bizarre expression. I mean that, in this case, transference has to be sustained by and borne along on what is sublimated, that is to say, on activities that are social objects—knowledge is a social object *par excellence*—and that are a source of a pleasure that is neither organ pleasure nor simple representational pleasure (as in a daydream or a phantasy) but, rather, the pleasure of thinking. When, however, one passes over to politics, within a collectivity of autonomous adults, the transferential element has to tend toward zero. For, we know, to take the opposite example—that is to say, that of a monarchical and, still more, a totalitarian regime—that in those cases the transferential factor tends toward 100 percent; there, the affects are directed toward the figure of the father who knows, who is capable, and who decides.

J.A.: Transference is massive and “it is blind.”

C.C.: And it is blind, of course. One-hundred percent transference is quite blind, for it places the subject before the omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, and mysterious other. Obviously, the extreme example of this is the God of monotheistic religions. It couldn't be like that in a democratic politics. Even in democracy, there will certainly always be political leaders, individuals who, on certain points at least, see further than the others, are able to explain more and better than the others. But relations with the leader, even if they can

never be pure, have to be disengaged as much as possible from transferential elements. That's also why true politics is even more "impossible" than psychoanalysis and pedagogy. A pedagogue has to, in a sense, arouse his students' love, a sublimated love. A politician has to arouse the love of his supporters. If he does arouse that love, he blinds them. Of course, he would be stupid to believe that these relations could ever be sanitized, rid of affective vectors, but these vectors ought to be modeled on friendship, not on love. Clearly, the question would merit our returning to it at length.

J.A.: This raises a practical question that isn't innocuous. Indeed, it is even, in terms of education and educators, of central importance. It's that, in the training of teachers, one always focuses on the initial training and one forgets their continuing education. It then becomes very important to raise people's awareness [*faire passer cette sensibilité*] in a cultural way in order that, without really being in treatment or therapy, so to speak, they would nonetheless really be alerted to the fact that the teacher-student relationship isn't simple, that it isn't made up of good intentions alone, that there are tons of problems—for example, for the teacher, that of avoiding having a hold over the pupil. This would bring us to the third theme of our interview, what we call multireferentiality.

F.G.-D.: Right before that, I would like to pose another question. I'm working on new schools and pedagogical innovations, where the concern to develop the being, to develop the student subject, is patent. And successful, moreover: these children undoubtedly become "more autonomous" than in other pedagogical contexts. But in each instance, there really is one point in common: it's a weakness on the level of knowledge transmission. It's as if developing the being, the "political being," implied abandoning the

transmission of knowledge. While, theoretically, it isn't clear why things should happen like that, concrete studies show that developing the student subject entails a kind of disqualification of knowledge transmission! That would leave us with two opposing groups: those who would opt for rote learning and those who would tend more to develop the person and the citizen, and who, as a result, would be obliged to sacrifice knowledge and the transmission thereof.

C.C.: For my part, I reject this dilemma. If studies show what you are saying, that means that the experiments have been conducted by people who aren't balancing the two components well. In my opinion, teaching is of course educating within an institutional framework, therefore trying to help students to acquire their autonomy. But it is also getting them to love knowledge and the process of its acquisition, which cannot occur without learning things. Otherwise, it would be a collective pseudopsychanalysis for children or adolescents.

F.G.-D.: Of course, but why is it that...?

C.C.: I don't know. I'm not in education. I am not familiar with the studies of the schools you're talking about. But I am opposed to the excesses of pedagogues, which my friend Philippe Raynaud and others have rightly been lambasting, as well as to excesses in education/instruction of the sort: Here is this or that Latin verb conjugation; you've either learned your Latin verbs or you haven't, and you get an A or an F, period. Both attitudes are false. There's no place for the dilemma. I don't see how one can form students as autonomous beings, in the true and full sense of the term, if these beings don't learn to love knowledge, therefore if they don't learn. It's almost a tautology.

J.A.: Would this not be, in your own terms, one of the detrimental effects of ensemblistic-identitary logic?

C.C.: It is, in any case, an excessive separation. Even more than that, it creates a false antinomy. When, on the contrary, the two terms are well understood, they imply each other. I'd like to go back, before going any further, to a phrase one of you said just a moment ago, *raising awareness* [*sensibilisation*]. Educators have to have their awareness raised about all these problems, but also about something else: about the reciprocity of the pedagogical relationship. Not symmetry, but reciprocity. Here again, one can take the example of psychoanalysis. As one knows, it was not Freud who invented psychoanalysis; it was, so to speak, his patients. Freud was enough of a genius to understand what they were doing and he theorized it. He knew how to listen to that female patient who told him: Are you going to shut up already and let me speak? This is where the essence of the psychoanalytic attitude comes from, and it always has been so. This is, moreover, one of the paradoxes that renders insoluble the question of training psychoanalysts and defining who is truly an analyst. For, one doesn't learn psychoanalysis in seminars; one learns it by having people on the couch. "Transmission" is also, in a sense, re-creation of analysis by the patient. Certainly, there are theoretical frameworks, but these frameworks enlighten you half of the time, and the other half they blind you. For, it is almost inevitable that one would be led to fit the patient into a category, or to use this or that hackneyed key to interpret dreams, if I may express myself thus. It is through one's patients that one learns how the Unconscious actually functions and that one learns of modes of operation of the Unconscious one didn't know. I think that the same thing is true for a parent. It is forgotten that a child teaches things to her parents. And an educator also has to know that children can teach him many things about being-a-child that are not in books, or aren't so with the same

intensity, the same pregnancy, in the same self-evident way that manifests itself in children's reactions. Children can teach him things about the operation of their minds and souls. Educators must have their awareness raised on this point.

J.A.: Let's illustrate this reciprocity by taking up again what you have just said: I readily use a term that has helped me out a lot, as a practitioner and as a researcher, which I call *negatricity*. And this is the representation I give myself of the other's capacity to undo, through his own counterstrategies, the strategies of which he feels himself to be the object. Am I correct that this is entirely connected with what you have just said?

C.C.: Absolutely.

J.A.: If I were today to take a contemporary example of negatricity, perhaps not one with very felicitous effects, I'd go looking for it in Saddam Hussein, among others.

C.C.: I agree completely.

J.A.: And the term *authorization*, we haven't come back to it, but do you reckon that it, too, is a useful notion?

C.C.: This is quite important, and the entire question is to know what limits there are to "authorizing oneself." Up till what point does one authorize oneself? That's the whole problem.

J.A.: The problem of the relation between law and transgression.

C.C.: Exactly. Once again, autonomy, just like democracy, signifies *self-limitation*, and not limitation imposed by someone else.

R.B.: Perhaps it would be of interest to pass now to the third point, in order to see how you understand this term *multireferentiality*.

C.C.: I'd like you first to explain what you mean by that.

J.A.: We could start, perhaps, by contrasting it with a term that has become very commonplace today, *multidimensionality*, which Georges Gurvitch had employed for sociology. Multireferentiality would be characterized, for me, not only by plurality but also by heterogeneity. In your language, it would involve almost the same distinction as the one between the *different* and the *other*. By multireferentiality, I intend therefore systems of reading, of representation, but also of languages that are accepted as plural. For example, I cannot reduce the language of a psychological approach to that of a sociological approach. These frames of reference, which are necessarily different from one another, involve one mourning and getting over the loss of unity and will serve as a way of accounting for the complexity of a phenomenon, of disentangling it a bit. For me, there is thus already a certain multireferentiality in the leaning of one imaginary on another and in their articulation.

C.C.: The question is extremely vast. It brings almost everything into play. I'll simply say a few words. I am in complete agreement about the principle, and I believe that this may be seen in my work. Take, for example, the psychical and the social; I have written on several occasions that the psyche is irreducible to society, just as society is irreducible to the psyche. It's a psychoanalyst's error to want to deduce society from the operation of the psyche, and the symmetrical error of the sociologist is to see in the psyche only the product of society and of the socialization process. There are indissociability and irreducibility. Another indissociability and irreducibility, much vaster since they embrace all that is, are that of the imaginary in the strict sense—of the poietic—and of the ensemblistic-identitarian—of the ensidic, for short. The huge ensidic—logicomathematical, in the most vast sense—domain is everywhere dense in being, dense in

the mathematical—or more precisely, topological—sense: as close as you'd like to any "point" of what is, you'll find ensidic elements. In the craziest delusions, there are ensidic elements, without which there would be no delusion, not even noise. And likewise in the most sublime poem. Music is not mathematics, but everywhere it contains mathematics. To compose a fugue is also to calculate all the time; the theme has to be transposed to the fifth, you have to introduce a countertheme in such and such a relation, and so on. But it would be silly to say that music can be reduced to *that*. Conversely, in mathematics, all the things that are not mere calculation, but also the bases of calculation, pertain to the imaginary, to the poetical. These two dimensions are indissociable, and mutually irreducible, and everything that exists, under one form or another, deploys itself in both of them. But when one speaks of multireferentiality, one must also try to specify its limits. For, in terms of the factors we were speaking about a moment ago, today some fantastic confusions arise that result from a raging eclecticism. Wittgenstein and "language games" are invoked, and one indulges in them to one's heart's content: page 14, I'm in the Freudian language game; page 15, in Dumézil's language game; page 16, it's the Palo Alto language game, and so on. And here, that won't do any longer.

J.A.: It's the collector.

C.C.: The collector, the eclectic. We cannot shirk an exigency for coherence. Of course, the world is not "coherent"; it's fragmented. We have to recognize this splitting up, this fragmentation of being, of which we are ourselves a manifestation, since we are neither galaxies nor neutron stars but something else entirely. And we cannot grasp ourselves with the same categories, the same concepts, as these other classes of being. Within a domain, however, we

have to try to be as coherent as possible, and we cannot articulate together the different domains just any which way—inasmuch as they do allow themselves to be articulated. For example, in psychoanalysis, you cannot be at once Freudian and Jungian, even if some of Jung's ideas offer some interest. Likewise, you cannot purely and simply combine psychoanalysis with social and historical thought.

J.A.: The question you are posing is: Can there be a multireferentiality that isn't New Age?

C.C.: That's it, exactly. One must say "No" to the "spirit of Cordova" and all that. There you are. I don't know if René Barbier will be angry....

R.B.: But I'm never angry.... (*Laughter.*)

C.C.: Yes, that's your Krishnamurti side. There undoubtedly are some admirable things in Oriental thought, in Buddhism, and so on. But the idea that quantum physics would have anything to do with that is mere confusion. Perhaps, Buddhism is more worthwhile and better than quantum physics, but that's another thing. So, there you are. I'm happy we're in agreement.

R.B.: Which doesn't mean that there wouldn't be parallels to be noted.

C.C.: I don't think so, but we'd need to have a detailed discussion.

J.A.: We're not going to go on and on much longer. But I would say that multireferentiality, which doesn't turn into confusion, indeed, or syncretism, is a provisional tool of analysis for complex phenomena. I define the latter, moreover, not ontologically, as a property of the object, but as an invention (it, too, is the fruit of the imaginary) in the subject's relationship to the object. That is to say that there is a first moment that consists in postulating the complexity of the object. This is my representation of the object, which will

allow me then to apply an appropriate alternative set of tools. The good side remains in fact our mourning and getting over the loss of that imaginary unity that has come from our monadic state. In order to get to know a certain number of phenomena in the present state of our plural forms of knowledge, we perhaps cannot do otherwise than combine several discourses.

C.C.: What is called complexity is, in my view, one of the manifestations of what I call the magmatic nature of being, namely, the fact that being is not a set, nor is it a well-ordered hierarchy of sets, but a magma. One can extract sets therefrom; one can construct sets therein. But these extractions and constructions will never either exhaust it or cover it. The very relationships among the various aspects we succeed in thinking as ensidic are themselves not ensidic. So, what seems to surprise the theorists of complexity so much surprises me much less so. For example, tangled hierarchies: for, nontangled hierarchies are precisely the province of ensidic logic. There are the elements of a set, its parts, the set itself, unions of sets, and so on. And in the extreme cases, these hierarchies can be complicated, and can be different according to the point of view one adopts, but they are never entangled. If, however, we exit from these ensidic hierarchies, there is no guarantee that there will be nice and beautiful hierarchies. Therefore, renunciation of unification or of ultimate simplification is neither provisional nor a rule of good conduct. One has to get over this once and for all, while never giving up [*renonçant*] trying to elucidate and to render coherent what we can elucidate and render coherent.... And that's what distinguishes us from Orientals, at least from the Orientals formerly in question. To put it bluntly, these Orientals decided once and for all that, behind appearances, there is Nothing. First of all, I don't think that's true. More

exactly, I think that this statement has no meaning (or it has only an anthropocentric meaning: behind appearances, there is not what we would like there to be). But above all, behind appearances there are, and there always will be, other appearances, and we cannot give up putting a certain order into each of these strata of appearances, and in their mutual relationships, knowing all the while that this order is not an ensemblistic-identitary order and perhaps—certainly, even—is not an order at all. We don't jump to a final conclusion in order to withdraw into silence—and that is deeply connected with our Greco-Western project.

Psychoanalysis: Situation and Limits*

The papers by Lawrence Jacobson and Philip Cushman raise a host of important and complex questions. I therefore feel it necessary to formulate my views relative to the assumptions underlying today's discussion, touching as I go, explicitly or implicitly, some of the points made by Jacobson and Cushman.

1. The Status of Psychoanalytic Theory

1.1 Epistemology

One of the reasons discussions around psychoanalysis give an impression of confusion probably without precedent in the modern world is the cloud surrounding its status both as a theory and as a practice.

As a theory, psychoanalysis is most often assessed

*French Editors: Written in English by Castoriadis himself for "Building Bridges: A Conference on Psychoanalysis and Culture" organized by the William Alanson White Institute of New York, this previously unpublished paper was read at that conference by Joel Whitebook in November 1997. The text broaches, directly or indirectly, a few questions raised by the contributions of two other conference participants, Lawrence Jacobson and Philip Cushman. "La psychanalyse: situation et limites," translated by Myrto Gondicas with a title supplied by the French Editors, first appeared [T/E: without the initial paragraph], in *FP*, 221-37 (269-88 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: A copy of the original English-language typescript, which had the provocative title "On Psychoanalysis, Talmudism, and Anything-Goism," was given to me by the author in September 1997, soon before Castoriadis was to enter the hospital to undergo the operation that would precede his death in December 1997. As he had done in the past with other papers that were to be delivered in English, Castoriadis asked me to edit this English-language text in preparation for the scheduled White Institute talk. This edited version was first published in [FTP.K.](#)]

according to whether it is a “successful” or “unsuccessful” science (or even, recently, whether it is a hoax or not). Behind this stands the dominant scientific, positivistic, and technocratic ideology. Psychoanalysis would stand or fall according to whether or not it conforms to the criteria and standards of established science, by which is meant “exact,” i.e., essentially mathematical/physical, science. In substance, these criteria boil down to cumulativeness, universal controllability (entailing some variety of verificationism or falsificationism), and predictive capacity. The last two are easily seen as more or less equivalent. To this corresponds the implicit requirement that psychoanalytic practice proceed along the lines of modern technology. Theory should lead to unambiguous practical prescriptions, the success (or failure) of which would serve as a check on its theoretical claims to validity.

This comparison and the resulting evaluations do not hold water. First, without for a moment disputing the tremendous successes of modern science (and of the corresponding technology), we cannot forget its huge theoretical limitations. Contrary to the prevailing vulgate, contemporary science is ridden with aporias and riddles, the solution of which is by no means at hand. Let us mention only the most important one. Mathematics, the backbone and the most secure part of modern science, is beset by the well-known results regarding undecidability (Gödel, Turing, Church). For seventy years now, physics has been incapable of reconciling its two parts—general relativity and quantum theory—which are theoretically incompatible but at the same time “confirmed” experimentally, and each of which presents its own riddles. Biology, hailed as offering a universal explanation of evolution, does not in fact “explain” anything of the sort. Evolution is a massive and indisputable fact, but

the neo-Darwinian conception (the “modern synthesis”) has only a tautology to offer: the capacity for survival and the elimination of the “unfit” are a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for the emergence of new species. These new species are certainly due (or correspond) to mutations of the genes, but such mutations are essentially random, and nothing in the theory explains why there are several millions of different species on Earth instead of millions of varieties of bacteria or why there is clearly a dominant trend toward the complexification of life.

Cumulativeness refers to results, not to the basic theories. The history of science moves forward by leaps and bounds, a fact that the late Thomas Kuhn was the first to describe and emphasize.

There is a metaphysics underlying the contemporary scientific/positivistic/technocratic view. Being on the whole would be a wholly “rational” system, a rigorous structure obeying thoroughly ensemblistic-identitary relationships and laws. This metaphysics is the necessary complement to the assumption underlying the capitalistic imaginary, that is, domination by the social imaginary signification of an unlimited expansion of “rational” mastery. There is indeed an ensemblistic-identitary (“logicomathematical”) dimension everywhere dense in whatever there is. This fact helps to elucidate the effectiveness and efficiency of the modern scientific outlook and the concomitant technical grasp of many aspects of the world.¹

¹Heidegger’s jeremiads about Western logocracy, the “forgetting of Being,” and the technicization of the world are unable to provide any account as to why this expansion and dominance “succeeds” to such an extent, i.e., how they would be possible if there were not “something” in Being itself that they encounter. Then the only way of elucidating the matter within the Heideggerian perspective is to say that *Dasein* succeeds

Briefly speaking, being is creation/destruction. And creation essentially means discontinuity, emergence of the radically new, and a stratification of what there is (such stratification corresponds to the big shifts that take place in the scientific imaginary as scientific explanation moves from one layer of being to another). The human world—both psychical and social-historical—corresponds, as a matter of fact, to one such stratum in the overall layout of being and to a rupture in its history. The order of existence, the type of being brought about by the emergence of the human world, is first and foremost that of *meaning*—which is why the claim that psychoanalysis should offer “explanations,” and that it does not, is strictly meaningless. Explanations have their place only in relation to the ensemblistic-identitary dimension of being. And it is only because physical being, for all that we know, is in large part reducible to ensemblistic-identitary relationships that it is amenable to explanation.

1.2 Understanding and Interpretation

One of the main businesses of psychoanalysis is to work with meaning—what is called understanding (*Verstehen*) and interpretation.

in “imposing” *logos* on whatever there is—that is, on something that bears no relation to it whatsoever, thus finally “violating” what there is. Then, however, and despite all his rhetoric, Heidegger appears unconsciously committed to the credo of human “omnipotence.” The same is of course true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Postmodernism and deconstructionist relativism, even in its simplest, “pragmatist” forms, as in Richard Rorty. But deconstructionism is so steeped in incoherence—the “anything goes” mentality, which is particularly flagrant when one looks at the practical/political level—that any discussion with deconstructionism would in fact be impossible, were it even worthwhile.

Despite an essential antinomy or, rather, split (*Spaltung*) in his mind, Freud knew this very well. After all, he called his first major work “The Interpretation...” and not “The Explanation of Dreams”—*Traumdeutung* and not *Traumerklärung*. He knew that he was dealing with *two layers of meaning*—the manifest one (even if it appeared to be illogical, but not meaningless: *sinnwidrig*, but not *sinnlos*) and the latent one—that the interpretation supplies. For this he had no need of Heidegger or Gadamer. He was a contemporary of Max Weber, the founder of “understanding sociology” (*verstehende Soziologie*), behind whom stand Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and, even further back, Johann Gottfried Herder and Hegel. All these people knew that the human world is, as Rickert put it, “the intermediate realm of immanent sense” (*die Zwischenwelt des immanenten Sinnes*). But Freud’s tremendous innovation was to see that manifest meaning and latent meaning were two different things and to make the fundamental theoretical decision that slips make sense, dreams make sense, delirium, delusions, and hallucinations make sense. This is what today’s vulgar critics of psychoanalysis are unable to see. The truth of this decision is independent of the nature of the meaning he thought he found and of the value of the paths along which he worked in order to establish it. It is also independent of the fact that it was not Freud who *named* the “hermeneutic circle”—which isn’t a discovery of Gadamer *et alii* either, but is implicit in Nietzsche, Marx, and a number of classical German idealists, not to mention Protagoras. This is what countertransference is about, and this is why he insisted on the need for a “purification” of the analyst by means of a didactic analysis, perfectly aware as he was of the decisive role the interpreter and the interpreter’s preconceptions play in the interpretive

process.² Of course, this does not deal with *all* the parameters conditioning the standpoint of the interpreter—his position in social-historical space-time, his belonging to a specific gender or to a given social stratum. The “discoveries” here belong to Nietzsche, Marx, and Hegel. We have to take them into account—and if Freud’s “pansexualism” seems to stand in the way of this, this has to be discussed on grounds of content, not of principle.

1.3 Metapsychology and the Question of Elucidation

Understanding—or interpreting concrete psychical material—does not exhaust the theoretical tasks of psychoanalysis. An account must also be given of *that which* manifests itself as conscious and unconscious meaning and of the grounds for this split. This is metapsychology, the inquiry into the structure and functioning of what Freud called the psychical apparatus. Here again, we have to make distinctions. There is the *theoretical decision* in itself: the psychical world is not just meaning but the emergence—or, as I would say, the *creation*—of meaning, along with a certain *organization*, i.e., constant or permanent or durable traits of structure and functioning, certain *determinations* and *laws*. And there are the particular findings of Freud as to what exactly this organization, this functioning, and this durable structure consist of, what the psychical apparatus is and how it works.

²T/E: “It may be insisted...that [the doctor] should have undergone a psycho-analytic purification and have become aware of those complexes of his own which would be apt to interfere with his grasp of what the patient tells him” (“Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis” [1912], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [hereafter: SE]), 12: 116.

But here again there is a specificity to be considered. Just as, when we decide that the psychical and, more generally, the human world is a world of meaning, we exclude *ipso facto* the possibility that it could be a world of quarks and gluons or of cells, so, when we decide that there are an organization, a structure, and a mode of functioning of the psyche, we rule out *ipso facto* the idea that this organization could be a physicochemical or biological one. This does not of itself “solve” the mind-brain, or psyche-soma, question, but it certainly rules out the idea that psychical meaning and its embeddedness in durable structures could be *determined* by physics or biology.

1.4 The Role of the Ensemblistic-Identitarian (the “Logical”) in the Psychical World

As was already stated, the narrowly “logical”—ensemblistic-identitary—dimension is everywhere present in whatever there is; it is, to use a topological metaphor, everywhere *dense*. But this does not mean that the former exhausts the latter. In the same way, the “logical” dimension is everywhere present in the psychical world—though it far from exhausts it. Indeed, for all that we know, the “residual” is more important here than anywhere else. This is related, in my view, to the much stronger *poietic* element present in humans. But in a sense that is but another way of phrasing the same thing.

Let us take just two examples. First, from the field of *content*. When interpreting dreams, we are struck by the fantastic amount of sheer logical work the interpretation deploys. Even more striking, however, are the incredible quantity and quality of logic that has been mobilized during the construction and the presentation of the latent meaning—

the *dream-work*, in Freud's words. This is parallel with the tremendous poetic creation that occurs in all but the most trivial dreams.

In the field of metapsychology, by necessity we have to use notions such as *force* and *intensity*, *economy*, *locus*, and *permanent trends* (e.g., the pleasure principle). These notions have met with some discredit among contemporary psychoanalysts, especially in France, or have been treated with condescension as "metaphors," and so on. But, granted that these terms cannot be taken in the same sense they are in other fields—thermodynamics, say (despite some dangerous formulations by Freud)³—they cannot be viewed as mere images, either. For instance, Freud's topographical divisions and expressions may be correct or incorrect. But we cannot eliminate the question of the ordered, simultaneous coexistence of different entities, and this is exactly what space (*topos*) means. Again, the enigmatic character of his "economic" formulations does not obliterate the obvious fact of very different intensities among psychical cathexes.

The theoretical work of psychoanalysis—whether "concrete," i.e., psychological, or "abstract," i.e., metapsychological—contains an inescapable logical dimension. And this is so not just because we cannot help but try to think logically but also because logic is immanent in the organization of the psyche. This, indeed, is what its very organization indicates—without, once again, being capable of exhausting it—as is shown, e.g., by the very fact that "The Unconscious knows nothing of time and contradiction."⁴

³Topography, principle of constancy, and so on.

⁴T/E: "There are...no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty [in the Unconscious]." "Reference to time is bound up...with the work of the

2. The Status of Psychoanalytic Activity

2.1 “Therapy” and the Aims of Analysis

Psychoanalytic activity began, historically speaking, as a sort of medical practice. It took a quarter of a century for Freud to decide (in *The Question of Lay Analysis*) that medical studies were less important for psychoanalytical practice than knowledge of literature, ethnology, history, and so on (and, I would add, philosophy and political thinking). I don’t know how much longer it took for the American Psychoanalytical Association to accept that having an M.D. was not a necessary condition for the practice of analysis.⁵

Today we have reached the other end of the spectrum. Anything goes, and there is an almost unbroken continuity from analysis to cartomancy and astrology, passing by way of psychoanalytical counseling, transactional analysis, sexology, behavioral training, primal scream—you name it.

The constant, from the most rigid psychoanalytical treatment to the most degenerate and fanciful varieties of today, is the idea of *therapy*. Now, the meaning of therapy is either of the following: somebody is deviating from some kind of norm and has to be “rectified” or somebody is suffering and asks insistently for relief. Both ideas give rise to almost intractable questions. It is immediately evident that they are strongly connected to the abyssal interrogations about the end and ends of analysis.

system Cs” (*Gesammelte Werke* [hereafter: *GW*], 10: 286; in English, *The Unconscious*, in *SE* 14: 186, 187).

⁵T/E: The exclusion of nonphysicians was dropped following a successful lawsuit in 1988 against the APA.

To speak about a deviation from a norm implies that we know what the norm is and *ought* to be and are ready to defend it. Now, leaving aside Kant—whose norm is at any rate unattainable—a norm can be either a biological norm or a social norm. In our field, despite strenuous efforts to define a “normal” development or a “healthy” sexuality, a biological norm does not make sense. We do not have, and could not have, a canonical model of what a “normal” psyche would be. Suffice it to recall that in one of his last writings—“Analysis Terminable and Interminable”—Freud stops to ask himself and the reader why a bisexual life should be considered abnormal, and he states bluntly that he sees no reason why. But neither could we accept uncritically and without further ado the validity of existing social norms. A social norm is socially instituted, and it is hardly necessary to argue about the spatial and temporal relativity inherent in this status. The criminalization of homosexuality in many places up to thirty years ago is well known, as are the cruel punishments inflicted upon Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing (who was driven to suicide after coming out of prison). Still today, in the State of Georgia (and probably a number of other ones), sodomy and oral sex are punished with years of imprisonment.⁶ More generally, and irrespective of any deeper critique, in view of our ethnological and historical knowledge psychoanalysis cannot uphold the validity of social norms in the sexual field—and if it does, as it did for many long decades, it calls down upon itself the fully justified accusation of adaptationism, on

⁶T/E: Castoriadis was writing in 1997. The Georgia Supreme Court struck down its antisodomy law the next year. The United States Supreme Court followed suit in 2003, reversing its 1986 ruling in a Georgian case. Castoriadis had already alluded to the earlier ruling in “Done and To Be Done” (1989), now in [CL5](#).

which more later. Here we find a necessary bridge between psychoanalytical questions and political ones. I intend *political* here in the most radical sense of the word, that is: pertaining to the institution of society and its contents.

But we do not find ourselves in any easier position when we evoke the idea of psychical suffering, however great the feelings of sympathy it may arouse in us. Human life necessarily includes suffering. Who is to draw the line between “normal” and “abnormal” suffering, unless he is willing to champion a model of psychical “health”? Should we accept the demands for therapy of those who suffer because they have been abandoned by their boy- or girlfriend? Or condone the attitude of contemporary humans, rushing to Valium, Temesta, or whatever else whenever a difficult situation confronts them? And in this case, why not abandon the whole field to neuropharmacologists?

Freud once defined, in an apparently irreproachable way, the end and ends of analysis as follows: “To restore the capacity to love and to work.”⁷ But to love *what*—and, much more problematical, to work *for what*? Are we keen to restore the capacity to work in a Taylor-Ford type of factory? Would the slavish submission to circumstances be a valid index of psychical health? Work is valuable to the extent that its own ends are valuable—and this is indisputably a social, an instituted evaluation. Love raises other questions, especially the vagueness of its content, the indefinable character of its

⁷T/E: This quotation, perhaps apocryphal, comes from Erik Erikson’s *Childhood and Society* (1950), 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 264-65: it “has come to me as Freud’s shortest saying.” See Alan C. Elms, “Apocryphal Freud: Sigmund Freud’s Most Famous ‘Quotations’ and Their Actual Sources,” *Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 29 [2001]: 83-104. Nevertheless, “the general idea is there,” Elms acknowledges, within Freud’s work.

object, its enigmatic relation to time.

But Freud spoke also in a humbler fashion about analysis as aiming to lead one from neurotic suffering to banal human unhappiness.⁸ The distinction is, I think, unmistakable for anybody who is in the least familiar with psychical life. But here again it would be fruitless to wait for a rigorous demarcation between the two. Lawrence Jacobson, in his beautiful and courageous paper, indicates what the trouble is with his two patients: their inauthentic attitude toward their own lives. I have a deep sympathy for this idea. And, personally, I could never become friends with somebody who I feel is inauthentic. But the trouble is precisely with this word: “feel.” I am perfectly sure as to what it intends and as to my capacity to tell who is and who is not authentic. But I am absolutely incapable of enclosing it in abstract words. For me, it is of the same nature as the difference between Beethoven and, say, Saint-Saëns. The hollow men, the stuffed men of T. S. Eliot⁹ are a perfectly legitimate object of study for literature—and even there, who would assert with certainty that Madame Bovary was authentic or inauthentic? Perhaps the only authentic moment in her life was when she killed herself—but by then it would be of no use to know it.

⁸T/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).

⁹T/E: The first two lines of “The Hollow Men” (1925) are: “We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men.”

2.2 *The Political Dimension of Psychoanalysis*

Psychoanalysis contains an ineliminable *political* dimension. “Political,” of course, does not mean the professions of MM. Clinton and Gingrich but, rather, the questions and activities pertaining to the institution of society. It thereby also becomes inevitably entangled with the controversies surrounding political ideas and activities. To this extent, psychoanalysis is a *practical* activity; it belongs to the domain of *doxa* [T/E: opinion], not of *epistēmē* [T/E: scientific knowledge].

This becomes apparent whenever we consider the aims of analysis, since of necessity they have to do with a *social* individual, her relation with herself but just as much with the other and, beyond any particular other, with conditions determined by the social setup. (This is clearly the case with Lawrence Jacobson’s two patients.) It is, by the way, totally inadequate to talk about the need for a “relational turn” in psychoanalysis. On the one hand, the patient’s relations with his environment have always been taken into consideration. Freud never stopped talking about the relations of his patients with the people surrounding them. But the problem with him was exactly the same as that with today’s “relational” analysis: the failure to realize properly that, beyond any concrete other, psychoanalysis involves, both theoretically and practically, the whole network of impersonal, anonymous, social institutions and significations. And, if we speak about “moral” or “ethical” parameters in analysis, we have to realize that (contrary to the whole Christian, and a great part of the philosophical, tradition) morals or ethics are but a dimension of politics and are at any rate inseparable from the latter.

On this subject I can only, of course, present my own

opinions dogmatically. I beg you to bear in mind, however, that in this field there can never be an *a priori* “foundation” but only a reasonable justification, downstream, of one’s positions. The object of psychoanalysis is essentially the same as that of politics—the autonomy of human beings. If we recognize the fundamentally social character of human beings, this autonomy, this freedom, has to be both individual and collective. I cannot live—I would never have become a human being in the first place—alone, nor can I eliminate the others. The question therefore is: How can I be free if I must live in a society where the law is determined by somebody else? The only conceivable answer—short of delirium *à la* Stirner—is: if I have the effective possibility to participate equally with anybody else in the formation and implementation of the law. And this is the true meaning of democracy. But the question also is: How can I be free if I am under the sway of my Unconscious? Since I can neither eliminate it nor isolate it, the only answer is: I can be free if I establish another type of relation with my Unconscious, a relation in which I know, as far as possible, what goes on in it and in which I am able, as far as possible, to filter whatever of it passes into my outward, diurnal activity. This is what I call establishing a reflective and deliberative subjectivity. And I think it can easily be shown that an autonomous society is possible only if it is formed by autonomous individuals. And autonomous individuals can exist only in and through an autonomous society. This is so because only the effective exercise of autonomy develops autonomy, and an education geared toward the autonomy of individuals can exist only in such a society.

2.3 Implications for Psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis as a Practico-Poietic Activity.

It is clear that autonomy cannot be imposed. Neither can it be “taught.” The analysand can only be helped in his way toward autonomy—and this entails both a knowledge and an activity. The sharing of knowledge is the aim of interpretation, which can give insight into one’s hidden and repressed motives and drives. But the analysand should be geared toward this interpretation in such a way that he gradually becomes capable of providing it himself. Psychoanalysis is a self-activity, reflection of oneself upon oneself; it is accession to autonomy through the effective exercise of autonomy, assisted by another person. The activity of this person—the limits of which can be traced only by considering the requirements for the development of the patient’s self-activity—is not an application of a technique, but a *praxis*, i.e., the action of one person whose aim is to assist another person to accede to her potentialities for autonomy. And inasmuch as the concrete content of this aim is not and cannot be determined in advance, since it also entails the freeing of the creative capacities of the radical imagination of the analysand, it is creation—that is, *poiēsis*.

Thus, I define psychoanalysis as a practico-poietic activity. This is also the defining characteristic of Freud’s two other “impossible professions.” Psychoanalysis, like pedagogy and like politics, is the activity of one autonomy upon another, virtual autonomy. And their aim is the creation of these new forms: autonomous persons and an autonomous society.

3. The Social-Historical Situation of Psychoanalysis

3.1 The Conditions Within Which Freud Worked

There is no need to recall the limitations and presuppositions imposed upon Freud's work by his time, his cultural sphere, the then-dominant ideology. Freud started out as a scientific positivist, an ideology dominant then as now, and he never stopped being one. But he was also (and perhaps gradually became more and more) ambiguous about this; he never forgot that the business of psychoanalysis was meaning, not molecules or chemical potentials. He was deeply steeped in the patriarchal culture of his milieu and his period (in fact, some thousands of years of human history), and the scars this left on his work are numerous and well known. He never dared to uncover, or rather to name, the fundamental role of radical imagination in psychical life. One of the most pathetic tragicomedies of intellectual history—where there is no dearth of such—is his initial belief in the “reality” of the traumatic event, his gradual and reluctant admission that this “event” was a phantasmatic—that is, an imaginary—one, the accusations leveled against him eighty years later that he had consciously covered up his initial discovery of the seduction of infants by adults, and the recent reverse ones that he is supplying the American psychotherapeutic and legal industries with scientific respectability for made-up seduction stories. But to my mind the social-historical setting's most damaging effect on psychoanalytical theory has been the total neglect of the fundamental role society, institutions, and social imaginary significations play in the formation of the individual. That neglect is accompanied by the hopeless effort to “deduce” society from psyche and by the crucial limitations

this effort has imposed upon theory and practice. Society came to be seen as “reality” in the sense gravity is “reality”—instead of seeing that the relevant reality here is society (this, despite a pregnant phrase in *Totem and Taboo*, happily ignored by successive generations of psychoanalysts).¹⁰ This is also why his indisputable political radicalism became, with the passing years, practically irrelevant and why he ended up with the ambiguous, even contradictory, stance of *Civilization and its Discontents* and *The Future of an Illusion*.

All of this in no way nullifies or diminishes his importance and the truth of what I would call the hard core of psychoanalytical theory, on which I will speak presently. To limit oneself to these or other, less important, points of criticism while forgetting or covering up the pathbreaking discoveries and insights of Freud is to behave like an inverted Talmudist or, more to the point, Stalinist or Zhdanovist. For, this attitude implies that Freud’s text has to be treated like the Torah or *Das Kapital*: not a word of it could ever be wrong, and if one finds points that have to be superseded the whole should be thrown into the dustbin of history or carried to the cemetery of dead white males, in the infamous company of Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, and so on.

¹⁰T/E: In “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968, in [CLL](#)), Castoriadis provides the reference for this affirmation, “The real world...is under the sway of human society and of the institutions collectively created by it,” as *Totem and Taboo* (SE 13:74).

3.2 After Freud

As was already well known by the time of Freud, and much more so after him, the mainstream of psychoanalytical theory and practice, both in America and in Europe, has taken on a definite adaptationist orientation, and this despite some well-meaning but unfortunate attempts (e.g., those of Wilhelm Reich) to combine psychoanalysis and social critique. This has been one of the main conditions for the present “crisis”—sociologically speaking, a true crisis—which is manifest in a host of ways:

- first and foremost, in the almost undisputed domination of reductionism, either on traditional biological lines or through the attempts to reduce the psyche to a more or less sophisticated version of a supercomputer;
- in the proliferation of all sorts of parapsychanalytical varieties, as mentioned above;
- in the uncritical wholesale rejection of psychoanalysis by various brands of feminists, “anti-Westernizers,” etc. and, clearly connected to this, in the incredible vulnerability of the present epoch to all possible cultural fads: hermeneutics, constructivism, postmodernism, deconstructionism, and so forth.

For the most part, these phenomena express the huge ideological regression of the present epoch, which is manifest in almost all the domains of the human disciplines (economics, political theory, sociology, and so on). But a nonnegligible contribution is made by the theoretical necrosis—or parrotism—of mainstream psychoanalysis, with its inability to stand up to the problems of the time.

3.3 The Hard Core

Before I finish I must state briefly the ideas that, to my mind, constitute the hard core of psychoanalytical theory and practice:

- the psychological domain is the domain of meaning, which has to be considered as such;
- the human psyche is by necessity structurally divided, at least between a conscious and an unconscious level;
- on the unconscious level, the “omnipotence of thought” reigns supreme;
- the pleasure principle plays an essential role in both conscious and unconscious psychological life;
- human sexuality is decisively dominated by imagination, and infantile sexuality is a central factor in psychological development;
- projection and introjection are the channels through which the singular psyche relates itself to the “outside world”;
- what we call the human individual is for the most part a product of society.

This is not a credo, and it is certainly not sufficient to build a psychoanalytical theory. In particular, the functioning of human imagination and the process of socialization require lengthy elaboration. But those who attack psychoanalysis should be asked if they dispute these premises. Because if they do, it is to be feared that the discussion with them would not be of great use.

4. The Nature of the Human Psyche and the Limits of Psychoanalysis

4.1 Theoretical and Practical Limits

Human existence is indissociably psychical and social. A nonsocialized human being does not and cannot exist. This is not an “external,” but an essential, condition: it impinges decisively on the organization and the content of psychical life. It is not enough to acknowledge this fact; one must recognize the limits it sets for both the practice and the theory of psychoanalysis.

From the practical point of view, we can help people work toward their autonomy. But we cannot, *qua* psychoanalysts, abolish or modify the social-historical factors, institutions, and significations that hinder and frustrate, often decisively, this work.

Practically and theoretically, we have to admit that phenomena such as psychosis present us with quite intractable problems. Interpretation—that is, understanding—encounters the walls of the full closure of the psychotic’s world. Its possible effects are limited by the specific nature of the psychotic’s transference, if and when this is established.

Theoretically, and in a general way, the work of elucidating the psychical world encounters a series of aporias. For example: What are psychical forces that are not *measurable*? And we cannot for a moment forget the abyss of the body/soul (or mind/brain) problem, with which we are almost daily confronted *also* in our practice: psychosomatic diseases, the effects the interpretation has on the physical state of the analysand, and so on.

4.2 *The Ultimate Limit*

The psyche is not a well-oiled, rational mechanism. The psyche is essentially radical imagination, a perpetually surging flux of representations, desires, and affects. As such, it is creative—which means also that this flow and its products are, as often as not, undetermined. This is already glaringly obvious—though not thematized—in the writings of Freud himself. *The Interpretation of Dreams* states clearly that not all dreams are interpretable, and no dream at all is fully interpretable. Freud does not say why this should be so, but his text in part gives the answer: the representations in a dream are *overdetermined*. They are, also, obviously, *underdetermined*. There is therefore no one-to-one correspondence between the images of the “dream content” and the various dream-thoughts. And of these dream-thoughts, Freud says that they branch out—or in—to the unknown. In a more radical and general way, the very idea of overdetermination reveals its inadequacy in the “Drives” text of 1915.¹¹ There, Freud speaks about the presentation of a drive by means of a representation (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*). Now, clearly, in humans there is no canonical, “normal” representation for a drive. This role can be played as well by a bosom as by a stiletto-heeled shoe.

This creativity of the human imagination is at the root of the gravest psychical and political problems. Humans create their own or proper world, different from that of other mammals. But each singular human being, too, creates, within this generic framework, a proper, an own world. This, however, is tantamount to saying that that world is

¹¹T/E: Castoriadis is referring to “The Instincts [*sic*] and their Vicissitudes,” with its questionably translated title.

“solipsistic”; it is egocentric, self-centered, not just “morally” but ontologically and epistemologically. The human psyche in its deep layers, in the Unconscious, is a-moral but also a-social and a-cosmic. That also means that, as such, in itself, it is radically unfit for life. It succeeds in living only because it is forcibly dragged out of its own world by society and its institutions, a process that carries, however, a very heavy price. The psyche has to abandon—or, better, bury—that which is, for itself, meaning, in exchange for the possibility, the near-necessity, of internalizing and cathecting that which society offers to it as meaning: social imaginary significations. But this also means that an ineradicable *negativity* henceforth inhabits the psyche, setting it against society, against the others, against reality, against the very social mask it has been forced to wear—that is, against itself as a social person. Hence the ineradicability, so far as the psychical core is concerned, of *hate*, of aggressive and destructive tendencies and/or a fundamental masochism. Social institutions have, up to now, dealt with this situation by creating intra- or extrasocial paths of diversion: e.g., competition and war.¹² Other, more humane ways can and should be found to accomplish this function. Yet we should never think in terms of a “naturally good” human being, corrupted only by the pernicious influences of society. This is a catastrophic illusion shared by anarchists, feminists, many of today’s radicals, and some psychotherapists. We ought to struggle for a change of society, for truly democratic institutions, for the expulsion of production and economy

¹²T/E: The English-language original had “ways of derivation,” but in French, *dérivation* can mean both “derivation” and “diversion.” The French translator opted for *dérivatifs* (derivatives), ignoring the phrase “ways of” that preceded “derivation.”

from the central and dominant place they have come to occupy in today's world, for an education geared toward autonomy and not just toward professional skills. But we have to face reality—and this is, essentially, psychical reality. A much more humane society is possible and desirable. But an angelic human being is neither.

July-September 1997

Psyche and Society Revisited*

Psyche and the Radical Imagination

Fernando Urribarri: I would like to ask you first of all to define a central notion of your theory of the psyche: the radical imagination.

Cornelius Castoriadis: I think that the radical imagination is what distinguishes the human psychism from the animal psychism. What makes the psyche capable of producing representations, these phantasms that don't result from perceptions? It's the radical imagination. That would be a first way of approaching the question. The human psyche is characterized by the autonomy of the imagination, by a radical imagination: it's not just a matter of seeing—or of seeing oneself—in a mirror, but also of the capacity to formulate what is not there, to see in anything what isn't there. For the human psychism, there exists a flux, a representational spontaneity that isn't submissive to a predetermined end.

Of course, if we take the work of Freud, we again come across the problem of phantasms, of *Urphantasien* or primal phantasies. Whether these phantasms might be handed down genetically or produced by each subject in her psychical life is no longer a problem that really matters to us; the sole thing at issue is that they have no relation to reality. These are neither images nor photographs of reality; they're creations of

*“À nouveau sur la psyché et la société” is the title chosen by the French Editors for Fernando Urribarri's interview, originally published as “Psique, imaginación, sujeto y autonomía” in the Buenos Aires psychoanalytical review *Zona Erogena: Revista abierta de psicoanálisis y pensamiento contemporáneo*, 28 (May 1996): 4-6 and 48-50, [T/E: and reprinted in *Ensayo y Error*, 1 (1996)]. The French transcription was posthumously printed in *FP*, 239-57 (289-309 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: The present translation was first published in [FTPK](#).]

the psyche. And these are the creations we also constantly come across in the clinical setting when we analyze dreams and when we listen to a patient who has an image of the world that is his own, quite different from that of the others.

One of the basic problems is the relationship these representations have with the drive [*pulsion*]. Many people think that the drives impose upon the psyche a certain number of representations or phantasms that correspond to these drives. This is true only for the animal psychism, where we find canonical representations of the instincts [*instincts*], for example the animal of the other sex, if it's a matter of sexuality. In human beings, there is what Freud calls, in the 1915 text on "The Instincts [*pulsions*] and their Vicissitudes," the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*, that is to say, the representation by delegation of the drive in the psyche. The process can be described in the following way: The drive, according to Freud, originates in the somatic, but, in order to be able to act upon the psyche, it must "speak the tongue" of the psyche; it must find a translation on the psychical plane, and this translation is the *Repräsentanz* by means of a *Vorstellung*, a representation. It's like an embassy, a delegation, that takes the form of a representation. And here must be seen a manifestation of the radical imagination in the human being: there is no predetermined link or obligatory relationship between the drive and its psychical representative. This may be seen with absolute clarity in the case of sexuality.

F.U.: That is to say that the drive can find a psychical expression, a representative that is representative, a representation, because the psyche is radical imagination, or the psyche's capacity to create representations...

C.C.: It's that. And there's something more...

F.U.: ...It's that the particular representations that are

created are not “canonical,” universal for the species, predetermined.

C.C.: Exactly. In the animal psychism, one can think that the representation is defined in a fixed manner by the instinct. And it’s functional. For an animal, sexual representation is functional; it enters into the process that leads to reproduction. Many things can be said about human representation but not that it is determined by the reproductive function. Here we even have an essential characteristic of the human psychism, and what I call its *afunctionality*: what one imagines, what one represents to oneself—whether it be on the conscious or unconscious level—is not determined by a biological functionality. Even if that may coincide from time to time: How many sexual acts can, let us say, a normal neurotic have throughout his life whose goal would be reproduction?

One must therefore grant this basic characteristic of the human psychism that is its “defunctionalization.” And this characteristic is combined with the psyche’s capacity to feel pleasure by means of representation, merely by representing. And this disconnect between representational pleasure and organ pleasure is possible only for the human being.

If I call this imagination *radical*, that’s because the creation of representations, affects, desires by the human imagination is conditioned but never predetermined. There is no external motor; it’s a spontaneous potentiality that creates the corresponding phantasm, representations, affects. And it’s for that reason that these are defunctionalized. What is the biological functionality of religious passion? Nothing can be understood about the psyche without a recognition of the essential presence of the radical imagination, this spontaneous and creative, afunctional potentiality that corresponds to the fact that the pleasure of representation is above organ

pleasure.

The radical imagination is also at the basis of another of the human being's extraordinary capacities: symbolism. It's thanks to the radical imagination that the human being can see one thing in another thing. That's the *quid pro quo*: taking one thing for another; seeing the written word *dog* and having it represent to me a dog, having the dog become present. Contrary to what's the case on the animal level, where there is only the signal—for example, the odor of a predator—fixed upon an object, for human beings there are not only signals; there are, above all, symbols. And that's what renders language possible, it's that upon which language is based.

F.U.: Does your notion of the imagination imply a twofold rejection, of biologism and of Lacanian structuralism?

C.C.: The Lacanian notion of the imagination is ridiculous. The imaginary, for Lacanianism, is the specular, that is to say what can be seen in the mirror. "The image in the mirror is imaginary; it isn't real." That's very impoverished; it's a vulgar reductionism.

F.U.: The reduction of the imaginary to the specular is the flip side, the complement of the formalist reduction of the symbolic to a signifying combinatory.

C.C.: I agree. It's also what allows the Lacanians to fail to recognize a whole series of key aspects of human being. A failure to recognize, for example, the singular human being's creativity, as well as creativity at the social-historical level. From the moment that the imagination is reduced to the imaginary *qua* reflection in a mirror, the imaginary can only repeat-reflect what is already there. This highly impoverished notion is to be found again in the history of philosophy and psychology, for, if things were like that, how and whence could something new surge forth [*surgir*]? Impossible. In the

Lacanian system, what is new—in the radical sense—is “foreclosure,” to use his terminology.¹ It is then impossible to think things as simple and fundamental as, for example: Why at a determinate moment did this novelty that is called psychoanalysis arise [*surgi*]? The truth is that this is unthinkable within Lacanian parameters.

F.U.: What relation do you establish between your conception of the radical imagination and the Freudian notion of unconsciousness?

C.C.: The Unconscious is one of the realizations of the radical imagination. And for us psychoanalysts, it is undoubtedly the most important one. But before going any further on the question of the Unconscious, I would like to point out that the Unconscious is not the sole domain in which the radical imagination manifests itself. It manifests itself as well in the Conscious, in waking life, to the extent that the latter isn’t pure repetition. To the extent that we are capable of having new ideas, or of accepting new ideas coming from others, that means that there is a capacity for the surging forth of new representations, even on the conscious level. Thus, conscious life isn’t condemned to mere repetition. But for us psychoanalysts, the most important domain is obviously the Unconscious.

F.U.: I’d like to insist upon the need to specify the relationship between unconsciousness and radical imagination. To go further, I would say that one “consequence” of the radical imagination is your understanding of the Unconscious as something that isn’t

¹T/E: “Foreclosure,” *forclusion* in French, is Lacan’s disputed translation for certain uses of Freud’s German term *Verwerfung* (“repudiation” in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [hereafter: *SE*]).

defined uniquely by repetition. The Unconscious is thought also as capacity for emergence of new representations, source of creation, as if it were open—even, at the limit, provided with a “prospective” dimension, to put it in a provocative way, since you criticize a unilateral understanding of the Unconscious as atemporal.

C.C.: That’s true, but I don’t know if I’d use the term *prospective*, which can lead to an equivocation of the opposite sort and equivalent to that of “atemporality.” The basic thing is that there isn’t only repetition of the past. There’s emergence of new things, of new representations and even of new structures.

F.U.: New structures? In what sense?

C.C.: Let’s take the classical Freudian conception of individual development. One begins with the oral phase. We know from clinical experience that, in this first stage of its existence, the *infans* isn’t limited to entering into relation with “a” basic object, the breast, and that it has “an” activity, sucking, which is also source of pleasure, and of displeasure in the case of the breast’s absence. But that’s not all. There is a whole psychical structure of orality that is deployed in this stage. And we see in a clinical setting with adults, in their subsequent life, the remains and the traces of this structure.

Following the Freudian schema, the subject then passes to the anal stage. There is then a new psychical structuration. These stages are not simple developmental phases; they also entail each time psychical structures and restructurations of the subject. To state it with an expression I have sometimes used, each phase creates a “world of its own,” a “proper world” marked by its oral or anal character. And these structures are not simply demolished or abolished by subsequent development, which, here again, we can see clearly in the clinical setting.

One of the specificities of the human psychism is precisely its stratification. The psyche is characterized by a multiplicity of instances, by the conflict among them. This is a product of the psyche's history which creates ever-diverse strata, and these strata, far from disappearing, enter into various relationships. Psychological history becomes the psyche's stratification. What distinguishes the evolution of the human psychism from every other "learning process" is the fact that, in and through this history, instances—or types of processes—are constituted that later on will be neither "harmoniously integrated" nor simply "overcome." Let us say that, in this history, the subsequent stages don't cancel out the prior ones; rather, they coexist conflictually.

F.U.: In your conceptualization of the Unconscious, for example in "The State of the Subject Today"² or in the sixth chapter of *[The Imaginary Institution of Society](#)*, you define it as "a flux of representations, affects, and intentions" (or "desires," at other moments). I would really like for you to explicate this idea.

C.C.: Let's begin with the term *intention*. We have already alluded to the animal psychism, but, more generally speaking, let's take the living being: it implies a "being for itself." The living being possesses and pursues its own finality, its objectives *qua* "being for itself," like self-preservation and reproduction. Each living being creates, each time, a proper world. We can't enter here into the details, which refer us to philosophy rather than to psychoanalysis. But as soon as a living being exists, we have a "being for itself," which implies "self-finality," creation of a world of its own, and of objects and facts that this living being seeks or avoids. That's what I call *intention* at the level of the living

²Now in *[CL3](#)*.

being *qua* “being for itself”: the elementary tendency to seek certain things and to avoid, to flee, other ones. This is accompanied, as may clearly be seen in animals, by an elementary affect, which is that of pleasure or displeasure but which is at that point only a simple biological signal—and which cannot be worked out, elaborated upon. The basic thing is its vital function. When we speak of the human being, the situation changes and becomes complicated, although it would still be a matter of a “being for itself,” of a living being. The situation becomes complex due to the fact of the radical imagination and of its capacity to give rise to [*faire surgir*] representations, affects, and desires. On this plane, I’m no longer talking about *intention* but rather of *desire*, so as to mark the human being’s specificity. In the human being *qua* desiring being, the intentions aren’t tied to biological functions. One could even go looking for different specific terms for *representation* and *affect*—which don’t exist only on the human plane.

F.U.: You are also talking about unconscious affects. The things Freud affirms on this point are contradictory. Think, for example, of the thesis of “repression” or of the “Unconscious,” on the one hand, and such notions as “unconscious guilt feelings,” on the other.

C.C.: Your reference to Freud is opportune. If we examine his work as a whole, we shall see that his position isn’t at all clear. Even in the metapsychological writings of 1914. In “The Instincts [*sic*] and their Vicissitudes,” he speaks of ideational representative (or representation) of the drive and of affective representative (or representation) of the drive. And what you were signaling here is true: if we take the late Freud, it’s obvious that he thought that there exist unconscious affects. And it couldn’t be otherwise, since there are unconscious desires. Here arises a very complicated

question, that of the relationship between these two psychical vectors. One finds sometimes in Freud the idea that the representation would be formed by the desire. This is manifestly true most of the time, for example when we are talking about wish-fulfillment dreams [*rêves de désir*] (and I'm leaving aside the differences here with respect to traumatic dreams, so as not to wander off the subject). If one takes this "princeps" case that is the wish-fulfillment dream, what does one see? An unconscious desire that is seeking its—unconscious—satisfaction via the dream. What does that imply? That the desire can procure the affect of pleasure in the Unconscious only by means of a representation. It's as if there were a "stage director [*metteur en scène*]," which is desire, that orders the Unconscious to present to it something that will satisfy this desire. And the function of the Unconscious under the orders of this stage director produces this representation of the latent dream. But that's not the only case. Sometimes it happens that it may be the representation that arouses the desire. Then we have a complex relationship—in this case, between desire and representation—involving the particular organization of the Unconscious and of the psychism in general, which cannot be thought with the help of the usual logic, ensemblistic-identitary logic. One cannot say that desire is always the cause, representation the result. And one cannot say the opposite, either. Things are mixed: it is impossible to conceive a desire that would not be desire *of* something; it's a something that is manifested, at least elementarily, by a representation. It is impossible to conceive, in the Unconscious, of representations that would be indifferent.

F.U.: If they aren't so, that's because they are tied to affects in an indissociable flux of representations, affects, and desires. This metapsychological definition poses a

philosophical, a logical question: the indissociability of the components that aren't carved up clearly into different and mutually separable units of outward elements implies a different logic than ensemblistic-identitary logic. A more complex logic, one capable of going beyond the inherited ontology, which is based upon the notion of "being *qua* determinacy," and also of rendering thinkable both creation and the imagination—which is what your elaboration of a "logic of magmas" is aiming at.

C.C.: That's right. Here, there's an opening to philosophical questions and not just psychoanalytical ones. I was referring to that. But if we broach those subjects now, we perhaps risk losing the thread of our discussion.

Structuration of the Psyche: The Psychological Monad

F.U.: This thread—let's pick it up again—leads us to the question of the psyche's structuration. You're talking about "stratification" as a metaphor for this process. You're talking about different stages that go from the "psychical monad" to the "social individual," passing by way of a "triadic phase," and culminating in the possibility—but only the possibility—of an "autonomous and reflective subjectivity." Before touching upon each stage of this process, I would like to ask you a question about the general meaning of this model: something like an overall view.

C.C.: The general meaning, so to speak, of this perspective is grounded upon the fact that all the psychical phenomena we know of become comprehensible only if we refer back to a point of origin, which I call the "psychical monad." Let's take, for example, what Freud calls the

“magical omnipotence of thoughts.”³ What does that signify? That, in the Unconscious, it suffices that a desire appear for it to be realized, and realized in and through representation. Whence does that come? Or, whence comes human beings’ fundamental egocentrism?

These questions lead to the discovery of one and the same reality: an initial psychical state—its exact chronological moment matters little—which I call *the psychical monad*. And this appellation endeavors to account for its basic character, namely this: Nothing exists for the subject outside of the subject itself. This is lived [*se vit*] as source of pleasure and as capable of realizing this pleasure. As immediate satisfaction of every desire that could present itself.

One of the best formulations of this monadic state is Freud’s in one of his notes from 1938.⁴ There, he has the following precise and marvelous phrase: “I am the breast,” which he then comments upon. Freud himself postulates that there is a first moment in which the newborn “is the breast,” and obviously not for the observer, the wet nurse, the mother, or the little brother, but for itself. The object is not a separate object. The “good object” is the newborn for itself. “I am the breast” is therefore not an attributive or else transitive affirmation, like “I am blond.” We could try to represent this to ourselves by completing the description as follows: the baby experiences itself [*se vit*] at once on the lip area, the oral cavity, and probably the upper part of the digestive track as

³T/E: See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13.

⁴T/E: “Ergebnisse, Ideen, Probleme” (note of July 12, 1938, in London), in *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*), vol. 17, p. 151; in English, “Findings, Ideas, Problems” (1941 [1938]), in SE 23: 299.

undifferentiated from this source of nice hot liquid that is the milk, and it experiences itself as having—being—a desire and capable of realizing this desire with pleasure. Here one could find the root of absolute egocentrism, that of the “magical omnipotence of thoughts” as well as that of the tendency of the Unconscious to form representations that satisfy its desire, and so forth. The monad “organizes” the experience of pleasure, not “with an object” but *qua* total—totalitarian, complete, absolute—experience [*expérience*] of a state. This experience will magnetize for ever the psychism, whose “object of desire,” whose search, will be for the recovery of, the return to, this state. It’s more a “desire of a state” than of an object. In this sense, the alienation of the subject’s desire to another’s desire—as we shall see in the triadic phase—is something of a second order, something subsequent.

Obviously, this state cannot endure for long. It is prolonged in what Freud calls “hallucinatory wish-fulfillment”: the baby is capable of “rendering present” the object that isn’t there. And obviously, one can see therein an expression of the radical imagination: the breast is not there but the baby hallucinates it—sometimes with the somatic support of thumbsucking. But after this stage there’s a rupture. There is somatic need, which is pressing; and there is also the presence of the other that breaks this circuit, which is closed upon itself. But it won’t be so much hunger as displeasure that will rupture the monad’s closure. That is to say, the need to give meaning to this displeasure—resting upon its somatic tension—makes it necessary for the psyche to create an outside to which the source of displeasure is attributed; this need makes manifest the need to “set things into meaning [*mise en sens*].”

F.U.: Before “leaving” the monad, there is, in relation to that, one basic question: the predominance in the human

being of representational pleasure over organ pleasure. A foundational and fundamental moment of this fact is found in the monadic stage.

C.C.: Obviously. This is shown by the prolongation of the moment of “real,” organic satisfaction via hallucination; it’s the human being’s capacity to feel pleasure by means of mere representation—whether or not the latter is accompanied by some organ pleasure. That’s the kernel. And it’s going to go on developing in psychical life: we shall see the ever-greater predominance of representational pleasure over organ pleasure. At the moment of hallucinatory satisfaction, we have the first moment of this capacity of the human being brought into action [*mise en acte*]. That is to say, the fact of being able to hallucinate and to find pleasure in hallucination, by means of representation.

F.U.: What relationship can be established between the monadic phase and primary narcissism as Freud conceptualized it?

C.C.: They are very close, even if Freud changed his position quite a lot on the question of narcissism. Some writers maintain that he abandoned narcissism, or took away its importance, in the second half of his work. That’s inaccurate: this notion is still present in his texts from the 1920s and 1930s, and even in phrases like the one I cited above. I think that there’s a real proximity between what I’m saying and Freud’s ideas, but I believe that he never brought them to a successful conclusion. Or then, he did so partially, in “On Narcissism: An Introduction” and in certain passages where he talks about the newborn as being in a stage he doesn’t call narcissism but autism. In [*The Imaginary Institution*](#) I provide the exact quotation....

F.U.: It’s a quotation from “Two Principles...,” in a note from chapter 6:

This note should be quoted *in extenso*, for here Freud affirms (against the “objection of reality”) that the infant, including maternal care, constitutes a psychical system wholly under the domination of the “pleasure principle”; and where he also states that a fine example “of a psychical system shut off from the stimuli of the external world” and which even satisfies its needs for nourishment “autistically (to use Bleuler’s term)” is provided....⁵

C.C.: Yes, it’s there that Freud compares the psychism to a chick in its eggshell. The meaning of that isn’t only that the human subject finds itself in a closed nutritive setting equivalent to the egg; if enclosure there be, it’s that of the psychism upon itself, it’s the “self-enclosed” representation the subject creates for itself of itself [*se crée de lui-même*] and of the world. That’s the closure, the closing upon itself of the psychical monad, of the monadic stage. And it’s this closure that the human subject has to break with in order to survive; save in the case—which fuels my argument—of mental infantile anorexia.

The Triadic Phase: The *Infans*, the Part-Object, and the Mother

F.U.: But what place do you grant to the libidinization of the tiny human, to its cathecting through another as

⁵[IIS](#), 401, n. 29. [T/E: The [IIS](#) translation gives the Freud reference as follows: “‘Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,’ *GW*: 232, note; *SE*: 219-20, note.” The full and correct reference is to be found in a note to “The Psychical and Social Roots of Hate,” above in the present volume: *SE* 12: 219, n. 4 (*GW* 8: 232, n. 1).]

condition, for example, for the passage from the functional, animal level to the level of representational pleasure?

C.C.: During the monadic stage, there isn't any other or any object. "I am my object" or "I am the breast," as Freud says. And I believe that mental infantile anorexia shows this: closure upon itself, total ignorance of the other. Now, as we know from seeing the process from the outside, this other is biologically and psychically essential for the subject. Yet the other isn't inscribed from the outset in the psyche. That's a view from outside the nursling's psyche. For the latter, the other doesn't exist as such. When the other appears, it's as if the other had at its disposal the object that is decisive for the nursling; decisive not for its life—since the baby doesn't think in those terms—but for its satisfaction, for its pleasure.

This is what I call *the triadic phase*, which is defined by the installation of a game, of a bringing into relation [*mise en relation*] of the *infans*, the mother, and the breast. The mother appears as having the breast at her disposal. And the *infans*, on the basis of its schema alone, that of omnipotence, "projects" it onto the mother. In other words, the *infans* who "believes itself" to be all-powerful discovers that it isn't so and transfers this omnipotence to its mother. From this will arise the *infans*'s ambivalence toward the mother. In this sense, Melanie Klein's idea is right; there will be a good breast and a bad breast that will correspond—in general terms—to the present breast and the absent breast. In this stage, a bringing into relation of three terms is constituted, wherein the part-object, the breast, is the crossroads, the zone of intersection, of the *infans*'s relationship with its mother. But it isn't a matter yet of an open world, even though one passes to three terms.

F.U.: The world of the triadic phase is "closed" in a peculiar sense, since it implies an opening, a beginning of

differentiation and of separation. This question appears to me to be all the more basic as the structuration of the psychism is at once also its socialization. Also, the first operation of separation that characterizes the triadic phase implies a first moment of socialization.

C.C.: Absolutely. The imposition of socialization upon the psyche is essentially the imposition of separation. And in a vast and profound sense. For the psychical monad, it is equivalent to a violent rupture, imposed by its “relationship” with others, by means of which a “reality” that is at once external, independent, transformable, and participable will be constituted. This violent rupture is what Piera Aulagnier called, in her terminology, “primary violence.” This is to say that, whereas the psychical monad always tends to close upon itself, this rupture is constitutive of what will be—or will be able to be—the social individual. The imposition of this relationship upon the other—and, afterward, upon others—is a succession of ruptures inflicted upon the psychical monad through which the social individual is constituted as a subject divided between a monadic pole—which always tends toward a reclosure—and what has been imposed upon it and what it has organized and integrated little by little within shifting syntheses.

F.U.: To return to the triadic phase, it can be said that it breaks up the monadic closure and that it contributes a new “setting into meaning” of the world—a world made up of three terms—in which the omnipotence of meaning is attributed to the mother. In the passage among these phases is played out, at once, the differentiation of inside-outside and the constitution of an external world. You point out in addition that, in this process, there is a predominance of projection over introjection.

C.C.: From the outset, there’s a fact: the baby

experiences the mother according to the schema of all-powerfulness. This omnipotence of the mother is a projection. This process is crucial, for we shall see that, throughout life, the other will be—at least potentially—a factor of alienation. Someone else will always be able to be placed in the site of omnipotence. At the same time, however, there are—and this is essential—processes of introjection. Without introjection, the subject would remain enclosed in solipsism. Introjection is at the basis of socialization: all communication between subjects involves the possibility of receiving and incorporating words, meaning, significations that come from the other. If, however, I have spoken of a primacy of projection, that's because the latter manifests itself in almost permanent fashion. Look at transference!

F.U.: According to you, the pattern of the phantasm is created during the triadic phase. Why?

C.C.: Because that's the first situation in which there is differentiation. The other appears as master of the object of desire. In every phantasm, an underlying structure is present and with it an object of desire. And the question is posed of who is the master of this object.

F.U.: In this connection, it would have to be said that the basic feature of this phase is the function the mother fulfills as "master of signification," master of "setting into meaning."

C.C.: Quite right. It's the mother who assigns a signification to each thing and situation. And to begin with, as Aulagnier has shown, through the naming of the baby's affects. And it's also the mother who says "that's good" and "that's bad."

F.U.: According to the way you conceptualize it, the psyche's structuration is also a process of socialization, which begins with the triadic phase. It's therefore a key moment of

the twofold process of structuration-socialization, wherein a first separation takes place.

C.C.: Socialization commences during the triadic phase because it's the mother who first says "No" to the *infans*. In this way the mother is constructed simultaneously as omnipotent, recognizing for her an existence and a desire or a will that are foreign to the *infans* and that the *infans* doesn't dominate. And that obliges the *infans* to recognize her as separate.

Individual and Society: Ways of Setting into Meaning

F.U.: Let's talk about the exit from the triadic phase, from this imaginary world still closed up by the mother's omnipotence over meaning. And let's then talk about the opening not to the other but to others, to the father and to the social, that is to say, one's passage to the "social individual."

C.C.: One begins to exit from this closed world as early as the monad's rupture, when one sees oneself obliged to abandon omnipotence. But this first exit is a "false exit" insofar as omnipotence is transferred onto another—and insofar as the *infans* can remain enclosed with its mother, which produces the gravest pathological consequences, as is now well known.

To proceed further, the *infans* must, at the psychical level, "depose" its mother from her site of omnipotence. And that is what does indeed happen with the Oedipal function. The mother no longer appears as all-powerful, the sole one to have some power; she is also recognized as incomplete, caught up in her desire for the other, that is to say, the father. And it's at that moment that a socializing opening occurs, when the mother falls from being the omnipotent figure.

One must not remain there, however. For, the appearance of the father doesn't suffice for breaking the closure, for bringing about socialization, for accomplishing the Oedipal function. The father must still be recognized as one father among other fathers; he must appear as not being himself the source of the Law but, rather, spokesperson for the Law, himself subject to the Law.

F.U.: From these developments I retain the fact that the psyche's structuration is also a process of socialization. And the key to this twofold perspective is undoubtedly the notion of "setting into meaning," of signification, as essential characteristic of the psyche as well as of society.

C.C.: Absolutely. The process of socialization is played out in and through the process of signification. Society is essentially a magma of social imaginary significations, which give meaning to collective and individual life. By way of consequence, socialization is nothing other than the entry into—and the functioning of—this instituted magma of social significations.

This is crucial for understanding psychical structuration, for otherwise one sees only the "negative" aspect of this structuration, that is to say, repression, what is denied or taken away from the subject, when one must also see the "positive" aspect: society "gives" the subject meaning; it contributes with its significations the setting into meaning that satisfies the psyche's imperious need. If not, that wouldn't work [*cela ne fonctionnerait pas*].

And recognizing this is essential, too, for understanding the social. The social is space and process of creation. There would be no true history if there were no change, no rupture and creation. The social-historical is essentially emergence of new social imaginary significations, new meanings. Its institution, the dynamic between the

instituting—the radical imagination—and the instituted—the already created institutions—is secondary with regard to this basic characteristic of human collectives that is the capacity to create new significations, new meanings. The radical imagination doesn't exist only at the level of the individual psyche but also at the social-historical, collective level *qua radical imaginary*. Society neither is nor constitutes itself *only* with the help of prohibitions! In spite of what a certain reading of *Totem and Taboo* might make a few too-hasty psychoanalysts think and in spite, too, of Freud's own equivocations, society cannot be thought to be the result of two prohibitions—the prohibition of incest and the prohibition of murder. Mere prohibition cannot create anything and hardly settles anything. In the creation and the existence of societies, there is an almost infinite positive content and not just prohibitions.

So, to come back to psychical structuration, let us say that, if the psyche doesn't find in the social space a meaning capable of replacing the originary, monadic meaning, it won't be able, obviously, to exit from its closure and survive. That's one of the conditions the psyche "exacts" from society: one can do with the psyche almost anything—making it a Buddhist, a Christian, a bourgeois, a Nazi, etc.—but what society cannot do is stop furnishing it a meaning.

An Enlarged Conception of Sublimation

F.U.: A very important aspect in your work on the psyche concerns—as is logical, if one is following the thread of our discussion—the process of sublimation. I believe that it's a central theme wherein one can appreciate at once the originality of your perspective and its deeply Freudian roots. Through an elaboration of the classical notion, and in giving

to it its full import, you are proposing, let us say, an “enlarged” conception of sublimation.

C.C.: That’s true. But if I needed to propose an “enlarged” conception of sublimation—as you rightly label it—that’s because there’s the following fundamental question: What is human life? What’s at issue there? Satisfaction of the drives? That’s only a tiny part of human life. The human is defined by the predominance of representational pleasure over organ pleasure, over simple satisfaction of the drives.

I define as sublimated activity everything that involves a cathexis of objects that are not directly or indirectly—that is to say, immediately or in a mediated way—drive objects. A condition, a fulcrum, for sublimated activity is the psyche’s capacity to feel pleasure through representation. Of course, representational pleasure is also at issue in phantasms and in waking phantasying, but the basic difference is that, in the case of sublimation, it’s a matter of cathecting socially valued objects.

What at the present time, generally speaking, is sublimation in psychoanalysis? When we read psychoanalytic texts, we have the impression that the sole model of sublimation is the one in which the child, instead of playing with its feces, plays with paints and has become a painter. That’s entirely ridiculous. The truth is that, as soon as the child begins to speak, the child is carrying out a sublimated activity and is in the process of sublimating. The child doesn’t seek any organ pleasure; he is seeking to communicate and, in order to do this, he has cathected—and he uses—a social object, language. If the child wants to be the best in his class or to excel at soccer, that’s because it’s a matter of socially cathected objects that procure no organ pleasure, nor any satisfaction of a drive.

F.U.: One of the most interesting consequences of this

reconceptualization of sublimation is no doubt that it allows one to think through the articulation between the subject and the social imaginary.

C.C.: Sublimation is the axis for or subjective “side” of the functioning of the social institution.

F.U.: In order to think this necessary articulation between the psyche and the social, in *The Violence of Interpretation* Aulagnier proposed the idea of a “narcissistic contract” and the notion of the “discourse of the whole.”⁶ On these points, one can refer to the sixth chapter of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) for a more detailed development. I would nevertheless like for you to be more specific about the relationship, around these questions, between your thought and that of Aulagnier.

C.C.: What Aulagnier called “the discourse of the whole” is one aspect of the institution of society; it’s the social discourse that says, “This is real, that isn’t real; this is true or just and that isn’t so,” and so on. With the “narcissistic contract,” she was seeking to theorize what the psyche expects from society as compensation for the abandonment of its “monadic ultranarcissism.” That’s the “narcissistic contract”: “If you behave in this or that way, you’ll then have

⁶Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement* (1975), tr. Alan Sheridan (Hove, England: and Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2001). [T/E: The “Narcissistic Contract” is developed near the end of the fourth chapter, pp. 106-13, commencing with endnote 16, which reads: “As far as the difficult relation between the psyche and the social, and the problems posed by its analysis, cf. Cornelius Castoriadis, *L’Institution imaginaire de la société* (in particular chapter VI), Paris, Seuil, 1975.” The “discourse of the whole [*discours de l’ensemble*]” is discussed in the first sub-subsection of the “Narcissistic Contract” subsection, pp. 108-109. Sheridan, who had neglected to cite the extant English-language translation of [*IIS*](#) by Kathleen Blamey, translates *discours de l’ensemble* as “discourse of the group.”]

other people's recognition; you will be cathected by the others, who will fill the narcissistic breach opened by the abandonment of originary omnipotence." I believe that both these ideas are entirely correct.

Subject and Autonomy

F.U.: Before ending our discussion, I would like for you to talk about the notion of "reflective and deliberative subjectivity" that you propose as a possible state of the social individual. This is a state that brings into play the signification and the very experience of autonomy.

C.C.: The social individual is a conscious individual. As such, his conscious Ego is capable of reasoning and calculating. And one can remain there. That holds for the greater part of the history of humanity. From the psychoanalytic point of view, and also from the social-historical point of view, it may be seen that this individual—though not psychotic, perverted, or neurotic—is alienated. It's heteronomous: it has certain criteria about what is good, bad, just, unjust, and so on, but these criteria haven't been produced by it. They have been imposed upon it within its socialization by society. But if one stopped there, at this submission to the social discourse, one wouldn't be able to understand certain facts and certain historical processes. For, human history is not just slavery and the Middle Ages. For example, one wouldn't be able to understand how psychoanalysis could have arisen. Why wasn't Freud content just to say, "Yes, there are big problems with sexuality," and so on? Why did he begin to say that the repression of sexuality makes men sick? Well, when Freud said that, was he only a "conscious Ego"? No. I'm saying that this is a reflective subjectivity. That is to say, a subject capable of

calling into question the imaginary significations of the society in which that subject lives, and even the institutions of that society. I am saying, then, that there is a creation in the history of humanity (which isn't difficult for psychoanalysis to recognize but which isn't to be understood only through psychoanalytic considerations): this is reflective subjectivity, which goes hand in hand with the birth of the project of autonomy. With the birth of an autonomous, reflective, and democratic political activity. We're talking about a subject who is not simply conscious but who is capable of calling into question the significations and rules she has received from her society.

F.U.: For psychoanalysis, the counterpart of this definition would be that autonomous subjectivity is defined by a certain type of change in the relationship between consciousness and unconsciousness.

C.C.: You're quite right. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it's a matter of a subject who is not simply carried along or led by her Unconscious but who is capable of being lucid in relation to her desires, of connecting with them, of being permeable to them, and at the very same time of filtering them. This is a subject capable of reflecting and of deciding what she is going to achieve with her desires and what she isn't going to do, and of acting accordingly.

F.U.: This leads us directly to what you call the psychoanalytic project, which for you is tied to the emergence of the project of autonomy. And to understanding the end [*fin*] of analysis from this perspective.

C.C.: Of course. The goal [*finalité*] of analysis, in the best of cases, is to aid the patient in becoming an autonomous subject, that is to say, a reflective and deliberative subjectivity. It's to help her to have a different relationship with her desires, in order that she might be able to channel

them and to master them with other means than repression. It's a matter of an ideal objective. Minimally, one tries to aid the patient to "go from neurotic suffering to a state of everyday human unhappiness."⁷

F.U.: That's clearly opposed to the Lacanians' "ethic of desire"...

C.C.: The Lacanians go on and on about ethics without ever saying anything specific about it. What does the "ethic of desire" mean? One may have a desire to kill. Must it be realized? At the very most, one could talk about "realizing certain desires." But then arises a key question, which the Lacanians avoid or simply ignore: Realizing what desires? And here is another, necessarily social question: What's the criterion? Can this criterion arise exclusively from psychoanalysis, as the Lacanians appear to be hallucinating? No. The decision will be singular and subjective, but it will also be tied to a collective and social-historical situation. In psychoanalysis, far from being an "ethic of privatized desire," the project of autonomy is brought into play as indissociably individual and social. This is to say that, insofar as the human being is a social being, the question of subjective action and of freedom is always brought into play in its relation with the freedom of others. The free activity of a subject can only be the kind that intends the freedom of others.

⁷T/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).

LOGOS

The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge*

The best a “positive” conception of history can offer is this: history is the sum total of actions of human beings through space and time. We may as well start with it. Immediately, though, questions arise. What are those human beings and where do they come from? Can there be human beings without history, outside history? Are they not shaped into very different forms *within* history, possibly *through the action of* history? Do these actions of human beings take place in a vacuum? Is there any possible meaningful human action outside an instituted society, the relations, the meanings, the purposes, the values posited by this instituted society? Unless by “history” we mean the mere unfolding of a sequence of any sort of events over time (as, e.g., in the phrase: “the history of the Solar System”), have we ever encountered history without society? Should we then say that history, in the proper sense, is the product of societies? But can we forget that social forms, particular societies as defined by their specific institutions, are themselves “products” of history? Is society generating history, or the reverse? Or is this opposition meaningless?

Meaningless it is, indeed. And it would even be inadequate to say that society is the “product” of history, or that history is the “work” of society. History is the self-alteration of society—an alteration whose very forms are

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each time the creation of the society considered. Repetition itself—as, for instance, in primitive or traditional societies—is never, of course, strict repetition; in its actual occurrence and in order to occur, repetition is heavily slanted by the basic orientation of the whole set of institutions of these societies. At a deeper level, it would still be inadequate to say that history is a *dimension* of society, the dimension by virtue of which the past of a society is always immanent in its present, this present always being inhabited by a future of some unspecified content and form. History is the self-deployment of society in time. But this time is, in its essential characteristics, a creation of society, both once and for all as *historical* time and in each particular case as *the* time of this particular society with its particular tempo, significant articulations, anchorages, prospects, and promises. In the same way, there is a self-deployment of society in space, a topic I will not dwell upon here. By space I do not mean “geographical expansion” (or location), but the creation of a simultaneously ordered “natural” and “social” multidimensionality proper to each and every society. As society cannot be without this self-deployment in time, as society *is*, indeed, this self-deployment in time, we would better speak, in philosophical terms, of *the social-historical*.¹

History does not happen to society: history is the self-deployment of society. By this affirmation, we contradict the entire spectrum of existing tenets: history as the product of the will of God; history as the result of the action of (“natural” or “historical”) “laws”; history as a “subjectless process”; history as a purely random process. It is not my

¹[IIS](#), 167-220.

purpose, however, to discuss or to refute these tenets here.²

We posit history *in itself* as creation and destruction. We are speaking at an ontological level here, for we are concerned with the creation and destruction of *forms*, of *eidē*. Creation is not “production,” the bringing forth of an exemplar of a preexisting *eidos*; it is the *ab ovo* positing of such an *eidos*. Even less would it be the random emergence of a numerically singular combinatorial configuration. Destruction is, here, ontological destruction. When a star or a galaxy runs its course and eventually disappears as this star or this galaxy, there is no destruction properly speaking. The form star or galaxy is unaffected, and stars and galaxies of the same type could be (and certainly are) produced again. And even if such were not the case, the *eidos* would not be destroyed: an ideal scientist-observer could, in principle, reconstitute this form. In a certain sense, nothing is really “lost” with the explosion of a supernova or the disappearance of the dinosaurs (whatever the empirical gaps and problems thereby created for biologists); however, the destruction of the Athenian *polis*, of the Roman religion, of Florence as it was from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, is the destruction of the singular, unique *eidos* embodied in each of these historical entities. It would be meaningless to say that this *eidos* is ideally preserved in the sense one may say that the Pythagorean theorem would be ideally “preserved” even after the disappearance of the Earth and the end of the human race. Because the being of a social-historical entity is not purely (not even essentially) “intelligible” or reducible to “intelligible” elements, it is in principle impossible to recover, after it is destroyed, the *eidos* it embodies and realizes. It is not only the glory that was Athens or Rome that has vanished.

²See [IIS](#), 9-70, 115-64.

It is the whole world of meanings, of affects, and of intentions—of social imaginary significations—created by these societies and holding them together that cannot be recovered, but only approximated with the greatest difficulty, on which more later.

Even more than the creation of *eidos*, the *destruction* of *eidos* must remain wholly unthinkable for the inherited ontology. Just as the creation of social-historical *eidos* is not a combinatorial pasting together of “immutable elements” (e.g., the “pairs of opposites” of Structuralist theories), destruction of *eidos* in history is not the decomposition of components, of “elements” that have been combined in this form and could be recombined in another. There are no such “elements” in the human domain. The “elements” of social-historical life are, each time, created *as* elements, in their relevancy, meaning, connections, and so on, in and through the particular institution of society to which they “belong.” Thus, each social-historical form is truly and genuinely *singular*; it possesses an essential, not numerical or combinatorial, singularity (strictly speaking, Structuralism and Poststructuralism assert that the singularity of a society—or indeed, for that matter, of an *œuvre* (“a work”)—is, and must be of exactly the same character as the singularity of the number, say, 556,632,413). Indeed, the “proof” that social-historical *eidos* is created is that it can be destroyed in a way that no other *eidos* can. For instance, any physical form (whether it be taken concretely or abstractly, as type) can have its elements “taken apart” and can subsequently, at least in principle, be recomposed. (That this may well *not* be the case even in physics, as might be inferred from some aspects of contemporary cosmology and quantum theory, is an indication that perhaps even sheer physical being cannot be fully captured in the ensemblistic-identitary

categories of inherited ontology.)

The specificity of the social-historical is not just being-for-itself, “meaning for...,” “representation,” “affect,” “intention” (or “desire”): these are already creations of the living being as such—though, of course, they acquire completely different contents in the social-historical field.³ The social-historical is, first of all, the phenomenological specificity of the forms it creates and through which it exists: institutions embodying social imaginary significations, and their concrete product, bearer, and reproducer, the living individual as social-historical form. More importantly, however, the social-historical is the ontological form that can *call itself into question* and, through self-reflective activity, *explicitly alter itself*. To be sure, this is not a fated or necessary result, nor does it happen *hōs epi to polu*,⁴ but rather as an exception. Nonetheless, it is only in the social-historical domain that we encounter an *eidos* that calls into question its own laws of existence (politics in the proper sense) and that, more particularly, calls into question the transmitted representations it has for itself of a world and of itself (philosophy). We not talking about an “immanent” or “essential possibility” of the social-historical. Democracy and philosophy are not the outcome of natural or spontaneous tendencies of society and history. They are themselves creations, and they entail a radical break with the previously instituted state of affairs. Both are aspects of the project of autonomy. But the emergence of this project (of which ontology and the self-ontology of the social-historical as

³“The State of the Subject Today” (1986), now in [CL3](#).

⁴T/E: This Aristotelian phrase, meaning “most often,” is to be found at *Metaphysics* 6.2.1027a21 and *Posterior Analytics* 87b20.

embodied in this very self-reflection are an aspect) has taken place at this level of being only.

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This essential feature of the social-historical lays bare to our scrutiny the abyssal question of social-historical knowledge. Of course it is not our conception that produces the question. The question is there, manifest in the innumerable substantive difficulties of social-historical knowledge and hardly veiled by the various “theories” about society and history formulated by historical materialism, functionalism, structuralism, and so on, as it cries loudly for recognition over the Procrustean beds on which all these theories lay their social-historical “material.” Our conception simply allows us to gain, from the start, a clear vision of the infinitely enigmatic character of the question.

Each and every society creates, within what must be called its cognitive closure—or, even better, its *closure of meaning*—its own world, which is both “natural” (and “supranatural”) as well as “human.” Our fountains are inhabited by Nymphs, our stars are palaces for our gods, only a young virgin woman may marry honorably, and so on. In this world, other societies (other human groupings) have a (generally very poor) limited and defined place, meaning, and role. Knowledge referring to them is scant, mostly pragmatic (they trade salt, they use poisoned arrows), and religiomythical in character (they are heathen, under the curse of God, etc.). As far as we know, only two societies, the Ancient Greek and the Western European, have developed a genuine interest in the others *as* others and attempted to attain a knowledge and an understanding of their ways of being. And this is the tradition in which we find ourselves.

The attempt to “know,” as far as possible, other societies than our own, be they “present” or “past,” immediately raises two questions: Why, and how? Let us eliminate facile answers to the first question. Of course, we may want to accumulate a knowledge of sorts about the others (in a sense, all societies do) in order, e.g., to exploit, conquer, dominate, or proselytize them. (*The Primary Use of Geography Is to Make War* is the title of a recent French book.)⁵ I am asking, however, for a reasonable, defensible, arguable answer. This can only be found in the implications of our project of autonomy. In attempting to know, to understand the others irrespective of any “practical use” of this understanding, we go over and beyond the *closure of meaning* of our own institution. We stop dividing the human world between “us” and “them”—us: the only true human beings; the others: savages, barbarians, heathens, and so on. We stop considering our own institution of society as the only good, reasonable, truly human one and the institutions of the others as curiosities, aberrations, “primitive nonsense” (Engels),⁶ or divine punishment for their devilish nature. We also stop considering our representation of the world as the only *meaningful* one. Without necessarily abandoning our institutions—since, after all, *these* are the institutions that made this questioning possible—we can take a critical stand against them: we can discover, as did the Greeks in the sixth and fifth centuries, that institutions and representations belong to *nomos* and not to *phusis*, that they are human creations and

⁵French Editors: Yves Lacoste *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* (Paris: Maspero, 1976; Paris: La Découverte, 1985 [T/E: new rev. ed. with new preface, Paris: La Découverte, 2012]).

⁶T/E: Friedrich Engels to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890, *Marx Engels Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), p. 400.

not “God-given” or “nature-given.” This opens up immediately the possibility of questioning *our own* institution and of *acting* in regard to it. If its origin is *nomos* and not *phusis*, then it could be changed through human action and human reflection, and this leads immediately to new questions: Ought we to change it? For what reasons? Up to what limits? How? This is why a genuine interest in the institutions of other peoples as such appears in fact only in the two social-historical formations, Ancient Greece and Western Europe (which includes, of course, the United States), where true *politics*—in the sense of calling into question the existing institutions and of changing them through deliberate collective action—and true *philosophy*—in the sense of calling into question the instituted representations and meanings and of changing them through the self-reflective activity of thought—were created. What I have in mind here is not a “causal” or “chronological” sequence. Geography, historiography, and ethnology (as distinct from chronicles of priests and kings and accounts of marvelous/mythical voyages) were in fact born as part of philosophy in the largest (and truest) sense, which is itself a dimension of the democratic and emancipatory movement born in the Greek *poleis* and reborn—much later, following a long period of regression—in the cities of Western Europe after the height of the “Middle Ages.”

Of course, once born, this interest starts feeding on what becomes our unquenchable thirst for knowledge *per se*. This thirst is one of the manifestations of our freedom, or autonomy: we constantly call into question the inherited (be it “scientific” or “philosophical”) representation of what there is, we constantly shake the walls of our own closure. Indeed, this is the very meaning of truth, as created in the Greco-Western world. Of course, in every society there must be

some sort of “truth”—but we should rather call that *correctness*: the canonical correspondence of statements and representations with what the instituted and closed world of meanings of the society considered has once and for all established as the “real” state of affairs as well as the instituted criteria whereby this correspondence is, each time, judged. In the Greco-Western world, truth is created as the perpetual movement of doing away with the closure of meaning (the movement is perpetual because this closure can never be eliminated). In the particular case of social-historical knowledge, however, our interest has as well another, equally strong motivation: to grasp human beings’ essential possibilities. We consider their social-historical creations, and their, or our own, sublime or monstrous deeds, and we thereby enlarge the view of our own possibilities. If Socrates existed, this is something a human being can be. If Hitler existed, this too is something a human being can be. And so, too, can the social-historical formations that made these human exemplars possible.



But *how* can we know other societies and historical epochs? What we do know is heavily, perhaps exhaustively, conditioned by what we are as social individuals brought up in and fabricated by this particular society, our own. This goes far beyond “prejudices,” and far beyond epistemology and theory of knowledge. The question has an ontological grounding. We are, and are what we are, because we share in a world that, far from being free-floating or neutral (assuming “humanization” or “socialization” in general) is created and instituted by our own society. Neither Immanuel Kant nor Edmund Husserl writes in a transcendental language. They

both write in German. And the German language—as any other—conveys an entire world.

Therefore, the first presupposition is the calling into question of the institution that made us what we are and of the ways of thinking it has furnished us. This is of negative value only. We thereby avoid uncritically imputing to others motives, feelings, and value orientations that have currency and meaning among us, and even “rationality” in general. (And, by the way, who said that our “rationality” is rationality *tout court*?) The first task in this respect is indeed to start probing our so-called rationality—and this would be the first *rational* task. As we know, this task remains in fact incomplete and is, in principle, incompletionable (except in trivial domains that exclude the infinite and exclude self-reference, that is, exclude by definition the self-reflective activity of thought). And we recognize, to begin with, that another society lives literally in another world—its own world (this was already known to Herodotus, as shown by his remarks about Cambyses and the Egyptians, or Darius and Greek and Hindu burial customs). How can we enter this other world, or, in fact, even approach it?

As I have done in the preceding pages, I offer these conclusions without benefit of “proofs” (i.e., without the necessary argumentation and empirical corroboration).⁷ There are some scant and (unless they be trivial) always problematic social-historical universals. They fall into two broad classes. The first belongs to what I call the ensemblistic-identitary (for short: *ensidic*) dimension of the institution of any society. Given what we are and what we know, we can deduce them almost *a priori*. For instance, if a society is to have language, it must be familiar with predication, and it must divide

⁷See [IIS](#), *passim*, and “The Sayable and the Unsayable” (1971), in [CLI](#).

statements into correct and incorrect. It also must have some arithmetic and geometry as well as functionally adequate descriptions and classifications of the part of the physical world in which it is living (the “first natural stratum”), including human beings as “biological” entities. Now, it happens (*sumbainei*) that we share with all humans the same biological constitution and the same “physical world” and know something about its properties. If a society is to last, it has to “function adequately”—maintain and reproduce itself—and therefore it must, up to a point, construct its world in some correspondence with the given first natural stratum and in accordance with some requirements of ensidic logic—to which, we find, the first natural stratum also “corresponds.” It would be easy, and tiresome, to multiply *ad infinitum* examples of the constraints thereby imposed upon the creation of social institutions.

But this does not take us very far. It boils down to this: given the physical environment of the Earth and the biological properties of human beings, each and every society, if it is to maintain and reproduce itself (that is, if it is to remain *observable*), will have to provide for its material and sexual reproduction. To this purpose, it will have to create some coherent fragments of ensidic logic and of “applied” knowledge of this world. Yet this would also be true of an “ape group.” And it would not in the least make intelligible the almost unlimited variety of societies and their corresponding institutions and social imaginary significations. Our knowledge of these constraints, and of their particular character (geographical environment, inherited or borrowed techniques, and ensidic “knowledge”) only points, in each particular case, to some of the beams used and to some of their particularities that have helped and/or hindered a society in the building of its institutions. The plan, the form, the

articulations, the purpose of the building, these are another matter—and that is what we are chiefly interested in. It is not the properties of stone that tell us the difference between the Pyramid of Cheops, the Parthenon, and the cathedral of Amiens. Neither is it the (problematic) sameness of their syntactic structures that will teach us anything about the difference between “the apple is a fruit borne by a tree” and “life is a tale told by an idiot.”

The construction of its own world by each and every society is, in essence, the creation of a world of meanings, its social imaginary significations, which organize the (presocial, “biologically given”) natural world, instaurate a social world proper to each society (with its articulations, rules, purposes, etc.), establish the ways in which socialized and humanized individuals are to be fabricated, and institute the motives, values, and hierarchies of social (human) life. Society *leans upon* the first natural stratum, but only to erect a fantastically complex (and amazingly coherent) edifice of significations that vest any and every thing with *meaning* (think again of language). This is also a transhistorical universal, and, up to a point, we can elucidate it and some of its implications. Society socializes (humanizes) the wild, raw, antifunctionally mad psyche of the newborn and imposes upon it a formidable complex of constraints and limitations (the psyche must renounce absolute egocentrism and omnipotence of imagination, recognize “reality” and the existence of others, subordinate desires to rules of behavior, and accept sublimated satisfactions and even death for the sake of “social” ends). Society thereby succeeds to an unbelievable degree (though never exhaustively) in diverting, orienting, and channeling the psyche’s egotistic, asocial (and, of course, fully “arational”) drives and impulses into coherent social activities, more or less “logical” diurnal thinking, and so on.

But “in exchange,” as it were, the psyche imposes upon the social institution an essential requirement: the social institution has to provide the psyche with *meaning*. Viewed from the standpoint of the psyche, the process whereby the psyche abandons (though never fully) its initial ways and objects and invests (cathects) socially meaningful ways of behaving, motives, and objects is *sublimation*; viewed from the standpoint of society, it is the social fabrication (nurturing, rearing) of the individual. Thereby a new *eidos* (different in each particular society) is created: the social individual (you, me, and the others). The individual is, in fact, the effective concrete bearer of the institutions of its society, and it is, in principle, bound by construction, as it were, to maintain and reproduce them. That this binding is more or less broken with the appearance of societies containing the germ of autonomy and the corresponding type of individual raises a further question.

The substantive task of “knowing” another society is thereby brought back to the attempt to penetrate, make accessible, and reconstitute the world of its social imaginary significations. (And, insofar as the concrete bearer of the emerged parts of these significations is the individual, some degree of “methodological individualism” is legitimate, though by no means sufficient.) The term *social imaginary significations* should not, however, be given an “intellectualistic” or even simply “noematic” content. The imaginary significations construct (organize, articulate, vest with meaning) the world of the society considered (and lean each time upon the “intrinsic” ensidic organization of the first natural stratum). Yet, in the same stroke and indissociably, they also do much more than that. To borrow, metaphorically, the distinctions correctly made by ancient psychology, they determine at the same time the representations, the affects,

and the intentions dominant in a society. In fact, one can show almost *a priori* that these distinctions necessarily correspond to the fundamental ways of being of any entity that is “for itself”—and, in their own way, both society and the social individual are “for themselves.”⁸ Not only is the “noematic” (“representational”) construction of the natural and social world a creation, each time different, of each and every society, but also each society posits its own important and dominant *intentions* (to live calmly with music and dance, to worship God and be saintly, to be *kalos kagathos*, to conquer the world, to expand the “forces of production,” to “build socialism,” etc.); moreover, and this point is usually ignored, it creates its dominant and characteristic *affects*. Even the sheer characterization of these affects is extremely difficult and can drag us onto very slippery ground or into the swamps of pseudoliterary *à peu près*. One example may help to understand what I mean. After describing Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy and his tremendous effort to import Aristotle into Christian philosophy, Étienne Gilson comments, “But for Thomas, faith remains primordial.” Now, this sentence would be Chinese for Aristotle—or, indeed, any classical Greek. *Pistis* in classical Greek, *fides* in classical Latin, have only a homonymic relation to what *pistis* and *fides*, faith, became with Christianity. (The possible antecedents in Judaism need not detain us here.) Faith, as this complex of *Erlebnisse* that is centrally and decisively organized around an *affect*, is a historical creation of the Christian institution of religion (and, for fifteen centuries, of society itself). We can follow its instauration from Paul and the Greek Fathers to Augustine; we can point to specific aspects of theological and mystical texts, of hymns, of church architecture, of paintings; we can

⁸See “The State of the Subject Today,” *passim*.

force people to listen for hours to the *Matthäus Passion*; we can describe crusading, pious, or caritative behavior. But we can neither show nor demonstrate faith (neither exhibit nor define it). And without this, any description, let alone understanding, of a Christian society would be hopelessly mutilated.

Thus, after the “external description” of a society (of its ensidic and functional organization), we have to attempt to grasp its particular *eidos*. This leads us to the need to penetrate and understand the magma of its singular social imaginary significations. *Some* “constituent parts” of this magma, and some institutional forms, may be universal—and this may help (but also create illusions about) our work. What matters, however, is the singularity of this magma.⁹ Of the three “vectors,” so to speak, that characterize this magma, the least difficult to describe is that of the “intentions” of the society considered—since they can be read immediately in its effective actions. Even in this case, though, things are far from simple. It is relatively easy to “understand” the “intentions” (the “drive,” the “push”) of capitalist society (or of the capitalist component of today’s Western societies). Let it be granted that they can be adequately described by the expression: “unlimited expansion of ‘rational’ mastery.” (The innumerable problems conveyed by this expression and the actual facts to which it refers need not detain us here.) The relative facility of access, in this case, is not only due to our proximity to, or participation in, this society. The very nature of the “goals” of the capitalistic system and of the means it uses (as, more generally, of the world it constructs) make it to a large extent amenable to considerations of ensidic logic

⁹Concerning this, see [IIS](#), 340-44, and “The Logic of Magmas and the Question Autonomy” (1983), in [CL2](#).

(*Zweckrationalität*). How individuals in this society live the universal expansion of pseudorationality, and why on earth a society would aim at it, is another part of the story.

The situation is very different, however, in most other cases. Consider, for instance, Aztec society or even, much nearer to us, the “true” Christian societies (from the fifth to the twelfth centuries). Here the “intentions” are so intimately entangled with “meanings” (in the narrow sense) or “representations,” on the one hand, with “affects,” on the other (cf. what has been said earlier about faith) that, very often, one’s understanding risks remaining external or simply verbal. Some aspects of Max Weber’s considerations about “World religions” seem to me to exemplify this risk. To use an image: in music we always have rhythm, melody, and harmony. Of course there are monophonic melodies, but even in this case harmony is embedded in the melody since melody cannot exist if it does not belong to a mode, which confers upon each note its potential harmonic value. Even bare rhythm, e.g., the monotonic banging of a tam-tam, contains a “melody” as a borderline case (here the “melody feature” is simply *a, a, a, ...*).

The situation is akin to that implied by having *full* possession of a “foreign” language (and the simile is not gratuitous, since language bears and conveys virtually the whole of the life of a society and a substantial part of its “history”). Such possession is possible, though very difficult, and perhaps not easily accessible to all people. (We are not committed to the thesis that everybody must be able to understand each and every foreign language, even less than we are committed to the thesis that everybody must be able to master, with equal facility, all branches of contemporary mathematics, say.) But the knowledge thereby acquired is not readily “translatable” in the native language of the student. As

in the case of language, the “translation” (the transposition of meaning) would entail the restitution of all the relevant connotations of the second culture in the first—which is, strictly speaking, impossible and can be posited only as a limit or an ideal. This by no means implies that all statements about a foreign society (or, for that matter, about our own), are equivalent, that “anything goes.” The validity of the attempts to understand and reconstitute a foreign culture can be judged on the basis of the following criterion: To what extent are they capable of making sense of this other society, of encompassing as many as possible of its aspects and dimensions, and of plausibly (reasonably) showing that there is a magma of social imaginary significations, distinct from our own, that accounts for the specific organization of the society considered, holds it together, and stands behind the “observable” activities and works (*œuvres*) of the individuals belonging to it?

One should not confuse this last criterion with Max Weber’s conception of *Idealtypen* and their “comparison” to “actual” behavior. Not only is the *zweckrational* component of behavior (its “instrumental” or “functional” dimension) for us the least important one and itself, as such, only instrumental in character; it is, each and every time, a *creation* of the society considered and deeply permeated with the imaginary significations of that society. The universality of even purely instrumental “rational” determinations throughout different social-historical forms is both a datum (mostly in its trivial aspects) and a question (for the more important ones). But there is much more than that. Any reconstruction of “understandable” individual behavior starting from observable social realities has to recognize the fundamental constraints of coherence, complementarity, and (ideally speaking) completeness. Ideal types are not pieces of garment

hanging on a coat rack. They have to be *internally* connected, and, by necessity, they refer to each other and all together to the institution of society and its social imaginary significations. The Roman *pater familias* refers from within—and not because the theoretician “constructs” it so—to the Roman spouse, the plebeian to the patrician, and all of them to the laws of the *urbs*, the Roman religion, and so on. They must fit together in order to produce not only a society as a functionally going concern, but a *coherent world of* (what is to us) *alien meaning*—and there is the rub. To be able to proceed to such a reconstruction, we would therefore have to be able to penetrate, to a nontrivial degree, the Roman imaginary of, say, the first three centuries of the Republic, and to reconstitute it, more or less satisfactorily (via various types of circumlocutions), in our own idiom. The fundamental precondition for this endeavor is, of course, the philosophical one: to understand that nothing of this idiom of ours can be taken for universally granted (even, for instance, or perhaps particularly, “rational economic behavior”). As was hinted at earlier, the easiest part of this reconstitution concerns the “intentional” “vector”—the drive or push of a society—for it can be deciphered from its activities and its hierarchy of values. The difficulties of reconstructing the “representational” vector are larger, but once we have shaken open *our* world and partially broken its closure, our imagination allows us to invent different, even violently “exotic,” world schemes and to compare them with the observable social-historical phenomena. The most difficult—and, in principle, inaccessible—task is the reconstruction of the “affective” vector. Nobody will ever be able to say how the Greeks lived their religion, nor what initiation into the *mysteria* of Eleusis meant for a newcomer.

And here the circle closes upon itself. Because of the

essential unity of the social space defined by these three “vectors,” our inability to relive the *Stimmung* of an alien society does not make social-historical knowledge vain, but instead stamps it with an essential lacunarity.

Tinos, August 1987—Paris, December 1987

False and True Chaos^{*}

Before broaching my topic as if nothing had happened, I would like to ask us all to stop our internal dialogue for a few seconds and focus upon what our Russian colleague was referring to in his talk and upon that not-so-distant era when some psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in the West were struggling to get people to recognize some terribly real things going on in Russia—struggling, most of the time, against the less stupid than self-interested obstinacy of the international psychiatric establishment.

The term *chaos* has been bandied about at least since 1963,¹ and it seems like some people now want to make it into a kind of catchall concept connected with a method that would be more or less rigorous (today, “rigorous” means *mathematical*), that would embrace all disciplines and, why not, renew philosophy. I won’t be sparing in my admiration for the works and new feats of mathematical physicists. (We’re talking here, I might add, above all about applied mathematics—a term that, when coming from my mouth, isn’t one of contempt.) These efforts allow one, up to a certain point, to explain (and yet, one would still have to agree upon

*“Faux et vrai chaos” was a talk on chaos given September 26, 1992 in the *Nuits de Ville-Évrard* series and published in *La Nuit de Ville-Évrard. Temps, Mémoire, Chaos. Colloques 1990-1992* (Paris: Descartes et Compagnie, 1993), pp. 201-10. Posthumously reprinted in *FP*, 277-84 (333-42 of the 2009 reprint), with a few formal corrections. [T/E: The present translation was first published in [FTPK](#).]

¹T/E: Here we follow the modern Greek edition. The published French version from 1992/1993 had (translating the French into English) “for twenty years.” Castoriadis is probably referring to Edward Lorenz and his 1963 paper delivered to the New York Academy of Sciences. It was nine years later, in 1972 (i.e., twenty years before the present lecture), that Lorenz coined the term *butterfly effect*.

what is meant by *explanation*...) a host of phenomena and to find certain affinities of behavior extending across fields that belong on entirely different registers, as for example turbulent flow and concentrations of asteroid clusters in the solar system. Yet I have strong doubts, first of all, about the essential novelty of the basic ideas behind these works, next, about their philosophical import, and, finally, about their claim to universality. I believe, as I glimpsed a moment ago while listening to him, that on quite a lot of points what I have to say tallies with or gives echo to some of the preoccupations René Thom expressed before me.

First of all, let us be specific about the notion of chaotic phenomena. *Chaos* now ends up meaning anything and everything, every region where there's disorder, where things aren't simple. I know of only one fairly rigorous definition of chaotic phenomena, the one found in David Ruelle's work, which seems generally accepted: these are the processes of temporal evolution in which there is a sensitive—an appreciable, an important—dependence on the initial conditions, namely, upon what was there at the outset or upon the limit conditions, as is said in mathematics, that is to say, upon what surrounds the phenomenon.²

If that is what's at issue, there isn't, indeed, anything new in it as an idea. All of us who have had a car accident must have thought, at one moment or another, "If only I had left home a half-second earlier or a half-second later, I wouldn't have had that accident." No need to remind you

²T/E: David Ruelle, "Sensitive Dependence on Initial Condition," ch. 7 of *Chance and Chaos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 2020), pp. 39-44.

about Pascal and Cleopatra's nose, right?³ If it had been a bit shorter, the face of the world would have been changed. But I defy anyone to write the equation that would connect the nanometers of Cleopatra's nose to what has followed within universal history. And yet, it should be thus.

A moment ago, Thom quite rightly mentioned, in this order, Henri Poincaré, Jacques Hadamard, and Ruelle. In the field of ideas—and not in the elaboration of mathematics, which is much more advanced in the authors Thom mentions—one could add the name James Clerk Maxwell. His 1870 text, "Science and Free Will," Maxwell talks about this sensitive dependence on initial conditions. I shall simply quote a brief passage, although the entire text is of interest. He says:

For example, the rock loosed by frost and balanced on a single point of the mountain-side, the little spark which kindles the great forest, the little word which sets the world a fighting, the little scruple which prevents a man from doing his will, the little spore which blights all the potatoes, the little gemmule which makes us philosophers or idiots. Every existence above a certain rank has its singular points: the higher the rank, the more of them. At these points, influences whose physical magnitude is too small to be taken account of by a finite being, may produce results of the greatest importance.⁴

³T/E: See section 162 of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1660).

⁴T/E: James Clerk Maxwell, "Science and Free Will" (February 1873), in *The Scientific Letters and Papers of James Clerk Maxwell*, vol. 2, 1865-1873, ed. P. M. Harman (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 822.

Now, after this historical reminder, I take up again the question in itself. "Sensitive dependence on initial conditions": first of all, one would have to recall—Thom didn't do so, I believe, on account of modesty—his catastrophe theory. Thom shows how an infinitesimal shift, in the domain of basic variables, can lead precisely to catastrophes (in the sense he gives to this term, which isn't the current meaning) in the domain of the phenomena under observation. But in the end, *sensitive dependence* is too vague an expression; it would be better to speak of *extreme dependence*. What can be said of this notion of extreme dependence? Proceeding very rapidly, I believe it can be understood only as that of a discontinuity that remains to be defined more precisely, but of which the following can already be said: There is extreme dependence when a continuous variation in initial conditions leads to a discontinuous variation in the result. Here, we see that we come back fully to Thom's catastrophe theory under another form. And if the thing has been well formulated in this way, we may discover that all forms of modern science have until now been living upon the following implicit postulate: the postulate of continuity of physical phenomena and even of extant phenomena in general. Moreover, this continuity isn't even mathematical continuity in the full sense of the term; it's mere linearity. This is to say that, for this implicit postulate to be satisfied, it would be necessary that all effects be proportionate to their causes. It suffices to state this idea clearly to perceive how outrageous it is. But anyhow, this idea has already been dealt a blow by the phenomena of turbulence or by quantum physics. What are the contributions from the early 1970s onward that have been made in this domain? It's simply that cases involving discontinuity have taken on much greater importance, and they have been discovered by chance.

That reminds me of a story Henri Atlan tells about the drunk who is searching for his key beneath the lamppost. Another guy passing by asks him:

“What are you doing there?”

“I’m searching for my key.”

“Are you sure it fell under the lamppost?”

“Not at all; in fact, I’m sure it fell somewhere else!”

“But then why are you searching under the lamppost?”

“Because that’s where the light is!”

“Positive” science treats only those phenomena it knows, more or less, how to treat. That’s legitimate. And it proclaims that these phenomena exhaust all that is. That’s an aberration.

Given that one didn’t have computers and couldn’t treat phenomena that exhibit very high levels of discontinuity, these phenomena were dropped by the wayside, as Thom has reminded us, and as Hadamard, Poincaré, and others had already seen. Then came computers; thus, these phenomena could be treated, and from that moment on the thing took on the importance one knows it now has, with results that are far from negligible in the domain of concrete research. And yet, there’s nothing basically new in these results. And there especially isn’t—I come now to the second point—something new in relation to the ideas of determinism and indeterminism. Here, the confusion is such that the idea of chaos is used, on the one hand, by people who want to attack determinism and, on the other hand—and I think that these ones are the most serious—by people who want to show that processes can be perfectly deterministic and yet be unforeseeable or unpredictable.

It's obvious that, with computers, forecasting can go much further than was previously possible. But what is a computer? A computer is a deterministic machine *par excellence*. As the much-talked-about GIGO principle says, "Garbage in, garbage out." If the data are correct and if the software is good, correct results will come out. Anyway you look at it, it's a deterministic machine.

In the third place, there's a question of universality. On this point, I have but a few words to say. In order for chaos theories to have some universal import, one would have to be able to write the nonlinear equations that governed, for example, the collapse of the Roman Empire or the collapse of the Russian Empire. I don't believe that we're there; I even believe that we will never be at that point. And I'm saying even more than this. I'm saying that the presupposition of universalization would be that all that is—absolutely everything—is mathematizable and ensemblizable, that is to say, brought under set theory [*la théorie des ensembles*]. That's a meaningless postulate. My claim is that one can place neither psychical nor social-historical nor even biological phenomena in their totality under algebraic or topological structures, nor under ordered structures. I shall simply pose the following question: Is Beethoven nearer, in the topological sense of the term, to Mozart or to Haydn? Did Romeo and Juliet love each other more or less than Tristan and Isolde? Is the Greco-Roman component in our Greco-Western culture heavier or lighter than the Judeo-Christian component? The day one will begin to say that these statements have some meaning, we'll be able to resume talking about such universality.

Now to the second point. Contrary to what our Russian colleague said a moment ago, in the initial Greek terminology—in Hesiod's *Theogony*, as Olof Gigon has

shown in a book dating from 1945⁵—chaos doesn't at all mean the same thing as *disorder* and *confusion*. Chaos means *the void*; it comes from the verb *chainō* or *chaskō*. What Hesiod says is that at the outset there was the void, there was nothing, and, starting from there, there were the Earth, Heaven, and Eros.⁶ The term *chaos*, with the acceptation now given to it of a confused mixture, appears for the first time in Latin literature from the first century CE. That said, the idea of chaos as effectively an initial Tohu-bohu is already there in Hesiod, in a passage that appears toward the end of the *Theogony*, when he is describing the place where Zeus locked up the Titans and then the Giants after having defeated them; it's a chaotic place, and it's described as such.⁷ It's also to be found in Plato and Aristotle. It isn't called *chaos*, but in the *Timaeus*, Plato's great cosmological dialogue, it's called *chōra*, that is to say, in a sense, space. It's not an amorphous mixture of confused elements; it's pure and absolute becoming as such, that is to say, total indetermination. This is also what *hylē* (matter) means in Aristotle. Plato, like Aristotle, makes this chaos, moreover, one component of the sublunary world, at least upon the condition that forms, ideas, are imposed upon it. In Plato, these forms, these *eidē*, are imposed [French Editors: upon sublunary beings] by the demiurge who gazes at the eternal forms; in Aristotle, these forms are there for all eternity and continue for all eternity. I think that these ideas (of *chōra* and of matter) are very important and that it's from here that we must start, and not

⁵French Editors: Olof Gigon, *Der Ursprung der griechischen Philosophie: von Hesiod bis Parmenides* (Bâle: Schwabe, 1945).

⁶T/E: Hesiod *Theogony* 116-121.

⁷T/E: *Ibid.* 814.

from a deterministic chaos: one must start from the idea of something entirely indeterminate.

But as we no longer want some Platonic demiurge or the ideality of the Aristotelian forms, and as, on the contrary, everything is pushing us to grant the idea of novelty in being itself and not only as a subjective impression, I think that we must make an ontology, a new ontology in which chaos will be the fundamental “determination” of being. I think that one can be precise and specific when talking, on the one hand, about inexhaustibility and, on the other hand, especially about being’s immanent capacity for creation, about a *vis formandi* of being. And one can maintain, and I shall do so, that this inexhaustibility of being comes from this immanence of its *vis formandi*.

Before going any further, I would like to offer a justification of this idea of creation, of immanent creation. There is the absolutely new; novelty doesn’t mean unforeseeability. If you play roulette, you’re perhaps going to hit 27. This is unforeseeable, but it’s not new: this number has already been hit billions of times. It’s not the unforeseeable that is new, and it’s not indetermination as such that yields novelty. When one arrives at the reduction of the wave packet, quantum phenomena are in a sense indeterminate; they can yield nothing but probabilities, yet they are not new. It’s always those miserable protons or electrons that you’re going to find. Novelty is the indeducibility and the unproducibility, that is to say, the inconstructibility of X on the basis of the whole prior situation. This “whole prior situation” always gives you the necessary conditions; yet those conditions, in the cases that interest us—where there is something new—are not sufficient, whence the novelty of what is created *qua* form, *qua* *eidos*. Creation is *ex nihilo*, but it is neither *in nihilo* nor *cum nihilo*: it suddenly appears

[*surgit*] somewhere and it surges forth [*surgit*] by means of things.

Chaos is the ground of being. It's even the groundlessness of being. It's the abyss that is behind every existent thing. And as a matter of fact, this determination that the creation of forms *is* ensures that chaos will always also present itself as cosmos, that is to say, as organized world in the broadest sense of the term, as order. Only, we're constantly discovering that the organization and ultimate order of this cosmos escapes us. They escape us precisely because the various strata of what presents itself as being are irreducible to other supposedly more fundamental or more elementary strata. For my part, I think that there's no possible way of reducing the social-historical to the psychological, nor both of them to something else, and that there is no possible way of reducing the biological to the physicochemical, for the very simple reason that what emerges, for example, already with the biological is a *meaning* that doesn't exist in the physical world—that is to say, a meaning for-itself, a meaning whose aim, for example, is self-preservation, self-reproduction. A star or a galaxy could care less about reproducing itself, about preserving itself. It preserves itself or it doesn't; those are laws.

I believe that what is especially of interest to us here is to what extent we are to speak of the psyche *qua* chaos and *qua* chaos that creates a cosmos or that contributes to the creation of a cosmos—that is to say, of a groundlessness, of an abyss that is at the same time formative potential, *vis formandi*. Why can one do so? First of all, because there's emergence or creation of the human psyche in general as such, *qua* level of being differing from the central nervous system as well as even from the biological psychism. In relation to the central nervous system, there's emergence of

meaning for-itself; in relation to the biological psychism, the meaning that the human psyche creates, or is while creating, is defunctionalized. This meaning, in the human psyche, isn't bound by the preservation of the individual or by the reproduction of the species. Men and women have been making love for thousands, indeed tens of thousands, of years, independent of the fact of knowing whether or not they were going to procreate. A bitch? No. Sexuality is not functional in the human being; it is so for all mammals we know of and for other sexed beings.

What does this defunctionalization mean? It means that the functionality of what was the animal psyche has been shattered by the emergence of something that is constitutive of the human psyche, that is to say, the radical imagination as perpetual flux of representations, affects, and desires. Now, what emerges in this way, what is thus created, is in itself chaotic in the sense I have given to this term, namely, it is perpetual creation; it is permanent surging forth that exits from the abyss or from a sort of groundlessness but that can be only in giving itself, or in taking, a form. And this is so throughout a history whose steps I cannot retrace here—a history that is, moreover, extremely difficult to retrace and in many respects quite unintelligible. I want to underscore here only one feature, or rather two. First, I want to emphasize what's strange, and indeed more than strange, in the relationship between psyche and soma, between soul and body, in the human being in any case, perhaps also in higher mammals and in other mammals, but what really matters to us is the human being. Among the thousand and one strange things that go on in this history and that in my opinion show why one will never be able to ensemblize this affair, mathematize it, is that psyche and soma are at once inseparable and separable. Why are they inseparable? Because

if I had a gun and if I were not nice, I would shoot a bullet into my friend Bourguignon's head, and, if his cranium had a hole in it, there would be no more Bourguignon psyche. They are inseparable also for some other reasons: when you're given psychotropic substances, your psychical functioning changes. And before that, people drank alcohol or took peyote and their psychical functioning changed. Compounds found in Largactil molecules or alcohol compounds somewhere encounter this "immaterial" that is the psyche. Where they encounter it, I do not know. At the same time, psyche and soma are separable, because from birth the psyche is turned toward itself, turned inward, and we have the proof thereof, for example, with infantile anorexia and probably autism, or, more banally, with people's resistance to torture. Someone has been cut to pieces and yet doesn't give up his comrades. Why? Biologically speaking, he should have given them up, and yet he didn't.

Throughout its history and along the ups and downs of this history, this psyche forms a cosmos. It undergoes a long process that culminates in the ordinary individual, you, me, anyone, an individual that is a social creation, but upon the ground of psyche, ever haunted and belabored by the psyche beneath, which always includes the possibility of creating something new. This psyche presents itself under forms that are, each time, more or less determinate. For example, the psychical instances Freud talks about are, somehow or other, determinate forms; nosological entities or simply character-based ones are more or less determinate forms. At the end of this history, we have this individual that can both calculate and dream and can, moreover, dream while calculating and calculate while dreaming, as Freud has shown, since in dreams numbers are in principle analyzable. This individual walks and sings, loves and quite often kills those whom it

loves, and the dreams of this individual, as Freud himself rightly said, are never fully analyzable. Freud didn't talk about chaos apropos of the psyche. Perhaps, since he was a self-proclaimed positivist, the term would have horrified him. But he knew very well what was at issue, as is shown by a passage from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (which no one used to pay any attention to back in the late Seventies):

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unraveled but has also made no further contributions to the dream's content. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation have to, in an even obligatory and quite universal fashion [for Freud, no dream is fully interpretable], remain without any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly dense that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.⁸

⁸T/E: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, pp. 529-30; in English, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5, p. 525, translation altered. This same passage was quoted by Castoriadis in "Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science" (1968), in [CLI](#); in [IIS](#), 279-80; and in "Psychoanalysis and Philosophy" (1997), now in [CL5](#). In modifying the *Standard Edition* translation, we follow Castoriadis's own original French translation.

I believe that in this quotation can be seen what psychical chaos is—and also that it has nothing to do with the term that is today in circulation.

Remarks on Space and Number^{*}

It remains, nonetheless, that mathematics (and, more generally, everything that we can conceive of as a formal system), within the limits sketched above, is wholly subject to ensemblist or identitary logic. The same is obviously true with respect to topology, which has recently become fashionable in the most unexpected places, due perhaps to the excessive attention paid to the signifier at the expense of the signified. Topology can provide striking metaphors or, in certain cases, allow the construction of models less rigid than those of other branches of mathematics. Doing topology, however, is basically no different than doing arithmetic: from a fundamental perspective, in both cases the logical operations and the mode of being of the object are the same.

These lines are taken from page 242 of the 1987 English-language translation of *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, a copy of which I had sent to René Thom when the book first came out in French (1975). Soon thereafter, Thom assured me in a thank-you note from him that my comparison of topology to arithmetic was wholly mistaken.

At the time, I interpreted Thom's remark as a prideful reaction on the part of the great topologist he is. Since then, I have seen that this remark flowed from a philosophical position that has been expressed ever more clearly in his published writings of the last decade. This position grants an ontological primacy to the continuum (and to space, a term to be taken figuratively as much as literally) over the discrete and number. Perhaps he would agree to having it characterized by a reversal of Leopold Kronecker's famous saying: "God made the continuum, all the rest is a creation of man"—this remainder obviously also including natural

^{*}"Remarques sur l'espace et le nombre," a previously unpublished text, first appeared posthumously in *FP*, 285-303 (343-64 of the 2009 reprint). [T/E: The present translation was first published in [FTPK](#).]

integers.¹

Before coming to the discussion of this position, allow me to explain myself about the motivations and the intentions behind what I wrote in 1975.

The Ensadic and Magma

From philosophy's origin, the idea that being far outstrips [*dépasse de loin*] the usual logic has been strongly affirmed under a variety of forms. This began with Anaximander and Heraclitus, was clearly formulated by Plato and Aristotle, and reaches all the way up to Edmund Husserl and Henri Bergson. When I wrote *The Imaginary Institution*, various rumors were intimating that one might have found a more "modern" (and more "rigorous") basis for this transcendence [*dépassement*] of traditional logic by opposing the "discrete"—separate, inanimate, mechanical—to the "continuous"—unified, living, organic. At the same time, the "topological" sleights of Jacques Lacan's hand were making the sheep from the École Normale Supérieure teaching school on the Rue d'Ulm gape and bleat with admiring incomprehension.

My work on the social imaginary and the social-historical as well as on the psyche and the radical imagination of the singular human being had been convincing me since 1964 that in these fields there was something at work other than traditional (Aristotelian, "dialectical," or modern formal) logic, but without one being able to affirm for a second that the latter had no hold thereupon. Whence the idea of a logic

¹T/E: Leopold Kronecker, the great opponent of Georg Cantor's innovations in set theory and mathematics, said, "God made the integers, and all the rest is the work of man."

of magmas including traditional logic (which I called *ensemblistic-identitary logic* and now, for brevity's sake, *ensidic logic*) though not reducible thereto.²

What I understood of contemporary science had persuaded me that such a logic also corresponded to the mode of being of the physical world as well as of the biological world, therefore ultimately of all being with the exception of human artifacts *qua* artifacts. An automobile is ensidic if one regards it as automobile; otherwise, it is an indescribable cluster of "particles" constantly shot through with innumerable neutrinos and combined perhaps with some amount of "dark matter," all of it governed in part by some rather unintelligible "laws." An algorithm considered as such, separated from the axioms that ground it, or a disembodied Turing machine is purely ensidic, if one abstracts from the presuppositions of their existence and from the consequences to which they may lead.

Ensidic logic underlies an infinite quantity of ineliminable propositions, of the kind $2 + 2 = 4$, *a* is not *not-a*, *anthrōpos anthrōpon gennai* (man begets man),³ one cannot be two places at once, and so on. This logic is explicitly embodied in those fundamental activities of every society that are *legein* and *teukhein*.⁴ It is everywhere dense in being. One cannot analyze a dream without appealing to ensidic logic; nor can one analyze a dream while remaining

²See "Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation" (1973), now in [CL1](#), and "The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy" (1983), now in [CL2](#).

³T/E: Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1070a28. "Man" intended, here and elsewhere, in the sense of humans.

⁴See ch. 5 of [IIS](#).

confined therein. Its basic presupposition is the existence of sets in the “naive” mathematical sense: an affirmation of the existence of clearly-distinct and well-defined elements that can be separated and combined at will, and whose properties of “combinability” and separability can be transmitted hereditarily to sets (or “classes”) that may be formed on their basis. Perhaps the most striking property is the possibility of effecting partitions, that is, exhaustive division of a set into parts that do not encroach upon one another (and whose intersections are, in pairs, empty), with the possibility of pushing this partition all the way to well-defined “indivisible” elements, ensidic atoms.

It is important to underscore this last feature, which also shows why the usual (mathematical) idea of the continuum hardly helps us to go beyond ensidic logic. The set of real numbers \mathbb{R} is supposed to be the very embodiment of the continuous, at the antipodes of the discrete. However, every element of this set is supposed to be well defined and clearly distinct from all others (and obviously also from those that are “as close as you please” to it). A question that will retain our attention below is the following: What becomes of this property when it is discovered that one can define, and therefore distinguish, almost no element of \mathbb{R} ? Likewise, a (real) function in a space of functions is, as such, supposed to be clearly distinct and well defined—independent, once again, of the fact that its definition would require the definition of a doubly uncountable infinity of almost indefinable elements. “Fuzzy sets” belong to the ensidic since their definition is probabilistic: probabilities can be defined only ensidically (Borelian sigma-algebra, etc.). For the same reason, inasmuch as it assigns determinate probabilities (“amplitudes”) to quantum elements, quantum indeterminacy is deterministic, therefore ensidic.

Mathematical Continuum and Effectively Actual Continuum

If it is true that being goes beyond ensidic logic, then it goes beyond (while still containing) both the continuous and the discrete, space as well as number, geometry as well as arithmetic, topology as well as algebra, as these notions are defined mathematically (and, for good measure, ordered structures must be added thereto). If “quantification” cannot exhaust what is, topology could not do so either.

Let us be more specific about this point. “Interesting” topology (let us leave aside here trivial [*grossière*] topology and discrete topology) works with the continuous. Does the continuum pertain to ensidic logic? Every compact and connected space is called *continuous*. The definition of connectivity supposes that of partition; the definition of compactness that of a separate space, therefore that of distinct points possessing disjunctive neighbors. In any case, the definition of a topological space brings numerous notions of set theory into play. If, therefore, the continuum is mathematizable—which certainly does not mean quantifiable—it is ensidic, therefore an animal of the same family as arithmetic (as numbers). It is not the same unity, but they have a common ancestor: the set.

Can the same be said, however, of the “intuitive” continuum or of the “real” continuum? We have an immediate representation (a pure intuition, as Immanuel Kant would say) of space and time as continuous: neither the one nor the other includes any holes. The living being moves of itself [*Le vivant se meut*] in reality, and we ourselves move with a continuous movement in a continuous space and a continuous time. That (conditionally, with Zenonian reservations) keeps us from considering the continuum as a

simple mathematical (ensidic?) artifact.⁵ But then, for exactly the same reasons, we are prevented from granting any privilege whatsoever to space over number, to geometry over arithmetic, to topology over algebra. Each of us, perhaps wrongly, represents himself as one and as having two arms and two legs. *The* living being tries to avoid *a* or *one* predator; *the* predator hunts *a* or *one* prey. The definite article, as much as and more than the indefinite article, supposes unity. To speak of movement presupposes the one (and the fundamental schema of iteration, which is implicit in Peano's axioms), the reverse not being, in the abstract, true. "One" is not simply a "category," as on the Kantian table. It is presupposed by all the other categories to an exorbitant degree. And if one passes over to the other side of the mirror, the living being's very existence forces us to recognize the one. For, the form *one*, imposed upon the simply physical being [*l'étant simplement physique*], certainly presupposes an ontological attribute on the latter's part: that it would be *unifiable*—just as the imposition of any other form upon matter presupposes that the latter would be *formable*. It cannot be said, however, that it "exits" from the object with the same force as in the case of the living being. The unity of a galaxy or even of a molecule is not of the same order of intensity, if I may put it this way, as that of an oak or a snake. The unity of a living individual is not simply unifiability via the observer; this unity is in itself and for itself.

A similar argument can be used, however, concerning

⁵I especially do not want to be misunderstood here as concerns the ensidic. The true mathematician's activity is not ensidic. Such activity is as poietic as any other kind. Indeed, it can be one of the most imaginative of human activities. It is the *caput mortuum* of this activity's results that, ideally, tends toward total ensidicness.

the effectively actual continuum. For, in the same way, the continuity of the living being compels our recognition. It can even be said that the living being is discrete only insofar as it is continuous, and that it is continuous only insofar as it is discrete. *A living being—a tree, a whale—is one inasmuch as it is continuous as life, as “movement” in Aristotle’s sense, and as “extension”: incessant interaction of the parts among themselves and with the whole within a “closed set” that, it too, is in itself and for itself. The living being as such is not generally divisible; its nature is not preserved after undergoing partition. I shall come back to this point.*

Digression on Physics

The continuity of the physically real plunges us into other perplexities. Special as well as general relativity postulates a space-time continuum. Quantum physics sets lower bounds to the units of energy-matter (Planck’s constant) but also of space-time (Planck time, 10^{-43} of a second). If there’s a lower bound of time units and an upper limit of speeds (the speed of light, 3×10^8 meters/second), the result would be a minimum unit of space of 3×10^{-35} meters. Photons would, in a vacuum, make a short hop of 3×10^{-33} centimeters every 10^{-43} of a second. They *can* do no more and no less. As is known, quantum theory raises tremendous problems. Its reconciliation with general relativity is one of these. Another one, which seems to me just as weighty, is that of “dark matter”: if the latter represents, as is claimed, 90 to 99 percent of the universe’s energy-matter, what conceivable way could there be of reconciling the existence of such an inert matter—which does not interact with the rest, save gravitationally—and the quantum theories (chromodynamics) of the interactions among particles (or “forces”), which are,

speaking in logicomathematical terms, “looped”? One would above all, however, have to grant that the space-time of physics cannot be likened to an \mathbb{R}^4 but, rather, to a sort of Z^4 (or rather to a $Z^3 \times Z'$, with, respectively, the “units” “1” = 3×10^{-35} of a meter and “1'” = 10^{-43} of a second).⁶ The movement must therefore be broken down into a countless series of small hops from one spatiotemporal “cell” to another, then to another, and so on. Nothing would then distinguish these short hops from a disappearance of the particle from the position (x, y, z, t) and its recreation at the position (x', y', z', t') . The stability of everyday objects would thus correspond, once more, to the roughness [*grossièreté*] of our perception. Perhaps here we have the view that is most compatible with the spirit of quantum theory. What would nevertheless remain to be done would be to justify the legitimacy of using differential calculus over discontinuous magnitudes (though this does not embarrass anyone in thermodynamics).

The Living Being as Such

Would not this discontinuity also undermine the continuity of the living being, via its purely physical substrate? No, if we grant a “metaphysical”—that is to say, ontological—distinction. *Qua physical body*, the living being is (or is not) discontinuous, according to the diktats of physics as each time currently accepted. But *qua living being*, it achieves a temporal and spatial continuity without analogy in the physical world, a “strictly local” continuity for the living

⁶T/E: Unlike in the cases of real numbers (\mathbb{R}) and natural numbers (\mathbb{N}), we are unable to represent here, in proper typographical manner, the mathematical symbols for integers (\mathbb{Z}) and, below, rational numbers (\mathbb{Q}).

individual, “weakly local” for generations and for the species and, finally, for the earth’s ecosystem. This continuity of the *vital*—of the *ti ēn einai*, of the *eidos* and of the *logos*, Aristotle would say⁷—is constituted, created in fact, by the living being. (At another level, another sort of “continuity” will be found in the psychical properly speaking and in the social-historical, but a discussion of this would lead us too far afield.) This is the continuity of the set of processes (of the labor of the “powers that resist death”)⁸ that make of a living organism something other than an assemblage of molecules and that are transmitted hereditarily as much as and more than “hereditary characteristics,” the latter sort of transmission presupposing the former. Mutations, for example, are mutations and act as such (even and especially when they are lethal) only because they arise within a living cell. It is this veritable *vis viva* that I do not hesitate to call the *substance* (the form, the *eidos*) of life.

Number

I have tried to show that neither number nor effectively actual space can be considered as having priority over the other. I will now attempt to show something more: Neither number nor space can be considered simply ensidic. In both cases, the ensidic and the poietic, the different and the other, the repetitive and the creative, are intertwined, as they

⁷*De Anima* 2.1.412b16, 2.2.414a13. [T/E: Castoriadis regularly translates *ti ēn einai* as “what it was to be.”]

⁸T/E: “In his *Physiological Researches upon Life and Death* (1800),” Xavier Bichat ([English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)), “defined life as ‘the totality of those set of functions which resist death.’”

are also intertwined in every effectively actual being [*tout étant effectif*] and in Being as such [*l'être comme tel*].

Let us note that the set of natural integers and every theory of this set are based upon some irreducible presuppositions, that is, ones neither deducible nor producible from something else. In Peano's axioms, they have the form of a primary element or distinguished element that is the successor of none other, of iteration (of an indefinitely iterable "successor" operation), of identity or equality, of propositional implication, and so on. Once this set was given, its ensuing extensions—which appear "natural" but required a few dozen millennia—led to sets of positive rational numbers, positive algebraic numbers, rational integers, real algebraic numbers *tout court*, complex algebraic numbers, and finally *calculable* real and complex transcendental numbers (*algebraic differentials*, following Émile Borel's term).

All these sets can indeed [*effectivement*] be constructed (their elements are calculable or computable) by means of well-defined operations and algorithms that themselves can be effectuated. Now, the set of real numbers *tout court* (and, as a result, also complex numbers *tout court*, but I shall not talk about the latter since, for our purposes, the set \mathbb{C} of complex numbers is isomorphic with \mathbb{R}^2) is not effectively defined, for almost none of its elements are effectively calculable.

Let us, in order to simplify things, consider the set of numbers contained in the interval $[0, 1]$.⁹ We know that it is equipotent to (has the same power, the same cardinal, as) the set of positive real numbers \mathbb{R}^+ . All these numbers can be written in the form of an infinite series of figures such as 0,...

⁹T/E: Castoriadis is using *nonstandard* notation to indicate a "half-closed" or "half-open" interval. Standard notation would yield: " $[0, 1)$."

(possibly all zeros starting from a certain place). In binary notation, this yields an infinite series of 0s and 1s. The set of these series is therefore equipotent to the set of positive real numbers. And as one knows (Georg Cantor's diagonal proof), the latter has the power of the continuum, or is uncountably infinite. But it is also known, since the work of Borel, Richard von Mises, Abraham Wald, and quite particularly Andrey Kolmogorov, Raymond Solomonoff, Gregory J. Chaitin, and Anders Martin-Löf, that almost all number series are random. It is indeed legitimate and logical to call a nonrandom series, if it exists, a law (in contemporary language, a program = an algorithm) for producing in succession its terms. Thus, $\sqrt{2}$ can be calculated with as many decimals as you please, following a known algorithm. Likewise, the numbers Borel called algebraic differentials, such as e or π , can effectively be calculated; for e , it suffices to push the calculation of the sums of the terms of the form $1/n!$, $n \in \mathbb{N}$ in order to have as many decimals as you please; likewise, π is approximated in $4(1 - 1/3 + 1/5 - 1/7 + 1/9 - 1/11 + 1/13 \dots)$. But every law, every program, every algorithm has to be able to be written (formulated) with a finite number of signs. Therefore, the set of these "laws," programs, algorithms would be at best countable. But the set of series (and/or of real numbers) is not countable; there is an "infinitely more." Therefore, almost none of the elements of \mathbb{R} are effectively calculable; almost all the elements of \mathbb{R} are "random." Each of them could be produced only by an infinite series of "genuine" drawings of lots (and about them, it could never be proved that they do indeed produce random elements, since, after, for example, an arbitrarily large number of drawings, the series of previous drawings *might* begin again). The calculable elements of \mathbb{R} are countable, and their set is negligible within the set of real numbers.

In mathematics, we are juggling with a set about which we do not know and will never in any way know (even for the abstract data of an inapplicable law) almost any of its elements. And there is, I believe, an abuse of language or at least ambiguity when we call \mathbb{R} *complete*, intending thereby, for example, that the \mathbb{R} *accessible to us* contains the limits of all Cauchy series; it contains the limits of the Cauchy series *that are accessible to us*, that is to say, that we would be able to define, whose set is evidently countable. Likewise, one could specify a Dedekind cut only through the effectively actual data of the two subsets of \mathbb{R} it defines—which, once again, is possible only for a countable set of cases.

Let us agree to write \mathbb{R}_c as the set of calculable real numbers in the sense defined above and \mathbb{R}_a the set of “aleatory” or “random” numbers. The set \mathbb{R} of real numbers *tout court* will then be the union of \mathbb{R}_c and \mathbb{R}_a . \mathbb{R}_c is not continuous in the mathematical sense (it is not connected; every element of \mathbb{R}_a divides it into two open ones). More than that, if Cantor’s proof is valid, it is uncountably “holey”; it is but a succession of uncountably infinite holes held together by a succession of countable points. (The apparent or real paradox implied by this phrase cannot detain us here.)

What, then, is \mathbb{R} , the set of real numbers, if the near-totality of its elements can be exhibited neither in person nor by a series of effectively actual operations, be they infinite, nor by a generative law [*une loi d’engendrement*], this impossibility being rigorously demonstrable, whereas we can demonstrate at the same time, just as rigorously (Cantor), that it “exists”? I propose to consider \mathbb{R} as a metaphor for the Chaos and \mathbb{R}_c as a metaphor for the Cosmos, part of the Chaos engendered on the basis of the Chaos and ever thrusting its roots into the latter, somehow or other determinate (somehow or other, on account of Gödel *et alii*) and displaying multiple

organizations (laws). Of course, neither 1 nor 0 are “engendered by laws”: they remain as metaphors of *yes* and *no*, of *there is* and *there is not*. Let us say again that \mathbb{R} is the metaphor for the poietic and \mathbb{R}_c the metaphor for the ensidic *in materia*. (*In forma*, the poietic in mathematics is the positing of axioms and the creation of methods of proof; the ensidic, deductive and computational algorithms.) It can yet again be said that \mathbb{R} furnishes an imperfect model of a magma: one can extract therefrom, or construct therein, an indefinite number of ensemblistic organizations, but it absolutely is not constructible via ensemblistic operations.

Richard Dedekind wrote to Cantor that he represented sets to himself as inexhaustible sacks. Cantor answered him that he, Cantor, represented them to himself, rather, as an abyss.

The Measure of Space

What is \mathbb{R} ? Here is an answer that is as good as any other: the set of infinite arrangements, with repetition, of the signs (0, 1). Why are we obliged to think about it and take it into account? Because of Cantor. In what way do we have more need of it than any other product of an unlimited combinatory? Because we have decided that one can establish a biunique correspondence between its elements and the points of a “real” straight line. What justifies this decision? In the first place, our intuition: it is impossible for us to envisage a real straight line made up essentially of holes. Even if we can specify the abscissae only of a very minute number of points that “make it up,” we can “see” the straight line—space in general—only as really complete.

Our intuition of continuity is an intuition of the continuity of *kinēsis*. And in the latter, local movement

undoubtedly remains privileged: Aristotle had privileged it already, despite the care he took to distinguish the four species of movement. Since Galileo, local movement has eliminated the other ones. The continuity of *kinēsis* is, at once, continuity of space and of time. In normal life, I cannot go from A to B without covering all the points in between. I cannot leap from now to later—to the moment when I shall have returned home, when some pain will have stopped, when some rendezvous will have taken place. Things proceed differently only at the margin of the everyday world—with magic, shamanism, seven-league boots, divine interventions, or cases of divine omnipresence. But these features pertain to other sorts of considerations.

But how do we go from number to space, or the reverse, if numbers culminate in \mathbb{R} , almost no element of which can be “given”—whereas intuition, the “perception” of everyday, “phenomenological” space and time, are perceptions of a continuum?

Everyday space, the space of the first natural stratum, is locally quasi Euclidean (see below). It “lends itself” to identity: displacements preserve distances, congruencies (superimpositions) can *de jure* always be effectuated. (Neither one of these properties has any meaning for time, but via movements or spatial phenomena—celestial sphere, clepsydra—a “measured” ensidic time is constituted that suffices both for primitive calendars and for quantum calculations.) It thereby lends itself to measure; not measure in the mathematical sense—we shall come back to this—but to elementary measure, sufficient as to need/usage (*pros tēn chreian hikanōs*, Aristotle would have said).¹⁰ We are still in

¹⁰T/E: Castoriadis takes this phrase from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.

the debt of the initial decision of a Paleolithic man or woman who posited that some piece of wood = 1. He or she had to save some nearly straight piece of wood (as straight as possible, for multiple reasons of convenience) in order, for example, to equalize the stilts of his or her lake-dwelling home. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the philosophers of the Oxford school, such as Robert Grosseteste or Walter Burley, were clear on this point: "Since the *continuum* is divisible to infinity, therefore in a *continuum* there is no primary and unique measure according to Nature, but only according to the institution of men."¹¹ In our language, this immemorial man posits: Such and such a compact part of \mathbb{R} = 1. Compact, in a noncontinuous sense, since not connected: the branch is a closed set, and if I break it in two, I have two closed sets (and I must be able to break it in two, in three, and so on, otherwise it is not a good measuring instrument).

It is not vain to recall, for the benefit of the phenomenologists, that everyday space, the space of the first natural stratum, is only quasi Euclidean, and that only locally. This everyday space certainly is not homogeneous or even isotropic; it has an above and a below; railroad tracks converge in the distance; the direction of any deme of Attica toward Athens is unique and privileged for the deme's inhabitants. It suffices to look at a map of the national railroad network to notice that French space is neither homogeneous nor isotropic. And it is only quasi continuous in Aristotle's sense, in the sense of divisibility—since divisibility can never be pushed very far. As soon as reflection begins, the world of life, the life-world, appears problematic.

¹¹Walter Burley, quoted by G. J. Whitrow, *The Natural Philosophy of Time*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 215; reprinted in 1990. [T/E: The first edition dates from 1961.]

Euclidean geometry, as has been said for a very long time (at least since Plato), is an outrageous idealization of this space. And it is constructed upon the intuition of continuity, especially that of movements (drawing of a straight line, rotation of a segment around a fixed extremity). Leaving aside here its “arithmetization” by David Hilbert, one can observe that, from Pythagoras and Eudoxus by way of Descartes and through till Augustin-Louis Cauchy, Karl Weierstrass, Dedekind, and Cantor, people have applied themselves to making algebraic entities correspond with the straight line. Why this idealization “works” is a first question, which I will not broach here. By what right we make algebraic and meta-algebraic (\mathbb{R}) entities correspond to the idealized space of Euclidean (or, indeed, non-Euclidean) geometry is another question, one that is rendered more acute when we keep the previous one in mind. The transfer of the properties of \mathbb{N} to the counting of the sheep of the herd or of the individuals of the clan does not raise a question, or not to the same degree. But what justifies the transfer of the properties of \mathbb{R} onto a straight line?

That this question is not futile is shown by a brief return to Zeno’s paradoxes.

Digression on Zeno

Contrary to widespread belief, Zeno’s paradoxes are still alive and still being discussed.¹² I shall limit myself here

¹²Among the recent discussions of these paradoxes, that of Whitrow (*ibid.*, pp. 190-200) is remarkable for its solidity and its concision. Alexandre Koyré’s “Remarques sur les paradoxes de Zénon” (1922; tr. from the German by Mimica Cranaki in *Études d’histoire de la pensée philosophique* [Paris: Gallimard, 1971], pp. 9-35 [T/E: this text originally

to that of Achilles and the tortoise, which, I believe, is the most fecund, the clearest, and contains the basic features of the other ones, as we shall see. Let us note that Zeno's paradoxes are not resolved by neo-Kantian refutations (Max Adler's, for example). That Zeno would be said to be dividing space *ad infinitum*, but not time, is clearly an aberration: his paradoxes are based precisely upon one-to-one correspondence between the "elements" of the spatial axis and those of the temporal axis. Neither can it be said that, space and time being pure forms of intuition, the attempt to grasp them by means of the understanding can end only in paradoxes. To accept this argument would be to condemn both mathematics and mathematical physics to nonsense.

In modern language, the aporia can be condensed into two propositions:

1. Whatever the tortoise's initial (finite) advance, a , and whatever the ratio of the speeds of the tortoise, b , and of Achilles, c , c being greater than b , \mathbb{R} (or \mathbb{Q}) being Archimedean, there always exists a time t such that $t(c - b) > a$. This is why Achilles will overtake the tortoise.

appeared in the *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 5 (1922), 603-628]) still retains its full interest today. Suffice it to note that Charles Sanders Peirce and Alfred North Whitehead rejected these paradoxes (Peirce considered Achilles and the tortoise to be a "silly little catch" [T/E: quoted in Whitrow, p. 196], and Whitehead attributed Zeno's "fallacy...to his ignorance of infinite numerical series" [T/E: quoted in *ibid.*, p. 197, Castoriadis translating "numerical" as *mathématiques*]), whereas Bertrand Russell considered them "all immeasurably subtle and profound" [T/E: quoted in *ibid.*, p. 196], and William James thought that refutations of Achilles' paradox "miss Zeno's point entirely" [T/E: quoted in *ibid.*, p. 198]. See, too, n. 13.

2. There always exists a bijective mapping between the segments $[a, a + b]$ (small d) and $[0, ct]$.¹³ In other words, these segments have the same power and, similarly, they have the same power as the lapse of time t . In still other words, there are as many spatiotemporal “points” in a given course Achilles takes and in the course of the tortoise, who retains over the latter an advance d (it is a matter of indifference whether these segments may be considered closed intervals of \mathbb{R} or of \mathbb{Q}). This is why Achilles will never overtake the tortoise.

Today’s reader will skip over the reading of the second proposition and will consider it, rightly, a fallacy. For, with the same argument, one would prove that Achilles (or any moving body) could never travel over anything but an arbitrarily small segment and, in the end, *no* segment at all. This, moreover, is what Zeno himself said with the “dichotomy” paradox (before arriving at abscissa point x , the moving object has to arrive at abscissa point $x/2$, and so forth). It will be said that Zeno’s argument is confusing the *power* (the cardinals) of the intervals of \mathbb{R} (or of \mathbb{Q}) and the measure of these segments. The measure of the distances upon a line implies a “finite” unit of measure, whereas what is proposed in the “counting” of the elements of an infinite field (\mathbb{R} or \mathbb{Q}) is to grasp these elements as “infinitely small,” “vanishing,” or “participating neither in space nor in time” (definition of the “point” by Euclid). At the very most, the reader will say, one is falling back upon the old metaphysical saw: How is one to produce an extended line on the basis of

¹³T/E: It is unclear what “(small d)” is still doing here. An original copy of the French typescript had “les segments $a + bt - d$ (d petit) et ct .”

nonextended points, and so on?

Things, however, are not that simple.

Every (open or closed) interval of \mathbb{R} or \mathbb{Q} has as many points as any other (and even, if one takes the necessary precautions, as \mathbb{R} or \mathbb{Q} themselves). This is what Zeno is basing himself upon, with a different terminology, obviously. In fact, I think that he must be credited with the first proof of this proposition (for the set of positive rational numbers) and, implicitly, of the initial intuition of the idea of the power of an infinite set.

To that, Aristotle rightly responded: A segment is not made up of an “addition” of points. This is true. But the question arises: *Of what*, then, is a segment made? Clearly, a segment is made on the basis of other segments—since it is *divisible*. And it is divisible *ad infinitum* in the sense that there is no conceivable lower bound to the segment. (That is so in mathematics. Mentioned above were the questions raised in this regard by quantum physics. But if there exists an “absolute” minimum unit of length—in other words, if space and time are made of indivisible units—we come back, as has been seen, to the idea that movement is made of a succession of “immobilities”—this is the meaning of the paradox of the arrow, which is motionless at every instant.) In other words, there is no absolute unit of length. Of course, however far one pushes the division, the number of minimum segments (of the same length) in two segments of different length will be different. It will become identical only if the limit is exceeded and the very small segment becomes an “infinitesimal segment”—a point. This is what Zeno does and what Aristotle, rightly, forbids him to do. But the question then remains: What gives us the right to identify the (real or rational) straight line with the algebraic field of real or

rational numbers?¹⁴

The Measure of Space (Continued)

The paradox of Achilles and the tortoise is “resolved” if one grants the following distinction: the power of a set is not, in general, the same thing as the measure of this set. That the segment (a, b) might be smaller than the segment $(a, b + c)$, if the segment (b, c) has a strictly positive measure, has nothing to do with the power of the “corresponding” parts of

¹⁴My object here is not to discuss these paradoxes for their own sake, and I am roughly in agreement with Whitrow’s conclusion that “definite logical antinomies result if we try to combine the hypothesis of continuity, and hence of infinite divisibility, with that of the transitional nature of time” (*ibid.*, p. 200), except that I think that the root of the difficulties is just as much on the side of “continuity” as on that of the “transitional nature of time.” Here, briefly, is why. It is impossible to divide the segment $(0, 1)$ into an infinite number of *equal* segments: if the segments are equal, there will be a finite number of them in the segment $(0, 1)$. But it obviously is possible to divide the segment $(0, 1)$ into an *infinite* number of *unequal* segments, for example, decreasing ones: thus, the segments defined by the points $0, \frac{1}{2}, \frac{3}{4}, \frac{7}{8} \dots, (2^n - 1)/2^n \dots$. The mathematician will say that the sum of these segments tends toward 1, and he will go on to something else. This is what Whitehead does when he reproaches Zeno for not knowing the sum of the series 2^{-n} ($n = 1, 2, 3 \dots$), which is “equal to 1.” But it is equal to 1 in the sense that *the difference between the sum and 1 can be rendered as small as you please*. The mathematician says, *As small as you please means nil*, and he goes on his way. The philosopher (as it happens, Zeno) says that the identification *as small as you please* = 0 in no way goes without saying. And he is right. The proof? Nonstandard analysis, created starting in 1960 (see Abraham Robinson, *Non-Standard Analysis* [Amsterdam, North Holland: North Holland-Holland Publishing Co., 1966], in particular chapter X, “Concerning the History of the Calculus,” pp. 260-82 [T/E: a revised edition was published in 1974]).

\mathbb{R} or of \mathbb{Q} . There is noncongruence of segments, whose power is the same. The relationship between space and number is strange.

This may be seen first of all by noting that this distinction does not always hold. In \mathbb{N} , for example, the “distance” from n to n' (for $n' \leq n$) is equal to the cardinal (minus 1) of the part $\{0, 1, \dots, n' - n\}$. It may above all be seen by recalling the difficulties with the very notion of measure—at least, as soon as one exits from one-dimensional spaces.

According to a fundamental ontological proposition, space and time are nothing if they are not also, in one manner or another, determinate, that is to say, ensidic (which does not necessarily mean measurable or quantifiable in some pertinent fashion). It happens (*sumbainei*) that space and time are ensemblizable in several ways: they allow ordered structures and algebraic and topological structures. But it does not at all go without saying that space would be algebraizable, that is, numerable. Number has to pass by way of measure. In primitive terms, one cuts a piece of wood and one makes a unit of length out of it, which allows one to “measure” straight-line segments. The operation is “squarable” and “cube-able” in physical space. But the same does not go for mathematical space. Felix Hausdorff was the first to formulate the problem of universal measure: There exists, for every bounded subset A of \mathbb{R} , a positive real number $m(A)$, nonzero for $A \neq \emptyset$, such that:

- 1) $m(A \cup B) = m(A) + m(B)$ if A and B are disjunctive;
- 2) $m(A) = m(B)$ if A and B derive from each other via translation or rotation.

Hausdorff demonstrated (1914) that the problem is insoluble for n equal to or greater than 3 (which does not prevent us from continuing to measure volumes). Stefan Banach constructed such a mapping for $n = 1$ and for $n = 2$ (though this last mapping is not unique). But he also, in using the axiom of choice, constructed what is called the Banach-Tarski paradox (1923), which is equivalent to the assertion that one can always decompose two bounded subsets containing at least one inside point (for example, two balls with different radii) into a finite and equal number of disjunctive and equal parts (or, one can cut up an orange and the visible universe into an equal number of equal, mutually disjunctive segment areas [*quartiers*]). This result, counterintuitive if there ever was one, does not seem to trouble the sleep of mathematicians unduly yet seemed to Borel to be an additional reason for rejecting the axiom of choice.¹⁵

Let us recall that all “measures” used by topology (distances, gaps, norms, seminorms, and so on) are basically one-dimensional mappings of $E \times E$ in \mathbb{R}^+ concerning pairs of points, as strange as the nature of these “points” (functions, series, etc.) or of the mapping used (p -adic distance, etc.) might be.

Generalization of the Notion of Space

Is there a side through which space escapes the ensidic? Yes, but this side is not *immediately* topology. It is *qualitative inhomogeneity*, itself engendered by creation, which has to be temporalized and spatialized, even when it is a matter of idealities. The Platonic ideas *coexist* necessarily

¹⁵Émile Borel, *Éléments de la théorie des ensembles* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1949), pp. 200-201, 206-10, 226-29, 236-37, 239, 310.

in a “supracelestial site”: “It is necessary that all being be somewhere, in some site and occupying a certain place, and...what is not on the Earth or somewhere in Heaven is nothing” (*Timaeus* 52b). Likewise, there is a space of mathematics in general, not “mathematical space” but the space in which mathematics exists and that it makes exist in existing, a receptacle of the partially ordered coexistence of the many [*du multiple*], created by mathematicians’ creations and altered by these creations. The space of mathematics is not the same before and after Pythagoras, before Descartes-Newton-Leibniz and afterward, before Cantor and afterward, before Gödel and afterward, and so on. In this space coexist today natural integers and finite fields, regular polyhedrons and the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem, the set of prime numbers and Fréchet filters.

Thom rightly writes, “every quality can be seen, to a certain extent, as a spatial form, an extended form in an abstract space.”¹⁶ But it is not obvious that such spaces would be liable to topological treatment. We are dealing here with the most general idea of “space,” which is not treatable mathematically except, perhaps, in trivial [*triviale*] fashion.

And yet it is true that, in the domain of the mathematizably “spatial”—which happens, in general, to be multidimensional; why several dimensions “are needed” is another matter—*qua* spatial, the link between quality and topology is manifest and primordial. (It suffices to recall that, algebraically speaking, one- or two-dimensional spaces cannot truly be distinguished and that one must have recourse to topology in order to establish their heterogeneity.) Here, *eidos* takes on its primary meaning: aspect, figure, form. What

¹⁶René Thom, *Prédire n'est pas expliquer* (Paris: Eschel, 1991), p. 53; reprint: Paris: Flammarion, 1993.

in spatial forms is nontrivial [*non trivial*] quickly leads to topology, just as, more particularly, the grasping of the passage from one form to another, inasmuch as we are talking about the emergence of a form, leads to catastrophe theory. Of course, topology and catastrophe theory labor under ensidic and relatively rigid notions (closed set, boundary, etc.). But that is the consequence of the ensidic dimension, which is everywhere dense in being and here particularly pertinent and rich. It is absurd to accuse catastrophe theory of not being “explanatory.” Its purpose is to describe what is at stake in the passage from one form to another. It does not aim at establishing a “dynamic of processes”: such a dynamic depends upon the temporal evolution of quantitative factors, and it would still remain to be “explained” why these factors vary and to establish the law of their variation. Neither does it aim at “explaining” the creation of a form, an attempt that would be, let it be said in passing, absurd. But in order to be able to speak of a new form, one must be able to describe it rigorously—and it is here that topology and catastrophe theory step in.

Would it be presumptuous for me to note that, in 1975, I was not wrong, and neither was René Thom?

Final Remarks

Being is familiar with [*connaît*] the “discrete” since it *is* through ruptures, creations, heterogeneous strata. It also knows [*connaît*] the continuous, insofar as these ruptures and these forms that emerge therefrom are, perforce, conditioned by what “precedes” them and what “surrounds” them—creation is *ex nihilo*, not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*—and insofar as each ontological level makes be a proper “space” and a proper “time.” Even though these terms are taken

metaphorically, they are no less imposing here. And they imply each other in the strangest fashion. An “order of coexistences” implies the *co-*, that is, a simultaneity. *Qua* order, an “order of successions” implies an “extension,” along which there are succession and an order of this succession. Leibniz thought perhaps he could offer definitions; he gave only (and admirably) circular explanations.

There is a “pure” idea of extension that is ineliminable. It happens that there is the many. And we can think the many only *within* a receptacle—or as *making be* a receptacle that will gather and welcome it. The many is in a continuity—or makes be a continuity by being; the many is discrete, otherwise it would not be many. The many can be different, or else other. In the first case, one has an ensidic extension; in the second, a poietic (imaginary) extension.

The many is not deducible. Every deduction (or production) presupposes the many and does so under the same heading and to the same degree as it presupposes the one. To put it in a more detailed way: If there were only being toward itself (*kath' auto*, Aristotle *Metaphysics* 4.1.1003a21-22), only the one would be abstractly conceivable (but for whom?). But being toward itself manifests itself; it is also being for us. Or: Some beings [*des êtres*] surge forth making being toward itself [*l'être vers soi*] manifest itself to them, making it become being for them [*l'être pour eux*]. We are something other than simply being toward itself, since we are those ones for whom there is being (toward itself and for us). As soon as we are, there is the many on account of the very fact that we are. And that is not a “deduction,” since “we are” is pure fact. And it happens (*sumbainei*), unless we are crazy, that even in the world without us the many has been, is, and will be. This is also a pure fact.

The many is one (otherwise it would be nothing), and

in the many there are ones. But the many as such is not the continuous. The many divides itself, bifurcates between discrete and continuous—which are cooriginary. The units of a cardinal (the “moments” of an ordinal) coexist in an “extension.” And reflection forces us to grant that every extension includes (is made up of?) an uncountable infinity of indivisible elements, the elements of the set of real (random and calculable) numbers that, almost all of them, will remain forever unspecifiable. This is why there can be no quarrel between space and number; this is also why their relationship gives rise to interminable aporias—for example, Zeno, and the paradox or the riddle of space’s measurability.

July-December 1993

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 April 2009 reprint of *Figures du pensable*, the (uncorrected) French source for the present [CL6](#) translation.

- 9n6 1982-1983 ; = 1982-1983) ;
- 12 l'édition . = l'édition.
- 17 Ajouter à la note de publication:
"L'Anthropogonie chez Eschyle et chez Sophocle" in *La Grèce pour penser l'avenir*, intro. Jean-Pierre Vernant (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), pp. 151-71.
- 17 la tragédie **grecque** {??!!}
- 28 νόσον; = νόσου;
- 28 κατώ κισα. = κατώκισα.
- 31 *pasan gèn thalassan esbaton tèi hèmeterai tol mèi katankasantes* = *pasan men thalassan kai gèn esbaton tèi hèmeterai tol mèi katanakasantes* {voir: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0199%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D41%3Asection%3D4>}
- 34 *legôn.* = *legein*.
- 34 ἦ = ἦ
- 34 ἄλλος = ἄλλος

- 35 *Unheimliche* = *unheimlich*
- 37 *pantoporos* := *pantoporos* ; {Voir les pages 20 et 39}
- 65 *Lidern* = *Lidern*.
- 68 *mèlopoios* = *melopoios* {en grec : μελος, n'est-ce pas ?}
- 70 nouveau ! = *nouveau* ! {ajouter des italiques}
- 72 *Wir und die Antike* = *Die Antike und wir, Vorlesungen*
- 114 1928 = 1929 {deux fois}
- 145 Add new section starting with "Revenons..."? {comme dans l'original de 1986}
- 147 Add new section starting with "Ce qui marque l'hominisation..."? {comme dans l'original de 1986}
- 179 *la naissance de la démocratie* = *la nature de la démocratie*
- 202 est nécessairement = *est nécessairement* {voir la version de 1999}
- 226 Il manque la traduction du mot "leadership" avant "la loi,"
- 229 leur dieux. {Dans *Guérir de la guerre et juger la paix*, c'est : "leur dieu." au singulier. Mais dans la V.O. anglaise, c'est "place."—en traduction française : "lieu" au lieu de : dieu(x). Corriger ?}
- 235 {Un paragraphe et demi se trouve dans la version de Kurasawa mais pas dans d'autres versions en français ou en anglais}
- 244 1939 = 1938
- 272 deux niveaux de sens = *deux niveaux de sens* {ajouter les italiques, comme dans la V.O.}
- 287n1 Voir n. 1, p. 240. = Voir n. 1, p. 290.
- 315 1994, = 1991,
- 320 Il faut insérer une ligne blanche avant « Ce trait essentiel... » comme dans le tapuscrit anglais original.
- 323 Il faut insérer une ligne blanche avant « Mais *comment* pouvons-nous... » comme dans le tapuscrit anglais original.

- 324 Voir *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* et *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe, passim.* = Voir *L'Institution imaginaire de la société, passim*, et “Le dicible et l’indisible” (1971), dans *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, tome 1. {selon le tapuscrit anglais et dans [*Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*](#)}
- 333 Depuis une vingtaine d’années {voir l’édition grecque ; la date correcte, c’est 1963}
- 357 (*d* petit) {?? ; il n’y pas de définition préalable de *d*, “petit” ou grand ; voir l’équation dans le tapuscrit : les segments $a + bt - d$ (*d* petit) et ct }